

CONFERENCE

Fashion Shows

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A SURVIVAL GUIDE



Daryl Lancaster, HANDWOVEN's Feature Editor, is recovering from surgery in Lincoln Park, New Jersey. She plans to be weaving, jurying, and teaching again soon!

Now is the time for all good conference goers to come to the aid of their guilds and enter their work for conference exhibitions! And for those of you who weave anything remotely resembling a wearable object, that includes entering the highlight of most conferences, the fashion show.

Seasoned conference exhibitors can tell you that conference entry forms and submission requirements vary considerably. Sorting it all out and getting everything together in the correct form can be as frustrating as a tax return. (Well, almost!)

Submission requirements

Many conferences are happy to include all entries in their shows—and, in fact, they are often looking for additional pieces. For this type of show, a basic description of your piece is usually all you need unless they also want to see some kind of photograph for planning purposes.

Then there are the conferences where entries are juried by a pre-selected panel of “outside experts,” peers, or conference committee members. This judging might be of either the actual piece or a photograph of the piece, depending on the policy of the sponsoring group.

Many of us, however, work on our pieces right up to the last minute, like hemming your wedding dress the night before the wedding! This makes it quite difficult to finish a piece, photograph it, and send the photo or piece with your application by the conference deadline—which can be up to four months in advance of the conference.

Acceptance and rejection

Weavers often show me their work and ask me why I think it was not accepted in a show. If I knew the answer, I'd happily market it, retire, and spend the rest of my days weaving on a deserted island with daily airdrops of yarn, dark chocolate, and café lattes! So many variables (many that are unknown to applicants) enter into the equation it's difficult even to know where to begin.

As a production weaver for more than ten years, I could wallpaper my living room with all the acceptance *and* rejection letters from craft

Models can also distract the viewer's attention. To emphasize the garment rather than the model's face, try photographing the garment from the back, especially if the garment back has special features.

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fairs and exhibitions all over the country! To be rejected is a terrible experience for all of us. We pour our souls into everything we weave. We are intensely proud of what we have done, so that one silly form letter can destroy our enthusiasm, egos, and expectations. And trust me, it never gets any easier. It wouldn't be so bad if we were told why, but rarely do we see a juror's comments. Even when we do, they can seem subjective and confusing. But having been on both sides many times, as a juror *and* exhibitor, I can hopefully shed some light on the process and the presentation.

What to weave for a fashion show

Fashion shows are really theatrical events with exaggerated lighting and often with professional staging and models. There is usually a theme for the show, and the pieces that are selected must support it.

How the pieces move and interact with the models can make or break the overall success of a staged fashion show. This is precisely why so many jurors require photos or slides of the pieces instead of the actual work (not to mention that they also avoid the added difficulty of storing, sorting, insuring, and shipping hundreds of garments).

A garment in a box does little to help the jury envision the piece as a living, breathing theatrical component moving on a stage in front of hundreds of eager onlookers. A handwoven garment can be exquisitely executed and very wearable but look boring and lost on a stage with flashing lights, dancing models, and fast-paced music. Runway appeal is therefore often a major point category for judges. Note that a scarf, belt, bag, or vest may be too small to have much runway presence.

The disadvantage of slides or photographs of garments in jurying is that they do not show the quality of the handwoven fabric. Since the garments are viewed by conference attendees in an exhibit after the fashion show in many cases (as for Convergence, for example) the fabrics must not be sleazy or disappointing on closer inspection. With this in mind, applicants for the Convergence fash-

Photographing a garment outdoors can result in a very lovely photo, but the environment can take over and distract the viewer's attention from the garment.





A garment can be photographed flat. Try to give it a little life by making some folds and positioning the sleeves. Keep the background plain.

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show for 2002 were asked to submit 12" × 12" fabric samples with their slides and documentation (a requirement that can present a problem if you don't have any leftover scraps of fabric to send in).

So what's a weaver to do? First of all, weave what makes you happy. Isn't that what all this is about anyway? If you design your piece for the runway and stage, think fun, playful, bright, and graphic. And also think up-to-date! If you are planning to weave something that was hot two years ago, consider adding a secondary technique, surface application, or embellishment. Give that plain-weave chenille some pizzazz!

Presenting your work

The standard of photographic representation in this age of digital *everything* is still the old-fashioned slide or transparency. Craft markets, art and gallery exhibitions, and many print materials (such as show catalogs, ads, and brochures) still require them. Transparency film is just a different type of film from print film and yes, it can be developed through your basic grocery-store photo counter. Slide film usually must be sent away for developing, however, so it may take from three days to as much as a week to come back.

Fashion show committees will very often accept photos of the work instead of slides, and slides can be made from prints. (But it costs!)

I don't know many weavers or artists for that matter who are as skilled at photography as they are at their art. And, no matter what anyone else says, clothing is the hardest artwork to photograph, with the possible exception of large quilts purely because of their size. How the piece is presented and whether or not it is shown on a model, can absolutely make or destroy an otherwise wonderful garment's chances for acceptance. Finding a model can be as daunting as picking out yarn, however, and not nearly as much fun. Many of us will spend without limits on yarn and weaving tools—to say nothing about sewing machines—yet we try to get models for free. And even if you are willing to pay for one, a professional model

can cost thousands of dollars for a single day of shooting. So what's a weaver to do?

