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Knit and Crochet Heritage Museum: A Work in Progress

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The goal of this paper as presented was to inform the textiles community of an upcoming symposium to explore the idea of creating a place to honor our knit and crochet heritage, and to invite people to attend. The symposium was held in Madison, Wisconsin, November 8-10, 2012 and was co-hosted by the Wisconsin Historical Society, and underwritten by a generous grant from The Yarn Group of The National NeedleArts Association. This paper begins by discussing the inspirations and motivations of the symposium's organizers, then describes the process of funding and organizing the symposium. It then concludes with a summary of the content, conclusions, and follow-up to the symposium. The endeavor has been renamed: Center for Knit and Crochet: To Preserve and Promote Art, Craft and Scholarship. Details are available at www.knitcrochetcenter.org.

Why a Museum?

Whenever I have shared my vision of founding a museum, the unanimous response of museum professionals is, "Don't!" They are aware of the inherent ethical, moral, and financial obligations to conserve and exhibit a physical collection of fragile textiles and archives of supporting documents. In the current economic and business climate, creating a new brick and mortar museum, when long established existing museums are being forced to close due to lack of funding, is a daunting vision. A more realistic and logical entry point is to begin with a digital collection of knitted and crocheted objects, which are accurately, thoroughly, and consistently described. The digital approach would provide an unprecedented opportunity to approach a new museum as a concept first, unburdened by a physical collection that necessarily reorders priorities.

However, a digital-only museum will not be a totally satisfying endpoint for something as inherently tactile as knitting and crochet. Many of the early endorsers of this initiative are driven by the vision of Great Aunt Millie's mittens being lost to posterity. Yet we can't save all the mittens of all the Aunt Millies. We will have to learn how to divide our energies and resources between preserving the past and empowering the future of knitting and crochet.

As practitioners and preservationists, we ask ourselves "What does Knitting and Crochet offer that merits the "museum" treatment?" Knitting and Crochet are: Elemental - Basic - Art - Craft - Practical - Soothing - Relaxing - Meditative - Rewarding - Milestone marking - Traditional - Classic - Honoring tradition - Ethnic - Folk - Creative - Futuristic - Habituating - Entrapping - Addictive - Educational - Math-based - Community - Communal - Social - Solitary - Stereotyped - Neglected - Humble - Low-tech - Expensive - Inexpensive - High-tech - satisfying - Alluring - Beguiling - Intellectually stimulating - Challenging - Mindless - Disparaged - Mocked - Simple - Complex - Structural - Architectural - Artistic - Textural - Colorful - Repetitive - Trancelike - Intimate - Charitable - Personalized - Female - Domestic - Unisex - Archetypal - Fluid - Flexible - Interlaced - Three-Dimensional - Bi-directional -

Multimedia - Derivative - Inspired - Original - Mystical - Magical - Enthralling - Tension - Gauge - Product/process - Timeless - Ageless - Calming - Rehabilitative - Exploratory - Historic - Fashion - Spiritual - Intergenerational - Productive - Regimented - Rigid - Joyful - Freeing - Evanescent - Accessible - Perfectionist - Forgiving - Iterative - Patterned - Sequential - Freeform - Structured - Unstructured - Replication - Synergistic - Therapeutic - Green - Economical - Tactile - Useful - Beautiful – Relevant.

Knitting and crochet intrigue and engage because both techniques make fabric without a loom, and enable the construction of form-fitting garments without sewing. Knit and crochet are unique among the textile arts and crafts because the structure of the fabric, its aesthetic character, surface decoration and the finished architecture are all created simultaneously with the primal technology of two sticks or a hook and string.

Dr. Ellsworth Brown, director of the Wisconsin Historical Society, and an initiator of the symposium, observed how distinctive and sophisticated knitting is. He mused that if he were sent home with fabric, scissors, needle, and thread he could return the next day with the semblance of a quilt. It would not be pretty or perhaps even functional, but it would be recognizable as a quilt. Given the same assignment with knitting needles and yarn, he could do nothing. Skill is required to perform the magic and mystery of creating with knit and crochet. It is reasonable to honor that skill and legacy.

