

Slow Cloth

Making with Meaning

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My name is Elaine Lipson. I'm a lifelong artist and maker, and professionally I'm a writer, editor, and author. I've edited some books you may know, including *Art Cloth* by Jane Dunnewold and *The Encaustic Studio* by Daniella Woolf. I'm the author of *The Organic Foods Sourcebook* 2001, a market research report called *The International Market for*

Sustainable and Green Apparel 2008, articles for *Ms. magazine*, *Yoga Journal*, *Surface Design Journal*, *Hand/Eye*, and many others, and a somewhat neglected blog.

Thank you to the Textile Society for having me here today. I urge you to participate in TSA and take advantage of all its opportunities for education. Last year I was able to attend the ISEND natural dye conference in France with partial funding through TSA, so apply for those grants that it offers and you might have an adventure as wonderful as mine was.

I'm here today to talk about Slow Cloth, an approach to working with textiles that I hope will inspire you and help to inform your work in new ways, and that demonstrates how our work with textiles connects us to our inner and outer worlds with meaning and power.

Slow Cloth is a concept I started thinking about and writing about in 2007, when I was working in the organic foods industry. I'd spent many years working alongside food activists and growers and entrepreneurs and agencies of change, including Slow Food, the now legendary brainchild and heart child of Carlo Petrini in Italy.

Every time I thought about Slow Food, with its principles of cultural preservation, artisan excellence, regional character, community, conservation, and pleasure, I wondered why the concept couldn't be applied to textiles. So I began to write about the idea.

Slow Cloth

It's an ethic of working with textiles and cloth.

It's a mission statement and a set of values for
making with meaning.

It's a conversation about process and practice,
sustainability and skill, beauty and expression.

It's not about how long it takes.

It's not a technique.

It's not a project.

There are no instructions.

At that time, it just didn't make sense to anyone; the whole Slow movement hadn't quite mushroomed yet. I got a lot of blank looks, a lot of "so what" looks, and some humoring remarks for my little idea. Now that seems kind of funny, because Slow is the new Green, thanks to people like Carl Honoré who have publicized a broader Slow movement — there's slow everything, and many people have adopted a slow framework for textiles. The concept doesn't seem so strange any more and has an intuitive resonance for many of us.

But right from the start, someone asked me if I had a manifesto for Slow Cloth, and I wrote up a set of principles and qualities that I think make it not only original but also unique among these Slow models.



My concept of slow cloth has four dimensions, exploring how we work, what we work with, why and where we do it in relation to others and in relation to ourselves. The first of these, the how, is process. There's an inclination to define Slow Cloth very literally – that it's simply something that takes a long time to make. The funny thing is that Slow Food originally wasn't a reference to time, but the Slow movement has naturally evolved to incorporate time, partly in response to our accelerated world. And time can most definitely be one aspect of Slow Cloth. I like to think of it as taking an appropriate amount of time to make a textile, or a human amount of time, rather than the time needed to fill an arbitrary or profit-minded mass production quota.

There's another way to look at time as it relates to Slow Cloth, and that is that we can choose to take time to master skills. This for me is where Slow Cloth departs from the mainstream crafty trend. The war in my brain is not art vs. craft; it's quality along the art-craft spectrum vs. what I call craftiness. Slow Cloth aims for the mastery, fluency and depth that can only come from cultivating a relationship to making, and to textiles, over a lifetime, not jumping from one crafty workshop to the next that aim primarily to sell you a lot of supplies. To make objects of quality, to explore a method in depth, to master skills, these are the elements of process that are inherent in a Slow Cloth ethic and aesthetic. It doesn't mean that you don't explore new methods and ideas, but that there is a discipline to your process and a movement toward excellence.

Now, if you look at the search terms that bring people to my writing, a lot of them want to know "how to make a Slow Cloth." They want a tangible and specific technique, not a concept, and they generally think it's hand stitching. That's far too limiting, in my opinion, and I created an inclusive definition that allows for any way of working with textiles, from stitching to garment construction to quilting, weaving, knitting, dyeing, collecting, designing, beading, researching, or even just wearing and using.



