

**Gene VanDyke, Ed.D., in conversation with Jonathan VanDyke**

*I grew up in the Pennsylvania countryside, but my early life was by no means pastoral: my father, a lifelong artist and progressive art educator, envisioned the early education of my brother and I as an opportunity for broad artistic experimentation. Together my parents guided us through the making of felt, paper, rugs, inflatables, baskets, wall hangings. Movement among forms was not only encouraged but expected: at one point I made a loose, abstract watercolor painting and translated it into a methodically-organized latchhook rug, a method of translation that re-emerges in my current work. As I experienced art, no clear division was made between the mastering of creative tasks and the creation of the home – the upholstering of furniture, the sewing of clothes and curtains, even ironing (one of my chores from a young age) were presented seamlessly alongside more loosely creative projects. It was later that institutions – museums, and schools – offered me an ideology of formal separation, of media and methods organized into departments and modalities. Of course, there were exceptions – the masterful fiberwork of Claire Ziesler, which I saw as a boy in a group show at the Corcoran Museum, struck me as an otherworldly, yet everyday object that has haunted me into my adult years. Was it the hardcore, pro-corporate privatization begun in the late 80's, in tandem with the rise of the commodity-driven art marketplace – as well as the increasing force of MOMA-style departmentalization – that cauterized boundaries among high and low, degrading an openness about making and process into jokes about macrame?*

*While seeking to make work that undoes such boundaries, I asked my father to describe an earlier era and his work with fibers. – Jonathan VanDyke*

***When did you first start working with fibers, woven materials, and felt? Were you instructed in these methods, or did you teach yourself?***

As a young college grad and new teacher my own work was in the area of my degree concentrations; painting and metals design. I was producing a lot of work and saw both areas as fine arts or sometimes the politically correct terminology separated the work into fine art (painting) and fine crafts (metals). But all the crafts areas were coming to the forefront of the contemporary art scenes.

The American Crafts Museum in New York City was elevating the crafts into “fine crafts” and/or “fine arts.” Outside of New York City, Peter Voulkos was making and exhibiting highly creative clay pieces, Marilyn Levine was making clay pieces in a trompe l’ole style that was indistinguishable from leather and fibers, Kenneth Beittel, ceramic professor at Pennsylvania State University (my undergraduate alma mater) took a sabbatical to work in Japan, and numerous Asian artists ( in a post war flurry) were influencing clay and fibers work internationally. This interaction with Asian philosophies was instrumental in moving many of the crafts from utilitarian to fine crafts with obvious attachment to creative, self-expression, etc. Books such as ***The unknown craftsman; A Japanese insight into beauty*** (Yanagi, 1972).

A multi-university (Alfred, PSU, NYSU, RIT, OSU, etc.) collaborative founded an annual, “**SUPERMUD**” conference each fall. Each conference provided a 24-7 time to create pottery, build kilns, and of course collaborate with national, if not, international potters. It also became a symbol to the art world that clay had arrived and had become an important fine art form.

Meanwhile the time period was one of living “free” and expressing oneself. Numerous self-supporting communes where young couples lived this “new” life style of farming, gardening, and producing goods and arts to sell to help support themselves were established throughout the country. Their goods and arts were often created by utilizing the products and/or bi-products from their agrarian life-style (waste not, want not). Hides, wool, vegetable fibers, hand-dug clay, pods, seeds, hand polished stones were turned into beautiful cabochons and subsequently exotic jewelry, etc. “Creativity” was clearly the direction of fine arts, fine crafts, and for that matter, art education for this period of time. The impact on art education was detailed in books like *Creative and mental growth* (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1964), *Creativity, art, and the young child* ( Brittain, 1979), and untold others.

***Can you describe your series of embellished mirrors from the late 70's and 80's? What was your initial intention with these works, and at what point did they become a series?***

During this time period of 1970's and 80's, my wife was writing for the *Pennsylvania Farmer Magazine* and met and developed friendships with rural and farm people around the northeastern and mid-Atlantic United States. Consequently as she explored such things as cheese-making, carding wool and felting she brought these skills and arts into our home, teaching our two sons and me her new found interests. Having had her interest piqued in many arts/crafts areas she enrolled in a variety of courses such as creative crocheting in a local craft school, The Manning's School of Weaving. Her travels and writing connected her with many sheep farmers and her stories from them about birthing of lambs and the docking of their tails caught my interest. Not being very careful about what I asked for, I quickly found myself as the guardian of hundreds of lambs tails and a good supply of naturally varying colors of fleece. Subsequently, the lamb's tails were incorporated into many of my fibers pieces and carried the message of the free and creative lifestyles of the times (see photograph of *Lambs tail basket*).

The fleece was cleaned and carded and therefore readied for felting. Many books had been written by this time in regard to the process of felting so we were pretty clear in regard to what needed to be done. Books such *Feltmaking: Traditions, techniques, and contemporary explorations*(Gordon, 1980) were plentiful and provided instruction in feltmaking and discussed the history and aesthetics of it, as well.

The lambs' tails were stretched onto boards and treated to tan and preserve them. After the preserving process, the tails also needed to be cleaned. So with cartons of lamb's tails and two young sons in tow, it was off to the local laundry mat to wash and dry the tails. We were feeling pretty “cool” in our VW Beetle convertible, top down with the cartons of tails and, oh yes, beach balls wrapped in fleece and compressed with used panty hose.

