**University of Alberta**

# How an Exhibit Shapes Viewers' Thoughts about Textile Conservation

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science

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# Abstract

As museums increasingly rely on public funding, informing the public about the need for conservation is vital. One way the public is informed about conservation is through exhibits. The purpose of this research was to mount an exhibit about textile conservation, then evaluate its message using focus groups. Participants learned textiles are preserved through treatment and proper storage. However, light levels and security measures, while appropriate for exhibits of textile artifacts, kept participants from seeing these textiles as conservators would. Participants wanted to see how conservators work and wondered how conservators decide which textiles to preserve. While interested in care and storage techniques, participants felt their own textiles should be used and enjoyed, even if this meant they would not last as long. If textiles are widely perceived as utilitarian and ephemeral, to garner public support textile conservators must explain the value in keeping the textiles they treat.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

The conservation of culturally significant objects focuses on their physical and chemical properties. Yet conservation is a human centred activity – culturally significant objects are representations of the people and culture associated with their creation and use. The way these objects are handled becomes a reflection of the handler's respect for that culture. It seems then, that the public should be interested in how their culturally significant objects are preserved. However, conservation is not a widely recognized profession.

Conservation has evolved in context of the museum, but is not limited to museum work. Conservation codes are national in scope, rather than specific to a museum, and pertain to conservators who work for museums as well as those who work privately. Conservation is concerned not just with museology, but with the broader picture of preserving cultural heritage. Yet it is through museums that the public is most likely to encounter conservation. Even so, the relationship between museum conservation and the public is indirect, because a conservator's work is generally hidden from view. Even when conserved objects are on display, the work is not supposed to be noticeable.

However, if conservation is human centered, what the general public perceives as relevant conservation activity must be considered by conservators and museum professionals. Conservation treatments involve time and money, and as museums search for a broad base of public support to continue their operations, the need for conservation activity must first be identified, explained, and justified to the public.

Because of the expense involved, preventive and treatment conservation may not be seen as feasible. In addition, a focus on the museum visitor experience, rather than museum collections, minimizes the role of artifacts in a museum. Interactive displays, videos, and replicas increasingly become part of the repertoire to portray "what life was like back when", and de-emphasize the actual object. Finally, with the recognition that objects not only have physical and chemical qualities, but also immaterial qualities that make them meaningful, comes the question of whether preserving the physical properties of an object at the expense of its continued use is ethical. Curators and conservators working with ethnographic artifacts are shifting their focus from preserving the object, to maintaining the associated "living culture". I believe issues of "living culture" need to be considered for all artifacts. Will a public that demands a satisfactory

museum experience, be satisfied with artifacts that cannot be used, cannot be touched? To what extent is the restricted viewing, touching, use of an artifact acceptable? Which audiences will find the viewing of "authentic" artifacts necessary for a satisfactory museum experience? Conservation, a profession that has concerned itself mainly with the future, needs to look at the present.

In my research, I use an exhibit entitled "Fragile Threads: A look at the conservation of historic textiles" to elicit a discussion about textile conservation with the specialists. Focus group discussions with exhibit viewers were analyzed to answer the following questions:

> How does an exhibit affect viewer's beliefs about textile conservation?
> What do viewers regard as acceptable condition for a textile artifact?
> How do viewers understand a subject like textile conservation?

An additional objective was to determine the participants' beliefs about preserving textiles in the context of their own experience. While wondering how conservation makes sense in the context of a museum, I also wanted to know what aspects of conservation are relevant to exhibit viewers in the context of their own experience.

As the number of museum exhibits about conservation has increased since the 1990s, I also wanted to evaluate how well an exhibit could communicate about conservation. Exhibits about the practice of artifact conservation within Canada, the United States, and Europe have reportedly been well received. High exhibit attendance and positive comments from viewers indicate the existence of a public that is interested in artifact conservation, and wants to learn more about it. However, only the work by Podany & Lansing Maish (1993) describes what messages viewers took away with them after viewing an exhibit about conservation. None of the cited exhibits presented information specifically about textile conservation.

Textile conservation was addressed specifically, because textiles, most often associated with the domestic rather than the "revered", are not valued in the same way art, less ephemeral artifacts, may be. However, textile artifacts, often functional in their original purpose, can be thought of as empirical evidence of the everyday lives of their makers and their wearers. These histories often remain undocumented, and so physical evidence is crucial in piecing these stories together. By presenting information about textile conservation in the form of an exhibit, then interviewing

viewers on what they learn, and their resulting impressions about the role of textile conservation, I wanted to gain insight as to how this specialized profession can relate to the public interest.

# Chapter 2 Review of the literature

This literature review is divided into seven main sections. The first section defines conservation, while the second section examines the relationship between conservation and the public. The third section discusses previous exhibits about conservation. The fourth section considers the definition and history of textile conservation in particular, to explain why an exhibit about textile conservation may be received differently from other exhibits about conservation in general. Object theory is discussed in the fifth section to outline how people interact with objects, and why they form an important part of the museum experience. How people learn from exhibits, and methods of evaluation used in museum exhibits is discussed in the sixth section. The use of focus groups as a research and evaluation tool is discussed in the final section.

## What is conservation?

Clavir (2002) writes that there is no one agreed upon definition of conservation (p.48). Various definitions include words such as preservation and restoration, which causes confusion but indicates the evolving nature of the field. The Canadian Association for Conservation (CAC) (2000) defines conservation as

> All actions aimed at the safeguarding of cultural property for the future. The purpose of conservation is to study, record, retain and restore the culturally significant qualities of the cultural property as embodied in its physical and chemical nature with the least possible intervention. Conservation includes the following: examination, documentation, preventive conservation, preservation, treatment, restoration and reconstruction (p. 12).

The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic works (AIC) defines conservation as "the profession devoted to the preservation of cultural property for the future". This is achieved through examination of the structure, materials, and condition of the cultural property, documentation in permanent format of information derived from conservation activities, and stabilization or restoration of the object to prolong its existence (AIC, 2002). In 1986, the ICOM Working Group for Training in Conservation and Restoration defined the activities of the conservator-restorer as consisting of examination, preservation, and restoration. ICOM defined preservation as any action to retard or prevent deterioration of cultural properties either through environmental control, or through treatment, while restoration meant action taken to make an artifact understandable, with minimal interference with the aesthetic and historic integrity.

What is unique about the Canadian definition of conservation is that it focuses upon retaining the physical and chemical properties of an artifact that are "culturally significant". While earlier definitions of conservation are written in reference to cultural objects, they tend to focus on prolonging the life of the artifact in general, and do not specify retaining its culturally significant properties. This suggests that conservation, at least in Canada, is expected not only to maintain the material properties of an object, but to fetter out what material components of that object actually matter.

The variety of definitions of conservation could be explained by the fact that conservation is a relatively new profession. Clavir writes that there is more consistency among the codes of conservation ethics than in definitions of conservation from different countries (see Clavir, 2002 for a comparison of eight codes of ethics). Conservation is very much a twentieth-century profession, arising from art and archaeology restoration (Clavir, 2002). These are activities which can be traced back to the classical workshops of craftsmen and artists of "every great civilization" (Caldararo, 1987,p.1). While many definitions of conservation include the term "restoration", Clavir (2002) differentiates between the two, stating that while restoration is primarily associated with the appearance of an object, conservation is based on the "*scientific* and *technical* analysis of collections deterioration with a view to stabilizing cultural property" (p. xxi, my italics). Concern for appearance is part of conservation, but the reasons for improving appearance differ from what restoration is thought to be based on. Restoration is not associated with preserving the integrity of the object, and does not emphasize using a scientific methodology (Clavir, 2002).

Although the conservation codes of ethics examined by Clavir do not always mention science directly, each describes a systematic approach to conservation practice based on deductive reasoning from evidence, and deductive and inductive reasoning based on the conservator's professional expertise. The codes also stipulate that no conservation professional should act beyond these limits (Clavir, 2002, p.40). To further illustrate how conservation has embraced the scientific method, Clavir explains that publications in this field "contain many examples of problem solving based on empiricism, determinism, the acceptance of paradigms, and the use of mathematical language (Clavir, 2002, p. 40).

While conservation is legitimized by its use of science, the fact that conservators work from a code of ethics shows that conservation activity is shaped also by a system of values. Clavir writes

that the dilemma in archeology described by J.C. Winter pertains equally to conservation: "Although there should be no question about the utility of the scientific method as a means of effectively understanding cultures and human behavior, there is also no question that much of what is called science in archaeology... is actually composed of value statements" (Winter 1985 as cited in Clavir (2002), p. 40) Winter suggests that the only way to distinguish science from value statements is to recognize that our goals and decisions are based on ethics and values and that science provides the means of achieving them (Clavir, 2002, p. 43).

Baer (1998) confirms that in conservation, the choices made depend on the value system of the decision maker. He continues that there are no simple formulae for assigning hierarchies among opposing value systems, but there is "reasoned judgement and reasoned argument presenting our point of view, and our values" (Baer, 1998).

Clavir (2002) emphasizes how important it is for conservators to recognize how conservation objectives and the decision-making process are informed by cultural information. Conservation work is often informed by the artist's intent, and the object's social history, but it also can add information to both these phenomena. It is expected that this new information be based on "expert observation of the physical object" rather than art or history specializations (p. 42).

Von Imoff (1986) also writes of the necessity for scientific objectivity in conservation, stating that a precise knowledge of our past "gives us an understanding of ourselves as part of the world and the societies we belong to" (p. 2). Von Imoff writes that it is the conservator who, working physically on an object "discovers and deciphers the less visible messages it contains, which may lead to a further understanding of the past (p. 2)". Since the conservator-restorer is also capable of ruining "information written" into an object, von Imoff calls for an informed, collaborative, and objective approach to conservation. To do otherwise, states von Imoff, would be to "help establish or perpetuate attitudes and opinions and even lead subconsciously to suppression or falsification of evidence for the sake of economic, political or other purposes, for wrong aesthetic considerations, or out of pure human vanity (p. 4)". That it is a conservator's ethical duty to preserve the documentary qualities of artifacts is echoed by Jedrzejewska's writings (1980).

## Conservation of immaterial qualities of an object

Not everything that is conserved is done so for the purpose of gaining information, and conservators like Patsy Orlofsky and Deborah Trupin, discussed further on, write that to say that acts of professional conservation are informed by science and ethics alone is false. However, it is only in the last ten years that an object's attributes not necessarily seen in it's physical nature, such as spiritual meaning or cultural significance to its originating people, have been considered in conservation codes of ethics (Clavir, p. xxi; Olofsky & Trupin, 1993).

Consideration of cultural perspective in treatment decision-making has been done as specific need or opportunity presented itself (Odegaard, 1995). One area where a cultural perspective has affected conservation decisions is in the presentation of objects. Responses by curators, exhibit designers, and educators to persistent events, discussions, and commentary, have influenced the nature and content of exhibits and publications. In turn, these influence the conservation decisions in preparing these items for display (Odegaard, 1995).

With regards to ethnographic sacred objects, Odegaard writes that their treatment and care concerns may be outside the jurisdiction of the conservator to solve, and that highly specialized spiritual care is generally not considered appropriate for the typical conservator. However, like questions surrounding artistic intent, these issues do require conservators to examine their treatment methodology. By accepting that cultural meanings change, conservators must consider less tangible attributes of an object, "but also to realize the acceptability of continuing process and the validity of a more abstract, shifting context than is usually found in conservation" (Clavir, 1996, p. 103).

Odegaard continues that, whether related to artist intent or religious significance, non-tangible attributes are considered by some conservators as essential to conservation care and treatment. Non-tangible information may or may not reflect the original artist's or maker's intent but may reveal equally significant information regarding the cultural purpose or function of an artifact. It provides a contextual meaning for an artifact, which can clarify the approach needed for preservation activities (Mellor, 1992, as cited in Odegaard, 1995).

Recognition of the non-tangible attributes of objects may require conservators to examine and strengthen their knowledge of material culture. Material culture studies provide a flexible framework with which to examine the cultural belief, behavior and history because it recognizes culture as continually changing (Odegaard, 1995). Aspects of material culture studies may assist and guide conservators in how they consider non-tangible information. Conservation observations may illuminate or expand on material culture issues that have previously gone unnoticed (Odegaard, 1995).

Michalski (1994,) considers another cultural influence that affects acts of preservation, whose consideration "has become taboo in the field of conservation" (p. 242). That influence is the monetary value of the object. While museums and conservators have adopted a democratic attitude towards their collections, maintaining that all artifacts should be treated equally (Clavir, 2002), Michalski notes that artifacts do indeed vary in monetary value, and sometimes, increase in value because of their degradation, which can serve to verify their age.

Orlofsky and Trupin (1993) further this notion, writing that conservators cannot be seen as "objective vessels, who base conservation treatments on the traditional pillars of scientific research, art historical expertise, and conservation training"(p. 2). The knowledge from connoisseurs, the marketplace, our appreciation for other cultures, aesthetic tastes and anecdotal evidence all affect conservation treatment decisions.

What Orlofsky and Trupin label the "connoisseurship bias" is composed of six elements:

1) Awe with which a textile is regarded at the time of conservation
2) The shifting perception of the cultural significance of a textile
3) The desire for recapturing the original appearance
4) The effect of the marketplace on the textile
5) The influence exerted by the owner or custodian on the textile
6) The concern of aesthetics, encompassing the history of appearance factors and taste and the role of patina

All of these elements can determine whether a textile artifact is conserved at all, and have little to do with the documentation of its unique history.

Since conservation acts take place within a given value system, there are times when conservation intervention can be seen as inappropriate, especially if, as Michalski asserts, objects sometimes

increase in value because of their degradation. However, the preservation of the material qualities of the object can also be seen to interfere and inhibit what Clavir terms the "living culture" the objects would otherwise facilitate. On a secular level, this may be expressed as the view that conservation limits the use and enjoyment of an object to prolong its life (Keene, 1996). However, if objects are considered to have spiritual importance, and are perhaps even animate, restricted access based solely on an object's physical properties has more serious consequences.

Aboriginal beliefs and conventional conservation practices are not always in alignment, and the resulting conflicts are an example of how actions to prolong the life of the physical and chemical properties of an artifact may in fact decimate the object's cultural significance. For example, Louise Crane (1997) writes that those who follow the traditional ways believe that people do not own the objects, but are the caretakers for the spirit the objects embody. Pipe holders, bundle carriers and drum makers were given the rights to become caretakers. A conservator's academic training does not grant custodial rights for these artifacts.

Clavir (1996) outlines the ways in which a shift from conserving the material properties of indigenous artifacts, to conserving the living culture associated with artifacts, challenges the typical conservator's framework. First of all, this requires that conservators not always adhere to scientific methods and conclusions. For example, some indigenous artifacts may require exposure to fresh air and light, which may physically damage the artifact. Secondly, the physical qualities of an object may be put at risk to facilitate the preservation of their conceptual integrity and cultural significance. Thirdly, conservators may have to relinquish their authority as specialists in the storage, handling and physical care of the museum's holding, acknowledging that their expertise in the physical properties of an object does not necessarily mean they may offer the most appropriate care, given the cultural significance of the object. Finally, the way in which conservators make decisions may change. Clavir notes that unlike those in New Zealand, conservators in North America do not usually begin a conservation treatment by consulting the originating peoples.

## Conservation and the public

As von der Lippe writes in Profession or occupational culture?: An ethnological study of the textile conservator's working conditions at the museums (1985), the purpose of textile conservation is to protect textiles as much as possible for the present and for the future. However, the extent to which the conservation of textiles is practiced depends on the extent society desires such preservation.

### How does society preserve what it values?

Examined here is the relationship between conservation in the context of its museums, and the public these museums currently serve. The relationship between conservation and the public is a recent issue. Other than that which has been done for private clients, conservation work has been removed from public input and influence. Ultimately, what is conserved may depend on the extent society desires such conservation, but the work conservators do has only indirectly related to society. The museum conservator has traditionally worked with the public through his or her museum's administration and policies (Feller, 1989).

Clavir (2002) writes that while conservators do not work in a vacuum, their work is informed by institutional rather than public viewpoints. Except for work on well-known pieces or controversial treatments such as the Sistine Chapel, conservation is not subject to public scrutiny. Conservators work behind the scenes, and good conservation work should not be noticeable, as it is the object, not the conservation work that is displayed (p. 36). Society has influenced conservation by supporting the institutions that use conservators, rather than conservation itself.

### Conservators are re-thinking what they do

Clavir (2002) writes that the self-reflection currently going on within the conservation profession is promoted by conservation's changing context within museums (p.1). Although Clavir's writing mainly concerns the demands First Nations are making to respect and preserve the immaterial qualities of their objects, she writes that a change in museum practice that places less emphasis on the actual objects and more on the visitor experience are also pressuring conservators to re-think their role in preserving historic artifacts. Limited budgets and attention have already curtailed conservation efforts (Grattan, 2001; Keck, 1980; Milner, 1999; Clavir, 2002). The recent cuts to the position of conservation consultant by the government funded

organization, Museums Alberta, provides a local example of the situation faced by the conservation profession. The decision was based on feedback from Alberta museums, of which small community museums are a majority. The small museums felt the information provided by the conservation service was too specialized when they still needed help with basic museum operations such as cataloguing and staff training. Even before considering how preserving the physical qualities of an object may affect, or run counter to preserving the immaterial culture of an object, and which should carry more weight, or the shift in the "visitor/object relationship", a lack of funding for expensive treatments is requiring conservators to re-think their profession.

## Conservators still have a place in museums

The changing focus of museums stems from a necessity to gain a broader base of financial support, as well a humanitarian desire to speak to a broader audience. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1994) writes that in order to survive, museums must communicate effectively with their audiences. Museums have been perceived as educational, and Hooper-Greenhill states that this connotation discourages those who were not successful at school (p.32). Museums suffer from the image of being 'worthy but dull' (Audit Commission, 1991:6 as cited in Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). Greenhill writes that the "task for museums and galleries is to find ways of arousing and instilling passions and ways of exploring ideas that people will find illuminating."(p.34). The challenge for museums who want to attract wider audiences is to present themselves as "worthy and fun" (p.32). This approach places special emphasis on the experience of the museum visitor.

Emphasizing a visitor experience, especially through the use of interactive units and "hands-on" replicas may cause museum administrators to question the role of their collections. Illustrating the extreme to which this can be taken is a comment made by George MacDonald, Director of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, stating that the museum is a "presenter of history, not a presenter of objects" (Macdonald 1993 as cited in Clavir, 2002). As conservators have traditionally aligned themselves with the care of the objects a museum houses, to say a museum is not a presenter of objects seriously questions conservation's role in museums. Clavir (2002) writes that conservators typically feel responsible for the physical safety of collections when museums have a history of putting objects at risk in order to achieve their other goals (p.2). Although the idea that objects provide "mute evidence" is being challenged by First Nations, museum conservators have traditionally taken responsibility for the welfare of objects that "cannot speak for themselves" (p.2). Despite a change of focus in museums, conservators maintain that conservation work is vital and needed, an expense, like the upkeep or maintenance

of a building or a public artwork, that simply needs to be worked into the equation of keeping, and portraying cultural heritage.

## Conservation is vital to the museum visitor experience, and should be communicated to the public

David Grattan (2001), chair for the International Council of Museums Canadian Committee (ICOM-CC), takes the view that conservation of objects does not place undue emphasis on a museum's collection at the expense of the visitor experience, but is vital to producing an authentic visitor experience. Artifact conservation is crucial in delivering what the museum-going public wants to see.

Grattan writes that a "museum or site can only attempt to give a truly authentic experience if it has a successful conservation policy" (p.8). Although conservators and conservation work may have suffered from the impression that they are overprotective of objects, Grattan states that conservators now see their principal role as providing the public access to the artifacts.

Grattan attributes a widespread loss of conservation staff and funding to the fact that conservation often takes place "behind the scenes", meaning both the public, and museum administrators have been unaware of conservation's role in facilitating access to authentic artifacts (p.8). Carole Milner (1999) concurs that there has been more attention to the "front-of-house" activities to attract the public into museums, while attention paid to the behind-the scenes care has been lacking. Milner writes that wider international concerns for long-term preservation of our cultural heritage should set the context for the role of conservation, rather than the short-term goal of getting people in the museum door. These international concerns centre on "issues of sustainability, the impact of cultural tourism, and the role of conservation as a key stabilization factor and as a conduit for economic and social development" (p. 27). Milner writes that it is false to see conservation activity as a competing priority with the experience of the visitor. Rather, conservation should be viewed as something that underpins all other museum activities (p.22).

While the museum-going public may not be conscious of most conservation efforts, conservation already contributes to a museum's "front-of-house". Watkins (1989) writes that conserved objects take on a new and distinct "look" that is authentic only to the object's time in the museum

setting, a look that allows an object to appear both old and new at the same time. This appearance can mean several different things. To Ross Menil, chief of the National Gallery's department of conservation in Washington D.C, conservation prevents a "good deal of mindless or unthinking vandalism". Conservation's aesthetic makes the museum look cared for, and encourages the public to do the same.

Stephen E. Weil, director of the Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington D.C., attests to psychological reasons for conserving objects. Weil says that "the compulsion to make things constantly 'new" is connected with our denial of death...the conservator says this need not be and we mortals take comfort" (as cited in Watkins, p. 41). The look of the conserved objects provides a sense of optimism. Clavir (2002) states that conservation not only makes objects look good, it makes the institution look good. While the public may not recognize conservation work, it may recognize accreditation attributed to good conservation. In Canada, federal grants to museums from the Museums Assistance Program were recommended, in part, on the basis of whether the museum was seeking or able to provide "proper" care for its objects or objects on loan (Clavir, 2002).

Grattan urges museums to communicate to the public the true state of their collection so that both the public and the politicians are aware of the need to spend money on conservation (Grattan, 2001). This need to communicate with the public about conservation is not specific to Canada and Britain. To encourage "the dissemination of information on the fragility of our heritage and activities which promote public awareness of conservation activities" is part of ICOM's international policy.

Verma (1995) expands on the idea of public involvement in conservation, stating that there are times when conservation activities can only be accomplished with the expressed support of public opinion, especially when urbanization and industrial pollution are the major threats to cultural property. Verma also writes that public opinion can pinpoint short-comings in conservation work already in existence, assuming that public opinion will oppose the idea of conservation work being done by non-conservation professionals. This calls for, however, communicating with an audience beyond those that walk through museum doors.

Verma (1995) writes that in India, it is being realized that national heritage is part of universal heritage, citing the appreciation of Indian culture in foreign countries as increasing the value

attached to India's heritage. As a result, a number of social organizations have engaged in debate over threats to historical monuments, including environmental pollution. To maintain this sort of concern however, Verma calls for an awareness of the cultural values, and the need to keep them safe to be passed on through youth and school aged children. Michel Benarie (1988) agrees. While those who already enjoy museums and cathedrals have their own motivations for appreciating heritage conservation, there are a large number of indirect beneficiaries who never go to a museum. Benarie states that a large portion of the indirect beneficiaries are still very proud of their ethnic or national background "without realizing what their specific cultural heritage is". He continues that the wide category of non-users must be shown how to enjoy and be made conscious of the benefits of cultural heritage. This argument relies on the idea that cultural heritage is indeed passed on through its significant objects.

The idea that how the public is educated affects how it perceives and values cultural heritage may be correct. However, the suggested approach, that in order to appreciate and value conservation activity, the public must be taught that it is valuable, raises questions about where the perceived need for conservation and heritage preservation arises.

The same question could be asked in regards to the entire cultural heritage industry. There are arguments that the act of encouraging a public interest in heritage is in fact a means of gaining political power and preserving the status quo. The authenticity that Grattan refers to is not fixed – objects mean different things to different viewers, and whether the object is real or not may not matter to everyone. On a more political note, Hewison (1987, as cited in Keene, 1996 p.11), claims that excessive public interest in 'heritage' promotes conservative politics and a national stagnation, encourages 'a respect for privacy and private ownership, and a disinclination to question the privileges of class'. Merriman (1991, as cited in Keene, 1996 p. 11) sees museums as legitimizing affluence by promoting an appropriate lifestyle and encouraging people to acquire 'cultural capital'. Conversely, Merriman also sees museums, and other institutions that house material culture as promoting "a non-commercial representation of the past based on the positive values of stewardship and scholarship" and that they "might have a vital role to play in providing materials for people to creatively construct the past" (p.12). Perhaps what can be concluded is that no matter how preservation activity is justified, ultimately it has to make sense to the public that is supporting it. This requires a dialogue between the public and the conservation professionals that serve it.

## Conservation is about people

A caveat with asking the conservation profession to communicate with the public is that it is not clearly established who professional conservators work for. It can be established that both public and professionals see professionals as protecting vulnerable interests (see *The Report of the Professional Organizations Committee, Ministry of the Attorney General of Ontario, 1980* in Ramsay-Jolicoeur 1993, as cited in Clavir, 2002, p.46). In the case of conservation, however, the public is not necessarily considered to be the primary interest. Many conservators see themselves as "advocates of the artifact" (Phillips 1982; Ward 1986 as cited in Clavir, 2002, p. 46), making the object the primary client of the profession. According to Merrill (1990, as cited in Clavir 2002, p.46): "Our loyalty is not owed to our institutions, organizations, or colleagues, but rather to the unique and irreplaceable objects that embody our history, culture and aspirations". The UK Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works' (1981) *Guidance for Conservation Practice* states that the conservator's responsibility is to uphold the best interests of the object (Clavir, 2002, p. 46).

