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THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND HISTORIC TEXTILE DATA BASE

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INTRODUCTION

Our charge today is to discuss strategies and methodologies for gathering and extracting data from textiles. My specific task is to discuss the University of Maryland Historic Textile Data Base. This Data Base was officially established in September 1986 with a grant from the College of Human Ecology. Its purpose was to establish a sophisticated data management program on personal computers to handle the massive amounts of data necessary for research in this area. The long range goal of this project is to include all flat textiles. The immediate goal is to establish a data base on coverlets.

Before discussing the data base itself, I would like to review the background of this project. This will include identification of the relevant academic disciplines, definition of the terms, description of the historiographical framework, and discussion of both the modified model used in organizing the artifact data, and the model used in organizing the technological process.

During my graduate work, the issue of how to study nineteenth century American flat textiles in general, and coverlets in particular, became critical. One could not find a model which had been successfully applied to these textiles. Flat textiles, for the purposes of this research, are defined as finished textile products which have a recognizable utilitarian function. However, the utilitarian function may be of secondary importance. Examples of such flat textiles include coverlets, quilts, samplers, show towels, and political handkerchiefs.

My academic discipline is material culture studies. A general definition of material culture varies not only among disciplines but also among scholars within disciplines. Schlereth finds anthropologist Melville Herskovits' definition of material culture most useful. Herskovits defines material culture as the totality of artifacts in a culture, used by humans to cope with their physical environment, to facilitate social interaction, delight their fancy, and to create symbols of meaning.¹ However, all definitions are similar in two respects. First, the "material" in material culture is meant to refer to a range of artifacts that have been either made or modified by man. Second, there is a link between material and culture.² I would add a third element, the use of physical evidence as primary data. Under this umbrella, decorative arts scholars have had a long tradition of studying functional artifacts, such as, furniture, silver, pottery, and glass as primary data for study, rather than as illustrations.³

My dissertation, Maryland Coverlets: The Artifacts, Technology, and Weaver⁴ was, in large part, a search for methods of studying flat textiles, such as "figured and fancy" coverlets. I looked to decorative arts scholarship for direction and found

many clues. However, many methods were not appropriate, because coverlets were not unique, high style, one-of-a-kind artifacts.

"Figured and Fancy" coverlets were used, rather than geometric coverlets, for two reasons. First, these coverlets represented an intermediate step in the transition from hand looms and the individual craftsman to power looms and the factory worker. Second, the provenance of many coverlets could be established. The corner block or border often contained at least some of the following information: the weaver's name, the client's name, the location, the date, and an identified logo.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The most useful context for the study of coverlets is as products of the craftsman. Schlereth⁵ has identified what he considers to be the three theoretical bases of American craftsman scholarship. They are:

1. the craftsman as a "creative artist," which is concerned with the craftsman's product, in this case, the coverlets,
2. the craftsman as a "participant in a specific craft tradition," which is concerned with technological process of the craftsmen, that is the looms, and
3. the craftsman as "an historical actor" which is concerned with the craftsman as a worker, that is, the weaver.

Schlereth points out that these are divisions for emphasis and organization rather than for classification of principles.

It has been customary in the past for scholars to use only one of these theoretical bases. However, Schlereth suggests that the best work using any one of these approaches has almost always involved elements of the other two.⁶ In my research, I have tried to utilize these separate, but overlapping, approaches as organizational tools in studying the coverlet, the weaver, and technology.

The first part of Schlereth's typology is the weaver's products. The large number of coverlets involved in this research made it necessary to develop or modify a model which would allow me to not only utilize the artifact as a source of information about the coverlets, the weaver, and technology, but also present the data in a systematic manner. Fleming's 1974 model⁷ of artifact study was ultimately chosen. Fleming's model was developed at Winterthur in the context of Early American Decorative Arts Studies. This model was proposed as a framework for the many possible approaches to material culture study.

The original model uses a five-part classification system of the basic properties of an artifact. Fleming believes this system provides "a formula for including and interrelating all the significant facts about an artifact," and a set of four operations to be performed on these properties. Fleming's five properties of an artifact are:

1. the history - when and where the artifact was made, by whom, for whom, and why, and the successive changes in ownership and reasons for these changes,
2. the materials - what the artifact is made of,

3. the construction - techniques and workmanship employed in the manufacturing process, and how the parts are organized to bring about the whole,
4. the design - form, structure, style, iconography, and ornamentation, and
5. the function - intended and intended use.

The four operations to be carried out on the above properties are:

1. identification - classification, authentication, and description, which results in a set of facts about the artifact,
2. evaluation - judgement of the aesthetic quality of the artifact and comparison with other like artifacts which result in a set of judgments about the artifacts,
3. cultural analysis - which examines various interrelationships of an artifact, and
4. interpretation - which suggests the meaning and significance of the artifact in relationship to our own culture.

