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Before there was Pinterest: Textile Study Rooms in North American “Art” Museums
Sarah Fee

I am a curator of Textiles & Costume at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto, Canada. I belong to a discrete Textile & Costume section, with a dedicated Textile & Costume gallery (the Patricia Harris Gallery). This is the Museum’s only cultural department organized by medium; all others are grouped by geography: Europe, West Asia, East Asia, Greek and Roman, Americas, Africa, etc. Looking to other large encyclopedic museums, a similar pattern can be found. When I informally poll my counterparts, they attribute the unique segregation of textiles by medium to the fragile and particular nature of the materials, which requires specialized expertise. But as I began to research the origins of museum textile departments, I found this explanation to be anachronistic. In fact, museums in their early years, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had little concern for the fragility of textiles. They routinely displayed pieces for twenty or thirty years running, allowed the public to handle them almost at will, loaned them to high schools, even cut up full pieces to create samples. In the beginning, textiles were among the most accessible of museum objects, the opposite of today.

This essay explores the historic roots for the creation of textile departments in large North American museums of art and culture. In particular, it examines the Textile Study Room, a public service offered by major encyclopedic museums in the twentieth century. Excellent studies exist on the history of collecting, displaying and curating textiles in individual North American museums. Yet, while each institution certainly has its historic idiosyncracies, my essay develops Pamela Parmal’s (2006:14) observation that all of them were part of a wider museum movement, one that can be traced in large part to the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. In doing so, I hope to make a secondary point: long before the creation of online collection databases and Pinterest, museums were intent on sharing textiles with the widest possible audience, with a range of communities and walks of social life and developed ingenious means to do so. Indeed, in their early years, at least, they collected textiles (and costume) with this very intention.

A response to the call of the TSA 2014 Biennial Symposium to reflect on the rich history of our field, this study represents a work in progress, to date based primarily on early museum reports and secondary sources.

In the service of design and industry: textiles in large North American Museums

In Establishing Dress History, Lou Taylor (2004) observes that textiles were routinely collected by most museums from their earliest days. It is useful to remember that there exist various kinds of museums, and their distinct mandates have resulted in varying strategies vis-à-vis textile collecting. Cloth objects appear in the first curiosity cabinets assembled by elite Europeans, as well as public collections. One cabinet in Ulm, Germany, contains African tunics acquired before 1649, while the British Museum by 1762 took in “a piece of lace made by Queen Elizabeth” (Taylor 2004:106). In modern times there have existed:
1. Dedicated textile museums. Quite rare, they generally grew out of private collections;
2. The university art museum, devoted primarily to instructing students;
3. Museums associated with university home economics departments, which typically originate in teaching collections assembled by professors;¹
4. Historic homes and other buildings, which often house period dress and textiles;
5. Ethnographic museums, which from early times collected textiles and dress. Notes and Queries, the bible of anthropological collecting, in its 1892 second edition made dress a #1 priority. Ruth Barnes (1992) has shown how collectors might follow this guide to the letter in making collections.
6. My study concerns a sixth type of institution. This is the large “encyclopedic” or “universal” museum of art and culture, which gathered objects from around the world, sometimes including natural history specimens. As can be seen in Table 1, all of North America’s prominent institutions of this type, in addition to acquiring cloth, had dedicated textile departments, curators and/or galleries, many from c. 1900. Why were they all so keen to collect, study and display textiles?

| American Museum of Natural History, New York City |
| Art Institute of Chicago |
| Baltimore Museum of Art |
| Brooklyn Museum of Art |
| Cincinnati Art Museum |
| Cleveland Museum of Art |
| Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum (Smithsonian Institution), New York City |
| Detroit Institute of Arts |
| Denver Art Museum |
| Young/Legion of Honor Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco |
| Indiana Museum of Art, Indianapolis |
| Los Angeles County Museum of Art |
| McCord Museum, Montreal |
| Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City |
| Minneapolis Institute of Arts |
| Museum of Fine Arts, Boston |
| Museum of International Folkart, Santa Fe |
| Peabody Essex Museum, Salem MA |
| Philadelphia Museum of Art |
| Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto |
| U.S. National Museum (original Smithsonian Institution Museum), Washington D.C. |
| Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Harford CT |

Table 1. Large museums of art or culture in North America with dedicated Textile Departments, Study Rooms, Galleries and/or Textile Curatorships at some point in the twentieth century.² Source: Lubell 1976.

