

## A VOLUNTEER TRADITION:

A brief overview of the role of volunteers in the Textile Conservation Lab of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1970 – 2008

### INTRODUCTION

The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco incorporates two museums at separate sites: the Palace of the Legion of Honor in Lincoln Park, located on the peninsula headlands overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge and the de Young Museum in Golden Gate Park. The Legion, as it is known, first opened in 1924. It is an adaptation of the 18<sup>th</sup> C Palais de la Legion d'Honneur in Paris and was remodeled and rebuilt after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake. It houses the Museums' European and Ancient Art Collections as well as the Achenbach Foundation for the Graphic Arts. The de Young, formerly the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, has been open since 1895. It was recently redesigned by the Swiss architectural firm Herzog and de Meuron and rebuilt completely, opening again on its original site in Oct 2005. It houses the Museums' non-western, contemporary, and textile collections.

The Museums' have a long history of utilizing the talents of volunteers. Today the museum-wide volunteer count totals some 400 individuals in various capacities, though not including the Docents who are part of the Education Department. The Textile Conservation Lab, as it has been called since the beginning, has worked with volunteers ever since it was first organized in the early 1970's. The Lab was founded and supervised by unsalaried textile curator Anna Grey Bennett as part of the Decorative Arts Department. The first salaried curator was hired in 1982 in conjunction with the Museums' carpet collection. Three other unsalaried textile curators were also on staff at this time. Following that in 1987, the Conservation Department was separated out from under the supervision of the curators. It is composed of Paintings, Paper, Objects and Textiles.

Although the Textile Lab is often spoken of as part of the Textile Department, it is in fact part of the larger Conservation Department.

### BEGINNING THE TEXTILE CONSERVATION VOLUNTEER TRADITION

The original group of lab volunteers was formed in 1973 in order to prepare the Museums' European tapestry collection for the exhibition FIVE CENTURIES OF TAPESTRY that opened at the Legion in 1976. Thirty-three tapestries were planned to be in the exhibition and preparation included conservation, mounting, and catalog photography. The exhibition was also planned to travel to three venues: Memorial Arts Gallery, Univ of Rochester, NY; Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, CA now San Diego Museum of Art; and the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, TX. The enormity of this task prompted Anna Gray Bennett to enlist help from the community, which was rich in textile knowledge and talent.

It is generally agreed that interest in the textile arts in Northern California, specifically the San Francisco Bay Area, really started to come together in 1939 when the Golden Gate Exposition opened on Treasure Island. Dorothy Liebes, a San Francisco based

weaver and designer, gathered examples of “craft” from all over the United States and Europe for exhibition in the Fine Arts Pavilion, assisted by Dr Elisabeth Moses, the curator of Decorative Arts at the de Young Museum. After this, Dr Moses continued to expand her interest in textiles by arranging exhibitions of contemporary textiles at the de Young and by helping form the Contemporary Handweavers Guild (Janiero 1977). By 1950 there were textile classes being offered at seven different institutions including the University of California at Berkeley and the California College of Arts and Crafts (now California College of Art). By the 1960’s and 1970’s, what is considered the second phase of the Bay Area textile movement was fully established. The Bay Area was a hub of activity; from traditional tapestry weaving to large contemporary wall hangings. It was home to many fiber artists, scholars and designers, fiber art material sources and classes, including those at two textile schools, Pacific Basin Center of Textile Arts (now Pacific Textile Arts in Mendocino) and Fiberworks Center for the Textile Arts (1973 – 1987).

Anna Gray Bennett was able to capitalize on the Bay Area textile talent as well as, at that time, there still were a lot of women who did not work outside the home and who were at a stage in life to be able to volunteer, whether of a certain economic class, empty nesters, or just talented needlewomen who wanted to contribute to a good cause. It was the 1970’s after all and the vestiges of the 1960’s and the “communal effort” ideals were still floating around.

Sixty-eight names of volunteers are listed in the catalog that accompanied the tapestry exhibition, although seventy-five is the number most often verbalized. “A group of intrepid but untrained volunteers, young and old, gathered to participate. Professional instruction came from Pat Reeves, textile conservator at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The group soon learned the techniques of washing, blocking, and mending tapestries, and some members went on to learn the intricacies of re weaving.” (White 1976) It is estimated that 95% of the tapestry conservation effort for this exhibit was done by the volunteer needlewomen.

As part of this volunteer enthusiasm, Anna Grey Bennett’s husband Ralph joined in by engineering many of the storage units, such as hanging chain racks, where the tapestries were rolled on tubes and dowels were inserted through the tubes and hung from each end to the chains on the rack. Ralph also made a sort of “space saver” unit by making rolling wooden cabinets with indentations on the cement floor for the wheels, which housed the rolled carpets and other rolled textiles. Ralph was responsible for the building of all lab equipment, such as tables, carts, stools and a “hoist” for assessing hanging textiles before treatment, attaching the lining and placing Velcro for mounting. He was instrumental in figuring out how to install the tapestries for display. Much of the equipment and furniture that Ralph built was still in use until the re-opening of the new de Young in 2005.

