



Business

Julia Brennan breathes life into textile heirlooms / C7

The Washington Times



Photos by Berl V. Goulet/The Washington Times

Right: Textile conservator Julia Brennan repaired a 19th-century French needlepoint chair in her D.C. studio Nov. 7. Above: A closeup of the work shows the skill, care and precision that goes into preserving fabric for the enjoyment of future generations.



Conserving the past

Washington at Work

Fabrics cleaner gives added life to heirlooms

By Judith Person
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

When an antique piece of cloth comes in to Julia Brennan's studio, the first thing she does is to take a picture of it. Whether it is a Victorian quilt, an Uzbekistani tent covering, or tapestries belonging to the Kennedy Center, her job is conserving history.

In 1994, Ms. Brennan started Textile Conservation Services, a D.C. business that repairs antique fabrics for museums, galleries and private collectors.

"I love being able to take something that is a wadded-up, wrinkled, dirty textile, and clean it, stabilize it and mount it for display," she says.

Ms. Brennan leans over a table in her studio, inspecting a 50- to 60-year-old Palestinian shawl to determine how to safely remove three stains that look like watermarked taffeta on its white linen field. A piece like this may take two hours to clean.

"I'm not just throwing this in a machine and walking away," she says.

A typical day for Ms. Brennan begins at 8 or 9 a.m.

and wraps up when the work is done, usually around 6 p.m.

She often spends three days a week at her studio sewing, and two days meeting with clients, often picking up supplies on the weekend. And there is always lots of paperwork.

"Running your own business is really a full-time job," she says. But being her own boss provides flexibility, which she needs as a single mother of two teenagers, Sara, 17, and Halsey, 16.

Ms. Brennan extends the same flexibility to her employees, who also have children.

On a recent day, her two part-time employees sat across the table focused on objects in front of them.

Jan VanGilder, 58, was reattaching beads to the fringe of a red-and-orange Palestinian purse. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Shuster, 26, stitched a 19th-century needlepoint seat cover from the Dutch Embassy.

A camera sat on the table between them. By photographing an item before, during and after their work, the conservators provide documentation about the object's history. Ms. Brennan also keeps detailed

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notes describing her repairs and which chemicals she uses in cleaning. That way, future conservators may have a full record about the object.

She does not attempt to restore an object to its original appearance. Conservators like Ms. Brennan clean and help to prevent artifacts from decaying further, while restorers try to restore an object to its original appearance, sometimes by replacing damaged fabrics. Conservators repair some damage, but their work must be reversible.

Senior citizens often use Textile Conservation Services to clean and store an heirloom before passing it along to the next generation.

Others spend the extra cash to have a piece mounted in an acid-free Plexiglas box to display on a wall. The 25-by-25-by-8-inch box that stands in the studio might cost \$800.

Ms. Brennan avoids charging high labor fees that discourage costumers from preserving an heirloom.

She advises clients to work within the value of the object when determining how much to invest. Some spend the \$50-an-hour fee to have something cleaned, but forgo the expense of mounting.

Ms. Brennan's love for handmade fabrics stems from her upbringing in Southeast Asia, where embroidery and weaving are an important part of the culture. She learned to sew, knit, weave and use her hands to create. After studying art history in college, she looked for a way to combine her love of history with her hand skills. Textile conservation provided a way to do that.

The tedious work requires patience. "It helps if you understand what you're working on," Ms. Brennan says.

Louise Shelley is a long-time customer of Textile Conservation Services.

"Initially she just wanted to mount the textiles," Ms. Brennan says. "Then we got into a very big project."

They hired painters and lighting specialists to remodel Mrs. Shelley's entire New Carrollton home, providing the best backdrop for her hundreds of cloth artifacts.

Ms. Shelley buys exotic fabrics from around the world. Ornate works from Istanbul, Uzbekistan and Morocco adorn every wall: the top of the stairs, over the mantle, even small places in the bathroom.

A large wall in her foyer remains conspicuously vacant. But hooks are already installed waiting for the two pieces Ms. Brennan just mounted.

Mr. Brennan tries to see most of her clients at the studio, but she does not mind running out to work on tapestries that are too large to easily move, such as any of the Kennedy Center's 31 tapestries she maintains.

In fact, she loves working in the Kennedy Center's large marble hall that offers lots of elbow space.

"Sometimes we will convert one whole end of the room," to spread out the tapestries, she says.

The contract first involved cleaning and remounting each of the tapestries. Before then, none had ever been cleaned. Now she maintains them two to three times a year.

When management at the Kennedy Center said the main Opera House curtain needed to come down, Ms. Brennan offered to help find a company that could handle the mammoth drape.

"I am not going to work on it at all. It is way beyond my capabilities," she says.

The silk curtain weighs 3,000 pounds and is 110 feet tall and 60 feet wide. It was a gift from Japan.

Ms. Brennan wishes for the bygone days when textiles were among the most prestigious gifts.

"That is not the case anymore," she says. "We give electronics."