Shibori sculpture by Michelle Griffiths, UK
(used with permission)



Katazome by Cathy Bullington, USA

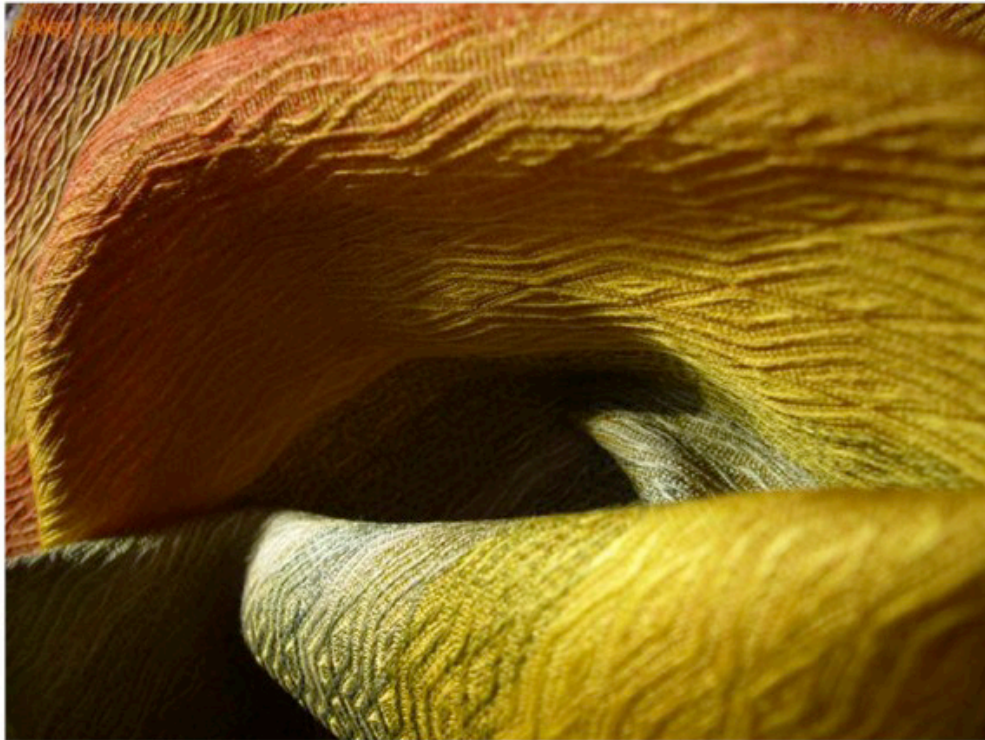
(used with permission)

The next dimension of Slow Cloth is material, and many people connect the slow concept to using only what we have come to call sustainable fibers. And it's true that the notion of sustainable use of resources and ecologically appropriate materials is a cornerstone element of Slow Cloth. The most familiar of these are organic fibers, recycled fabrics, and natural dyes, each of which has its own complex resource issues. But we can say that the awareness of the concerns related to sustainability in textiles is growing and that's a positive and important movement.

I believe, however, that if you're making something with a Slow Cloth ethic, it's probably an ecologically sound activity that adds more to your life and to the planet than it takes away. We want to push fiber production to be more environmentally and socially responsible, but we don't yet have full availability of these materials. Use the full spectrum of what's available to you and support changes in the industry. There are many fabrics and fibers, including synthetics, that make sense in the context of design and usage. There is also great value in supporting domestic and local textile production if that's appropriate to your region.

When we talk about slow textiles and craft, many people stop there, with process and materials. I invite you to consider two more dimensions that make Slow Cloth a more powerful idea and add more meaning to our making.

Slow Cloth has a cultural dimension. We've had a long period of losing skills and losing touch with traditional textile techniques, and of losing our connection to the history and significance of those techniques. Textiles have been a form of art, communication, survival, seduction, spirituality, expression, community, and enterprise throughout history for all of humankind on planet Earth and beyond. There is always a textile story to a place or an event. Even Neil Armstrong went to the moon in a spacesuit with a hand stitched bodysuit underneath the fabrics that kept him alive in space. I learned that from the Smithsonian magazine's Threaded blog .