"*The Report of the Professional Organizations Committee* referred to by Ramsay-Jolicoeur (1994) and Clavir (2002), outlines three categories of interests that may potentially be vulnerable. First-party interests are those of the providers of the service (e.g., the conservators); second-party interests are those of the clients of the professional services (e.g. those who have purchased the service, such as museums or collectors); and third-party interests are those who have neither provided nor purchased the service but are likely to be affected by it (e.g., the general public). More specifically, these second- and third- party interests may include the originator of the work (e.g. the artist), the owner of the work, the public, and the "collectivities who might suffer the loss of some aspect of their cultural material heritage", as well as the institution housing the works. Clavir (2002) writes that another way to look at who the clients of conservation are, is to ask "who will be harmed by bad conservation measures?" (p.46). All of these "clients" could be potentially harmed financially, and the damage may also lead to irreparable loss (p.46). If future generations are considered to have third-party interests, then they may be affected as well.

The gravity with which the loss of cultural property can be viewed is illustrated by Baer's (1998) recount of a letter written to the court to encourage a stricter sentence for the theft of maps from Columbia University's rare book and manuscript collection. Wrote Simon Schuma, a social historian at Columbia University,

...such an act has graver implications, I believe than a theft of other kinds of property. For in rare book and manuscript libraries lie the artifacts of our common memory; the documents by which we can reconstruct the life and culture of our ancestors, and by so doing understand our kinship with them. To steal or mutilate such works is not only a violation of that kinship, a form of tomb robbery, it also inflicts a brutal wound on our remembrance" (as cited in Baer, 1998).

ICOM states that our cultural and natural heritage is fundamental to our cultural identity, and that our obligation to keep it accessible for present and future generations, is a moral one.

The serious impact of damaging culturally significant objects is brought into sharp relief when one considers that the desecration of the victim nation's identifying objects is often a humiliating act of war. The recent damage to the Buddhas in the Bamian Valley of Afghanistan is a recent example of this, although one needn't think too far back in history to recall stories of a nation's treasured paintings buried or whisked away from Europe to North America for safe keeping, with the threat of German occupation.

While these examples are dramatic, they risk restricting an understanding of conservation to the acts necessary to mend violent damage to an artifact. They negate the day to day maintenance with which most conservators are occupied. In considering the public as having second-party interests in conservation activity, Ramsay-Jolicoeur (1994, p. 25) makes the point that conservators may ask to what extent the Canadian public has the necessary degree of awareness or experience when it comes to assessing conservation needs, services , or end products. "Nothing makes an impression like destruction" writes Caroline Keck (1980, p. 39). "Either a shocking disaster of monumental proportions will generate a great wave of vigilance and we can buy time to get the long business of collection maintenance underway, or no catastrophe will occur and almost everything will powder into dust behind closed doors". Keck writes that without actual artifacts, "echoes of the past" will likely be created in Disneyland fashion – which will ironically receive adequate care as such organizations generally include a budget for upkeep.

However, if conservation, despite being object focused, is a human centred activity, then what the general public perceives as relevant conservation activity must eventually be taken into consideration. Clavir (2002) sees dialogue between the professional and the client happening in other professions. "The 'non-expert' - the patient", writes Clavir (p. xxi), "is being increasingly considered as a partner in the health care process. The doctor now discusses with the patient what treatment might be appropriate rather than simply dictating what is to be done." Clavir continues

that "in other areas of Canadian society as well, those who consider themselves as central participants, or "stakeholders", are currently enlarging their rights to negotiate, to voice opinions, and to be part of the decision-making process" (p. xxi).

That the object becomes a conduit through which the conservator's actions affect other people is acknowledged by Michalski (1994, p. 257). Michalski writes that the conservator's responsibility to objects should be considered a parable, and that a conservator's responsibility is "to our biological inheritance as perceptive, active, emotional beings and our social inheritance as knowledgeable, cultured beings, as influenced by objects" (p. 257). Michalski's statement verifies the role of the human in object conservation, and just how complex, and political an act of conservation can be.

## With respect to the condition of displayed artifacts, conservators do not know what the public considers appropriate

While museum conservation is influenced and surrounded by the larger political, social and economic systems, conservation as a profession grew in association with large and powerful museums, and not from society itself (Clavir, 2002, p. xxi). Much of conservation's status has risen from a claim to be scientific, and scientific methods, knowledge and values is what has made conservation distinct from restoration (Clavir, 2002, p. 25). What the general public, then, considers acceptable conservation practice may differ from the standards set by professional museum conservators.

As mentioned earlier, Michalski raises an interesting point about what the public expects conservation to be able to do. A 1992 survey of the public found that when viewing the returned statue of *Marcus Aurelius* in Rome, manual workers commented on its poor condition, while information workers commented on its marvellous condition. This points to a discrepancy between the aims of the conservators, and the expectations of the public, and even discrepancies within the expectations of the public itself. Individual reactions to the condition of the statue are also not known. Writes Michalski,

> What each saw, what each sensed in their hands, what they brought to the experience, what they reduced to words, what they remembered, how much the years of expensive intervention did or did not affect these judgements, all remain unknown for even this singular object, let alone the masses of others (p. 247).

Michalski points out that we have even less information about the relevancy of artifacts, and their conservation to the majority who do not visit museums in the first place. Without these answers, Michalski asserts that "conservation decisions will fall back on the same old assumed responsibilities, the same old ideological camps of institutionalized professionals" (p.247). Michalski states that we cannot presume to know humanity solely through introspection.

### Museums are recognizing that the public is diverse

Who museums and their conservators affect is being considered with increasing specificity. Public museums have been defined as non-profit institutions contributing to the benefit of society as a whole (Clavir 2001, p. 47). The larger society has in the past been defined as "the public", meaning the majority culture, and "future generations". However, there is increasing recognition of diversity and minority "stakeholders" whose needs, different from the "majority culture", must be served. Clavir's work addresses how a different cultural view of objects is influencing conservation practices, and how the conservation of material culture may or may not support preserving the integrity of the culture to whom these objects are attributed. Michalski's comments cited in the previous section, however, suggest the differences in what is considered appropriate care of an object may lie not just between among groups, but among individuals within the general public. Suzanne Keene (1996) writes that conservation and preservation are not universally perceived as good things. Conservation is often perceived as puritanical, and conservators as insisting on preservation at the expense of enjoyment (Keene, 1996, p. 21). Hewison (1987, as cited in Keene, p.21) states that conservation creates a context and use of its own. Although their reasons may not be spiritual, a public that demands a satisfactory "museum experience", also may not appreciate methods of conservation that limit or restrict access to objects, and may ask for justification.

Nancy Odegaard (1995) writes that today there are political implications for collecting, exhibiting, collection research and access, educational programming, and the preservation of cultural property that simply did not exist 10 years ago because of an awareness of indigenous perspectives on cultural property (p. 1). In a society that is increasingly pluralistic, it will become necessary to realize that there are differing ways to preserve what is significant about an object. Even before considering different cultural approaches, conservators already recognize that differences in what is considered acceptable treatment exist between the sub-groups of

conservators. For example, while re-weaving is considered acceptable for tapestry conservators, such a method would be considered too intrusive for a work like an embroidered sampler.

The question of artist's intent is another example outside of cultural difference that has forced conservators of all media to re-examine their approach. If the artist is available for consultation, the correct manner in which to treat an ageing or otherwise damaged artwork can be negotiated between the conservator and the artist. However, when the artist is not available for consultation, Nancy Odegaard writes that concepts such as artist's intent are broadened to include cultural context, and are expected to change over time. In this way the problems with conservation of fine art objects become similar to the conservation of artifacts. Odegaard states, then, that conservators have to rethink their methodology for all examples of material culture, and not just "those that are designated sacred, potent or culturally sensitive" (1995).

While most of the demand for changing conservation practices may currently arise from specific cultural groups whose view of objects and their appropriate treatment differs from the Western European views, the general public may not be long in demanding alternate methods of preservation. Post-modern and symbolic interactionist theories state that in a capitalist, global economy, what is originally attributed to one culture is borrowed and re-interpreted by others. Clavir refers to increasing dialogue between the professional and the client occurring in professions such as medicine. These professions are also beginning to include paradigms outside a Western European framework. It is not unusual to find a physiotherapist who also practices acupuncture, or a medical doctor who is also an herbalist. If museums do in fact result from our social fabric, it should be expected that what is considered the Western European view of artifacts and collections will continue to change as well.

As Clavir writes (2002), the notion that artifacts might be treated differently in a museum can be interpreted as counter to the idea of museums as democratic institutions. Museums that are public, non-profit institutions, place a high value on democracy because they must serve a broad public. Democracy has been interpreted in the way museums care for their collections, by attempting to give the same level of care to all objects, regardless of value or significance. Clavir writes, however, that respecting the cultural significance of objects may result in "undemocratic" behavior. For instance, First Nations peoples may request that access to certain collections be restricted according to gender (p. 32). Whether such restrictions are considered democratic or not, the decision to recognize and appeal to stakeholders, embracing the fact that what is

significant about an object will change depending on who is interested in it, while maintaining a relationship with the general public, can only be supported by a tolerant population. The population must be tolerant of the idea that different objects are treated differently, and may not be accessible to everyone, nor hold the same significance for everyone. Alternatively, preservation efforts have to rely solely on the support of special interest groups.

## Exhibits about conservation

Little has been written about interaction between conservation activity and the public in general, but one way conservators are communicating with the museum-going public is through exhibits about conservation. Exhibits about artifact conservation within Canada, the United States, and Europe have reportedly been well received.

In the 1930's George Stout, conservator and former director of both the Worcester and Isabella Stewart Gardiner Museums, noted that "it was naughty to inquire about the condition of a work of art, almost as naughty as to inquire about the condition of the digestive system of an opera singer". In the 1990's, exhibitions about the subject have brought conservation to the forefront. Some curators feel showing in-progress conservation treatments helps to change the perception of a museum as a storehouse to a "living, breathing" entity (Hill Stoner, 1999, p. 49). My search for exhibits about conservation extended to the internet, BCIN database, and the Conservation On-Line electronic newsletter. No exhibits specifically about textile conservation appeared, and only one exhibit, "Preserving the Past", held at the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1991, was formally evaluated. However, all of the exhibits cited were reportedly well received, indicating the existence of a public interested in, and wanting to find out more about artifact conservation. A summary of these exhibits is provided in a chart in appendix A.

High exhibit attendance and positive comments from viewers indicate the museum-going public is interested in artifact preservation, and wants to learn more about it. Suzanne Keene writes that while the growth of simulated historical experience exhibits indicate that many people want history primarily as entertainment, the success of exhibitions such as "Fake!" (British Museum, 1990) shows that substantial numbers of people want and enjoy an extremely detailed, accurate, academic and scientific treatment of artifacts. According to Keene, these exhibits not only stem from a desire to communicate to about the need for conservation, but are also developed to appeal to audiences who like technical information and want to see something new. Since these exhibitions are housed within the context of a museum, it can be assumed that the audiences they are reaching are already concerned with, and perhaps accepting of, the preservation of cultural heritage.

A formal evaluation was conducted of the exhibit entitled "Preserving the past" at the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1991. Informal surveys were taken of 125 visitors as they left the museum, and

38 in-depth interviews were conducted with people leaving the exhibition. In addition, facilitators kept a log book in which visitor reactions were noted. The element of the exhibit that made the most impression was a 6-minute "behind the scenes video" filmed over a period of one year, which showed conservators working on gap-filling, in-painting and the mechanical cleaning of stone, bronze, and ceramic objects. This was followed in popularity by an interactive activity where the viewer had to reconstruct a vase from fragments from two reproduction vases. Other popular elements of the exhibit included an earthquake shake table, a display about the cleaning of bronze and stone busts, and a display about determining the authenticity of a vase. Of the 38 visitor interviews, most were able to discuss at least one of the principles of conservation highlighted in the exhibition with "impressive accuracy". All visitors expressed the desire to see more exhibitions like this on all facets of conservation fields, although those interviewed disagreed on how technical the exhibition should have been. Some thought it was too technical, while others found it not technical enough (Podany & Lansing Maish, 1993).

This information indicates that the subject of conservation can make for an interesting and engaging exhibit, but does not indicate what the museum-going public finds to be appropriate and acceptable conservation. However, exhibits about conservation makes overt a process that is otherwise not evident to the public.

## Textile conservation

It is possible that the conservation of textiles will be viewed differently from the conservation of art or other historical artifacts. Von der Lippe writes that textile handicraft has been regarded as a refined type of feminine pursuit, and has never had the same prestige with the academic milieu (p. 31). However, given ICOM's recognition of cultural heritage as fundamental to cultural identity, textile artifacts play a crucial role. Often functional in their original purpose, and intimately involved with day to day living, textile artifacts can be thought of as empirical evidence of the everyday lives of their makers and their wearers. These histories often remain undocumented, so physical evidence is crucial in piecing these stories together.

According to Jedrzejewska, textiles carry more complex documentary information than other artifacts because of the diversity of techniques, raw materials, methods of production, destinations and function. They may be constructed through weaving or other methods, dyed or undyed, made of different kinds of fibrous raw materials, including metal yarns and leather strips, on different

looms or other appliances. The first way in which a textile is a document is connected with the fabric itself. The second way concerns the items that are produced from the textile. The final way can involve a secondary use of already used material, such as making clothing or a quilt from previously used material. Because of this, artist intent or the intent of the maker may be difficult to ascertain. Even aesthetic pieces are often conceived by designers, but created through workshops. In addition, textile materials are inherently fragile, and archaeological textiles are extremely rare to find when compared to bone and ceramics. Much history of textiles is from "hard evidence". For example loom weights, and other weaving equipment, are used to construct how ancient textiles were made and what they looked like because the textiles have long since disappeared (Wayland-Barber, 1994).

Textiles most often include functional objects, but may also refer to pieces that are primarily aesthetic. In this way, the history of textile conservation follows the history of conservation in general, in that it began as a restoration for textiles which were primarily aesthetic in function, then for textiles regarded as having a significant history associated with them. However, textile conservation may be regarded differently from other types of conservation because of cultural associations with the material. While current textile conservation, like conservation in general, is based in science and ethics, its practice is also connected to the domestic lives of women.

Textile conservation in Scandanavia began in the late 1800s, and was motivated by a desire to preserve museum, church and royal collections. It began with the Handarbetets Vanner (The Society of Friends of Handicraft) in Sweden, a group of women who feared that the traditional textile crafts would disappear as a consequence of the growth of industrialization and began collecting patterns and techniques (von der Lippe, 1985, p.14). Throughout the 1870's, the Handarbetets Vanner built up their collection through donations and purchases. In order to build on their knowledge, they contacted women from different social classes skilled in textile crafting. From 1885-1930, Johan Bottinger, art historian and manager for the art collections of King Oscar II, the Royal Collections, and eventually the Royal Art Collections as well, worked closely with the Handarbetets Vanner for conservation work. Von der Lippe cites this as the first instance of an art historian actively participating in the problems of textile conservation.

In 1908, Agnes Branting, a textile artist and researcher who worked and eventually directed Handarbetets Vanner, helped to initiate the Pietas Society to handle the growing demand for textile restoration and conservation. Von der Lippe writes that the press release from 1908 shows

that textile conservation was no new or unknown activity at this time, but previously the work had not focused on textiles as historical sources. The five founders possessed knowledge of art history, and of museums, through formal education, experience, or family background. In this way, Pietas became the first workshop for the conservation of museum and church textiles in Scandinavia, with statutes that establish textile conservation as an occupation guided by historical and aesthetic value judgements (von der Lippe, 1985). Eventually, museums throughout Scandinavia acquired their own textile conservation workshops.

Sweden's early development of textile conservation is linked to the fact that the Reformation in Sweden did not involve the destruction of images, thus church ornaments were preserved. Also, during the time of "Sweden's great power", the country amassed a great number of Medieval textiles, which were in need of conservation in the early 1900s (Bertil Berthelson, as cited in von der Lippe, 1985, p. 19).

Von der Lippe describes the first conservation workshops as small and poor, with one or two employees and occasional assistants who were supervised by individuals who had knowledge of history. Salaries were low, uncertain, and funded by private commissions. The price of conservation work was determined by tenders, and could spell a loss for employees. Textile conservation was at first done mostly by women with skills in the textile crafts. As wages were low, these first textile conservators were either personally well off, or supported by their husbands. They did not enter textile conservation for economic reasons – the work was done in light of the fact that voluntary preservation work in the public interest carried with it a certain status. At the Kungliga Livrustkammaren, the term "oldfru" (housekeeper) was used to designate museum employees who worked with textiles (p. 23).

Von der Lippe writes that the extensive destruction of property during World War II strengthened a universal concern for the protection of cultural treasures. The early 1950s saw the formation of UNESCO, the International Council for Museums (ICOM), and the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC). These organizations facilitated the exchange of information, and conservators that had once worked in isolated workshops were able to participate in meetings. Of particular influence to textile conservation was the formation of the Centre International d'Etude des Textiles Anciens (CIETA) in 1954. The main goal of the organization was to establish a common technical terminology for textiles, and to serve as a centre for chemical textile analysis (von der Lippe, 1985).

In 1964, the first conference on the conservation of textiles was held by IIC in Delft in the Netherlands. At this time, the textile conservation profession was still based on the manual skills closely associated with women's traditions, repairing and cleaning in a way similar to the completion of household tasks. This conference introduced methods based on scientific research, and initiated the development of research programmes into the causes of textile degradation under museum conditions, and the principles of textile cleaning (Hofenk de Graff, 1998).

The new orientation towards science was not met without criticism, and gradually lead to the formation of two distinct approaches to textile conservation: a new scientific approach, and a traditional one based on needlework (Geijer, 1959, as cited in von der Lippe, 1985, p. 26). Another split could be seen in the way most textile conservation workshops were run. Two categories of education for the employees developed. The employees academically trained were responsible for the textile collections as a whole, while the employees who had a practical education in textile handicraft remained responsible for the practical conservation of the museum textiles. They advanced to become supervisors depending on seniority and inclination (von der Lippe, 1985, p. 27). Von der Lippe writes that in the early years of textile conservation, the conflict between those whose knowledge was based in theory, and those who had the practical skills, was less marked. Although there is not a standardized training program for textile conservators today, most are educated both in practical hand skills and in chemistry, as well as art history or art practices. The split today in museum workshops can be seen between conservators and curators.

The origins of textile conservation as a profession reinforce how the appropriate social climate is necessary for it to exist. For a further discussion on textile conservation as a profession, see "Profession or Occupational Culture?: An ethnological study of the textile conservator's working conditions at the museums" by Inger Marie von der Lippe (1985).

## Object theory

The idea that objects can in fact carry cultural significance and are indeed meaningful beyond serving as a commodity has been mentioned in this thesis but so far not explained. The area of study that deals with objects and their meaning is termed material culture. Prown (1996) defines material culture as "the study of material, raw or processed, transformed by human action as expressions of culture." (p. 21). The materials studied, however, may not be purposefully made as expressions of culture. James Deetze (1977, as cited in Pearce 1992 p. 5) defines material culture as "that segment of man's physical environment which is purposely shaped by him according to a culturally dictated plan".

Material culture studies began in the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology in the 1880s (Pearce, 1991, as cited in Odegaard, 1995). Prown writes that in order for object based study of culture to have validity, the artifact must be authentic. It must be what the researcher thinks it is. Fowler (1996) adds that in addition to an authentic object, what is necessary for material culture studies is also good documentation. Without documentation, objects, whether ethnographic or archaeological, remain aesthetic but are of no value for scientific study (Fowler 1986, as cited in Fowler, 1996, p. 131). However, in accordance with Michalski's human centred view of conservation (1994), Kingery (1996) writes that while material culture studies are object focused, material culture must be concerned with human activities, organization and behavior. Artifact use, design, performance, and manufacture are component parts of a larger system comprised of economics, aesthetics, and learned behavior (p. 182-183).

While a material culture framework explains how objects can be informative to those who choose to study them, it does not address how non-material culturalists consider objects. As previously noted with regards to conservation, not all objects, such as artworks, are about information, and not all museum viewers will regard objects with the intent of gleaning information from them.

Pearce (1992) uses a behaviourist approach to explain the interaction between people and objects, both inside and outside museums. Pearce writes that many exhibits, for their impact, depend on the viewers experiencing both a "re-run" of what the individuals and groups were feeling when the material on show was new, and the current experience, when viewers realize the relevance of what they are seeing to their own behavioural experiences. The individual viewer is presumed to have a set of attitudes, beliefs and values, and motives arising from both nature and nurture.

Pearce (1992) writes that though this idea applies to viewing an object in a sitting room or a shop window, it is also applicable to museum objects because, although most museum objects do not function in the way they were intended, or as they would if outside the museum context, they "embrace an element of active intention on the part of the viewer" (p. 217). Meaning, writes Pearce, does not lie with the object itself or the viewer, but is a convergence of the two (p. 219).

Meaning also may be based purely on the viewer's reactions to formal qualities of an object, especially if there is no cultural understanding on the part of the viewer. In reference to curating an exhibit on African art, Vogel (1991) writes that the artist co-curators were the least preoccupied by the cultural context of the objects. They simply approached the object as pure sculptural form. Sculptor and co-curator of the African art exhibit, Nancy Graves, commented, "One may get more information about it which enhances it, but its strength is here for anyone to see...." (p. 195). Vogel points out that ultimately, people don't respond to objects with a set of responses that are isolatable as aesthetic, but with their total humanity. She cites William Rubin's argument that the distinction between form and content is theoretical, since neither an understanding of the cultural context nor a personal appreciation is possible as a pure experience (p.195).

In an attempt to form a comprehensive model that shows how object meanings are negotiated by the viewer, and the factors that influence those meanings, I have adapted the Human Ecological Onion model (Kilsdonk, 1983; Sontag, Bubolz, Nelson & Abler 1993) to describe the acts of looking and interacting with objects (see Figure 1). In the Human Ecological Onion model, the human being is placed at the centre of a series of concentric circles. Comprised of psychological and physiological aspects, the human being is surrounded by near and far environments, which are divided, like sections of a pie, into the natural, social, and human built environments. These interact with the human being's psychological and physiological aspects.

My model depicts three human beings somehow associated with the object, as affected by their natural, social and human environments, which in turn affects how these humans interact with a specific artifact. It accounts for the different types of meaning that may be negotiated. That the perception of the object (in this case, a textile) can occur strictly through the senses is reinforced in the drawing by the depiction of hands and eyes for each of the "humans" in the model. This shows that it is possible to find meaning based strictly on aesthetics. That meaning can be

influenced by the immaterial qualities of the object, is shown by arrows between the humans representing the communication of ideas between individuals, and also the transmission of ideas through the social environment. The differing roles of the humans in this model, in this case the creator, the user, and the conservator, show how the meaning of an object changes with the intent of the human. The arrows between each human and the textile show how an object can be documentary – the actions of the creator or user are transmitted through physical signs on the object. That the physical qualities of an object are affected by natural and human built environmental factors as well as human intervention is noted in the diagram.

While it is tempting to see an object's immaterial qualities as changeable, and its physical properties as enduring, a conservator will attest to the ephemeral and changeable nature of many materials. As demonstrated in this model, neither objects nor their meanings are static, even when in a museum. It also shows that consideration must go beyond an object's physical properties if its meaning is to be preserved.

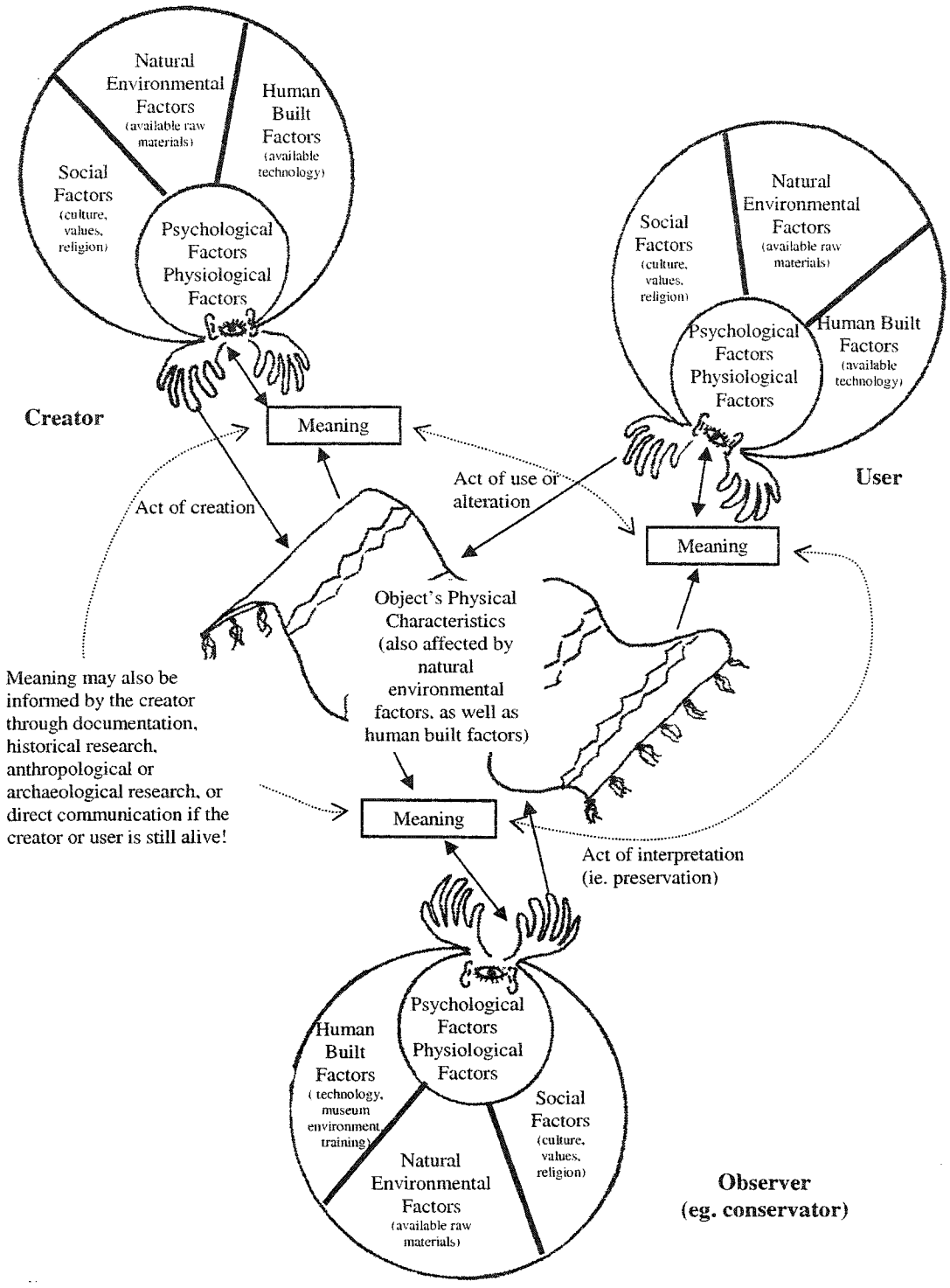


**Figure 1** Becker Object Meaning Model (2001)

## Learning from exhibits

Barbara Fahs Charles (1987) writes that museum exhibitions fall into three categories: those in which the artifact is primary, those in which the concept is pre-eminent, and those that emphasize both by using artifacts to express concepts. She associates the first type with art or decorative art galleries, the second with science/technology centres, and the third with history museums (p. 97).

