

## **Collecting Textiles: Is It Worth It?**

by Beth Ann Koelsch, Kathelene McCarty Smith,  
and Jennifer Motszko

### **Abstract**

This article describes both the benefits and disadvantages of collecting textiles in an archival repository based on an analysis of three different collections housed at the Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The article details how the curators weighed concerns regarding preservation and storage against the value of using textiles for research, instruction, and exhibits for each of their collecting areas. Their conclusions, and the rationales behind them, highlight important issues regarding textile collections within the archival field.

### **Introduction**

Do textiles belong in archival repositories? Does the historic and intrinsic value of textiles outweigh concerns about storage space, preservation issues, and archival significance? Collecting, preserving, and storing textiles, which are by nature “among the most fragile of all artifacts,” is a constant challenge for archivists.<sup>1</sup> Ideal preservation conditions dictate specific storage requirements and strict environmental control. Additionally, textiles consume substantially more space than paper-based documents.

Archivists have traditionally prioritized the collecting of documents, leaving textiles to the realm of museums; however, recent literature makes the point that everything that institutions collect can be considered a

“document.”<sup>2</sup> Whether they are considered “documents” or “artifacts,” textiles can greatly enhance and add context to paper-based collections. Thus, archivists should examine the value of collecting textiles along with more traditional paper-based documents.

The case for collecting textiles can be found in the study of “material culture” and in the historic value of materials. Material culture is predicated on the idea “that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged.”<sup>3</sup> The fact that some college and university archives collect textiles at all suggests that some archivists are interested in preserving the history which these materials document. Ultimately, they agree with the theory that textiles are “essential to an understanding of the past, of cultures, and even of ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>

Of the colleges and universities that do collect textiles, most are associated with clothing and textile departments and the items are mainly used as teaching collections.<sup>5</sup> In 2012, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) conducted an online survey with its member libraries regarding art and artifact management within their collections. Results revealed a lack of best practices and management strategies within the institutions regarding art and artifact materials, a category that includes textiles. Survey comments showed that artifacts were not generally collected “intentionally,” and that their value was often limited to exhibition use.<sup>6</sup> In fact, one respondent mentioned that “because [artifacts] are not integral to our mission

(except occasionally in the University Archives) we have not made their care a priority in any way.”<sup>7</sup>

Over the past three years, curators of three distinct collections at the Martha Blakeney Hodges Special Collections and University Archives (SCUA) at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) addressed the dilemma of collecting textiles. Kathelene McCarty Smith, the curator of the University Archives Textile Collection (UA Textile Collection), Beth Ann Koelsch, the curator of the Betty H. Carter Women Veterans Historical Project (WVHP), and Jennifer Motszko, the manuscripts archivist for Manuscripts Collections, each inherited textiles as part of their collections. This article details the curators’ deliberations as they weighed the value of continuing to collect textiles against concerns regarding preservation and storage. Their differing conclusions, and the rationales behind them, highlight important issues regarding collecting textiles within the archival field.

### **Organizational Change and Collection Development**

In April 2010, the library hired a new SCUA head and reorganized the department’s organizational structure. These changes resulted in rethinking the department’s mission, prioritizing collection development, and broadening the archivists’ curatorial autonomy over their collecting areas. This autonomy allowed curators to reassess their collecting, instruction, and outreach initiatives within the broader departmental mission of collecting, preserving, and making accessible unique and historic materials for learning and research. Additionally, the new departmental head charged the archivists with devising collecting priorities

which were integrated into the departmental collection development policy.

Other changes resulted from a renovation of the SCUA storage and office spaces in 2011-2012. In preparation for the departmental move into a renovated and expanded space, Smith, Koelsch, and Motszko were asked to deliver collection assessments, including a plan for future storage needs. They discovered that textiles currently within the archives required over 500 linear feet of shelving. Including the estimates for future collection growth, textiles were allotted approximately fourteen percent of the department's shelving space.

