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NEW**DIRECTIONS:** *Examining the Past,
Creating the Future.*

Textiles and the Virtual World

Broadening Audience Engagement at the Textile Museum of Canada

Roxane Shaughnessy

Abstract

Museums with textile collections face challenges in providing meaningful public access to these cultural objects. Textiles can only be displayed for limited periods to minimize damage from light and exposure, and the fragility of most textiles requires careful handling to prevent deterioration. Textile exhibitions and special visits to storage areas provide opportunities for public engagement with textiles. However until recently, the close study of materials and techniques required direct access to the object.

In recent years, digitization and web technologies have afforded global access to museum textile collections, and enabled those interested to engage with the objects virtually in a variety of ways. Beyond the museum, viewers now have the ability to zoom in on a digital high resolution photo, and explore the complex weave structures of a fine cloth, or marvel at the technical brilliance of a pre-Hispanic woven tunic. Online collection databases provide a rich and comprehensive resource for researchers and others worldwide, furthering serious scholarly inquiry and promoting discovery.

Presenting textiles in online exhibitions and conceptual web projects provide opportunities for further user-directed exploration. The public can engage in the narrative content associated with textiles as social objects, and can contribute their own textile related stories and thoughts to the conversation through posts, blogs, and other social media, all without stepping into the museum.

Inside their walls, museums nowadays are integrating technology and media in the galleries as an interactive interpretive tool, using new digital and mobile technologies to teach, captivate, and immerse visitors in the art they are encountering. This paper examines recent efforts in these directions at the Textile Museum of Canada (www.textilemuseum.ca).

Introduction

“The art museum experience occurs now inside the museum, outside, online, on smart phones...there’s more and more recognition, I think, that we’re in the business of creating experiences.”

February 2012, Dan Monroe, President of the Association of Art Museum Directors¹

Founded in 1975 by Max Allen and Simon Waegemaekers, The Textile Museum of Canada explores the continuum of textile work from antiquity to the present. With more than 13,000 objects from over 200 countries and regions, the TMC's permanent collection celebrates cultural diversity and includes traditional fabrics, garments, carpets and related artifacts such as beadwork and basketry. Visitors to the galleries can experience the traditions, skills and creative processes that make textile arts so engaging.

¹ Kenneth Baker, “Dan Monroe examines future of art museums,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Feb 19, 2012.

The Museum offers a broad variety of exhibitions including themed shows based on our permanent collection and contemporary exhibitions of the work of Canadian and international artists, often integrated with our historic textiles. Approximately seven to nine exhibitions are mounted per year, and attendance averages 24,000.

From its inception, the Museum's goal has been to make the collection accessible to the public, and display methods are designed to provide visitors with an opportunity to have a close up and intimate engagement with the textiles in the galleries.



*Figure 1. TMC school visit with Education Programs Coordinator Susan Fohr
Photo by Brent Lewin, 2008*

At the TMC, you can get close enough to smell the textiles, admire the elaborate patterns and compositions, and observe the detailed work of the human hand. Touching, however, is discouraged to protect the textiles from potential damage this can cause. Due to the special environmental needs of textiles, periods of exhibition are limited to minimize damage from light and exposure, and the fragility of textiles requires controlled handling in order to prevent deterioration. These factors impose limits on the public's access to the Museum's collection.

Over the last 16 years, the TMC has sought to broaden audience engagement by increasing access to the collection, and recognized that digital technology could support this strategic goal, making the Museum's collection available to new and existing audiences on a global scale. This paper traces the Textile Museum of Canada's journey into the virtual world, in the context of 21st century museum practice.

Digitization of the Collection

Digitization began in late 1990s at a slow pace with limited support. When the Museum received public funding from the Department of Canadian Heritage beginning in 2004, the digitization of the entire collection began, and it was published online on the TMC website in stages that were completed in 2008. Digital images provide access to the museum's rich collection and transform the online catalogue

into an experience of visual discovery. The catalogue records provide artifact information and multiple image views of the object.

