NOBLE EFFORT

Bringing Lady Astor's coronation outfit back to life (as well as James Brown's jumpsuit)

Tied to the front railings of Julia Brennan's house are tattered handkerchief-size prayer flags from Bhutan, their former colors bleached to white. As the flags disintegrate, the prayers spread throughout the Friendship Heights neighborhood and beyond, carried off by the wind and on the wings of cardinals who perch in the holly bushes before taking flight. ¶ Accepting impermanence is one of the tenets of Buddhism, but thwarting it is what keeps Brennan in business. As founder of Caring for Textiles, she specializes in preserving fabric — ridding precious tapestries of moths and treating such iconic clothing items as James Brown's "Sex Machine" jumpsuit and the coat Abraham Lincoln wore the night he was assassinated. ¶ On this chilly February morning, Kristen Stewart, curator of costumes at the Valentine Museum in Richmond and her assistant, Bethany Gingrich, are standing with Brennan around a large Correx box. Folded inside, amid layers of acid-free tissue paper, is the fur-edged ceremonial outfit worn by Lady Nancy Astor to the coronations of King George VI in 1937 and Queen Elizabeth II in 1953.

STORY BY CATHY ALTER

Astor, who was born Nancy Witcher Langhorne in Danville, Va., spent part of her childhood in Richmond before moving to England after a disastrous short marriage. She then married Waldorf Astor, who inherited his title from his father — an American-turned-British citizen and builder of the Waldorf hotel.

For a time, Lady Astor was one of the most famous women in the world: She became the first woman seated in Parliament, was friends with Lawrence of Arabia, played golf with King Edward VIII (who abdicated to marry Wallis Simpson, another American socialite) and was apocryphally credited with telling Winston Churchill, "If I were married to you, I'd put poison in your coffee," to which he responded, "If I were married to you, I'd drink it!"

Meanwhile, her sister Irene became American royalty of sorts, marrying graphic artist Charles Dana Gibson and serving as the prototype for his Gibson Girl.

Astor continued to visit Virginia, and in 1958 she donated her coronation ensemble to the Valentine, which focuses on Richmond history. The robes were displayed shortly thereafter and again in 1981. Now, after decades in storage, they are being loaned to the Langhorne House, Astor's birthplace, in Danville, a small house museum open only on Saturday afternoons. The six-piece ensemble — a silk underdress, a velvet drawstring bag and small purse mirror, a coronet, a kirtle and a mantle — will be the main attraction of an exhibit called "Encounters With Royalty." "Nothing like it has ever been shown around here," says Pat Maurakis, Langhorne president and resident Astor-ian.

The free **"Encounters With Royalty"** exhibit runs through Nov. 5 at Langhorne House (117 Broad St., Danville, Va.). Open 2-5 p.m. Saturdays and by appointment.

"OKAY, HERE WE GO!" Brennan says, snapping on a pair of white medical gloves. Wearing their own gloves, Stewart and Gingrich set the archival box on a group of tables covered in white Tyvek polyethylene sheeting.

Brennan removes the lid and takes off a layer of muslin atop the layers of tissue. Clearly the Valentine has done a more careful job of safeguarding the outfit between occasions than Astor did: "My lady's robes had been stored in a tin trunk since before the war," wrote her maid Rose Harrison in her memoir. Working around the perimeter, Brennan exposes a second layer of white acid-free paper with a crimson velvet bag resting on top. She next uncovers something that looks like a full-length slip — the ivory silk satin underdress, which was worn beneath the open robes.

Running a finger along the straps, Brennan notices some fraying. She'll need to reinforce them with a fine netting that costs $150 a yard and is made by Dukeries Textiles & Fancy Goods, a company in England that uses original antique looms. "They are the only ones who have these kind of looms," she says.

Brennan gently lays the underdress next to a Warhol "Soup Can" paper dress and an 18th-century Masonic apron, also current projects. "I like to introduce them to each other and shock them," she says of the anachronistic still life.

Going through the box is like opening a nesting doll in reverse; each object increases in size. "Oh my," says Brennan upon seeing the kirtle, a short-sleeved velvet robe with three "stripes" of white ermine encircling its poofed sleeves. The material is ruby red, rich and alive. She notes where the ermine trim has become unstitched from the seams.

The mantle, or cape, is the last out of the box. She looks at the label sewn inside: Ede & Ravenscroft, by appointment to the King and Queen. It is London's oldest tailor, founded in 1689.

As dictated by the British peerage system, each rank (in descending order: duke, marquess, earl, viscount, baron) has its own ceremonial dress, with prescribed details such as the length of the train or number of ermine stripes along the kirtle's sleeve. A mantle worn by a viscountess such as Lady Astor has a quarter-yard train with a two-inch ermine edging (a duchess by contrast has a two-yard train with a five-inch edging). The small ermine capelet that hangs from the back of the mantle should bear 2½ rows of black sealskin "spots," which looks a bit strange, as if someone decided to take a coffee break in the middle of the job.