I love museums. I came to this project as a devout pilgrim to scores of museums around the world. My perception and comments were, until I plunged into this quest, totally of the visitor: Beautiful, important, valuable, and historic objects belong in museums, where they are lovingly displayed and placed in a context that highlights their beauty and importance and help the museum-goer understand how an object came to be, as well as know the stories of the people who made and used it. Careful grouping and exposition of related objects enables synthetic analysis.

Because I believe that knitting and crochet are intrinsically worthy of the museum treatment, I focus on seeking them out and have often been disappointed. This project has been driven by a desire to elevate the perception and status of knitting and crochet. If existing museums weren't treating these arts/crafts with the respect, scholarship, and awe that I believed they deserved, maybe we knitters and crocheters needed to have a museum of our own.

That spark was kindled into a smoldering passion when I visited the International Quilt Study Center and Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska. If quilters could have a fabulous collection housed in a world-class study, exhibit, and conservation center, why not knitters and crocheters? If quilting could have an endowed chair on the faculty of a major university, why couldn't knit and crochet?

Isn't there already a knitting museum? A quick internet search revealed these limited examples:

- Kawashima Knit Museum, Tokyo. The Japan bobbin knitting method is featured here.
- Sanquhar Tolbooth Museum, Upper Nithsdale, Dumfries, Scotland. Gloves with intricate two color geometrical patterns knitted by locals in the 1700's and 1800's are featured. The gloves, knit from a wool and cotton or linen blend, known as drugget, are warm and extra durable, and have been gifted to the local museum.

- Selbu Parish Museum, Norway. Several rooms contain an extensive exhibits of Selbu mittens, their designs and history.
- Deutsches-Strumpf Museum, German; Hosiery and Sock Knitting Machinery Museum. Presently online with promising placeholders, but little information.
- Paisley Museum, Scotland; founded in 1871. This is Scotland's first municipal museum; the building was paid for by Sir Peter Coats of the famous Coats thread manufacturing family.
- Knitting and Crochet Guild of the United Kingdom, at Lee Mills near Holmfirth, West Yorkshire. The guild has a collection of about 2000 knitted and crocheted objects, related tools, a 2000-volume research library, and some 50,000 pattern leaflets and booklets produced by spinneries. There is no physical location for a museum. The collection is stored in a warehouse with access by appointment only.

Before I had formulated my desire to create a museum, and in an effort to create a network in the Madison, WI fiber community, I participated in other knit and crochet related pursuits, including a Cozy Shelter Yarn bombing in September 2010, and a community fibers arts show of microscopic organisms: "Tiny Friends and Foes," Overture Center, Madison Wisconsin, December 2010. I created a knit and felted replica of a portion of the HK 97 bacteriophage virus's genome.

A Symposium

By chance, I had dinner with Dr. Ellsworth Brown, the current Director of the Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS). He knew that I was obsessed with knitting, and he gamely began asking about stitches and construction. As any textile fanatic, I can prattle endlessly about esoteric techniques, but I stopped myself, saying that I really wanted to talk with him about why the world needs a knitting museum. Dr. Brown had an idea that found an outlet in my vision. He understood, long before I did, that this endeavor provides a unique opportunity to create a twenty-first century museum in the digital age, honoring one of the most ancient and elemental of fiber arts, without being burdened by the financial and ethical constraints of a physical collection.

At the beginning of the evening, Dr. Brown did not know about Elizabeth Zimmerman, founder of Wisconsin-based Schoolhouse Press and long running summer "knitting camps" in Central Wisconsin. Nor did he know that the Madison Knitters Guild boasts of 550-plus members, the largest modern guild in the U.S. (and possibly the world). By the end of the evening, he had proposed that the prestigious Wisconsin Historical Society host a symposium to discuss the proposition that a museum to honor knitting and crochet be established.

I presented Dr. Brown's amazing offer to the Yarn Group of The National NeedleArts Association (TNNA), the people behind the independent yarn industry: store owners, fashion designers, yarn designers and distributors, book and magazine publishers, product manufacturers, and their representatives and teachers. Yarn Group members work together to bring new products, new ideas, new fashions and new stitches to the knitting and crocheting community around the world, through trade shows, events, television appearances, books, magazines and retail stores. I asked for \$3000 support for the symposium that WHS was offering to host. Yarn Group members enthusiastically raised the amount to \$5000, and one of their members, Jim Bryson of Bryson Distributing created an endowment in memory of Bev Galeskas, pioneer designer of modern felted knitting.