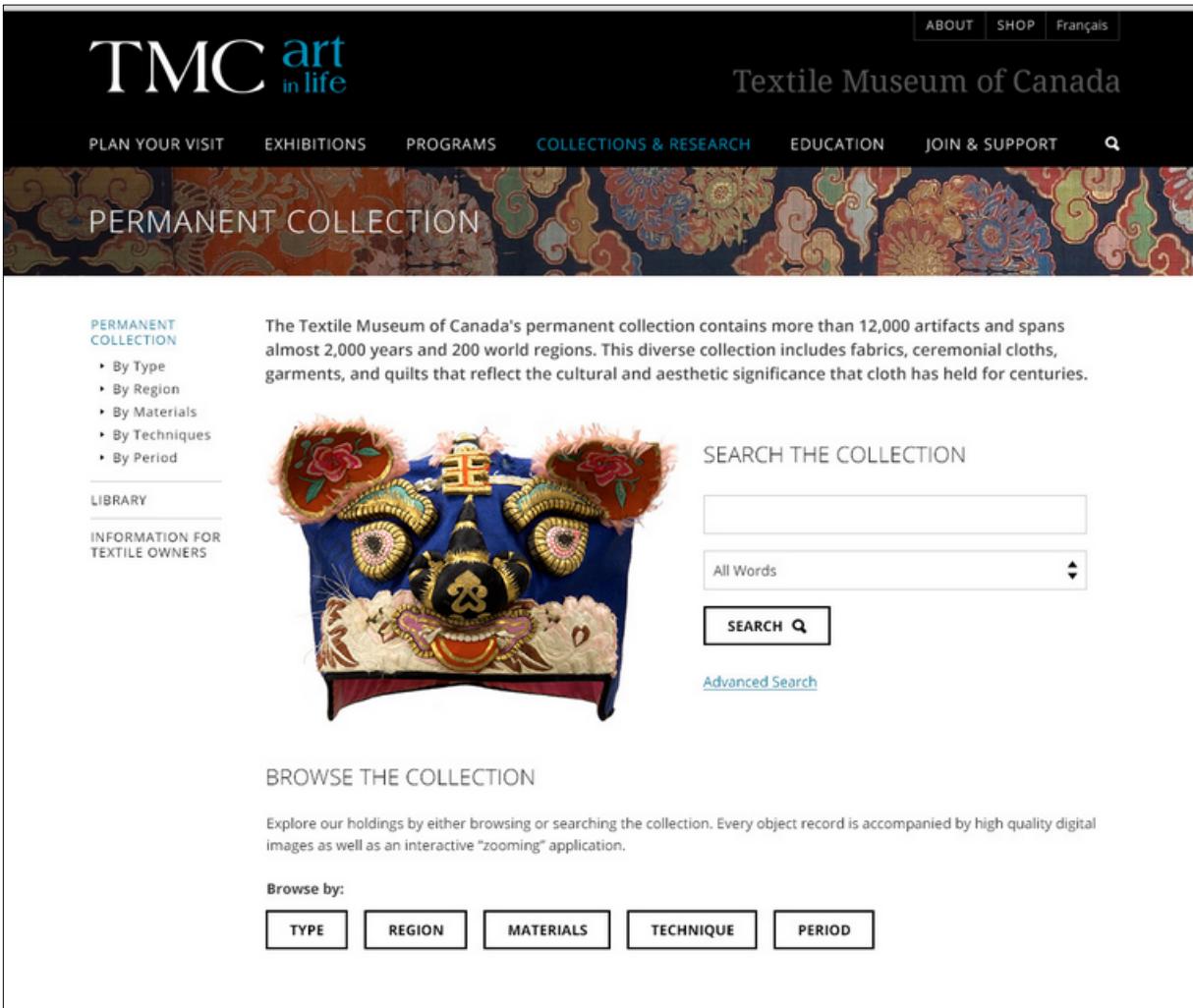


Figure 2. Screenshot of TMC Collections and Research interface
(<http://www.textilemuseum.ca/apps/index.cfm?page=collection.home&language=eng>)

Users who may not be familiar with the depth and breadth of the collection are able to browse through categories that form the thesaural structure of the database. Searching regions or materials, for example, the user can refine their query with more and more detail while digging down through the hierarchies. Other points of entry are available by searching directly with key words or using advanced search.

With the image of each artifact, a zoom feature enables users to see a magnified view of the object, revealing the fibres and structures in enlarged detail, and provides a unique opportunity for researchers to study textiles without having to see them first hand.

