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Susan M. Strawn

Dominican University, sstrawn@dom.edu

Mary A. Littrell

Colorado State University - Fort Collins, mlittrel@cahs.colostate.edu

Linda Carlson

Colorado State University - Fort Collins, carlson@CAHS.Colostate.edu

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Preserving Provenance: Collaborative Conversation with a Textile Collector

Susan M. Strawn
Dominican University
River Forest, IL 60305
sstrawn@dom.edu

Mary A. Littrell
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80522
mlittrel@cahs.colostate.edu

Linda Carlson
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80522
carlson@CAHS.Colostate.edu

Introduction

Donations of textile collections are essential for universities and museums that rely on historical and ethnographic textiles for research, teaching, and exhibitions. In turn, collectors who have amassed substantial numbers of textiles seek appropriate donation venues. Provenance related to collecting individual textiles may be lost, however, before a donor selects an institution, or before the donation has been accessioned into a university or museum collection. A donation received after the demise of a donor who did not document individual pieces limits the provenance—the history of the source and ownership—of individual textiles. Without provenance, it is tempting to see even the most intriguing textiles as inanimate objects. In addition, limited provenance restricts the story-telling ability of textiles. In this paper, we describe a method intended to capture provenance for each textile in a living donation bequeathed as a planned gift.

Judi Arndt Central Asian Collection

Judith (Judi) Arndt, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, is a textile artisan and collector. She established a career as a professional interior designer and lived abroad for many years with her husband and children. As time permitted, she studied and developed skills in dyeing and weaving. Informed by her understanding of the patience and time required for hand-produced textiles, she collected pieces that were specific to her interest in natural dyes and complex weaving techniques. When did she realize that she had a collection?

. . . when I realized that my passion for travel and textiles came together as a single focus, and the textiles were starting to take over my home. While traveling to various underdeveloped areas I also wanted to support what women in these countries were doing to support their families. They were making a living from producing the same crafts that I had been doing since the late 1950s.

Judi grew to love Asian textiles, Central Asian textiles in particular. Aware that the strength of her collection lay in dye and weaving techniques, she sought an appropriate educational venue that would use her collection for teaching and research. Her network of textile enthusiasts acquainted her with the strong ethnic focus of the textile program at Colorado State University, where faculty members have strong roots in socially responsible production and marketing of artisan textiles. Based on these factors, she decided on the Museum of Design and Merchandising, a facility housed within the Department of Design and Merchandising at Colorado State University.

Museum of Design and Merchandising

The Museum of Design and Merchandising, previously known as the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, began more than 50 years ago with donations of private holdings from individual faculty members. The Museum includes more than 12,000 objects and has expanded

to encompass interior furnishings. Housed in an appropriately controlled facility, this is among the largest academic research and teaching collections in the country. The mission statement for the Museum reflects its use for research and teaching:

As a museum, the purpose is to obtain, document, preserve, and exhibit artifacts of regional, national, and international significance emphasizing the material culture (and cultural transfer) of the near environment. As a teaching and research facility, the Museum is a repository of historically significant costumes, textiles, and interior furnishings useful to scholars and students primarily in the fields of clothing, textiles, and interior design.

Although a documented planned gift to the Museum of Design and Merchandising, the Judi Arndt Central Asian Collection remains in the hands of the donor. However, objects are already being used in teaching and research within the department. The History of Textiles course has incorporated Central, South, and Southeast Asian textiles, for example. Discussions about the Silk Road are richer and seem more “real” when students see textiles and garments from Samarqand and Bukhara, ancient caravan stops along the Silk Road. This arrangement allows faculty access to the collection and creates opportunities for close communication with Judi. Faculty benefit from Judi’s expertise in dyes and weaving and know that artifacts shared with students are authentic and among the finest available.

Collaborative Documentation

Well in advance of actually receiving the collection, a collaborative photo- and text-documentation procedure in the donor’s home was used to record more than 300 textiles in the collection. A template modeled on the Museum’s accession form was designed to obtain collecting provenance for each textile and to record the most salient design elements—all intended to maximize teaching, research, and exhibition opportunities. The basic documentation setup included a laptop computer with Microsoft Word documentation template, digital camera, black cloth backdrop, a few supporting props, a dowel from which to hang the longer pieces, a step stool to reach the dowel, and small safety pins used to attach paper tag labels.

Judi took an active role in the documentation process. Earlier she had commissioned a carpenter to construct a mannequin on which to photograph robes and dresses. She handled the textiles and numbered, labeled, and pinned a paper tag to each object. Textiles had not been labeled before this documentation process. As she positioned each textile for photography, she described the story behind collecting the piece. At least one digital photo was taken and information recorded into a template for each object. Photos were downloaded into a laptop photo file and labeled to correspond with the documentation forms twice each day. Figure 1 shows one of the documentation forms—simple and with only the most salient information—that now serve as finding aids used to identify specific objects for teaching, research, and exhibits.