Whatever the type of exhibit, however, museums covertly instruct viewers on how to look at the objects they display (Vogel, 1991). As an example, Vogel writes how displaying objects from Africa so that their formal qualities are the focus of the exhibit causes them to be viewed as art, while putting a similar object in a diorama setting emphasized less the formal qualities of the object and more the information about how it was used. Vogel writes that museums teach in both explicit and subtle ways. A system of highly political values is expressed not only in the style of presentation but also in how a museum operates. Vogel includes here the types of programs a museum chooses to present, the audiences it addresses, the size of staff departments and the emphasis they are given, the selection of objects for acquisition, and more concretely in the location of displays in the building, as well as in lighting and label copy.

Vogel continues to say "the fact that museums re-contextualize and interpret objects is a given, requiring no apologies. They should, however, be self-aware and open about the degree of subjectivity that is also a given" (p. 201). Objects in a museum do not speak for themselves. Their presentation is "filtered through the tastes, interests, politics, and state of knowledge of particular presenters at a particular moment in time" (p. 201).

The idea that the viewer must be lead to find meaning in an exhibit, beyond personal reaction, is supported by Miles, Alt, Gosling, Lewis and Tout (1988, p. 9). In contrast to the idea that putting objects out on view allows them to speak for themselves, without risk of bias being introduced by the exhibition, the authors cite Popper (1972) saying that our minds are "not 'buckets' which become filled with sensory data as we passively acquire knowledge from the outside world, rather they are 'searchlights' actively seeking out meaning in the things we observe and experience." They write that objects by themselves are able to communicate little beyond their own existence, and the belief that they can when placed out of reach, as is often the case in museum exhibits, is denied by the whole history of scholarship.

The need for viewers to be lead through to information about display objects is supported by a study by David Greenglass (1986), Curator of Education at the London Historical Museums in Ontario, who examined learning tasks concerned with the acquisition of information from objects. The purpose of his study was to determine whether different instructional approaches in museums (i.e. use of either a non-directed discovery mode or a directed teaching mode) produced differential learning effects when applied to adults differing in conceptual level (CL), which is a measure of information-processing ability. The skill of obtaining information by perceptual discrimination with the aid of directive, challenging questions is radically different from extracting the same information from language (museum labels). In his study, objects were used as sources of information without the assistance usually provided by labels: thus, the results have a practical application in furthering our understanding of the process of learning from objects alone p. 57). Sixty adults were asked to complete a Museum Task. The five parts of the task involved the careful observation of objects to answer specific questions. The first two parts had the subjects handle and observe archaeological pottery. The first task was to determine, by the top of a ceramic jug, if the jug was used by a right handed or left handed person. The second task was to determine, from a piece of ceramic dish, the technique used to make the original. The last three tasks involved observing selected Greek vases and a Roman sarcophagus to ascertain the object's functions, to account for the large size of the single Greek vase, and to estimate the age of the person for whom the sarcophagus was constructed. The Museum Task appeared in two forms. In the "low structure form", subjects were presented with an introduction and questions only. In the "high structure form", the subjects were presented with introduction, questions and "hints". The study showed that there is a relatively wide range of CL among adult museum visitors. High CL adults benefit equally from both high and low structure approaches, while low-CL adults benefit significantly from the high structure approach. According to Greenglass, this supports the notions that all exhibits should be highly structured to maximize the number of viewers who would benefit.

Miles et al (1988) write that in order for the exhibit to communicate effectively, objects must be presented in a coherent and informative context. They continue saying that a strong and easily understood narrative is also necessary, as isolated and poorly understood facts are soon forgotten unless they can be related to other facts with the help of some broad unifying ideas.

Despite the many ways museum exhibits are said to influence the viewer, museum settings are described as voluntary, open-ended, nonlinear, hands-on, and entertaining. They require no

prerequisites, no exams, no grades, and social interaction is often an important part of the experience (Ucko, 1985). That this sort of environment can provide an educational experience is confirmed by the statistic that over 80% of an individual's learning is not done in a traditional educational setting (Beer, 1985, as cited in Ucko, 1985). The very nature that makes museums different from structured learning environments, and is what administrators use to bill museums as unique education environments, makes learning difficult to gauge.

According to Screven (1986), exhibits are not as productive educators as planners suppose. Time spent (averaging between 15 and 30 seconds per display) is far less than required for even the most elementary recognition of major ideas. A number of case studies illustrate that the level of measured learning from didactic exhibits did not meet the exhibit planner's expectations. Peart and Kool (1988) found that the amount visitors learned from the exhibit, "Living Land Living Sea" at the Royal British Columbia Museum, was "precious little". In their evaluation, 56 questionnaires were randomly given to first time visitors leaving the gallery for the experimental group, and 56 questionnaires were randomly given to first time visitors entering the gallery. The difference in knowledge gain scores was significant (34% for the experimental group and 22% for the control group), indicating that the exhibit did impart knowledge. However, the actual percentage of correct responses was low.

Screven (1986) asserts, however, that apparently low acquisition of knowledge does not mean exhibit viewers do not learn. Instead, what is learned is different from what is being measured and from the learning that was intended. The knowledge gained may be in part limited to the ability of the evaluator to measure it. Screven points to the possibility that the unintended effects of exhibits may be more desirable than those intended.

Harvey Gudeman and Johnson (1991) evaluated adult learning from three exhibits designed to teach the basic concepts of art museum literacy skills at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Visitors were asked the question "What do you think the main points of this exhibition are?" and their responses were then categorized according to accuracy. Roughly a third of the visitors to each exhibit were able to articulate what was considered "most accurate answers". The evaluators were both surprised and pleased by this high accurate response rate to their open-ended question. They believe that their estimates of the proportions of visitors who discern messages are low, as not all visitors who discerned messages were, they felt, able to articulate clearly what it is they discerned. Their success may in part be due to use of an open-ended question in their

survey. It is possible that the way in which learning from exhibits is evaluated is not really encapsulating what viewers take away with them.

Screven also writes that the interaction between viewer motivation, exhibit content, the museum environment, and visual design are complex and poorly understood by both psychologists and exhibit planners, and evaluation case studies attest to this. Peart and Kool (1988) found that 35% of the time visitors spent in the gallery was not viewing exhibits, but walking, talking, sitting and looking around. Given that more than 25% of the visitors in the control group stated their reason for visiting was "to enjoy myself", the social aspect of the museum visit plays an important role.

Peart and Kool (1988), also found that while the "abstractness" (meaning two-dimensional and text based) or the "concreteness" (meaning three-dimensional and object oriented) of the exhibit did not significantly correlate to amount of learning, a pattern did arise showing measured knowledge gain related to the more abstract exhibits. This occurred against their conventional wisdom that concrete exhibits would have more to offer viewers. Perhaps this occurred because the objectives of the abstract exhibits could be expressed more blatantly. Peart and Kool (1988) also found that exhibits with less staying power (meaning the amount of time visitors spent looking at them), resulted in more knowledge gain, confirming Alt's (1982, as cited in Peart & Kool) assertion that holding power as of little use to measure knowledge gain.

Screven points out that what museum audiences learn from an exhibit relies on their motivation. Unguided museum audiences are leisurely – they interact with exhibitions on a voluntary basis and on their own terms. Whether or not they pay attention to exhibit content, notice details, make comparisons, read explanatory text, or follow instructions depends on their expectations and the enjoyment resulting from these activities (1986, p.1). However, defining the type of exhibit that imparts the most knowledge is a complex issue. Screven writes that "at best, long experience and learning theory can only provide educated guesses about what viewers will or will not do, notice, feel, organize, or relate to once an exhibit is installed" (1986). The following two models illustrate the complexity of communicating through museum exhibits.

Hooper-Greenhill's (1991) model of communication shows how what is learned by exhibit viewers is negotiated between the viewers, the team of communicators, and all communication media present in the museum, including the museum environment. Greenhill states that while there is both intended and unintended communication happening in an exhibit, there is also a

distinction between what is intended to be meaningful, and that which is meaningful because of the viewer's perception.

Another model by Alt (1977, as cited in Lawrence, 1991) ties the viewer's cognition of the exhibit to time, breaking the process of exhibit viewing into four stages:

1. Fore period: the time visitor enters the beginning of an exhibition/orientation area, and the time the visitor enters the exhibit area proper.
2. Performance: involves continuous monitoring of behaviour, and alteration of the visitor's previously planned pathways.
3. Post-performance: visitors are likely to evaluate the exhibit in the light of their previous intentions.
4. Delayed Postperformance: may result in the visitor's reappraisal, altering their beliefs about museums and their use generally, as well as toward the particular museum visited.

Both these models can demonstrate why accurate measures of learning through exhibits are difficult to ascertain, at least through "traditional" museum evaluation techniques which rely on participant observation, surveys and questionnaires.

Lawrence (1991) asserts that the complex nature of viewer-exhibit interaction is not addressed by current museum exhibit evaluation methods of surveys and observation. She explains that these original methods of evaluation in museums were taken from sociology. While evaluation methods used within sociology have progressed, methods used in museums are still based on outmoded empiricist and behaviourist theories. She writes that today, sociologists feel that survey research is poorly suited for analyzing social structures, and concludes that there are limits to what the empirical tools of observation and survey will reveal about the world of museum visiting.

Roger Miles (1993) criticizes Lawrence's arguments against typical museum methods of evaluation. While Miles states that what is meant by evaluation is indeed an assessment of the relationships between visitors and exhibits in terms of affective and cognitive measures, he says that Lawrence confuses evaluation with research, and does not propose a viable alternative to behaviourist-based approaches. That evaluation does not constitute research is echoed by Screven (1986). Because of the number of variables involved in the experience of a museum

exhibit, what holds true in one exhibit evaluation may not apply to another. Exhibit evaluations do not determine why something does or does not work in achieving a particular effect. Evaluators are concerned with the practical question of whether something worked at an acceptable level (Screven, 1986).

Perhaps the state of museum evaluation is best summarized at the end of Lawrence's paper where she cites Guba and Lincoln (1989). They assert that evaluation outcomes are "not descriptions of some true state of affairs but represent meaningful constructions that...actors form to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves, and that these constructions are inextricably context and value-linked and that they may well serve to enfranchise or disenfranchise stakeholding groups." Evaluative data may not be generalizable, but it may still be useful.

## Focus groups as a research tool

### Type of knowledge gained with focus groups

Focus group discussions are perhaps best known for their use in marketing evaluation, but they are increasingly used for research applications (Vaugh, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996, p. 3). Focus group methods are compatible with key assumptions in the qualitative research paradigm (Brotherson, 1994, as cited in Vaugh et. al, 1996 p. 15). When using focus groups, as in qualitative research, there is the belief that multiple realities exist. Second, focus group methods recognize the influence of the inquirer. In focus groups, the interactions between the moderator and the participants are viewed not only as influential but as potentially adding dimension to the knowledge gained. Finally, in focus groups, as in qualitative research, the nature of truth is seen as being influenced by perspective (Vaugh et al, 1996, p. 18).

Focus groups can be used to develop hypotheses for further study when there is little information on the subject being studied (Vaugh et al., 1996 p. 27). Calder writes that using an exploratory approach, focus groups can be used to investigate areas relatively unknown and obtain "pre-scientific" knowledge (1977, as cited in Vaugh et al., 1996 p. 27). The aim of focus groups is to generate ideas and to validate them against the everyday experiences of the participants.

Focus group discussions are more structured than informal small group discussions; a moderator has prepared questions to elicit participant response. While small groups are often used for

consensus building and problem solving, reaching a consensus or solving a problem is not the purpose of a focus group. Instead, focus groups are used to discover a range of points of view (Vaugh et al., 1996, p. 5), and an in-depth understanding of the expressed perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and experiences. Because the data gained from focus group interviews are specific to a context, the information is not expected to be generalizable to a population. However, the data may be considered transferable to similar situations. It is therefore important to document the context which gives rise to these understandings (Vaugh et al., 1996, p. 15; Mayan, 2001, p. 26).

Focus groups are conducted under the assumption that people are valuable sources of information, especially about themselves and that they can put their opinions about their feelings and perceptions into words. They are also based on the assumption that obtaining people's feelings and opinions is best accomplished through a structured group conversation in which information is solicited by the moderator, and that group dynamics enhance the likelihood that people will speak honestly about the subject in a way that cannot occur through individual or small-group interviews. Finally, related to this assumption is the fact that the information obtained from a focus group interview is genuine, rather a "group mind" (Lederman (1990) as adapted in Vaghn et al.,1996, p.6).

It should be kept in mind, however, that while the intent of focus group interviews is to create a comfortable atmosphere to encourage participation, the focus group is usually an unnatural setting (Morgan, D.K., & Spanish, M.T., (1985) as cited in Vaughn et al.,1996, p.152). The participant-moderator interaction and the group dynamic is key. Participants will not respond authentically if the general environment of the interview is threatening, the questions are inappropriate or ambiguous or the moderator cannot encourage responses or does not respect the integrity of the responses. Assurances of confidentiality, how interview questions are worded, the pull for socially desirable responses, and the make-up of the group will influence the responses. The intent of the interview must not be to coerce or intimidate participants to express a particular point of view, but to gather data (Vaugh et al.,1996, p.153).

As focus group outcomes are not intended to be generalizable to the population, but are meant to provide an understanding of an issue or topic to design further research, a purposive rather than a random sample is used (Vaugh et al., 1996, p.58). A purposive sample is a group of participants selected for their ability to inform and contribute to the research study, and provide group homogeneity.

The resulting documentation from a focus group interview should show the similarities and differences among the groups and link the results with the overall objectives of the study (Edmunds, 1999, p. 88). A number of tools can be used to analyze the outcome of a focus group, including notes taken by the moderator, notes taken by the viewer of the general ideas discussed, debriefing sessions between the moderator and her assistant immediately after the focus group discussion, and transcripts from the focus group discussions (Edmunds, 1999, p. 89). The data can be analyzed using manifest content, where the analyst looks for and tallies specific words used or ideas expressed and then generates statistics, (Morse, J.M., & Field, P.A. as cited in Mayan, 2001 p. 21) or using latent content, where the analyst identifies, codes and categorizes primary patterns in the data (Patton (1990) as cited in Mayan, 2001 p. 21). Latent analysis takes into consideration the intent of the participant (Mayan, 2001, p. 22). As a result, latent analysis may have greater internal validity than manifest analysis, as it presents a more accurate picture of what happened in the discussion.

## Size and number of focus groups

Typically, focus group interviews consist of 6 to 12 participants (Edmunds, 1999, p.1; Vaugh et al.,1996, p.5), with the optimum number being between 8 to 10 respondants (Wells, W.D. 1974 in Vaugh et al, p. 50; Yoell, W.A. (1974) as cited in Vaugh et al, p. 50). Morgan writes that the rule of thumb for focus group size specifies a range from 6 to 10 (1997, p. 43). With fewer than six participants a discussion may be difficult to sustain, while above 10 a discussion may be difficult to control. However, Morgan also writes that one should not be limited by these boundaries, having conducted successful groups of 3 highly involved participants, as well as discussions in naturally occurring groups of 15 to 20 (1997, p. 43). Small groups are useful when the researcher wants a clear sense of each participant's reaction to a topic because each participant has more time to talk. However, responses in too small a group may be heavily influenced by the dynamics of individual participants, and participants may not be as involved. Too large a group can require more moderator involvement if participants are highly involved, and risks becoming unmanageable. As focus groups emphasize the interaction amongst participants rather than between the moderator and the participants (Morgan, 1997, as cited in Mayan, 2001), increased moderator intervention may interfere with the quality of the data (Morgan, 1997, p.42). The interviews typically last from 1.5 to 2 hours (Vaugh et al., p.50).

The number of focus groups conducted on a topic depends on many factors and is often not determined until data collection begins. Enough groups should be conducted so that the findings are repetitive and no new information is gained (Vaugh et al.,1996; p. 49). The rule of thumb specifying three to five groups is based on the claim that more groups seldom provide meaningful new insight (Morgan, 1997, p. 43). However, the right number of groups before the collection of data no longer generates new understanding depends upon the variability of participants both within and across groups, the degree of interview structure, and the availability of participants. More variability and less interview structure will result in the need for more groups. Limited availability of participants may result in conducting more focus groups of a smaller size (Morgan, 1997, p. 43-44).

## Moderator's guide

The moderator conducts the focus group using a list of predetermined ideas she or he would like to discuss, and possible questions to ask. As part of the reason for using a focus group is to allow for unexpected but pertinent information to arise, the moderator uses these questions as a guide, keeping in mind the main points of information she or he wants to address.

The guide should outline an opening, closing, and the main points that need to be addressed. Krueger recommends focus group discussions open with participants getting acquainted and an introduction to begin the discussion. Insight on areas central to the study are obtained using "key questions", while "transition questions" move the group smoothly between subjects (1998 v.4, p. 22).

The structure and wording of the moderator's questions are important. Open-ended questions are essential, so as not to imply a response, or suggest the type of response that is expected (p. 32). "Think back" questions that ask participants to reflect on their personal experiences and then respond to a specific question are useful because they help establish a context for the response, and let participants know that you want to be specific and grounded in their experiences, as opposed to repeating "hearsay" from others (p. 32). Kreuger suggests avoiding "why" questions because it can remind people of interrogations. Participants may respond with rational and appropriate answers, but not necessarily reliable answers. Kreuger writes that "the participant has 'intellectualized' the answer, speaking from the brain and not from deeper forces that motivate

behaviour" (p. 33). Kreuger also recommends using probes ("tell us more" or "can you elaborate on that" and follow-up questions to clarify and elicit additional information. He recommends leaving unplanned or serendipitous questions to the end of the discussion (p. 36). Finally, Kreuger recommends keeping questions simple, and cautions giving examples because they may limit the thinking of respondents (p. 34).

### Analyzing focus group data

When analyzing focus group data the researcher must take the group's dynamics into consideration. Firstly participants may have censored, or conformed their opinions to group dynamics (Kidd, P.S. & Parshall, M.B. (2000) as cited in Mayan (2001) p.22; Morgan, D.L, 1997, as cited in Mayan (2001) p.22). Secondly, issues may be themes across a group or significant for just one or two members. Thirdly, an issue may arise in only one group or in more than one group. And finally, an issue may be considered important and interesting, or just one or the other. (Mayan, 2001, p. 22). All of these considerations should shape how the researcher analyses the data collected from the interviews.

Vaugh et al. (1996) propose a method of analysis adapted from the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. cited in Vaugh et al , 1996, p. 102) and naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G., 1985, cited in Vaugh et. al, p.102). This method corroborates with the procedure outlined by Mayan (2001). The five step method involves identifying big ideas, unitizing the data, categorizing the units, negotiating the categories, and then identifying themes and, if possible applying theory.

The first step of identifying big ideas occurs during and immediately after the focus groups. Possible categories are formulated using the participant's words, ideas, intensity and non-verbal communication. Moderator and viewer's notes, as well as debriefing sessions might be used to generate these themes.

Unitizing the data involves reading through the transcripts and identifying units of information that will later define the categories. A unit of information is the smallest amount that is informative by itself, and should be interpretable without more than a broad understanding of the purpose of the study. Mayan (2001) describes this process as "coding - the process of identifying persistent words, phrases, themes, or concepts within the data so that the underlying patterns can

be identified and analyzed (Morse & Field, 1995 as cited in Mayan, 2001). Mayan clarifies that coding is not the process of assigning labels or categorizing, but becoming familiar with the data so that the researcher can organize the information. The researcher reads the data, re-reads, highlights, and makes comments on any ideas that are striking (Mayan, 2001, 23).

These units of data are then categorized. During this process, rules that define each category are documented to justify units into that category. Initial categories emerge from the information available after the focus group and from the transcripts. These transcripts are later reviewed for overlap and completeness. Similar categories are collapsed into broader categories. When negative cases, individual responses that do not fit within the categories, arise, the researcher must look for similar cases, and form either a new category or label the case as an anomaly. While Vaugh et al. specify that data that is not meaningful is eliminated at the unitizing stage, Mayan indicates that all of the data must be accounted for and represented (Mayan, 2001, p.23). Krueger (1998, v. 6 p.76) writes, however, that the analyst will purposely choose to set aside information or comments in the focus group, because the analyst seeks to discover and bring to the surface those concepts that are most relevant to the purpose of the study. In order to analyze, data reduction and selective attention to certain topics are required. Not every story or experience told is relevant. The purpose of the study should shape the analysis.

Negotiating the categories may involve more than one analyst comparing the categories each has identified independently. At this stage, the number of focus groups that support the themes and categories are noted. It is possible to have themes that are supported by all the focus groups, or just one. Nonetheless, Mayan writes that categories should have the following qualities:

- categories should include all parts of the data, and the negative cases be investigated
- categories make sense- give a picture of the whole data
- categories are labelled using the same language as the data categories make sense to others
- categories have internal validity – they should be credible to the person or people that provide the information (Mayan, 2001, p.24).

Finally, the initial themes are reframed and restated in consideration of the units and categories. The researcher identifies the themes and determines the categories which support these themes. The researcher may also apply theory to the findings at this stage. Because focus groups are often used as an exploratory tool when little information is available on a topic, there may be few

theoretical underpinnings to link to the content of the study (Vaugh et al.,1996, p. 113). At this stage the researcher should look at how the categories are related, what patterns keep recurring in the data, and what conclusions should be drawn (Mayan, 2001, p.24).

This "step-by step" method has been used as a framework for my own data analysis. However, Krueger (1998, v. 6) emphasizes that while focus group analysis should be systematic, it is, like other qualitative research, dynamic and should be responsive to the situation (p.18). The objectives of the research plan, as well as practicality should guide the analysis. In deciding what parts of the data to pay attention to, Kreuger recommends considering the frequency, extensiveness, intensity, and specificity of responses. The actual words, context and internal consistency (when and how people change their opinions during the discussion) can also inform where emphasis is placed. Finally, a researcher can consider what is not said. Ordinarily, writes Kreuger, a topic not mentioned by the group is less important than the researcher initially expected because it did not come to mind, although the risk with this interpretation is that you do not know unless you ask during the interview.

# Chapter 2 Project design and procedures

Focus group participants first learned about textile conservation through an exhibit titled "Fragile threads: A look at the conservation of historic textiles", then discussed both the content and the form of the exhibit in subsequent focus group discussions. The exhibit was used primarily to inform participants about textile conservation so that they would be able to discuss the subject. However, in order to explore how viewers were related to its content, it was necessary to evaluate its form.

Several factors motivated the decision to use focus groups as an evaluation tool. First of all, the previously cited literature indicates that questionnaires and surveys do not address unintended learning. A method was needed that would allow viewers to articulate responses to the entire exhibit. Because focus group interviews, while structured, use open ended questions, I anticipated the response from viewers would be more comprehensive, not limited only to the content of the exhibit, but to the subject of textile conservation as well. Another advantage to using focus group discussions to evaluate "Fragile threads" was the opportunity to ask questions about which of their own textiles participants valued (i.e. were there favourite), how long they would want them to last, as well as in what condition participants would expect textile artifacts to be displayed. While these topics could have been explored without first having participants view an exhibit about textile conservation, it would have been difficult to address the subject of textile conservation if participants were not already somewhat familiar with the work that textile conservators do.

Focus group interviews were also the most practical way to elicit an in-depth response to the exhibit because of its location. The exhibition space is in the front foyer of the Human Ecology Building, a transient area that differs from the typical museum context in that most viewers see exhibits while on their way to do something else. Asking viewers to stop for surveys or interviews would have been invasive and obtrusive, and would limit the sample to people who work in the Human Ecology Building. Inviting subjects to participate in a focus group allowed for the viewpoints of people outside the Human Ecology Department to be expressed. However, it should be kept in mind that the intent of participating in a focus group after viewing the exhibit has the effect of encouraging participants to view the exhibit more closely than they normally would. The focus groups discussions evaluated how viewers could potentially interact with the exhibit. They did not evaluate the typical response of people moving through the exhibit space.

