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Brooklyn Museum of Art

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Catering to the Designer: Stewart Culin’s Study Rooms at The Brooklyn Museum of Art

by

Kathleen Moore

In 1918, Stewart Culin, Curator of Ethnology, opened his first “study room” at The Brooklyn Museum of Art, filled it with Indian cottons, and invited American designers to use it for inspiration.

While Culin never designed a textile or costume and never deviated from his scholarly and curatorial roles, he in effect functioned as both master of a design library and informal manufacturer’s agent. American designers responded by incorporating ideas gleaned from the materials he offered them. Stores displayed his exhibitions and even bought from the same sources he collected from.

This presentation will explore how Culin saw himself, his museum and his specialty (ethnography) as active participants in the shaping of both an American design aesthetic and specific textile and costume designs. American costume will enter the discussion secondarily, as examples of designs that have been filtered through an “ethnographic” clothing reference, rendering a study room object marketable.

At the site (The Brooklyn Museum of Art) materials from the Stewart Culin Archive and the Special Collections will be displayed, and everyone will be encouraged to participate in an extended discussion after the presentation. Issues for discussion will include: How curators and museums affect the marketplace and are affected by it; what factors during and after World War I were prompting the development of an American aesthetic; what were the elements of that aesthetic; what changes have occurred in the tradition of museums inspiring designers.

Kathleen Moore is a textile and costume historian and consultant whose recent work has ranged from evaluating collections of 20th-century swatches, swatchbooks and related design materials for the Brooklyn Museum of Art to participating in the development of MONA, a library of digital images of 19th and 20th century textiles from the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She has installed costumes at the new Jazz Museum in Kansas City, worked for Cora Ginsburg, Inc., and prepared auctions at Metropolitan Antiques and William Doyle Galleries. In 1992, she left a position as senior fashion editor at Women’s Wear Daily to enroll in the Museum Studies program at the Graduate Division of the Fashion Institute of Technology, where she has completed course work toward a Masters Degree and is working on her thesis on Jacqueline Kennedy and the politics of fashion.