

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

Preserving Brutal Histories, One Garment at a Time

By ZOEY POLL

LARGE boxes of history regularly arrive at Julia Brennan's doorstep in Washington. A delivery might contain the greatcoat Abraham Lincoln wore on the night of his assassination or a rhinestone-studded "Sex Machine" jumpsuit that once belonged to James Brown.

A textile conservator, Ms. Brennan, 62, is a trusted resource for museums and collectors, who call upon her to soften the damage done by time, the elements and mishandling. In her meticulous hands, a tattered rabbi's hat rises like a soufflé; centuries-old emotional states and habits — underarm stains on a wedding dress, cigar burns on a kimono that belonged to Babe Ruth — are analyzed with care.

Over the past five years, Ms. Brennan has also taught herself to conserve another kind of fabric — the clothes left behind by mass atrocities. She has salvaged thousands of garments from a notorious Khmer Rouge prison in Cambodia, and a shipping container's worth of bloodstained clothing collected from victims of the Rwandan genocide.

"Textiles are so often forgotten," Ms. Brennan said over a recent video call, but even a simple T-shirt can lend human specificity to an unthinkable act of violence.

"It's that woman who wore that camisole," she said. "It's that man who had his hands tied behind his back, wearing his favorite brown canvas jacket."

The garments are not only vivid reminders but also forensic evidence. "We don't know what governments, conservators, stakeholders and historians will want to do in the future," she said, "what information they'll mine from these collections."

There were few precedents and no standard protocols for this work, which was funded in part by the U.S. State Department. The clothes had been housed in buildings that were not entirely sealed off to their tropical climes, she said, letting in "rodents, birds, micro-organisms, rains, sunlight, which literally eat them up."

At the former prison in Cambodia, now the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, the director, Chhay Visoth, happened upon the clothing in a disused storeroom in 2014, 35 years after the Khmer Rouge fled the city. A mix of military uniforms and civilian clothes, it had been stuffed into trash bags, and severely damaged by moisture and insects.

"I explained to my staff, this is the great treasure of the museum collection — it's not rubbish," Mr. Chhay recalled. Soon after, impressed by Ms. Brennan's work for a museum in Thailand, he called on her for help.

Ms. Brennan found an even more daunting challenge in the garments worn by thousands of Rwandans when they were massacred in 1994, in a church where they had taken refuge. Survivors commemorated the victims by piling their clothes on the pews, and in 1997 the bullet-riddled church became the Nyamata Genocide Memorial.

Two decades later, the remaining shirts, pants and skirts were rigid and unrecognizable, caked in red dirt and bat droppings. "It looked like a building fell on top of them," Ms. Brennan said.

Conservation of these collections was difficult for many reasons — their scale and poor conditions, the responsibility of safeguarding this history as an outsider



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— but mainly because washing the clothes was out of the question.

"If we were to clean everything, we would remove a lot of witness-bearing information," Ms. Brennan explained. There could be DNA in the stains, and at the Nyamata memorial the grime contained bone fragments.

She interviewed archaeologists, forensic scientists and others for advice, and tested out techniques on Goodwill cast-offs she had soaked in the murky Potomac River and flattened under her car's tires. She looked for new tools in unexpected places, or made her own.

A desiccant from the agricultural industry provided a low-cost remedy for moisture. She experimented with devices like chili pepper roasters and bingo ball cages, before customizing one, to gently tumble fossilized bricks of fabric from Rwanda until they broke into separate garments.

THE Nyamata project — a partnership between the Rwanda National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide and PennPraxis, a research institute at the University of Pennsylvania — restored color and form to the clothes. Now, said Martin Muhoza, a conservation specialist with the national commission, "You can imagine exactly who was wearing the textile."

Over monthlong visits to Phnom Penh, Ms. Brennan headed an exhaustive operation, organizing climate-controlled storage and training the Tuol Sleng museum staff. Decades removed from the Khmer Rouge regime, her Cambodian collaborators brought a sense of urgency to the work.

Kho Chenda, head of the museum's conservation lab, said that without the

evidence she and her colleagues save, Cambodia would run the risk that future generations would not believe the atrocities took place.

Alongside the museum's black-and-white photographs of some of the 20,000 political prisoners once held there, and torture devices used to extract "confessions," are now ammunition pouches, hand-patched linen shirts and tube skirts.

Ms. Brennan, whose father worked for the State Department, was born in Indonesia and also lived as a child in Nepal and Bangladesh. Textile crafts grounded her peripatetic life; she learned embroidery from her Thai caretakers, and batik-making and palm-weaving in middle school.

"I was wrapped and carried on my Indonesian nanny's hip in a batik from the day I was born," she said.

After studying art history at Barnard College, Ms. Brennan apprenticed with a textile conservator in Philadelphia, and after a decade she founded her own practice in Washington. "The work is contemplative and disciplined," she said.

Before mending the clothes of historical figures, she reads their biographies, even if her task is limited to a corroded zipper or a faded collar. With private clients who want to preserve family heirlooms, she takes on the role of a "textile therapist," listening to the memories evoked by the needlepoint samplers and christening dresses.

The genocide memorials weren't her first encounter with remnants of tragedy — she has treated artifacts from every major American war — but the immediacy of the violence made these assignments more difficult.

In Rwanda, she regularly handled garments that attested graphically to the

killing. A dress pierced with haphazard holes suggested grenade shrapnel. A cleanly sliced T-shirt indicated the use of a machete.

"My mind automatically filled it out with the person that was wearing it," she said. "I would have to steel myself," she admitted, citing as inspiration her Rwandan collaborators, many of whom were themselves survivors of the genocide.

SHE was also guided by the example of Miyako Ishiuchi, a Japanese photographer who captured evocative images of garments that survived the Hiroshima nuclear blast. "After she photographs one of these textiles, she says 'goodbye' and 'I'll make sure that your memory is kept alive,'" Ms. Brennan recounted.

Ms. Ishiuchi inspired Ms. Brennan to rethink the notion that a conservator must remain "detached and technical." She allowed herself to wonder about the lives hinted at by details like names embroidered onto military caps and tiny pockets sewn into waistbands and seams.

She still thinks about a "Creamsicle-colored" child's dress found among the Khmer Rouge uniforms. It conjured images of a young girl "playing in the courtyard of her house off a boulevard," Ms. Brennan recalled, guessing that its Peter Pan collar and flared silhouette "must have been so super vogue, in 1968, '69."

An unknown number of children, including some infants, were imprisoned at Tuol Sleng, only a handful of whom survived. Conserving the dress was a small, necessary gesture for Ms. Brennan, restoring a record of "a person and an era."

"It's so distinctive," she said, "that somebody might even recognize it."