Fleming's model, without modification, is cumbersome and difficult to use with a large number of objects.

The second part of Schlereth's typology is concerned with the technological process of the craftsman. Earl's "Craftsmen and Machines: The Nineteenth-Century Furniture Industry"⁸ addresses this area. Earl found that "to determine the parameters of craftsmanship in the nineteenth century, we need an investigation of the relationship between the craftsman and the machine."⁹ Such an investigation should answer the following questions:

1. kinds of machines used,
2. how they were used, and
3. when the machines were introduced.

She continues¹⁰ that only this view of technology from "the inside out" or what Ames¹¹ calls "centrifugal analysis" will lead to understanding of the relationship between the product, the process, the new technology, and the kinds of products produced by them.

The third part of Schlereth's typology, the craftsman as a worker, is primarily concerned with the social history of the weaver. This includes the weaver's

1. occupational identity,
2. technological sophistication,
3. level of economic wealth, and
4. rank in social status.

THE DATA BASE

The first phase in establishing the data base was choosing a sophisticated data management package that was capable of managing up to 10,000 records. It was also necessary to meet the following technical criteria:

1. the program must be capable of handling the file size and number of records to be stored,

2. it must have the ability to do complex searches involving several variables, and
3. it must have the ability to update the system to improvements in hardware and software.

In addition, ease in both updating records and learning the basic tasks of entering, appending, and editing the data, was necessary. The last criteria were extremely important because untrained undergraduate students would be hired to enter data, and graduate students would be using the data base for research without extensive training. dBASE III Plus¹² was chosen from the four data management programs studied. Factors contributing to the final decision were initial cost, the powerful query language needed for complex searches, wide user support, and a reasonable amount of user assistance for the novice. A drawback was that dBase III Plus is considered a business program, consequently all support is geared toward this. However, as I gained proficiency in the programs use, I was able to translate the business functions to my needs.

Ultimately, the total data base will have the following five separate segments:

1. the craftsman's product or "figured and fancy" coverlets and carpets,
2. the design motifs found in coverlet centerfields, borders, corner blocks, cartouches, and logos,
3. the craftsman as a worker or the weaver of the "figured and fancy" coverlets and carpets,
4. the weaver's advertisements for coverlets and carpets, and
5. the technology or early patent and franchise information.

To date, more than 3,500 coverlets have been documented. Of these, I have seen and documented at least 1,700 which are owned by private collectors, museums, historical societies, auction houses, and dealers. Another group of coverlets was documented from lists of holdings provided by museums and historical societies. We were very fortunate in having had a forty-four per cent response rate to my letter soliciting this information. A third group was documented from the literature, antique newspapers, and auction catalogs, using content analysis.¹³

The first task in setting up the data base was deciding what information was needed to answer the research questions. Unfortunately, I belong to "the vacuum cleaner" school of collecting information and wanted to record everything that I thought might possibly be useful. This, of course, was not practical, and choices had to be made. As a result, Fleming's model was further revised. In the final version of the coverlet file, the properties of the artifacts considered are as follows:

1. each artifact's history, including where it was made, when it was made, who made it, and who it was made for;
2. the materials, including the fiber content,
3. the construction of the artifact, including the weave structure, the number of panels, and whether or not they were joined, and
4. the design, including the length, width, and colors.

The function was not included, because it is assumed they were all intended for bedcoverings. The designs or motifs were not included in the coverlet files but are in a separate motif file.

Fleming's four operations were also modified. The identification will consist of simple classification as a coverlet. The aesthetic evaluation was eliminated because much valuable information is lost when artifacts are ignored because of poor design and/or workmanship. However, the factual comparison of the artifact with others of its kind in quantitative terms is included as one of the major purposes of the data base. Both content and cultural analysis will be used to gain the most information about the artifact. Interpretation was deemed inappropriate for the data base. It is sufficient to assume that the coverlets have monetary, historical, and often sentimental value in today's society. The coverlet files were designed with these research questions and operations in mind.

Perhaps this is the appropriate place to define basic data base terminology. A data file is a collection of related data. An example would be all New Jersey coverlets. There will be a separate data file for each state's coverlets. The information about each coverlet is stored in a record and each record has a unique code number. The data in each record are divided into fields. Fields are the smallest unit that can be used to describe an item. For instance, the weaver's full name must be divided into three fields: a first name, middle name, and last name. This necessitated the eighteen questions becoming fifty-two fields.

