

Detail of an Ottoman towel (late 19th century), photograph by Joost Kalkman

A TREASURE TROVE OF TEXTILES:

THE STORY OF THE TEXTILE RESEARCH CENTRE AS TOLD BY DR. GILLIAN VOGELSANG-EASTWOOD

In 2016 Hand & Lock's Robert and Jessica went to Leiden in the Netherlands to view a very special collection of textiles. We'd known for some time about the Textile Research Centre (TRC) and were delighted to be able to visit it in person. Dr. Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, The Director of the TRC welcomed us and personally showed us pieces from their vast archive. The purpose of the trip was to help find historic embroidered items for our 2017 exhibition. Dr. Vogelsang-Eastwood also kindly agreed to speak at our conference on the subject of ancient Egyptian textiles and embroideries. The trip and the kindness and generosity of Dr. Vogelsang-Eastwood left a last impression and we wanted to make sure everyone knew about this amazing research centre tucked away in a beautiful corner of the Netherlands. As such asked Dr Vogelsang-Eastwood to tell us the story of the TRC...

I can't remember when I didn't have a piece of cloth in my hand, most of the time it was a piece of embroidery. Little did I realise that this childhood fascination would lead to an institute with an international level textile collection and extensive library, which works with specialists, academics,

students and those who 'simply' enjoy textiles, from all over the globe. More importantly, the TRC in Leiden is the home of thousands of stories that tell the history of the world via 'simple' pieces of cloth.

The TRC, Leiden

The Textile Research Centre, Leiden, was founded in December 1991 with the stated aim of supporting the study of textiles and dress – what people wear to say who they are or who they would like to be. Dress is a silent language that everyone speaks (from the nudist to the well-attired monarch), but at the same time it includes many 'dialects' that can cause great problems if misunderstood.

Ever since the setting up of the TRC, its range of work and activities can be headed under the keywords of research, presentation and inspiration, all of it associated with textiles, clothing and accessories (from hats, jewellery to footwear). Originally accommodated in the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, since 2009 the TRC has been housed at the Hogewoerd 164, in the centre of the old university town of Leiden. Here exhibitions, workshops, courses and lectures are given on a

regular basis by a range of specialists. In addition, there is a library, a work area, and most importantly, a storage space for the TRC's impressive collection of ancient, historical and modern textiles and garments. The TRC works closely with a variety of other institutes, ranging from Leiden University to Kew Gardens, London.

The People

The TRC is run by a group of fifteen enthusiastic men and women who come in on a regular basis, with the extra assistance by others if and when required. It is a non-profit making organisation headed by a board that includes academics (actually three professors, including a former Chancellor of Leiden University), curators, and people from the commercial world. The TRC is not a museum. Instead it is a centre where people can come to see, discuss and in many cases handle and examine textiles from many different cultures, social and economic backgrounds.

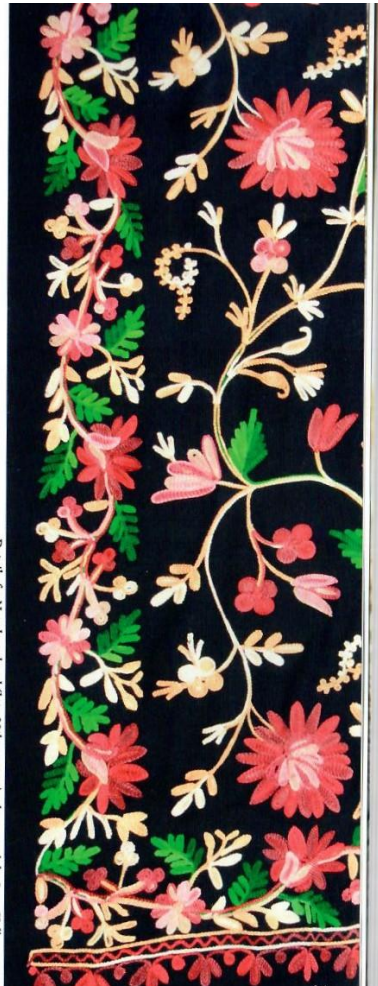
Every week people come to the TRC with donations of textiles, garments, accessories, textile equipment, and 'little things' such as button collections. Of course we can't accept all of these gifts, but we are regularly tempted to do so. In this way, various people who helped to fill in gaps in the collection, such as Magdalena Kircher, who gave a large collection of European folk dress; Sherry Cook, who is helping to build up the TRC's collection of American quilts, and David Reisbord, who donated Central Asian and Syrian items. Jonkheer Mr. Van Rijckevorsel van Kessel, a Dutch baron, gave the TRC a collection of

textiles and garments that were owned by his great aunt. She had been a textile buyer for a Dutch fashion house in the 1930's. This donation also included rare 1940's garments.

The majority of these and similar objects are added to the collection. Others pieces are sold in the TRC shop (with the donor's permission, of course) or given to those who can use them as part of their exploration of the world of textiles, especially fashion and textile students.

An important part of the TRC's work is to write down the stories associated with the objects. These include social, economic, trade, political, religious, as well as private and family stories. Part of the TRC Collection consists of photographs of people making, using and selling textiles and garments as part of their daily lives, so help to illustrate these stories.

Basically, textiles are an essential, approachable and indeed immediate method of telling the story of human life and creativity through thousands of years, whether they were worn by a pharaoh, queen, merchant or baby. The TRC tells some of these stories 'told' in the form of exhibitions, both actual and digital. Some recent and forthcoming exhibitions include, For a Few Sacks More (2018; American feed sacks, sponsored by the US Embassy, The Hague), Velvet! (2019; 1000 years of velvet history, techniques and uses), Out of Asia (summer 2019; Eastern influences on Western textiles), Socks Galore: Hand knitted socks and stockings (autumn 2019); 200 years of American Quilts (spring 2020, part of 2020 Mayflower



Detail of a Nepalese shawl (late 20th century), photograph by Joost Kalkman

Celebrations), and Ties to History (men's neckwear and the stories they can tell; autumn 2020).