The answer begins to emerge when one recognizes that most of today’s famous art museums in North America began not as “fine arts treasure houses,” but rather as museums of art and industry or art and science. The Golden Age of museum building in America (and continental Europe) occurred between 1875 and 1925, fueled by a complex mix of forces. Seeing that it came at a peak time of state building, industrialization and colonization, scholars have offered many theories to

¹ See Welters and Ordonez 2011 for a history of collections with university home economics department ties.
² Winterthur and the Yale University Art Gallery represent two smaller, specialized museums with dedicated textile curators or study rooms in the twentieth century (Lubell 1976).
explain the construction craze: attempts to control citizens, workers, immigrants or labor unrest, to inculcate human evolutionary hierarchies, or was more benignly guided by the ideals of the “Age of Reform” and Progressivism which sought to democratize access to education and moral uplift.

Most pertinent to our discussion, Stewart McClellan (2008:32) notes that another major aim of early museums was promoting national industry, both in production and consumption.

Serving as the world leader in this last objective was the South Kensington Museum in London. 3 Founded in 1852 as the Museum of Manufactures, based on the collections of the 1851 “Exhibition of Industry of All Nations,” it was in 1899 renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum, or V&A. Design reform and social reform were its dual mandate: “on one hand, to stimulate native design and manufacture through a comprehensive display of decorative and applied arts; on the other, to provide taste and wholesome recreation to the masses who had flocked to the capital in search of work” (McClellan 2008:32). At the helm of the V&A were Henry Cole and Owen Jones, leaders of the design reform movement who, to cite Dilys Blum (1997:107), “reformulated the principles of decorative design in terms of industrial manufacturing, seeking to encourage the production of objects that were both useful and beautiful.” These men stocked their museum with what they considered the best examples of design, both European and nonwestern, mostly from bygone times. In selecting objects they were joined by proponents of the Arts & Crafts movements, notably William Morris, who militated against the machine-made and industrial, but encouraged the study of these same museum objects by craftsmen to perfect their pursuit of the handmade. All these actors passionately believed that the tastes and habits of designers, workmen, merchants, salesmen and consumers would be vastly improved by direct contact with the so-called “best objects from the past.” Workers were further offered free entry and evening hours in the hope of combatting the dehumanizing effects of mechanization, as well as the misuse of newly-acquired leisure time, a substitute for beer halls and tawdry dime museums.

Scholars have shown that in creating museums most American cities directly adopted the V&A model. 4 Many grew out of existing philanthropic organizations – Mechanics’ Halls or Apprentice Libraries – aimed at improving the vocational and domestic lives of working men and women. Encouraging local industries and elevating consumer tastes were also explicit aims. Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), “in the first public announcement of the purpose of its foundation, gave out that one was ‘to provide opportunities and means of instruction in drawing and designing with their industrial application,’ and the first expenditure for works of art was in 1876 for the ‘advancement of artistic design in the industries of Massachusetts’” (MFA Annual Report 1898:10). Likewise, the original 1870 charter of today’s grande dame of fine arts museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA), sought the "application of arts to manufacture and practical life" and "furnishing popular instruction"; until 1940, it devoted staff, exhibits, and publications to industrial design and outreach (Guglielmo 2012). The movement gained momentum in 1876 when the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibit – officially titled “The International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine” – put to shame American manufacturers, particularly those in the field of textiles (Blum 1997:11). Many objects from the Exhibition were used to create the nucleus of the Pennsylvania Museum, later renamed the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), which (as many other museums) was simultaneously provisioned with a School of

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3 A large body of literature traces the many historic roots of the V&A - notably manufacturing competition with Paris - and the V&A’s influence on museums around the world. See Burton 1999 and Taylor 2004 among others.

4 In fact, many North American museums engaged V&A staff as acquisition advisors or collectors.
Industrial Art and, from 1883, a Textile School. The Brooklyn Museum, meanwhile, began its life in 1890 as the Museum of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts & Sciences and, like the Newark Museum, partnered with department stores for exhibit curation. Even major natural history and ethnographic museums, including the Field Museum of Natural History and the American Museum of Natural History, initially had mandates to collect objects for the inspiration of U.S. manufacturers.⁵

Steven Conn (1998) asserts that by c.1910 American art museums, led by the MMA, had severed most ties with industry and the working masses as they began to recast themselves as “fine art” museums, as “temples” rather than “schools.” But there is an exception: textiles. The development and sharing of textile collections, departments and displays continued to be nurtured in museums throughout the U.S. – including at the MMA – precisely due to their links to industry.

