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Art Reviews

Revamped Textile Museum in DC Weaves Together Historic and Contemporary Fabrics

by Aaron McIntosh
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Textile Museum exterior (photo by Jessica McConnell Burt, courtesy the George Washington University)

WASHINGTON, DC — When you think of textiles in museums, you inevitably imagine old things: musty rooms, faded colors, grandiose tapestries or thread-bare fragments, and fussy, protective installations. I have two degrees in textiles and that is my assumption when seeking out the usually small, hidden-away textile department in most museums. Because everyday textiles — bedding, garments, wearable accessories, home furnishing fabrics, utilitarian sundries, and fine art — are rarely staring back at us from the textile collection walls and pedestals, visitors rarely make the leap from old to new, from anachronistic decorative forms to the T-shirts and jeans they're wearing or contemporary artists like Yinka Shonibare MBE. Even though we wake up every morning underneath cloth, tread upon carpets, don various fabrics as markers of self, and perennially celebrate rites of passage with specific vestments, this vast ubiquity of textiles has a way of obscuring historical lineage and making static their cultural importance. For these reasons, textiles don't register in the public mind as a dynamic, contemporary field of study and collection.

The newly opened Textile Museum, now part of George Washington University (GWU), is here to upend these assumptions and make textiles newly vital. The only institution of its kind in the country, it is now embedded in the footprint of a large urban university campus, has expanded its facilities to an impressive 46,000 square feet, and is now more easily accessible. Originally located in two 19th-century mansions in Kalorama Heights, it was a pilgrimage for the initiated. Those intimate house interiors hosted some of the best textile exhibitions I have seen, including 2011's *Colors of the Oasis: Central Asian Ikats* and 2012's *Weaving Abstraction: Kuba Textiles and the Woven Art of Central Africa*. Despite this, it was a stuffy place ensconced in Western architectural styles that starkly contrasted with the vibrant, non-Western textiles often on display, and forever reminded me of the colonial-era cultural hoarding upon which the collection was built.

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Textile Museum interior (photo by Jessica McConnell Burt, courtesy the George Washington University)

Like many in my textile tribe, I have anxiously awaited this museum's reopening. The intimacy of the old museum would be hard to recreate in a large space; one needs to be extremely close to textiles to appreciate their intensity and complexity. I worried that the curators, emboldened by so much more space, would first showcase only their primary (albeit impressive) holdings of Ottoman carpets and Middle Eastern textiles at the expense of a global cross section of textile traditions. I became more worried about the visibility of contemporary practices after reading the digital catalogue essays, which focus solely on specific historic traditions. But I can report that my preliminary worries were mostly unfounded.

In the Textile Museum's new incarnation, gone are the imposing historic home interiors. The space is an open, modernist-lite construction with a Guggenheim-esque stairwell connecting five floors: large exhibition spaces on the second, third, and basement levels, a 100-seat lecture hall and museum shop on the ground floor, and the Arthur D. Jenkins Library on the fourth floor. While larger rooms will allow for more comprehensive exhibitions, the museum's architecture manages to retain elements of the old location, notably a balcony overlooking the 30-foot walls and open floor plan of the second level — a great space for viewing extraordinarily large textiles like rugs, tapestries, and yardage. And while some of the intimacy is lost, there is now space to move about freely, and the curators can create different arrangements of "rooms" within the open layout. On a recent visit I was thrilled to find a decent crowd of visitors from a broad range of demographics: women and men, people of diverse ethnicities, student groups, young families, old couples, teenagers, and fellow textile devotees.

Yinka Shonibare MBE, "Lady Walking a Tightrope" (2006) (Newark Museum, purchase 2007 Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund; image courtesy of the Newark Museum)

With its inaugural exhibition, *Unraveling Identity: Our Textiles, Our Stories*, the Textile Museum has brought out the largest-ever showing of the treasures in its collection and framed them as emblems of cultural identification. Instead of organizing textiles by geographical region, the exhibition is grouped into five focus areas of identity: Spiritual/Religious, Political, Cosmopolitan, Aggrandized, and Transformative. This curatorial choice allows textiles with similar social purposes to be cross-referenced in spite of vast differences in form and technique. The Cosmopolitan section contains some of the best interplay between pieces; a favorite pairing is the 1930s Javanese Hip Wrapper featuring mythological creatures and Flash Gordon comics next to a 16th-century Peruvian wall hanging depicting a white bird feeding her own flesh to her young, a symbol of Spanish colonial rule. Extreme feats of craft abound, and digital natives will surely be perplexed by the unbelievably crisp, pre-computer graphic quality of works such as the Chinese slit-tapestry woven Empress Dowager's surcoat, the metallic gold embroidery of a Daoist priest's robe, or the serpentine woven forms in the Tlingit Chilkat blanket. Additional rarefied examples include the 19th-century Sumatran Palepai, a complex woven wall hanging depicting mythological, multi-tiered ships that is used to govern social standing conferred at life transition ceremonies.