By 1976, the volunteers were lead by former volunteer and weaver Bruce Hutchison, who had spent a grant-funded year in Europe learning tapestry conservation techniques. He returned to take up the first FAM textile conservation post, funded by the City of San Francisco.

While the thirty-three tapestries traveled nation-wide in 1978, a smaller team of volunteers continued conservation work on other textiles in the Museums’ permanent collection. By 1979 the team was supervised by another former volunteer, Birgitta

Anderton, a Swedish-born conservator who had been raised learning textile skills and who had spent six months with Karen Finch at the Textile Conservation Center at Hampton Court Palace, outside of London. Her education also included 3 months at the Royal Armory in Stockholm and a year of tapestry weaving instruction at West Dean College, West Sussex, England. For the rest of the 1970's until her departure in 1985, there was a team of 20 – 25 volunteers, each giving about 5-6 hours a week to the Lab. In addition to this group there was a fluctuating number of student interns from college and university programs statewide.

Supervised by the Head Conservator, and later also by a salaried Associate Conservator, along with several textile Curators, this team was responsible for many fine exhibitions and publications at both the Legion and the de Young showcasing the Museums' collection of costume, fans, hats and lace. In line with the original mission of the volunteers, tapestry conservation continued to be a mainstay in the program during this time. The care of the tapestry collection was taken very seriously and included tubular, cotton sateen dust covers with hand-sewn bound buttonholes for the twill tape ties to cinch at each end. Both curatorial and conservation volunteers kept volumes of handwritten inventories of the textile collection, which served as the record of the collection until the registration department created a computer database. Managing and working with volunteers as part of the conservation staff, as a way to carry out the Museums' and Department's programs, had become a part of the Museums' culture. It was not so much a decree from the administration, but was an understanding passed from one conservator to the next.

#### CONTINUING VOLUNTEERISM

Throughout the early 1980's, the needs of the exhibition schedule, the maintenance of the collection and the care of new acquisitions was met by volunteer labor. It was understood between the conservators in the textile lab, that if they desired help with the workload, the administration would only support volunteer help; no additional staff would be hired. The conservators and volunteers at this time were very proud of the work they accomplished. The administration did not give any directive of what the volunteers could or could not do, so the conservators at this time made all the decisions as to how to use them. The conservators were basing the volunteer duties on what had been past practice as well as on the needs of the department.

An abrupt change occurred in the mid-1980's due to the departure of the two staff textile conservators: the volunteer team was disbanded and the lab essentially closed. The years 1985-87 were a time of transition for the Lab staff, with different conservators working on a temporary basis, and records of this time are sketchy at best. At one point there was a paid assistant who oversaw the volunteers though it is unclear what their duties were. Later, a core group of 4 volunteers continued to serve the lab and spent much of their time re-housing fringed silk shawls that had been left discarded on tables from a curatorial survey.

By 1987, two conservators were again in permanent positions in the lab. Despite the Museums' being partially unionized, the directive from the Museums' administration to the two salaried Lab staff continued to be to utilize volunteers for whatever project, in whatever capacity, because additional assistance would not be funded. This continued to create a team with a wide variety of backgrounds, from hat makers to tailors, ballet

costume designers and opera wardrobe managers. As before, many student interns came through the lab, both pre-program and interim. Student's studies were diverse and included exhibition design, museum studies, anthropology and art history as well as those destined for conservation programs.

By the mid 1990's the Lab staff was purposefully reduced by the Administration to a department of one. It was about this time that the Lab was charged by the Museums' to start what is called a "private lab" program, which continues today. In a model initiated by the Museums' Paper Conservation Lab, private conservators generate their salaries by treating material owned by private clients and smaller institutions. Though more than one conservator is working within the lab, technically the private lab conservator is not working on Museums' projects unless there is funding to hire the private lab conservator. This creates a situation where the sole staff conservator still relies on volunteer labor to help with the maintenance of the permanent collection.

### THE TEXTILE LAB'S VOLUNTEERS TODAY

The only directive that has come from the administration about the use of volunteers in the 21<sup>st</sup> c has been that a volunteer is not to be used for work that can be or has been done in the past by a paid staff person. This was brought up in connection with the technician department, which is protected by a union. Though the conservators are not unionized, the textile conservators had been using this as a mantra throughout the late 1990s to the present in order to have conservators hired for conservation work, rather than relying on volunteer labor.

There is still a place for volunteers within the textile lab, but the duties they perform are based on their specific talents as they apply to the lab's needs. The team is currently comprised of five very dedicated and skilled volunteers. Three of them began volunteering in the very early 1980's. Another was recruited after being referred by the other volunteers. The fifth, the husband of another volunteer, was brought in to keep the Lab accounts, which became quite complicated once the Lab was instructed to start the "private lab" program. The volunteers range in age from 62 to 80. All are well versed in weaving, spinning, dying and sewing, as these skills have been a part of their lives since childhood. One is a published author on textiles, and another could be considered a weave structure expert. They are members of weaver's guilds, knitting clubs and textile study groups.

