

CIDOC2015 - Documenting Diversity – Collections, Catalogues & Context

Title: Collaborative Documentation of Decorative Art Elements at Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens

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Sub-theme: Access and integration of material from multiple fields

Type: Project

Scope: Institutional

Length: Short paper

The institutional project “Collaborative Documentation of Decorative Art Elements at Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens” is an on-going project between the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH) archives, conservation department, and its American decorative arts house museum, Bayou Bend. The project, which is being completed in two phases, gathers and co-references decorative elements, primarily fabrics, installed over the decades at the house museum.

Bayou Bend Collection and Gardens was created in 1927 as the private home of philanthropist Ima Hogg (1882-1975). The 27 room mansion sits on 14 acres of gardens in a bend of Houston’s Buffalo Bayou. In the late 1950s, Ima Hogg donated first her home then her collection to the MFAH. The collection is considered one of the world’s finest for American furnishings, silver, ceramics, and paintings. Rooms in the home are dedicated to decorative art periods, such as William and Mary, Queen Anne, Chippendale and Federal.

Bayou Bend underwent extensive renovations prior to its opening as a museum in 1966. Subsequently, it underwent significant renovations in 1991 and again in 2010. Textiles installed through the major 1991 renovation comprise the first phase of the project. Currently installed textiles, ironwork elements and fabrics without extant samples will be documented and preserved in the second phase.

The project was the brainchild of longtime curator, Michael Brown. After his death in 2013, docent Florine Carr approached the Archives about undertaking the project. Florine has

been connected with Bayou Bend since 1968, focusing largely on textile projects. For a time, she worked with a textile conservation consultancy. In 2014, the museum requested that she and assistant Bayou Bend curator, Remi Dyll, review the textiles stored in art storage in preparation for the move out of the current Conservation, Archives and Art Storage facility. Early samples from this group (those installed through the 1991 renovation) constitute Phase I of the project.

The vision was to physically preserve, provide access, and, most importantly, co-reference the decorative elements with textual documentation from Bayou Bend’s art object files as well as from the textual and photographic documentation in the Archives Ima Hogg and Photography collections.

Figure 1 – William Mackay wallpaper sample, with drawings and correspondence gently encouraging a gold background over the white Ima Hogg first envisioned, 1939



In this figure a sample of gilt dining room wallpaper has been tied to designer William Mackay’s design drawings and a letter proposing the gilt background. Early in the project it was decided that a set of fabric samples would be coupled with photographic and textual documentation in a “scrapbook” designed for access; preservation samples would be maintained separately in “deep storage”. To the extent possible, the resulting archive will be preserved and distributed through the MFAH’s digital archive.

