

“A Delicate Fabric”, “Ein Zarter Stoff”, by Dr. Angelika Franz, PM History Magazine, July 2021

English translation

**The stuff history is made of**

*When people have been gone a long time, their clothes are still there. Julia Brennan preserves items of clothing from bygone eras and thus preserves the story (s) that they tell of their former owners and their fates.*

**Ms. Brennan, who have you worked for in the past?**

Currently - since 1995 - I have been working as an independent and self-employed conservator based in Washington D.C. As I am very flexible as a self-employed person, I was always able to choose and participate in many projects, both in terms of the conservation of special textiles and teaching assignments for various institutions. These include the Smithsonian Museums, the country home of George Washington Mount Vernon, the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, the Queen Sirikit Museum of Textiles in Bangkok, the Taiwan Conservation Institute or the now unfortunately closed Taiwan Puppet Museum. Before starting my own business, I was at the Textile Museum in Washington D.C. for seven years. employed.

**So you've been working with old textiles for over a quarter of a century. Which pieces do you particularly remember?**

20 years ago, in Bhutan I preserved a patchwork cloth made of silk brocade - a blanket that was used to adorn and cover a statue of a deity on a certain holy day. The cloth had been fetched from its remote temple and brought down to the capital, to the National Textile Museum, where I was supposed to treat it. This piece of material was very venerated, it was particularly sacred and it was said to have healing and protective powers. High-ranking monks and believers came by to pay homage to the textile and to be blessed. A long line of people even formed in front of the museum to worship the cloth and to get its blessing. They put money on the revered textile and touched the edges with their foreheads. For me it was the first time that I felt the power a piece of cloth can have. It was lifeless and yet alive at the same time.

I was also very impressed by a skirt, or rather a tube skirt, a so-called *phasin* or *sarong* from Laos. It came from the 1970s and had an elaborately woven decorative hem band with fighter planes and bombs as motifs. At first glance, these motifs seemed no different from other traditional spiritual images, mostly animals or symbols, which are supposed to have a protective character. But in truth they represented the terrible and relentless eight-year bombing of Laos by the United States of America during the Second Indochina War, also known as the "Secret War". The imaging on the hem reflected the bombing terror that the women who woven the fabric had been exposed to.

The moment I held Muhammad Ali's terry cloth training coat in my hands was particularly moving because I was treating him and building a suitable doll/mannequin for the exhibition - and just then I

learned that he had died. Capturing this very personal piece of world history while the news of his death went around the world was a very moving feeling.

**Do you have a favorite era? Which clothes do you enjoy most when it comes to preserving?**

Most of all, I like clothes that were made before the age of the sewing machine or that were generally made without mechanical sewing. I grew up in Southeast Asia (Thailand, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Nepal), where everyone still wore traditional clothing when I was a child. As a child I learned to distinguish the different indigenous ethnic groups from Thailand, Laos or Cambodia based on their clothing, what the different Indonesian batik patterns mean and whether they come from Central Java or from the north coast. These clothes are mainly shapeless, long lengths of fabric or hand-sewn tubes. Since this is the clothing that I consciously noticed textiles in for the first time, I love it the most.

I also love working on fabric or clothing that belongs or belonged to someone I admire. The garment makes me think about this person's life and their successes, what the world looked like at the time, how and where the fabric was made ... if only clothes could talk! It's the hidden stories that impress me the most.

When it comes to fashion epochs, I really like the 60s and 70s, the free-spirited western "hippie" fashion with its preference for fringes, Indian fabrics, flowers and bold colors.

**Which textiles are the greatest challenge?**

There are two types of challenge in my work - one is physical, and the other is emotional or human.

