

# TEXTILE CONSERVATION

*Advances in Practice*



Edited by  
Frances Lennard and Patricia Ewer

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# Textile Conservation: Advances in Practice

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## **DEDICATION**

This book is dedicated to the future of textile conservation education.



## FOREWORD

Textile conservation is a complex, challenging and multi-faceted discipline. Textile conservators work not only with some of the most vulnerable objects in our cultural heritage, but also with a large variety of related materials which may form part of a textile artefact. In the last 20 years there have been significant changes and developments in the profession. This book, written by leading conservators in the UK, North America and Europe, illustrates not only the technical advances in treatment options that have been achieved but also the different world in which the textile conservator now operates. The interaction of these two factors has shaped the profession and broadened the textile conservator's role into one of far greater diversity. Technical skills are only part of the textile conservator's work. In order to apply those skills in an appropriate context, the modern conservator needs to understand the multiplicity of meanings and values that an object can present and the role of that object in a collection. In an increasingly project-led culture the conservator also needs the ability to assess and manage risk. Management and negotiating skills as well as financial acumen are needed by conservators in both museum and private practice.

Many factors have contributed to the advances in techniques and the wider range of materials which are part of the modern textile conservation studio. There is now a substantial body of practical experience among textile conservators about the validity of a whole range of treatment options and the reasons for the failure of earlier applications. These observations are backed by a body of scientific research into the effects of treatments on historic textiles and have resulted in a more complete understanding of condition. The profession has grown in confidence over the past 20 years. Most training for textile conservators is now at MA level. Codes of ethics developed by professional conservation bodies have defined and promoted the field. Systems of accreditation have been established. There is open exchange of information between different schools of textile conservation and access to online discussion groups and online journals. Multi-disciplinary meetings and conferences have also played a significant part in contributing to technical advances. The basic methodology of textile conservation remains the same but there is greater finesse in application techniques, a wider and more informed choice of materials and an increased understanding of the effect of those materials and techniques on the object. Conservators view treatments differently. The concept of reversibility, a basic principle of conservation for so many years, has been replaced by that of re-treatability and minimum intervention. Solvent-activated adhesives, cold-lining techniques and pressure mounts are an alternative to the use of thermoplastic adhesives; ingenious non-invasive treatments have been devised for upholstery conservation projects. New materials for mounts and more sophisticated designs have resulted in the recognition that a well-constructed mount can play a greater and often crucial role in minimizing the amount of interventive treatment needed to stabilize a damaged object. Digital images enable conservators to illustrate the possible outcomes of treatment proposals and document the condition of an object with more clarity.

These new tools have given textile conservators more flexibility, an essential factor in dealing with the often rapid changes that have faced them over the past two decades. Pressures on conservators are

greater today than they have ever been. The focus on access in the museum world has led to a constant demand for objects on display in exhibitions and on loans, some of them at a succession of venues. Many conservators have the added responsibility of acting as couriers of these objects to loan venues or with touring exhibitions. Cuts in funding and greater demands mean that levels of conservation treatment have to be balanced against available resources of time and money. There are fewer opportunities to treat objects in storage. Consequently there is a greater need for preventive conservation and strategies for whole collections are not uncommon. Extensive conservation treatments for museum objects are often contracted out to private conservators. Conservators in both private and museum practice consult not only their colleagues but every stakeholder involved with the future of the object. There is widespread recognition that the view of an object by a client or curator may change over time and that minimal intervention gives more freedom to re-interpret the object and its role in the future. Perhaps one of the most positive results of the economic constraints on modern textile conservation is that conservators have developed a more reflective practice and think in a creative and flexible way of how to balance the key issues of access and preservation in their work.

The diversity of the textile conservator's work makes it a very rewarding profession. Textiles have infinite variety and interest and they are often objects of great beauty. The conservator is in a privileged position and needs to understand the significance of every aspect of the evidence that a textile might present. Conservators can add to a greater technical understanding of the production and construction of a textile object and, by doing so, contribute to its historical context. These insights also add to the enjoyment of the object by its audience. The publication of this book, however, comes at a difficult time in the history of conservation. Funding cuts have led to a reduction in the number of permanent jobs available in textile conservation and a contract culture exists in many museums. MA training in textile conservation is no longer available in the UK. Opportunities for research at university level have been curtailed. The technical advances of the last two decades and the ability of conservators to make sound decisions about the objects in their care have never been needed more. The examples in this book illustrate the great range and competence of the modern textile conservator and the crucial role they play in preserving a vital part of our cultural heritage.

*Lynda Hillyer*



## EDITORS' PREFACE

The last comprehensive manual on textile conservation in the UK, Landi's *The Textile Conservator's Manual*, was published by Butterworth-Heinemann in 1985, over 20 years ago. This and other pioneering texts, such as Leene's *Textile Conservation* (1972) and Finch's *Caring for Textiles* (1977), focused primarily on textile conservation techniques, reflecting the needs of the time. This book is intended to demonstrate the development in the role and practice of the textile conservator since these first textile conservation manuals were published, hence the sub title *Advances in Practice*, and to capture the current diversity of textile conservators' work. The book focuses on four factors which have influenced the development: the changing context, an evolution in the way conservators think about objects, the greater involvement of stakeholders and technical developments. These four factors are interconnected and are all integral to effective conservation decision making. The core text in each chapter is written by the editors, and it is illustrated with case studies by leading practitioners in museums and in private practice. The book is written primarily from the perspective of conservators in the UK and USA.

