



Julia M. Brennan talks about textile conservation

by Sandra Sider

Photos by Magali An Berthon

Julia M. Brennan has worked in textile conservation since 1985. Her company, Caring For Textiles, founded in 1996, is based in Washington DC: <http://www.caringfortextiles.com>. She offers a full range of textile treatments, display, installations, storage, and survey work for institutions, historical sites, and private clients. She frequently lectures to historical societies and collector groups on the care and display of textiles and is passionately committed to conservation outreach and the protection of cultural property.

In 2008, Brennan initiated an ongoing contract, training a new generation of textile conservators in Thailand, helping to establish the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles in Bangkok. She also helped establish the textile storage facility at the Philadelphia College of Textile's Goldie Paley Design Center (now The Design Center at Philadelphia University), and in 1989 she received a Getty Research Grant focusing on the analysis of dyes in historic

Thai textiles, as well as treatments for oriental carpets.

During her tenure as Assistant Conservator for Exhibitions at the Textile Museum in Washington, Brennan prepared more than thirty exhibits, and was guest curator of a contemporary textile show on Faith Ringgold. She is a Professional Associate of the American Institute for Conservation and Historic and Artistic Works (AIC), as well as a member of the Textile Society of America and on the board of The Washington Conservation Guild. She holds a BA in art history from Barnard College and a Masters in art crime from The Association for Research in Crimes Against Art. In February, we spoke via phone for this interview.

S: How did you decide to become a textile conservator? I'm curious because it's such a specific area within the field of object conservation.

B: I was raised in southeast Asia, which encouraged and nurtured my love for textiles and costume. Early in my career I photographed textiles, studied weaving in studios in Germantown, Pennsylvania, and at The Fabric Workshop, and studied art history. But I missed working with my hands. Textile conservation appeals to me because the field combines anthropology, ethnography, art history, and the physicality of objects, plus there's the human element. Who doesn't have a favorite textile? They are part of our lives and culture.



S: Could you please explain the difference between conservation and restoration of an object? And is conservation the same as preservation?

B: Conservation is the same as preservation, the act of taking care of and being a good steward of a physical object, even of the earth itself. The goal is to stabilize and protect, extending the life without removing any original material. In restoration, the goal is to restore the object as closely as possible to the original, and this level of treatment is sometimes requested by quilt owners.

To give you an example relating to quilts, in conservation we might simply stitch a piece of lightweight sheer tulle over a damaged square of fabric; sandwiching it and protecting the original fibers. In restoration, we would try to match the damaged fabric with actual

vintage fabric or a modern reproduction, sewing the new square on top of the old one or even replacing it if necessary.

S: One of the exhibitions on which you worked at The Textile Museum was a solo show of pieces by Faith Ringgold. What was it like to work on her material?

B: Her pieces are in amazingly good condition! We did have to do some stitching repairs on the Tibetan-style thangkas, her earliest textile works. Our company has also worked on a collection of African-American quilts owned by the Smithsonian, doing conservation assessments and surface cleaning. As with many quilts, the combination of fragile and mixed-media materials, such as newspaper filling and unstable dyes, prevents more extensive cleaning.



S: Please tell us a little bit about your conservation business. How did it begin?

B: While working at the Textile Museum—which I loved, by the way—I decided that for personal reasons I needed a more flexible schedule. I am doing quite a bit of teaching and training in Asia, including aspects of security and storage for textile collections. I’m usually out of the country for four to six months a year.

S: Do members of your team have different specialties? Or do you all work together on the projects?

B: Well, I oversee everything. Currently our two specialists have expertise in costume, and they both have backgrounds in opera, not fashion. They are especially adept working in three-dimensional textile objects, a difficult area that includes historic costumes.

S: What has been the most challenging type of items on which you have worked, and why?

B: Flapper dresses! They have what I call “inherent vice” in their construction. All those beads are stitched to thin netting that falls apart as it ages. Restoring one of those dresses takes hundreds of hours of work.

S: What have been some of your most challenging quilt projects?

B: I would probably have to say crazy quilts. Some of these have been delivered to me all folded up and crusty. Their dried-out condition presents a major problem because we really can’t wet-clean them. These quilts typically have many different types of fabrics, odd and fragile material for the ties, and embroidery thread with dubious dyes.

We also had a conservation project for a quilt collection that had been in a fire—not burned but very stained with soot, and they smelled terrible. We also took care of a quilt owned by B.B. King. It’s from the 1930s or 1940s, simple patchwork cotton, but was covered in mold and mildew. We did manage to clean it fairly well.

S: Could you tell us what you think some of the problems might be in working with contemporary quilt art? I’m thinking of having to deal with fusible materials, paint, organic embellishments, etc.

B: I’m always concerned about fusible materials because they will not hold up over time. We can already see fusibles in 1970s textiles falling apart. Today’s quilt artists should consider stitching or tacking over fused fabrics for better longevity. In addition, quilt art often contains many different combinations of fabric types and dyes, which could cause conservation problems in the future.

However, the artist is the artist. And whenever I am asked to conserve or

even install a contemporary quilt, I contact the artist. That dialogue between artist and conservator is important. [Ed. note: It would be a good idea for artists to include basic documentation with each quilt summarizing the exact materials and processes used.]

S: Finally, do you have any general advice about storing quilts?

B: For large or bulky quilts, which should be folded and stored in a box or chest, please see the video on my website at www.caringfortextiles.com/our-work-2/articles. Scroll to the bottom for the video. Smaller, thinner quilts can be rolled around a tube that has been covered with acid-free tissue paper, then wrapped in acid-free tissue before storage.

S: Anything else to add?

B: Just that I’m happy to provide basic advice as “textile therapy” via the telephone: 202-362-1941 or email contact@caringfortextiles.com. I want to do everything I possibly can to support our textile culture.