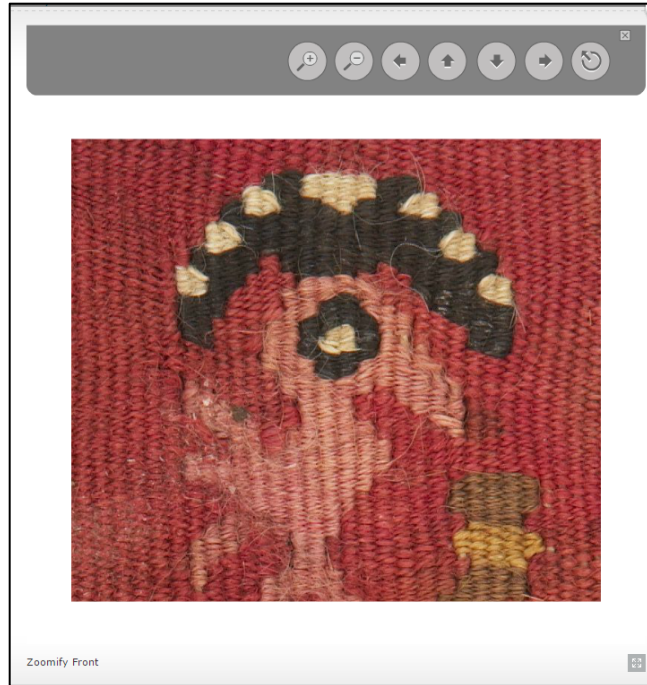


Figure 3. Screenshot of Zoomify: Border fragment, Peru, Chimú
Gift of Pascal Muzard and Nieves Carrasco, T2005.17.20
 (<http://www.textilemuseum.ca/apps/index.cfm?page=collection.detail&catId=14104&row=1>)

The ability to see objects from all angles online is possible through 3D views, such as in this example.

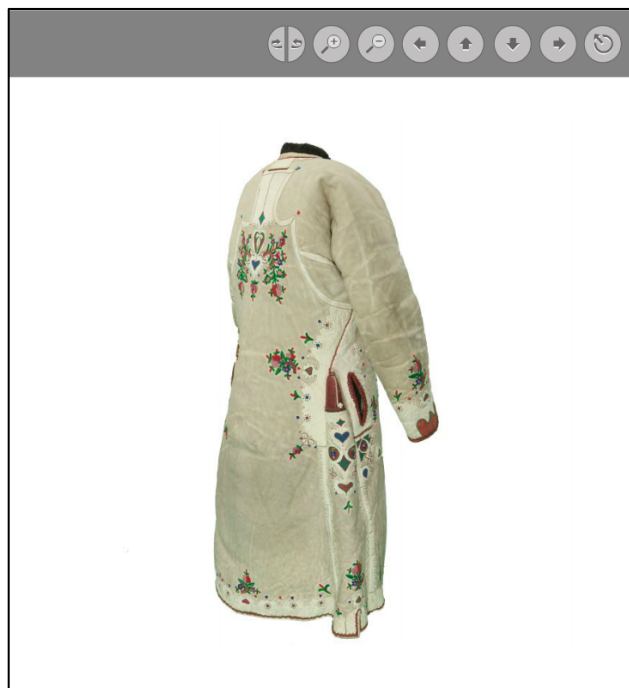


Figure 4. Screen shot of 3D View: Coat, Hungary, early 20th century, Gift of Kalman Czegledy, T93.0011
 (http://www.textilemuseum.ca/TMCMedia/VR/gallery/T1993_0011_VR/T1993_0011_VR.html)

Making Museums Matter

In the last several years, there has been a rethinking of the nature of the museum experience, together with a realization that museums need to become increasingly user-oriented to revitalize their role. There has been a shift in museums "...from collecting and preserving objects to serving their visitors."² Influencing how the museum and public interact is the idea "...that the objects displayed in the museum do not have any fixed or inherent meaning but that 'meaning making,' or the process by which those objects acquire meaning for individual members of the public, will in each case involve the specific memories, expertise, viewpoint, assumptions, and connections that the particular individual brings."³

In 2008, Elaine Gurian stated that new digital tools should be introduced to allow users to access collections to explore their own interests, rather than those perceived by the museum, necessitating a change in the role of curator from "teacher" to "facilitator"⁴. She asked museums to concentrate on "access to information systems that are easy to understand, repeatable, and transferable ...and include ways for the public to add information to the system and respond to the information left by others."⁵ These approaches promote the idea that museums should give more consideration to the needs and interests of users in order to remain relevant.

TMC Online Projects

The Museum recognized and sought to maximize the rich potential and opportunities offered by digital technology. It strived to become more relevant to its visitors, to connect with audiences, and to engage them in multiple ways. At the same time the Museum was posting its digital collections online, it was developing a context for understanding and applying the knowledge these collections contain. Presenting textiles in online exhibitions and themed web projects provided opportunities for further user-directed exploration and discovery of the collection.