Before there was Pinterest: Textile Study Rooms

Several studies have admirably traced the histories of individual museum textile departments, their collections and display strategies, oftentimes noting their early ties to design reform or industrial art initiatives (Blum 1997, Jacknis 2004, Parmal 2006, Peck 2013, Stayton ca. 2009, Tartsinis 2013, Thurman 1978).⁶ They tend to leave the impression of isolated endeavors, the novel initiative of a prescient curator or trustee. As Parmal (2006:14) suggests, however, this public outreach and collaboration were in fact common practice. My comparative cross-museum study shows indeed that textiles were in museums most everywhere accorded special status in the work of inspiring industry and providing social uplift. This occurred due to several reasons: first, cloth was considered a privileged source of surface design for all media, and secondly, textile production was at the time in most western countries a critical national industry and main employer.

While museums were mandated to share their textile collections with wide audiences, exhibition hall vitrines allowed for the display of only a small number of pieces. Many museums sought to overcome this limitation with the Textile Study Room.⁷ This sort of self-service open storage or library made available thousands of textiles – and sometimes costume – to the public through special mounting and compact storage. The inspiration again appears to have emanated from the V&A in London.⁸ Below, I outline the general features of the main proponents: Boston’s MFA, New York’s MMA, Philadelphia’s PMA, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the Brooklyn Museum. Not coincidentally, these same cities were some of the America’s most active textile and garment design and manufacturing centers. Although varying slightly from institution to institution, Textile Study Rooms in the U.S. largely followed a similar format.

Textile Study Rooms: their layout and arrangement

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⁵ The enormous, but long defunct, Philadelphia Commercial Museum had similar goals, although largely for improving US export manufactures (Conn 1998). The Cooper Hewitt Museum has best retained the original charter of making the “museum the active center of all art industrial workers.”

⁶ See also the series on the history of museum textile departments in the TSA Newsletter, 1995-1998.

⁷ Textile Study Rooms might also be called Textile Rooms, Textile Store-Rooms, Textile Study Collections, Textile Department, or Textile Study Galleries.

⁸ By 1866 Henry Cole himself had devised a carousel display stand to hold frames containing V&A prints and textile fragments (Burton 1999:84). Emulating the V&A model from the 1860s, Germany’s many dedicated industrial art museums also had elegant Textile Study Rooms (Richards 1927).
It appears that Boston’s MFA was the early leader in North America, creating a Textile Room in 1898, followed by New York’s MMA in 1909 (Peck 2013:10, MFA Annual Report 1899:12). Photographs, floor plans and descriptions reveal that North American Textile Study Rooms were usually a large single room, furnished and arranged in every detail to facilitate consultation. Testament to the priority put on public access, the Detroit Institute of Arts placed its room “conveniently housed in light and spacious quarters on the ground floor, opposite the reference library” (Weibel 1928:44).

On the one hand, the Textile Study Room served to store those textiles considered as “study collections” or “documents” not attractive enough for display or, as at the MMA, for all textiles not on exhibit. On the other hand, the Room was equipped with special collections and custom-made furniture: small pieces of fabric – usually fragments – were mounted on linen or cotton stretched on wooden frames⁹ that fit into specially constructed slotted wooden cabinets lining the room. These same mounted frames, which came in several sizes, facilitated other purposes, too: temporary gallery displays (being hung on walls or placed on specially built desk cases) or for loan. By 1901, the MFA had 4100 pieces mounted in this manner, representing four-fifths of its collection (Brooks 1902:102). Some museums encased each frame with glass panes, although the Art Institute of Chicago – which belatedly created a Textile Study Room in 1940 – eschewed glass to keep the frames lightweight and allow for the best up-close viewing of detail (Anonymous 1947:6). Large and full textiles were placed on sliding shelves or, in the case of Detroit, displayed in wall or table cases. Garments and accessories, as well as “passementeries, gimps, braids, fringes, and tassels” might simply be stored on shelves in cabinets, again freely accessible to the public (Morris 1915:7).