## Exhibit description

"Fragile threads: A look at the conservation of historic textiles" was on exhibit in the foyer of the Human Ecology building from March 6, 2002 until April 13, 2002. Upon entering the building, the viewer glimpses the profile of a blue wool walking suit from 1910, and a text panel featuring the title of the show and quoting "Conservation is directly connected with things coming from the past .... They may be very different in type, size, age, importance, state of preservation, but have one thing in common: they convey information about the history and development of mankind" (Jedrzejewska, 1976) (see Figure B 1).

Entering the exhibit area through the foyer doors, the viewer takes in the entire exhibit with a glance of an eye as the case runs parallel to the south and east walls (see Figures B 2 and B 3). The glass panels on the front of the case are supported by heavy black metal frames, dividing the case into sections. Each section features a horizontal text panel on the platform of the case, and one or more garments. Turning slightly to the left, the viewer sees the front of the wool walking suit (c. 1910) juxtaposed with a large black and white S.E.M. photo of a degraded wool fibre (see Figurse B 4 and B 5). The next section features an orange and blue suit jacket (c. 1925) a purple dress (c. 1940) and a cotton muslin shelf supporting various conservation materials (see Figures B 6 through B 8). Following these are a green silk sleeveless dress (c. 1925), a men's suit made of shot fabric (c. 1948), and a blue and white woven coverlet from the late 1800s (see Figures B 9 through B 12). Where the glass panels of the exhibit case project forward, a multi-coloured shisha embroidered top and skirt from the Gujarat state in western India is displayed flat on a white slant board (see Figures B 13 through B 15). The next section features an off-white bifurcated woman's undergarment suspended from a padded hanger and stuffed out with nylon netting, and a red silk dress from 1910, displayed flat on a white slant board (see Figures B 16 through B 18). Images of the treated areas of these garments are enlarged and suspended behind them. A T-shirt and raggedy jeans, also displayed flat on a slant board are featured in the second projected area of the case (see Figures B 19 through B 21). The final panel features a white silk dress with black embroidery (1915-1925) on a mannequin, and a dark crazy quilt suspended behind it. A Peruvian fragment sits near the front of the case on a slant board (see Figures B 22 through B 25).

The purpose of this exhibit was not only to answer the question "what is textile conservation", but also to show conservation's role in preserving historic artifacts. I wanted viewers to know what textile conservation is, what causes textiles to degrade, and the way textile degradation can be informative. I also wanted viewers to know that textile conservation is informed by science, and that while conservation can improve the appearance of an artifact, this is not the primary motivation for conservation work.

A challenge in designing this exhibit was to make acts of textile conservation visible. Because I wanted to discuss textile conservation as it relates to a museum collection, I chose to use textile artifacts as vehicles for discussion about textile conservation, while the signage and props were there to reinforce themes of fabric, and the materials used in conservation. I wanted there to be a feeling of the ephemeral, but also of the clean, clinical appearance of a conservation laboratory.

The text, artifact selection, and design of the exhibit evolved simultaneously. I had the main ideas of the exhibit in mind when selecting the artifacts, however, the final text was not solidified until the end of the exhibit's production. Planning an exhibit as a series of iterative steps allows a for a back-and-forth series of refinements. This keeps superfluous elements to a minimum and results in a more integrated exhibit (Serrel, 1996, p. 158). Because this was "a one person show", I had the luxury of being able to switch quickly from one area to another, and allow changes in one area of the planning process to affect the others.

The process for developing the exhibit is outlined in the following steps: 1) Decision made to use artifacts to convey ideas about conservation 2) Brainstormed for ideas for the overall feel or impression of the exhibit 3) Examined literature on conservation and conservation exhibits 4) Developed points to be covered in the exhibit 5) Searched for artifacts 6) Restructured and refined exhibit ideas 7) Determined artifact and signage layout using maquette of exhibit case 8) Finalized prop materials 9) Selected artifacts 10) Wrote text 11) Prepared props and artifacts, finalized artifact selection 12) Finalized text 13) Installed exhibit. The timeline used to develop the exhibit is shown in Table 1.

| Week | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Research | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Themes, objectives | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Artifact Selection | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Artifact Preparation and Mounts | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Exhibit lay-out | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Text | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Props | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Installation | | | | | | | | | | | |

**Table 1** Timeline for artifact preparation. Grey areas indicate when a particular aspect of the exhibit was addressed.

For this exhibit the modalities, the forms used to present the content of the exhibit (Serrel, 1996, p.66) were artifacts from the University of Alberta Clothing and Textiles Collection, their mounts, text, photos, and some examples of conservation materials. I decided that artifacts would be the best way to provide viewers with a context for conservation activity. Although the literature states that viewers need text to interpret the visual information, I relied very much on the visual aspects of the artifacts to catch viewer's attention. I wanted people to see them as objects – to look at the materials and their formal qualities as if they were seeing them in a lab. The accompanying text and photos carried information specific to conservation issues related to these artifacts, as well as the broader themes of the exhibit.

## Artifact selection

I wanted the textiles in the exhibit to reflect the range of textiles that may be given conservation treatment. I also wanted to portray clothing worn by either gender, and show examples from across various cultures to show that the textile conservation is not restricted to the care of historic women's clothing from Europe or North America. An exhibit of only women's clothing or only two-dimensional textiles would appear to be about that particular type of textile, rather than about textile conservation. I anticipated that the variety of textile artifacts would also cause viewers to wonder what these objects had in common, and prompt the viewer to "read-on". This approach,

however, put extra emphasis on the visual qualities of the artifacts. The interaction between the colours, and the appearance of the textures of the pieces would have to work synergistically to unify the exhibit, and also interest the viewer with their variety. I avoided using small artifacts, as they are difficult to examine in the large display case.

Finding artifacts in the University of Alberta Clothing and Textiles Collection (CLTX Collection) that were good visual examples of degradation or conservation treatment was challenging. Signs of degradation can be subtle and the ability for viewers to see conservation treatment is confounded by the tenet that conservation work be visually unobtrusive. Even if the artifact is accompanied by a before picture, the effect is not always visually dramatic. In this exhibit, close-up photos of the degradation or treatment accompanied the text to emphasise the aspect of the garment discussed.

The CLTX Collection is a research and educational collection; most treatment conservation is carried out by students. Many of the treatment examples I found were small enough to have been done within a span of a university term of three months, and sometimes the treatments were not exemplary of the work done by professional conservators. For example, in the CLTX collection I could find only one instance of stitching stabilization done on a large, flat textile, but many small embroideries and fragments that had been stabilized and mounted. The history of the collection itself also plays a role in the types of conservation treatments available to be seen. The misfortune of two floods in the artifact storage area over a 2 year period has resulted in many examples of artifacts salvaged and recovered through wet-cleaning techniques.

The range of textiles in the exhibit was also circumscribed by the nature of the collection itself. The University of Alberta Clothing and Textiles Collection consists of over 17, 000 artifacts, a result of donations from the local community, as well as active collection around the world. The collection includes men's and children's clothing and accessories, as well as ethnographic pieces, but is predominantly women's clothing from a Western European tradition. Almost all of the textiles in the collection could be considered functional.

An initial group of artifacts was examined and compared to the objectives of the exhibit. Because the degradation on some of the pieces resulted from poor storage prior to being added to the collection, I decided to include a section on preventive conservation. As the text evolved, more specific examples of treatments or types of artifacts were needed. For example, after originally

selecting a white dress as an example of stitching stabilization, I decided that a more brightly coloured example would be better for the treatment section as the bifurcated undergarment selected as a superior example of wet-cleaning was also white, and would be displayed beside it.

While the social history of each artifact was not a primary consideration, brief facts about the artifacts were included in the exhibit text to let viewers know what they were looking at. The visibility of the damage or treatment, and the formal qualities of the textiles were given the most consideration. See Table 2 below for a description of the content and visual qualities of the artifacts selected for the "Fragile Threads" exhibit.

**Table 2** Content and visual considerations in selecting the artifacts for "Fragile Threads"

| Artifact | Content qualities | Visual Qualities |
|---|---|---|
| **Blue wool walking suit** | The ripped piping on the skirt shows how a colour change can happen even from everyday use. | The cut of this outfit is so obviously 19th century, which immediately triggers thoughts about "old clothes". |
| **Orange and navy striped suit jacket** | This coat shows the results of moth damage, which probably occurred during storage. | This is a very eye-catching piece with its orange and navy stripes, especially since so much of men's clothing is dull in colour. |
| **Purple dress** | The colour change on the shoulders and sides of this dress is a dramatic example of what can happen just from exposure to atmospheric pollutants. | The colour of this dress works well with the nearby orange and navy jacket. |
| **Green "flapper dress"** | The colour change resulting from perspiration on the centre back of this dress is an example of how use degrades textiles. | This is a "fun" piece from the 1920s, interesting to look at because of its colour gradations, and unexpected location of perspiration damage. |
| **Purple suit jacket and pants** | The owner of these probably wore the pants more often than the jacket because there is more wear on the pant pockets than on the jacket. The wear is easy to see as it shows up as red threads. | Its shifting colours are unusual to see in men's wear. Because the warp yarns are navy and the weft yarns are red, the suit appears purple. |
| **Coverlet** | This is a piece that has had many lives, made visible in the way it's been cut and patched, and the pink juice stain. | This is an example of a flat, functional textile. Its patterned surface also provides contrast to the smoothly textured dress and suit adjacent to it. |
| **Shisha top and skirt** | This piece is a good example of a complex textile to illustrate the ways a textile conservator would examine a piece before deciding upon a treatment. | This piece is bright and beautiful to look at, especially beside the softer colours in the case beside it. It is also an example of a cross-cultural textile. |
| **Combination undergarment** | This is a dramatic example of "before" and "after" treatment, and it provides an opportunity to talk about washing and bleaching. | This piece is an example of something relatively old, and aesthetically pleasing. The fact that it is bifurcated makes it unusual as well. |
| **Dress from 1910** | This dress is an example of stitching stabilisation, as well as an example of the problems with weighted silk. | The dress reads as old, but beautiful. It was chosen over other examples of stitching stabilization because of its colour, which would contrast with the combination undergarment beside. Its condition and the refinement it suggests would also contrast with the jeans and t-shirt on the other side. |

| Artifact | Content qualities | Visual Qualities |
|---|---|---|
| **Jeans and T-shirt** | These pieces are a dramatic example where the prescribed treatment is " no treatment". | The condition of these common items makes them extraordinary. |
| **Tuberculosis Quilt** | This piece is an example of stitching stabilization on a large flat textile. | The patching and embroidery on this piece are interesting to look at. Also, the quilt is dark overall, which will offset the white dress nicely |
| **Peruvian fragment** | This piece is another example where conservator's may not wash an artifact, and another example of how something is stitched for stability. Its age also shows the range of items textile conservators work with. | Its small size adds variety to that section of the exhibit case. |
| **Dress** | This dress shows how important the drying process is in conservation. | The black and white silk provides a dramatic contrast. The light coloured dress also offsets the predominantly dark quilt behind it. |

## Exhibit area

Because this exhibit would not be travelling to another venue, I took the design of the case into larger consideration than if the exhibit were to be displayed in several different spaces. The exhibit case is located along the east and south walls of the foyer of the Human Ecology Building, between the building entrance and the stairwell. The glass is coated with a UV-protective filter, and the case is lit from the inside by incandescent pot-lights, which can be adjusted by a dimmer switch for brightness. As the case is very large, measuring 19 $m^2$, the front is divided into seven sections bordered by black metal to support the weight of the glass. Starting at the east side, the fourth and sixth sections project forward as two "points". The third section also features a rather deep corner. A challenge is working with these points and the deep corner of space in the third section. I chose to use these sections of glass to separate the exhibit thematically, and the points to highlight specific artifacts. The extra space in the third section I used to exhibit conservation storage materials.

Although the exhibit case is linear in design, the sections of the case at either the stairwell or the building entrance can be thought of as a starting point. For this reason each section of the exhibit needed to be understandable in and of itself. It was important that the first and last panels have a strong visual impact, so that the viewer's attention would not wane toward the "end" of the exhibit. I addressed this by including what I thought would be an interesting prop in the first section, an enlarged microscopic image of a wool fibre, and by creating high contrast in the

seventh section with a white dress against a dark quilt. Also, the mannequins in the end sections were the only two in the exhibit, used as reminders of conservation's museum context.

I used a scale model of the exhibit space to determine the orientation of the signs, and to experiment with how the support materials in the exhibit could be used to convey the overall theme of the "Fragile Threads" exhibit. I wanted to echo the ephemeral of qualities of textiles, and I wanted to emphasize the textile materials. My original idea was to have the support images, and perhaps even the text, screen printed or dye-sublimated by heat transfer printing onto sheer fabric. However, that proved to be beyond the budget, and the old standard of mounting poster printed images onto foam core proved to be the most practical. Another idea was to have a very stylised "laundry line" throughout the case, made of silver airplane cable, as sort of a visual pun referring to how these objects' were cared for in their past, in contrast to the specialized care they receive in the museum. I decided, however, that that would complicate what was being said about conservation, because conservation treatment differs from how textiles are handled at home. Instead, the conservation materials used in the treatments and the mounts, and the hangers the garments were actually stored on, were allowed to remain visible. The textile theme was carried through the exhibit by incorporating the image of a woven textile background on the text panels, and the enlarged close-up images of the textile artifacts

## Text

My approach to the text labels was informed by writings by McManus (1989) and Serrel (1996) and I aspired to their ideals of how exhibit labels should function. To read the text panels of "Fragile Threads", please see the text accompanying the figures in Appendix B.

### *About text*

People do read museum labels. Visitors react to them as if the exhibit designers are speaking to them, and may even vocalize their responses as if they are interacting with the team (McManus, 1989). What visitors are likely to learn from labels depends on several factors. If visitors are able to take in the exhibit message quickly, they are more likely to incorporate it into their conversations. The tone of the labels should be conversational, and include open rather than closed questions. An authoritarian tone in labels is inappropriate (McManus, 1989).

Beverly Serrel describes how to write viewer friendly labels. Label texts should address the visitor's curiosity aroused by an object or photo, or other image-triggering sources. While images created by three-dimensional objects are the most powerful attractors, all components, including photos, should be explained. Ideally, images and words should work together to create a complete experience, as if one could not one exist without the other. "Visitors read and look, or look and read, the result is a gestalt that leaves the visitor feeling that the effort was worthwhile – they got something more by doing both – even if it only took a total of five seconds." (Serrel, 1996, p. 151). Images and words also need to work together in the whole exhibit, and not just individually.

Messages expressed in exhibit labels should give visitors something to do (Marlene Chambers, as cited in Serrel, 1996, p. 83). Visitors should agree with the ideas, disagree, use them as building blocks in making conclusions, or make discoveries of their own. In order to accomplish this, Serrel suggests that labels should start with information directly related to what visitors can see, feel, do, smell, or experience from where they are standing. Other guidelines include varying the length of sentences, using short paragraphs and small chunks of information, using quotations to advance the narrative. Serrel suggests avoiding alliteration, which is easy to overuse, and exclamation marks, which can make emphasis feel forced. Metaphors can complicate an already complex communication environment, and humour should be used sparingly as it may not be universally appreciated.

***Text in the "Fragile Threads" exhibit***

The exhibit labels featured four levels of text which included a title, main body text, detail text about the artifacts, and captions for the images. In addition, there was also a sign to introduce the exhibit in the main entrance. The text levels were differentiated by font size. Titles were used to 'hook' the viewer into reading further, while the main body text expressed an idea about conservation. Information given about the artifacts included explanations of the degradation or treatment shown, as well as some background history when available. Although all the text levels were included on the same panel, an amorphous translucent shape on the background of the label was used to separate the artifact text from the main body text. The shape was inspired by the silk crepeline used in stitching conservation treatments.

With regards to the number of words in the text, I used Serrel's (1996) recommendations as a guide. Although Serrel reminds us that word count is not a prescription, she suggests using 1-7 words for titles, 200-300 words for introductory labels, 20-150 words for group labels, and 20-150 words for captions.

I did not, as is often suggested, use questions in the text. While this is a popular method to catch viewer's interests, in order to be effective the questions have to be the sort of question your viewer would actually ask, and not be used as a gimmick to force the designer's intent (Serrel, 1996). I was unsure as to what people would ask about conservation – I would find out in my focus groups!

The font style and size were chosen after holding up boards and text samples at the approximate angle and distance they would be in the case. While a high contrast between the background and foreground can improve legibility, black print on a white background tends to look raw and somewhat unfinished. I chose a light beige background with a "weave" texture to emphasize the material the exhibit was talking about, and a dark brown, sans-serif font for easier reading. Including detail photos on the text panels helped orient the viewer to the object to which text referred.

The positioning of the text was a compromise. The information on the text panels was crucial to understanding what was being said about conservation, and so I felt it was best placed at the front of the case. However, I did not want it to obscure the artifacts, and so kept the text panels low, and horizontal in orientation rather than vertical. An alternative would have been to suspend the artifact labels so that they hung beside the artifacts they described, but as the ventilation in the case causes small, suspended objects to blow around, I opted to keep the detail text with the main body text.

## Mounts

Condition reports and actual artifact examination were crucial for choosing how items would be mounted. Although I approached the task knowing I wanted the conservation materials to show, the actual mounts resulted primarily from the needs of the artifact.

Most of the artifacts were clothing. However, the emphasis of this exhibit was not on how they were worn, but how they are conserved, and so I decided to use a mannequin only at the beginning and the end of the exhibit, as mentioned before, to remind viewers of the museum context, and of the artifacts' original use.

As preventive conservation was one of the exhibit themes, I decided to display the garments in two sections called "A clean low-lighted place" and "Signs of use" on their padded storage hangers, with the text emphasising the need for padded surfaces. Some pieces, like the T-shirt, could not be hung because the shoulder seams could not withstand the pull of gravity, and required the support of a slant board. After devising this solution for the T-shirt and jeans, I decided this display technique would be better for some of the hanging items as well. Slant boards were used in the sections of the exhibit that described examination and treatment procedures.

## Conservation

Aside from the creation of the mounts, minimal conservation work was done to prepare artifacts for exhibit. Artifacts were mechanically cleaned by vacuuming their surfaces through a polyester screen with a Nilfisk vacuum cleaner, and a rheostat transformer to control the level of suction. The garments were humidified in a conditioning room set at 65% humidity to relax any folds or wrinkles. The blue wool suit received additional humidification using an ultrasonic humidifier to further relax creases in the hem of the skirt.

## Props

The photos were used to highlight and emphasize the treatment or degradation of the artifacts in the exhibit, and to draw attention to the artifact's physical characteristics. Three posters showed a SEM photo of a degraded wool fibre, the "before treatment" image of the bifurcated undergarment, and a detail of the silk crepeline encapsulation and stitching stabilization on the 1910 evening gown. The SEM photo was to communicate that science is involved in conservation, while the other two posters were to depict more vividly the work conservators do.

In addition to the posters, there was also a display of materials used in conservation. A muslin storage device (purchased at IKEA™) provided a solution to display these materials. Again, I wanted to give the impression of a clean laboratory.

## Installation

Installation took place over five days. This included time to adhere labels to the foam core. The stands and boards were placed in the display case first, and time was spent arranging them. After that the coverlet was suspended, and then the quilt. The height of the coverlet was determined by the height of the garments it was to be beside and the height of the quilt was determined by "what looked good" , as determined by myself, the textile conservator, and the clothing and curatorial technician. After that, the items mounted on the slant boards were put in place, and finally the hanging garments. The posters were then suspended, and the text panel put in place. Only small adjustments were made to the positioning and angle of the artifacts.

## Lighting

The lights were adjusted so as to best illuminate the details on the garments and dimmed so as to be no higher than150 lux. Given that the maximum recommended illumination for textile exhibits is 50 lux, this is quite high, but after consulting with the textile conservator, Shirley Ellis, it was deemed acceptable as the exhibit would only be up for a month.

## Summary

While motivated by the idea of conservation treatments and what they are, this exhibit developed from the desire to educate the public about the science, technique, and judgements made in textile conservation. Much of the text was informed by the artifacts themselves. The mounts were used to adequately support the artifacts selected, but were also used to carry the themes of conservation. The shape of the exhibit space also informed the content of the show, as the panes in the front display window were used to separate the show thematically. Time and budget limitations curtailed experimentation with props and other display materials.

## Focus groups

### Recruitment and sample description

A convenience sample of 31 participants was selected to participate in four focus group interviews. Because the exhibit could only be displayed for a limited amount of time, and response to presentations to local craft guilds and first year art and design history classes (targeted because of their interest in creating textiles and their visual literacy skills respectively) was low, recruitment strategies were changed and a convenience sample used. Twelve participants (39%) were recruited using word of mouth, eight (26%) responded to posters in the Human Ecology Department, five responded to presentations made to local craft guilds (16%), four responded to posters around the University of Alberta (13%), and two (6%) responded to a message sent out in the electronic graduate student newsletter. Please refer to Figures C 1 through C 4 for the recruitment notices and information sheets.

The groups were predominantly female, although only one group consisted entirely of women. From their responses to a short questionnaire, twenty-nine (94%) of the participants were either highly interested in textiles or frequent museum visitors if not both. Most accurately described, the focus groups were conducted with people willing to view the exhibit and participate in a subsequent discussion.

**Table 3** Description of participants

| Group | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Gender breakdown:** | | | | |
| Male | 1 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| Female | 8 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| Total | 9 | 5 | 9 | 8 |
| **Recruitment method:** | | | | |
| Word of mouth | 3 | 2 | 5 | 2 |
| Department poster | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Guild presentation | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| University poster | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Graduate student e-list | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| **Reported interest in textiles and frequency of museum visits:** | | | | |
| Textile interest[1] | 5, 5, 4, 3, 5, 5, 3, 4,3 | 5, 4, 5, 5, 4 | 4,1,#,3,5,5,4,3,# | 4, 4, 2, 3, 4, 5, 4, 4 |
| Average textile interest | 3.6 | 4.6 | 3.5 | 3.8 |
| Museum visits per year[2] | 2, 1, 3, 7-8, 3, 3, 1, 1, #[3] | 4, 1, 1, 4, 2 | 2,5,2,1,4,0,2,3,# | 4, 3, 5, 1, 2, 4-5, 2, >5 |
| Average museum visits per year | 2.7 | 2.4 | 2.4 | 3.31 |

[1] Participant responses when asked to rate their interest in textiles on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being low and 5 being high.
[2] Participant responses when asked how many museum visit they make per year.
[3] # means no response given

The group size ranged between five and nine participants. The group of five participants proved most effective in gaining information, as all were highly involved in the discussion. This may be explained by the high degree of homogeneity in that group: all five reported a relatively high interest in textiles and all were female. The groups of 8 and 9 proved to be a little large, as each of these had participants who participated minimally. However, these groups did elicit a range of viewpoints. Given the number of questions and the time allotted, 6 to 7 participants would have been ideal. The discussions lasted an hour and a half, including approximately 20 minutes to view the exhibit. Four groups proved enough for "saturated" data, although homogenous groups taken further outside of the university population would likely provide different results.

Participants were asked to meet in room 336 of the Human Ecology Building, which is designed for focus group observation studies. As the moderator, I greeted them, then asked them read and

sign the participant consent form. Participants then went down to the lobby to view the exhibit. As they returned, I asked them fill out the short questionnaire asking them their interest in textiles, museums, and if they wanted a copy of the summary of the research. Please refer to Figres C 5 and C 6 to read the consent forms and questionnaire given to participants.

The focus group began with my introduction, and an explanation that an assistant was on the other side of the one-way mirror, tape recording the conversation. This may have made participants initially a bit nervous, but I felt that participants quickly lost their self-consciousness. The participants then munched on the pizza or dessert provided while discussing the questions. The moderator's guide is described in Table 4.

**Table 4** Moderator's guide

| Main point | Prompting questions | Follow-up questions |
|---|---|---|
| Is it important that your own textiles last a long time? | To start off, I'm going to ask you to think about a textile that you own, that you really really like. It can be clothing, or a quilt, or a rug – anything that is kind of special to you. I'll have you write it down when you get back.<br><br>So to start off I'll go around the room, and ask you to say your name, and describe the textile that you wrote down. | How many years would you want that textile to last?<br><br>What would you do with it when you were finished using it? |
| What condition should artifacts on display be in? | What did you think when you saw those oily ragged jeans and t-shirt?<br>What did you think after you read the text panel?<br><br>What about the pink dress beside it? Should it be made to look as new and clean as possible? | When should artifacts on display be cleaned and repaired to improve their appearance? |
| What did you learn? | I'd like everyone to jot down one thing you found out about conservation by looking at this exhibit, and one thing you thought was interesting. | What about that – caught your attention?<br><br>If you had to describe this exhibit to someone, what would you say? |
| What would make this exhibit talk more effectively about conservation? | Everyone write down what they would like to see more of?<br><br>What would you like to see more of? Different information? Different artifacts? Different method of display? | How helpful was the text?<br>The images?<br>The artifacts?<br>The way they are displayed?<br><br>In future, what would make these more effective? |
| Would you change how you use your textiles to make them last longer? | Making textiles last longer sometimes means limiting their use - keeping them out of the light such as limiting how much they are handled. I'm going to ask you to think of that favourite textile again. After seeing this exhibit, would you change the way it's used to make it last longer? How so?<br><br>Would you ever consider conservation treatment to improve its look or stability? | |

At the end of the first focus group, participants requested to see the conservation lab, and my assistant and I conducted a short tour of the conservation lab and the collection. Tours were offered at the conclusion of subsequent focus group interviews.