The first TMC project-based website *Cloth and Clay: Communicating Culture* (2002) (http://www.textilemuseum.ca/cloth_clay/), which was accompanied by a museum exhibition, was developed in partnership with the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art. This website explores over 2000 years of history, and introduces ancient and contemporary objects from the two museums' collections. Textiles rarely seen outside of museum storage facilities and ceramics are featured in an interactive, image-rich environment, creating a path of discovery. On this website the strength of the physical collections of ancient objects combined with the potential afforded by digital technology yielded new discoveries. This 1500 year old Moche textile fragment with striking imagery has remnants of dyed blue yarns. Our virtual restoration of these blue dyed threads, most of which have disappeared from the textile, gives a closer approximation of what this tunic fragment might have originally looked like on its wearer.

² G. Wayne Clough, *Best of Both Worlds, Museums, Libraries, and Archives in a Digital Age* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2013) p. 18, <http://www.si.edu/content/gwc/bestofbothworldssmithsonian.pdf>.

³ Stephen E. Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 2002) p. 212.

⁴ Elaine Heumann Gurian, "The Potential of Museum Learning—The Essential Museum," in *The Manual of Museum Learning*, ed. Barry Lord (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2007), 37.

⁵ *Ibid*, 40.



Figure 5. Screenshots from *Cloth and Clay: Tunic fragment, Peru, Moche-Wari, Gift of Thomas Kalman, T85.0520* (http://www.textilemuseum.ca/cloth_clay/LTOS/moche.cfm)

Produced in 2005, *Canadian Tapestry: The Fabric of Cultural Diversity* (<http://www.canadiantapestry.ca/en/hom-fla.html>) delved further into the collection to explore the stories behind textiles and discover Canada's cultural diversity through cloth.

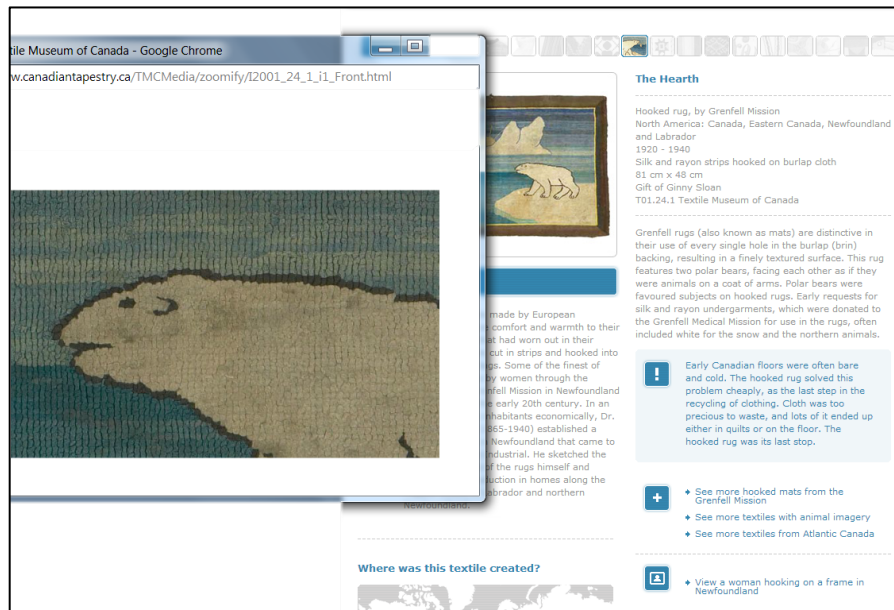


Figure 6. Screenshot from *Canadian Tapestry* (http://www.canadiantapestry.ca/en/det-T01_24_1.html)

This object tells a Canadian story of the hooked rug industry established by Dr. Wilfred Grenfell in Newfoundland and Labrador in the early 20th century in an effort to provide a source of income for inhabitants in isolated communities who struggled to make ends meet. The mission became a real means of securing essential clothing, food and medicine. Today, Grenfell mats provide whimsical glimpses into a time when this region was shaping its future in the emerging Canadian political and cultural landscape.

As part of web development, the Museum explored and incorporated interactive, web-based technologies to encourage exploration by learners of all ages. Included in these websites are online educational elements, play-based learning modules, and a variety of learning resources for teachers and learners in different age groups that support the larger stories told.