Desks or a large table and chairs were provided for visitors to lay out pieces or frames for study (Figure 1). Difficult to imagine today, ink or watercolors might also be on offer. In addition, a reading library was often located near or in the Room. The Art Institute of Chicago had by 1947 further placed in its Study Room “related photographs, books, periodicals and superb kodachrome slides” and, from 1962, original manuscripts and sample books (Anonymous 1947:6; Davison 1962:10). As a final amenity, in Detroit, the curator’s desk was placed in the corner of the Room so that her “advice and assistance can be readily obtained” (Weibel 1928:45).

Textile Study Rooms supplemented, rather than replaced, the ongoing display of textiles in exhibition halls: in dedicated textile galleries, in galleries devoted to source countries, or as décor in period rooms. By 1925, the MMA counted, in addition to its Study Room (which in 1917 was moved from the basement to a more prominent room at the north end of Wing H), a gallery devoted to lace and two others galleries, the one filled “with woven fabrics and embroideries from India and the Near East” and the other with European rugs, prints, embroideries and woven pieces (MMA Annual Report 1925:18). Yet, here, too, the goal was maximizing quantity and design instruction: each gallery was equipped with desk cases at the center of the room displaying “a series of mounts illustrating a chronological sequence that enables the student to follow the history of weaves form Coptic fragments of the fifth century to modern loom work of the nineteenth century, and at the same time to note the interesting migration of pattern as it developed in the various countries” (Morris 1925:102). The proximity of these galleries to the Textile Study Room was intended to offer “a better perspective of the art of weaving than has been possible from the mounted fragments in the Study Room collection” (ibid.). The Art Institute of Chicago likewise had four galleries

⁹ The MFA’s frames measured 30 inches by 21.5 inches (Morris 1915:3).
devoted to displays (and storage) of textiles, in addition to its study room (Davison 1962:9). Other institutions, such as the Royal Ontario Museum, in the early years simply crammed the dedicated textile gallery – as well as any empty wall or space – with hundreds of pieces for public viewing (Royal Ontario Museum 1919).\(^\text{10}\)

Stocking Textile Study Rooms and servicing design and industry strongly shaped museum textile acquisition – as well as dealer – practices in the first decades of the twentieth century. The textile collecting mandate of the PMA Museum was in early years limited to the purchase of “objects that could serve as models for the application of art to industry” (Blum 1997:47). Thus, from 1929 the Museum acquired 456 early French prints, at a time when French provincial design was all the rage with consumers (ibid.). For her acquisitions, MMA curator Frances Morris felt compelled to respond to the American textile industry and the schools of design when there came “daily an increasing number of calls for ‘Georgian’ and ‘flowered’ patterns” (Peck 2013:6). For cost and ease of handling, fragments were preferred and actively acquired. Some dealers specialized in this task, cutting up yardage and garments – church vestments in particular – and selling pieces to multiple museums (Blum 1997:11). The Textile Department at the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum of History & Technology (present day National Museum of American History) meanwhile created its own study file of swatches by cutting off pieces from full-sized accessioned textiles and attaching them to file cards. Seeking large, comprehensive collections that could demonstrate historic “progress” in a given genre, museums often acquired fragments in large lots, as in 1877 when the PMA acquired 300 woven swatches from the French dealer M. Fulgence, or in 1911 when the nascent Royal Ontario Museum acquired 346 pieces of historic lace, assembled (and framed) by dealer Samuel Chick that were originally destined for the V&A (Currelly 1956:195). The resulting sheer quantity and speed of textile collection building is startling. By 1928 the DIA had 2,000 double-sided frames in its study room, with many more pieces on shelves and in vitrines; the MMA had already assembled some 12,000 items by 1925.

\[\text{Figure 1. The Pennsylvania Museum, later the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Textile Study Room, Memorial Hall, 1930 or 1931. Philadelphia Museum of Art Archives}
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\[\text{Copyright Philadelphia Museum of Art}\]

\[^{10}\] Eventually, The Royal Ontario Museum did create a Textile Study Room of sorts (Brett 1957:24).
Textile Study Room Contents: The Canon

As with room layout and furnishing, great uniformity can be found in the types of textiles or “documents” that were initially acquired to fill Textile Study Rooms. Certainly, market availability strongly influenced acquisition; due to political events and scientific discoveries, Spanish velvets, “Coptic” textiles and imperial Chinese dress each became widely available on international art markets at various times (Blum 1997). And yet, supply was not the sole force. Dilys Blum’s (1997) findings for PMA collecting strategies can be extended to all the study rooms here under consideration. She shows that the guiding principles were provided by the tenets of Design Reform and Arts & Crafts which, as noted previously, centered on “the best objects of the past.” In addition, I would argue, although often claiming to provide “a complete textile survey,” the study rooms, by in fact privileging pieces from Egypt, the Mediterranean and Europe, and through their physical arrangement, fit with the wider Victorian museum meta-narrative placing Western culture and art as “the crowning achievements of …civilization and human creativity” (Conn 1998:12).

