

A Brief and Interesting Bit of Herstory

By Cindy Walker

What began as a healing hobby has become a major source of interest and curiosity in my life.

Textiles do not hold up in the archeological record very well, therefore the chasing down of samples, hence facts and dates can be a tremendous undertaking. From surfing the net and reading books, I am deeply amazed at the age of this “art” and what a huge role fabric making has played in our evolutionary path.

According to Elizabeth Wayland Barber in her magnificent book: Women’s Work the First 20,000 Years, women’s roles within the community were primarily defined by jobs which were “compatible with simultaneous child watching.” She goes on to explain that repetitive and easily interrupted and resumed tasks that keep children safe and can be performed close to home such as fiber arts and cooking generally became the jobs of women, not that they could not and did not hunt and not that men could not and did not sew, it just made more sense for women (who quite often nursed their children for two or three years) to feed and clothe the community.

The few fiber fragments found (say that three times fast) that have held up because of the specialized environment in which they were left such as mummification, peat bogs, permafrost and dry climates, can be dated to the Mesolithic Age (4600-3200 BC) and show that the mastery of the weaving craft had been well achieved far before these dates. A piece of string found in the painted caves of Lascaux, France (ca. 15,000 BC), carved figures of women wearing string skirts from Gagarino, Russia (ca. 20,000 BC) tell us that this is a very, very old aspect of our human culture.

In 1589, English clergyman William Lee, invented the first knitting machine (although Queen Elizabeth I refused to give him a patent for fear of displacing the many hand knitters in the country), so we can mark this date as the first mechanization for the fiber industry. (1785—Edmund Cartwright invented the power loom) If we then look at the time continuum with this in mind, it is only in the past 413 years or 2% of the time over 22,000 years, that have we been making clothing by machine. In other words, if the past 22,000 years were a football field—no, let’s say, a mall—you could walk from one end to the other and it would only be in the last twenty feet as you’re shifting packages, practicing justification speeches and reaching for the exit door that every bit of thread, yarn, cloth and clothing had been made by human hands. WOW, predominately women’s hands. Isn’t that amazing? It’s in our DNA. It’s part of us, a common thread that runs through a millennia of time, soothing our souls and rhythmically tying us to our past.