Produced in 2007, *Digital Threads* (<http://www.digitalthreads.ca/en/>) features an interactive web environment which highlights digital artworks by Canadian artists that link to 50 exhibitions representing 17 years of TMC programming, 180 contemporary artists, and thousands of textiles from the TMC collection. Here, art and technology merge, as technology not only produces the content but is woven into the very fabric of the artists' creative engagement. The site includes a studio, where visitors can create their own digital artwork and experiment with pattern, colours, shape and meaning. One of the artists, Ruth Scheuing, has created an interactive site called *Walking a Line: Mapping the Days*. "Her artistic process begins with a simple digital line that traces the routes of her daily activities and ends with four layers of pattern, colour, images and textures – a collage of factual and fictional information that she finds on the World Wide Web."⁶

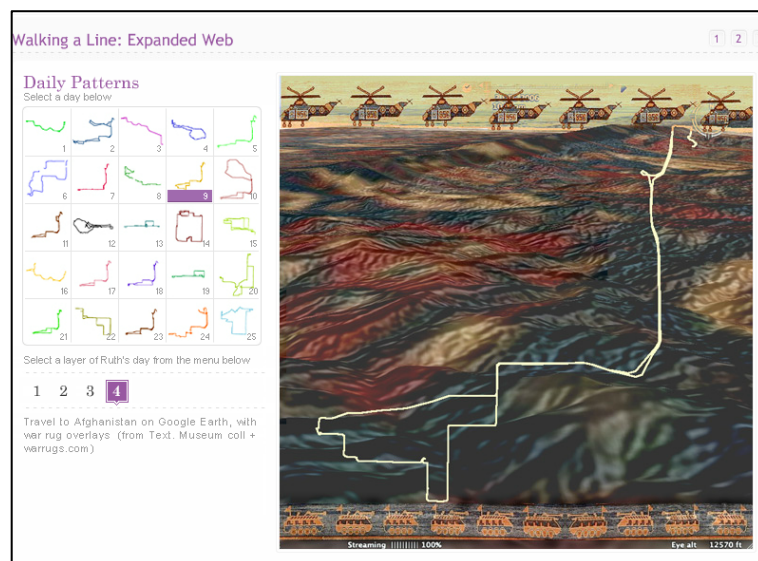


Figure 7. Ruth Scheuing, *Walking a Line: Mapping the Days*. Drive to Cap for teaching + shopping along Commercial Dr. after work, 1: 34,000. This collage: Travel to Afghanistan on Google Earth, with war rug overlays (from Text. Museum coll + warrugs.com) (<http://www.digitalthreads.ca/en/myth/artwork.cfm>)

With *In Touch* (<http://www.textilemuseum.ca/intouch/en/index.cfm>) which was produced in 2009, the Museum discovered and experimented with new ways of expanding entry points to the exploration of textiles, using more technology and educational elements. Objects can be explored through enhanced photography, with macro views and animations. Audio recordings of curators, scholars, educators and community members provide additional opportunities to engage with the collection.

⁶ Digital Threads, Myth and Science: <http://www.digitalthreads.ca/en/>.

Through *Social Fabric* (<http://www.textilemuseum.ca/socialfabric/Home.aspx>), a 2.0 website produced in 2010, the Museum created an opportunity to turn online audiences into active participants in the storytelling, research and engagement with 50 museum objects, selected by different community groups: artists, makers, academics, students, new Canadians and fashion designers. The idea was to bring community knowledge, participation and voices into web projects and the physical galleries.

The visitor can explore *Social Fabric* by choosing the physical quality of an object, such as *Soft/Light* or *Silky/Shiny*. These qualities and textures, visible in enlarged detail through high quality images, can evoke the visitor's personal memories and experiences, which they can associate with museum objects. Each object is paired with two provoking questions to elicit responses in the form of videos, audio recordings, images and text – one question is based on factual knowledge and the other about the visitor's personal experience.

Question: What types of dance would someone wear this garment for?

This sash made from bamboo and bottle caps chosen from *Bright/Noisy* prompts a visitor to post a video clip of a Zambian theatre troupe performing at an HIV-awareness event. The dancer is clothed in a similar garment – we can hear the sounds and see its movement in a dance – an object that can't be touched but is brought to life in other ways. In order to explore the relationships between objects, each one is linked to a collection connection – a related object from the TMC database, in this case a dance sling from Peru.