Experts in data base management consider twenty-five to be the optimum number of fields in a file. The fewer the fields in a data base, the less time the search requires. The pilot study of New Jersey coverlets contained 180 records, so search time was not a problem. The New York file has about 1,600 records, with more to be added, so the search time has become too long. The fifty-two field coverlet file will probably be separated into two files. One file will contain the history and verification information and the second file will contain the materials, construction, and portions of the design information. This will reduce the searching time considerably.

The motif file was established to classify and quantify the use of the design elements. The design pattern of each coverlet is separated into six basic groupings: the centerfield, side borders, bottom borders, top borders, cornerblocks, and cartouches. Each record has four fields, with the possibility of each coverlet having as many as thirty-five motif records, all linked together with the unique code number. The unique code number also links the motif records with the coverlet record.

The motif file will enable us to search and compare motifs with those of other weavers in the same geographic area, and those of other weavers in different geographic areas. It will also allow us to track the change in motifs over time, as well as determine the widespread use of the design elements. This will allow us to determine the popularity and uniqueness of the motifs by quantitative methods. We are installing additional hardware and software which will allow us to also search by codes for pictures and search pictures for codes.

The weavers' file deviates from Schlereth's typology. We will not be able to answer the broader questions concerning the social history of the weaver until we

have accumulated a large number of weavers' records. The weavers' records will include sixteen question or forty-three fields. The following questions are included:

1. a code unique to each weaver,
2. his full name,
3. his work local,
4. state or country of birth,
5. vital statistics,
6. ethnic heritage,
7. church records,
8. census records
9. whether he advertised,
10. if extant coverlets exist,
11. whether the coverlets were "figured and fancy" or geometric,
12. if there was a corner block or logo,
13. whether he purchased, sold, or was granted a patent,
14. when he began and ended his weaving career,
15. whether he had a partner, and
16. his family weaving connections.

Once we have a large enough data base, we will than be able to address Schlereth's questions.

The questions Earl raises will be addressed by the technology data base file. Since many looms and loom improvements did not receive patents, records of these inventions are scant or non-existent. Because of this, the study will be limited to those looms and improvements that did receive United States' Patents. This study is further limited by the fact that a December 1836 fire destroyed all patent records. However, there is a reconstructed file which includes the name of the patentee, the date of the patent, and title of the patent. I also realize that many looms that were patented were not successful. The patent's record¹⁴ includes fifteen questions or thirty-five fields. The record includes the following information:

1. the invention's name,
2. patent number,
3. date of patent,
4. type of patent number,
5. name of patentee,
6. location of patentee,
7. printed specifications,
8. printed drawings,
9. National Archives specificaions,
10. National Archives drawings,
11. National Archives references,
12. Franklin Institute citation,
13. other citations,
14. description of patent, and
15. the existence of advertisements.

When completed, "The University of Maryland Historic Textile Data Base" will not only serve my research and that of graduate students, but also the larger

community of scholars, museums, universities, and collectors. We will be able to provide a unique intellectual and historical resource to many diverse interests.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas Schlereth, "Material Culture Studies in America," in Material Culture Studies in America, ed. Thomas J. Schlereth (Nashville, Tennessee: The American Association for State and Local History, 1982), p. 2.
2. Thomas J. Schlereth, Material Culture: A Research Guide, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1985), p. 6.
3. See Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter, An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," Winterthur Portfolio 15 (Autumn 1980) for a complete discussion of discipline and field.
4. Clarita Anderson, "Maryland Coverlets: The Artifacts, Technology, and the Weaver" (Ph.D. dissertation. University of Maryland, 1985).
5. Thomas J. Schlereth, "Artisans and Craftsmen: A Historical Perspective," in The Craftsman in Early America, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1984), p. 41.
6. Ibid., p. 42.
7. McClung Fleming, "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," Winterthur Portfolio 9, ed. Ian M. G. Quimby (Chicago: Winterthur Museum and the University of Chicago, 1974).
8. Polly Ann Earl, "Craftsmen and Machines: The Nineteenth-Century Furniture Industry," in Technological Innovation and the Decorative Arts, ed. by Ian M. G. Quimby and Polly Ann Earl (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1974).
9. Ibid., p. 308.
10. Ibid., p. 308.
11. Kenneth L Ames, "Folk Art The Challenge and the Promise," in Winterthur Portfolio 16, no.4 (Winter 1981), p.295.
12. dBase III Plus, Ashton Tate, 1986.
13. For a more thorough discussion of this, see Clarita Anderson and Jo B. Paoletti, "The Use of Eagles as a Decorative and Symbolic Motif in the 19th Century American Coverlets," Ars Textrina 3, (May 1985), pp. 173 - 208.
14. Much of the work on the Patent File was made possible by a General Research Board Summer Research Award funded by the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park.