## Analysis

Initial ideas were gained from notes I took during each focus group, the notes my assistant took, and debriefing sessions after each focus group interview. I transcribed the data tapes using a foot operated transcriber and a word processing program, simultaneously beginning some of the coding process while transcribing, using the "comment feature" in the word processing program to record my thoughts and observations. Each response was numbered and labelled according to participant pseudonym and date. Afterwards, data were categorized across the groups by response to each question (using the copy and paste feature in word processing program to create new documents). Unsolicited comments that pertained to the questions asked (for example, arose in other areas of the conversation) were put into their own category. These were then read for thematic responses, and the data were finally organized into the following large themes: 1) How, when and why participants keep their own textiles 2) In what condition do participants expect artifacts to be displayed 3) Participant response to "Fragile Threads: A look at the conservation of historic clothing". This last section is further broken down into 1) Reactions to exhibit content 2) Reactions to exhibit components 3) Problems with the exhibit.

## Limitations

Although I avoided mentioning that I designed the exhibit, some of the participants made this assumption. This may have prompted them to respond in a more positive manner than otherwise. Also, as pointed out by Morgan (1997), focus groups are an unnatural setting. The anticipated focus group discussion provided an impetus to read all of the labels and to look more closely than one normally would. Also, the act of participating in the focus group may also have reinforced and expanded on what these viewers may have taken away from the exhibit. The experience of these viewers is not typical. However, the data from the focus groups point to what can potentially be taken from the exhibit. As an evaluation technique for exhibits, focus groups in themselves may not be enough to give conclusive results, but they can point to potential problems that can be further investigated.

# Chapter 3 Results and discussion

## Results

This analysis of the focus group discussions is divided into three parts. The first part shows how, when and why focus group participants keep their own textiles. This information was collected to provide context for their reactions to the exhibit. The second section examines in what condition participants expect artifacts to be displayed. I wanted to test the idea that people may have different expectations as to acceptable condition for museum artifacts. Also, if participants found the condition of artifacts to be important, it would support David Grattan's statement that conservation plays a crucial role in giving museum audiences the sort of authenticity they want. The third section examines participants' responses to the exhibit "Fragile Threads: A look at the conservation of historic textiles". This section includes what participants said they learned about conservation from the exhibit, as well as their reactions to the exhibit itself. This section also examines what participants felt was lacking in the exhibit, again including formal properties as well as content.

## Part 1

## How, when and why participants keep their own textiles

When asked to describe their favourite textile, almost all participants described textiles they were currently using, and described them in terms of how they are used. The way an article of clothing was most often described was by how it looked when worn, how it felt, or the sound it made when it moved. Participants often associated their favourite textile with feelings of comfort, and sometimes with travel memories. Only two participants mentioned as their favourite textiles that functioned strictly as aesthetic objects, while four participants across the groups mentioned items that had been previously functional (wedding dresses, trunk full of old furs), and were kept because of their connection to family.

When asked how long their favourite textiles should last, participant responses varied throughout the groups. While there were some favourite textiles participants wanted to last indefinitely, most could see retiring these textiles. Conversely, two participants mentioned that the reason for choosing the items they mentioned as favourite, both articles of clothing, had been for the reason that the textiles had lasted so long and still looked "like new".

Participants in all the groups came up with additional examples of textiles that had not immediately come to mind as favourite, but were things they wanted to keep for a very long time. Again, these textiles were primarily aesthetic, or had a history or memory associated with it. This speaks to the importance of the associated stories, memories and history of items that participants felt should be kept, over the physical properties of the textiles.

The information in this category was taken from participants' answers to the question "How long should it last?", as well as other areas of the conversation that turned to the topic of what to save, and for how long.

All four groups were selective about which textiles should last indefinitely. While some textiles are meant to be used up, like socks, textiles that are to be kept need to be special in some way.

> I think what most people would like is to be able to keep a few items and preserve them. I'm sure most of us wouldn't want to keep a whole wardrobe and all our furniture forever, because you'd need trailers to store them.

All of the groups expressed that longevity was not a concern for most clothing, because we change our clothes with the fashions and like to keep them looking new. Clothing was mostly seen as temporary items.

> We don't think of our clothes as anything that we'd want to keep for very long. If we have something of our aunt's or our grandmother's or our great-grandmother's, then that really has a special value. But I don't think it ever occurred to me to put aside something favourite of mine that maybe my grand-daughter would absolutely fall in love with.

Participants in all the groups also spoke of continuing to use some articles of clothing, despite their deteriorating condition. Some spoke of wearing items out because they liked them so much and were comfortable, and didn't care if they were patched, while some spoke of continuing to wear their clothing because they could not find replacements.

> Are there some things you don't want to look like new?... The more beat up a pair of jeans, the more naturally ripped and worn and thread bare, the better you like them! That's the style.
>
> That reminds me of one shirt that I particularly liked just because of the colour in it..... It was my mom's turtleneck that she wore in college. I have it and it's still hanging in my closet. I still wear it occasionally, but I really shouldn't because I've sewn it up on the

> seams and the shoulders several times. It's just falling apart and it's really threadbare, but I love it so much that I just want it to last forever.
>
> Everything's wrong with [my workpants] yet what keeps them around is comfort. For some reason the most comfortable clothes that I have are the ones that have been worn to a thread.
>
> I've got narrow feet. They're size 10A and I have a lot of trouble getting shoes....I've got five pairs altogether and I bought them in the early seventies. You can imagine then it's not in very good shape. My wife is embarrassed when I wear these things....It's very difficult for me to find replacements for them.

By contrast, the idea that it was possible for textiles, specifically clothing and furniture, to last too long was expressed in three of the four groups. These groups agreed that fashions and personal taste change before most textiles actually wear out.

> ...probably most of us here we never wear out our clothing. We would discard it before we'd ever wear it out because we're so in tune to fashion. I know I am. And I don't really care whether they last or not. I'd prefer that they not.

One group explicitly mentioned environmental concerns associated with textiles and man-made materials in general lasting too long.

> I think that's what I don't like about things like polyester. They're made almost to last forever ....We've gone so much from wooden, cotton, you know natural fibres. I like wooden spoons and things like that rather than plastic items. Old TV sets, old computers all of these things - where are we going to put them?

Conversely, in two of the groups, concern for the environment was also given as a reason for wanting textiles to last a long time, or for finding uses for textiles other than was originally intended.

> [Old socks] go into the rag bin, and you use them to cover your hands while you've got the paint brush going. They have a second life and from there they can go in the garbage. They're a carbon so they can go in the landfills ..... They are biodegradable, not like a polyester sock which 2000 years from now will still be a polyester sock.
>
> I think that I'd like to see fabrics last a lot longer than they are. That's why I never buy cotton socks because they just don't last. I think we're dumping too much of this into our landfill.... I'd like to spend a little bit more on my items so they go a lot longer.

All four groups expressed that the textiles they would want to save were associated with personal or family history.

> [I] found my mom's wedding dress. My mom has now [been] deceased for many years. It was in a pink plastic bag. It was a satin fabric and it was just gorgeous.... I'd like that to last a long time.
>
> I'd have to say a lace blouse. Its Battenburg lace made by my great aunt after whom I'm named.... I never wear it because it doesn't fit and it has rust stains from the snaps. I just keep it forever with me.

Related to the idea of saving textiles because of their associated memories, participants in all four groups expressed that they would want to save certain textiles for future generations.

> ...I'm thinking of the shawls that we have.... Some of them are really intricately done, the fabric itself. We have a couple of them in our family and I would like not to see them fall apart, and hand them to future generations for as long as they can be maintained properly.
>
> Some of the things that I have are already old. My mom is 83. She bought them before she was married, so that was when she was 20. I don't know if my kids are going to be collectors, but I would really love to be able to keep those things for them....
>
> I have a hope chest where I put the things that that either don't fit and I want to pass onto future generations, or I just really liked, and they can still be looked at.
>
> ....I have [my great-aunt's dress] and I'd like to pass it on to my aunt's grand-daughter. I'd like it to last as a memoir as a memento to her as long as possible.

Participants in three of the groups spoke of how items can gain unexpected meaning as they age, and how a person might preserve things for this reason.

> It's sometimes the things that we throw away that we should keep, because it tells us about its construction.
>
> But it's also important to preserve something that was made in 1990. Because in 2090, just think of the condition it will be in if they started conserving it now.

Participants noted the difficulty in assuring that future generations would see the same significance in the textiles the collectors did.

> We think the people who come behind us should love [the textiles] just as much.
>
> ...Your kids could go through and clean out your house and go, "God why did mom keep this – like this is hideous" and sell it to an antique store, a Good Will because they don't

> really know why mom kept it.... You had memories and reasons for keeping it but they just didn't know...
>
> If you're going to store it, put that history with it.

Participants in two of the groups expressed the idea that ultimately, we are not responsible for what the next generation sees as valuable.

> There is a saying: Once you leave the gate you have no control. You have to trust that the care that you've taken and demonstrated would be respected at some level.
>
> ....Maybe the choice about what gets passed on is not the person who is trying to guess what people will want, but the person who is already appreciating [the textile]...

Three of the groups expressed the idea that concern for the duration of textiles, their condition, and their collection, depended on the characteristics of the collector.

> As a textile person, as a quilter, it's my job to rescue fabrics....From the store. That's my justification for improving on my stash all the time. But come and live with me I'll look after you I'll take good care of you and you'll look good forever.
>
> That reminds me of people who collect coins and stamps. At what point do they start collecting it? How many one dollar bills have you got saved?
>
> It goes back to your personality and the way you are. If you're clean, if you're going to be storing something, you're going to make sure that it's a cleaned article...But if people are slobs, and don't care about certain things, and their place is a disaster and they die and somebody comes in, well you just take your truck and haul all their stuff to the dump. You look at it and you'd say, "Well, there's nothing of value here. It's in such poor shape".
>
> Is it the frugal-meister in yourself or the creative one that wants to see how long you can make this last. I like the look of patched jeans, myself, or darned socks. I love darned socks.
>
> I don't keep anything. I haven't kept my wedding dress.

I did not ask about the monetary value associated with the textiles participants wanted to save, and money was not given as a reason for keeping textiles. Participants did mentioned fancy materials, or the fact that something was precious, in relation to the textiles they wanted to save. The association of monetary value to textiles that are thought of as worth saving could be further explored.

All groups expressed the idea that after seeing the exhibit, they would not change how they currently use their favourite textiles to make them last longer. They felt that their textiles were to be used and enjoyed as intended.

> Sometimes it's sad though when people cover things, and then you only see them later. If you get something, and it's nice, why not have it out?
>
> My favourite things are fuzzy things. If I can't touch them I don't care. If it's not fuzzy it doesn't matter anymore.
>
> I do lots of work with fibres and fabrics and my greatest joy is to see people use those things that I make. I wouldn't want them to last 2000 years if somebody didn't get some enjoyment out of them. Any clothes that I have, or quilts that I have, or things that I make, I'm going to use them and I want everybody to enjoy them, and to see them and touch them....Anything I have is never going to last long.
>
> I don't think I'd change the way I use my crocheted afghan. If it falls apart, that shows that the family loved it everybody used it and it served a good purpose.

By contrast, when asked what they would have liked to have seen more of in the exhibit, all groups mentioned an interest in more "at-home" tips, (see "Part 3" of this analysis). Participants in two groups said that while they would not modify the use of their textiles, but they might modify how they stored their textiles.

> I might consider putting [a quilt I've made] on a wall that doesn't get a lot of sunlight because I would think that would be needless damage. Someone didn't love it to pieces to get it to look like that. You actually could have prevented that kind of damage. I think once my afghan starts to show where and tear, I'll probably take it out of use and keep it stored properly.

Participants in three groups expressed that they had already taken measures to limit the use of the textiles they wanted to preserve.

> I've got two matching sweaters from my boys when they were little. That's probably one of the very few things that I did keep. I maybe have one more thing and that's it. But I made sure that they were clean, stored in a box and a clean box in a nice cool area; all those kind of things.
>
> I've put [my great aunt's dress] away permanently. Until it's brought out specifically for public display. It has changed my reaction or my use of it. I used to wear it all the time.
>
> I have [my grandma's handkerchiefs] all sealed up and still its amazing how they've maintained their scent. I want those to last for a very long time...

Some participants indicated they had found a "happy medium" between use and preservation needs.

> I do this balancing act where I wear my hat but I make sure I don't wear any makeup on my forehead. I only wear it a certain amount, and I try to make sure that when I take it off, it's stored properly. I still can have fun and keep it. Instead of breaking down in five years, it'll maybe take 25.

> I like to have [my quilt] on my bed just for sentimental value. I also have three cats, so I have another old quilt on top of it. My quilt is still on the bed but it won't get scratched by the cats. And I try not to put too much light on them because I know that they fade.

One participant described the dilemma when trying to modify the use of a historical item owned by several members of the same family.

> I wanted to mention an item my family has. It's a christening dress. It's from 1905 - my grandfather was christened in it. The family's now concerned because it's starting to fall apart. Where do you draw the line, who's going to be the last one to use it? And you know the next person who's in line to have a baby says, "Well, just let me use it and then I'll be the last one," but it doesn't end.... When do you stop and take that out of use?

## Part 2

## In what condition do participants expect artifacts to be displayed?

The data for this section are from participant responses to the question "In what condition should artifacts be displayed?". Participants were also asked for their reaction to a very decrepit pair of T-shirt and blue jeans in the exhibit, which were in the display because they had not been given conservation treatment, despite their poor condition, as well as the evening dress from 1910 on display beside the jeans. All of the groups concluded that the condition in which an artifact should be displayed depended on what the exhibitor wanted to show.

> In a display of the presidents' wives' gowns for inaugural balls in Washington D.C. at the Smithsonian, [the dresses] were all perfect. I'm sure that if there were any stains from being swept along through the snow or dust on the streets or any wine stains, they were removed because this was supposed to be a perfect appearance.
>
> When I see [the jeans] in a display case you immediately think about a person or somebody. I guess the same thing about that beautiful dress too. What are you trying to tell us? What's the story here?
>
> ... If you were portraying Lincoln with all the presidents, you wouldn't show him with his shot out jacket, so there again it's when and how you're presenting it!
>
> I didn't even notice that there was a contrast between [the jeans and t-shirt] and the dress. It was part of the exhibit and it made a point and that was enough. It doesn't matter that it was dirty or clean.

All of the groups saw prolonging the life of the artifact as an important reason to take steps to improve its condition.

> Take the pictures beforehand, write all the stuff out, then say we had to clean it because we wanted to keep it.
>
> I would ideally like [some of the historic pieces] to be brought to condition that would enhance its longevity.
>
> I don't like to see my fabrics mistreated. And to go to an exhibit, I have an expectation that [artifacts] will be cared for.

Participants in two groups expressed that the type of artifact would change their expectations as to the condition in which it should be displayed.

> I wouldn't expect a ballroom gown to be damaged, but I would expect the oil rig pants to be pretty dirty....

Some participants expressed they wouldn't even consider the condition of the artifact when looking at a museum display.

> If I were to see that garment in a display, the fact that it's damaged isn't going to change the fact that it was a dress from that era.

> I don't think most people really care whether you've cleaned it or how you've cleaned it. I know I would never give it a second thought. You would look at it and think, "Oh that's what they wore in the 40s or 30s or whatever" and continue.

All of the groups agreed that an accompanying story could explain and justify a degraded state.

> You would have to have the story behind it if you want it to have the blood stains. You would have to display it as such; this is the event of whatever.

> Unless you really knew the story behind why it was marked in such a way, chances are you wouldn't be that interested in seeing [the stains].....Having the caption telling the story becomes important.

The idea that a story was necessary to understand the state of an artifact is congruent with participant responses to the jeans in the display case. All four groups expressed that the text was important for appreciating the condition of the jeans and t-shirt. Before reading the text, the jeans appeared to be common, and participants wondered why they were there. It was after reading the text associated with the jeans that the groups found them interesting.

> At first I was surprised that they were in your display, because the other items seemed to have more historical significance. But after reading your description of the value, and how they explained a part of our history, or history around that industry, then it makes more sense to me why you put those in.

> I thought those jeans were really one of the most interesting aspects of the whole exhibit downstairs. It was the kind of human story behind it that made it the most interesting. The touch about the patches were sewn on by his girlfriend. I could almost imagine what this guy looked like because of the way the exhibit itself was presented.

All four groups expressed that degradation or damage on an object could be important. Damage verifies the associated story.

> (In response to the question "Should the blood be removed from Lincoln's jacket?) Absolutely not.

> ...There is a human caring aspect too. Someone who has a mustard stain on her dress - the mother would probably yell at the child, "Look you got mustard on your dress". But if the child got mustard on her dress and then died before she had time to wash it, I'm sure the mother would be very emotionally tied to those mustard stains because the story that's there. So I think those small stains become important because of the story tells it.
>
> In the Clinton scandal would they, will they ever clean the famous dress? History kind of sets the tone sometimes, I think.

This was also congruent with how participants responded to the jeans. The groups agreed that the condition of the jeans spoke about the individual who wore them, as well as the broader experience of a certain kind of labourer.

> My first impression is that guy must be very poor. That's why it has been recycled reused many times.
>
> You could really see it in the way that they were laid out. They still had bumps where his knees had been and just made me think of him down on his knees hammering or something in pain.
>
> Those could have been pants that came out of my house a few years ago. We would patch them and patch them because there was no point wearing new jeans all the time when you work on the rigs, because you're there for an hour and you almost look like that. It's a commentary of what that man's life was like. He's not alone – there's a ton of those kinds of jeans somewhere!

Participants in three groups expressed that an artifact's condition should suggest its age, even if damage did not result from a particular event, or was associated with a specific story.

> It is old so leave it be ... the character...
>
> ...I don't like to go to museum exhibits when you can't tell what's a real artifact and what's a reproduction. I like to see the wear and tear...I really like to see what can happen with something over the ages...
>
> I think that some of those changes can tell a story about the life of that garment or textile.
>
> I would think there's a difference between restoration and preservation and I think that preservation is really important. I was thinking about the Beatles exhibit - really we didn't want those blue jeans taken back to their original form because the charm was all the rips and the tears. They wouldn't have even been in the exhibit had they been [like new].

Participants also expressed reasons for keeping artifacts in as good condition as possible. One group agreed that it was important for artifacts to look as good as possible for display. This idea

that damage was distracting from the artifact, and that it would be best to see it in its original condition was echoed by participants in two other groups.

> You always want them to look nicer for a display.
>
> I like things to be cleaned up. I find sometimes that stains and discolourations can be distracting on a garment.
>
> If it's on display, I think that that I would [like to see the pink dress as clean as possible] for the fact that your imagination can take over and you can visualize somebody in that.
>
> I want it to be in the original shape and appearance, like when it is first worn by the original owner. I would like it to be shown in its glory...

Two groups agreed that not all damage was meaningful or important.

> Something that wouldn't happen from normal use...you'd want that cleaned up because the first thing a person would do, when they got home would be to clean that up.

## Part 3

## How participants responded to "Fragile Threads: A look at the conservation of historic clothing"

I asked focus group participants to write down one thing they learned about conservation from this exhibit, and also one thing they found interesting before sharing their ideas with the others. I was not interested in comparing what was learned to what was interesting, but I did want to see what people took away with them from both the content and the form of the exhibit: - artifacts and props. I expected that participants would respond to the question of what was learned with content from the text, and to the question of what was interesting with their reactions to the formal qualities of the exhibit. I expected that responses to this second question could be used to gauge how influential the actual artifacts were in the exhibit, and what other elements of the exhibit were effective. Some things that participants said they learned were what others reported interesting, and so I collapsed the learned and interesting categories that fit together thematically into one. Included in the interesting category were items that participants spoke about with enthusiasm and without prompting, as well as items participants explicitly said were interesting. I did not expect all the participants to cite the same things as learned and interesting. However, I did want to hear the range of what participants learned and found interesting.

### Reactions to exhibit content

Participants commented mostly on learning how textiles degrade, the special treatment and storage techniques, and that textile conservation can reveal information about objects and how they were used. Also mentioned was that textile conservation can improve how objects look, that textile conservation relates to other fields of study, and that textiles are a field of study in themselves.

#### *How textiles degrade*

Participants from all four groups expressed that they learned how textiles degrade.

> How light deteriorates fabric.
>
> I was surprised to find out that too dry [conditions] were harmful too.

> We were talking about acidity of the soil ...[we] just think of [soil] as inert.
>
> What was new to me was the different ways [fabric] is worn....Some [wear] is caused by perspiration and some caused by soil stains or oily stains....I hadn't thought about that before because to me a stain is a stain.

***Textile conservation uses special treatment and storage techniques***

Special treatment and storage techniques used in conservation were mentioned in all four groups. Participants in three of the four groups expressed that they learned about the treatments conservators use. The point brought up most often was about stitching stabilisation, mentioned by three of the four groups. This information was displayed with the 1910 dress, with an enlarged photo of the conservation work that had been done. Participants noted learning that stitching in conservation was done through original stitch holes when possible.

Three of the groups mentioned learning something about the special washing techniques used in conservation.

> I was thinking of solvent as being one of the corrosive, abrasive sorts of things, and in a couple of garments it was used to clean the stain.
>
> I mean the fact that you shouldn't iron a garment, that it should be weighted with glass balls and dried naturally.

Participants in three of the four groups mentioned that the reason why dyes bleed, and that you could do something about it, was very interesting.

> ...the most interesting technical thing there was, was that there are different drying times on fabric and that [to keep] the trim from bleeding into the faster drying garment you should blot it...

Three of the four groups mentioned they learned how storage can be used to preserve textiles.

> ...I've never used moth balls, but I think I learned that you should clean your garments before you put them into storage.

The fact that cedar chests should not be used to store items came as a surprise for two of the groups.

> I thought that point about that even the cedar chest might be harmful to quilts, was really astounding. Most people put everything, all their treasured quilts and stuff, into a cedar chest and that might not be so smart after all...
>
> I was amazed about the cedar chest too, because we all have them and we all put stuff in them. I'm thinking is anything going to survive now? We have to be so careful about what we do with our clothing or with our textiles or the things that we want to pass onto other generations...
>
> ...The whole cedar chest thing was significant to me because we have a big cedar chest that my mom put her mom's wedding dress in. A couple years ago we took it out and it was this perfect yellow ...and I was convinced that that was the original colour.

***Textile conservation can reveal information about an artifact***

Participants in three of the four groups expressed that they learned that textile conservation can reveal information about the artifacts, their manufacture, and their use.

> ...it was really interesting to learn about your role as a detective ...the process and the steps that you follow to uncover a garment's history. You do a complete diagnostics and it sounds like it's a very complex process...
>
> The careful examination of textiles that are that is done, and all that can be captured from that examination....that's all new to me. A textile is a textile. It looks nice, it feels nice. So just how much work goes into that before decisions are made about what to do with it.
>
> I was most surprised to learn that dirt was so important.

***Textile conservation improves how objects look***

The fact that textile conservation makes artifacts look better was mentioned in two of the groups by three participants. One participant said this was something they learned, while the others said this was something they found interesting.

> I found out that conservation makes those old items more beautiful than before. .... I am very interested in how powerful conservation treatment is, to make those items in good condition.

It is interesting to note the different ways "look better" was described by the three participants, from "more beautiful than before", "modern and good-looking" and "revert it to the original state". The language used may point to differing expectations about the condition artifacts can be

expected to be in, despite agreement earlier on in the discussions that the condition in which an artifact should be displayed depends on what is being shown. It may attest to how important it is that condition of artifacts in an exhibit be explained.

***Textile conservation relates to other fields of study***

One participant mentioned that conservation could provide a historical perspective, eliciting nods and words of agreement from that particular group.

> ... I think conservation is important because it provides a historical perspective of the period during which the garment or the fabric was used, and records say it has a story to tell. So it provides a window to the past and it provides information about social and culture and use and structures of the people who used it.

***Textiles***

Participants in two groups said they learned something about the nature of textiles themselves, and how they are manufactured.

> Something I learned was that wool had protective scales on it. ...And that they used metal salts on silk.
>
> I was really impressed by the mineral salting process that you wrote that they used to use on silk fabric. Just the thought of that totally repulsed me, the thought of wearing something that has been treated with mineral salts like that is really bizarre to me. I had no idea that they ever did that that recently as 1910 or 1890's you know the red pink dress.

One participant commented on learning that textiles is an area of study.

> So that's new to me. Textiles are of so much interest and importance to people that it can support a large faculty and obviously a number of graduate students.

***Textiles and textile conservation uses a special language.***

Participants in two of the four groups commented on the language associated with textiles and textile conservation. Two participants commented on specific terms or phrases.

> ...but what was really interesting was the sound that silk makes had a name "scroop".

I loved the term "fugitive dyes".

## Reactions to exhibit components

Participants responded strongly to the stories associated with the artifacts. The enlarged photos of the textiles, their damage and conservation treatment were also mentioned as interesting.

### *The artifacts and their stories*

Participants in all of the groups mentioned the stories behind the artifacts as being one of the most interesting aspects of the exhibit. Although stories were specifically mentioned only in the first group, all of the other groups referred to the histories presented of specific artifacts. Also, when asked what they would like to see more of, three groups mentioned more story, more history. The fourth group showed a split between wanting more social history, and wanting more scientific information (see section "More social history").

> It's kind of like when touring a city. You can drive by it yourself, look at all the buildings. If you go on a guided tour you actually hear the story about what happened in that building and then it takes on meaning, That's the written guided tour there.
>
> I think that the clothing is one thing and to have a story with it has a bigger meaning and that's exactly what has happened.

