A WOMAN ON A MISSION •

Preserving Textiles

BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

BY **ERICA HOLTHAUSEN**

CAMILLE MYERS Breeze spends her days conserving textiles, teaching others about creating fiber art that is preservation-worthy, and building a knowledge base to help others do the same. Now she wants to spread her gospel to you. As the Director and head conservator of Museum Textile Services in Andover, Massachusetts, Camille has seen it all. Imagine your family's lovely Christmas tree with its heirloom decorations adorning it. Now imagine it after the tree caught on fire. How about priceless 300 year old wall hangings that originated in Tibet and depict Buddhist images framed by ornately woven silk? Now imagine those revered religious icons 300 years, and 17,000 miles later. Or how about an early example of an art quilt that represents the burgeoning of a new American art form? Now imagine it after it has been hanging for 20 years in a community art space without regard for sunlight, settling or stretching of the fabric. These are the times when Camille's phone rings.

Technician Jen Hale surface cleaning a veil with a HEPA vacuum

Camille Breeze stabilizes a thangka after the painting has been removed

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–CAMILLE BREEZE

Museum Textile Services was born out of Camille Breeze's urgency to care for and preserve world textiles, before they disintegrate into history. Her passion for preservation has taken her to Peru several times. "It's one of our missions to not only restore and educate but also to raise the position of textiles within the spectrum and improve the status they have in relation to other art forms, like other cultures. I taught a class for seven years in Peru. Pre-Columbian textiles are the highest form of art in that culture. Basically, textiles are the currency of that culture. Imagine returning from that kind of experience only to drive past a wedding gown that hangs in a consignment shop for a year and not a thought has been given to the damage that's been done to it!"

How did it all start? "I can still remember how I first learned about the field of Art Conservation. Early in my freshman year at Oberlin College I asked an art history professor to explain what the Intermuseum Conservation Association was and why it was located in the art building. His explanation of art conservation sounded to me like the perfect trifecta of research, craftsmanship and philanthropy."

As an undergraduate student, Camille interned at the Textile Conservation Workshop in South Salem, New York. "The environment at the Textile Conservation Workshop was like an extension of my liberal arts campus: intimate, historic, beautiful, open, and enriching," says Camille. "I was mentored by the staff and learned a vast amount in just a few months."

In 1999, Camille started her own textile conservation studio in Andover, Massachusetts. "My decision to go into private practice was in no small part driven by my wish to create an ideal work environment where conservation philosophy and creative problem solving would thrive," says Camille. "From the outset, my vision for Museum Textile Services has included conservation of museum pieces as well as works from personal collections. My hope is for people to understand that their family heirlooms are just as worthy and important to archive as a confederate uniform we may get from a museum. And we treat them that way."

Over the past decade, Museum Textile Services has worked with more than two dozen interns. Camille is dedicated to using interns in her business, just as she interned during her own undergraduate work. Her goal is to give them the same opportunity that she was given to fall in love with this work while learning the core skills needed to make it a career. One of these interns, Cara Jordan, has been on the staff as a Conservation Assistant since 2008.

Together, Camille and Cara have worked with hundreds of museums and individuals to conserve their textiles. Each tapestry, sampler, quilt, article of clothing, and other work of fiber art provides the conservation studio's interns an opportunity to gain hands-on experience and an understanding of the specific challenges presented by each type of textile.

Three years ago, Museum Textile Services started work on a new project to conserve eighteen Tibetan thangkas from the collections of the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts. "We have really enjoyed learning about thangkas and Tibetan Buddhism," says Camille. "From a conservation perspective, this project had a lot of exciting challenges. Thangkas consist of two distinct components—the painting and the textile border—that are conserved in two very different ways. It allowed our team to draw upon all of our skills as conservators."

Thangkas, loosely translated as portable icons, function as objects of Buddhist meditation. A visual recording of history, they are often used as teaching aids in monasteries. The focus of each thangka is a cloth painting depicting the Buddha, bodhisattvas, other deities, or eminent monks. The painting is surrounded by a fabric border, usually made of fine Chinese silk. Many thangkas also have a silk veil that hangs over the image. When the image is on view, the veil is raised and held in place by a silk cord.

When the thangkas first came to Museum Textile Services, they were extremely fragile and dusty from years in storage. The thangkas first needed to be cleaned. "The goal of cleaning is rarely to improve the appearance—it is really to remove deterioration products and improve the preservation of the objects," says Camille. "Dust acts like little saws. When textile fibers expand and contract with environmental changes, they are expanding and contracting against all of that dirt."

Conservation cleaning always starts with the most conservative method. The thangkas were first cleaned with a gentle hand vacuum designed to remove particulate matter. But the dust was only a part of the problem. "The thangkas were covered in an oily residue," says Camille, "which is probably soot from the traditional yak butter lamps used in Tibetan religious ceremonies."

To remove some of the residue from the thangkas, the conservators used vulcanized rubber sponges. The sponges were cut into finger-sized pieces and the thangkas were gently surface cleaned section by section. As the residue was removed, the shine started to return to some of the threads. "In one case, we were actually able to get color to come back to a faded fabric," says Camille. "The act of cleaning rearranged the fibers to show their non-faded sides. An area that had faded to gray was actually purple. It was quite miraculous."

