

MANSION

THE GURU

A Guardian of Rare, Exotic Fabrics

Julia Brennan brings damaged textiles back to life and turns scraps of cloth into large wall displays: handling Abraham Lincoln's coat, a Native American parka and a 19th-century gift from the king of Siam

BY JOANNE LEE-YOUNG

TEXTILE CONSERVATIONIST Julia Brennan has helped institutions restore everything from Abraham Lincoln's coat to a kimono given to Babe Ruth when the baseball all-stars visited Japan in 1934.

For private homes, she does another kind of conservation—bringing damaged or limp pieces of fabric back to life as stunning wall displays.

Recently, Ms. Brennan, who lives in Washington, D.C., spent 140 hours reattaching paper, sequins, beads, braid trim and gold thread onto a 19th-century Thai robe owned by Anders Normann, a Danish businessman who has been collecting Asian art, porcelain and carpets since he moved to Bangkok in 1967.

Mr. Normann appreciated the history of this robe—the king of Siam had once given it to a Danish naval officer, the first and only foreigner to head the Royal Thai Navy—and had kept it draped on a mannequin at his riverside penthouse. Local embroidery experts, noting how the robe's metallic threads were dragging down its light cloth, urged him to contact Ms. Brennan. In addition to restoring the piece, Ms. Brennan directed the construction of a glass case to support the robe on a slant “so as not to stress the heavy embroidery” and added angled mirrors and strategic lighting so the back of the robe can be seen.

“She just treated that robe like it was her child,” says Mr. Normann.

Ms. Brennan's deep respect for textiles and handmade things is rooted in her own childhood. Born in Indonesia, she was raised in Thailand and spent her college-age years in Bangladesh and Nepal. At a Thai school in Chiang Rai and at a small missionary school in Chiang Mai, she says, her days were spent “learning palm weaving, paper folding for temple festivals, batik making, pottery, weaving and embroidery.” Apprenticeships and internships in the U.S. led to workshops and consulting jobs, when Ms. Brennan started her first project teaching textile and preventative conservation to rural monks in Bhutan. Ms. Brennan's work now takes her to museums in places like Algeria, Thailand and Madagascar.

After 25 years in the textile-preservation business, Ms. Brennan, 54, has two staffers. Her home studio's climate-control system keeps the temperature and humidity within a specific range, as spikes in either are harmful to textiles and organic material.

Some textile aficionados turn to Ms. Brennan to put together an entire collection for their homes. She sometimes collaborates with interior designers, with jobs ranging from \$300 to \$30,000 depending on size and complexity.



A STEADY HAND Julia Brennan works on a silk good luck flag—the flags were carried by Japanese soldiers during World War II. Clockwise from bottom right: Ms. Brennan; a textile of embroidery on linen from Central Asia; a 19th century embroidered robe given to a Danish naval officer, the first and only foreigner to head the Royal Thai Navy, from the King of Siam



When Robin Tyner was remodeling her home in Poulsbo, Wash., near Seattle, she turned to Ms. Brennan to assemble nearly 30 eclectic textiles. They included Chinese embroideries dating to the 1800s, Mongolian horse bags, Turkish and Persian block prints, silk lounge-chair covers, Gujarati patchwork pieces, Northern Vietnamese Hmong appliquéd panels and Portuguese bridal-bed covers. Ms. Brennan prepared a few for hanging from Velcro or sleeves, put some “onto shaped boards to accentuate their unique profiles” and stitch-

mounted the others. She grouped smaller pieces into multiples and pairs for display in the entryway and left the larger ones for display on their own in the master bedroom and library.

“We have two bedspread-sized tapestries in the grand room,” says Ms. Tyner, a landscape architect and former entomologist whose love of textiles comes from dabbling in a bit of weaving herself and from adventurous travels in the 1970s when “we used to go from London to Kabul in those Mercedes vans.”

At the heart of Ms. Brennan's business is work that must be done with a steady hand. Donning medical gloves, she recently used distilled water to soften and very delicately pull and stretch an 8-inch-by-8-inch piece of brittle seal gut into its original shape: an adult-size, Native American parka with extended sleeves. After this painstaking task, which took almost 60 hours, Ms. Brennan created a felt-covered brass support to prop up the parka and secured the entire piece into a frame with rare-earth magnets.

The client, Martha Alexander, who lives in Washington, D.C., says she inherited the parka from her grandfather, Robert Fiske Griggs, a botanist who spent years traveling all over Alaska and the Aleutian Islands. Now, the parka sits on a wall at her second home, in the mountains of Pennsylvania.

Currently, Ms. Brennan is mounting a colorful 19th-century quilt that is made of fine silks, ribbons and velvet that was then embroidered. “It will command the wall with its jewel-like colors and fine details,” she says.