After Dr. Brown offered to host a symposium, I collaborated closely with Margaret Peterson, a designer, teacher, master knitter, and retired public relations executive from Marshfield, Wisconsin. Together we developed a draft guidance document.

Vision

- Raise the status of knitting and crochet
- Enhance the visibility of the art form
- Make knitting more attractive and relevant to current and future generations
- Create a space dedicated to knitting scholarship and public education.

In sum, we want to preserve, promote and help knitting and crochet continue to evolve.

Goals

- To preserve and promote the wonders of the works of our hands: past, present and future
- To restore the status of knitting and crochet to its historic levels
- To increase access to and the accuracy of their documentation in history, costume and textile collections
- To create a home for the source materials of the America's knitting superstars, as well as exemplars from all the ethnic groups who brought their fiber traditions with them to America
- To foster the continued development, exploration of, and experimentation with, knit and crochet as an expressive art form so that they remain relevant and vital elements for future artists and crafters

Objectives

- To collect, preserve, document, and share knitted and crocheted objects and related study materials
- To provide academic research resources and internship opportunities
- To create display space for both permanent and traveling exhibits, as well as a home for the collections and papers of leading designers
- To host workshops, classes and other social interactions that promote creativity and the expansion of our art

Outcomes

- To provide a home for beautiful exemplars of vintage and historic knitting
- To help existing institutions to meet the needs of our knitting and crochet community for access, accuracy and inspiration
- To raise the profile and esteem of knitted and crochet objects, where held as part of general collections of history and art museums, or more specialized costume and textile collections
- To increase the accuracy and completeness of the documentation of the knit and crochet objects in these collections

- To increase the availability of knit and crochet objects for study, and frequency of exhibition to the general public

Evie Rosen, Founder of Warm-up America and Marilyn Murphy, TSA member and founder of Clothroads, agreed to serve on an Advisory Board. On June 8, 2011, I located the Mary Walker Phillips Collection, (safe with family), and met its appraiser, Melissa Leventon, who will keynote the Nov 8-10, 2012, Symposium.

In November 2011, my husband Larry Hands and I visited Barbara Walker, in Florida, at her urging, to photograph her recent, unpublished works in support of the museum. In the 1970's, Ms. Walker assembled a comprehensive collection of traditional patterns, community contributions, and over a thousand original stitch patterns that she created. She first wrote *A Treasury of Knitting Patterns*, followed by a Second, Third and Fourth Treasuries, *Mosaic Knitting* and *Knitting from the Top*, a leading text on creating one piece, seamless, garments, worked from the top down.

With those initial pieces in places, I next confronted the naming dilemma. I have called this project a "Work in Progress" because no boundaries have yet been set. I am clear about including knitting and its intertwined partner, crochet, within the scope of the museum. (My dear, grandmother, an ardent practitioner, taught both my sister and me.) Initially, I omitted crochet from the title, sacrificing inclusion for brevity. I soon learned that was a mistake.

What's in A Name? Knit and Crochet is cumbersome. Why is there no sibling word?

One omits crochet at one's peril. Consider: – Stitching, Yarning, Yarn Play, Yarn Arts, Knitching, Croning (well maybe not . . .). Should we name the enterprise: Hook and Needle Heritage; Museum of Sticks and Strings; Museum of America's Stitching Heritage? But I wasn't thinking of embroidery . . . I fear that including NeedleArts or Fiber Arts in the name will dilute focus on long-neglected knitting and crochet. I laughed when someone asked whether tatting would be included. As a child, no matter what handwork I carried to amuse myself on long car trips: knitting, crochet, lanyard braiding, my crusty English grandfather always growled: "So you brought your tatting with you again." I persuaded a family friend to teach me the basics of tatting, just so I knew what Grandpa meant.

