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A New Unit for Study and Research The Textile Museum and the George Washington University in Washington, D.C

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Furthering the understanding of mankind's creative achievements in the textile arts has been the guiding principle of The Textile Museum for almost a century. The Museum accomplishes this through development and maintenance of textile collections and a research library, through object study and documentation, as well as through scholarly research, exhibitions, publications and educational programs. The Textile Museum’s new affiliation with George Washington University is a watershed moment that provides opportunities to disseminate textile knowledge through higher education. 

During the last few decades, an increasing number of global research projects and exhibitions have placed textiles at the center of scholarly conversations as crucially important in the context of archaeological, art historical and cultural studies. With this comes an increased demand for specialists of textile arts with attention pivoting towards equipping academic programs to educate this next generation of textile researchers. How will The Textile Museum leverage its new position as a part of the George Washington University to build a foundation for this next generation?

Established in 1925, The Museum’s mission states: The Textile Museum expands public knowledge and appreciation—locally, nationally and internationally—of the artistic merits and cultural importance of the world’s textiles. The Museum achieves this through the maintenance of textile and library collections, conducting scholarly research, and presenting exhibitions, publications and educational programs. The Textile Museum’s mission remains unchanged.

After few years of negotiations, The Textile Museum and The George Washington University signed a definitive agreement outlining the principles of this affiliation during the summer of 2012. With this agreement, The Textile Museum became a corner stone of The George Washington University Museum. The ground breaking for the new museum building took place on October 18, 2012. Museum staff moved in to the museum building in July 2014. The collections move began in spring 2014 and completed at the end of September 2014. The Textile Museum retains ownership of its collection, which is on a perpetual loan to the George Washington University; the loan agreement was signed in summer 2014.

While the University will cover facilities and maintenance costs for the new buildings, The Textile Museum will continue to support its programmatic budget through fundraising. Continued financial support from donors, members, and institutions is the key to continuing The Textile Museum’s tradition of providing exciting programs in the form of exhibitions, publications, educational programs, and library resources.

The Museum operations are now shared between two locations: Ashburn, Virginia and Foggy Bottom in the District of Columbia. The Conservation and Collections Resource Center (CCRC), located on the George Washington University’s Science and Technology Campus in Ashburn will house all of the Textile Museum collections and some of the George Washington University art collections including Albert H. Small collection of Washingtoniana. The main base for Collections management, conservation, and the exhibition production departments will be in Ashburn.
The public face of the Museum is a custom-built, 35,000 square foot museum building located at G and 21st streets in the center of the George Washington University’s main Foggy Bottom campus. Attached to this building is the historic, 6,000 square feet Woodhull Building, which is renovated and incorporated into the museum facility as the Albert H. Small Washingtoniana Collection and Center for National Capital Area Studies. The exterior of the Museum will bear the names of both The Textile Museum and the George Washington University Museum. The Museum’s educational rooms, meeting rooms as well as the administrative and curatorial offices, and most importantly for scholars, the Arthur D. Jenkins Library are in the Foggy Bottom building.

Figure 1. The George Washington University and The Textile Museum located on the GW’s Foggy Bottom campus, Washington, DC. Photo by Jessica McConnell Burt/The George Washington University.

Figure 2. The conservation and collections resource center located on the GW’s Science and Technology Campus in Ashburn, VA. Photo by William Atkins/The George Washington University.
This affiliation is a turning point for The Textile Museum especially in 3 areas: collections stewardship, public outreach, and research/scholarship. With this affiliation, The Textile Museum gained not only better and larger storage space for its collections, but also improved access and organization with state of the art storage units, and conservation laboratory equipment and a larger exhibition production workshop. The move of the collection allowed for improved permanent housing for the textiles. Both the Conservation and Collections Resource Center and the Museum building have vastly improved climate control capabilities over the former Textile Museum buildings. The Conservation and Collections Resource Center also houses a study room designed for research access to the collections which doubles as a photography studio complete with a catwalk for photographing large or fragile objects.
Figure 4. Registrar Rachel Shabica preparing to receive art objects to the new storage units in the Collections Center. Figure 5, left. Assistant registrar Tessa Lummis by the Museum’s new freezer unit in the Collections Center. Photo by William Atkins/The George Washington University.

Figure 6, right. The move of the collections allowed for improved permanent housing for the collections. Photo by William Atkins/The George Washington University.

This affiliation also provides The Textile Museum with improved ways to engage our public. Public side of the Museum is very near to the busiest metro stations in Washington, DC and designed to be fully accessible for people with disabilities.