Landi commented 'Wide exchange of information must rely on publication but a good bibliography on the practical side of textile conservation is not easy to compile, as I know to my cost when making the attempt for my own book, published case histories covering new ground being very hard to find' (1988: 32). Fortunately, this is not the case today; although relatively few books have been published, specialist texts and articles in professional journals and conference proceedings discuss treatment case studies and broader issues. In fact the body of textile conservation literature is now so large – today it includes online journals and resources – that it is impossible to provide a comprehensive bibliography in this book. However, one of the aims of the book is to highlight some of the published sources; these are given in the lists of references at the end of each chapter and case study, and in the select bibliography at the end. Please see the bibliography for a list of abbreviations used in the references.

The editors hope this book will be used by a diverse audience including textile conservators, students and prospective students and other museum professionals. Within the economic climate in which it was written (2009–2010), the impact on conservators in museums, private conservation laboratories and studios was great. How do we react to these new developments, respond to protect the objects that are entrusted to our care and protect our jobs? Textile conservators have proved, as you will see in this text, to be extremely flexible and resilient.

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Finally we would like to thank Hannah Shakespeare, our editor at Elsevier, for her encouragement and advice, Susan Li, Project Manager and all the Elsevier team for their work in producing this book.

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Julia M. Brennan has worked in textile conservation for over 25 years. She lectures to historical societies and collector groups on the care and display of textiles and is passionately committed to conservation outreach. From 2000 to 2008, she led four textile training workshops in Bhutan and helped establish their Textile Museum, conducted a conservation seminar and mounted a national exhibit of historic nineteenth-century textiles in Madagascar and taught the first textile conservation workshop at the National Bardo Museum in Algiers. Julia is a Professional Associate of the AIC and Director of the Washington Conservation Guild. Her company, Textile Conservation Services, founded in 1996, is based in Washington, DC. [www.caringfortextiles.com](http://www.caringfortextiles.com)

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Mary Westerman Bulgarella obtained a Bachelor degree in Art History and a Master's degree in the Conservation of Artistic Works, and subsequently trained in textile and costume conservation. Her professional work focuses not only on interventions and their documentation but also on problems pertaining to the research of materials and methods of storage and display. She has collaborated with an array of museums and institutions in Italy and abroad and has published many articles on conservation-related subjects. At present she is a freelance consultant on conservation projects as well as organizing conferences on significant textile and costume themes.

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Linda Eaton is currently the director of collections and senior curator of textiles at Winterthur Museum and teaches in the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture and the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation. She did her graduate work on the programme run by the Textile Conservation Centre in conjunction with the Courtauld Institute of Art. She has worked as a conservator for the Scottish Museums Council, the National Museums of Scotland and Winterthur Museum. She has curated a number of exhibitions including *Deceit, Deception & Discovery; This Work in Hand: Philadelphia Needlework from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*; *Needles & Haystacks: Pastoral Imagery in American Needlework*; and *Quilts in a Material World: Selections from the Winterthur Collection*, also the title of her book. Together with recent WPAMC graduates, Alison Buchbinder and Samantha Dorsey, she has co-curated the exhibition *Who's Your Daddy? Families in Early American Needlework*.

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Ann French trained in textile conservation at the Victoria and Albert Museum from 1984 to 1988, and worked for Glasgow Museums, the Area Museums Council for the South West and The National Trust, before joining the Whitworth Art Gallery in 2002. She has served on the committee of the Textiles Group of Icon, including as Chair from 1998 to 2001 and as textiles representative on Icon's Accreditation Committee. Her primary interests are enabling achievable collection care whatever the institutional circumstances and communicating conservation beyond the professional sector.

**Sarah Gates**

Sarah Gates has been affiliated with the FAMSF since 1980 and was named head of the Textile Conservation Department in 1992. She received a BA from Mills College in 1981, interned in the Organics Divisions



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Nicola Gentle trained as a painter at Winchester School of Art. In 1978 she joined the staff of the Conservation Department (Textiles Section) of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and as Senior Conservator (1988–1994) was in charge of the Osterley Textile Studio. Since 1994, she has worked as a freelance Conservation Consultant in Devon and Cornwall. She is an Accredited Member (ACR) of the UK Institute of Conservation.

### **Kathryn (Kate) Gill**

Kathryn (Kate) Gill, FIIC, ACR, FHEA. Following her training in the conservation of textiles and upholstery at the Textile Conservation Centre (TCC), England, Kate moved to the USA to set up upholstery conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 1992, after 7 years as Senior Conservator, she took up a post at the TCC, University of Southampton. Kate was Senior Conservator and Lecturer until the TCC's closure in 2009. During this period and since then, Kate has combined practical conservation (textile and upholstery treatments) with teaching and research. She has taught on a number of conservation programmes and courses for professional conservators in practice. Kate has published widely on textile and upholstery conservation.

### **Sara Gillies**

Sara Gillies has completed an MSc in Archaeology at the University of Bradford, for which the scientific analysis of a seventh- to eighth-century Egyptian tunic in the collections of the V&A formed the basis of her dissertation. Previously she received an HBA in history from Lakehead University, looking at the establishment of the textile industry in New France, and an MA in the history of medicine from University College London, on the redefinition and regulation of English midwifery at the turn of the twentieth century.

### **Christine Giuntini**

Christine Giuntini is the textile and organic artefact conservator for the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA) in New York City, where she has worked since 1981. She attended the Conservation Program at the Institute of Fine Arts and studied textile conservation under Nobuko Kajitani at the MMA. Her particular areas of interest are three-dimensional fibre artefacts, archaeological textiles and feather work, and the development of mounting and exhibition techniques for these types of complex artefacts.

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Claire Golbourn, BSc, completed her degree in Restoration and Conservation in 1999 at the former London Guildhall University. She worked as preventive conservator for Historic Royal Palaces at Hampton Court before joining the National Trust in 2000. Claire has been senior conservator at the Textile Conservation Studio since 2006. She has managed a number of large studio-based conservation projects, besides participating in on-site teams.

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