Our pact was that we would act completely normal while other customers watched us move the tails from the washers to the dryers and we sat calmly by while the scrubbed beach balls bounced happily in the dryers.

Like my school students, sons Jonathan and Marc, built their own looms and created marvelous weavings even as very young children. They enjoyed the kinesthetic activities and quickly became interested in working in clay, metals via the lost wax process, papermaking, etc. well before they even entered kindergarten. Can you imagine handmade paper created from broccoli and celery? Paper good enough to eat, right?

We also found that Goodwill Stores, the Salvation Army Stores, and stores boasting slightly used goods provided other supplemental items inexpensively for our family. Great “finds” soon included items to use in our arts and crafts work. Old fur coats purchased became part of woven bedspreads and a series of mirrors that I was producing. This series became more and more intriguing to me as the mirrors provided a mirror to the soul of the viewer; art through our own lenses. The intensity of mourning, could be imagined through gazing through a veil worn by new widows and into the shattered mirror in my *Mourning Mirror*. Likewise, the viewer can feel the self-esteem being built by the right “out there” verse, “You are so beautiful, to me” in a mirror by the same name.

***In your career as an art educator and artist, did you feel that fiber arts were given a different status than other media, such as painting? Has this status changed over time?***

As an art educator and director of an art program (1976-1989) for a large and affluent suburban school district I had the responsibility for planning and providing art educators from eight counties a professional development program several times a year. This became a tremendous opportunity to bring artists/craftsmen to our area for art educators and subsequently K-12 students. These visiting artists/craftsmen included glassblowers, weavers, basket-makers, metal-smiths, ceramicists, papermakers, etc. These “new” materials for fine arts/crafts were soon apparent on the course lists for local colleges and school districts. It also gave a whole new generation of local students and artists the knowledge that these “crafts” materials were really a part of the fine arts. Interestingly, forty years later these course offerings are still imbedded in the art curriculum of the local community college, the nearby state colleges, and almost all of the area’s public schools.

***What role do you feel fiber arts should have within art education?***

As a young teacher I was experimenting with teaching creative fibers (and all creative and fine crafts) in the middle school and high school grades during the 70’s and 80’s. Students who saw the renaissance of the crafts as relating to their interest in being a “hippy” were easily motivated to work in the fine crafts. Also, their need for kinesthetic learning and creativity were closely aligned with the areas of fibers, metals, clay, etc. Students readily engaged in activities such as using their bare feet to mix clay, cutting tails from road-kill to incorporate into weavings, making looms, etc. About the same time, Howard Gardner at Harvard University was defining, “Multiple Intelligences” through his research about how students learn. Certainly “visual intelligence” was an important intelligence according to Gardner, but “kinesthetic intelligence” was equally

important. His book *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences* clearly outlines and describes these intelligences (Gardner, 1985).

***How did growing up in a farming family effect your relationship to crafts and hand work and, especially, to fabrics? How does your experience with "domestic arts" such as upholstering, sewing, flower arranging, relate to your other artistic projects? Did they inform one another?***

Though not residents of a commune our family's (both the family I grew up in and then the family composed of my wife and two sons) activities closely mirrored residents who did. Gardening, canning, and freezing foods were part of lives and budgets. Because my parent's farm had many financial difficulties, my mother went to work when I was in third grade. All the responsibilities of maintaining a home suddenly became the responsibilities of my sister and me. However, my mother was also a craftswoman and taught us sensitivity to natural materials and objects, much like the guidance that Mrs. Wright gave to her son Frank Lloyd Wright. Because of my mother's income we were, some years later, able to acquire indoor plumbing (water and bathroom), an electric range as opposed to a wood stove for cooking, a telephone with a party line, and a home with central heat. Many years later (late 50's or early 60's) we were able to get a television. So up until that time our home life was focused on doing things and making things. My mother, of course, instilled the sense of strong aesthetics into our being. She taught us that even in the absence of money we could create beauty in our home, our clothing, our food, etc.

Therefore, as a married couple, my wife and I knew we could also create beauty in our home, our clothing, our food, etc. My wife made my ties and sport coats which were still required garb for all teachers. She made her clothing, our sons' clothing, and items for our homes such as pillow covers and draperies. Together she, our sons, and I reupholstered flea market finds including love seats, dining room chairs, and much more. Renovations we made on our homes realized generous profits for us when we later sold the home and moved on to still another "fixer-upper."

As an aside, we (wife, sons, and me) didn't own a color television until the late 80's or early 90's. Our small black and white television provided the news and an occasional arts show, but importantly spared us the time for significant and deep dialogue about the arts, aesthetics, world affairs, etc. It was always our expectation that our sons would be able to hold their own in a dialogue or even a discourse. It was, in fact, the regular agenda during our dinners.

Our regular visits to large city (NYC, DC, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, etc.) museums also enhanced our sons' understanding of the arts and aesthetics. Jonathan was still in a stroller when we pushed him through the impressionist's section of the National Gallery. Other museum goers in the same galleries were dumbfounded and awestruck to hear this pre-school age child intelligently discuss the variations in several impressionistic artists' styles.

So, yes there was and still is a huge relationship between what we create for utilitarian purposes and for the art we create. The sense of a fine aesthetic is definitely a transferable

sense. Most art educators try to help their students grasp this ability to transfer their aesthetic sense from one area to their whole being.

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