Initially, I was encouraged to focus on the collection first. I thought that it was "key to acquire a core collection," one that would inspire knitters and crocheters, industry supporters, educational and cultural institutions, and foundations to fund the development and operation of an organization to protect the stitching legacy. One curator encouraged me to: "Get the object!!" I envisioned a campaign: "Mining America's Attic Archives for hidden knitted treasures . . . "Give us your tired, your torn, your knitted fragments yearning to be honored."

Early on, I was contacted by lace knitting author/designer, Myrna Stahman, who needed an outlet for the remarkable lace knitting of Marguerite Shimmons, since deceased. How to preserve and promote Ms. Shimmons' collection of over a thousand exquisite lace pieces raises many of the issues that a museum for knit and crochet could help to resolve: Will the heirs give the collection the honor that it deserves? Would they value it more if it had monetary value? If this project succeeds in raising the appreciation of heritage knit and crochet, will it paradoxically price our nascent museum out of the market? How ironic, if the very act of developing the capacity and resources to gather and maintain a notable collection rendered potential accessions unaffordable!

I wanted to ensure a safe haven and exhibit space for the works of my knitting heroes and role models, including, but not limited to (an extremely subjective and unranked list): Cat Bordhi, Hazel Carter, Sydna Farley, Beverly Galeskas, June Hemmons Hiatt, Deborah Newton, Mary Walker Phillips, Marguerite Shimmons, Meg Swansen, Montse Stanley, Barbara Walker, and Elizabeth Zimmerman.

I pondered the issues around scope and organization of a collection: historic, ethnic regional; technical examples: lace, cable, texture, color work, shape; insights on women's contributions: domestic, charitable, commercial, educational; art and craft – knit and crochet as the media of cutting edge innovation.

Fortunately, other museum professionals, including Roxanne Shaughnessy and her colleagues at the Textile Museum of Canada [TMC], provided a reality check by helping me understand conservation concerns such as: environmental controls; maintaining constant relative humidity; close control for borrowed objects; providing an air cleanliness filtration system; lighting kept at lux levels below 50 for highly sensitive items; maintaining constant temperature to control humidity levels; integrated pest management [IPM] to control: the “M” word (moth), silverfish, firebrats, carpet beetles and more; and proper storage such as keeping items flat, (not layered), or rolled, and using acid-free tissue, or mylar.

All of these precautions come with a cost. Quickly, I realized that every cherished knit and crochet object is actually a conservation liability; thus, my mental campaign to build a collection moved from: “Save Aunt Millie’s Mittens” to “Adopt Aunt Millie’s Mittens,” to “How can we Afford to Accession Aunt Millie’s Mittens?”

My TMC mentors advised that to operate a textile museum with a building and a collection, I should have in-hand funding of a million dollars per year for five years. Serious money must be raised to fund the vision: “I want to give you the opportunity to help preserve our knit and crochet heritage.” We will need one Melinda Gates or two million Ravelers at \$5 each. Likely, our path lies somewhere in between.

In sum, an isolated project like a physical Knit and Crochet Museum can only go forward when funding is identified. In reality, to succeed as a brick and mortar museum with a physical collection, the Knit and Crochet Heritage Initiative must be connected with a partner institution. If an institution like the WHS, were to be willing to take on the Knit and Crochet Heritage Project, a strategic alliance with an established entity could create that credibility to attract funding.

Dr. Ann Lane Hedlund, U of Arizona, warned, “If you are thinking of starting a museum, don’t.” Elaine Heumann Gurian cautioned: “It is a lot easier not to start, than to stop.” The caveat is, that starting the museum is like getting pregnant: It can start with a real “rush,” but it has serious long-term consequences. Even if we could get a museum up and running, there was a risk that we would fail to maintain operating funds about four years into the project. Long-term commitment, a sound business plan, and an endowment are imperative. It is sobering to ponder the public trust we would be undertaking when we take possession of the hand-knitted and crocheted art of others.

Meanwhile, we should pursue building strategic partnerships to:

- Improve the use and documentation of existing collections as well as the case for their expansion.

