

TEXTILE CONSERVATION WORKSHOP

by Nancy Sloper

Nancy Sloper and Carmela Simons started the Textile Conservation Workshop in 1977 in answer to the many requests from private individuals to examine and/or treat their textiles. They were affiliated with the Laboratory for Research and Museology at U.C. Davis where most of their work was for the State of California, caring for textile artifacts. Ms. Simon had come to Davis from Israel where she had helped set up the textile conservation dept. of the Israel Museum. She received her diploma in Fine Arts from the Salde School, London Univ. and had completed the UNESCO course in conservation at the Institute Royal du Patrimoine Artistique in Brussels. She spent additional time in getting practical experience with various conservators including some time spent at the Textile Museum in Washington D.C.

Nancy Sloper met Ms. Simon in 1976 and served as her apprentice while she earned her Masters degree in Art History at Davis. In 1978 the laboratory at Davis was closed and they set up shop in Carmela's home. They continued to do contract work for the State of Calif. as well as collectors, dealers, etc. She went to England for a year of study at the Textile Conservation Centre in London. When she returned to Davis in the summer of 1980, the two women decided to find a larger workspace. After much searching they found a house in the small town of Winters, fifteen miles of Davis, and now have a fully equipped workshop.

When we tell people that we are textile conservators, they often say, "Oh you restore tapestries," and we answer that while we can't "restore" them, we do "conserve" them. But in this part of the world tapestries make up a very small portion of our work. More commonly we are asked to care for such things as historic costume, e.g. the 1850's wedding dress of Patty Reid, one of the survivors of the Donner Party, which is on exhibit at Sutter's Fort, Sacramento, Calif. In fact, we have done a lot of work on 19th century costume. We also see many Chinese textiles, painted flags and banners embroidered pictures, ornate ecclesiastical vestments and furnishings, pieced-work coverlets and quilts, and various other domestic linens from state historic homes, museums and private clients.

But let me tell you about our workshop. One large room serves as a general workroom with especially built tables that can be easily moved and disassembled as required. There is good natural light, supplemented by adjustable lamps for close work. The photography room is equipped with tripod, lights, backdrops, soft-board walls, a mannequin and a

boom which can be lowered or raised to permit hanging large flat textiles. We use a system of two 35mm cameras; one for black and white prints and one for color slides, and lenses for ordinary and macrophotography. A detailed log is kept of lighting conditions, exposure time and camera and object position so that the setup for the "before treatment" photograph can be duplicated for the "after treatment" one.

Our library doubles as office and small workroom. Here are kept the ever-burgeoning collection of papers, published and unpublished, on current research in the field of conservation, art historical reference material, textile history books and a good collection of works which deal with specific textile techniques.

Our kitchen has an area for scouring and dyeing fabrics and threads and an area for cleaning artifacts. Dye solutions are carefully labeled and dated. Pipettes, graduated cylinders and a balance beam are used for accurate liquid and weight measure, and we keep a file of dye formulations and swatches. Various cleaning agents, adhesives and consolidants, and volatile solvents are stored in closed cabinets. Trays and white boards are used for washing and drying small objects, while large textiles are washed in baths constructed to fit their exact dimensions.

Throughout the other rooms of the workshop are cabinets with broad, deep shelves for storing flat textiles and a large upright unit for rolled storage of both artifacts and fabric and paper supplies. We also have a closet for storing hanging costumes.

In addition to practical conservation of actual objects, we do on-site examinations and consultations of collections as well as giving lectures and workshops to small local museums, historical societies and embroiderers' guilds. As we meet with these people we generally find that they are eager to preserve historic artifacts but often they have no clear idea of how to go about it. We offer advice on safe, simple methods of cleaning and store to ensure protection from light, dust and moisture. We stress that structural conservation as well as most washing and dry cleaning should be left to the trained conservator. So what does a trained conservator do?

When a textile comes to us, our first task is to examine it carefully and thoroughly. We will want to identify the fibres and other material from which it is made and to determine its overall condition including structural weaknesses and/or damage.

to make note of missing parts, attack by mold or insect, soil accretions and stains caused by soiling, dye transfer, or oxidation. We will also look for former repairs and evidence of alterations. For museum quality pieces or in the case of special cleaning problems, we may include analyses of dyes and finishes and any non-fibre materials such as metal, bone or glass. Fortunately we still have strong ties with faculty and research personnel in the Textile Sciences Dept. at U.C. Davis, and at the Crocker Nuclear Laboratory, so analyses which would be difficult or impossible for us to do, can be carried out using some of today's most advanced technology. At the Workshop, we may also do thread counts and weave analyses. In addition, some objects warrant historical research.

After the examination/analysis a plan of treatment is devised, specific to each individual artifact, but adhering to the principals which govern responsible conservators everywhere. These are: First: an object should leave the hands of the conservator with all clues to its past history intact or fully recorded. This means that no part of an original artifact should be removed and nothing added, but that conservation should be given to ensure, as far as possible, the safety of that object. Second: any treatment given, such as attaching loosened threads, or mounting on a supportive lining, should be removable at a later date without damaging the artifact in the process. And third: there should never be an attempt to deceive. Original and additional areas (if they must be added for the stability of the textile) must be identifiable on close and knowledgeable inspection.

With these principles in mind, a treatment is planned which will usually include three stages: cleaning, structural supporting, and preparation for exhibition or storage. Cleaning may be restricted to careful vacuuming or it may include immersion in a bath of de-ionized water with a specific formulation of synthetic detergent and soil-suspending agents. Whatever method or combination of methods, thorough testing and documentation of results must first be carried out to determine that the procedure will be safe for the object and that it will indeed make the object cleaner. Usually textiles must be carefully and evenly supported while they are cleaned, without obstructing the flow of the cleaning solution and the removal of loosened soil. The choice of appropriate cleaning agents and the design of equipment for

support while cleaning and drying are important considerations often differing with each textile.

Once the textile is clean and realigned, it will be given support mounts, linings, patches, net coverings and sewing repairs as necessary to preserve its life without compromising its original integrity. Generally, loosened threads can be couched down, with very fine silk thread, to patches or a lining of new fabric of the same or very similar fibre, weave, weight and color. Sometimes limited amounts of reweaving or other types of reconstruction may be carried out. Very fragile textiles can sometimes be saved from rapid and complete disintegration by mounting them on new fabric using adhesives especially formulated for this purpose.

After the textile has been given its support, it is prepared for the environment to which it will return. A costume may need to have an especially built mannequin and case. Flat textiles may be mounted on cloth-covered strainers and framed using ultra-violet-light-filtered plexiglass. Items for storage must be rolled (if flat) or packaged to prevent creasing, stress, and exposure to light, dust, and moisture.

All work is photographed before and after treatment and while work is in progress if necessary. Most objects leave our hands with recommendations as to appropriate conditions for storage or display. These considerations are also dealt with in the original examination of the object and the discussion between client and conservator. Each object that comes to us is given a number and a file folder which will contain a log of all the treatment it receives; including cleaning formulas, notes on construction, drawings, a list of fabrics, threads, adhesives and consolidants if any are used, correspondence, exhibition record, and records of follow-up examinations.

Every textile is a unique creation with its own history and problems. Consequently the conservator must approach each object as an individual problem entailing the consideration of many factors before the most appropriate treatment can be devised. It is a challenging field in which we are always making discoveries.

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