



FABRIC OF LIFE

"I have always worked to conserve both public and private collections, and I find it fascinating to understand the reasons people consider textiles so important. We live surrounded by textiles, we wear them every day, and we express our rites of passage through textiles."

Story by ANSIE VAN DER WALT

South Australian-based MARY JOSE wanted to be a marine archaeologist, but problems with her ears prevented her from diving. Instead, she opted to study the 'next best thing', a BA in history, prehistory, and anthropology at The Australian National University. This is how she discovered that there was such a thing as textile conservation.

As a 16-year-old, Mary spent some time in Brazil. This first exposure to the rich colour of Brazilian culture, people, and place left an indelible mark on her. Travelling and experiencing culture through textiles has become part of her professional and personal life to this day.

In the late seventies, early eighties, when Mary was a student, nobody in Australia taught textile conservation. Mary studied paintings and only had access to one tapestry on which she managed to write an essay. Today, the National Gallery has an extensive textile collection and a textile component as part of the fine art course in Canberra.

Once she graduated, Mary moved to England for postgraduate training in textile conservation at the Courtauld Institute of Art based at Hampton Court Palace. "We were lucky to spend each Wednesday morning in the textile study collection at the Victoria & Albert Museum, and attend lectures in the conservation department at the British Museum in the afternoon. The breadth of the textile collections in the UK opened up a world of textiles that I hadn't seen in Australia in the mid-1980s. I am pleased to say this is very different now."

Working on a collection of Egyptian textiles recovered by Egyptologist, Flinders Petrie, remains one of Mary's highlights. "It was the first time I worked on 2000-year-old textiles. It was terrifying but a great way to build confidence."

Mary worked at Castle Howard in Yorkshire while studying, and they offered her a job after graduation. "I was tempted to stay as they have a fantastic textile collection, including a big collection of Ballet Russe costumes. But I also received a job offer in Australia at the same time and I decided to return home."

Mary returned to Adelaide as Manager of Textiles at Arnlab, a South Australian Government agency, providing preservation, care, and management services of the state's cultural collections. "I had just graduated, and the role seemed daunting. I walked into an empty lab on my first day and found only a pile of files on my desk."

Mary stayed in this role for seven years, building her team and working on a range of projects, often in collaboration with conservators in other disciplines. "It was a fantastic grounding to be working in these incredible facilities and with so many different collections."

Going back to her first love, textile conservation, Mary opened a studio, taking on projects for private clients and galleries. Her business, *Fabric of Life*, was born. By that time, Mary had taken several trips to Southeast Asia and had accumulated a sizable collection of textiles. As an experiment, she opened a small gallery shop in North Adelaide "to just see what happens."

The travel bug she caught as a teenager in Brazil was still there. During her time at Arnlab, Mary started exploring Asia's cultural textiles. Her very first textile trip was to Laos, where with the help of an interpreter, a retired history teacher, they traversed the countryside and small villages to learn about and buy textiles.

After working with textiles in museum conditions, often considered treasures or valuable artifacts, Mary was astonished to find that practising artisans produced work of even greater quality, yet they went without any recognition or appreciation of their work. Mary's shop was a way to recognise and celebrate these artisans and their skills, and to share the things she learned about living textiles as opposed to museum artefacts.

While attending the Sari To Sarong: 300 years of Indian and Indonesian Textile Exchange exhibition presented by the National Gallery in Canberra in 2004, Mary met Carole Douglas, another textile-loving Australian who was in the process of setting up textile tours to India. "She asked, 'Would you like to come to India with me and I will test my tour on you in exchange for some feedback?' I said yes, of course."

"We went to Gujarat, where Carole knew many artisans and introduced me to her network of blockprinters, dyers and weavers. I went back the next year, and the next, and started buying from them regularly. It is important to me that I work directly with the makers, that way I can ensure that their work is respected and they receive fair payment."



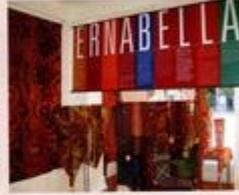


Mary's textile collection tells the story of her travels to India, Uzbekistan, South East Asia, and Australia. Over the years, she has built personal relationships with artisans from all these regions, worked with organisations supporting women, people with disabilities and those protecting and supporting sustainable production practices.



Textiles tell stories, and Mary has many of them. From the artisan who trusted her when she ran out of money in remote areas of India. "He said, just take it and send me the money when you get back to Australia," to the textile trader from Delhi, whose family owns a cashmere shawl business, in whose home she shared a meal with a journalist fresh from the war in Iraq. "It was an eye-opening experience to see the world from a perspective so far removed from my Australian viewpoint."

Although her formal studies and museum work educated Mary in the use and meaning of many kinds of textiles, it was the living stories that fascinated her. "I learned about refugees returning home after upheaval who could be identified by the embroidery pattern on their clothes, as each symbol is unique to a specific area and many times a specific maker. I learned that people who are considered by modern standards to be illiterate can 'read' clothes to tell you who made them and where they come from."



Ernabella

Closer to home, Mary built a deep relationship with the batik artists from Ernabella, in the APY lands of remote northwestern South Australia.

"In the early days of the shop, I contacted Ernabella to invite them to do a batik exhibition at *Fabric of Life*. They told me, 'Come up to see us and we will decide if we like you.' I guess it was their way of saying we have to know you first before we will decide to work with you."

So I, with my husband and daughter who was eight at the time, drove up to the APY lands. It is very remote, and there are no hotels. We were allowed to sleep in the art centre itself. They locked us in at night, and we had the place to ourselves. It was lovely as we could wander around and study all the art that was in progress. We stayed for a few days, getting to know the artists and their families, after which they declared they liked us and we could proceed with the exhibition.

I worked with them for about seven years, hosting a few exhibitions each year. We got to know each other very well and had a beautiful relationship."



Mary's gallery shop is now closed, and she works from her home studio and sells her fabrics online or at exhibitions. "I am in the process of restoring a graduation gown for a client who plans to graduate in the same gown her grandfather wore. I am restoring a vintage beaded bag for another client and I am working on a collection of textiles for the All Souls Church in St Peter's. I also have a collection of kimonos for another client that is waiting in the wings."

Mary might not have become a marine archaeologist, but being a textile conservator allowed her to take a deep dive into history, prehistory, culture, and fine art all at the same time, while her ears stay attuned to the stories told by textiles and thread.