Smith, Koelsch, and Motszko believe that as part of an academic library, the department's mission is not only to collect and preserve materials, but also to promote the use of the collections by UNCG students and faculty, the broader scholarly community, and the general public. Each curator sees the archival value of textiles and emphasizes using a wide variety of materials for instruction, research, and short-term display purposes. To date they have prioritized use over preservation considerations. They differ, however, in their views on how textiles should feature in the future of their collections.

### **Origins and Descriptions of the SCUA Textile Collections**

The University Archives can trace its beginnings to the early 1940s. At that time, textiles were not a priority in the university's archival collections. This changed in the 1980s when the university archivist, Betty Carter, began to reconsider established collecting policies. Carter concluded that "the history of the university is paper, textiles, artifacts, photographs and, of course, all sorts of electronic and digital

files... [but] we are a visual society and textiles and artifacts supply the 'visual.' In my opinion, an archivist is charged with preserving the history of an institution—all of the history."<sup>8</sup> Believing that public interest and historic value supported her decision, Carter began to accession textiles and artifacts into each of the University Archives and Manuscript Collections, which became the foundation for the UA Textile Collection and the WVHP, and expanded the parameters of the Manuscript Collections.

Not surprisingly, the UA Textile Collection holds the greatest number of textiles in the department and focuses entirely on items associated with UNCG, from its founding in 1891 to the present day. The UA Textile Collection's origins and major acquisitions resulted from two large transfers from other campus sources and from a publicized appeal to the alumni community. The initial transfer came from the School of Home Economics' Textile Collection, which incorporated clothing that belonged to early college faculty and students. In the early 1980s, the School decided to weed this teaching collection and the textiles that were not considered important for instruction were transferred to the University Archives. Items of particular interest from this transfer included clothing owned by the college's founder and first president, Charles Duncan McIver, and his family; early school gym suits; a 1916 graduation dress; and the World War I Abercrombie and Fitch Red Cross uniforms and surgical vestments belonging to Dr. Anna Maria Gove, an early campus physician and teacher.

The second large transfer of textiles occurred in 2010, when the UNCG Alumni Association donated its own textile collection to the Archives, increasing the UA Textile Collection's size by more than thirty percent. The Alumni

Association transfer brought in a rich trove of textiles that included early twentieth-century pennants and banners, as well as class jackets. The tradition of class jackets began in the 1930s and remained at the college until the early 1970s, a decade after men were welcomed onto campus in 1963. While the Archives already possessed class jackets, this transfer increased their number in the collection. Hoping to fill in additional gaps, the university archivist recently posted a short article in UNCG Magazine asking for donations of jackets for the years that the collection lacked. This article was met with enthusiastic donations of class jackets that filled out the collection's holdings from 1950 to 1973. The UA Textile Collection continues to expand, adding not only items chronicling the school's past, but also more recent items such as a 9/11 commemorative quilt.

Unlike the UA Textile Collection, uniforms and other textiles in the Women Veterans Historical Project are usually part of an individual veteran's collection, which can also include manuscript materials. The foundation of the WVHP textile collection began in 1992, during a campus celebration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the United States Navy WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). For this occasion, several veterans sent uniforms and other memorabilia to the Alumni Association. Those items, which were used in an exhibit, were transferred to the University Archives in 1997, and formed the nucleus of the WVHP.

In 1998, the WVHP was formalized and the collections were expanded to non-alumnae veterans. It became the general policy to solicit donors for all of their military materials, including uniforms. These uniforms ranged from one piece, such as Rachel Twiddy's World War

II-era Army Nurse Corps cape, to the fifty-six pieces from Gretchen Davis' fifteen-year army career from 1978 to 1993. Additionally, the collections were augmented by purchases from eBay vendors and other sources to create the ninety-piece Women Veterans General Textile Collection. This artificial collection includes a variety of uniforms and textiles, including a rare World War I uniform worn by a volunteer for the American Red Cross/Army Nurse Corps who served in France; a World War II Coast Guard SPARS dress uniform; and a World War II Women's Army Corps (WAC) guidon.<sup>9</sup>

