



A new way to preserve textiles

BY KINLEY Y DORJI

The National Textile Museum in Thimphu is trying out a new technique to preserve its collection of traditional textiles.

"It is similar to the technology used in food packaging and this is the first time in the world that we are using it to preserve textiles," said American textile conservator Julia Brennan with the National Textile Museum.

Known as the anoxic (oxygen free) storage system, the technique involves storing a textile in a transparent film case which is sealed after all the oxygen is sucked out.

Nitrogen gas is filled into the case to purge remaining oxygen and for volume. Additional oxygen absorbent, called Age-less, is also put into the case so that the oxygen level in the case is not more than 0.05 percent.

An indicator, a small purple pill, is put inside the case which would turn pink if the case is improperly sealed or damaged.

According to Julia Brennan the lack of oxygen would protect the textiles from insects, pests, mold, mildew, humidity and other environmental factors that would otherwise deteriorate the textiles. She said the system was created after numerous consultations with American, Canadian and German scientists.

The museum plans to store about 150 textiles like ghos, hats, tunics, ranging from the early 1800s to the present day, using the new storage system.

Museum director, Singye Dorji,

said that the anoxic storage system was a new trend in the textile conservation field and would go a long way in fulfilling the museum's objective to conserve the rich textile heritage of Bhutan.

He said that prior to the new system, conservation of textiles was done using 'very traditional methods'.

"We either used to vacuum, fumigate or freeze the textiles to get rid of insects and pests and then store it in a zip-lock or air tight bag," he said.

Some of the textiles which did not allow too many folds were rolled in a daphne (*desho*) paper and a fine muslin cloth and stored in PVC pipes.

The anoxic storage system was made possible with the financial support from two non-governmental organisations based in the United

States, the Friends of Bhutan's Culture and the Getty Grant Program.

The NGOs are also funding the basic conservation training programme for caretakers across the country. The NGOs are also helping conserve a Guru Thongdroel from Trongsa Dzong. Conservation of thongdroels at Sangchoekhor and Talo monastery, and conservation of 18th and 19th century Chinese embroidery are among the other projects being completed.

Apart from the textiles at the museum, a collection of 17th century saddles in Gasa dzong have also been preserved using the new anoxic storage system.

"I really cannot say for how many years we can preserve the textiles using the new system but it will definitely last for a long time," said Brennan.



Julia Brennan helps museum assistants seal a textile using the new anoxic storage system

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