Typically textiles were classified by the four basic techniques: woven fabrics, prints, embroideries and lace. Within these broad categories, pieces were arranged chronologically and/or geographically. Considered of “great interest to the designers,” and for the study of weave structures, brocades and damasks were included in great numbers (Blum 1997:12). Typically, they covered Coptic and early Mediterranean, Moorish Spain, and finally French silk brocades and Italian velvets. Velvets, both Italian and Persian, occupying a “high place in design” were much desired (Brooks 1902). Prints and embroideries focused on the English, French, Indian and Middle Eastern. Large collections of historic European lace were requisite, a trend which, in North America, Blum (1997:63) traces to yet another influential, world exhibition, the Columbia World’s Fair of Chicago of 1893, where exhibits of Italian homemade lace had excited great interest at a time when machine made versions were dominant. Indeed, a number of museums – including the MMA, Royal Ontario Museum and the Smithsonian’s U.S. National Museum – created dedicated Lace Galleries after 1900. Rarely were contemporary textiles collected or included before WWII, although there were exceptions, notably at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Concerning nonwestern textiles, a few select types were consistently included. These were Persian, Turkish, Indian, Chinese and Pre-Columbian Peruvian. The rationale for the first two is aptly summarized by Blum (1997:107) and deserves quoting in full:

“Among the examples of ‘good design’ to which these [nineteenth century design] reformers looked were the ornamental forms found in Mediterranean and Middle eastern art, from the abstract and stylized designs of ancient Egypt and Greece to the rich, harmonious colors and flat, ornamental patterns of Turkey and Persia. …Thus among the textiles purchased by the Pennsylvania Museum in its first years were Turkish brocades and velvets, Greek Island embroideries, and Persian embroideries and costume.”

Additional interest in Persian textiles, Blum continues, was “possibly a result of the debate among scholars over the relationship of Persian and Coptic textile design to that of Byzantine silks” while Egyptian textiles became readily available with increased excavations from the 1880s through 1920.

The inclusion of select South Asian and East Asian textiles in study rooms can likewise be traced in part to Design Reform preferences. Indian prints and weavings were especially admired by Owen Jones and his disciples for their “flat patterning and harmonious coloring” which provided an alternative to western mass produced goods focused on naturalistic imitation (Blum 1997:129).
Japanese and Chinese silk brocades were included due to perceived high technical skills, the flooding of art markets with the material from respectively 1860 and 1910, and the renewed widespread western fascination with both cultures. “A very complete collection of Japanese and Chinese brocades” – mostly Noh theatre costume and priest’s robes – was acquired by the MMA in 1919 with the hope they “will prove of great interest to designers and silk workers” (MMA Annual Report 1919:22). Similarly, the Royal Ontario Museum justified its 1918 purchase of a large collection of imperial Chinese costume by the design inspiration and cultural insights it would afford Canadian merchants entering into the Asia trade. Thus the use of study collections by manufacturers envisaging exports could be highly predatory: their industrial imitations of foreign handmade wares, particularly for sale to India and China, were made to compete with and eventually undermine local artisans. The only Southeast Asian pieces routinely included in Textile Study Rooms were batiks from Central Java. This choice can be linked to Arts & Crafts admiration for harmonious design and craftsmanship, the art of batik resist-dye having been eagerly taken up by craftsmen in Europe and North America in the early 1900s (Blum 1997:149).

Finally, for indigenous American textiles, only two types were routinely featured in Textile Study Rooms: archaeological Pre-Columbian Peruvian fabrics (mostly Paracas) and unidentified “North American” works, likely Navaho blankets (Jacknis forthcoming).