Similar to the WVHP, textiles within the Manuscript Collections are part of individual collections, and have been accepted along with donations of papers and artifacts. The first textiles were donated in 1996 as part of the Joseph Bryan Archives. In addition to the more than sixty linear feet of personal and professional records, the Archives received Joseph Bryan's top hat, Oasis Shriner Fez, several suits, academic robes, and five green golf jackets (two from the Greater Greensboro Open and three from the Augusta Masters Tournament). The Bryan Archives represents the largest group of textiles in the Manuscript Collections, but it is not the only example. In 2002, New York artist Duston Spear gave to the Archives materials related to 3 Women in Black, a project started by Spear to show solidarity with the "Women in Black" movement of Belgrade, Serbia, which protested the rape of women during the conflicts in central Europe. This collection includes three black dresses, one pair of leather gloves, two mismatched knit gloves, a ski mask, and two veiled headpieces. A final significant group of textiles arrived with the Weatherspoon Guild Collection in 2003. This collection includes six dresses made of paper that

were worn by the UNCG Department of Art faculty at the Art on Paper 1967 show on October 10, 1967.

### **Use of Textiles in Exhibits, Instruction, and Research**

In the last three years, SCUA has seen a significant increase in use of textiles. During this time, departmental statistics show that approximately 300 textiles have been used for exhibits, instruction, and research. Smith, Koelsch, and Motszko attribute most of the statistical increase to the expanded use of textiles in exhibits and instruction. SCUA offers UNCG professors the opportunity each semester to bring their classes into the archives to learn about campus history, archival methods, and the use of our collections for research. Participating disciplines include History, Kinesiology, Art, Library Studies, and English.

Textile collections also are seeing increased use for individual research, thanks to a recent library-wide digitization initiative. The department has improved cross-collection access for researchers by photographing and uploading images of textile items into CONTENTdm, our digital collection management system. CONTENTdm allows archivists to digitally manage and display each item with complete metadata. This software also makes it possible to show different angles of each textile and view them closely using the zoom feature. Most of the textiles in the UA Textile Collection and the WVHP textiles have now been photographed and the images uploaded to CONTENTdm, creating easy access without further damage to the textiles. This valuable research tool dovetails successfully with departmental exhibits and instruction.



### *Exhibits*

Smith has frequently used textiles from the UA Textile Collection for exhibits in the UNCG library, as well as other campus venues, for alumni reunions, School of Nursing events, and campus commemorations. Exhibits have featured class jackets, historic school banners and pennants, college gym suits, junior marshal dresses, and regalia. These one-day exhibits are complicated as they include up to seven dressed mannequins and related materials that must be transferred from the Archives to another campus building. Some of the most successful exhibits have been those related to the annual alumni reunions. The alumni react to the clothing as if they were old friends, often taking group photographs with a class jacket or a gym suit.

Preservation can also be a significant consideration when exhibiting textiles. One noteworthy example was the exhibit of junior marshals's dresses that accompanies the annual UNCG junior marshal installation. This exhibit includes delicate and easily damaged dresses dating from 1907 to 1950. The transportation and handling of these dresses has caused noticeable stress to the textiles. While the textiles enhance the historical context of the installation, preservation concerns may necessitate a more limited exhibit in the future.

Koelsch exhibits a different selection of uniforms from each of the military branches at the annual women veterans's luncheon at UNCG, which honors the military service of women and highlights the WVHP collections. The accompanying exhibit typically includes ten to twelve uniforms, as well as artifacts and a display of posters and other images. The women veterans examine the uniforms intently and compare them to their own uniforms. Koelsch

often receives specific requests from veterans to display the uniforms they donated.