- Create synergy with skilled and dedicated volunteer knitters and crocheters to interact with and build local collections in smaller institutions.
- Make the case that each expansion of the collection must come with its own endowment, either from the donor or volunteers/fans/funders who support the acquisition.
- Encourage partnering institutions to broaden their collection scope, to reflect the multiple traditions and ethnic backgrounds of their natural audience. For example, could an expanded collection of knitted and crocheted objects better tell the story of immigrants?

Just assembling the symposium has been a massive undertaking. If successful, much more work lies ahead. The symposium is all about sharing expertise, building a team and realistically assessing the best way to begin. It is an exciting time to envision a totally unique museum -- getting off to the right start in the digital age -- before we are blessed/burdened with objects that are simultaneously assets and liabilities.

The Symposium

The symposium began Thursday afternoon with a reception, followed by welcome and opening remarks from Dr. Ellsworth Brown, the Ruth and Hartley Barker Director of the Wisconsin Historical Society; and Karen Kendrick-Hands, Symposium Chair (that's me!). The lobby was graced with four cases filled with knit and crochet treasures from the Textiles and Costume Collection of Wisconsin Historical Society [WHS], and the Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection of the School of Human Ecology of the University of Wisconsin-Madison [HLATC]. The exhibit was curated by Leslie Bellais, Curator of the WHS collection, with assistance from Liese Pfeifer, the Collections Manager of HLATC.

Susan Strawn, PhD, is a professor of Apparel Design and Merchandising at Dominican University in River Forest, IL and author of "Knitting America - A Glorious Heritage from Warm Socks to High Art." Dr. Strawn presented a thought-provoking montage of knitters throughout the years titled, "The Knitting Image: Popular Media, Art, and Industry Look at American Knitters." She explored how industry, media, government, and other social institutions manipulated public perception and value of handwork, specifically knitting during wartime and peacetime. Social knitting was promoted as patriotism to mobilize public support during World Wars I and II. Subsequently, knitting and crochet were demoted to in-home pursuits, and those who knitted in public were subject to ridicule in the popular media that had, just a decade earlier, lauded them.

On Friday, Melissa Leventon, principal of Curatrix Group Museum Consultants and Appraisers, former Curator-in-Charge of Textiles, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and consultant to the new Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles in Bangkok, gave her keynote address: "So You Want to Start A Museum." She spurred us to think deeply about the feasibility of establishing a museum. Ms. Leventon provided a number of examples of successes and failures of museum undertakings. Her advice included:

- start small
- location matters
- be visible
- have easy access
- know your audience before you commit

A common thread throughout the talk was: "It always costs more money and takes more time than you can imagine." The immense expense of owning a building and maintaining a physical collection made us much more receptive to the concept of honoring knit and crochet by creating a digital space with the attributes and offerings of a physical museum -- an alternative championed by Dr. Ellsworth Brown and others.

Jennifer Lindsay, M.A., History of Decorative Arts and coordinator for the Smithsonian Community Reef (a collaborative fiber art exhibition created for the National Museum of Natural History's exhibition of the Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef in 2010) advocated creating a virtual museum when she first got involved with the project in 2011. At the symposium, Ms. Lindsay discussed the virtual museum's form and content as an opportunity to integrate institutional knowledge with community knowledge more deliberately and openly than museums are doing on-line now. She recommended that we collaborate with museums and other collectors to develop a global, pan-institutional digital collection of historical and contemporary objects that could be augmented and critiqued by members of the community using recent advances in technology and in social networking.

Ms. Lindsay referenced the Australian Dress Register ("ADR") developed at Sydney, Australia's Powerhouse Museum, which currently includes examples of dress from 45 collections, and allows the public to add objects and supporting information upon approval. The ADR provides excellent resources to support outreach and education, including how to photograph, store, preserve and catalogue items of dress. Ms. Lindsay suggested that a virtual museum would promote appreciation and scholarship of knitting and crochet most effectively by facilitating a robust exchange of information about the techniques, materials, and evolving social history of knitting and crochet between museum professionals, collectors, scholars, artists, and passionate practitioners. She noted that it could also be used to test the feasibility of developing a physical museum at a later date.

Emily Pfotenhauer briefed us on the Wisconsin Decorative Arts Database, a digital collection among Wisconsin museums. From a practical perspective of having set up a pan-institutional digital collection for decorative arts media, she emphasized the importance and value of a standardized, structured "metadata" – the information about stuff – that is "searchable, sortable, interoperable and sharable." Ms. Pfotenhauer talked also about the International Quilt Study Center and Museum as a possible model.