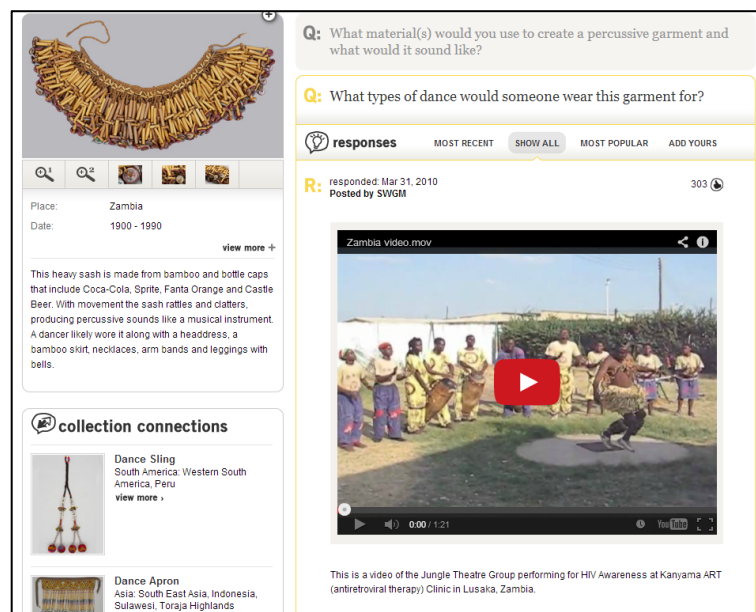


Figure 8. Screenshot from *Social Fabric* (<http://www.textilemuseum.ca/socialfabric/Bright-Noisy/Series-1/Dance-accessory.aspx?QID=160&RID=153&vmode=detail>)

One of the goals of *Social Fabric* was to feature objects from the website in our gallery with a computer terminal for visitors to access the website inside the Museum to post their comments. A recent installation of a Chinese fibre rain cape was the inspiration for a school project with Toronto students in Grade 6, who visited the museum to see the exhibit and then returned to school to make their own

rainwear out of found materials. A display of these garments was mounted in the Museum's education gallery, fibrespace. *Social Fabric* serves as a model for engaging the public and building community knowledge about diverse heritage objects, a shift for museums from being content providers to platform providers.

Audience Engagement beyond the Museum Walls

In 2009, Robert Janes stated the call for renewing the relevance of museums and advocated for museums to be "... grounded in consciousness of the world around them... fulfilling their latent potential as community organizers of the highest order."⁷

TXTilecity, a new platform introduced in 2012, extends the Museum experience beyond its walls to engage directly with its community. It is based on key narratives not addressed in the Museum's collection – the role of the Museum in relation to its context, and the fundamental role textiles have played in shaping Toronto's social, cultural, economic and architectural terrain. Through this website as well as the *TXTilecity* mobile apps, the user discovers the role of textiles in defining the urban landscape in a mapped interface documenting sites and their stories, from early garment manufacturing and the performing arts, to the rise of the fashion industry and contemporary design.

Facilitated *TXTilecity* tours for school programs are led by trained guides, with Museum tablet computers that provide school classes access to the rich information captured within the city streets. *TXTilecity* is an invaluable teaching resource, and students encounter Toronto's diverse history through stories brought to life in audio and video documentary accounts.

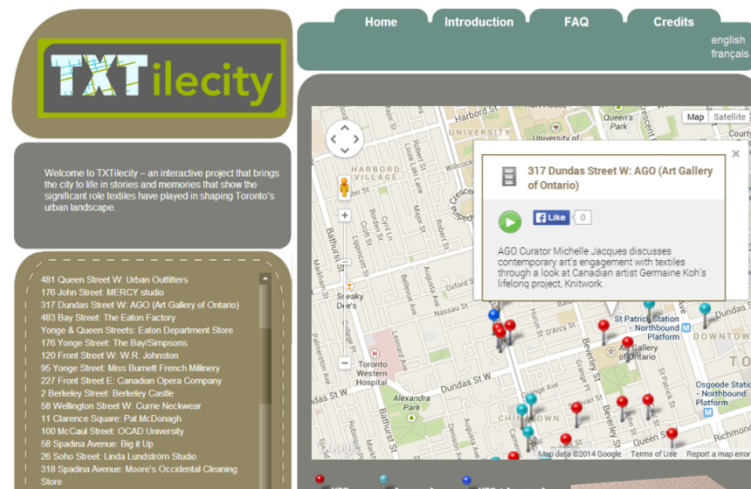


Figure 9. Screenshot of TXTilecity, 317 Dundas Street W: AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario (<http://txtilecity.ca>))

One of the school tours, for example, explores textiles used by visual and performing artists in the field of art, sculpture, performance art, theatre and design. In one of the documentaries connected to mapped physical sites, Art Gallery of Ontario curator Michelle Jacques discusses contemporary art's engagement with textiles through a look at Canadian artist Germaine Koh's lifelong project, *Knitwork*.

