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THE FABRIC OF CIVILIZATION

How Textiles Made the World

By Virginia Postrel

“From the Stone Age to Silicon Valley, textiles have played a central role in the history of the world. Virginia Postrel has an encyclopedic knowledge of the subject but she imparts it with a touch as light as Penelope’s at the loom. Ambitious, erudite, and absorbing, *The Fabric of Civilization* is both an education and a pleasure to read.”

—Barry Strauss, author of *Ten Caesars: Roman Emperors from Augustus to Constantine*

“This is an engrossing and illuminating portrait of the essential role fabric has played in human history.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

From Neanderthal string to 3D knitting, a global history of textiles and the world they made

We’re surrounded by textiles but largely overlook their significance, and the efforts embodied in every scrap of fabric. Textiles created empires and powered invention. They established trade routes and drew nations’ borders. Since the first thread was spun, fabric has driven technology, business, politics, and culture. In **THE FABRIC OF CIVILIZATION: How Textiles Made the World (Basic Books; November 10, 2020)**, Virginia Postrel traces this surprising history, exposing the hidden ways textiles have shaped civilization. She makes a convincing case that textiles have been the world’s defining commodity – even more so than spices or gold.

Assiduously researched and deftly narrated, **THE FABRIC OF CIVILIZATION** demonstrates how the desire for textiles, and the search for better ways to satisfy that desire, influenced every aspect of our development. The origins of chemistry lie in the coloring and finishing of cloth. Selective breeding to produce fibers accompanied the birth of agriculture. The textile business funded the Italian Renaissance and the Mughal Empire; it left us double-entry bookkeeping and letters of credit, the David and the Taj Mahal. From the Minoans who exported woolen cloth colored with precious purple dye to Egypt to the Romans who wore wildly expensive Chinese silk, the trade and production of textiles paved the economic and cultural crossroads of the ancient world.

Each chapter represents a stage in the textile journey, beginning with production—fiber, thread, cloth, and dye—and then moving to merchants and consumers. We learn about the many ways textiles have moved history, from the spinning machines that set off an economic revolution to the unexpected connections between cloth and mathematics. Postrel concludes with a new take on fiber, introducing the innovators who revolutionized textiles in the twentieth century, as well as those today who hope to use cloth to change the

world. Synthesizing groundbreaking research from economics, archaeology, and anthropology, **THE FABRIC OF CIVILIZATION** restores textiles to their central place in the human story.

In an interview, Virginia Postrel can discuss:

- How textiles are so woven into the fabric of our lives that we take them for granted. They cover our bodies, bedeck our beds, and carpet our floors. Textiles give us seat belts and sofa cushions, medical masks and duct tape. Yet, we overlook the world-shaking consequences they've had.
- That the story of textiles is the story of human ingenuity. It forced us to address complex scientific problems: How do you breed sheep with thick white fleeces? How do you prevent dye from fading? And tricky social problems: How do you finance a new spinning mill? How do you record weaving patterns so someone else can duplicate them?
- The relationship between cloth and mathematics. Long before the dawn of mathematical science, weaving brought right angles and parallel lines into everyday life. And the widespread teaching of algebra began largely in order to track and value textiles.
- How textiles have always been central to commerce, from Bronze Age caravans to today's container ships. The cloth business spurred letters and record-keeping (and the literacy it required) and brought us banks and bookkeeping.
- We tend to view the textile industry as stagnant but the desire for more and better cloth has driven technological innovation. Today, companies like Under Armour and Nike relentlessly compete to find new ways to satisfy the demands for heightened performance, from new water-repellent materials to eco-conscious alternatives.
- What the future of textiles might look like. Some scientists, for instance, are working to embed modern technology into fibers. We could have pockets that double as a phone charger, or hats that give directions in the years ahead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Virginia Postrel is an award-winning journalist and independent scholar. She is a columnist for *Bloomberg Opinion* and has been a columnist for the *Atlantic*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times*. She is the author of the highly acclaimed *The Substance of Style* and *The Power of Glamour*. Her research is supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. She lives in Los Angeles, California.

You can find the book trailer and related videos [here](#).

ABOUT THE BOOK:

THE FABRIC OF CIVILIZATION

How Textiles Made the World

By Virginia Postrel

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More Praise for *THE FABRIC OF CIVILIZATION*

“Virginia Postrel has created a fascinating history of textiles from their Palaeolithic beginnings to the present and future—from the earliest plant fibers plucked from weeds to synthetic fabrics with computer chips in the threads. And why, you say, should we examine mere cloth? Precisely because it fills more and more roles in our lives, yet we take it for granted. As Postrel writes, “We suffer textile amnesia because we enjoy textile abundance.” Well researched and highly readable, the book is a veritable treat.”

