

REVIEW OF THE 8TH BIENNIAL NORTH AMERICAN TEXTILE

CONSERVATION CONFERENCE

PLYING THE TRADES: PULLING TOGETHER IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Too often we academics become immersed in our own disciplines, intensely focused on our respective areas of research, that we fail to step back for a moment to see the potential for collaboration with other fields. In an effort to remedy this frequent scenario, the North American Textile Conservation Conference (NATCC) organized its 8th biennial conference around the theme of collaboration. *Plying the Trades: Pulling Together in the 21st Century* brought together professionals from conservation, anthropology, museum administration, education, archaeology, science, design and more, to spend four days showcasing the various ways that we all can work together to promote excellence and deepen our research in the field of textiles and culture.

The conference was held in the Teatro Macedonio Alcalá in the beautiful city of Oaxaca, Mexico, a perfect place to host this event due to its long and highly regarded textile tradition. Indeed, the conference began with a number of workshops, including opportunities to explore and learn about some of the oldest Oaxacan textile traditions: backstrap loom weaving, the use of natural dyes, and

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the elaboration of feather mosaics. Other workshops for the more scientific-minded included taxonomy and gel cleaning techniques for textiles.

In addition, participants had the opportunity to explore nearby archaeological sites during optional guided tours held prior to the conference, including a multi-day trip to the seaside to witness the traditional practice of shell-dyeing. This ancient practice uses the natural secretion of the murex shellfish to dye cotton a royal purple, sometimes referred to as "Tyrian purple". Literally hundreds of shellfish must be used for this technique, once also practiced in the Mediterranean city of Tyre, from which the colour earned its name. Fabric dyed this shade of purple was consequently extremely expensive, a luxury reserved only for royalty.

Today, this custom is still practiced in a sustainable way that does not actually harm the shellfish. On the coast of Mexico it is practiced when the tides are favourable, between October and March.

The opportunities for collaboration among conservation and other professionals are numerous, although we may not always recognize them. This was made clear during the two days of presentations which followed the workshops. Themes varied widely but focused on the impact that textile conservation and textile conservators can have on the research carried out in other fields. An example of this was the presentation given by Christina Margariti, a textile conservator from Greece who discussed the impact that different conservation approaches can have on the information able to be gleaned from archaeological textile remnants found in ancient funeral pyres. She was able to demonstrate a clear link between effective textile conservation techniques and the ability for the archaeologist to interpret the historical record.

One of the most interesting case studies presented was that given by Nancy Britton of the Sherman Fairchild Center for Objects Conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. She discussed an intensive

conservation treatment and reproduction carried out on part of a suite of 1788 furniture, originally created for Marie-Antoinette's *cabinet de toilette* at the Saint-Cloud palace and now housed in the Wrightsman Gallery at the MMA. Very little of the original embroidered fabric was extant among the pieces to be conserved; consequently Britton sought to combine 21st century techniques with traditional embroidery in order to re-create this 18th century work. She worked with modern-day digital textile designers to perfect the pattern and layout to be re-created for the suite of pieces in her care, and engaged a workshop of traditional embroiderers in India to carry out the production. The result was an incredibly successful collaboration across time, place and cultures.

A couple of the papers presented examined the conundrum that conservators and other museum professionals continually face: how to balance conservation and public access or use of historical artifacts? One solution presented was to bring conservation to the public. Vivian Lohead from the People's History Museum of Manchester, UK, shared how her institution installed a window into the conservation lab, visible from the galleries, allowing the public to view ongoing conservation work.

Another interesting collaboration was presented in a paper by Tatiana Kousoulou, a Greek textile conservator. Her paper discussed an unusual collaboration between the Greek Directorate of Conservation and the Lyceum Club of Women, a volunteer group dedicated to preserving and showcasing traditional Greek folk costumes and dances. The Directorate funded a documentation project which resulted in a book combining diagnostic images used in conservation with an explanation of the textile techniques employed and the need for conservation. Proceeds from the sale of this book will be used to fund conservation treatments, ensuring the long-term preservation of these important historical artifacts, which the group not only exhibits but also brings to life during regular performances of traditional Greek folk dances.

A theme particularly close to my heart was that of the role of textile conservation in the revitalization of a lost or threatened ancient textile technique. This theme was presented in a number of different presentations whose frame of reference stretched across the world, from Argentina to Romania, Greece to Mexico. Topics included the repatriation of traditional knowledge to indigenous cultures, gleaned from study of museum collections; the incorporation of indigenous perspectives in the use, care and treatment of objects housed in museums; and the collaborative efforts to revive ancient textile techniques. This topic was lovingly presented by Florica Zaharia who passionately presented the modern practice of the ancient art of Turcana wool felting in the Apuseni mountains of Romania. Another engaging presentation on this theme was given by conference Chair Hector Meneses Lozano, who discussed the collaborative efforts between textile conservators, scientists and modern folk artisans to research, analyze and ultimately reproduce the ancient art of feathered textiles, of which few examples exist in modern collections.

The conference closed in perfect Oaxacan style, with a traditional calenda – a spectacular, joyous parade starting at the conference site and travelling all the way to the stunning Botanical Gardens, location of the closing reception. All conference participants walked in the early evening dusk, many carrying candles, accompanied by exuberant dancers and musicians, and Gigantes, huge figures made of papier mâché. The calenda is the traditional manner of “announcing and inviting” the public to attend a celebration. In the same way, conference-goers were invited to come together, not just to celebrate the closing of a great conference, but also to enrich each other’s research, professions, and ultimately the study of textiles.