Uniforms were also featured during a local television news segment for Independence Day. The news crew came to campus, and Koelsch used a uniform display to explain the history of women in the United States military. Uniforms have traveled to different community events, such as an exhibit celebrating Women's History Month at Fort Bragg. Enlisted women soldiers wearing camouflage battle dress uniforms were fascinated by the wool World War II WAC dress uniform. One Fort Bragg soldier expressed envy for such a "ladylike" uniform, even though the WAC uniform, hurriedly adapted from the men's uniform, was considered at the time to be the ugliest uniform of all of the women's branches.<sup>10</sup> Although uniforms were the marquee pieces of these exhibits, Koelsch eventually decided that the risk of damage was too great and stopped using textiles in off-site exhibits and presentations.

Motszko has found only a few opportunities to include textiles in exhibits highlighting the Manuscript Collections. SCUA has lent Joseph M. Bryan Archives items to the Greensboro Historical Museum for several short-term exhibits. In addition, Bryan's top hat, walking cane, and Masters green jacket were used for various UNCG library exhibits. The paper dresses from the Weatherspoon Guild Collection were put on a short-term display in Jackson Library at UNCG shortly after their acquisition. For most exhibits, Motszko favors using photographs and paper documents, which she feels better represent the collections.

### *Instruction*

While it is not surprising that alumni and veterans appreciate viewing items from their own history, it is perhaps more interesting to see current students's reactions to textile items used to teach classes in the archives. Smith incorporated the UA Textile Collection into many of the classes taught in the archives and found that the students were fascinated with the differences in styles and in the constricting nature of some of the clothing. In one particularly effective example of using textiles to enhance instruction, Smith showed early campus gym suits and related material to a History and Philosophy of Sports and Physical Education class. By examining these textiles, dating from 1905 to 1972, students could easily observe the evolution in design and draw conclusions about the changing attitudes of physical exercise for girls during the twentieth century. On display were 1905 and 1916 black serge gym suits that have long-sleeved blouses, tied at the collar, buttoning onto voluminous pantaloons. This more restrictive style was compared with a 1930s blue one-piece cotton gym suit that allowed for flexibility and comfort. For further contrast, two gym suits from the 1960s and 1970s were also exhibited. The gym suits serve as important visual teaching aids that illustrate the school's interest in advanced physical education theory and practice throughout its history. Ultimately, these textiles represent a microcosm of the history of physical culture and fashion at UNCG.

Koelsch and Motszko have found fewer opportunities to use textiles for instruction, although WVHP textiles have been incorporated into class sessions about the history of World War I and World War II. Additionally, the Department of Consumer, Apparel, and Retail Studies offers

a course on Historic Costume and the WVHP conducts a class session devoted to World War II uniforms. Motszko can recall only one instance of instructional usage: Bryan's Oasis Shriner fez was displayed for a lecture about the use of primary sources.

### *Research*

The University Archives Textile Collection is not on permanent public display and is considered a teaching collection viewable by appointment only; therefore, having a digital equivalent of the textiles for researchers is essential. The digital accessibility of the collection has created an alternative to handling and displaying the often fragile textiles. Displaying the collection through CONTENTdm software (<http://libcdm1.uncg.edu/cdm/textilesandartifacts/>) has allowed this unique resource to be available to students, alumni, scholars, and the general public. Students find the option for "at-home" research particularly helpful and the link to the UA Textile Collection landing page is included in lectures and research guides. Additionally, low-resolution images may be downloaded for inclusion in class papers and projects. This site is also popular with alumni and researchers who are not able to visit the archives in person.

Almost all of the researchers of the WVHP textiles access the collections via the WHVP website (<http://library.uncg.edu/dp/wv/>) to view the seventy high-resolution photographs that were taken of uniforms and hats. Occasionally, there are phone calls and on-site visits by theatrical costume designers and historical re-enactors who want detailed information about a uniform's construction.

Motszko believes that researchers rarely request access to the textiles included in the Manuscripts Collections

because they are seen as peripheral to the research value of the paper materials. None of the textiles has been photographed and they are not represented in CONTENTdm.