Ms. Kendrick-Hands, Dr. Strawn and Ms. Leventon joined Trisha Malcolm, VP and Editorial Director of Vogue Knitting, and Jack Blumenthal, VP of Lion Brand Yarns on a panel, moderated by Sheryl Thies, author and designer, which addressed The Values of Heritage and Why It Matters.

The strength of the gathering, beyond the fine presentations, were the interactions and synergies among the more than 50 participants from 13 states and 2 foreign countries, including Beth Casey, owner of Lorna's Laces and Chair of TNNA's Yarn Group, our primary sponsor; Kathy Digman, Symposium Registrar; Jolie Elder, past president of Atlanta's Knitting Guild; Julia Grunau, owner of Patternfish in Toronto, CA; June Hemmons Hiatt, author of *The Principles of Knitting*; Gwen Blakley Kinsler, founder and first president of the Crochet Guild of America; Kathy Lange-Novak, Book Festival Manager; Lilly Marsh, a doctoral student in American Studies at Purdue University who is researching Elizabeth Zimmerman; Kathleen Mullins, President of the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House, Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan; Nicole Scalessa, IT Manager for The Library Company of

Philadelphia, Karen Searle, fiber artist and editor of TSA's newsletter; Myrna Stahman, author, teacher and collector; Dr. Angharad Thomas, Textile Archivist of the Knitting and Crochet Guild of the UK, (who came all the way from England); Sheryl Thies, knitting designer and author; and Barbara Tuceling, private collector.

Members of Madison Knitters Guild, the local guild with over 500 members, participated and volunteered to make the event possible. Passionate practitioners came from near and far to learn and help this initiative succeed. Of course the risk of listing is omission, so I apologize in advance!

The most important work was done Friday afternoon and Saturday morning when all the participants joined, under the guidance of facilitator Bert Stitt, to address our interests, excitement and concerns regarding the feasibility of establishing a knit and crochet museum. Our facilitator asked us to consider:

- vision – what we see as a final product
- mission – the things we must do to make the vision real
- purpose – why we do it
- goals – what we will accomplish
- action – what we must do.

These hours were interesting, intense and enlightening (and - to some - frustrating) but ultimately productive. After extensive discussion, we selected the following name and tagline. [International] Center for Knit and Crochet: To preserve and promote art, craft and scholarship.

As the Saturday session concluded, we formed a nine-member temporary board: Karen Kendrick-Hands, president; Jennifer Lindsey, vice president, Marilyn Huset, CPA, treasurer and Nicole Scalessa, secretary; and board members, Lilly Marsh, Pamela Mather, Kathleen Mullins, Margaret Peterson, and Myrna Stahman; and consented together to pursue nonprofit incorporation and 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. We have begun the process with the assistance of counsel Jennifer Amundsen. Ms. Hiatt, and Ms. Lindsey are leading a team, including Dr. Thomas, Ms. Scalessa, Dora Ohrenstein, and Karen C.K. Ballard to develop a vocabulary and categories for our "metadata" to describe knit and crochet objects, techniques and tools. Attendees have volunteered to edit the newsletter, Vanessa Gribowski; write grants, Rebecca Holmes; and maintain the contact list, Kristi Gersbach.

A second strategic direction is to develop and share guidelines for best practice for private collectors and local guilds to ensure the preservation of important knitted and crocheted objects intact with their stories in their local context. Ms. Elder will host a virtual brainstorming session online to generate and prioritize scope, project, program and partnership ideas. The Center for Knit and Crochet, Inc, incorporated as a Wisconsin non-stock corporation on Dec. 13, 2012. We will be developing a new logo, web page, and newsletter to reflect and share our collective vision and strategic directions, as well as opportunities to join, engage and fund, the Center for Knit and Crochet. The symposium gathered a stunning collection of talent, intellect, passion, and energy and propelled the birth of a new research and preservation endeavor!! We hope that you will join us on this amazing journey by visiting www.knitcrochetcenter.org.