In terms of exhibition space, the Museum now has 7,394 sq. ft. active exhibition space. This is in comparison to the 3,555 sq. ft. active exhibition space in its former location. In other terms, The Museum doubled its exhibition space. Beyond increased square footage, the configuration and layout of the galleries are designed to be as flexible as possible through use of removable walls. Future
exhibitions will have layouts that more closely parallel the exhibition storylines. The new museum building’s climate control expands loans possibilities from other institutions to enrich the exhibitions. In the past the absence of reliable climate control in exhibition spaces caused the need for specially designed cases for loan objects which was often cost-prohibitive.

Educational outreach also benefits from this affiliation. The new Museum building houses a custom-built large classroom for various activities from conducting dye workshops to hands-on activities for school groups. Being part of an academic community allows the Museum to engage speakers from academia and attract attendance from student community for our programs.

The greatest gain, however, is and will continue to be in research and scholarship. The Textile Museum is in a position to integrate textile studies into the curriculum of many academic departments and a wide variety of research projects thus fostering the next generation of scholars and museum professionals for whom textiles become the lens through which they view their disciplines.

The George Washington University offers a wellspring of possible partners in textile-related research. The University has very well-known and respected programs related to museums: Museum Studies Program and Museum Education. There are also other departments that have potential for engagement such as art history, fine arts—especially now given the Corcoran School of Art + Design integration with the George Washington University—archaeology, anthropology and religious studies to name a

Figure 7. Exhibition galleries in the new museum. Photo by Jessica McConnell Burt/The George Washington University.
few. Exciting potential also exists with departments outside the usual suspects such as chemistry, forensic sciences, and mathematics.

Connections come from unexpected corners, the Museum just need to keep its eyes, ears, and minds open to see the potential. This will be the highest priority for the museum staff in coming years.

The Textile Museum is pursuing several different approaches to academic integration with the George Washington University. One is direct involvement with academics through teaching. Two years ago Textile Museum curators, Mattiebelle Gittinger, Lee Talbot and present author, taught an Asian textiles course and the role they play in Asian politics. Curators and research associates will continue to seek opportunities to teach about textile arts. Several George Washington University professors are already using the Museum as a resource for their courses. So far these are focused more on non-collection related areas, primarily because of the inaccessibility of the collections due to the move. These courses have benefited the Museum in several ways. Exhibition design courses, created exhibition designs for our upcoming 3 exhibitions: China through the Lens of John Thomson, Seat of Empire: Planning Washington (1790-1801), and The Civil War and Making of Modern Washington. In another course, students helped to create ways to reach new and younger public through digital and social media.
The Museum welcomes interns and owes much of the success of a smooth and efficient transition from S street to Foggy Bottom and Ashburn to them. During their tenure, they not only learn about textiles, but how a museum and each department in a museum functions. On top of it all, over the last two years, they have been experiencing what it takes to move a museum from one location to another, considering some museum professionals never experienced such transformation in their whole professional career.

Besides being involved with the education of the next generation of art historians and museum administrators, the Museum is also focusing on furthering the importance of textiles, research and knowledge of textile arts. The Textile Museum has, and will be in the future, involved with research projects conducted by the George Washington University faculty and possibly with other academic institutions.

This direct and indirect involvement with programs across disciplines and projects at the University are crucially important to integrating the study of textiles in the mainstream and scholarly research.

Textiles are of tremendous cultural significance for a majority of societies in the world. To understand these societies, unlocking their textiles will reveal much. The Textile Museum is now well-positioned to introduce textiles as primary source material for research and to teach emerging scholars how to unlock and use this resource.
Whatever direction The Textile Museum chooses to go in, it will first and foremost rely on its assets. The first asset is of course its textile collections for hands-on, direct study of objects. The second asset is its collections’ focus on non-western cultures which aligns well with many disciplines of cultural study, because textiles transmit information on every aspect of culture (religious to secular) from one generation to another, their role is central in many non-western cultures. The third important asset is the Museum itself, as an operational entity. It is a fully functioning museum where students will not only gain knowledge of textile arts, but every aspect of administering and managing a museum from curatorship to collections management, from education to fundraising.

One way The Textile Museum may choose to proceed is by establishing a program for the study of history of non-western textile arts. The Textile Museum is developing a solid case for such a program with a strong curriculum and long range plan to entice supporters and future students alike. For that purpose the Museum has to assess ways to teach the tools for unlocking textiles, understand the current and future needs of the field of textile arts, develop a curriculum that meets these needs, establish ways to attract students, and position the Museum to gain prominence in teaching textile arts.

Regardless of the path The Textile Museum chooses, the future for the Museum and as an extension future for the study of textile arts looks bright.

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