

Preserving SOCIETY'S *fabrics*

BUSINESS LIFE REPORTS ON THE ART OF PROTECTING PRECIOUS, AND SOMETIMES PRICELESS, TEXTILES.

Adelaide-based textile conservator Mary Jose has helped restore and conserve fabulous textiles such as a priceless Ching Dynasty Empress's robe, but she says the real need for textile conservation is more likely to be found in people's homes and businesses, and in public institutions such as local councils and churches.

'Many families have lovely old textiles that have enormous sentimental value, such as old christening gowns and wedding dresses, which are seriously at risk of not making it through to the next generation due to deterioration', she says.

'People have textiles they've inherited or brought back from overseas. Often, too, there are collections of military memorabilia - perhaps things owned by family forebears in World War One - that are also at risk.'

Mary is particularly concerned about wall hangings, such as old flags and banners, tapestries, robes

and costumes, often found in local councils, churches and other organisations, that have been poorly kept and displayed - and yet continue to be neglected because nobody knows what to do about them.

'The most serious threats to the long-term protection of textiles are light, insects and improper storage or display that can actually end up destroying the precious textile', Mary says. Cleaning valuable textiles can be especially difficult, with the risk of permanent damage being caused if not carried out by experts.

A common case that distresses her is the poor display of antique samplers, beautifully embroidered panels, often done by schoolgirls as an exercise, and that she has seen glued to a solid backing. 'Samplers are now becoming extremely valuable, yet I have seen some that have been framed using materials that will speed up their deterioration.'

Mary says that increasingly, either for sentimental reasons or because of their investment value, people who



A stitch in time... Mary Jose, conserving history

come into contact with textiles that are valuable, are making use of professional conservation services.

Mary, who has more than 15 years of national and international experience, began her textile conservation career with an art history degree at ANU in Canberra. She completed a postgraduate degree in textile conservation at the Courtauld Institute in the United Kingdom, where she was based at Hampton Court Palace, outside London. Mary is a former chair of the accreditation panel of the Australian Institute for Conservation of Cultural Materials, the body that sets the standards for all conservators.

For several years at Artlab, one of Australia's main government-owned conservation organisations, she was responsible for all South Australian textile collections in government institutions, including the Art Gallery of South Australia, South Australian Museum, Carrick Hill, the State Library and the Migration Museum. Since launching her own business, Mary has conducted assignments for the Art Gallery, the University of Adelaide, the National Trust and the Festival Centre Trust, as well as private textile collectors from around Australia.

'Often it is just a matter of telling people about the various storage options that are available', she says. One of her main objectives is to help people display textiles in a safe, convenient and aesthetically pleasing way. If a textile has become damaged, she is able to repair and stabilise it so that further damage will not occur.

'Most people are familiar with the need for conservation of paintings or books and prints, but textiles have been making a comeback over the past 10 years and they are just as much in need of careful preservation', she says.

Mary recently opened a new studio and workshop in Adelaide where owners can take fabrics and textiles to have their condition assessed and a conservation program established. 🏠

Photo: Trevor Fox