In each group the crazy quilt, and the T-shirt and jeans were mentioned as being interesting because of the story associated with them. Although the quilt was put in the exhibit to show an example of stitching stabilization on a large flat textile, the participants reacted to its history rather than the conservation that had been done. In all groups, the crazy quilt prompted a side discussion among participants about why that quilt while the girl's other belongings were burned. All the groups related the quilt to today's ideas on how we deal with disease and contamination.

> ...They kept the quilt even though she had worked on that while she was ill. They'd never burned that. That was sad. An important thing.
>
> ...The quilt was good. It kind of reminded me of a similar thing, of AIDS victims trying to immortalize the people dying from AIDS. The quilt kind of reminded of me of that.
>
> ...When my dad passed away my mom burned his quilt. I'm like, "Well he doesn't have an infectious disease". It's just interesting that people with traditional thinking from the

> old country still hold that mentality that, "Oh this person was sick. Now we have to burn whatever they were in".

Another artifact that was frequently mentioned was the green 1925 flapper dress. Participants responded favourably to the story that explained the degradation.

> The girl who wore the dress where the partner's hand was so sweaty that it stained, must have been a very beautiful woman and intimidated the guy badly.
>
> ...the second thing was the green evening dress from the 20's with the sweaty stain in the middle of the back that you wrote was put there by the dance partner hand. I thought was really interesting. I'll have to tell my boyfriend to check his hands out before I dance with him. I didn't know that could happen so easily.

Not mentioned as having an interesting story were the coverlet, the fume faded dress, the black and white dress, and the archaeological textile, which were displayed with little or no social history information.

The stories were not the only aspect that was reported as interesting. Participants also responded to the visual qualities of the some of the artifacts, especially the top and skirt featuring shisha embroidery.

> ...And I also thought the outfit from India was just wonderful all the different patterns the use of threads the colours the stitching the use of mirrors the layers on the bottom an extra band of stitching on it. It would take a fair amount of time to make.

The visual qualities of some of the artifacts prompted participants to imagine what it would be like to wear them.

> I couldn't tell by the light what sort of weave [the blue wool suit] had...but I just had a wonderful time imagining somebody actually wearing that and going out for a saunter dressed in wool.

***Props***

The props in the exhibit were also a point of interest. Participants in three of the four groups mentioned the microscopic views of the fibres.

> ...My favourite thing was the close up of the microscope photo of the wool fibre. Even though I've seen it before, I still like the way it looks because you can actually see the degradation on that one.
>
> ... I guess we don't look at fabric magnified very often .... I was looking and thinking now what part of the fabric is that from...

One group expressed the necessity of the photos to appreciate the treatments explained in the exhibit.

> The photograph of the item before it was cleaned was good...If you didn't have the photograph then you'd say "well why did someone clean this if there's some history to it?"

## Problems with the exhibit

In this category are participant responses to do with technical problems with the exhibit. Participants were asked to write down and share what they wanted to see more of in the exhibit, or what would have made it better. Included in this category are mention of problems outside the question as well. The groups felt the light levels were too low, and the position of the text to be awkward. They expressed a desire to see the artifacts and props more closely. In addition, the groups wanted to know explicitly why the displayed textiles should be conserved. While they wanted to see additional components that would show the process of conservation, they also wanted to see more social history information about the textiles on display.

### *Low light*

Most everyone agreed that they would have liked the light to be brighter, both for reading and for better examination of the artifacts, although a couple of the participants realized that better lighting would indeed defeat the purpose of conservation. Perhaps a way to improve it would be to juxtapose display conditions with lab conditions.

> Better lighting.
>
> Is it possible to put sort of like spotlights on the copy?
>
> ... unless it captures me I'm not necessarily going to read all of it. Because the light's kind of dim, to look down and read I found was a little more difficult...

*Text*

Participants felt the text was necessary and desirable because of the stories which made the artifacts meaningful. Participants in two groups noted that participating in a focus group prompted them to read more carefully than they would otherwise.

> I had to bring myself back and concentrate. If I was just looking at an exhibit, I likely wouldn't have.
>
> There is so much visual stimulation on some of those items that you tend to spend so much time looking at the dress. Then you really don't have time to read.
>
> Because I'm involved in this focus group I really did read it all, but I'm not sure that I would take the time to read it all. I would probably just read the larger print at the top and look at the more interesting pictures, but I don't think I would read the rest of the small print like I did tonight.

One group agreed that there was too much information in each panel.

> The one part that I didn't read at all was where the striped jacket was. I had to stop myself and make myself read it. There was a great deal of information on that one card and I just didn't I couldn't get into it.

All four groups agreed the placement of text panels were at an awkward height, and participants in two of the groups mentioned they noticed spelling mistakes.

> There's about two or three if you read them over.
>
> The one I noticed was that the little description on the bottom when you say "left, centre, right"....the one on the left said right and the one on the right, left.

One group agreed that some of the wording would be difficult for viewers who did not speak English as their first language. The phrases they pointed out as problematic were "wreak havoc", the terms "condition" and "scroop". Another group agreed that they would have liked the wording to have included more questions.

> They should ask a question rather than make a statement so that it engages our interest and tells us exactly what's being answered. When it's a statement, you're not sure that that's even a question you want answered or that you would think to ask.

*Inability to see artifacts and props closely*

Three of the groups agreed they wanted to be able to examine the artifacts more closely, or to be able to touch samples of the fabrics displayed.

> ...I would have preferred to be able to look at a little more detail with the pieces ...particularly with the wool walking suit with the dark fabric. It was much harder to determine that.

> ...I would have loved to have some of those things on turnstiles or something so I could see the whole garment. I would have liked some of the things, like the piece of fabric or a made up stained piece of fabric and that I could have touched or had a look at.

Two groups agreed they would like the photos to be larger, or to be able to get closer to them.

> The part with the nightgown, where you had a photo of all the damage behind, it was a good sized photo. For people with trifocals it's not that hard to see. That was good for me to be able to see that and say, "Wow, the restoration of this was really quite remarkable".

Participants in the fourth group expressed the idea that including other media would assist comprehension of the exhibit. This idea is reflected in all of the groups in the section about wanting to see more about the process of conservation.

> I went to the ROM just after Christmas and spent several days there, and one of the interesting aspects of the exhibits were the oral presentations that accompanied certain dioramas....And I found that really helped put it into context specific items.

*Confusing props*

Three of the groups found the display of conservation materials confusing. Part of the reason was that they found it difficult to match the text with the material. One group expressed that the transparent piece of Mylar™ was difficult to see. Another group expressed it was difficult to visualize how the materials might be used.

> ... there were different kinds of materials in there, and I had to really think "now what do you mean here". Do you mean that you're using it for backing, using it for storage....

*Order of information*

Although some participants were expecting a chronology to the exhibit, all four groups did not feel there needed to be an order for the text panels, and felt that each should be able to stand on its own. While there was an introductory panel in the exhibit, one group expressed they would liked to have seen a concluding panel somewhere.

> ...I noticed that there is a board outside and I liked reading it. It's just like opening a door to the exhibit, like a general introduction. So after visiting so many garments and textiles I think that if there's an ending part it allows the audience to still think about it, and look forward to seeing more next.

Verifying that exhibit viewers do in fact react to the entire environment of an exhibit, one participant wondered about the smell that came from the sculpture currently being installed in the stairwell.

## Suggested changes to the content of the exhibit

Participants in all groups commented that there were changes they would like to see in the content of the exhibit.

***Explicit information about why these artifacts should be preserved and conserved***

All four groups wanted more information about why these garments deserved to be conserved. They recognised conservation as a time consuming activity, and that the artifacts that are conserved are special. They wanted to know both which artifacts were chosen for a museum collection, and which ones were treated.

> ... I'm sure you must be getting lots of garments for conservation. So do you decide that you're only going to conserve some of them and not all of them you get and if so what makes you decide you are going to pick and choose some of the garments and not the others?
>
> What are your criteria for accepting [an artifact] and for expending this amount of time and energy that you obviously do on each garment?

*More stories and social history*

All four groups wanted to see more social history. Within one group, however, some participants expressed that including more history would distract from the science discussed in the exhibit. Participants in two groups agreed that knowing the stories about the artifacts helped them to understand why the artifacts were preserved.

> ...the reason that so much time and energy is put into [conservation] is so that we have these [artifacts]. They tell us a story and it goes on...
>
> I liked the balance that you struck between the stories and that gives some context to the work that a conservator does.
>
> The focus was on the work of the conservator and the stories help us to understand why that's so important: your detective work to uncover the stories and to share those stories.
>
> ...anything you can provide about the fabrics: why it was worn, what kind of person would wear those things, in what kind of generation ...

***More about the process of conservation***

All four groups agreed they would like to see more about the process of conservation – a video of a conservator working, or perhaps more photos.

> I'd love to see the bath that [conservators] use. I don't know if you call that the bath or the tub - that large space where you can put down an entire garment to clean it and preserve it.
>
> I thought maybe pictures of conservators working on these items, to show large tables that they use. You talked about glass weights? I'd like to see a picture of that.
>
> I'm still really interested, after looking at the exhibit, in knowing more about how a conservator works....I need to visualize now how they're doing their work. So we mentioned photographs - maybe that's one way of showing.
>
> I don't know if it was possible to do a video?

Two groups expressed they would like more information about how conservators analyse garments.

> ...how do you find out what was the cause of the damage to the garment? Do you make a chemical analysis of that portion and then find out what caused the damage, or does the story come with the garment itself...

*More information about the nature of textiles*

Three of the groups wanted more information about the physical nature of the textiles themselves, including weave structures of the fabrics and the properties of the fibres.

> How long does it take for some of these fibres to break down under the certain condition?...Which ones are affected more by some of these things than others?
>
> What makes a material durable? What makes it resistant?

Three groups wanted more information about specific conservation treatments.

> I notice a lot of treatments were wet-cleaning. Do you often use dry cleaning?
>
> Does it cost a lot, trying to conserve the clothes?

*More prevention and "at home" textile care tips*

All of the groups wanted more "at home" textile care tips, especially in deciding when to dry-clean.

> I think it'd be nice to know, if you were going to keep something, how you would clean it to keep it longer ...I'm always looking at labels. They say dry-clean only and I always like to challenge, "Can I wash it? Should I wash it?".
>
> We're always putting things in zip-up plastic bags or the plastic that came from the dry cleaners to keep the dust off. [I'd like] just a bit more explanation how we can store stuff ourselves.
>
> That's it exactly that's what I would like to see more of: what you are supposed to do to remove your stains, or storing your materials.

## Discussion

It would have been difficult to ask people questions about textile conservation if they did not know what textile conservation is. The "Fragile Threads" exhibit informed participants about textile conservation, while the focus group discussions worked to elicit their feedback on the subject matter. The focus group discussions also worked as a front-end evaluation of the exhibit. The problems the groups mentioned with both the technical aspects of the exhibit, and the content, point to ways in which this exhibit could be improved, and could be made to communicate its message more effectively.

Because participants knew they would be taking part in a discussion about the exhibit, they were highly motivated to read the text panels and examine the exhibit. What they expressed as having learned describes what can potentially be learned from this exhibit, and the more these responses between the groups are similar, the more likely it is that the casual viewer would express the same idea. Conversely, if the groups consistently missed ideas and concepts in the exhibit, I would guess that the more casual viewer would also miss these ideas and concepts, and I would conclude that these sections of the exhibit would have to be changed.

As discussed in the "Limitations" section of this thesis, the opinions expressed in these focus group discussions about textile conservation are particular to this sample, and to the information that was conveyed about textile conservation in this particular exhibit. Ideas about the extent to which participants would be willing to fund textile conservation activities, or blatant agreement or disagreement with conservation activities, were not addressed. However, the data illustrate a range of reactions to the subject, and point to the possible ways a larger public might react to the subject. Examined here are the expressed viewpoints of the focus group participants, and the implications if they were to inform how textile conservation is carried out.

## How participants spoke about preserving their own textile, and implications for textile conservation

Focus group participants were selective about what textiles they felt should be saved, and what they reported as their favourite textiles were not usually the ones they later said they wanted to save. Participants felt it was possible for things to last too long, as often people are finished using them before they wear out. Sometimes this idea was tied to concern for the environment, while sometimes it was linked to a general feeling of not wanting to be wasteful.

Participants expressed that those textiles which should be made to last indefinitely depended on how long they wanted to use them, their associated memories or history, as well as who was doing the saving, and for whom the textiles were being saved. While some participants felt textiles should be saved because they may gain unforeseen significance, participants recognized that it was impractical for museums to save everything, and wondered how museums decided what should be preserved. These participants understood the need for a museum's collecting policy to be selective.

These participants also saw conservation treatment as selective, and wanted explicit information on the qualities that made the textiles exhibited in "Fragile Threads" special enough to receive conservation treatment. As discussed in the literature review, public museums strive to incorporate democratic ideas in the way they manage their collections, sometimes advising staff to treat every object as the museum's most precious. Further research could expand on what "democratic" handling of artifacts entails, and how the public views a museum that is fair in its practices. How democratic are current museum practices? In what situation is it acceptable for museum artifacts to be subjected to different types of care? While treating objects the same may help to eliminate biases based on monetary value, it does not take into consideration other cultural criteria for determining value.

Although participants did not speak of this in the context of a museum, they recognized that the textiles they saved themselves may not hold the same significance for future generations, and felt that it was important to keep some sort of documentation with the items that are preserved. This is especially true when the reason a textile is kept is mostly for its association with a family member, rather than any material or aesthetic quality the item may posses. An example is a set of

polyester scarves that belonged to my grandmother. They are very brightly coloured, they speak about her unique aesthetic sense, but nothing about them speak of anything associated with "the old world". They do not look "historic", and their significance would need to be explained to anyone who did not know of the association with a beloved member of my family. The preservation and documentation issues faced by museums were easily understood by focus group participants.

The fact that the use of an object featured so prominently in the way most participants described their favourite textiles suggests not using a textile at all in order to make it last longer is an unnatural thing to do. Although these textiles were not described by participants in spiritual or religious terms, the groups agreed their textiles were to be used and enjoyed, although some participants had chosen to limit or alter the use of the textiles they wanted to save. Further emphasizing the association of use with textiles, participants said they would not modify the use of their textiles in order to make them last longer, even after seeing the exhibit. If participants' favourite textiles were not used as was originally intended, it was because they had a personal or family story associated with them. This supports the idea that for a textile to be saved at the expense of its use, it must have a strong story, or a strong explanation as to why it must be kept out of use. That participants also expected this explanation from museums is supported by their desire for more story behind the artifacts exhibited, and their questions regarding the reasons for conserving the exhibited textile artifacts.

The implications for textile conservation, and other areas of conservation that deal with primarily functional items, is that both their significance, and the reasons for restricting their use need to be explained. Once taken out of use, the public for whom these items are being preserved rely more and more heavily on the documentation, the associated story, to understand the value in keeping them, and caring for them.

## In what condition participants expected artifacts to be displayed, and implications for textile conservation

Participants concluded that the condition of the artifacts depended on the intent of the display. Extremely poor condition, however, was not self explanatory. Once they read the text, participants felt the raggedy blue jeans were one of the most interesting parts of the display.

Before reading the text they thought the jeans were quite common to look at, and expressed surprise at seeing them in an exhibit. Participants also felt that the poor condition of an artifact could verify a story. Some participants said they wanted to see the age of artifacts indicated by their condition.

Overall, participants were more concerned with prolonging the life of the artifacts than giving them a clean or new appearance, although the opinion that items should be cleaned specifically for the purpose of display, to look "as good as possible" was also expressed. Some participants wanted to see historic textiles look as they did originally to help them imagine how an outfit was originally worn. It may be more informative to poll viewers at an artifact based exhibit on a topic other than conservation, to see what their reaction to artifact condition would be. These participants' concern for the longevity of the artifact may have been influenced in part by the subject matter of the "Fragile Threads" exhibit, which emphasized that conservation would not make artifacts look new, but would make them last longer.

From the discussions, the ideas arose that future generations may not see the same significance we see in artifacts, and that future generations may find items that we currently do not value as having significance. While this idea was expressed in reference to which objects should be kept, it was not discussed in reference to the physical properties of the object itself. The participants who said they would like to see items in their original state also said the changes should be documented, indicating they were aware of the documentary value of an artifact. In this exhibit, however, there perhaps needed to be more emphasis on how conservation activity can inform the story associated with an artifact, rather than just preserving the artifact as a prop for its associated story.

## Relationship of artifacts and participant response to the exhibit, and its implications for textile conservation

Artifacts, in this case, were seen as props for the story. Participants said the stories associated with the artifacts were the most interesting aspect of the exhibit. Some said knowing the stories helped them to understand why one would conserve textiles. However, this interpretation may also have resulted from the way the artifacts were presented in this exhibit. While participants talked at great length about the stories behind the artifacts, they also wanted to be able to see the

artifacts more closely, to be able to touch materials, and to see a video or photos of the process of conservation. Because what some participants said they wanted more of was information about the textiles themselves, where the textiles were made and the structure of the fabrics, it seems there was an interest in the physical properties of the textiles themselves that could not be satisfied because viewers could not interact more closely with the artifacts. The groups said the fact that conservation could be used to gain information was interesting. However, the exhibit did not clearly show how this was done. Interactive elements such as the inclusion of unaccessioned, degraded textile samples viewers could handle, or a computer program that woulds allow the viewer to "zoom in" on the fabrics would more clearly show how information from an object can be gained. In this exhibit, the text was the primary "entrance point" for the viewer – the significant physical properties of the artifacts had to be translated into words.

## What participants learned and how this relates to what was expressed in the exhibit

Participants recalled details about how textiles degrade, stitching stabilization and washing techniques, and that how something is stored can make it degrade or last longer. They also reported learning that textile conservation can be used to gain information about artifacts and the people who use them. A small portion said they learned that textile conservation could improve the appearance of textiles, and make them look like new. This is in keeping with the content of the exhibit, where only two garments, the bifurcated undergarment, and the white and black 1925 dress, were shown to have a dramatically improved appearance. The other artifacts, the pink dress, the quilt, and the archaeological piece, were described as being treated to stabilize their structure, rather than to improve their appearance.

While only one section of the display dealt specifically with examination techniques, the idea of conservation providing clues about the use and life of the textile was carried also in the section on storage titled "A clean low lighted place" and the section titled "Signs of use". In each of these sections, an explanation was given to explain how the garments are damaged. These sections also explain why the participants reported learning about the way textiles degrade, and that sometimes the way it degrades can be meaningful.

Ideas about storage were often mentioned but discussed vaguely, except for the point about cedar chests contributing to textile degradation. The display about storage materials was confusing, and explains the vague understanding of the storage materials used in conservation. Participants understood that the way a textile was stored could contribute to its longevity, but were unclear about which materials were suitable, and how they were used.

Unexpectedly, participants reported learning about textiles from the exhibit and that textiles are a field of study. This may mean that textile conservators, before explaining their field, may also need to explain why textiles are worth preserving. It also explains the desire for more explicit information at the beginning and conclusion of the exhibit. As one participant pointed out, the magnitude of conservation needs in a museum is so much different than at home. One participant felt the specialized nature of conservation needed to be emphasized. These two points could be emphasized in future exhibits to better explain the context in which conservation takes place.

The science of the exhibit was only explicitly mentioned by a few participants, but it was implied in discussions about the special tools, the way textiles are analyzed. A few participants wanted less emphasis on the social history and more information about the science. One group expressed they felt the exhibit lacked a context in which they could understand why the displayed artifacts had been selected for display, and also for conservation treatment. Although a "lack of context" was not expressed in the other groups, the other groups did express a desire to see more about the process of textile conservation, and more social history. More of an emphasis on the science of textile conservation may have provided the context the one group was looking for, and perhaps mitigated the desire for more social history by re-enforcing the theme of the exhibit. Technical problems such as the height of the text, and the low light levels also hindered viewers' learning from the exhibit.

An informal discussion with a group of museum professionals pointed out aspects of the exhibit that were not mentioned by the focus groups, but could be said to contribute to the typical viewer's experience of the exhibit. First of all, the professionals commented that without looking closely, the textiles in the exhibit all looked like they were in pretty good condition – they did not reflect the outer limits of poor condition. The dramatic aspects of conservation, the sense of renewal, or making the old look young again, was not readily seen. Although the exhibit was aesthetically pleasing, a sense of conservation did not come just from looking at the exhibit – you

had to read the text. A more interactive exhibit, or one that more dramatically showed the results of conservation would lessen the need to read the text to understand its message.

# Chapter 4 Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

## Conclusions

### How does an exhibit affect viewers' ideas about textile conservation?

Focus group participants learned how textiles degrade, specific details about stitching stabilization and washing treatments in conservation, and about textiles in general. Many noted learning that conservation could provide information about textiles – how they were made, used, and by extension, the people who used them. Although participants said they would not limit the use of their own personal textiles to make them last longer, they expressed interest in how preventive conservation techniques (methods of storage) could be used to make their own textiles last longer. Participants also said they learned about textiles, and that textiles comprised a field of study.

### What do viewers regard as acceptable condition for a textile artifact?

Participants expressed a range of opinion on the condition artifacts should be in when displayed. Some participants expressed a desire to see garments returned to their original state so that they could imagine how they looked when worn. Others wanted to see signs of degradation to show that the artifact was old. The groups agreed, however, that the condition of an artifact on display should depend on what was being said with the exhibit. An accompanying explanation could make poor condition acceptable, and sometimes seeing damage was important to corroborate a story. Groups also agreed that an artifact should be treated to improve its longevity.

### How do viewers understand a subject like textile conservation?

Von der Lippe (1985) asserts that society determines the extent of textile preservation. Contrary to my expectation, the discussion with focus group participants revealed that textiles that were considered "favourite" were not necessarily seen as items that should be saved. Participants were extremely selective about what they wanted to save. By their questions about how museums decide what to keep, it is possible they expected museums to be selective as well. Participants

saw conservation activity as a special treatment, and wondered how conservators decide which items to treat.

Participants saw use and enjoyment as the "essence" of their textiles. While some had limited the use of the textiles they wanted to keep, due to the textiles' weakened or worn state, most said the textiles they owned and loved would eventually get used up that way. While participants expressed a concern for the longevity of museum textile artifacts, their conviction that their textiles should be used asks textile conservators to consider the ways textile conservation limits the use of textiles. The public may understand limiting use to prolong life, but may also require an explanation as to why it is appropriate to prolong a textile's life at the expense of it's use and enjoyment. The textile conservator may establish a range of acceptable interaction. In some museums, artifacts are already tiered, allowing different levels of use for different items.

The groups saw conservation work as preserving a story so it could continue to be told. Although they expressed learning that conservation could provide information about the artifact and how it was used, they did not explicitly say that conservation informs its story. If in order to understand conservation, the public must understand the importance of the physical object, then this last point needs to be emphasized. The trick to communicating conservation's role to the public lies in telling the object' s story, but making clear how the object's physical qualities inform that story.

## Implications

The idea that the object's condition should match the story that is being told could be construed as propaganda. At the very least it asks the conservator, and all parties involved in the preservation of the textile, whether the textile's primary role in the museum is for research or for display. The purpose of some artifacts in a museum may chiefly be as showcases for the public. When explaining their work to the public, conservators have to be clear about the relationship of their actions to the artifact's story, and how the information gleaned by the conservator affects its story, and how the objects story affects the acts of the conservator. The idea that sometimes objects can provide valuable documentary evidence that refutes its story may have needed more emphasis in the exhibit.

To say that conservation maintains the authenticity of artifacts, hence provides an authentic museum experience may not be enough to justify its importance to an audience mostly concerned with an artifact's story. Preserving the physical characteristics of a textile may only be of importance to people with a specialized interest in them; people aware of their documentary properties, or an interest in how they are made. Part of that specialized interest arises from interaction with textiles. Of course, a special interest in textiles can be, and is most often developed outside of the museum. To those who have not developed an interest outside the museum, however, the methods of preserving the physical qualities of textiles – restricting touch, and even viewing through dim light and glass panels - interfere with developing an appreciation for their physical qualities, the very things that the conservator wants to preserve. The more stringent the preservation of a textile, the more heavily the non-specialist will rely on someone else's verbal interpretation of the object. To an audience unconcerned with the physical properties of an artifact, the story may be better told using replicas and dramatizations, rather than with dimly lit views of actual artifacts.

Textile consevators may not only have to explain why a textile is worth preserving, also how their type of care is appropriate to the textile in question. Textiles in these focus group discussions were not described in terms of religious or spiritual significance, but even so, use and enjoyment were described as their essence. When is restricting their use inappropriate? Should conservation be described as preserving objects, and prolonging their life? Or should the definition be less future oriented, and define conservation as an appropriate way of regulating the use and storage of an artifact?

The idea of appropriate conservation, as opposed to conservation done to keep the object from changing has ethical concerns. As mentioned earlier, museums can be seen as "providing materials for people to creatively construct the past" (Merriman, 1991, as cited in Keene, 1996, p.11). If you shorten the life of a piece, do you rob future generations of the opportunity to recreate, or refine history? Does it become too easy to utilize and tailor artifacts to propaganda? Or is the only way for conservators and curators to balance the present needs with concerns for future documentation to designate, at the outset, where artifacts lie on the continuum between showpiece and documentary evidence?

The response from these focus groups suggest that the public may expect museums to serve as a "gatekeeper" rather than receptacle – sorting what is significant from what is not, is suggested by

these focus group discussions. While Clavir (2002) writes that treating all museum artifacts to the same level of care reflects the museum's desire to be democratic, these focus group participants were selective about which textiles they would save, and they expected museums to be as well. They wanted to know how museums decided which artifacts to conserve, suggesting that perhaps the public does not expect museums to be "democratic" in the sense that everything is treated the same. One could also argue that treating all artifacts the same does not necessarily reflect a democratic ideal to begin with. This asks for a definition of which circumstances make it acceptable to treat objects differently. How tolerant is the public to appropriate, but differing types of care? How does the public expect museums to reflect its social ideals?