⁷ Robert R. Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* (London: Routledge, 2009), 185.

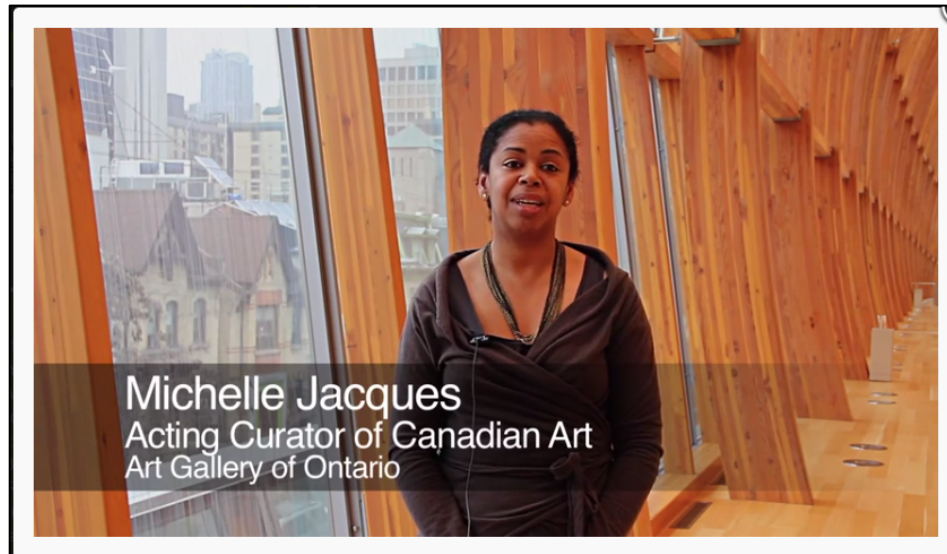


Figure 10. Screenshot of video from TXTilecity: Michelle Jacques at the Art Gallery of Ontario

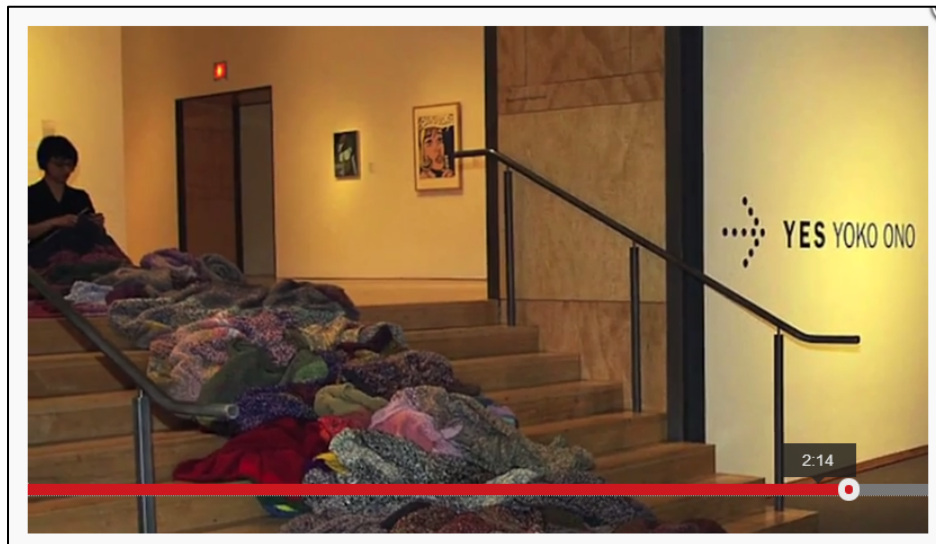


Figure 11. Screenshot of video from TXTilecity: Knitwork, Germaine Koh, Art Gallery of Ontario

New Directions

The Textile Museum's most recent project, *Narrative Threads: Crafting the Canadian Quilt* (www.narrativethreads.ca), to be launched in 2015, builds further on the Museum's goals of relevance, community knowledge building, and continuing its dialogue with the public.



