Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings

Textile Society of America

2006

Talking about Textiles: The Making of *The Textile Museum Thesaurus*

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TORONTO, ONTARIO
OCTOBER 11-14, 2006

" textile narratives
+ conversations 2006

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BIENNIAL
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AMERICA "

Talking about Textiles: The Making of *The Textile Museum Thesaurus*

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The vocabulary for talking about textiles has always been rich and evocative, but at the same time quite varied based on many different factors, such as the specialties, nationalities, geographic foci, and professions of those involved in textile conversations. Textile artists and practitioners often use different terms than academic textile historians; researchers of European historical textiles use different terms than researchers of ethnographic textiles, who often introduce foreign terms into the discussion; and, even within the English language, North American textile specialists often use different terms than their British counterparts.

This bounty of terms can be exhilarating, but when it comes to tracking a vast, global collection of textiles in a computerized database, it becomes downright impracticable. The Textile Museum in Washington, DC embarked on a project to standardize its cataloging in its collections management software in 1998. Supported by a grant from the Cotsen Family Foundation, we set out to maximize the value of our collections database as a tool for providing access to our collections to as wide a range of our constituents as possible.

The Textile Museum houses one of the most extensive and important collections of textiles in the world. Almost 17,000 textiles span the globe culturally and geographically, and range temporally from 3000 BCE to the present. Each of these textiles is represented in the Museum's database, but we quickly found that tracking these textiles was no easy feat, due to the lack of a unified vocabulary that would cover the full range of our collections.

Standard cataloging vocabularies for museum databases, such as the Getty's *Art and Architecture Thesaurus*[1] and Chenall's *Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging*[2], proved quite inadequate to the detailed description of a global textile collection. While several classifications of textile-specific terminology do exist, such as The Textile Museum's own publication of Emery's *The Primary Structures of Fabrics*[3], Seiler-Baldinger's *Classification of Textile Techniques*[4], and the textile industry-focused *Thesaurus of Textile Terms*[5], none were designed for use in a computerized database and none were comprehensive enough to cover our entire collection. It was clear that we needed a thesaurus.

What is a thesaurus? A thesaurus is a classified controlled vocabulary for data entry and searching in a computerized database. The advent of such databases for managing library, museum, and other collections accelerated the demand for standardized terminologies in every

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[1] http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/vocabularies/aat/index.html (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Trust, December 1, 2006).

[2] Blackaby, James R., Patricia Greeno and The Nomenclature Committee, eds., *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging: A Revised and Expanded Version of Robert G. Chenhall's System for Classifying Man-Made Objects* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press and American Association for State & Local History, 1995).

[3] Emery, Irene, *The Primary Structures of Fabrics* 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: The Textile Museum, 1980).

[4] Annemarie Seiler-Baldinger, *Classification of Textile Techniques* (Ahmedabad, India: Calico Museum of Textiles, 1979).

[5] Backer, Stanley and Emery I. Valko, eds., *Thesaurus of Textile Terms Covering Fibrous Materials and Processes* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press (1969).

field, but no thesaurus yet existed for textiles. Therefore, we set out to create one. Eight years later, in 2005, we completed our core thesaurus in our collections management database and published it in book form[6] in order to share our work with colleagues facing similar issues with their own collections.

A thesaurus serves several main functions in a database. It controls data entry so that a standard vocabulary is used, which allows the data to be retrieved later through searches. It links all the various forms of a term, such as alternate spellings, alternate grammatical forms, obsolete versions, and synonymous words, so that the database will find the correct textiles no matter which term a data enterer or searcher uses. Finally, it classifies the terms hierarchically, so that the database can expand a search on a general term to include all the many specific examples within that category. This eliminates the need to enter multiple terms for each individual textile.

Let's look at some examples of how this works. Consider this intricately embellished Rabari woman's top from Gujarat, in Northern India (fig. 1). One person cataloging this type of textile might call it a *blouse*, while the next might call it a *shirt*. The curator who collected it calls it by its local name, which is *kanchali*. Without a thesaurus, if one person cataloged this textile using one of these terms and the next person searched the database using another of these terms, she would not find this textile. We have chosen to catalog this textile by its local name: *kanchali*. We prefer to preserve the terminology of the maker whenever possible, but of course not everyone who would be interested in seeing this textile will know this term off the top of her head.

Figure 1. Kanchali *(blouse); Kachhi Rabari; Sanosara, Gujarat, India; 1991. Cotton, silk, mirrors; embroidered plain weave. The Textile Museum 1991.17.1. Museum purchase.*

In The Textile Museum Thesaurus, the local term for this textile, *kanchali*, appears as an alternate term for the word *choli*. *Choli* is the local term most commonly used in English to refer to this type of backless blouse, worn by women throughout northern India. *Choli* is organized hierarchically underneath the term *blouse*, which in turn appears under the term *shirt*. All of these terms are narrower terms of *upper body garment*, and ultimately of the terms *garment* and *costume*. Therefore, no matter which of these words a researcher were to enter into a search box, she would find this textile.