# Recommendations

The importance of story, and the role of museum as "gatekeeper" arising from the conversations, asks conservators, whether textile or other, to consider the connection between conservation and the museum mandate. Odegaard (1995) has written how the conservation process may inform exhibit content and design. I say that conservation is inevitably affected by the museum mandate operations. This can also help conservators to explain and justify what they do. Conservators may also have to be clear about whether the specific artifact is being set up to be appreciated aesthetically, for its documentary information, or its story, and realise that these will affect the type of treatment an artifact will receive.

As use seems to be so important in the understanding and interest in a textile, textile conservators may also have to examine how the use of a textile is restricted - perhaps developing a "sliding scale" of use restriction, rather than eliminating handling altogether. With a textile, the way it is used, how it is touched, the intent with which it is touched, the way it is stored, the materials it comes into contact with, the elements it comes into contact with, could be thought of as regulated, rather than restricted.

A problem with using an exhibit of historic artifacts as a way of communicating about textile conservation is that the conservation standards which keep lighting levels low and prevent the artifacts from being touched, interferes with the content of the exhibit. The environment of a conservation lab is much different from that of an exhibit. While textiles are not continually exposed to high light levels when being treated, conservators do rely on being able to touch and see the artifacts they work on, if only in a very systematic and reasoned way. An exhibit

environment may help to remind the viewers the context in which conservation is done, but what conservation is may be more easily explored through accompanying interactive components. An inexpensive method to raise awareness about conservation would be to include a placard or brochure outlining the conservation activity used to prepare the exhibit on display. Another way would be to have replica fabrics, or degraded items without provenance that viewers could examine and handle. A brightly lit "interactive room", in conjunction with a display of textiles would be a nice juxtaposition, and remind the viewer of the context in which conservation is executed. Stop motion photography of a conservator's progress in stitching stabilization, or washing a textile, would be a good illustration of the process. To facilitate discussion about conservation, an exhibit may not even be necessary – tours of collection and conservation facilities, or the presentation of a few well-chosen examples may also be effective in aiding a conversation.

A call for more interactive components in order to appreciate the physical properties of a textile also applies not only to conservation exhibits, but any exhibit where the physical properties of the artifacts are key. Visual access can be increased by including aids such as videos and enlarged detail photos of the artifacts. Where there is sufficient security and staff, textiles could be displayed without glass paneling in front of them. One approach taken by The Textile Museum in Washington D.C. is to have a room full of "looms" that visitors can play with, with an accompanying description of textile techniques, giving the viewer a better understanding of how textiles are constructed. Similar methods could be used in future textile conservation exhibits.

The following example illustrates how viewer interaction with a textile display was successfully balanced with conservation. Susan Heald and Kathleen E. Ash-Milby (1998) describe how viewers' desire to touch and the preservation needs of the artifacts were handled when a selection of 19$^{th}$-century Navajo blankets from the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) were displayed at a Navajo reservation. The blankets were displayed without physical barriers. In traditional museum settings, some viewers feel distanced and alienated from their cultural heritage by these barriers, and NMAI staff did not want to offend the Navajo visitors. However, textiles are especially vulnerable to the oils and other soils on people's hands, as well as to the friction from being continually handled. A balance between access and preservation needs was reached by designating the 10 most sturdy and stable textiles as touchable. While small "Please Do Not Touch Signs" were placed beneath each of the object labels, larger "Please Ask a Staff Member If You Want to Touch a Blanket" were posted around the viewing gallery, and the

touching policy was politely explained by staff when viewers entered the gallery. This approach limited "incidents of random handling" and worked to increase interaction between museum staff and viewers. Heald and Ash-Milby write that the handling of the blankets was always gentle and respectful, and that most visitors seemed satisfied after only briefly touching the weavings.

Although this approach was motivated by respect for another culture, and perhaps made possible by sufficient staff available for the number of viewers, it could also be used to enhance viewer experience of other textile displays, and especially displays about textile conservation. While the textiles displayed in "Fragile Threads" were not discussed in terms of their spiritual significance, participants did discuss the immaterial qualities of the objects such as their stories. Referring to their own textiles, one group described their use and enjoyment as the textile's "essence". It is not only specific cultural groups who feel barriers such as glass and "Please do not touch signs" as alienating. These participants understood that limiting use of a textile artifact is a way to care for it, and were accepting that this was necessary to preserve its life. However, restricting interaction with a textile also has the effect of distancing viewers from the physical qualities of the artifact, which are the very qualities most conservators are concerned with. By relying on text and indirect methods observation that obscure a textile's physical properties, exhibitors inadvertently diminish the importance of the textile's physical presence. More interaction with the actual artifacts would enhance the importance of their physical presence. In a controlled environment, those who care about cultural heritage may be as respectful and gentle as the viewers were when handling the previously mentioned Navajo blankets. No matter the culture, we are the biological and social beings Michalski describes (1994). If the purpose of preserving a textile can be explained, an informed public may modify its interaction with the textile accordingly.

Finally, we need to look at what constitutes appropriate conservation not just for ethnographic artifacts, but for all artifacts in general. Participant responses indicate that for display, the expected condition of an artifact depends on context. Further research would clarify which circumstances ask for an artifact to be aesthetically pleasing. Is there a standard for textiles that differs from other museum artifacts? Does the standard differ depending on the type of textile? How and when do people today use and keep their own special textiles? Could this contribute to how use and preservation issues with textiles are balanced in a museum? While the care of museum collections need not match the way objects are cared for in a domestic setting, a comparison may reveal ways both textiles and their meanings are preserved. The result could be

a public that sees how textile conservation can be used to keep and access a rich and informative aspect of our material culture.

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# Appendix A

| Year | Institution | Title | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| Began in the 1980s and is continuing as of 1997 | West Lake Conservators | | Conservators organized the small town of Skaneateles to save over 300 paintings by John D. Barrow that had been severely damaged by poor storage conditions (Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| 1989 | National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute and the National Institute for Conservation of Cultural Property (NIC) | Save Our Outdoor Sculpture! (SOS!) | |
| August through September, 1987 and in 1994 - 1995 | Detroit Institute of Art | | Showed frescoes by Diego Rivera treated in-situ in their galleries while the public watched; Rembrandt Peal's *The Court of Death* was treated behind acrylic glass in 1994-1995 (Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| 1991 | J. Paul Getty Museum | Preserving the Past | Showed gap filling, in-painting, mechanical cleaning of stone, bronze, and ceramic antiquities, scanning electron photos of ancient gold jewellery, forgery detection (Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| 1992 | Getty Museum | | Displayed the documentation of a six-year effort to conserve the paintings of Nefertari's tomb in the Valley of the Queens (Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| May 1993 – January 1994 | The CAAM in conjunction with the Getty Conservation Centre | | Exhibit on preventive conservation and preservation concepts and the methods used on the CAAM's collections (Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| 1994 | Mount Holyoke College Art Museum and Williamstown Art Conservation Center | "Altered States" – a travelling exhibit to three venues in Massachusetts and New York over seven months | Showed detailed treatments of paintings, drawings, objects, sculpture and furniture (Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| 1995 | Metropolitan Museum in New York | Rembrandt/Not Rembrandt | Showed x-radiographs and neutron activation autoradiographs of revered paintings(Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| April, 1995 | Santa Barbara Museum of History | | Showed a look at preventive conservation(Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| 1996 | Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore | | Showed recreations of its paintings, objects, and manuscripts conservation laboratories, complete with interactive displays (Hill Stoner, 1997)<br><br>16-foot Tiepolo painting was cleaned, consolidated and inpainted behind plexi from |

| Year | Institution | Title | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | September 1993 to April 1996 (Hill Stoner, 1997) |
| January 31 to March 25, 2001 | The Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery of Markham | "Art meets Science: an investigative look at conservation" | |
| Website | Bristol Museum | "Yours for Keeps" | view website at www.bristol-city.gov.uk/cgi-bin |
| Currently on-going | National Museum of American History | | Shows the in situ conservation of the American flag |

# Appendix B

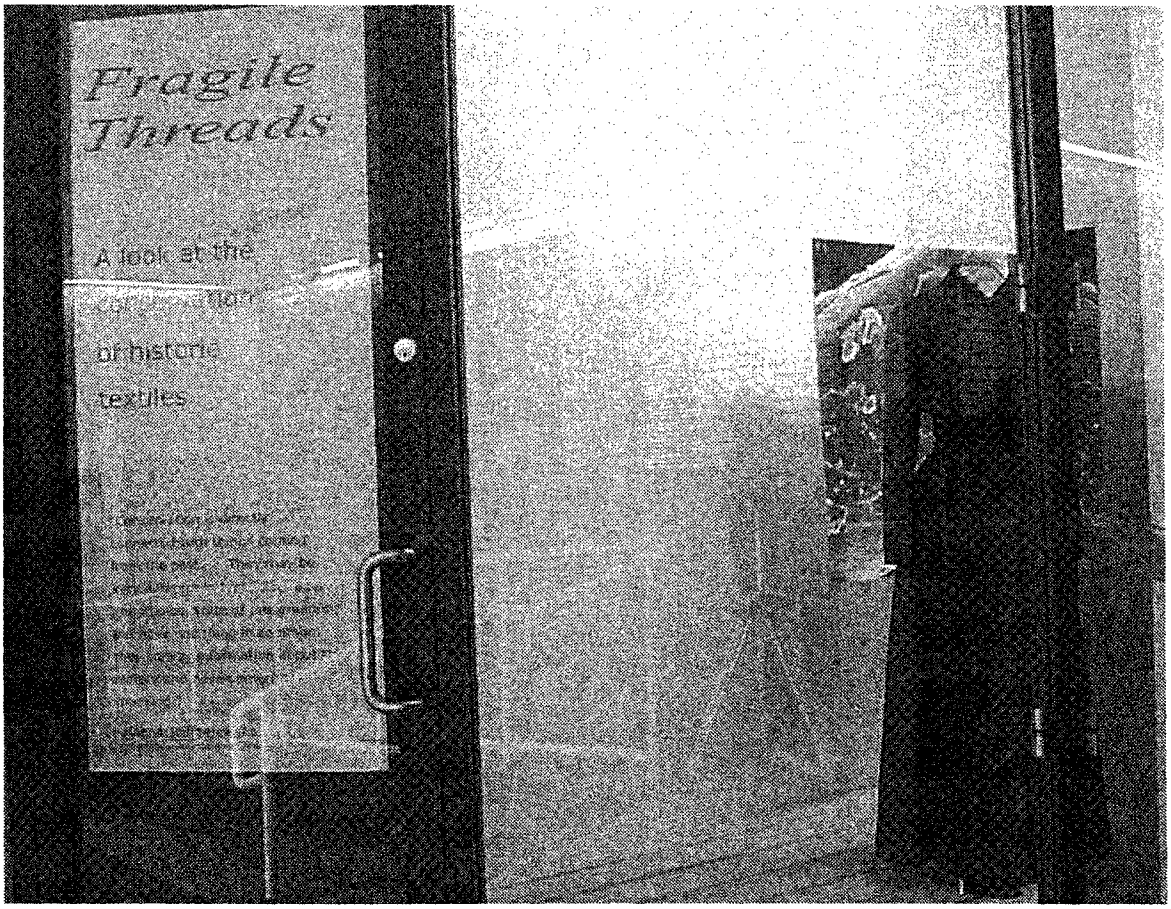


**Figure B 1**View of exhibit from front entrance

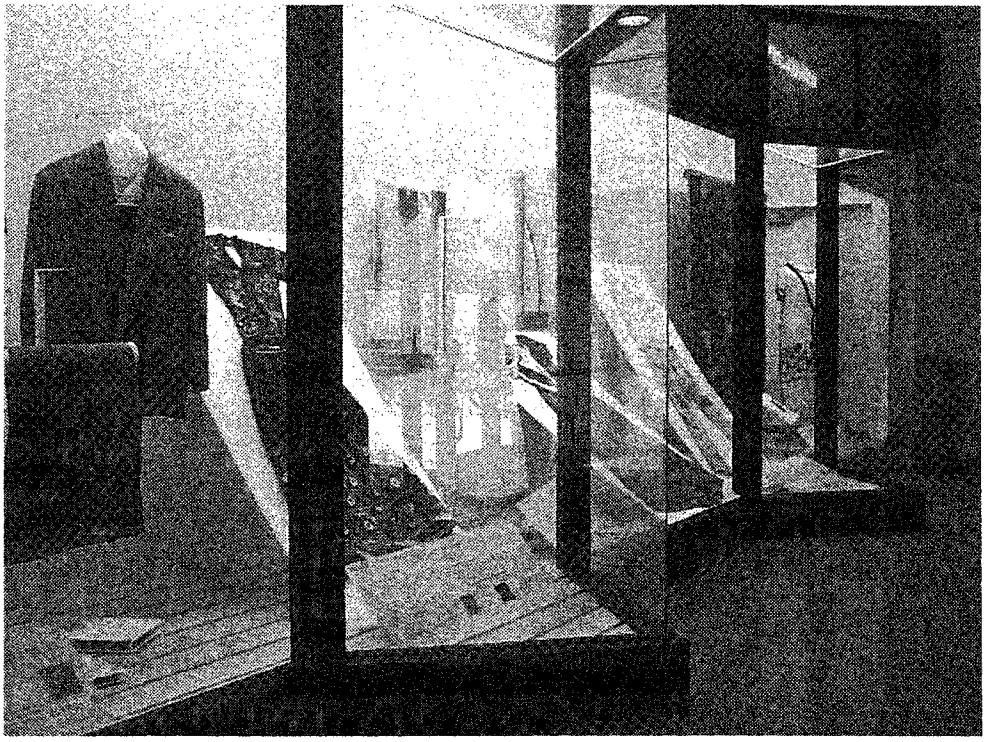

**Figure B 2** View of exhibit from foyer

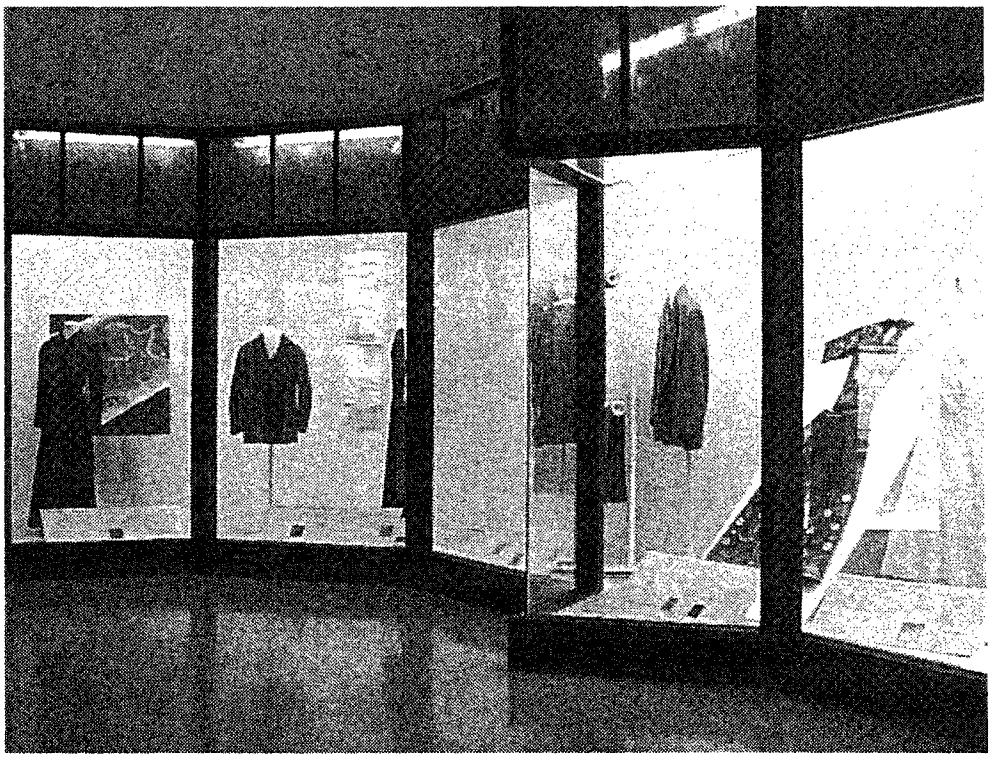

**Figure B 3** View of exhibit from stairwell

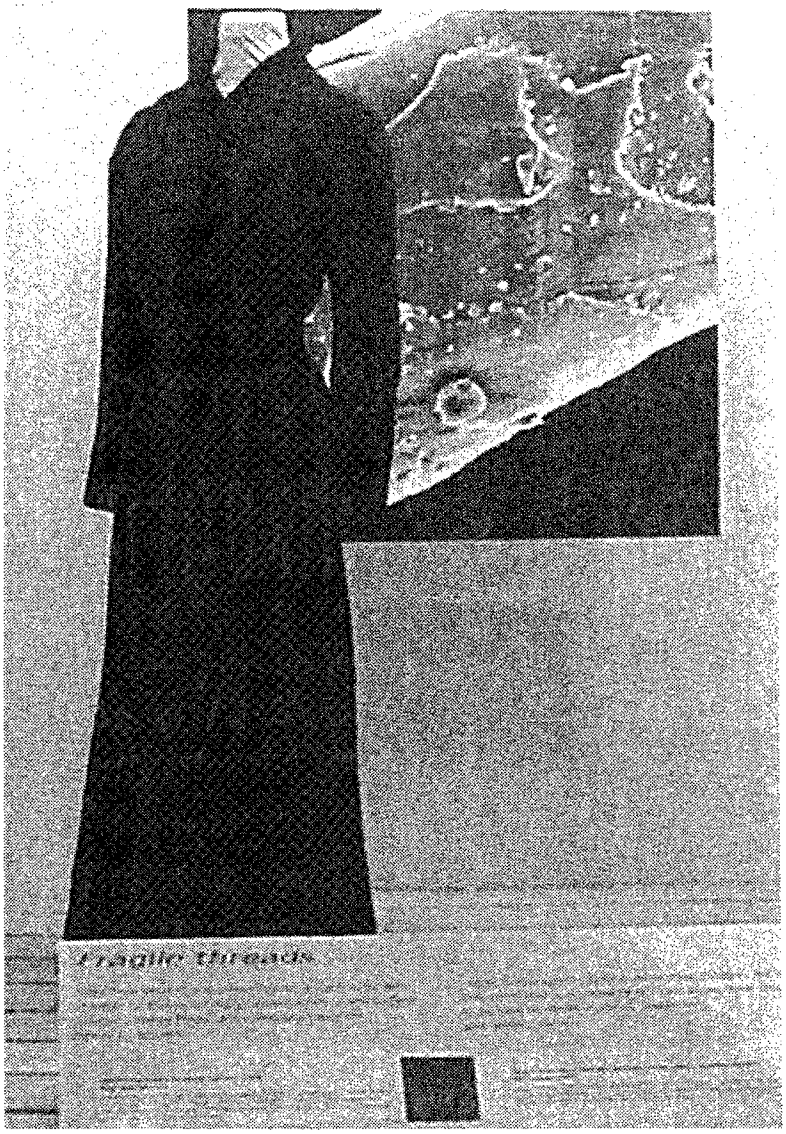

**Figure B 4** Exhibit section: *Fragile threads*

## *Fragile threads* (main text)

From their beginning textiles respond to light, heat, and changes in relative humidity. These forms of energy fade colours, weaken fibres, and eventually cause the textile to degrade.

Textile conservation cannot reverse these changes, but it can slow them down. A conservator's care allows these artifacts to be seen by future students, researchers, and gallery visitors.

## *Fragile threads* (detail text)

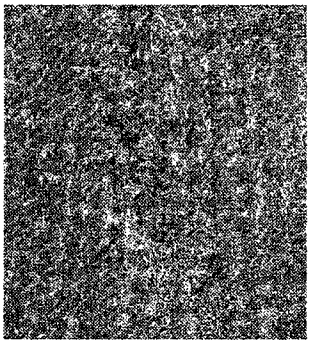

**Figure B 5** Detail: Colour change on skirt

**Left: Women's walking jacket and skirt, 1906**
**Wool with silk trim.**
This garment survived the voyage from England to Canada, but lost some silk trim before reaching the Clothing and Textiles Collection. The light blue strip of fabric shows how everyday exposure to the elements faded its colour. More evidence of colour change can be seen under the arms of the jacket.

**Right: Wool fibres from this garment viewed under a Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM)**
Wool fibres in good condition are coated with protective scales. The fibres from this garment are weak and brittle: mechanical and chemical degradation chipped parts of the scales away, and in some cases wore the surface smooth.

**Figure B 6** Exhibit section : *A clean low lighted place*

## *A clean low lighted place* (main text)

Light, heat, extremes in relative humidity, bacteria, fungi and pests wreak havoc on a textile. The acidity of a textile's environment also speeds degradation. Most wood products like paper, cardboard or even a cedar chest give off acidic vapors that cause discolouration and weaken fibres.

***Preventive conservation*** creates a safe environment for textiles. Appropriate light levels, cleanliness and relative humidity are continual concerns. From dust covers to the enamel surfaces on metal shelving, all materials are tested to make sure they will not interact with the textiles they house.

## *A clean low lighted place* (detail text)

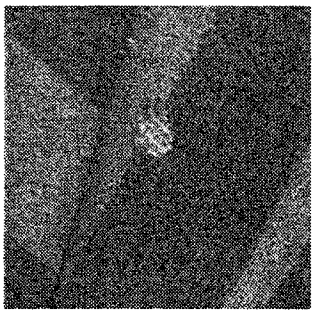

**Figure B 7** Detail: Insect damage

**Left: Men's blazer, c. 1925**
**Wool with jute interfacing**
Moth larvae dined on the collar and the bottom edge of this blazer: attractive areas because they hold perspiration and body oils. Both garments and storage areas must be clean to discourage hungry insects.

In the past, textile artifacts have been treated with anything from DDT to moth balls to prevent infestation. Today, freezing or heat treatments are used on infested artifacts to avoid the health and environmental risks associated with insecticides.

**Centre**: Conservation materials (listed top to bottom)
*Cotton stockinet* stuffed with *polyester fibre fill,* and crumpled *acid free tissue paper* keep creases and folds in textiles from becoming brittle and splitting. Not only are these materials inert, they buffer changes in humidity. For textiles that can be hung, padded hangers reduce strain on shoulder seams.
*Laundered unbleached cotton* and *non-woven nylon* (Cerex™) protect artifacts from dust. The Cerex™ lets you see what is wrapped inside.
*Polyethylene foam* (Ethafoam™) provides a cushioned surface for artifacts and is used for constructing mounts.
*Polyester film* (Mylar™) works as a barrier to keep garments from touching display case surfaces, or to separate incompatible parts of an artifact, such as a rusty pin on a hat.
The yellowing on this plastic shows it is not chemically stable. How can you tell which materials are sound? See what it's made of, then ask a conservator.

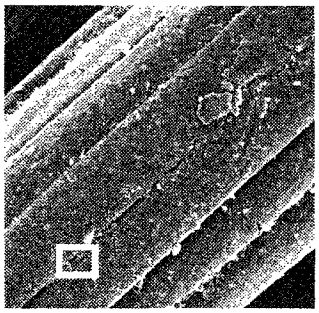

**Figure B 8** Detail: Damage on an acetate fibre

**Right: Women's dress**
**Acetate**
Exposure to both air pollutants and light caused the sleeves and sides of this dress to change colour. The weakened state of the fibres are confirmed by the cracks on this acetate fibre. The culprit? Air pollution, and possibly an open closet door!

**Figure B 9** Exhibit section: *Signs of use*

## *Signs of use* (main text)

Textiles often arrive at the Clothing and Textiles Collection looking well used. An artifact may need conservation treatment if it is going to last much longer. Treatment conservation will not make the textile "like new", but it can slow on-going damage.

In a museum, the conservator and the curator decide together what conservation treatment is necessary. Sometimes the existing damage provides clues to the textile's past life.

*Signs of use* (detail text)

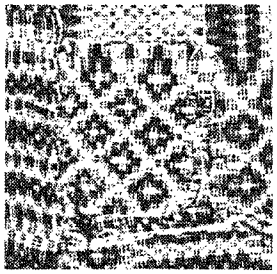

**Figure B 10** Detail: Patch on coverlet
**Left: Coverlet fragment, late 1800s. Cotton and wool.**
The written records says this coverlet was woven in eastern Canada. The piecework and patches say it was well used! A variety of stitches and threads suggest several different people altered this piece over its life span. The pink juice stain must have occurred before the coverlet was cut apart, as the stain ends abruptly at the seam!
Proposed treatment: Spot cleaning may work to lighten the juice stain. Old repairs are sometimes removed because of they distort the textile. In this case, the patches attest to the coverlet's history.

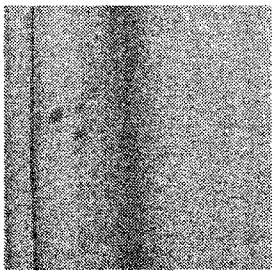

**Figure B 11** Detail: Stains causing degradation

**Centre: Women's evening dress, c. 1925. Silk.**
Holes and the change in colour show these stains are chemically degrading the silk fibres. The yellow oval on the back of the dress? A result of perspiration. The wearer's dance partner had sweaty hands!
Proposed treatment: Wet-cleaning to lighten the stains and prevent those areas from deteriorating further.

