

ART OF QUILTING

Textile conservator Julia Brennan of Washington, D.C., repairs a golden embroidered robe presented in 1902 by King Rama V of Siam to his admiral of the Thai navy, a Dane, Andreas du Plessis de Richelieu. Today, the robe is on public display inside a glass case in Bangkok.



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Conservator gives aging textiles new life

Our ties to history often hang by a thread.

Textile conservator Julia Brennan of Washington, D.C., makes it her life's work to ensure that important artifacts aren't lost to the ravages of time.

As a child growing up in Thailand, Brennan developed a deep appreciation for handwork, learning the art of batik making, pottery, weaving and embroidery. In the 30 years of her career since, she has traveled the globe to rescue and preserve many rare and exotic pieces of cloth.

Brennan, now in her 50s, entered a sacred Bhutan mountain monastery, where she taught monks how to preserve a late 18th- or early 19th-century altar canopy of silk tapestry called a ladri. Large in size, 70 inches by 95 inches, and poor in condition with large holes, it was black with soot and smoke from burning incense and butter lamps.

Reclaiming the ladri required careful vacuuming through netting and wet-cleaning it outdoors in a specially built tank with water heated by three outdoor fires. With drying, re-sewing and stabilizing many areas of the religious textile, the process took about 10 weeks.

When its original colors were revealed, Brennan wrote in May 2013 in the publication *Textiles*, caringfortextiles.com,

tiles Asia, the design was one of "unexpectedly brilliant yellows, oranges and blues with dynamic cranes in flight and sparkling metallic gold dragons."

"It is quite miraculous to watch a blackened textile become colorful again," she writes.

Brennan will tell this story and others of her travels and conservation training in Thailand, Algeria and Madagascar during a local program: "From Around the World

to Grand Junction: Textile Preservation Globally and Locally" from 1:30-3:30 p.m. Saturday at First Presbyterian Church, 3940 27 1/2 Road.

The program is to be interactive with hands-on tips. Participants are invited to bring a textile that's important to them or their family for preservation solutions and recommendations.

Brennan also will talk about the basics of preservation with an emphasis on how to care for your own textiles, including quilts.

This program is sponsored by P.E.O., (Philanthropic Educational Organization) Chapter DY. Tickets cost \$10 in advance, \$12 at the door, and funds support scholarships for higher education. Email dytextiles514@gmail.com or call 970-241-7922.

Brennan, who holds a bachelor's degree in art history, operates her Washington, D.C.-based business Caring for Textiles, caringfortextiles.com,

and works with museums in training staff and upgrading storage displays and sometimes working with private clients.

She is a professional associate of the American Institute for Conservation and serves on the boards of the Washington Conservation Guild and the Collection Care Network.

Brennan's expertise often puts her in close proximity to items of cultural and historical significance, such as the gold embroidered robe given in 1902 by the King of Siam to the first and only foreign commander of the Thai Royal Navy. After nearly 200 hours of repair, she restored this robe, which now is on public display in Bangkok.

Her labors include a 16th-century tapestry, part of a series depicting Antony and Cleopatra; multiple christening dresses; wedding costumes and trousseaus from a North Carolina museum; 18th- and early 19th-century samplers for the Daughters of the American Revolution Museum in Washington, D.C.; and turn-of-the-century quilts belonging to a family whose ancestors made them on their plantation.

Other famous Americans whose textiles Brennan's hands have touched are those of baseball legends Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig and the 16th president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln.

When Gehrig's 1931 Yankee's wool jersey was sent to a sports memorabilia auction, it took a detour to Brennan's Caring for Textiles for repair of

disfiguring holes in the back, neck and shoulders. Bleach and other cleaning agents had been too strong for the old wool, and the damage was shoddily disguised. Brennan removed that damage, realigned what remained of the original wool and, using lightweight support cloth and similar wool, reconstructed large areas to regain some of the jersey's priceless value.

As for President Lincoln's Great Coat, Brennan says it was made for him by Brooks Brothers of New York for his second inauguration. Draped over his chair at Ford's Theatre the night of his assassination in Washington, D.C., the coat now is displayed at the theater part of the year. As its textile conservator, her only starker brush with the Great Emancipator's history might be touching his actual bearded face.

She made "repeated stabilizations to secure the fragile embroidered and quilted lining." The coat's silk lining is quilted with a pattern of eagles holding pennants, which read "One Country, One Destiny."

Whether she's talking about 16th-century, Civil War-era or 20th-century textiles from all reaches of the world, you won't want to miss Brennan's upcoming program on her travels and adventures in restoring vintage textiles to their original glory.

It's her way of making history come alive again.

Email Sherida.Warner@GJSentinel.com.

How to care for heirloom fabrics

By SHERIDA WARNER
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How can you safely clean an heirloom quilt?

When Julia Brennan hears that question, she says dry cleaners and washers and dryers are off-limits.

The Washington, D.C., textile conservator recommends a vacuum with a soft brush attachment and low suction. If it's delicate or frayed, put nylon net, similar to a window screen, over it first.

She gives this and other tips about preserving textiles in *Family Tree* magazine.

When storing an antique quilt, she says to fan-fold it and put crushed tissue paper between the layers. Wrap it in tissue or cotton sheets. Do not use plastic, which traps moisture. Store the quilt in an acid-free box. You can watch her instructional video at caringfortextiles.com.

Brennan also will share her expertise from 1:30-3:30 p.m. Saturday at First Presbyterian Church in Grand Junction. Tickets cost \$10 in advance, \$12 at the door. The event is a fundraiser for P.E.O., Chapter DY. For tickets, contact dytextiles514@gmail.com or call 970-241-7922.

Several local chapter members plan to have Brennan look at their heirloom textiles. Mary Day Musgrave, for example, will bring a quilt "made and given to my mother's great-grandfather, John Orr, by his grandmother in 1889."

The backing and binding of the quilt, made in a "Village Square" pattern, show some damage.



SPECIAL

This heirloom quilt, made in 1889 in the "Village Square" pattern, is owned by Mary Day Musgrave of Grand Junction.

Musgrave also has a handmade quilt by her grandmother, made between 1890 and 1900, and hopes to properly care for it.

Glenda Moore, chapter member, also has an 8-inch round quilt made by her great-grandmother, given to her by her mother. A hole was worn in the corner and the crocheted repair. She will have it repaired.

"I also had a quilt made by my grandmother, which my husband's grandmother used as a table runner, and place mats, so that my sisters and daughters-in-law have some use and pleasure out of it."

One of the quilts has a worn spot, so she hopes it can be