Composition

Composition is everything! Take a look, for example, at the photo of the shawl on page 29. We have all taken our work outside, artfully arranged it around a person or garden bench in full sun, and taken a few shots. The photo might be well composed, but it is really hard for the viewer to read anything about the work or to see how it relates to a fashion-show runway. Sometimes in a very busy photo, as for the shawl on page 29, it is hard to know what the subject of the photo actually is.

Often applicants send photos of the garments on themselves. In itself, this isn't a problem (unless the committee wishes to judge the work anonymously), but the photo is usually home-grown with window treatments, garage doors, or lively wallpaper as background. Since both model and photographer are usually unskilled, most often the photo is shot head-on with the model's legs cut off, and there are too many other objects included.

Often, these photos are taken with point-and-shoot cameras that do not give the photographer the ability to see what the lens is really seeing. When the photo is developed, it does not show exactly what you saw when you looked into the viewfinder. Only single-lens reflex cameras (SLRs) allow you to see through the actual lens with a series of mirrors.

The garment needs to fill the space in the photo. The farther away you are from the model, the more difficult it is to read the piece. Excessive background is also distracting for the viewer. One fashion show judge advised me, "Ditch the west coast beach scenes and rocky outcroppings, they just don't work!" If you do use a point-and-shoot camera and end up with a photo that would be more effective if cropped (cropping is chopping off unwanted background), it has to be done proportionately. Locate a competent custom photo lab and they can easily do this for you. Cropping can also be done to slides. Remember, crop tightly so that the piece fills the photo or slide.

It is a good idea to find a photographic supply store or go online and purchase an inexpensive photographer's backdrop to use as background for your photos. They come in a couple of widths, many colors and gradients, and they can be taped to the wall, window, garage door, or anywhere you need to take the photo. Using a backdrop will keep backgrounds from competing with the model or the work. Once you have a setup you like, take multiples of the same shot. It is cheaper to use and develop a whole roll

of film on one garment than to have reprints made from slides. Never submit your originals.

The model dilemma

There are many different schools of thought on using models for photos of garments. In a pinch, I have successfully shot clothing on a dress form, and with some clever arranging of sleeves and drape, produced an acceptable representation of the garment. A dress form does not really give a jury a true idea of what



A garment can be photographed on a dress form. Again, try to give it some sense of movement by positioning the sleeves.

the garment will be like on a real person, however. When I use a model, I prefer that the model's face not be visible. Even good models can be distracting. If the piece has an interesting back, consider shooting the garment from the back (see the photos on pages 28–29, for example). If you are shooting from the front, try directing the model to look down and away from the camera, so that the focus is not on her face.

Hats can be fun and they can diminish the effect of a model's face. The garment can be seen on a living breathing person without the person getting in the way of the garment.

Compare the effectiveness of the three photos of my handwoven shirt constructed from an Issey Miyake Vogue pattern. The first shot (page 30) is the classic lay-the-piece-on-a-table-and-shoot-it-flat presentation. The second (page 31) shows the shirt on a dress form. The third, at right, is taken by professional photographer Ralph Gabriner using a professional model whose face is partially hidden by a hat.

The jurying experience

Last summer I had the privilege of jurying a conference fashion show. The jurying was for prize winners, not for selecting the pieces to be in the show. First the jurors examined the pieces on hangers and then we got a closer look at each garment laid flat on a table. When we couldn't visualize how a piece might look when it was worn, we would have someone from the committee to try it on. Of course, not knowing who the piece was actually designed for gave us no clue as to how it was really supposed to fit. Often a photo accompanied the piece, which helped somewhat. We did our best!

The night of the fashion show, I was eager to see what the garments I had studied so closely would look like under bright stage lighting on models in motion on the runway. As a member of the audience, I would this time be viewing them from about fifty feet away.

I was floored! Many of my comments would have changed had I seen the show before judging the pieces!

Most of these garments were modeled by



A garment is best photographed on a model. Keep the background plain and obscure the face of the model to make the garment the focus of the photo.

the weavers themselves. Since we weave our garments to fit our personalities and spirits, a garment drooping on a hanger or lying on a table is missing a key ingredient: the spirit of the maker! Garments whose designs I hadn't really understood were suddenly transformed into living, breathing, moving artwork with a presence and electricity all their own.

Remember that judges are human, too. They see many garments over the five to six hours it takes to judge a show. What they are looking for may not be what you

wove. Your slide may not represent your work in the best way. What you like to weave and what's appropriate for your lifestyle may not be right for a runway.

A conference fashion show coordinator gave me this advice: Give your piece a title. A title can provide jurors with a focus for viewing a piece and inspire them to consider it closely—a definite plus! A fashion show committee is looking for Wow! An audience is looking for Wow! As a weaver, I want my work and my slides to say Wow!, too! 