Weaving by Meg Nakagawa, NZ + Japan

(used with permission)

Just as Slow Food sought to protect and re educate people about regional food tastes, we as Slow Cloth advocates and artisans have an opportunity to celebrate, and a responsibility to appreciate, the stories of textiles and those who make them around the globe.



Weaving by Meg Nakagawa, NZ + Japan

(used with permission)



Do Not Watch the Waves

Elis Vermeulen, Netherlands

Wool, both raw and clean, handfelted, wood, tubing, and a lot of rope.

(used with permission)



Traveller's Blanket by Dijanne Cevaál, Australia

(used with permission)



Lorie Hancock McCown, USA

(used with permission)

The collective and cultural aspect of Slow Cloth includes the idea of teaching. Many of us learned from a parent or grandparent, but again, we have a big gap, a couple of generations of people where that natural passing on of information and knowledge has disappeared. Now we have the Internet and new ways of teaching and learning, and as we've seen time and time again, the high speed and rapid evolution of the Internet can give life to dying traditions in the connections that it offers. So Slow Cloth in its cultural dimension doesn't reject technology; it enjoys it and takes full advantage of it as a means to teaching, learning, and connecting.

Finally, Slow Cloth has an emotional and even spiritual or soul dimension. That is the opportunity in working with textiles to experience joy, to create an island of contemplation, to express oneself, and to add beauty to the world. Now, as I say this I don't want to sound too precious about it. Not every moment of making, especially when you're in business, is all serene and blissful. But over time, over a lifetime, you find that there is, reliably, a way to access these experiences through textiles and textile related skills.



Ralli Quilts photographed by Zunaira Saeed Khan, Pakistan

(used with permission)

So these are the dimensions and qualities, for me, of Slow Cloth. If you seek, recognize, honor and develop these qualities in your work, then textiles become a source of meaning, deep satisfaction, connection, and nourishment. Making things that take attention and care is not a waste of time;

it's reclaiming time. We can choose materials and methods for the pleasure of using them and for their appropriateness to our design, not for speed, efficiency, sameness, or short-lived trendiness.

We can connect to people all over the world, and indeed to every time in history, through the commonality and language of textiles. We can elect to use textiles in our lives that are well made and that may reveal the hand and character of the maker. We can take pride in working toward mastery, toward a relationship with our materials that's graceful and rewarding. We can teach people how to make something and I want to stress that this should be a gender free activity, that textiles are just the right thing for many men just as working with iron or wood is captivating for many women.

All of this the choice to make things in a conscientious and authentic way becomes a political act and an optimistic vote for a sustainable world when you contrast it with a world where few people know how to make anything with their hands; where we are consumers but not creators; where our choices are determined by a conflux of corporate interests that run big box stores fueled by multinational manufacturing where the cheapest, most polluting, and most inhumane methods rule the day, making objects with chemicals and toxins that are beyond regulation and the human costs and consequences of them are ours to pay.



Elaine Lipson, USA



Shipibo Indian Embroiderer, Peru

Photo by Chris Kilham (used with permission)



Shipibo Embroidery, Detail

Photo by Elaine Lipson



Work in Progress/Completed Work
by Deidre Adams, USA

(used with permission)



Hand-Felted Sundrenched Coat, Roz Spier, USA

(Used with permission)

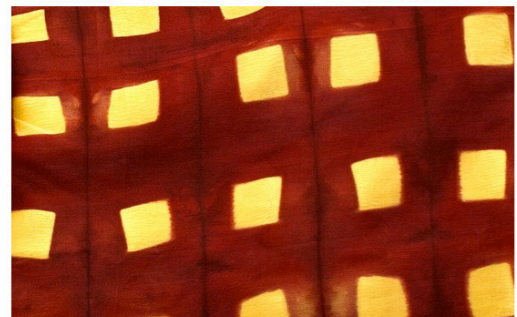
On perhaps a less dramatic level, it rejects the idea that even craft can be commoditized and cheapened for the marketplace. We see that even the resurging interest in craft, that people's hunger to create and to work with their hands can be exploited by turning everything into a frantic industry where selling trends and promoting quick results with poor quality materials overrides creativity and quality, and where everything begins to look alarmingly similar.