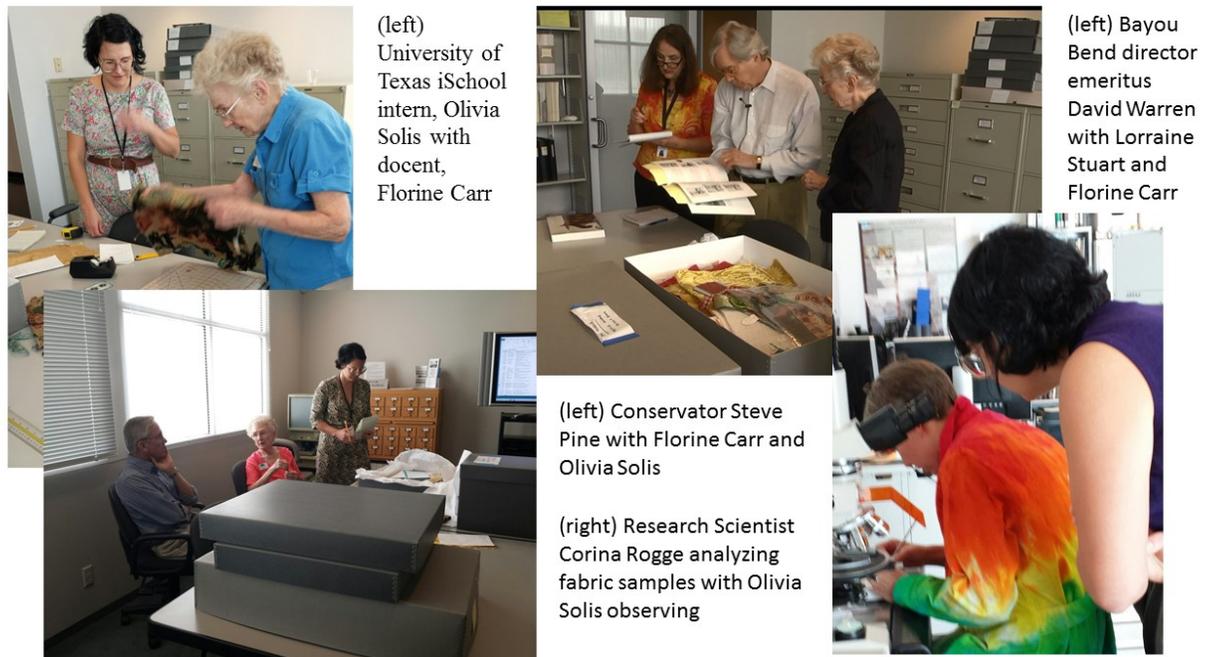


Figure 2 – Photos demonstrating collaborative effort

In the past, the Archives has worked collaboratively on projects with both Conservation and Bayou Bend. However, this is the first project that captures the corpus of knowledge from allied fields as it relates to materials. Conservation and curatorial staff conferred with the Archives to provide preservation guidance, oral documentation and chemical analysis of the textiles. The Bayou Bend Education department video-recorded a session with David Warren, who began as a curator at Bayou Bend in 1965. As well as knowing Ima Hogg during the last decade of her life, his knowledge of the collection is extensive. The video provided a foundational framework, with each fabric receiving a sequential tracking number based on its appearance in the video. Fabrics were initially sorted loosely by time period and the room of their installation. This ultimately became the final arrangement for the scrapbook.

Although Phase I of the project officially began in the spring, the bulk of the work was conducted during the internship of graduate information science student, Olivia Solis. Olivia began by capturing stills and gleaning information from the video and Bayou Bend collection guides. The fabrics were later photographed as needed for color management. Photography allowed fabrics with only a single sample to be maintained in “deep storage” within a portfolio box and to be represented in the scrapbooks designed for access. For similar reasons, as well as

to capture fabric samples maintained in the art object files, textiles were directly scanned in some instances.

The first textual documentation to be reviewed was maintained in the art object files. Fortunately the accession numbers of the objects that the textiles had covered had been previously well-documented. Thus, the object files often provided a wealth of information about the nature of the fabric, such as whether it was the original covering, where it had been purchased, and when it was removed.

Initial plans called for the inclusion of document copies in the physical scrapbooks which were to also contain textile samples; it quickly became obvious that there was too much documentation to make that practical. The digital repository promised a more accommodating environment, so the documentation is available digitally as well as in hardcopies maintained in separate files.

Textual material from Ima Hogg Papers was then reviewed with plans to glean and gather in a like manner. An unexpected development occurred when references were encountered to early textiles that were not in the sample set. Although it is doubtful that samples of all the early textiles documented in Ima Hogg's correspondence remain extant, efforts to document through early photography and news articles will be undertaken as part of Phase II.

A large subset of the textiles was not associated with an art object. These were primarily draperies but also cushions. In these instances, photographic documentation found in the archives became of paramount importance in determining in which location and era they were installed. In one instance, a misidentification was corrected by a de-installation photo Florine Carr provided.

Figure 3 – Docent's de-installation photo leads to correction of mislabeled undercurtain



The anticipated objective of the project has been achieved in the physical and digital “packaging” of textiles with archival and object documentation. The archival photography has been enriched by the knowledge imparted by Conservation and Curatorial staff. Symbiotically, records gleaned from the Ima Hogg Papers have provided additional context.

The end result of the project is that comparisons of Bayou Bend’s objects and rooms over time can readily be made. Happy but unexpected results have been the donation of materials held by docent Florine Carr and, most significantly, an increased institutional interest in integrating materials and working collaboratively toward further documentation.