Since the mid 1990s, staff conservators formalized the parameters as to how volunteers were treated and what projects they worked on. The basic rules are:

- never keep them waiting. Always have projects appropriate to their skills and interests organized in advance and ready to start upon their arrival
- give them as much cancellation time as possible
- always be present when they arrive to start work
- always have a staff person supervising

The volunteer team today works on a different range of projects from the team of the 1970's. Generally, conservation treatments as well as exhibition installation and de-installations, are the responsibility of salaried museum staff and temporary contract conservators.

Under supervision the volunteers undertake the following:

- archival storage projects including custom padded hangers, muslin costume covers, and, hat and shoe storage supports,
- condition reporting new acquisitions about which they have expert knowledge, for example, the volunteer who has a tailoring background writes condition reports for costume (condition sections reviewed by staff conservators, including documentation of preventive incoming pest treatment),
- attachment of Velcro for exhibition of large hangings, including tapestry,
- supervised, non-deadline “craft restoration” treatments such as knotted and woven “plugs” for pile carpets and,
- clerical work such as filing, label making, supply lists, and record updating.

It was also around the mid 1990’s that the intern program started to become formalized. Portfolio reviews were required for the interview in keeping with the prerequisites for entering graduate school. Interns came from or were admitted to the graduate programs at Buffalo State College, Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation, New York University, University of Rhode Island, San Francisco State University, John F Kennedy University, the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in San Francisco, Queens University in Ontario, Canada, and the Textile Conservation Centre/University of London/Hampton Court. Although originally they had always worked unpaid, by 1997, the Lab began a regular practice to seek some level of funding to support their work for at least a month or two. The volunteers contributed to the interns’ experience, often teaching them new textile techniques to build on their studio work for their portfolio. By 2000 however, the parameters for accepting both new interns and new volunteers were changed drastically due to a previous intern falsely citing the de Young as providing conservation training that she did not receive.

In order to protect the Museums’ and the Lab’s integrity, staff conservators realized that past practices needed to change. Since then, resumes are perused with more formality and caution. Portfolios are required to prove established hand skills. Only interns who prove to be committed to pursuing entry into one of the conservation graduate school programs and with unblemished referrals are considered. Only one temporary volunteer has been accepted since that time, via referrals from other lab volunteers, although there continues to be many letters of interest.

## THE FUTURE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS IN THE LAB

The volunteers continue to provide a wealth of expertise and knowledge by bringing in their unique talents within the fiber art world. Staff conservators gratefully acknowledge that much of the archival storage mounts would not be done if not for the volunteers’ efforts; the Museums’ budget does not allow for many of the maintenance and conservation issues of the permanent collection unless it accompanies an exhibition. Staff conservators also realize that conservation treatment must be carried out by professionally trained conservators for the promotion of the field, consistency of treatment methodology for the collection and in keeping with ethical conservation practices. The evolution of the role of volunteers within the Lab has proven this last point. In 1973, 68 volunteers began conservation treatments of 33 tapestries under the

supervision of unpaid curators. In the late 1990's, conservation began on a series of three tapestries. Over the next 12 years, between one and two formally trained textile conservators specializing in tapestry conservation carried out the treatment. Though professional conservators provided the treatment, volunteers still played a supporting role by repairing slits under the supervision of the conservator, assisting with attaching the lining, and attaching Velcro for exhibition.

The Lab has changed the focus of volunteer activities from the Museums' view of to "use them however and for whatever project" to supporting the work of the professionally trained staff conservators within the scope of their specific talents. For example, one volunteer with a tailoring background primarily works on incoming acquisition condition reports and storage mounts for costume. Two others with expert knowledge of weave structure prepare plugs for loss compensation on carpets. Though the staff conservators continue to work toward promoting conservation as a trained profession, there is still a place for volunteers within the Lab. Volunteers have provided a wide range of expertise and knowledge as well as an esprit de corps that cannot be denied. And the volunteers have expressed satisfaction in being able to put the knowledge they have acquired to use in the museum.

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Anna Gray Bennett

The current core of volunteers:

Barbara Arthur, Don Ellison, Kathy Murphy, Barbara Nitzberg, Jean Scardina

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#### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Sarah Gates has been affiliated with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco since 1980 and was named head of the Textile Conservation Department in 1992. She received a BA from Mills College in 1981, interned in the Organics Divisions of the British Museum in 1985 and received a 3-year Diploma in The Conservation of Textile from the University of London, Textile Conservation Centre, Hampton Court, in 1987.

Beth Szuhay has been with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco as a Textile Conservator since 2001. She received her BA in International Studies from Miami University in Oxford, Ohio in 1990 and her MS from the Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art Conservation in 2001.

