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EXPANDING TEXTILE STUDY: SOME RECENT APPROACHES

A Museum Approach to Exhibiting a History of American Textiles

Karen J. Herbaugh

The Museum began in 1960 as the Merrimack Valley Textile Museum with the original collections focused on machinery--both hand-powered and industrial, while the textiles themselves were of minor importance. The few textiles originally collected focused only on wool. Gradually over the years the policy broadened to include other natural fibers and eventually fiber content restrictions were eliminated. However, the focus of the Museum remained machinery and how it related to industrial archeology and labor history.

This caused much confusion to the public since the Museum's name, Merrimack Valley Textile Museum (later changed to the Museum of American Textile History and then American Textile History Museum), always contained the word *textile*, implying to the public that when they came to the Museum there would be textiles on display. There were some temporary exhibits that showcased textiles but the permanent exhibit centered on machinery and only a shawl and a few sample sheets were included. A complaint of visitors was that the Museum was supposed to be a textile museum but there were no textiles!

By the 1980s the textile collection had grown considerably as well as all the other collections resulting in a storage shortage. This combined with an increased desire to expand public programming resulted in the Museum's board deciding to relocate the Museum.

A shift in priorities took place during the planning of the new exhibition space. The amount of exhibition space available would increase from 4,000 to 35,000 sf. This greatly influenced the staff's decision about what to include in the exhibit Textiles in America. By this time, the early 1990s, the Museum had amassed an unparalleled sample book collection and a substantial number of woven, flat textiles including linens, blankets, and coverlets. Certainly plenty to put in an exhibit! However, as the staff made plans they realized that these objects and the machinery were not sufficient to accurately portray the whole story of textiles. Another concern was whether or not visitors would be able to make the link from hundreds of samples to the wide array of fabrics available for clothing and home furnishings without actually seeing end products.

For these reasons, ATHM decided that it was necessary to include clothing, accessories, and other finished textile goods to help the visitors relate to the textiles. This was a major decision for the Museum because it had not previously collected clothing, accessories, or other three-dimensional objects. The new policy required the acquisition of objects that would demonstrate the points staff were trying to make about the fabric. For example, an embroidered silk dress was acquired to reflect the luxury fabrics imported from Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. Sample cards of car upholstery were exhibited with a 1926 Ford showing the latest in automobile interiors. Printed cotton dresses from the turn of the twentieth century were compared to silk dresses with like patterns to show the differences in women's economic and social situations.

The other major component decided upon for Textiles in America was that machinery should be operated. Some demonstrations of machinery were conducted at the old location, and it was decided at the new location that this feature would be expanded to include a running weave shed so visitors could see woven cloth being produced. The visitors not only needed to see the end products but also all the steps involved in making textiles. By taking this approach visitors were not viewing the textiles in isolation from all the other elements that impacted their development, i.e. fiber preparation, fabric design, weaving, finishing etc.

When visitors are asked what they like most about the Textiles in America exhibit common responses are: the *Clothing displays.....*, *The dresses.....*, *.....seeing all the different clothing*, *The operating looms*, *.....equipment in operation*, and *Seeing the looms working*. The feedback to the Museum, through both the visitor services staff and visitor comments cards, has led the staff to believe that including both of these approaches in the exhibit was the right decision.