

The University of Leeds International Textiles Archive : The Establishment of a Resource for Scholars and Industrialists

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1. Background

Anthropologists have addressed the question of how similar cultural traits, or the use of certain technologies or forms of decoration, can occur among different peoples in different regions. Competing schools of anthropology consider one of two possibilities: independent invention with parallel development or else a process of diffusion. Up to the nineteenth century, it was believed that human progress was governed by sets of universal laws, culminating in the so-called Revolutionist School of anthropology. Around 1890 there was a reaction to this perspective from scholars such as Franz Boas, Gabriel Tarde and Fredrick Ratzel. They stressed that changes in culture were almost totally as a result of diffusion of ideas or artefacts from another geographical area. Where objects or ideas are adopted from another culture a process of change and selection occurs. That is borrowed elements usually undergo change or adaptation. Agents of diffusion have included missionaries, of whatever religion, conquering armies and colonial powers. As we enter the twenty-first century, the economic forces of globalisation fulfil the same role. All may enforce adoption of customs, fashions, technology and forms of decoration.

The overland routes between east and west were opened up at least a few centuries prior to the onset of the Christian era. This brought China, Japan, Central Asia, India, the Middle East and much of Europe into contact. The so-called Silk Route was in reality an extensive network of trading routes through the deserts and mountains of Asia. The possibility of cultural exchange was further enhanced, some centuries later, by improvements in maritime technology and the use of various sea routes. Cultural contact accelerated globally over the course of the twentieth century with the increased application of air travel. As we enter the twenty-first century, communication networks have reached levels of sophistication undreamed of twenty or even ten years ago.

The process of diffusion has had a catalytic function in the development of cultures.

This has depended on the ability of all societies to borrow elements from other cultures and to incorporate them into their own. There is a fascination with differences and a surprise at similarities. It is this fascination and surprise that led to the establishment of museums in Victorian Britain and in other parts of Europe. These resources were seen as playing a fundamental role in the education of the general public.

2. The Establishment of ULITA

In 1892 a textile museum was established in the Yorkshire College (the predecessor of the University of Leeds), following receipt of a grant to the value of £1,000 from the Worshipful Company of Clothworkers of the City of London. This museum was used as a resource to teach textile design students woven fabric structure. The constituent collections of this early museum grew significantly throughout much of the twentieth century, but fell into disuse during the 1960s when the focus was primarily on the discovery and use of new forms of man-made fibres. During the 1980s the collections were re-assembled and now form the University of Leeds International Textiles Archive (ULITA). The principal constituent collections include: several hundred pattern books, Greek island and other Mediterranean embroideries, Chinese textiles mainly dating to the Qing dynasty, Paisley and Kashmiri shawls, 20,000 glass photographic plates depicting late nineteenth and early twentieth century textile processing equipment, a unique collection of natural and man-made fibres donated by ICI during the late 1970s, sets of Egyptian mummy fabrics and children's garments, and many Italian, French and other European textiles from the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. A significant proportion of the Archive has been acquired in recent years, including quantities of Pakistani hand-block-printed cottons, Javanese batiks, Indonesian ikats and other textiles from Asia. [Screen "The Ikats of Sawu Island"]

3. The Re-Housing Programme

In recent years the University of Leeds acquired premises previously occupied by Leeds Boys' Grammar School, including a mid-Victorian building which functioned as a chapel. This latter building has been set aside to re-house the textile archive. The intention is to establish a resource for use by scholars interested in the cultural aspects of patterned textiles, for visits by school children, community groups and members of the general public, and for use by industrial designers in the design of modern collections. A digital archive of still and video images will be created.

The inspiration for the design of the storage area of the resource came from the consideration of a silk worm, which spins a cocoon for protection. The Archive will contain a central conservation ark, which in its early designed form resembled the shape of a silk worm's cocoon. The project will involve the conservation and documentation of an internationally important textiles archive and its registration with the Museums and

Galleries Commission: the restoration of an historic building: access for children, young people and members of the public: full disabled access: the development of an innovative programme of exhibitions and workshops: the collaboration with community, education and cultural organisations in the region: the use of IT both to improve conservation and to improve access. Close collaboration with industry is anticipated.

4. The Merit of the Archive

Many of the fabric types held could not be readily produced in today's industrial context: appropriate processing arrangements and skill-based techniques have been superseded in the interests of more favourable production rates. Structural analysis of the items can however provide technical indicators to aid the production of novel and innovative ranges using current-day processing equipment. The collection of glass photographic plates offers an extensive record relating to technological change and innovation in textile machinery, an area in which British manufacturers held world dominance during the early part of the twentieth century. The collection of fibres and yarns (particularly the man-made fibre varieties) offers a source from which to trace twentieth century scientific invention and developments in fibre production.

The range of items held in ULITA is extensive in terms of fibre, yarn and fabric type, as well as texture, colour and surface decoration. This is particularly true in the case of the pattern books and portfolios, which offer remarkable ranges of woven silks, cottons, worsteds and linens, many of which employ unusually complex colouring and structural compositions. As a result the Archive has been recognised as an aesthetically rich source from which to develop modern textile collections.[Screen BBC Look North item].