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## **A Faculty / Staff Discussion Seminar on Textiles**

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Williams College is a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts, with about 300 faculty and 2000 undergraduates. Here at the college, there is a Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, whose purpose is to foster inter-discipline research and discussion for the faculty. The Oakley Center has allowed interested faculty the opportunity to present ideas in various types of seminars, so that new topics of scholarship can be researched, with the participation of faculty in unrelated fields.

In the fall of 1999, a Faculty and Staff Discussion Seminar on Weaving and Textiles was offered at the Oakley Center. Meredith Hoppin, a Classics Professor and then the Director of the Center, had early meetings with me about focusing on this broad topic for one of the Center's offerings for that particular school year. I am the Costume Designer for the Theatre Department at Williams College. My interest in textiles is an obvious one. Textiles are part of my every day work. Here was an opportunity to explore ideas with a complement of scholars from many fields. Meredith and I began to shape this offering for the upcoming fall.

The seminar was open to the college's faculty and staff. Both Meredith and I knew of various professors and professionals who have some interest in textiles, and we both hoped that they would take part in the seminar. Some of these people were connoisseurs and collectors with a narrow interest in one particular subject, such as kilim fragments or lace. Some were weavers themselves. Some had an interest in Women's Studies, while others were interested in the use of weaving language in storytelling. And finally, we had some who had no knowledge of any study of textiles or understanding of any aspect of the topic we were exploring. So we had a broad range of interests that could travel far. Also we had a wonderful coincidence take place as we began our preliminary meetings in the spring, when we discovered that Nancy Matthew's, a curator at the Williams College Museum of Art, was planning to exhibit textiles from the college's holdings in January 2000. This was the first time that textiles were ever exhibited at the museum. And the seminar helped Nancy as an unofficial advisory group.

The final participants included faculty and professional staff. The fields and organizations represented were: Sociology, Economics, English, Religion, History, Classics, Theatre, Williams College Alumni Review, and Williams College Museum of Art.

Meredith and I chose the early readings from scholarly essays, and we also solicited offerings from the entire seminar population. We began by selecting several chapters from Elizabeth Barber's *WOMEN'S WORK THE FIRST 20,000 YEARS*. We also included essays on indigo production in Indonesia, linen making in the 18th century

Europe and sections on weaving, looms and basic fibers. These readings came from *CLOTH AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE*, edited by Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider and *A HISTORY OF TEXTILE ART*, by Agnes Geijer. And we chose sections from the Iliad and Odyssey, for a discussion of the use of weaving as metaphor in the poetry of Homer.

In addition to the readings, Meredith and I both felt that whenever possible, we should provide a sample, on hand, of the objects discussed. Also, the seminar participants had an early meeting at a local weaving studio to see looms and the amount of preparation that went into the threading of the looms. We then had the opportunity to go to the study room of the College Art Museum to see examples of the collection that was being prepared for exhibition. We went to one participant's home to view their carpet collection. One member of the seminar, whose background was in textile surface design, had led a group of students through India, documenting various dyeing techniques, so we had a video session on that material. In fact there were two participants who had traveled extensively in India, and they brought multiple examples of cloth for the group to see. Because of the variety of backgrounds of our group, Meredith and I tried to include readings that supplemented and complemented the objects that we were seeing.

We felt it was the combination of discussing essays along with the practical viewing of looms and textiles that made the seminar so enjoyable. The abstract ideas had practical manifestation. The worlds of words and objects were in the same place. This seminar brought together people who could share both their theories and their appreciation of textiles and to teach us all something new on many different levels.

We met roughly every two weeks over the course of a thirteen weeks semester. Then in May of 2000, the Oakley Center sponsored a mini symposium that was a direct result of the discussion seminar on Textiles and Weaving. We were able to bring Elizabeth Barber, who wrote *WOMEN'S WORK THE FIRST 20,000 YEARS*, to the college, as a visiting Bernhard Scholar. She gave a series of public and college wide lectures which included her presentations, "Archaeological Origins of East European Costume", and "Penelope and the Origins of Greek Art". She visited classes and gave a slide lecture for a classics and history course on "Women in Greece and Rome". And Professor Barber was the speaker for the Humanities Center symposium, which was attended by some of the discussion seminar participants, other interested faculty and a selected group of students.

This discussion seminar has also given Meredith, a Professor in Classics, and me, a Lecturer in Theatre, the opportunity to teach a winter term course in textile in the near future. This type of inter-disciplinary program allows for a new type of learning for the faculty, staff and eventually students at my institution. Having this opportunity to use textiles as a topic for discussion and as an outreach topic across fields is a fine example of the liberal arts tradition. It is my hope that this model can be incorporated into other programs and that is why I am presenting it to you today.