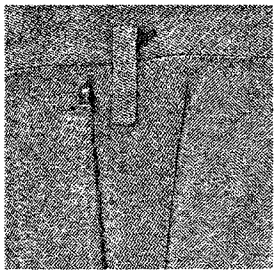

**Figure B 12** Detail: Wear abrasion
**Right: Men's suit jacket and pants, c. 1948. Red cotton weft and blue wool warp.**
The owner of this suit wore the pants more often than the jacket. Wear abrasion shows up red on the pant belt loops and pockets, but not to the same extent on the jacket.
Proposed treatment: Gentle vacuuming to remove the dust. No treatment is needed for abraded areas. As the garment will not be worn, no further abrasion should occur.

**Figure B 13** Exhibit section: *Body of evidence*

## *Body of evidence* (main text)

A textile is carefully examined before the conservator proposes treatment. Lots of information is in the textile itself. All observations and treatment are documented with written reports, diagrams and photos.

***How was the fabric made?***
The conservator identifies all fibres, including stitching threads and embellishments, by examining their shape under a microscope. Man-made fibres are identified through chemical analysis. The conservator also examines the structure of the weave, the yarns, and the direction in which the fibres were spun.

***How was the textile constructed?***
The way a garment is pieced, stitched, altered and repaired can show if it was worn by one person or several, mass produced or unique. As methods of garment construction change over time, this information can be used to establish when a garment was first made.

***How was the textile used?***
All signs of damage, soiling, and distortion are noted. Briefly exposing the artifact to an ultra-violet or black light can help to identify stains: a glowing area may indicate biological activity such as mildew. Testing the acidity or alkalinity of the stain with litmus paper helps the conservator to later remove the stain.

***How will the textile react to treatment?***
If the textile will be cleaned with water or another solvent, samples of each fibre type and colour are tested for wash fastness

## *Body of evidence* (detail text)

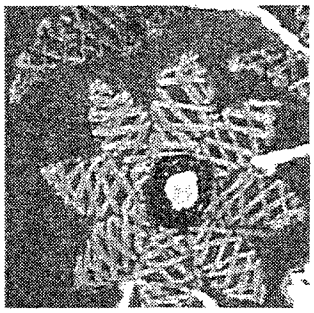

**Figure B 14** Detail: The hand drawn pattern shows up in white beneath the stitching

**Women's bodice and skirt, 1983 -1988**
**Cotton, Shisha embroidery**
Made in the Gujarat state in western India, this bodice and skirt show how complex a textile can be. Not only do they feature glass components (the mirrors that define this type of embroidery as shisha), they consist of 13 different colours of thread, 10 different colours of fabric, 2 different weave structures and at least 3 different fibre types. Samples of each of these materials would have to be tested for wash fastness and shrinkage before this garment could be wet cleaned.

**Figure B 15** Detail: Yarns on the skirt dyed with fluorescent dyes glow pink under a black light

Aside from a small tear in the skirt, these garments are in excellent condition. Loose threads running horizontally across the skirt suggest it once featured more trim. Under a black light, the glowing embellishment indicates some of the embroidery yarns were dyed with fluorescent dyes. This makes the garment particularly sensitive to light exposure, as fluorescent dyes will quickly fade.

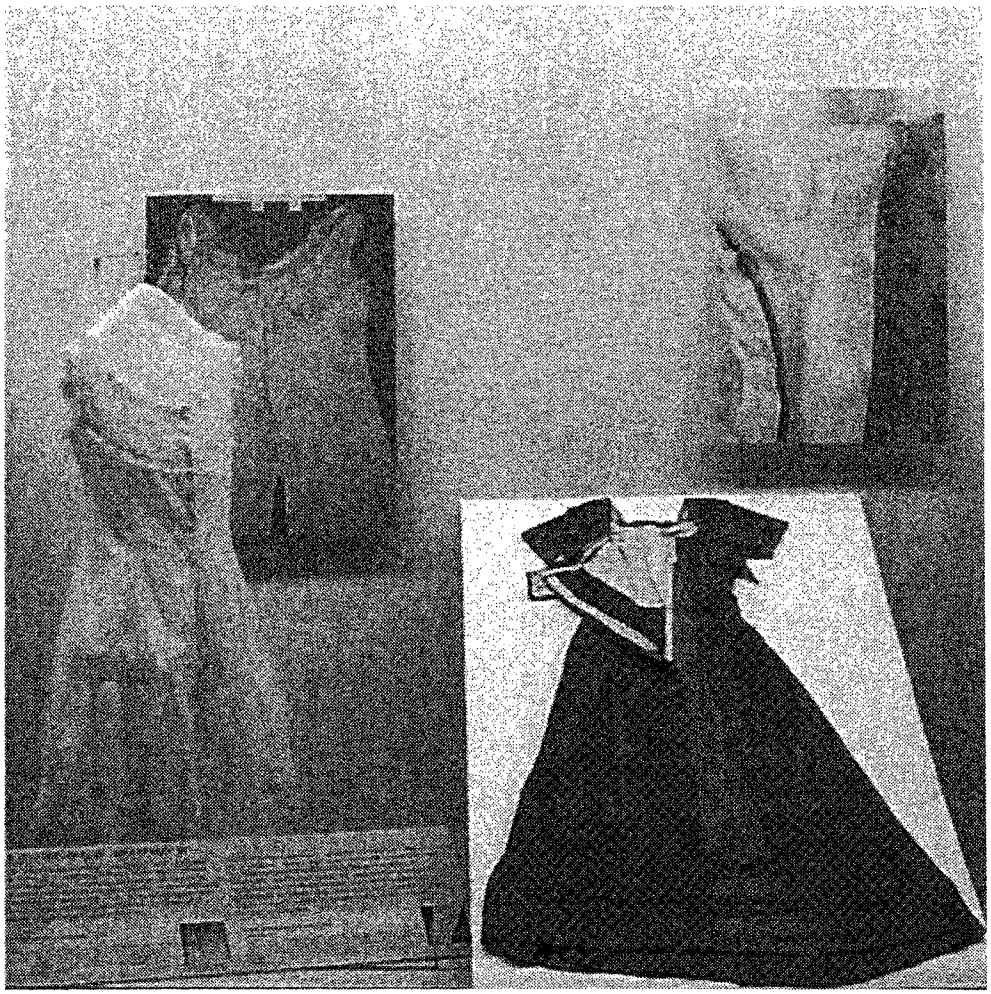

**Figure B 16** Exhibit section: *Not just any laundry*

## *Not just any laundry* (main text)

Dirt particles abrade a textile from the inside out. A soil's acidity also speeds deterioration. A conservator draws on a knowledge of chemistry to identify and remove stains. Textiles may be cleaned mechanically by gentle vacuuming, with water or with other solvents. In conservation all of these processes are carefully controlled. Household products, which may contain softeners, bleaches, and brighteners, and commercial processes are too aggressive for historic textiles.

Fragile textiles are supported or stabilized by encasing the area with sheer silk or polyester. A weak area can also be stitched to a backing material. It is important that stabilization is both visually and structurally unobtrusive. Care is taken so that the needle does not puncture the yarns, but draws the thread between them. Where possible, stitching is done through the original stitch holes. If the fabric is extremely brittle or if the surface is painted, an adhesive might be used to attach the fabric to its support.

## *Not just any laundry* (detail text)

**Figure B 17** Detail: Back of garment before treatment

**Left: Women's combination undergarment, c. 1908**
**Cotton**
This undergarment arrived in good structural condition, but perspiration stains made the lace insertion brittle. Wet cleaning with purified water and a pure, anionic detergent lightened the stains and restored the garment's flexibility. A controlled peroxide bleaching further improved the appearance of the garment. As the heat from an iron is damaging, textiles are stuffed with netting, or held flat with glass weights so that the fabric remains smooth after air drying.

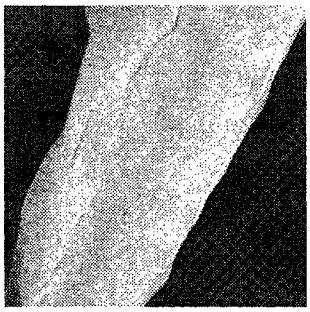

**Figure B 18** Detail: Splitting silk encased with silk crepeline

**Right: Women's evening dress, c. 1910**
**Silk, cotton**
Until 1939, silk fabric was sometimes treated with metal salts to improve its "scroop" (the scrunching or rustling sound it makes). Unfortunately, these salts also catalyze its degradation. The splits in the lining of this dress are characteristic of degraded weighted silk. To keep the lining somewhat intact, silk crepeline was used to encase areas of severe splitting. Fine hair silk stitched through the existing seam keeps the crepeline in place.

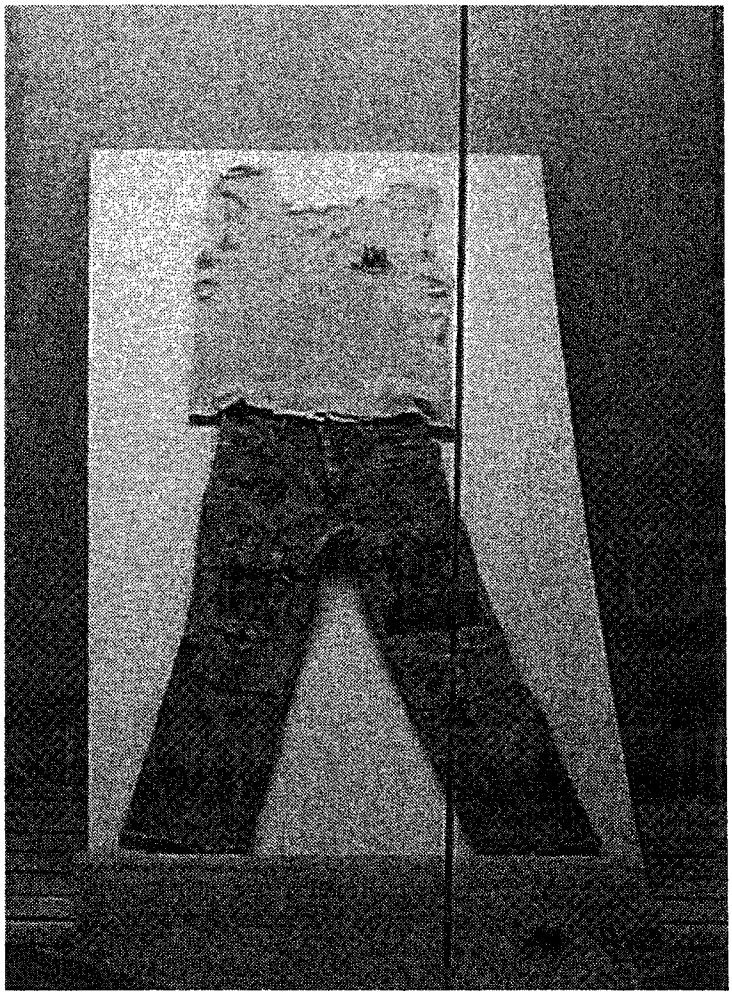

**Figure B 19** Exhibit section: *Informed Decisions*

## *Informed decisions* (main text)

These jeans and T-shirt make a statement, but not about fashion. Worn for oil rig work off the Isle of Man, then for construction and roofing in Edmonton, these garments convey their wearer's experience, and more generally the nature of the work itself. Not all T-shirts and jeans, and rips and stains are such vivid story tellers!

Will these garments be treated to improve their appearance?
No. To minimize the damage would take away from their significance. Their condition is a visual corroboration of their history.

## *Informed decisions* (detail text)

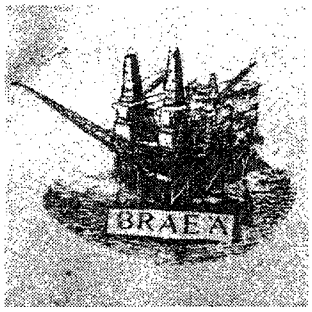


**Figure B 20** Detail: T-shirt logo

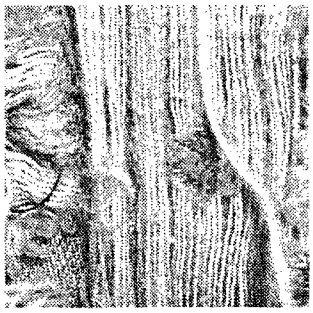

**Figure B 21** Detail: Patches on patches

**Men's T-shirt and jeans, 1986**
**Cotton**
Tar, oil and epoxy resin permanently mark these garments. The cuffs and collar on the t-shirt were torn off soon after purchase as they interfered with the work. The tears in the jeans result from carrying tools. The patches were done by the wearer's girlfriend.

**Figure B 22** Exhibit section: *Here for a good long time*

## *Here for a good long time* (main text)

These textiles have spent only part of their lives as artifacts in the Clothing and Textiles Collection, but they will remain here a very long time.

Conservation lets students, researchers and gallery viewers continue to find meaning in these artifacts and their histories.

## *Here for a good long time* (detail text)

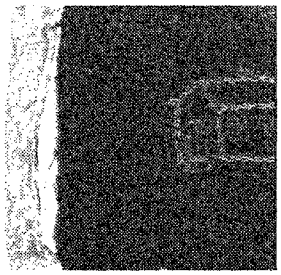

**Figure B23** Detail: Before treatment

**Left: Crazy quilt, c. 1900. Wool**
The girl who made this quilt died from tuberculosis at the age of 19. While the rest of her belongings were burnt, this quilt was saved and stored in a box. The embroidered names belonged to members of the girl's family.
Although generally in good condition, part of the binding had come unstitched. To keep the loose binding from catching and further pulling away, a conservator re-stitched it to the edge of the quilt using original stitch holes. Keep an eye out for this piece in "Quilts: The fabric of our lives", coming in May!

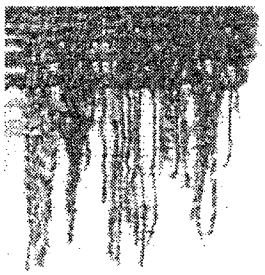

**Figure B 24** Detail: Stitches holding fragment in place

**Centre: Peruvian textile, 500-900 AD. Wool**
Unlike the dust that coats the surface of most textiles, soil trapped in an archeological textile is significant. It may indicate the textile's use and burial conditions, and washing it away may away remove valuable information!
This mount for this brittle fragment is both a support and a medium for display. Stitches placed between its yarns attach this fragment
to the support fabric.

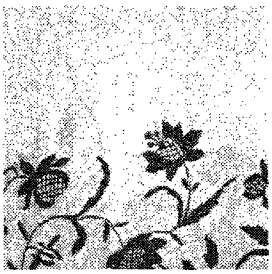

**Figure B 25** Detail: Before treatment

**Right: Women's dress, 1915-1925. Silk**
Water stains and dye transfer interfered with the aesthetics of this dress. Closely monitoring the drying process after the dress was wet cleaned resulted in the stain's removal.
Slow drying areas, like the embroidery on this dress, will bleed into fast drying areas, staining white fabric with fugitive dye. To prevent dye transfer from reoccurring, blotting materials were used to draw water and dye away from the black threads.

# Appendix C

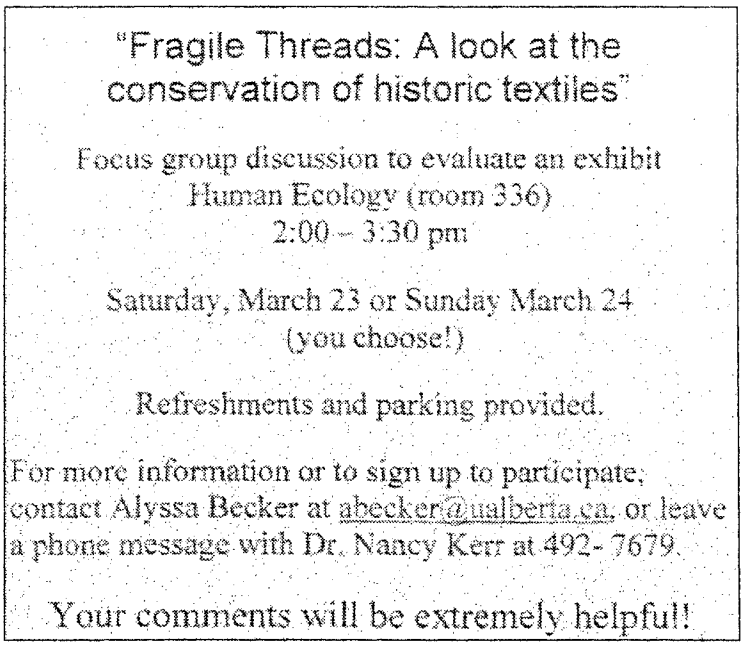


**Figure C 1** Recruitment notice given to first year art and design students

# Volunteers Needed for Research Project:

## What is Textile Conservation?

I am seeking volunteers to participate in a group discussion after viewing an exhibit titled "**Fragile Threads: The conservation of historic textiles**". The purpose of this project is to evaluate this exhibit about textile conservation. By interviewing viewers about this exhibit, I hope to gain some insight as to how the textile conservation profession can relate to the public. The information will be used for my master's thesis in Clothing and Textiles.

Your participation will be entirely voluntary, and you would be free to withdraw from the discussion at any time. I want to record the interview on tape so that I can more easily capture all that you have to tell me. During the interview, I will refer to you by your first name, but your name will be changed when I transcribe the tapes, and the tapes will eventually be destroyed. Individual responses will be treated confidentially and your name will in no way be associated with any comments provided during the discussion.

The exhibit will be in the first floor exhibition space of the Human Ecology Building, on the University of Alberta campus. Each group discussion will be held in **room 336 of the Human Ecology Building at 7:30 pm on Tuesday, March 26 and Wednesday, March 27, 2002.** Refreshments will be provided. An assistant, named below, and myself will be facilitating the discussion. I anticipate that viewing the exhibit and the following discussion will take approximately 90 minutes. If you are willing to participate, please contact me at abecker@ualberta.ca, and indicate which day you are able to participate. You may also leave a message at **492-7679**. The attached form can be filled out, and given to me before the discussion.

Thank-you for considering participation in this project. The insights you provide will be extremely helpful!

**Researcher:**
Alyssa Becker, BFA
MSc Candidate, Clothing and Textiles
302 Human Ecology
University of Alberta
E-mail: abecker@ualberta.ca
Phone: 492-7679

**Assistant:**
Diana M. Young, BHEcol, Diploma C.C.
MSc Candidate, Clothing and Textiles
Department of Human Ecology
University of Alberta

**Figure C 2** Recruitment notice given to guild members

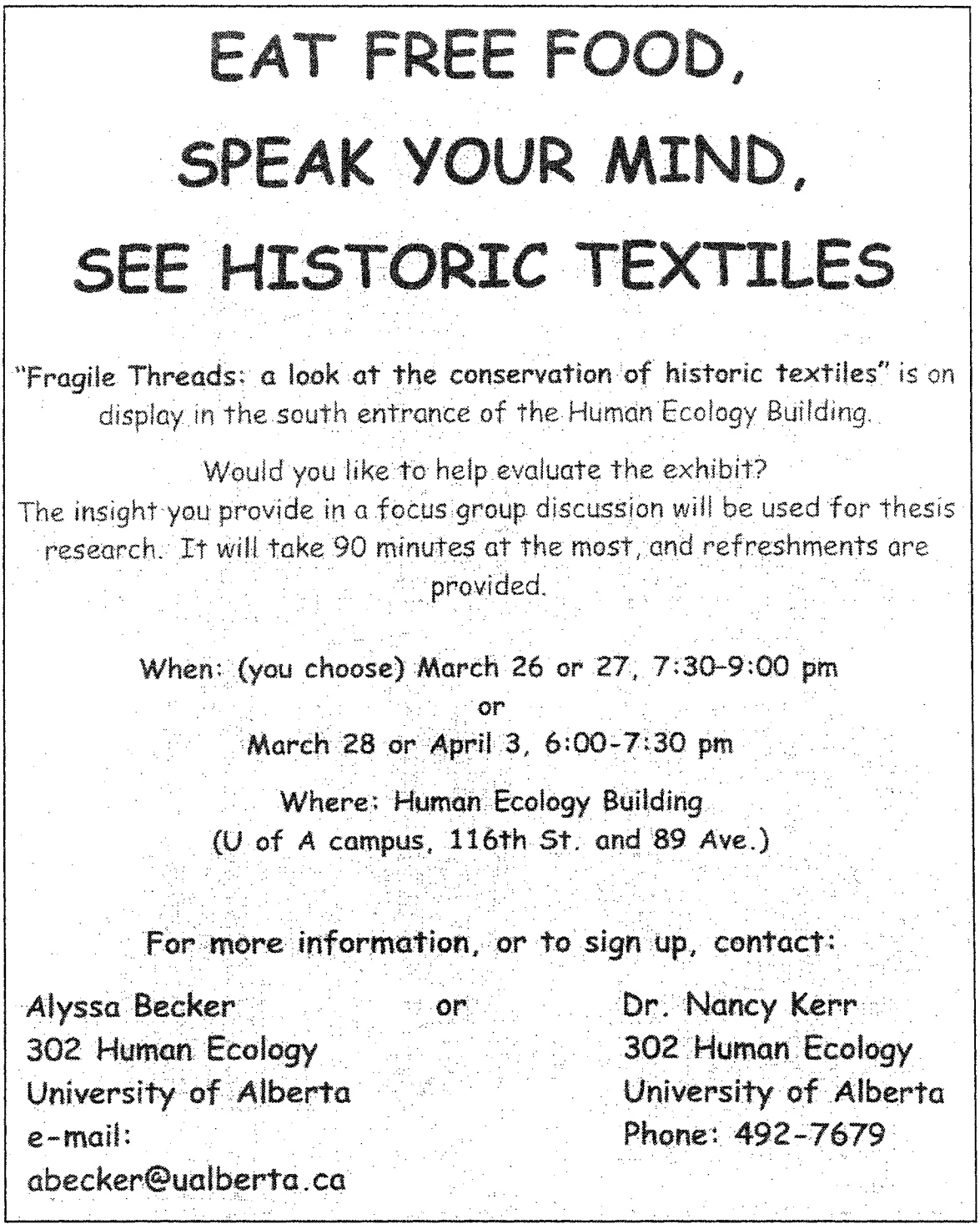


**Figure C 3** Recruitment notice posted in the Human Ecology Department and around the University of Alberta. The content of the poster was also distributed electronically with the Graduate Student Association Newsletter.

# Fragile Threads Discussion Group
# Info Sheet

The purpose of this project is to evaluate an exhibit about textile conservation. By interviewing viewers about this exhibit, I hope to gain some insight as to how the textile conservation profession can relate to the public. The information will be used for my master's thesis in Clothing and Textiles.

Your participation will be entirely voluntary, and you would be free to withdraw from the discussion at any time. I want to record the interview on audiotape so that I can more easily capture all that you have to tell me. During the interview, I will refer to you by your first name, but your name will be changed when I transcribe the tapes, and the tapes will be destroyed in September of 2002. However, because this is a group discussion, I cannot guarantee that other participants will treat your answers confidentially.

The exhibit is in the first floor exhibition space of the Human Ecology Building, on the University of Alberta campus. An assistant, named below, and myself will be facilitating the discussion. I anticipate that viewing the exhibit and the following discussion will take approximately 90 minutes.

Thank-you for participating in this project. The insights you provide will be extremely helpful!

**Researcher:**
Alyssa Becker, BFA
MSc Candidate, Clothing and Textiles
302 Human Ecology
University of Alberta
E-mail: abecker@ualberta.ca

**Supervisor:**
Dr. Nancy Kerr
302 Human Ecology
University of Alberta
E-mail: Nancy.Kerr@ualberta.ca
Phone: 492-7679

**Assistant:**
Diana M. Young, BHEcol, Diploma C.C.
MSc Candidate, Clothing and Textiles
Department of Human Ecology
University of Alberta

**Figure C 4** Information sheet given to potential participants

HOW AN EXHIBIT SHAPES VIEWERS' THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS ABOUT THE CONSERVATION OF HISTORIC TEXTILES

INVESTIGATOR: Alyssa Becker
ASSISTANT: Diana M. Young
SUPERVISOR: Dr. Nancy Kerr

Department of Human Ecology, The University of Alberta

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this group interview. If you have any questions about the procedure during the interview, please feel free to ask them. Please be aware that you are free to leave at any time during the interview, if for any reason you are unsatisfied with the process. If you have questions following the interview, I can be reached at the address provided below.

CONSENT:
I give my consent for the data from this focused group interview to be used for the principal investigator's masters thesis, possible PhD research, and any related publications and presentations.

I acknowledge that the research procedures described on the information sheet (attached) and of which I have a copy, have been explained to me, and that questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I know that I may contact the people designated on this form, if I have further questions either now or in the future. I understand that the discussion will be audiotaped. I have been assured that personal records relating to this study will be kept confidential. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time.

The people who may be contacted about the research is:

Alyssa Becker
302 Human Ecology Building
The University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB T6G 2N1
E-mail: abecker@ualberta.ca
Fax: (780) 492-4821

Dr. Nancy Kerr
302 Human Ecology
University of Alberta
E-mail: Nancy.Kerr@ualberta.ca
Phone: 492-7679
Fax: (780) 492-5821

Name

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

**Figure C 5** Participant consent form

Please tell me a bit about yourself.

First name: _____

How would you describe your interest in textiles or clothing (please indicate on the scale below)?

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| low interest | | | | high interest |

What aspect of textiles or clothing is most interesting to you?

_____

_____

_____

_____

How many times per year do you visit a museum (please circle one)?

0 1 2 3 4 5 More than 5 (please write how many) __

Would you like to receive a summary of the results of this study? Summaries will be ready in September.

Yes _____ No_____

**Figure C 6** Questionnaire given to focus group participants