

TEXTILES -- THE FIRST TECHNOLOGY?

Anthropologists and archaeologists, the professionals who study the old, OLD, olden times, hardly ever mention textiles. The obvious reason for this is that very few very old textiles have survived the natural bio-degrading of the ages, and so there are not many examples to be discussed. Bones, stones, and pots have survived much better and therefore are discussed a lot.

However, when archaeologists do say a few words about textiles, they generally agree that the development of rough textiles came before the invention of pottery. And, although it goes unmentioned, inspection of stone tools such as axes, arrow and spear points, bolas, and fish hooks reveals that most of them required a twine or thong tie to be effectively used. That is, an ax head has to be tied to its haft; arrow and spear points have to be fastened to their shafts; bola stones have to be tied together; and fish hooks have to be tied to the end of a line. Arrows also require a bow with a bow-string.

As none of these bindings remain to be seen, it isn't known whether they were made of sinew or of twined vegetable fibers. The late Dr. Louis Leakey demonstrated for film-makers the simplicity of making a rudimentary but effective cord from the fibers of vines growing in Africa. Using only his hands and teeth, he separated the fibers and then "spun" them by rolling them in bundles against his leg. With the resulting strong twine he fashioned a snare for catching small animals and demonstrated how, with only such a twine and a sharp stone blade for skinning, one could provide both food and material for clothing.

Whether made of sinew, vegetable fiber or animal fiber, any long strand of material which can be wrapped, twisted, woven, knotted or made into netting is a textile fiber. A textile is anything which has been spun, woven, plied, felted, knitted, knotted, netted, looped, chained, or crocheted. Baskets, nets, bags, mats and ropes are all textiles.

The oldest textiles we have certain knowledge of are some sandals woven of tule-like grass which have been found in several caves in the desert regions of the western United States. These date back to 11,000 years ago, and are at least three thousand years older than any pottery which has been found anywhere in the world.

In a recent article ("Origins of the Mind," PSYCHOLOGY TODAY, July 1978), anthropologists Richard E. Leakey and Roger Lewin, commenting on what differentiates the use of intelligence by the higher primates from that of true humans, observe that early humans were able to establish a food-sharing society through devising carrier bags in which to bring home roots, plants, seeds, eggs and small game. Thus, not every member of the human troupe had to go hunting daily for subsistence and therefore were free to build huts, honor their dead with burial, incise and paint pictures on stone, and experiment with better methods of stone chipping. No other mammals-- even those which use stone tools to crack open shellfish, nut or bones-- have ever developed textiles.

Stone instruments have mostly been discarded by humans, but the development of textiles-- the foremost human activity-- is still going strong.

-- Sally Garoutte
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We have received many original and interesting business cards. We thought it would be fun to share some of them, so from time to time we will be running one or two of them. If any of you have a card you would like to share please send it along to Box 270, Mill Valley, CA 94941

Chicago Art Institute Exhibit

The current exhibition of quilts from the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago is a once-in-12-years opportunity for quilt lovers. It has been that long since the quilts were last shown to the public. And who knows when they will be out again?

The quilts are being shown in two sections: One show of twenty three quilts was up during September and October, and the other one is up now until January 21, 1979. Even though this means that people living outside the Chicago area can only see half of this important collection, half is still well worth seeing.

The Art Institute of Chicago is one of the few museums in the nation which has a separate textile division with its own exhibition space. The staff is justifiably proud of its new Textile Conservation facilities which, I am told, include a storage space which is temperature and humidity controlled, acid-free containers and wrappings for all stored textiles, and acid-free cloth covered work tables. This is good news to anyone concerned about the way old quilts have faded from years of subjection to fumes and daylight. (It should be noted that our "normal" air these days is more and more filled with acidic fumes which are accelerating the destruction of textiles old and new.)

In the interests of conservation, the light level in the exhibit hall is exceedingly low during this show. It is difficult to make out the true colors of the quilts on display. One has to lean over and peer at them -- not always easy to do when other people want to look at the quilts too. I wish that, during the brief time the quilts are available to be seen, they really could be seen.

The only catalogue of the Art Institute quilt collection, AMERICAN QUILTS, by Mildred Davison, was prepared in 1966. It has been out of print for a number of years. Since 1966 there have been significant additions to the collection -many of which are being shown currently -but there are no plans to issue a new catalogue. Instead, the Textiles curatorial staff have prepared labels for the quilts

on display which carry more than the usual amount of information. Serious viewers may wish to take a notebook and allow for extra time to copy this information, and perhaps to sketch the quilts. Flash photography, of course, is not permitted, and the gallery light level is too low for normal photography.

The Art Institute is located at North Michigan Avenue at Adams in downtown Chicago. It is open to the public Monday through Saturday, 10 - 5, Sundays and holidays, 1 - 6, and on Thursday evenings until 8:30. Lunch is available. There is a large and pleasant Museum Shop which, unfortunately, has very few books on textiles or quilts.

-- S.G.

EMMA B. HODGE

An article entitled "Old-Time Patchwork and Appliqued Quilts" (LADIES HOME JOURNAL, Jan 1922) pictured two quilts in color from the Emma B. Hodge collection. In the black & white catalog (now out of print) AMERICAN QUILTS FROM THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO/1966, twenty quilts are listed as gifts of Mrs. Emma B. Hodge including the two in the article. The two pictured in the article and listed in the catalog are Cherry Basket (#30 Accession #19.550) and Cherry Tree (#2 Accession #19.546).

Charlotte Jane Whitehill made a Cherry Tree which is pictured in the Denver Art Museum collection and pictured in the 1963 catalogs (pg. 44 & 45, Accession #A-682) and in the 1974 catalog (pg. 65 & 655 Accession #A-682).

Note: Anyone having information about Mrs. Hodge is urged to write to the JOURNAL.

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