Empress Dowager's surcoat, front, China, late 19th century, 46.9 x 63.9 in. (gift of the Florence Eddowes Morris Collection, Goucher College, all images courtesy the Textile Museum unless noted otherwise) (click to enlarge)

The Textile Museum now shares its GWU home with the Albert H. Small Washingtoniana Collection and, unfortunately, the two collections are presented as very disparate. I found only one textile piece in the Washingtoniana wing, an 18th-century printed bandana map of DC. (Where are the Revolutionary-era propaganda toiles depicting General Washington riding in chariots?) But the greater missed connection is the Political Identity section of the Textile Museum, which should have been directly adjacent to the connecting entryway that joins the two museums. Instead it is left isolated and disconnected in the basement. The two collections could have been integrated through the inclusion of US presidential garments, political bunting, or national flags in the Textile Museum's Political Identity section, instead of mostly obscure, non-Western artifacts that are lost on visitors. The wall texts don't help elucidate how these textiles are explicitly political in nature, other than that they were used to denote wealth. In fact, the texts accompanying selections in the Cosmopolitan and Aggrandized Identity sections do a better job of explaining the political power conferred and transferred via textiles. Truthfully, all sections could use some critical reframing to remind us that textiles have long served as vessels of war, trade, conquest, assimilation, human bondage, and misery.

Mark Newport, "Batman 2" (2005) (Smithsonian American Art Museum, museum purchase through the Richard T. Evans Fund; image courtesy of the artist) (click to enlarge)

While the exhibition does lean mostly on older works, the addition of contemporary artists is a critical step forward. I counted a total of nine artists, designers, and makers with work from the past 20 years on view. The standouts are Mark Newport's knitted and grandmotherly "Batman 2" (2005), Lia Cook's looming jacquard tapestry "Big Baby" (2000), and Yinka Shonibare MBE's "Lady Walking a Tightrope" (2006), which is expertly placed along a wall of enormous, 16th-century Safavid trade carpets. Nick Cave is represented here, but via a video interview, "The World is My Skin" (2013). Tulu Bayar's "Confluence" (2005), a split-screen video showing two women covering their heads intermittently with a wig and veiling cloth, comments on the similarities between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious piety proscribed for women's bodies. Given the global political relevance of this work, I want this video to resonate within the nearby room full of religious textiles (most of them Middle Eastern), but instead it is practically hidden away near the bathrooms and exit. This is a problem throughout; the contemporary selections should be better integrated with the historical ones.

I understand the impulse to add contemporary depth to a show with video art, but in this case, I would rather see physical textiles, and especially more sculptural textiles, such as Cave's *Soundsuits* or Sheila Hicks's coil-wrapped pillars. Somewhat ironically for an exhibition with the theme of "identity," there is no trace of the Fiber Arts movement, which included artists like Hicks, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Olga de Amaral, Jagoda Buic, and Claire Zeisler, whose hybrid work across textile design and modernist sculpture pioneered a new field in the 1960s shaped by feminist gestures and the primacy of materiality. And what to make of the absence of the textiles that marked the beginning of the Industrial Revolution or those driving the latest interactive technologies? Of course, *Unraveling Identity* doesn't purport to be encyclopedic — that would require 10 times the real estate — but I think that the inclusion of fewer than a dozen examples date from 1900 to 2000 constitutes a major gap.

That said, the new Textile Museum is poised to explore more deeply this relatively uncharted chasm. With better research facilities and larger remote storage completed, I hope the museum's benefactors and curators will grow its collection to support a dynamic, future-forward vision. I hope to see exhibitions that pair core elements of the collection with individual artists and designers, and shows that tackle challenging subject matter like colonialism, race and gender. This first exhibition is a great start. Go see *Unraveling Identity*, peer closely at these extraordinary textiles and ponder the complexity of their making as well as their meaning. Most importantly, look for your own stories, inventive and real, in these flexible, fibrous materials.

Installation view of 'Unraveling Identity: Our Textiles, Our Stories' at the Textile Museum

Detail of table covering or wall hanging, Peru, south highlands, 1675–1700, 68.9 x 64.2 in (acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1951)

Detail of Empress Dowager's surcoat (back), China, late 19th century, 46.9 x 63.9 in (gift of The Florence Eddowes Morris Collection, Goucher College)

Detail of horse cover, Northwestern Iran or Caucasus, Shahsevan people, 1850–1900, 60 x 48 in (gift of Arthur D. Jenkins)

Installation view of 'Unraveling Identity' with Arlette Muschter and Claudy Jongstra, Wedding Dress Japonesque, the Netherlands, 2000 (Cincinnati Art Museum purchase, Lawrence Archer Wachs Fund; photo by William Atkins, courtesy The George Washington University)

Unraveling Identity: Our Textiles, Our Stories *continues at the Textile Museum (701 21st Street, NW, Washington, DC) through August 24.*

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Aaron McIntosh is a cross-disciplinary artist who works in textiles, sculpture, drawing, collage, and photography. His work has been exhibited nationally, internationally, and most recently in Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and... **More by Aaron McIntosh**

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