With 17,000 textiles in the database, it is crucial to maintain consistency in the cataloging terminology. The thesaurus allows us to designate a single preferred term from among several or many synonyms, alternate spellings, and so forth. For example, consider now the weave structure

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[6] Gunzburger, Cecilia, ed., *The Textile Museum Thesaurus* (Washington, DC: The Textile Museum, 2005).

of this pre-Hispanic Andean bag, a 2500-year-old example of a clever color-weave effect found in many places around the world (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Bag; Ocucaje, Peru; ca. 600-300 B.C.E. Cotton; plain weave with color-weave effect. The Textile Museum 91.910. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1957.

Would you describe the weave structure as *plain weave* or as *tabby* (fig. 3)? *Tabby* is often used by handweavers and in the British literature, but at The Textile Museum we prefer to use the term *plain weave*, which is more common in academic circles in North America.
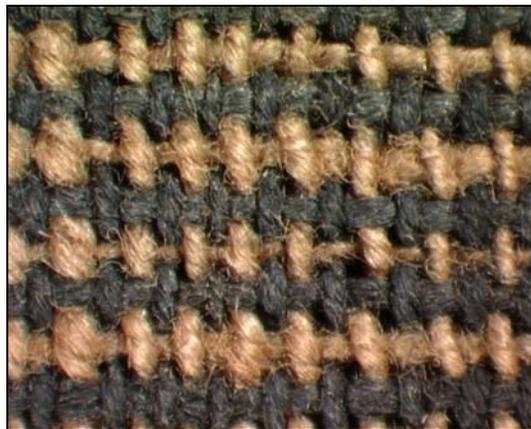

Figure 3. (detail, figure 2).

This bag is cataloged using the term *plain weave*. We recognize, however, that both terms are in use and we would like researchers not aware of our preferences to be able to access our textiles. For this reason, *tabby* is listed as an alternate term for *plain weave* in our thesaurus. It is an illegal term, which means that it is not allowed in data entry. If a cataloger tried to enter *tabby*, the thesaurus would direct her to use *plain weave* instead. But if a searcher entered the word *tabby*, the thesaurus would automatically direct the search to the equivalent preferred term, and the searcher would get this bag along with all the other textiles cataloged as *plain weave*.

Often in the world of textiles, there are groups of terms with interrelated meanings that are not so easy to categorize as equivalent or hierarchical. Several terms are currently in use to describe the technique used to pattern this woman's wrapped garment from Cameroon (fig. 4), such as *tie-dye*, *bound resist*, *tied resist*, and so on. In addition, many textile scholars and practitioners use foreign terms from various places around the world where this technique is

used, such as *shibori*, *plangi*, and *adire oniko*. We have cataloged this particular textile using the term *tie-dyed*.
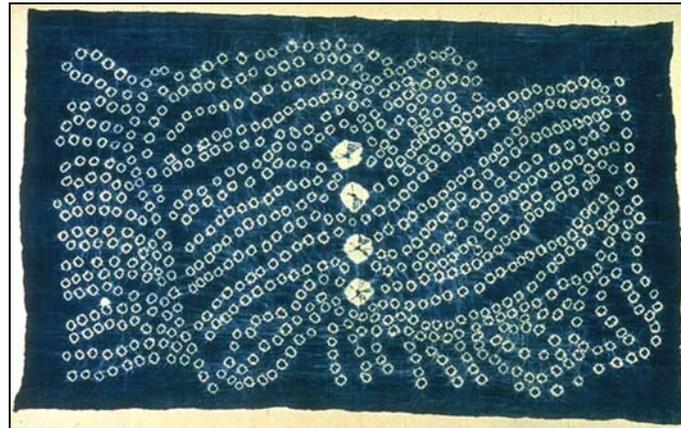

Figure 4. Wrapped dress; Hausa, used by Cameroon grasslands people; Cameroon, possibly Garoua district, Poli; ca. 1950s. Cotton, indigo; bound resist-dyed plain weave. The Textile Museum 24.5. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1957.

In the thesaurus, we designated the various English terms for this technique as equivalent to each other, and organized the various culturally-specific terms hierarchically under the English category term. This way, our curators and researchers can use whichever English term they prefer in cataloging and searching. A search on any of the English terms will return all examples of this technique in our collections, regardless of geographic origin. At the same time, a researcher interested only in Japanese bound resist can enter *shibori* and she will get only those objects.