—Elizabeth Wayland Barber, author of *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times and Prehistoric Textiles*

“A fascinating, surprising and beautifully written history of technology, economics, and culture, told through the thread of textiles, humanity’s most indispensable artefacts. I loved it.”

—Matt Ridley, author of *How Innovation Works*

“The story of technology is a story of human ingenuity, and nowhere is this more clear than in the story of textiles: the original technology, going beyond what we commonly think of as ‘tech.’ As with many technologies, we suffer an amnesia about them when we enjoy them in abundance, as Postrel observes; her book gives us back our memories about this technology that we use every day without even knowing it.”

—Marc Andreessen, co-founder, Netscape and Andreessen Horowitz

“Cleanly written and completely accessible, this book opens up an entirely new world of textiles, explaining the most ancient archeological fabrics and the latest polymer blends that cool the body —not warm it as textiles have done for thousands of years—with equal verve.”

—Valerie Hansen, author of *The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalization Began*

“Postrel’s brilliant, learned, addictive book tells a story of human ingenuity....Her deep story is of the liberty that permitted progress. Presently the descendants of slaves and serfs and textile workers got closets full of beauty, and fabric for the cold, a Great Enrichment since 1800 of three thousand percent.”

—Deirdre Nansen McCloskey, Distinguished Professor Emerita of Economics and of History, and Professor Emerita of English and of Communication, University of Illinois-Chicago, and author of the *Bourgeois Era trilogy*

“*The Fabric of Civilization* is more engaging and informative than any textile science or textile history course that I studied in college. Postrel has distilled thousands of years of the making and manipulation of string (thread) into a comprehensible read whether or not you have knowledge of its invention or the current bio-engineering research. She has woven in personal experiences; interviewed historians, computer programmers, scientists, textile archeologists, and contemporary and indigenous artisans; and gone behind the scenes in textile laboratories and manufacturing plants. After reading this book, I felt like I had wandered the world for centuries using fabric for my currency and wealth. I had won political battles in its name. I had been sickened as well as healed by it. And now I am an inventor synthesizing environmentally healthy fabric by means of chemicals. My appreciation and knowledge of how textiles make the world have been greatly enhanced.”

—Marilyn Murphy, co-founder ClothRoads and former president of Interweave

“Fascinating and wide-ranging... This is an engrossing and illuminating portrait of the essential role fabric has played in human history.”

—Publishers Weekly

“Virginia Postrel captures the ingenuity with which people around the globe solved the problems of raising fiber, spinning thread, making cloth, and giving it beautiful colors. This book opens the reader's eyes not only to the textiles that daily surround us but also to the remarkable skills of their makers.”

—**Jenny Balfour-Paul, author of *Indigo***

“*The Fabric of Civilization: How Textiles Made the World* is one of the most compelling books I've ever read on the history of textiles-witty, well-researched, and full of fascinating things I'd never known despite being quite well-read on textile technology. (Did you know that letters of credit from clothiers helped build the early European banking system? Or that aniline dyes were one of the earliest applications of organic chemistry?) If you thought Elizabeth Wayland Barber's *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years* was interesting, you'll swoon over this book. I *loved* it.”

—**Tien Chiu, weaver, teacher, and author of *Master Your Craft***

“Fiber artists of any stripe, prepare for a juicy read through a new book on textile history! Virginia Postrel's new book will turn your old ideas about fabric and civilization down unexpected pathways. *The Fabric of Civilization* is divided into chapters loosely related to individual textile processes, such as spinning, weaving, and dyeing, and the author points out that textiles are the basis of our number systems, our banking, our commerce, and our science. This book is full of stories of individuals who innovated entire systems because of their sensitivity to textile processes. The author actually learned to spin and weave while writing this book, and her explanations and diagrams are spot on. Profusely illustrated with photos and diagrams, and contains a comprehensive bibliography. Highly recommended.”

—**Alice Schlein, weaver, author of *Network Drafting* and *The Woven Pixel***

“*The Fabric of Civilization: How Textiles Made the World* chronicles the laborious and cumulative innovations that allow cloth to play an essential role in our comfort, cultural identity, and our dependence on programmable functions. At times, the fabric of society appears threadbare but, based on the global nature of textiles, it is comforting to know that all cultures have a shared experience. Postrel reminds us that we are all woven together with colorful threads.”

—**Susie Taylor, artist**