

Fabric designers display integrity of their dyed-in-the-wool art form

The fabric arts occupy a curious position in modern art. One of humankind's most basic forms of decorative arts, fabrics that people wear on their bodies or put on their walls say much about aesthetic sensibilities. The Field Museum's splendid show of fabrics, "Master Dyers to the World," demonstrated that. Yet, in the last half-century, artists who have attempted to elevate fabric to contemporary art ideas have still had to fight the image of the workaday craftsman, motivated by professional considerations reputedly foreign to their fine-arts colleagues.

One of the most influential art movements of the 20th century, the German Bauhaus, argued the opposite view for contemporary craft. In elevating architecture and industrial design to a high level, the Bauhaus artists sought to bring advanced visual ideas to the most ordinary objects machines had begun to produce. This pragmatic, no-frills approach to artistic application set particularly well in Chicago. Not only one of the country's premier industrial cities, Chicago was also the home of the New Bauhaus, which German Bauhaus emigre László Moholy-Nagy established before World War II.

Angelo Testa, one of the first graduates of the school, worked side-by-side with Moholy-Nagy in the school workshops on East Ontario near the present Museum of Contemporary Art. Testa carved a niche shaped from the folds of commercial fabrics designed to complement the new clean geometry of Bauhaus-inspired architecture. Today, most of the country's leading textile manufacturers have Testa designs in their collections.

In conjunction with the Japanese Living Treasure show

ART Charlotte Moser

at the Art Institute last year, Testa was named by the Art Institute as one of America's "living treasures" as a fabric designer. Some 40 years of his work as a designer, painter and weaver are now showing through Friday at the University of Illinois at Chicago art and architecture gallery, Peoria at Van Buren.

Like other artists associated with the Bauhaus aesthetic, Testa has been concerned with maximizing a sense of space by using the most minimal geometric elements. The clean, non-objective designs of his fabrics are carried over in meticulous, geometric paintings as bold and simple as modern architecture. "Little Man" and "Little Elephant," possibly Testa's most famous mass-produced designs of the '40s, are organic shapes with protuberances resembling arms, legs and even elephant trunks.

A major part of the Bauhaus aesthetic was understanding the intrinsic nature of materials, their textures, colors and plasticity. For fabric, that meant weaving as well as textile design and techniques for dyeing.

Testa, too, tried weaving, though the efforts in this show relate more to his sculptural interests than to his two-dimensional ones. These woven constructions, including one still attached to a loom, consist of geometric blocks of multicolored yarn stacked in a woven version of architecture.

The greatest recent contribution to improving the status of the fiber arts, however, has come in the form of



Angelo Testa surrounded by his work.

contemporary weaving. Of all the areas that have produced great weavers, Scandinavia seems to have had a particularly energetic group. One can only speculate why. A traditional woman's art in the cold northern climates, weaving has been a part of the culture for centuries. Perhaps, the roots of contemporary Scandinavian weaving can even be traced back to the Bauhaus itself, so close in spirit to modern Scandinavian design.

An impressive show of contemporary weavings by leading Scandinavian artists, "The Scandinavian Touch" is on view at the Chicago Public Library Cultural Center through May 14. The show, part of the "Scandinavia Today" program traveling around the country, illustrates the artistic level achieved by female weavers in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.