All the useful ways of organizing textile terms presented above were not immediately obvious. The process of developing this textile thesaurus occupied several full-time staff members for eight years, along with contributions from myriad other people. Textile Museum curators, especially, spent many long hours reconciling their points of view and checking terms in their areas of expertise. The Textile Museum also welcomed twenty-one textile scholars from around the world to contribute subject expertise for specific areas of our collection. In addition to textile experts, we also relied heavily on advice from thesaurus development specialists from the information science and library worlds. From them we learned many invaluable techniques for organizing and presenting thesauri that we could apply to our project. Both the textile expertise and the thesaurus development expertise were crucial to completing our thesaurus, even if it was sometimes challenging to manage the competing priorities of the many contributors to the project.

One of the most important lessons we learned from thesaurus development specialists was the concept of faceting. Facets allow us to accommodate the several equally valid connotations of many terms by creating different hierarchies based on different ways of looking at textiles. This concept was especially important in the object section, one of the four main sections of *The Textile Museum Thesaurus* (fig. 5).
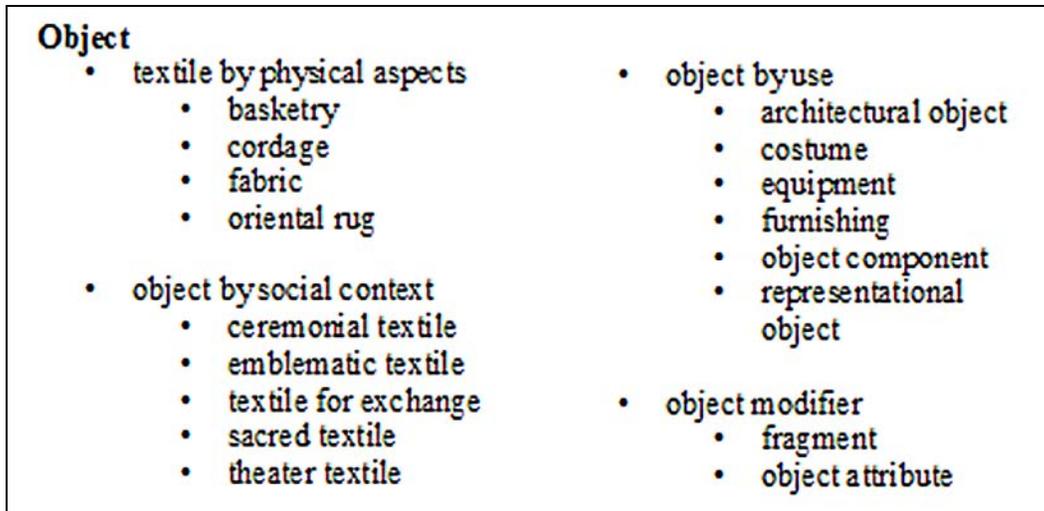
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Object
    • textile by physical aspects          • object by use
        • basketry                            • architectural object
        • cordage                             • costume
        • fabric                              • equipment
        • oriental rug                        • furnishing
                                              • object component
    • object by social context                • representational
        • ceremonial textile                    object
        • emblematic textile
        • textile for exchange             • object modifier
        • sacred textile                      • fragment
        • theater textile                     • object attribute
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Figure 5. Overview of the Object section of *The Textile Museum Thesaurus.*

For example, the term *Noh robe* appears both under *theater textile* and under *robe*, in the *costume* section, and the term *mat* appears both under *basketry* and under *floor covering*, in the *furnishing* hierarchy.

While seemingly more straightforward, the materials terminology (figure 6) was challenging because in addition to the expected fibers and dyes, almost any type of material can be found in a textile somewhere, from bone to metal to plastics. This touches on another main challenge in developing the thesaurus: defining the scope of our project. While we would have liked to produce a comprehensive textile thesaurus covering all possible textiles, it soon became clear that such a project would be nearly impossible to complete. Instead we focused on the terms necessary to describe the textiles in the Textile Museum's collections, while striving to design our hierarchies to permit expansion into other areas of textile terminology in the future, or by other institutions with other types of textile collections.
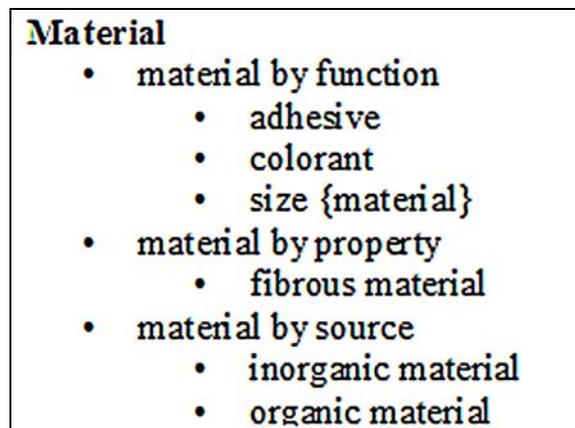
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Material
    • material by function
        • adhesive
        • colorant
        • size {material}
    • material by property
        • fibrous material
    • material by source
        • inorganic material
        • organic material
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Figure 6. Overview of the Material section of *The Textile Museum Thesaurus.*