From the technical aspect, broken silk fabrics are very challenging. Often these are fabrics from the 19th century whose weight was increased with the help of salts. They decompose, tear apart in ribbons and literally break like thin porcelain. These heavy silk fabrics have what we call a "natural defect": there is a structure or component in the fabric itself that causes progressive damage. The cause of the disintegration lies in the substance itself and cannot be reversed. A dye often contains a stain made from iron tannate or other metals. Over time, this reacts with the air or with components of the fabric and causes rust or simply the disintegration of the fibers and threads. We can often see this, for example, in fabrics from the Indian long-distance trade from the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as *palampore* or chintz, where the black or brown motifs have fallen out over time. They decompose and then just fall out. Sometimes the brown and black threads dissolve in an embroidery of letters, numbers or entire slogans and fall out, sometimes making the entire lettering illegible.

Another example is the flapper fashion, the clothes from the 10s and 20s of the last century. They were often richly decorated with tiny pearls and beads on a surface made of fine georgette silk or tulle. However, these thin fabrics simply cannot bear the weight when moving. The surfaces decompose and then you have a pile of pearls on the cabinet floor - oops. Many plastics also contain chemical components that disintegrate or discolor and are therefore quite a challenge - but these are not my specialty.

The clothes worn by victims of genocide or mass abuse are definitely emotionally challenging. I have worked with textiles like this in both Rwanda and Cambodia. This clothing is what remains of those who were not allowed to stay. They carry the memory of the dead, tell detailed stories of real people and awaken many memories in families and friends. The principle of clothing is simple and universal, it

applies equally to all people. We all wear clothes. It is tactile, we can touch it, it warms us, protects us and makes us beautiful. Working with clothing left behind after tragedy and often badly damaged is very personal. We are a group of conservators who work together here, share stories and work together to develop possibilities and approaches that are respectful and suit the memory of the bereaved. These are the most challenging textiles for us in human and emotional terms. In preservation, we need to understand their history, face the violence, and acknowledge the suffering and grief. We need to have compassion for the fabric and also for our colleagues who work with us - and try to transform the garment into something that can bring healing, reconciliation and understanding.

Textiles from royal families are also challenging because they are linked to expectations of visual and aesthetic perfection. This requirement must be met.

**Do you feel connected to the people whose clothes you preserve?**

I conserved James Brown's famous "SEX" suit, which has numerous stories and footage, and actually touching and mending this epic contemporary story garment was just amazing.

Working on the preservation of George Washington's waistcoat or Abraham Lincoln's coat has made me awestruck and deeply connected to the history of my own country. These textiles are most likely what could be called "relics" in our democracy. And I had the privilege of preparing a dress for former First Lady Michelle Obama that she wears in the portrait by artist Amy Sherald. A simple and elegant cotton dress that is reminiscent of an American quilt and exudes calm confidence. That was something very special for me - just to have the honor of making the dress as respectful and beautiful as possible. As I noted, I am inspired by working on textiles or clothes by people I admire or who were important. It appeals to all of my senses when I mend and fix history for future genera

**Sometimes your work leads to new historical insights. Do you see yourself as a textile conservator or rather as a historian or even an archaeologist?**

I see myself as an "anthropological conservator" who deals with the people who own a piece of clothing and the stories that go with it. But also the question of the people who made the garment are part of my work, as well as its use, its hidden messages, its structures, its technical performance and its complexity. The question of how I can extend the life of a garment is very important in my work. History plays an important role in my work: the analysis, recognition but also leaving untreated of the damage of battles, the dirt of wars and the holes torn by grenades. My work is an interplay of art, humanities and natural sciences, both in theory and in practice.

**What do you particularly like about your work?**

I like the great variety of textiles from all over the world with all their techniques, fibers, patterns and applications.

I love the tactile qualities inherent in textiles. It takes manual skills to preserve them; it is "craft" in the truest sense of the word.

The general humanity of textiles and clothing makes it so important to preserve them. Far too often they are seen as part of our "use-and-throw-away society". They are degraded to "lower arts" and

neglected. Whether simple exercise pieces or unique historical items of clothing that belonged to a famous person, whether a personal teddy bear or a comforter - saving and preserving these pieces has a deep meaning for me and is very important to me.