
Sixty thousand years ago, Southeast Asians sailed the seas on rafts of bundled reeds. During the 1970s Chilean women, silenced by the oppressive Pinochet regime, told their stories to the world by embroidering scenes of violence. Baseballs are stuffed with yarn and stitched together to help them snap off of the bat when hit. Crochet models are being used by scientists to help explain hyperbolic space. Though they are often overlooked, we depend on and place meaning in textiles. In her latest book, Textiles: The Whole Story, Beverly Gordon reminds us how integral fiber is to our existence as living, spiritual beings.

Gordon holds a PhD with a specialization in textile history and is currently chair of the Design Studies graduate program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has written extensively on the history and symbolism of textiles, particularly in association with women’s studies. Her passion and knowledge for the subject make her an ideal authority to write an updated review of the history of textiles.

Gordon takes a broad view of textiles to include both hard and soft fibers and materials from string to finished cloth. To provide such a comprehensive overview, each chapter is devoted to a theme: primal awareness, human survival, social meaning, economics and power, communication, and the spiritual or sacred. Each theme is well-represented and includes examples from diverse cultures and communities. Gordon also addresses contemporary issues which are illustrated with the work of many modern artists and designers. While the scope of the book goes far beyond clothing design and decoration, fashion is discussed in relation to the larger theme of each chapter.

The framework of the book makes disparate and at times complex themes easy to understand. The text, which occasionally includes intimate personal narrative and memories from Gordon, is easily read. Chapters do not need to be read sequentially. High-quality color illustrations provide beautiful examples of the chapters’ themes and are well-chosen to illustrate the text. Many detail images demonstrate the complexity of the technique and commitment of the artist.

The inclusion of an extensive bibliography, a list of further reading, and an index makes the book a light reference guide for students of world history, cultural studies, and the visual arts. Those well-versed in textiles are sure to learn something new and find inspiration. Thames & Hudson has recently published other textile histories, such as World Textiles: A Concise History by Mary Schoeser (2003). Gordon’s work, however, presents a more connected and personal view of the subject that will encourage readers to reconsider the significance of fiber.

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