This simple and direct setup kept the documentation process flexible and efficient. Uzbek yardages, for example, were photographed sequentially hanging on a dowel against the black backdrop. Robes and dresses were draped on the mannequin (see fig. 2), while such small objects as suzani embroidered pillows were propped on a table draped with black cloth. Other objects were photographed in place to avoid removing and repositioning them. Although the initial purpose of photography was documentation, certain textiles were photo-styled for later use in promotional brochures, posters, or presentations. Figure 3 shows a series of fabrics that illustrate the batik process.

Judi Arndt Textile Collection

Documentation #: 42

Photos taken: Front and back of robe on mannequin; detail of lining (3 photos)

Type of object (purpose): Man's robe

Date of acquisition: April 2000

Place of acquisition: Bukhara, Uzbekistan

Ethnic design identity: Uzbek ikat

Artisan or artisan organization: Purchased at antique textiles shop in the madrasa

Physical Description

Fiber content: 100% silk (adras); cotton lining (Russian print)

Fabric structure: 8-shaft satin weave

Surface embellishment: Plain binding

Construction:

Hand: hand woven

Machine: machine stitched

Colors: Maroon, cherry red, green, light blue, gold, pink (white woven over with red); Lining: black and white with printed blue, black, pink, green border; plain sleeve lining

Design character: Large scale ikat with butah, floral, and heart shapes

Provenance: Purchased at antique textiles shop in the madrasa. Approximate date, c.1900. Robes with this many colors were no longer so available by 2005.

Figure 1. Example of documentation form used for the Judi Arndt Central Asian Collection. Museum of Design and Merchandising, Colorado State University.



Figure 2 (left). Example of documentation photo. Museum of Design and Merchandising, Colorado State University.



Figure 3 (right). Example of a styled documentation photo. Museum of Design and Merchandising, Colorado State University.

Central Asian Emphasis

Central Asian textiles—Uzbek textiles in particular—emerged as a central strength of the collection. Design and Merchandising Department Chair Mary Littrell understood the context for this collection from Ford Foundation research for Aid to Artisans that had taken her to Uzbekistan. Judi knew and understood the textiles in context from her travels and hands-on expertise with weaving and dyeing. Other faculty knew little about the origins of the textiles, however, and tended to see them as inanimate objects rather than living textiles within context. That insight led to planning a study and collecting trip to Uzbekistan.

Travel to Uzbekistan in May 2006 strengthened personal and professional relationships between Judi and four colleagues with close connections to the collection. Judi retraced her steps from two previous trips to Uzbekistan, joined by Mary Littrell, Linda Carlson, and Molly Eckman of Colorado State University, and Susan Strawn, who had carried out the documentation. Travel proceeded from Tashkent to Shakhrisabz and through the Ferghana Valley, and then followed the Silk Road through Samarqand, Bukhara, and Khiva. Travel through the Kyzyl Kum (Red Sands) desert led to serendipitous meetings with nomadic people. Immersion in remarkable Uzbek architecture, culture, and textile production created opportunities to meet artisans who machine-embroider fabric, weave hand-tied silk rugs, prepare and weave silk for ikat, and embroider suzani, the traditional Uzbek dowry cloth (see fig. 4). Judi sought opportunities for further study of natural dyes and design motifs. Figure 5 shows a detail of a suzani in the collection of the Museum of Needlework at the emir's palace in Bukhara. Judi also acted as advisor on textile purchases from individual artisans or at such notable venues as the Urgut market near Bukhara.



Figure 4 (left). Suzani embroidery artisan, Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan. Photograph by Susan Strawn.



Figure 5 (right). Suzani embroidery (detail) in the Museum of Needlework, Bukhara. Photograph by Susan Strawn.

Collaborative Conversation

The collaborative conversation between collector and university has continued, and this arrangement allows faculty access to textiles and further encourages collaborative conversation. Following an earlier donation of more than 400 kimono, the Arndt donation has further encouraged the Museum of Design and Merchandising to identify and refocus its collecting policy with an invigorated emphasis on Asian costume, textiles, and interior furnishings. In addition, faculty stresses the importance of provenance, asking Judi to gather as much context and history as possible for each piece added to the collection. Greater awareness of the importance of provenance has increased the teaching and research value of her donation.

Judi also benefits from her association with the university. She has joined faculty and contributed insights at seminar presentations and exhibits that include pieces from her collection. Her understanding of scholarship grows, shaping subsequent choices selected into her collection as part of her continuing travels. The collaborative conversation, which began as documentation of a planned gift, has grown to include far more in benefits for collector and university alike. Maintaining the conversation assures that textiles in the Judi Arndt Central Asian Collection will not be viewed as inanimate objects held in a museum collection. Instead, the textiles will be considered in context as a living collection—and the personal narrative of a collecting life.