Figure 12. Screenshot from Narrative Threads website in development (www.narrativethreads.ca)

The project features 175 objects selected by the TMC in partnership with five Canadian museums: Saskatchewan's Western Development Museum, Niagara Historical Society & Museum, Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife, Delta Museum & Archives, and Manitoba Crafts Museum & Library. These artifacts reflect the role that craft and textiles have played in shaping the country and its diverse cultural landscapes. Students, cultural heritage audiences, researchers, teachers, scholars, and life-long learners can view a rich and varied selection of artifacts from Canadian museums, and can contribute their own object biographies, possessions and experiences through 2.0 functionality. Text, photographs, animation, audio commentary and scans of primary documents are available for visitors to explore.



Figure 11. Screenshot from Narrative Threads website in development

This immigration quilt tells the story of Christena and John Mackay who were forced by their landlord from their farm in Lairg, Sutherlandshire in Scotland in 1830, and crossed the Atlantic and settled in East Nissouri, Ontario. When the couple died in the 1860s, they left behind 80 grandchildren and 18 great-grandchildren. This quilt was made by a direct descendant of the Mackay's second daughter, Betsy. It tells the story of the family's journey on the ship *Cleopatra* from Cromarty in Scotland to Québec City. According to family records, they were at sea for 13 weeks and three days. Sailing ships, women and children waving goodbye, a dog, and a tartan-clad piper are depicted in appliqué and embroidery.

Content that is created collaboratively through partnerships can offer a broader experience, as it presents multiple points of view. Cross-institutional content makes connections among linked objects, and users can discover other museums and their collections. The TMC was also able to share expertise and production costs through these partnerships among sister institutions. Digital technology provides the public with a unified way to access these diverse objects in one place, and helps to serve the widest possible audience.

Mobile Technologies

Digital technologies are also being introduced into galleries to provide greater context and enhance informational content of museum experiences. *Handheld* is the TMC's new technology program, supporting the use of mobile technology as an interpretive tool in all TMC educational programming. As part of *Handheld*, museum educators and docents use tablets on tours to show multimedia content, providing context about the makers, cultures and techniques featured in our exhibitions. Mobile technology also provides access to the Museum's vast collection online while in the museum, including a growing body of photos, documents, and audio associated with objects in the Museum's database. Visitors can see views or details of objects that are inaccessible in the museum's physical setting.

Conclusion

The approach to the collection at the TMC, solidly rooted in the long term care and development of the collection, has focused in recent years on ways to engage audiences with our 13,000 objects through digital access, our online database, and interactive websites and mobile technologies. This online access to digitized objects and records has opened up our storage cupboards for the world to explore and is democratizing knowledge, enriching the visitor experience for those that come to the museum, and expanding our reach to the millions who cannot. Combined with the power of social media to connect with audiences, digital technology increases the capacity of individuals to engage with our textiles and bring their own stories to the conversations.⁸

The Textile Museum has transformed how the institution communicates with audiences and opened up new forms and levels of visitor engagement. The collection has been made globally available to be

⁸ G. Wayne Clough, *Best of Both Worlds, Museums, Libraries, and Archives in a Digital Age* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2013) p. 2, <http://www.si.edu/content/gwc/bestofbothworldssmithsonian.pdf>.

virtually accessed, researched, discovered and enjoyed by our public. The virtual space created by websites enables us to place these objects in multiple narratives or stories providing the visitor with an opportunity to become a virtual curator engaged in the “discovery” of the object in a variety of ways of their own choosing.⁹

Through online programs, we have extended our programming capacity engaging new audiences of all ages and backgrounds, 1,000,000 unique visitors per year (compared to 25,000 to 30,000 annually through the physical plant). Despite this growth, the public continues to place great value on the physical visit to the museum. Audiences will continue to be drawn to see textiles and other objects close up, and museums serve as destinations for families and others to enjoy shared experiences. Digital images can heighten awareness of what museums have to offer and enhance physical encounters with objects. At the same time, digital collections reach millions of people who cannot visit in person, building institutions’ impact and relevance.

Acknowledgements

The fourteen years of progressive online new media development, digitization and audience engagement at the Textile Museum of Canada is the product of the vision, imagination and dedication of many individuals and organizations. I would like to acknowledge the Department of Canadian Heritage, Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport, Ontario Trillium Foundation, Jackman Foundation, ecentricarts inc., Axiell ALM and other partners; and present and former Board Trustees, Directors, staff members, contractors, volunteers, and students, too numerous to mention here, for their contributions towards transforming how the TMC communicates with its audience, and its achievement of broad new levels of visitor engagement.

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⁹ Douglas MacKenzie, “What is the Role of the Artifact in a Virtual Museum?” *Spectra* (Spring 1997): 28-33.