The capelet is pulling away from the mantle's neckline. Squinting through her reading glasses, Brennan notices an old repair. "Nice stitching," she says to herself. "But it didn't work." Another problem involves the gold, coiled tassels attached to the capelet. The ones on the right side are fine, tight like pieces of trottole pasta. But the left ones have become undone. "They won't boing," Brennan says.

After an hour, everything is laid out, including the coronet (which peers don only after the royal has been crowned) with a floppy tassel on top. Brennan surveys the scene. "It's like, where do I begin?"

THESE PAGES: PHOTOS BY ANDRÉ CHUNG

BRENNAN, 56, SAYS HER CHILDHOOD in Asia led to her love of textiles. A Foreign Service brat, she was born in Indonesia and raised in Thailand, where "people still wove in their villages and still wore traditional clothing," she says. She learned how to sew and knit and crochet as a child, and her Thai nanny taught her to weave and embroider.

"Textiles are probably the most intimate objects that we own," Brennan says. "We're swaddled in them and shrouded in them."

While attending the University of Pennsylvania for her master's in art history, she decided to combine her intellectual pursuits with the handwork she had so loved as a girl and apprenticed with a private textile conservator in Philadelphia. A research fellowship at Washington's Textile Museum led to a full-time job; she left to form Caring for Textiles in 1996.

Brennan, one of nine textile conservators in the Washington area listed by the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, has handled a 1920s flight suit belonging to Howard Hughes, a kimono given to Babe Ruth when he visited Japan in 1934, and wall hangings designed by Alexander Calder. She has led international workshops, helped establish a textile museum and conservation lab in Bangkok, and has been commissioned to conserve batiks by world-renowned Indonesian artist Iwan Tirta.

But before she leaves for that job, she must tend to a certain lady.

A FEW WEEKS LATER, Brennan has discovered that the silk lining of the capelet is so deteriorated it won't hold a stitch. "It's like an old house," she says. "Once you get into it, one thing leads to another, and instead of fixing one pipe, it's all the pipes."

She will need to place a piece of silk coated with adhesive behind the deteriorated lining, then sandwich it between two pieces of silk crepeline, cut just a bit larger than the original lining, in order to stitch into the newly formed edges. Because the crepeline is netted and the original lining is still visible, her conservation work is both distinguishable and reversible, fundamentals that are part of the code of ethics she must follow as an AIC member. It's what separates conservation from restoration (for example, the conservation of an 18th-century sampler with missing letters would focus on stabilizing the material, while a restoration would involve reembroidering the sampler).

"We're extending the life of the object but not trying to re-create the object as it was," she says. "We are not becoming the artist."

Brennan will provide a 28-page report detailing her work, including before-and-after pictures and materials used down to the last stitch (made with Gütermann's Skala thread, a polyester strand that "virtually disappears" on fabric treatment).

Stabilizing the capelet is a two-person job, and

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Brennan's assistant, Lauren Klamm, is sewing a bias binding along the neck of the mantle where it is so frayed. With needle in hand, her head bent to her task and a slant of sunlight coming in, Klamm, a props artisan at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, looks like the subject of a Vermeer painting.

Classical music plays in the background. Brennan looks over at her assistant and gives her a bit of final instruction: "You cannot bleed on the textiles."

AFTER SOME 50 HOURS of handwork, the coronation ensemble is almost ready. Brennan just needs to add the tassels (she is awaiting gold bullion trim from Tinsel Trading in New York City, which specializes in vintage metallic trim) and remove the wrinkles.

The outfit now graces a 1940s dressmaker's form — upright and shapely. "I want to give the items some life," says Brennan, holding out the mantle as if a gust of wind has swept into her studio. "It needs to move."

She moves the Jiffy steamer head along the eggshell-colored silk lining, pulling the wrinkles out as if she's waving a magic wand. "I feel like her lady in waiting now," she says.

Perhaps 400 people will walk through the exhibit before the ensemble returns to the Valentine in November. None of the visitors will see Brennan's work.

"But 100 years down the road," says Brennan with a laugh, "conservators will look at it and they'll all say, 'What's this strange polyester thread?' " ■

Cathy Alter is a frequent contributor to the Magazine. To comment on this story, e-mail wpmagazine@washpost.com or visit washingtonpost.com/magazine.

Page 24: Lady Astor in her coronation robes in 1937. She is wearing a tiara with the famed Sancy diamond. The diamond is now in the Louvre in Paris. **These pages:** Julia Brennan, far left, and assistant Lauren Klamm work to conserve the ensemble, including a coronet, above.

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