

House & Home

A looming renaissance: textile art for the digital age

Nicole Swengley - MAY 31, 2019

How weavers are harnessing modern technology and materials to create complex patterns and shapes

As digital technology spreads across industries, it seems counterintuitive that labour-intensive “slow” art — such as handweaving — is enjoying a renaissance among artists, collectors and homeowners. Still, as Christine Lalumia, executive director of gallery Contemporary Applied Arts, observes: “Complex textile art feels nourishing in our fast, shutter-speed lives — an antidote to constant bombardment by choppy images and short messages.”

The irony is that the computer’s forerunner was the programmable power-loom devised by Joseph Marie Charles, a French master weaver’s son known as Monsieur Jacquard. Patented in 1805, its innovative punch-card system was adapted by Charles Babbage for his “difference engines” — early computation machines.

“Weaving is really another form of digital design: the intersection of a [vertical] warp and [horizontal] weft mimics a pixel,” says Ptolemy Mann, a weaver based in London.

This loom-computer relationship is celebrated by Channing Hansen, an artist based in Los Angeles. After washing, dyeing, blending and spinning wool he follows a computer-generated pattern to create large-scale, knitted artworks. Shapes, colours and fibres are dictated by an algorithm, creating unpredictable outcomes.

“Fiber art” has seduced collectors in the US since the 1970s but less so in the UK. After graduating from London’s Royal College of Art in 1997, Mann was one of few to pursue an art practice. “Everyone went into industry and product-making — it was very hard to survive without doing consultancy or making rugs,” she says. The process itself is partly why. “Hand-weaving requires unparalleled levels of patience even by most craft-based practice standards,” says Mann. Further barriers existed. “For years no fine art galleries would show my work because they didn’t understand how to sell textiles.”

In the UK, the emphasis remains on functional textiles. “As a genre, textile art is still under-appreciated and undervalued, although this is gradually changing,” says Mann. “A huge shift happened when [London gallery] Tate Modern held last year’s Anni Albers exhibition. That sent a very different message than if it had been at the Design Museum or Victoria and Albert Museum. Showing ‘art’ made on a loom put weaving into context and gave it artistic validity. It really boosted inquiries.”

The distinctions between “craft” and “art” are slowly evaporating. “Textiles act as a bridge between the disciplines,” says Maria Wettergren, owner of a gallery in Paris. “Collectors love the personal, sensual, handcrafted qualities of textile art. Its slow pace is felt as a soothing counterbalance to the frenzy of modern life.” Equally, weavers are passionate about creating “art”.

“I see the return to handwork as a reaction against uniformity and digitalisation,” says Tamara Corm, senior director (London and Europe) at Pace gallery. “People want to feel the presence of the artist’s thinking and reflection. Imperfections and mistakes are part of the work’s journey.” Artist Brent Wadden describes his large-scale, geometric abstracts as “paintings” despite handweaving with pre-used yarns, cottons and wool. Swapping oils for yarn was a defining moment for the Berlin and Vancouver-based artist. An initial solo exhibition at Pace London in 2016 sold out; collectors bought 80 per cent of last winter’s show.

Contemporary materials such as recycled plastics and reflective yarns are also tempting makers. Danish artist Astrid Krogh hand-weaves optic fibres on a loom, connecting them to light monitors. The artwork’s appearance changes as colours pulse through the fibres. But they retain a connection to historic textiles, as Krogh is influenced by Gobelin tapestries and ancient kilim carpets.