African and other “tribal” textiles and fashion were as a rule excluded from the Rooms, with the exception of three associations with ethnographic museums or collections. Ira Jacknis (2004) demonstrates that, into the 1970s, students at faculty of the University of California at Berkeley’s Design and Decorative Arts Department made extensive use of the ethnographic collections at the University’s Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology (as well as building up a separate, departmental collection, later donated to the Hearst). Ann Marguerite Tartsinis (2013) shows that in New York, during World War I, the American Museum of Natural History anthropology department targeted textile and fashion students, designers, makers and merchants. Curator-anthropologists Clark Wissler and Herbert Spinden teamed up with M.D.C. Crawford, a fashion insider and aficionado of Peruvian weaving, to create a special Textile Study Room (open by appointment), a lecture and pamphlet series, and to additionally loan pieces to designers and manufacturers. At the start they focused on indigenous objects from the Americas in the hopes of contributing to a wider movement aimed at creating a distinct American design vocabulary, but by the end of WWI had expanded to include dress and design from Siberia, Africa and Southeast Asia. During these same years, at the Brooklyn Museum, pioneering Curator of Ethnology Stewart Culin “responded to the sudden hiatus in the flow of fashion from Paris by establishing a study collection for the inspiration of designers and the garment industry” (Stayton ca. 2009). Working with Crawford, he opened a Textile Study Room in 1918 “filled with ethnographic objects from Africa, Asia, eastern Europe, India and North America” (Lawrence 1997:4). Although, in some ways unique, these three experiments should nevertheless be understood within the wider museum-industrial art collaboration and Textile Study Room movement of the time.

The Impact of Textile Study Room and their Public
Although they may appear quaint today, in the first decades of the twentieth century, Textile Study Rooms were considered revolutionary. In 1923 pioneering textile curator Frances Morris observed

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11 See King 2005 and Schneider 1987, among many others.
12 The Newark Museum in WWI years focused locally, hosting events to promote New Jersey manufactures (Dietz 1998).
“It is not so many years back that the American designer of textile fabrics who could not afford a trip abroad was obliged to content himself, in his search for inspiration, with publications … but today every advantage accorded to students in foreign museums is available in New York” (cited in Peck 2013:6). Most rooms were free and open daily to the public, during regular museum hours. The Annual Reports of many museums proudly claimed that craft workers, design students and professionals, interior decorators, department store buyers and sales personnel, manufacturers and others flocked to the rooms. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts from 1906-1909 counted annually about 800 visitors to its Textile Room located in the basement; after a move to a new building in 1910, the rate rose to over 1450 visitors per year, with up to 317 in a single month (Flint 1910:74, Flint 1911:210). They were primarily students of the attached art school, but also “students of design, teachers, lace-makers, embroiderers, dyers and weavers, also … members of the various arts and crafts societies” (Flint 1906:58). In 1925, the MMA study room recorded 1,129 visitors, who made some 2,673 drawings (MMA Annual Report 1925:18). Their greatest users appear to have been textile and apparel designers and makers, both student and professional. Blum (1997:11) notes that the Textile School of the PMA Art School, with its over 20 faculty and hundreds of students, turned to museum collections as the “primary resource for the study of weaving techniques, textile design, and surface decoration.” Tartsinis (2013) and Lawrence (1997) reveal that the WWI-era study rooms at the AMNH and Brooklyn Museum, particularly the embroidered costumes of Persian and fabrics of Peru, led to modern interpretations by “some of America’s leading designers such as Edward L. Mayer, Ruth Reeves, Jessie Franklin Turner, Max Meyer and Vera Maxwell” (Lawrence 1997:5). In Brooklyn, Culin’s 1923 exhibit on African art and outreach to manufacturers inspired, among other things, a line of “readymade sport clothes made from the newly introduced ‘Congo Cloth’ designed by Frank Meyer of Blanck & Co.” (Lawrence 1997:5). Unlike the AMNH, Brooklyn continued this mission, resulting in a design research laboratory “with study rooms and collections at the disposal of member firms and designers” (ibid.). Likewise, at the Royal Ontario museum, well into the 1950s, curators were lecturing to fashion students using museum objects, the final student projects including a woman’s modern wardrobe based on “a Chinese woman’s coat and skirt” (Brett 1957:22).

