

Practicing textile conservation

by Mary Juillet-Paonessa

Textile history fascinates me; quilt history fascinates me even more. After college, I gravitated to the New York City garment district and the Fashion Institute of Technology. When I later relocated to New England with my family and a fabric stash in tow, I started a business stitching other people's quilts.

In the beginning, clients asked for gift-type items: baby quilts, wedding quilts, and house-warming quilts. But word spread that I took on quilt projects no one else wanted to touch: the quilt "the poodle ate a hole in," the quilt that "grandma cut out but never got to finish piecing before she died," and the pre-printed embroidered top "Aunt Em stitched that her niece proudly bleached all the blue quilting dots off of." These were all restoration and completion projects, and the clients wanted the quilts to look like new.

Slowly, the age of the quilts and the issues that needed problem-solving

began to change, and I recognized my need for more education. Living in New England, clients never seem to run out of 19th-century quilt tops from their attics that need to be wet-cleaned and quilted. Many jobs involved repair and stabilization rather than restoration, and I needed to know the difference between the two techniques. I had to know if the quilts and quilt tops were strong enough for treatment or more valuable left as is. What appropriate storage and display techniques could I teach to quilt owners? To better serve my clients' needs, I began the master's degree program in Textile Conservation and Historic Research at the University of Rhode Island.

Conservation has two sides: theoretical and practical. The theoretical side relies on a basic knowledge of art history, textile history, technical advances, social changes, and chemistry. The practical side involves the time spent in internships and student

work experience, practicing stitching techniques, and investigating ways of handling difficult materials.

Now, when a textile comes into my studio, the first thing I do is study the piece and write a condition report before any treatment is undertaken. This systematic analysis creates a record of the history, size, materials, and condition of the object and is augmented by digital images of damaged areas. Outlines of one or more recommended treatment proposals follow the condition report. Together with the client, decisions are made concerning the most appropriate methods for cleaning, repairing, and storing or displaying the quilt, balancing the needs of the client with the conservator's credo of "do no harm." The conservation process focuses on maintaining the historic integrity of the quilt, preserving valuable evidence of social and technical histories for the future.

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How you can help with the future conservation of your art quilt

- Keep a precise list of all the materials and techniques used to create your art quilt.
- Examine the art quilt on a regular basis. Look for evidence of infestation and/or the breakdown of materials. Note the changes and take digital images of the affected areas.
- Vacuum the front and back of the quilt on a regular basis. Place window screening, available at the local hardware store, cut into a large square and edged with binding (to eliminate rough edges) over the piece to prevent the vacuum from suctioning up anything but the particulate matter. Putting a finger between the window screening and the vacuum tool will reduce the strength of the suction.
- Store art quilts in an area away from drastic changes in temperature and humidity. Storage spaces in the interior of your studio or home usually maintain the most constant conditions.
- Use cotton fabric as dust covers. It can be laundered periodically to remove dust. Conservation companies sell archival tissue paper and boxes specially designed to store textiles safely. Choose a box large enough to minimize the amount of folds in the piece. The folds create stress on the fabric and stitches, which over time can lead to breaks in the fibers along the creases.
- Storage tubes, long enough to roll the textile without folding it, can also be used. These are also available from conservation supply companies. Cover rolled objects with a cotton tube dust cover which can be laundered periodically. Although this is an appealing option, I always worry about the stress put on the fibers that end up rolled on the outside of the tube.

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Fellow conservators Susan Jerome and Elsbeth Dijkhoorn have joined me in the business this past year. Each brings complementary experience in textile history, collection care, and management, weaving, and dyeing. We met at the University of Rhode Island, where we all received master's degrees from the Department of Textiles, Fashion Merchandising and Design.

The bigger challenges lie ahead of us, as recent innovations include technological advances in textiles, battings, interlinings, fusibles,

adhesives, and notions. Quiltmakers experiment with all the latest products coming into the market. Just as time has shown how decisions made by 19th-century dye manufacturers affected the colorfast properties of brown, black, and green dyes, it will also show us the effects of adhesives, paints, and thread choices on the variety of fabrics being used in modern quilts. Storage and exhibition practices, as well as environmental concerns, affect how slowly or quickly modern textile products begin to deteriorate.

Art quilts are subject to even greater risks because of the experimental nature of some of the work. Techniques borrowed from the art world include a host of printing techniques, transfer processes, screenprinting, and photo transfers, to name a few. Painted and dyed fabric surfaces, along with attached recycled materials, glitter, beads, shells, wood, and

feathers, create chemical reactions that may jeopardize the lifespan of the piece. Organic in nature, even cotton decays over time. Manmade fibers and other materials frequently begin to decompose just a few years after manufacture.

Art quilts displayed in public venues are often exposed to long-term stresses such as light, dirt, extreme climate changes, and environmental contaminants. Moving textiles from one venue to another creates another kind of stress as they are handled, packed, and shipped. As these works of art age, conservators will be challenged to learn more about the aging processes of 20th- and 21st-century materials in order to preserve these artifacts for the future. ▼

CT Quilt Works, a textile conservation studio, is located in Lyme, Connecticut. Mary Juillet-Paonessa can be contacted at ctquiltworks@aol.com.

Suppliers of Archival Materials

Conservation Resources International:
www.conservationresources.com

Gaylord: www.gaylord.com

Light Impressions:
www.lightimpressionsdirect.com

Talas: www.talas-nyc.com

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