

Lost in the Museum, October 5, 2018-July 28, 2019

When an object enters a museum's collection, it typically is accompanied by a story. Each piece is labeled with a unique number connecting it to records about who owned it, when and where it was created, and when and why it was given to or purchased by the museum. The RISD Museum's Costume and Textile Department cares for more than 30,000 objects. When a 2003 inventory revealed 1,400 works without accession numbers, they were set aside and placed into inventory boxes. Since then, these objects have been inaccessible, and their stories have remained unresolved.

Through careful sleuthing we are working to uncover how and why these pieces came to the museum. Clothes and textiles are extremely personal objects. We wear them, use them, and repair them in unique ways. An object's history is an intrinsic part of its value, and the recovery of lost stories is a form of repair. Mending and patching the biographies of objects is part of caring for our collection.

— Anna Rose Keefe
Conservation Assistant
Costume and Textiles Department
RISD Museum

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

These pieces went uncatalogued for decades, so they were never given accession numbers. The two floral panels were once part of the same skirt; one part was acquired in 1982, but the date when the second panel came to the museum is unknown. Original paperwork for the casaquin jacket mentions that the cuffs were missing, yet they were found in an inventory box 40 years later. Decades after museum staff planned to decline the donations of the seat cover and valance, they are still here. The floral textile and chasuble on the right were never accessioned, probably because they are heavily patched.

Why was each of these works kept in limbo? What should we do with them now? Questions like these help staff repair old records and shape the museum's future.

French; Probably
Skirt Panel, late 1700s
Polychrome silk taffeta brocade
Museum Collection INV2004.651

Found Uncatalogued; Unknown source
INV2004.651 Museum Collection



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French; Probably
Skirt Panel, late 1700s
Polychrome silk taffeta brocade
Gift of Mrs. Paul Fletcher 82.076.12



French
Casaquin, mid 1700s
Silk brocade with supplementary metallic-wrapped wefts and metallic
bobbin-lace trim
Gift of Mrs. Kenneth Shaw Safe 63.010.1



Spanish; Probably
Chasuble, 1700s
Polychrome silk brocade, patched together, silk woven trim, linen
plain-weave lining
INV2003.403



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Historically, museums have often prioritized textiles that look new over those showing signs of wear. These objects arrived on the same day in 1981, as part of the same donation. The largest piece of the textile was given a new number, 81.131B, while the irregularly sized and repaired pieces were left unlabeled, then forgotten in storage. That these scraps had been saved and carefully repaired speaks to how highly work by Jean-Baptiste Huet and the Oberkampf factory was prized, both for its visual appeal and technological innovation.

Christophe Philippe Oberkampf, French, 1738-1815

Jean-Baptiste Huet, French, 1745-1811

Medallions Antiques, ca. 1800

Cotton plain weave with copperplate printing

Gift of Miss Mary L. Crosby 81.085a

These items were catalogued properly when they arrived, but as the objects went on and off display, the labels that connected them to their records were lost.

The distinctive materials and techniques that make these works noteworthy today—peacock-feather yarns, metallic-wrapped threads, and raffia cut pile—were all described in their original records. By examining details listed in museum records, including fiber contents, measurements, motifs, and embellishments, researchers reunited the unlabeled textiles with their original biographical data, bringing them back into circulation.

Turkish

Embroidery Fragment, 1700s

Undyed cotton ground, silk embroidery

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lorin A. Riggs 1991.112.1



Indian

Embroidery Fragment, late 1600s-late 1700s

Cotton muslin ground with chain-stitched mochi motifs and silver-metallic badla embroidery

Gift of Francis Crosby Whitehead 71.109.36



Congolese

Textile Panel, late 1800s - early 1900s

Cut-pile raffia embroidery, made from leaves of *Raphia vinifera*

Gift of Brown University 22.078

These textiles illustrate past attempts to repair object records. Without a digitized database to search through, matching textiles with numbers is all but impossible. In these cases, earlier matches later proved false when more recent research revealed another, better match to a record. The top, middle, and bottom examples each show a pair of textiles that was mistakenly assigned the same number.

The original index cards for each textile are shown above. How much information would you need to match an object and a record? How important is color in identifying the correct object? Technique? Motif? Material? Measurements? Would you have made the same choices?

Greek

Embroidered Textile Length, 1700s

Linen plain-weave ground, silk embroidery

Mary B Jackson Fund 41.079

1997: Labeled as "Found in Collection" S1997.024

2003: Labeled as unknown donor

INV2003.242 Now: Mary B Jackson Fund 41.079

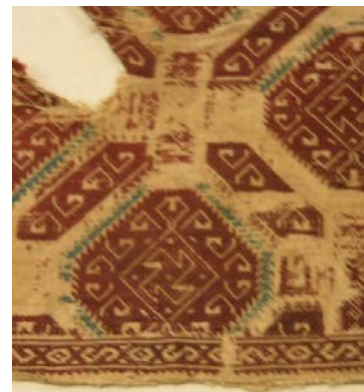


Greek

Embroidered Textile Fragment, 1700s

Linen plain-weave ground, silk embroidery

Museum Works of Art Fund 47.618



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Azerbaijani

Textile Fragment, 1500s

Linen ground, silk embroidery, silk lining

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 15.117



Persian

Embroidered Textile Fragment, 1600s

Linen plain-weave ground, silk and linen embroidery

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 17.043

2003: Labeled as unknown donor INV2003.206

Now: Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 17.043



French

Casaquin Cuffs, mid 1700s

Silk brocade with supplementary metallic-wrapped wefts

Museum Collection INV2004.215



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Probably; Algerian
Embroidered Textile, 1800s
Silk-satin ground with couched-satin embroidery stitches
Bequest of Lyra Brown Nickerson 16.481

2003: Labeled as Unknown donor INV2003.243
Now: Bequest of Lyra Brown Nickerson 16.481



Indian; or; Pakistani
Embroidered Textile, late 1800s-early1900s
Cotton
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 31.194

Japanese
Buddhist Altar Cloth (Uchishiki), 1800s
Polychrome silk brocade with silver-gilt paper wefts; silk embroidery
Gift of Charles B. Hoyt 27.081



English; French
Textile Fragment, 1720s
Polychrome silk brocade with silver-metallic weft yarns
Gift of Pamela A. Parmal 1996.4



American
Ugly Bonnet (Capote-écran), ca. 1830
Silk exterior, silk ribbons, wire frame
Gift of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities
60.034.10



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Chinese
Rank badge, 1800s
Silk
INV2004.434



Italian
Chasuble fragment, 1600s
Polychrome silk brocade, gold gimp edging
Gift of the Estate of William E. Brigham 63.011.111