But what of the original Social Reform museum goals of improving the lives of the working masses, with V&A curator Gilbert Redgrave committed to addressing “the iniquities of the sweated dressmaking trades” (Taylor 2004:108)? Data is less available on this demographic of visitors. One interesting nexus of working women, museums, collecting, and study rooms is the aforementioned widespread trend of acquiring lace and displaying it in dedicated galleries. In Philadelphia, elite women set up philanthropic lace making projects as remunerative work for Italian and Irish immigrant women (Blum 1997:63). In Chicago, too, the Antiquarian Society, originally “an association of ladies,” “sought to help impoverished women master the skills of an honorable trade, particularly by training women artists and artisans in the applied arts. With the aid of teachers in drawing, painting, and needlework, the early Antiquarians embarked on improving the quality of women’s work and creating a market for it. Admiration for the resultant handiwork was so great that the society was invited to occupy rooms at the newly organized Art Institute of Chicago” (Art Institute of Chicago n.d.). The society later revised its charter “for the sole object of making collections of antique and artistic textile fabrics, and other objects of decorative art, for the museum of the Art Institute” (ibid.).
Certainly the rapid creation of large holdings of textiles from 1875-1925 was a boon for textile scholarship and the professionalization of textile collection management. By 1923 the MMA had acquired over 12,000 pieces, some 75% of its current holdings, a trend that is likely true of other institutions as well. The need to staff study rooms and create exhibits in dedicated galleries gave rise to the creation of textile curator positions and in many (but not all) instances dedicated textile departments. It also provided the vast comparative corpus necessary for the first structural studies of textiles. The 1920s and 30s saw the birth of pioneering research on textile structure by (predominantly female) textile curators, made possible only through the examination of a wide pool of actual physical specimens (e.g. Nancy Reath, Dorothy Burnham).

**Conclusion: the Death and Rebirth of Textile Study Rooms**

Following World War II, the raison d’etre of the Textile Study Room progressively waned. Textile manufacturing moved from the east coast of the U.S. to the southern states, before manufacturing of all types moved offshore. Simultaneously, within museums and the university, there occurred a shift in the perceived status and value of textiles, away from utilitarian objects and “decorative arts” to “art.” The labor and costs of their care rose correspondingly. Kevin Stayton (ca. 2009) neatly summarizes that textiles “that had entered the collection as study objects to be stashed in full drawers, and then used became works of art that happened to be made of textile, a particularly fragile and demanding material with costly restrictions in storage and exhibition.” New standards of conservation and display militated against the handling of objects by an untrained public, and against mounting and storing on archivally-unsafe wooden frames or shelves. In 1962, the Art Institute of Chicago opened a refurbished textile study room, only to close it five years later, due to space and conservation concerns (Thurman 1978:3). In many museums, costume became the new collecting focus (Parmal 2006:20). Over the 1960s and 70s, many Textile Study Rooms were disassembled, their artefacts removed from frames to be housed with the rest of the collection in new storage facilities. Two study room leaders, the MMA and the V&A, were the last to close their public rooms: the former in the 1990s, the latter in 2011. The pieces were transferred to off-site state-of-the-art storage, conservation and study facilities, respectively the Antonio Ratti Textile Center and the Clothworkers Centre for Textiles and Fashion Study and Conservation. As *memento mori*, the newly opened Clothworkers Centre retained one original wooden cabinet with its framed textiles. The PMA’s new Dorrance H. Hamilton Center for Costume and Textiles represents another state-of-the-art update on the past, its study area frequented by students of the Philadelphia University Textile Design Program, direct descendant of the Museum’s Textile School.

The recasting of textiles as “art” from industrial object arguably contributed for a time, in the 1980s and 90s, to a broader malaise in encyclopedic museum textile departments. Fiscal crises and changing priorities caused some departments to be reduced, abolished or absorbed by Decorative Art Departments. In the 2000s, however, reconfiguring and/or renaming departments and collections as “Textile Arts” has helped to attract internal museum and donor support, leading to revitalized and refurbished programs at many major museums. A second trend has been to reformulate textile and costume collections to emphasize their links to fashion. The immense success of the “blockbuster” Alexander McQueen retrospective exhibition of 2011 at the Costume Institute in New York – one of the most profitable and successful exhibits in museum history – was a catalyst in this direction. As a consequence, some departments of Textiles & Costume, including

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13 These departments might be independent, or under the aegis of Decorative Arts departments.
the Royal Ontario Museum, where I work, have recently been renamed Textiles & Fashion. Thus, so as in the past, museums and their textile departments continue to be shaped by the larger cultural and economic cues of their times.

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