Make some or all of the qualities of Slow Cloth your reference point, and you regain power, control, and meaning over your relationship with textiles and your ability to learn, succeed, and share. Your work with textiles, fibers, and fabric becomes a source of connectivity and a companion. It becomes a rebellious and even radical vote for self-sufficiency, quality, and creativity in a mass produced world. It's good work.



Dress by Anaka Narayanan, BrassTacks Madras,
Chennai, India

I'll close with a quote about good work that a friend shared just the other day, from Wendell Berry, a poet, farmer, and teacher who never needed a constructed idea of Slow because he lives its essence. This is from Berry's essay "Conservation is Good Work."



Clamp Shibori Fabric for BrassTacks Madras,
Chennai, India

“...The name of our proper connection to the earth is “good work,” for good work involves much giving of honor. It honors the source of its materials; it honors the place where it is done; it honors the art by which it is done; it honors the thing that it makes and the user of the made thing. Good work is always modestly scaled, for it cannot ignore either the nature of individual places or the differences between places, and it always involves a sort of religious humility, for not everything is known.”

Wendell Berry, *Conservation is Good Work*, 1992



Dye Garden, France

Sustainable Materials: Naturally dyed scarves at ISEND 2011

Photo by Elaine Lipson



So I wish you good work with textiles, work that takes just as long as it takes to make something beautiful, useful, skillful, and joyful, that connects you, via a stitch or a thread, with your soul, your community, and your planet. I hope the model of Slow Cloth inspires you and provokes new ideas and conversation.

Thank you!

^Naturally dyed scarves by the Regional Centre for Innovation and Technological Transfer in Horticulture (CRITT), France, a sponsor of ISEND 2011.



Indigo-Dyed Shibori by Glennis Dolce, USA

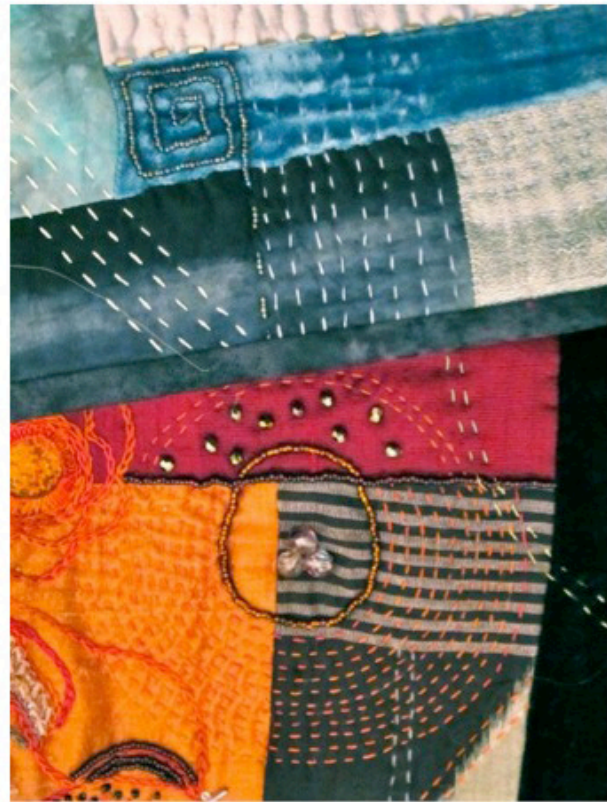
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slowcloth.net

(in development)

Slow Cloth on Facebook

a place for
discussion
information
networking



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Beaded Embroidery,
Detail, by Elaine Lipson,
USA