Teaching, research and the TRC

Students from all over the world come to the TRC, from America and Russia to China. In 2018, for example, two students from the Manchester School of Art spent two months at the TRC learning about textiles, running a collection and using aspects of the TRC Collection as part of their third year projects and theses.

One of the most popular courses is a 5-day intensive textile course that is held four times a year and attracts people from many different countries. Recent workshops have included participants from America, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, as well as, of course, The Netherlands.

All of these people are driven by their love of textiles and the fact that it is becoming harder and harder to find centres that give lessons in the history and techniques of textiles. Workshops range from indigo dyeing in Taiwan, ikt weaving given by Indonesian weavers, spinning, naaldbinding, Holbein embroidery from Europe, as well as embroidering the Bayeux Tapestry.

The TRC collection

There is a growing interest and acceptance of textiles and dress studies and increasing demand for more and more information about techniques, styles and designs. But for many years, textile departments and the teaching

of textiles were deliberately discarded. This is one of the reasons why the TRC Collection is so important, as it is an active, handling collection that is open to anyone who is seriously interested in textiles. Seeing, touching and feeling a textile is one of the best ways to really understand it.

The Collection currently includes about 25,000 objects, and range in date from prehistory to yesterday (quite deliberately, as the story of textiles continues to grow and develop), without any geographical or political boundaries – culture ignores such boundaries.



Additions to the collection have come in the forms of sponsorship by companies such as Shell (the TRC's Iranian regional dress collection), a donation of c. 6,000 printed textiles dating to the 20th century from the collection of Prof. Yves Cuvelier d'Oresmieux (1903-2005), a Parisian textile designer who worked with the fashion industry there, to examples of hand embroidery and military lace from Hand & Lock.

The TRC online

In order to share information about the TRC Collection, its activities and exhibitions among as wide an audience

as possible, the TRC has a very active website. Most of the Collection is already online (trc-leiden.nl/collection), and there is an ever increasing number of digital exhibitions (trc-leiden.nl/trc-digital-exhibition) on a wide range of subjects based on the TRC Collection (literally from ancient Greek loom weights to American printed feed sacks and quilts). We should not forget to mention the TRC social media presence, thanks to a very lively Facebook and Instagram presence.

Associated with..

The TRC is associated with various groups for advice and support, notably Tiraz in Amman (Jordan, Middle Eastern dress), The Zay Initiative (Dubai; Gulf textiles and dress), PARZOR (Parsi community, India) and the Tracing Patterns Foundation (USA; textile craftspeople especially in Indonesia). The last mentioned has kindly agreed to share its C501(c)(3) status so that donors in the US can gain tax benefits for their help in shaping the future of the TRC.

After all it is essential to share knowledge and stories.

Encyclopaedia of embroidery

In addition to articles and books, the TRC is involved in the production of a series of encyclopaedias for the publishing firm of Bloomsbury. This developed out of helping with a series of similar works in 2010 about world dress and fashion, edited by Prof. Joanne Eicher. Some years ago the idea was developed for a single volume about the history, the use and the types of hand



Detail of a Tunisian embroidery (early 20th century), photograph by Joost Kolkman

embroidery in the Arab World. Shortly before this publication was finished, it was decided to have a series of books that would record the history of world embroidery. There will be seven volumes in total, to be published over the next five to six years.

The first in the series, the Encyclopedia of Embroidery from the Arab World, was published in 2016 and was a mega encyclopedia (700 pages). This was not the original intention, but because of the appalling political situation in the Middle East, and Syria and Yemen in particular, it was decided that the study would be used as a cultural ark to preserve knowledge about hand embroidery forms for future generations, and indeed all lovers of embroidery. To everyone's delight the encyclopaedia won three international awards, including the prestigious Dartmouth Medal, which is given by the American Library Association to a particular reference book in the English language, published anywhere in the world on any subject – and our book on embroidery won the Medal for 2017. This award has changed the way textiles and embroidery are

regarded within various academic circles.

TRC Needles

Another way the TRC Leiden is sharing information about embroidery among, and from a world-wide audience is TRC Needles: The TRC Digital Encyclopaedia of Decorative Needlework (trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles). This is a digital encyclopaedia that covers the enormous field of needlework, focussing in particular on appliqué, beading, darned knotting, embroidery, needle lace making, passementerie, patchwork and quilting. The encyclopaedia includes information about different forms from all over the world, literally from the Americas to Asia. It looks at the earliest surviving examples from ancient Egypt to present-day forms, with an emphasis on handmade examples rather than industrially produced items.

The future

An important part of the TRC's work is to build up various parts of the Collection and in particular the embroidery, to

develop an international embroidery centre where examples of embroidery, from samples to finished items, from all over the world, can be brought together for study and inspirational purposes, as well as to have as many items and the stories attached to them available via its online database and online exhibitions.

In order to continue and indeed expand its work the TRC Leiden is actively planning and looking for more space and financial support, in order to increase its storage space, number of exhibition galleries, the size of the library (and number of actual books), as well as workshop space, and a textile laboratory for the analysis of fibres and dye types. Financial support is also being sought for the Encyclopaedias of Embroidery to cover research and travel costs, while the published and distributed costs are being covered by Bloomsbury.

All in all, there is much to do in Leiden, a textile city and international centre of knowledge.

More details about the TRC can be found at www.trc-leiden.nl



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