Once the dust and other harmful materials were removed from the thangkas, the pieces needed to be stabilized to prevent further deterioration. Because the two elements of the thangkas needed to be treated very

ABOVE RIGHT: Special Project Intern Leah Wolf Whitehead sponge cleaning a thangka. RIGHT: Intern Christina Gorky inpainting a thangka painting.

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Guru Urgyen Dorje Chang, First Manifestation, Tibetan (18th – 19th century), Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts. Gift of Mrs. George L. Hamilton, 1952.29

differently, the paintings were removed from their silk borders. "In many cases, the thangkas showed damage from having hung for a long time," says Camille, "and the paintings showed damage where they had been rolled to be carried, transported and stored."

After the paintings were lightly brushed to remove dust, they were sprayed with an archival consolidant. This not only stabilizes the cracking paint, but forms a very thin barrier between the original painting and the modern conservation materials. Using water-soluble paints, the conservators decided which areas of paint loss required in-painting to protect the paint layer and improve legibility. In some cases, the thangkas had been splattered with liquid during traditional ceremonies. "That sometimes dissolves the paint," says Camille. "We chose not to remove evidence of ritual use because it is inherent to the history of the piece."

Once the paint was stabilized, each piece was evaluated to determine whether the back of the painting needed to be lined with fabric to strengthen and preserve the integrity of the piece. But the back of the many of the paintings had handprints of the artist and inscriptions from the consecration ceremony. "Traditional relining methods cover the back of the painting in such a way that all that information would be lost," says Camille. "We needed a translucent material to back the paintings."

A very thin silk crepeline—a strong, diaphenous, natural material—was used to line the paintings. An archival adhesive mixture was painted onto the crepeline and allowed to dry. It was then reactivated with a solvent and gently pressed to the back of the painting. "Earlier treatments used a lot of heat, pressure, suction or moisture that would disrupt the paint," says Camille. "So we chose a method that had proven successful with our colleagues and we were very satisfied with the result."

With the paintings stabilized, attention turned to the Chinese silk borders. Silk is friable, and the borders had become damaged over time from repeated rolling, moisture, light exposure, and the weight of the hanging thangka. To stabilize the silk and camouflage areas of a loss, many borders were lined with dyed cotton. A translucent fabric of nylon net was then laid

over the top of many pieces to add further stability. "We took a lot of time reinforcing the silk supports to ensure that the thangkas would not be damaged while on exhibit," says Camille. "It's important not to rely on the strength of the original textile at all, so it is sandwiched between modern materials that are hand-stitched to the original piece. It was a painstaking process—just putting a needle through the original fabric could sometimes cause it to rip."

After the paintings were sewn back into the fabric mounts, the thangkas were prepared to be hung for exhibit. "Originally the thangkas were hung by cords of leather," says Camille. "Those cords will still be displayed, supported by monofilament, but they will not be bearing the weight of the thangkas."

Instead, an elaborate support system of support was created to ensure that the thangkas could be safely displayed. A hook and loop fastening system attaches the thangka directly to an aluminum Velcro slat on the wall. A piece of cotton fabric hangs between each thangka and the wall for added protection. The wooden rod that many thangka have at the bottom was suspended and secured to keep the thangka from swaying and to take some of the weight off of the artwork.

The staff at Museum Textile Services learned a great deal from this project. When the exhibition, Picturing Enlightenment: Thangka in the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College opened in the fall of 2011, Camille was invited to share what she learned with students, colleagues and museum-goers at a public program.

Camille's passion extends to building an online knowledge base. The Museum Textile Services website offers downloadable "how-to worksheets on caring for textiles, such as vacuuming textiles, properly storing them, retrofitting dress forms for display, disaster response, and many other conservation topics. Camille is a hero to those who value both historical and contemporary textiles and fiber art. She teaches and learns from the fibers she is given the opportunity to work with. As Camille puts it, "I strongly believe that just as the works of art pass through our hands, so must we pass along what the objects teach us."

PRACTICAL RESTORATION 101

1. Material preparation is critical. Wash and dry raw materials. Test dye fastness to be totally assured that there is no running dye. Even if you think something will never get washed, it WILL get wet.

2. Choose the highest quality materials. I have friend who does yarn painting on masonite. It is fundamentally an unsound material, created of adhesives and a composite –basically a wood spam. I've never been able to convince him that his foundation must be as high quality as possible –archival-conducive to preservation.

3. Give lighting top priority. Never, ever, display your textiles in sunlight or bright light. UV filtration is available for new windows, but for those of us who are not in the market for installing all new windows in our homes, careful consideration of placement will do the job. The hallways, guest bedrooms or other interior spaces of your home are where textiles should live.

4. Consider display methods as a core component to preservation. How you display the work plays an important role in longevity. No thumbtacks or carpet strips! I find that textiles are given the bottom of the artistic totem pole. Since not everyone thinks of them as an art form, they aren't treated as such. I've found that people don't even care for textiles as well as they would a piece of garden sculpture that stands up to the elements.

Erica Holthausen is a writer whose work has appeared in *Coastal Home* magazine, *Retro Style, A Seaside Retreat,* and other publications.