Even though the Textile Museum is known for Irene Emery's work on textile structure terminology, organizing these terms presented one of our biggest challenges (fig. 7). We decided to take a pioneering step by separating structure terms, for describing the physical relationships of the elements in a textile, from technique terms, for describing how they got that way. We were very fortunate to have the expertise of Ann Rowe to draw upon here, since she has been working

on this concept for some time. It turned out that Emery's structure classification did not work in the context of a computerized thesaurus, because it did not allow us to gather different forms of the same structure into one category. For example, woven interlacing and oblique, or braided, interlacing, are in separate sections in Emery's classification and we wanted to be able to include both terms under the category of interlacing.
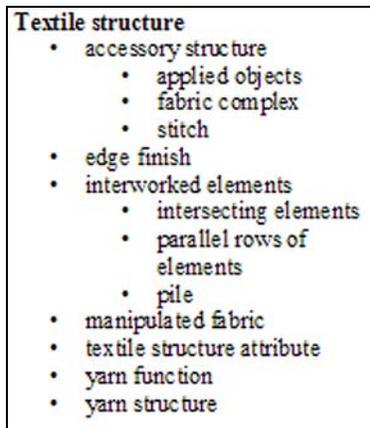
Textile structure
- accessory structure
    - applied objects
    - fabric complex
    - stitch
- edge finish
- interworked elements
    - intersecting elements
    - parallel rows of elements
    - pile
- manipulated fabric
- textile structure attribute
- yarn function
- yarn structure

Figure 7. Overview of the Structure section of *The Textile Museum Thesaurus.*

Ironically, Emery's classic classification turned out to be most useful in the technique hierarchy (fig. 8) rather than the structure hierarchy. Terms are cross-referenced as much as possible between the structure and technique hierarchies, because these distinctions are by no means yet fully defined and agreed upon among textile specialists.
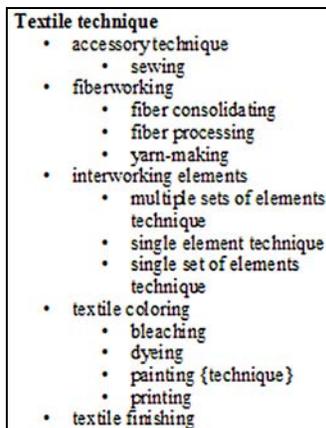
Textile technique
- accessory technique
    - sewing
- fiberworking
    - fiber consolidating
    - fiber processing
    - yarn-making
- interworking elements
    - multiple sets of elements technique
    - single element technique
    - single set of elements technique
- textile coloring
    - bleaching
    - dyeing
    - painting {technique}
    - printing
- textile finishing

Figure 8. Overview of the Technique section of *The Textile Museum Thesaurus.*

Obviously no single classification system can adequately reflect the infinite variety of human behavior embodied in textiles, nor the infinite shades of meaning contained in human language. The Textile Museum Thesaurus presents one possible way of organizing all the thousands of terms we use to describe the textiles in our collection. On many occasions, we considered several equally valid ways of organizing a group of related terms, and we chose the one that seemed most useful to us in terms of our preferences, the types of textiles we collect, the database software we use, and the ways in which we use our collection. Many other ways of organizing the same terms do exist, but our objective was to design a system useful for us.

The thesaurus is a living, working document that continues to grow and change. Since its publication in book form, we have added terms to the electronic version as we added new textiles to our collections. We have also made changes based on our own usage. For example, we found that it is necessary for us to classify all terms for types of Oriental rugs underneath the term *rug*, even though many of them are not, in fact, floor coverings. But for The Textile Museum's constituency of rug aficionados, being able to search on *rug* as a general term proved essential. Also, in the nine months since publication, we have corrected several content errors and typos in the computerized thesaurus. Finally, the thesaurus publication has sparked many interesting discussions about textile terminology and classification with our colleagues in the field that continue to refine our thinking on the subject.

We are eager to hear more about how useful our work has proved to others, either as a cataloging tool for other textile collections or as a general reference. The Textile Museum envisions its thesaurus as an initial step, and knows that there is ample room for expansion and refinement. Several areas that currently receive scant coverage in the thesaurus are textile industry terminology and European textile and costume terms. The addition of illustrations, definitions, and bibliographic references would, of course, be a great help. It is our hope that The Textile Museum Thesaurus will grow through collaboration and help to make textile collections more accessible and to promote the textile arts worldwide.

Acknowledgments