

CONSERVATION

REPORT

Textile Conservation in The Kingdom of Bhutan

By Julia M. Brennan

I NEVER IMAGINED that textile conservation would take me to the farthest reaches of the world, to the mountainous kingdom of Bhutan. But for this winter, thanks to a project funded by the non-profit organization, The Friends of Bhutan's Culture, a dream came true. My grant to teach preventative conservation and textile conservation for six weeks at Bhutan's Textile Museum was the first of its kind in Bhutan. It has launched the first generation of Bhutan's conservation technicians, and inspired that country's young professionals to pursue the important task of preserving their cultural property.

My base was the national Textile Museum in the capital city of Thimphu. Established in 2001, the museum houses about

800 textiles, representative of the country's rich and complex hand weaving traditions. The museum's two floors of gallery displays, two storage rooms, work room and wonderful gift shop are staffed by six employees and four resident hand weavers. It is a gem of a museum in a country where appreciation of textiles is evident everywhere—in the colorful daily dress, temple hangings and home ornamentation. In 2003, a gift of over 100 exceptional Bhutanese textiles augmented the museum holdings. One objective of our project was to use this newly acquired collection to teach the fundamentals of collections care and textile conservation.

A team of six, we rapidly established a daily rhythm that exemplified dedicated collections care. We examined each textile and compiled a computer-based catalogue record. Textiles were then measured, tagged, condition reported, and prepared for freezing for pest management. A major aspect of our daily work was the systematic re-organization of storage and identification of future storage needs. We upgraded the storage rooms, installing new roller racks and re-housing textiles.

Several of the books provided by the grant included textile terminology and structure. Because daily training emphasized accurate report writing,

these were valuable references. Pest management and environmental monitoring, critical to maintaining textiles in Bhutan's humid climate, were approached theoretically, then applied, using tools such as hygrothermographs, pest traps, and humidity and light fading indicators that I brought. Many other conservation materials supplied by the grant—fine threads, stabilization fabrics, tagging tape, and work tools—are not available locally. Having them on site enabled us to begin treatment immediately. The conservation resources and books provided under the grant established the beginning of a valuable library at the Textile Museum.

The project included a Textile Conservation Workshop held at the Textile Museum in Thimphu and the National Museum in Paro. This afforded a diversity of collections and challenges, and a collaboration of staffs. Ten to eighteen attendees with varying professional backgrounds participated in a program whose dual emphasis was preventative conservation and object treatment. Both components approached the collections as living laboratories. Exhibition displays were re-designed, storage facilities upgraded, and treatments such as wet-cleaning, stain removal, and stitch repairs were conducted. I observed important growth and significant skill acquisition during the Workshop.



Attendees gained a fundamental understanding that each employee in a museum plays a vital role in the conservation and maintenance of the collections.

The project concluded with the conservation of some of Bhutan's most revered, sacred textile "relics." These artifacts were brought from their monastic homes to the Textile Museum for a once-in-a-lifetime treatment. One piece, a silk brocade monk's *choegho* or shawl, elaborately embroidered with mantras and the Eight Auspicious Symbols, is one of Bhutan's most holy treasures. Once a year, the *choegho* is presented publicly, and pilgrims come from hundreds of miles to have an audience with this textile to receive the highest merits possible. Daily spiritual cleansing of the Textile Museum work-space preceded conservation work on the 16th-century shawl, and blessings were taken regularly.



Scenes from the Bhutan textile conservation workshop conducted by Julia Brennan, shown above with a museum staff trainee viewing the newly-created digital catalog.

Far Left, Staff trainee creating a support.

Left, Staff trainees repairing a silk textile.

Right: Staff trainee reinforcing the *choegho*.

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Staff trainees learn cleaning methods for delicate textiles.

Museum staff demonstrated their newly acquired knowledge while working on the *choegho*. Our treatment approach involved the application of overlays to the split and damaged areas, as well as supports and selective hand stitching—fine and complex work. I was deeply gratified by the proficiency of their hand skills and their sensitivity to the artifact.

The rare honor of working on such a sacred object was a grand finale for our team at the Museum. It raised our technical level and deepened our dedication to conservation work, and opened a window into the potential of future projects.

This project has seeded conservation education in Bhutan, a

country where cultural preservation is at the heart of their commitment to development. Little did I know how receptive the staff would be to this opportunity to learn and absorb and carry on. Their dedication was a huge reward for me, confirming that outreach and the gift of knowledge does make a difference. Upon returning home, I have received letters from my colleagues describing their ongoing work and completion of certain projects—testament to the success of our training. I am certain that this is the start of conservation education in a unique country where cultural preservation is at the heart of their commitment to development, and aptly expressed in Bhutan's national creed, "Gross National Happiness."

— Julia Brennan

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EXHIBITION

REVIEW

Enchanting Modern: Ilonka Karasz, 1896-1981

GEORGIA MUSEUM OF ART

ATHENS, GA

Nov. 15, 2003-FEB. 8, 2004

CURATOR ASHLEY CALLAHAN and the Georgia Museum of Art have resurrected the career of one of the pioneers of modern design in America, in the form of a beautifully designed exhibition and accompanying catalogue titled *Enchanting Modern: Ilonka Karasz, 1896-1981*.

Karasz, who immigrated to the US from Hungary in her teens, brought with her an aesthetic based on her training in Budapest's Royal School of Arts and Crafts. Her early work in the U.S. included textiles and graphic design heavily influenced by German and Austrian modernism, but laced with Hungarian folk tradition. This blending of modern lines and ways of seeing with traditional, sometimes naive, forms, colors, and textures is a hallmark of Karasz' varied and lengthy career.

The exhibition is organized both chronologically and by medium, a combination of approaches essential for this artist. As Callahan points out, Karasz' career included painting, furniture, metalwork, textiles, advertising design, book illustration, magazine covers, wallpaper, prints, interior design—even, with the family home in Brewster, New York, architecture. If the exhibition once or twice feels disjointed, it is perhaps for the same reason that Karasz' career has been largely

overlooked: her prodigious output cannot be easily or neatly classified.

Karasz' reputation has until now rested largely on her extensive work for the *New Yorker*.

Original artwork for more than a dozen covers for this magazine graces one wall of the exhibition, showing the artist's development between 1925 and 1973 in layout, subject matter, and execution. An adjacent notebook holds the actual magazine covers, inviting the visitor into the artist's mind as she worked space for titles and text into the drawing.

There are other felicitous relationships, such as the placement of a tea and coffee service designed by Karasz for the Paye and Baker Manufacturing Company, North Attleboro, MA in 1928, in vitrines near a framed working drawing. Following the artist's pencil as a single line develops into a pitcher encourages the viewer to appreciate the economy of Karasz' fundamentally modern approach to design. The juxtaposition of graphic work such as book jackets, textiles, and wallpaper with three-dimensional ceramics, metalwork and furniture allows us to see how Karasz' early training influenced all of her art-making. The inclusion of family photographs reminds the viewer of the personality and the very full life behind the work.

This exhibition, and the catalogue, are all about the "what" of Ilonka Karasz' career. The compelling list of awards and contemporary critical commentary attest to the importance of the work in its day. The next step for curator Ashley Callahan is to concern herself with the "whys." Why was Ilonka able to win awards and critical acclaim in every medium or technique she tried, and why have her achievements been so overlooked? I look forward to the next installment of this story, with all its complex and fascinating layers.

— Madelyn Shaw



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