

***Textiles Today: A Global Survey of Trends and Traditions.* Chloë Colchester. London: Thames and Hudson, 2009. 208 pp.\***

Reviewed by Terence Kavanagh

Arachne, whose hubris displeased the goddess Minerva so much that she turned the consummate weaver into a spider, has a modern sister in Chloë Colchester's book *Textiles Today: A Global Survey of Trends and Traditions*.

Myths and folklore have often employed textiles. Textiles are woven into the fabric of our imaginations providing perfect metaphors for the human condition: Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, weaving and unraveling her husband's shroud, Theseus following the thread of Ariadne, or the tragic story of the speechless Philomela whose loom became her voice. Like Arachne, the tales of spider women can be found in other parts of Europe as well as in the hieroglyphs of Teotihuacán and the sagas of the Navajo and Pueblo peoples of Southwestern North America.

In this book the author brings an erudition that is clearly the sum of her educational experience namely: an undergraduate degree in Fine Art from Oxford and a Masters and Ph.D. in Anthropology from University College, London. By using examples from across the world, she demonstrates a keen eye for the beauty of textiles as well as providing some interesting insights that recognize the part that textiles play in material culture. At this point it is worth quoting from the book on the matter of textiles:

....a fundamental part of our daily lives and their development can never be solely attributed to technology. Like music or food, textiles are at once one of the most and least localized of the arts: they owe their development to religion, commerce, cultural exchange and travel, and their preservation to tenacious regionalism. [p. 8]

This statement may be considered a leitmotif. We are presented with a dazzling array of technological wizardry but without the intervening hand of the designer, who translates these new inventions into artifacts, such developments would have little meaning or purpose.

*Textiles Today* joins a host of books on contemporary textiles notably, among others: *Contemporary Textiles: The Fabric of Fine Art* by Janis Jeffreys and Bradley Quinn (2008), *Techno Textiles 2: Revolutionary Fabrics for Fashion and Design* by Sarah E Braddock Clarke and Marie O'Mahony (2007), and *Extreme Textiles: Designing for High Performance* by Matilda McQuaid (2005). This proliferation of literature is symptomatic of the revolution that has been taking place over the last forty years in the realm of textile innovation. They celebrate the significant contribution of science and technology to new materials and processes. Designers and artists have been quick to identify the opportunities and these authors have provided

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interesting and important illustrations, if not profound insight, of how wonderfully rich, progressive and ubiquitous textiles are today.

One of the main attractions of *Textiles Today* is that it is beautifully and profusely illustrated. It has been divided into five chapters: Introduction; Materials; Objects; Pattern; and Textiles, Art and Culture. It encompasses a large range of contemporary topics under each section that would help inform an interested layperson or a student studying textiles. Topics mentioned include, in some cases rather enigmatically: The Cost of Materials in the Global Economy; Nano-Technology and Surface Design; Biomimicry; Fabric Robots and the Fabric Computer; Fabric Architecture; Pattern and Place; The Edge of Chaos, Pattern Formation and Error; Conceptual Craft; and in the final chapter an examination of textiles in Nigeria and textiles and cultural exchange in the Pacific Diaspora. Here lies perhaps one of the problems of this book because it covers almost too much territory both literally and metaphorically and it feels like a sampler where topics are introduced but often without sufficient depth of context or reference. In some ways the introduction promises more than is actually delivered in the rest of the book. Nevertheless for the novice it is a revelation and would encourage further engagement in an appreciation of textiles and their obvious contribution to material culture.

Apropos Arachne—one of the most interesting sections of the book discusses the use of biomimicry in textile innovation. In our efforts to produce a sustainable manufacturing economy we have an obligation to remember that:

...innovation in the field of textiles is not purely scientifically and technologically driven, but that innovation can also be inspired by nature. Biomimicry does not see nature as a resource of new materials, but rather seeks to learn from the way natural materials are formed. Biomimicry studies these materials and takes inspiration from them to solve contemporary problems. [p. 36]

The author explains how spider silk combines so many valuable characteristics and outperforms many current man-made materials in a combination of strength, lightness, and stretch. Although not mentioned in this book, attempts have been made to harvest spider silk but this method has proven rather challenging. Recently, however, a fabric was displayed at the American Museum of Natural History (2011) produced from the silk of one million Madagascan wild female golden orb spiders. It is good to know, however, that analogous materials are now emerging much to the relief, no doubt, of the Madagascan spiders!

There is a continuum relating to the history of textile production that goes all the way back to those early myths. Some of the first methods of manufacture are still being employed across the world today, particularly where the use of the hand is a vital component. As an example several million people in India are still engaged in producing cloth, often of the highest quality, solely by handloom weaving. Kanakalatha Mukund and B. Sundari Syama [2001] estimate that Indian handloom cloth production at the end of the 20th Century was more than 7000 million square metres per annum. These figures are by no means insignificant. Any survey of textiles should celebrate the fact that the old continues to sit beside the novel.

*Textiles Today* makes a worthy attempt to show the diversity and richness of textiles in the 21st. Century and although the reviewer has reservations about the possibility of tackling such a diverse range of textile and textile-related subjects in sufficient depth in a book of such modest proportions, it does however serve the purpose of an excellent introduction.

The great Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake can have the last word:

‘A piece of cloth’ is a constantly evolving concept that will translate into different forms from this epoch to the next. An invisible thread both to the ancient days of their origin, as well as the present connects it all. The process of making things advances but never severs its ties with knowledge of the age that preceded it. [Miyake and Fujiwara 2001:70]

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