### **Considerations and Conclusions**

Smith, Koelsch, and Motszko all believe that textiles are relevant to the mission of the department, but each archivist has separate collecting priorities; therefore, they have made different decisions about the future of the textiles in their respective collections. These decisions will be integrated into the departmental collection development policy.

Given the popularity of the UA Textile Collection in exhibits and instruction, the question of whether or not to continue to collect textiles is clear. However, at the current rate of collecting, Smith estimates the textiles will reach the storage capacity within the next three to five years. She realizes that space limitations must dictate whether to continue to accept every new donation, particularly in the case of the alumni class jackets for which the collection has a full run after 1950. The library's relationships with the alumni community, as well as the campus community, are an important factor in the development of the UA Textile Collection; therefore, in some cases she will accept duplicate jackets to cultivate good donor relations. In addition to storage considerations, constant use of the collection for exhibits and instruction has naturally limited the use of some textiles because of preservation issues. While digital access has alleviated some of the stress on the textiles, Smith believes that their physical display is still important to current and future students, alumni, and researchers. Therefore, she has decided to continue to exhibit the textiles

based on condition and length of display. Smith has also decided to continue to actively collect textiles related to the university with consideration toward the alumni/donor relationships, but to limit duplicate item donations when possible. She also aims to maintain a realistic balance between preservation and use to rationalize the continued collecting of textiles.

In the case of the WVHP, Koelsch realized that her collection contains numerous duplicates of certain types of uniforms, especially from the World War II era. Storage space limitations make accepting uniforms from every donor unfeasible. Accordingly, Koelsch has decided to collect only unique uniforms not already within the collection and will retain all previously donated items. However, exceptions may be made in cases of donor relation development or when the offered uniforms are in better condition than ones currently in the collection. This decision will result in a loss of historic information because, even though every military branch produces tens of thousands of dress and work uniforms, each uniform is also customized by the individual veteran—be it by name labels, alterations, shoulder patches or insignia—and is as distinguishing of each woman's personal experiences as letters and photographs. By accepting the medals, ribbons, and other insignia from each uniform, Koelsch hopes that most of the informational and artifactual evidence of a veteran's military career can be preserved.

Unlike the UA Textile Collection and the WVHP, the textiles in the Manuscript Collections are seldom used in teaching and research. In most cases, the textiles are not unique and weighed against storage and usage considerations; Motszko believes they hold little archival

value. She has decided to discontinue collecting any form of textiles and will consider deaccessioning or transferring textiles currently in her collection.

The authors' initial question of whether repositories should invest their resources in collecting textiles does not have a one-size-fits-all answer. Ultimately, each repository must carefully evaluate their instructional, research, and outreach goals against the physical limitations of their storage capacity, stability of their storage environment, and preservation concerns, to determine the value of collecting textiles.

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*Jennifer Motszko has been the Manuscripts Archivist at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro since 2008. She received an MA in History and an MLIS from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2007.*

## NOTES

1. Nancy Carlson Schrock and Kathryn Myatt Carey, *Archival storage of textiles* (New York: Gaylord Brothers, 1997), 2.
2. Robert S. Martin, "Intersecting Missions, Converging Practice," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, & Cultural Heritage*, 8.1 (2007): 81.
3. Jules David Brown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Wintherthur Portfolio*, 17 (1982): 1-2.
4. Richard Martin, "Costume History: The State of the Discipline," *History News*, 45.6 (1990): 14.
5. For example, Cornell University, Louisiana State University, and The Ohio State University.
6. Morag Boyd and Jenny Robb, *SPEC Kit 333, Art & Artifact Management* (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, 2012), 17.
7. Boyd and Robb, 17.
8. Betty Carter, e-mail message to Kathelene Smith, 11 January 2013.
9. SPARS was the name of the United States Coast Guard Women's Reserve. It is an acronym of the Coast Guard motto and its English translation: Semper Paratus Always Ready.
10. Mattie E. Treadwell, *The Women's Army Corps* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1954), 166.



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