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# Slow Cloth

## WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

By Elaine Lipson, Boulder, Colorado, USA



A couple of years ago, I started a blog about textile art, craft, and culture, intending to explore and frame a way of working with textiles that reflected my lifelong experience—that working with textiles, fabric, and fibre, whether sewn, embroidered, knitted, woven, felted, beaded, studied, or collected, could be a meaningful and rewarding creative endeavour.

I'd been working for many years in the organic foods' world and watched with interest as Carlo Petrini's remarkable Slow Food movement grew into an international community. Why couldn't its principles of preserving regional and local traditions, celebrating pleasure and quality, building community, and honouring right use of resources also be applied to textiles? People like Carl Honoré ([slowplanet.com](http://slowplanet.com)) were extending the Slow philosophy in many areas; couldn't textile artists, artisans, and entrepreneurs do the same?

At the same time, I saw that the do-it-yourself, Craft 2.0 trend had gone a little wild, with more and more people "crafting" but with little attention to quality and skill, and plenty of craft industry mushrooming. Developing the idea of Slow Cloth, for me, was an alternative to this state of mind, and a way to reclaim personal meaning and validity in craft.

I started writing about my vision of Slow Cloth in late 2007, and was lucky to find a few like-minded creative souls to follow along. Now, in 2010, a Slow Cloth movement is taking hold. Around

the world, there are other people simultaneously developing their own concepts and communities of Slow Textiles, Slow Fashion, and Slow Craft. The common thread is a worldview that includes technology but is not limited to it; that opts for creativity over efficiency; and that considers time and how we can approach things at a healthy and human pace.

So what, exactly, is Slow Cloth? In early 2008, I identified ten principles or qualities of Slow Cloth that I think can apply to any textile-related process.

Slow Cloth means recognizing the possibility of **joy** in the process. I often hear people say that they think they "should" learn to knit or sew, because they think they will save money (right) or that it's somehow virtuous. I do believe that everyone should know how to sew on a button or mend a seam, but beyond that, working with textiles and fibre should be a choice that brings you the possibility of joy. In other words, it's the journey, not the destination. If efficiency and sameness are the primary goals, it's not Slow Cloth.



Slow Cloth offers a way to be **contemplative**. Not every moment of working with textiles is a serene mystical precious experience. But the totality of your work opens space for you. There are moments of peace that come from the process of making something yourself, whether by hand or machine.

Slow Cloth honours **skill** and has the possibility of mastery. So many people today are engaging in craft in a superficial way. Rather than choosing easy or instant-gratification methods, the Slow Cloth way seeks an ever-expanding level of fluency and grace in the techniques you work with.

The Slow Cloth approach acknowledges the rich **diversity** and **multicultural** history of textiles. Textiles are an expression of culture and we live in a fantastically big and small world. Slow Cloth celebrates that diversity rather than eliminating it.

Similarly, the Slow Cloth approach honours its **teachers** and lineage. Most of us began to learn our skills with cloth from an ancestor or friend, and there are many generations before us who used their inventiveness and creativity to expand possibilities in the world of cloth. Thank them, and pay it forward.

Slow Cloth encourages thoughtful, respectful, and **sustainable** use of materials and **resources**. Ever been to one of those wholesome organic dinners where the host went through every dish

and named the farmers? Similarly, take a moment to remember that it takes a lot of people to make your fabric or yarn or dye. For me, Slow Cloth doesn't have to be only natural materials — some of my favourite artists, like Mary Ruth Smith, work with some synthetics — but be mindful of your footprint and choose well and appropriately. Make what you do sustainable in the sense that it gives more than it takes, and allows

### Slow Cloth means recognizing the possibility of joy in the process.

future generations the same gifts and opportunities to create that we have today.

The Slow Cloth approach celebrates **quality**. We want to make things that last and are well-made.

The Slow Cloth approach appreciates and celebrates **beauty**. Beauty is a whole complicated subject all its own. I think that we all have a need for beauty that has driven the urge to make and decorate textiles for tens of thousands of years.

Slow Cloth supports **community**. A Slow Cloth company respects all of its labour force; individual artists and makers acknowledge their relationship to other textile artists. This includes sharing knowledge, preserving knowledge about traditional techniques, and teaching others.

Finally, the Slow Cloth approach embraces textiles that are **expressive** of individuals or cultures. Decorative arts have not always had an individual signature, and that's still often true today, but the human creative force is reflected and evident in the work.

To reiterate, Slow Cloth is not a project or a technique; it's a relationship to your work and life with textiles and fibre. Slow Cloth is not literal; it's not about "things that take a long time to make", to name a common misconception; it's about things that are appropriately made, whether by hand or machine. And while Slow Cloth celebrates hand-stitching as a vital creative and functional act, it isn't limited to hand-stitching; just as Slow Food chefs use ovens, so many Slow Cloth practitioners use sewing machines and other tools, or they may weave, dye, quilt, design clothing, or work with textiles in any other conceivable way.

If you like the idea of this kind of relationship to textiles, please join the Slow Cloth discussion and community group on Facebook that I've started ([www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=269539431110](http://www.facebook.com/#!/group.php?gid=269539431110)), and keep an eye open for future Slow Cloth developments—it may become a non-profit organisation, or at least have its very own newsletter. And please visit my blog ([lainie.typepad.com](http://lainie.typepad.com)) for more posts on textile art, craft, culture, and Slow Cloth!

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### Editor's NOTE

This article is adapted from work originally published on Elaine Lipson's blog ([lainie.typepad.com](http://lainie.typepad.com)) and in HandEye magazine ([handeyemagazine.com](http://handeyemagazine.com)). Elaine Lipson is a writer, editor, and artist, and the author of *The Organic Foods Sourcebook* (Contemporary Books, 2001), *The International Market for Green and Sustainable Apparel* (Packaged Facts, 2008). She is currently a book editor at Interweave. Contact her at [elainelipson@gmail.com](mailto:elainelipson@gmail.com)

