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Fibre Traditions / BHS Board Presentation

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Thank you for the opportunity to share some of the history and activities of the Burlington Handweavers & Spinners Guild with you this afternoon.

Before I tell you about our Guild in particular, I'm going to talk briefly about fibre traditions in general. Throughout history, spinning, weaving and related fibre activities have been instrumental in the development of the artistic, literary, economic, social and political identities of almost every nation and culture. Who among us can think of a Persian carpet, a Scottish tartan, a Paisley shawl, an Irish linen tablecloth, a Navaho rug or a Gobelin tapestry without also thinking of the history that surrounds these items? All are functional items, most produced initially as clothing or to warm a household, yet each was developed to a high degree of design and artistry, using materials and equipment available locally to the makers and each has a wonderful story to tell.

Recently the Textile Museum in Toronto mounted an exhibit - Cloth That Shook the World – that illustrated six examples of how cloth has shaped history. From the riots of the Spitalfields silk workers throughout the 1700's to a Kashmir shawl weavers protest in the 1800's to an attempt in 1925 by the government of Panama to ban traditional Kuna dress each event has changed the course of history. In the 21st century we take cloth production and the creation of both functional and decorative items very much for granted, but to previous generations they were as important as our auto and high-tech industries are today.

The equipment, yarns and dyes used to produce handspun and handwoven items has been and continues to be as varied as the items produced. In many third world countries yarn is still spun on something as simple as the drop spindle my son brought me from Ecuador. Weaving can be done on a backstrap loom tied around the weaver's back and fastened to a nearby tree, or an upright loom that may also form part of the supports of a home. We constantly marvel at the complex patterns and traditional images that emerge from this basic equipment. In other cultures, spinning wheels have sometimes been designed especially for flax, wool or silk; the colonial housewife could also spin on a "walking wheel" that gave a long "draw" to the yarn and kept her on her feet for many hours during the process! Many looms also achieved a high degree of complexity in the pre-industrial era with some having up to 32 harnesses. Chinese figured silks, Spitalfield silks, the Royal weaving workshops in Lyons France and the linen weavers of Ireland all used drawlooms and later hand-operated Jacquard looms to produce complex patterns and images of birds, flowers and other familiar objects. Shuttles could be as simple as a polished stick of wood, notched at each end, as beautifully crafted as a damask shuttle or as technologically advanced as an end-feed shuttle, depending on what was to be woven. Yarns were for the most part produced locally – from hardy shetland sheep in the Scottish highlands to silkworms in more temperate climates, to cotton in the American south all were essential to the economy of their regions. Dyes are another wonderful story! Japan and Indonesia have long been known for the beautiful



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ikat and shibori patterns produced by wrapping, manipulating and dyeing yarns. The weaving is simple but the effects are stunning! In Holland, madder was an important economic crop and the red dye it produced was especially prized.

You can see that our guild is part of a long and honoured textile tradition! It was formed in 1958 by a group of dedicated local weavers (many of whom were still active when I joined in the early 1970's) and joined a group of 21 other Ontario guilds dedicated to promotion and education of weaving and spinning. Our aims as a guild have always been:

- to provide a learning opportunity for members
- to develop and encourage excellence in craftsmanship
- to promote fibre crafts within the community
- to interact and cooperate with related guilds and organizations

These are very similar to those of the early guilds formed in medieval times although we are not as interested as they were in influencing the political and economic direction of our community!

How do we accomplish these aims?

Learning - Programs at monthly meetings; guild afternoons in the studio; workshops – 1 day or several; study groups – usually focus on a specific weave structure; purchase of equipment many members would not own (100" loom, dobby loom); participate in hosting regional seminars; extensive guild library, We have always had teachers among our guild members. (Frances Forstner through Dept of Rec.; Diane Woods, Lucy Slykerman, Fran Boisvert through BAC).

We have five Master Weavers who took the Ontario Handweavers & Spinners program, involving 3 years of intensive study followed by a thesis project; 4 or 5 more have taken the Master Weaver or Master Spinner certificate course but have chosen not to do a thesis. Many of us travel at least once a year to attend a conference or take a course. We also have three accomplished dyers in our guild – Joyce Newman, Lucy Slykerman and Margaret Jane Wallace who act as mentors to the rest of us. Canadian weavers are regarded as highly accomplished compared to many from the US. Several of our members have dobby looms and two of the three drawlooms owned by Ontario weavers belong to our guild members.

Excellence in craftsmanship – we are one of few guilds in the province that has developed and maintains a list of standards for handwoven and handspun items; everything submitted for sale or show is reviewed by other guild members; we hold a biennial juried show that promotes originality of design and excellence of workmanship. One of our members, Sharon Gowland, took first prize for a handspun, handknit sweater at the Ontario Handspinning Seminar last June and our Guild display won first prize at the regional Five Counties Seminar in September. Our work is part of our identity and we are proud of it! Promote fibre crafts – we have always participated in shows and sales at the Centre; try to participate in community events – ie. Demonstrating at Ireland House; members take part in other regional shows and



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sales (Jennifer Earle and Lucy Slykerman are currently exhibiting in a Juried Show in Dundas; we weave blankets for the Carpenter Hospice.

Interaction and cooperation – belong to Ontario Handweavers & Spinners, Handweavers Guild of America, Textile Museum, Ontario Crafts Council; host Five Counties seminar regularly – a day when regional guilds come together for learning and fellowship; provide reps and board members to the OHS and participate on conference committees; cooperate with other guilds to bring instructors from a distance.

So the next time you hear the phrase “shuttle bus” – think of a weaving shuttle that goes back and forth across the web. When you hear “spinster” think of the colonial maiden aunt whose task it was to produce enough yarn to keep the family warm all winter. When you hear the phrase “Oh what a tangled web we weave” by Sir Walter Scott or hear the Greek myth of Penelope who believed so strongly her husband would return that, with her maids, spent all night unweaving the cloth she wove each day so she wouldn’t be forced to wed another...

Think of us for whom weaving and spinning, as Frances Forstner once said “is almost a way of life.” and of the traditions and heritage we are committed to maintaining and developing as vibrant arts of the 21st century!