Meet Lee Talbot, Curator of the Eastern Hemisphere Collections at The Textile Museum in Washington DC.

Lee Talbot is Curator of the Eastern Hemisphere Collections at the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum in Washington DC. It’s a vast geographic area for any curator to encompass, yet a role for which Lee is well equipped. He admits to a long term (almost lifelong) fascination with the people, culture and history of East Asia. Given the rich textile culture of the region, it is perhaps no surprise that his interest was sparked by an early encounter with fabric. ‘My father spent time in Japan and Korea during the Korean War, and brought back some clothing and fabrics. These languished in a closet for years until I discovered them at the age of four. The colours, textures and patterns were unlike anything I had seen before; they seemed to literally jump out at me, and I was absolutely enthralled by them. I wanted to know everything I could about the places where they were made.’

The interest in Asian culture those fabrics awakened has persisted but it was 20 years before textiles re-emerged as a focus for his attention. ‘After graduating from university I moved to Taiwan to study Mandarin Chinese. Through frequent visits to the National Palace Museum I realised that art provided for me the most compelling medium through which to approach Asian culture, and a number of trips to Southeast Asia – Thailand, Laos and Cambodia – reawakened my interest in textiles as I began collecting and learning about fabrics from those countries as well as East Asia as a whole.’

What began as a passion turned into a vocation as Lee enrolled at Bard Graduate Center in New York City to study the history of decorative art, design and material culture. His career path, however, remained unclear. ‘I never expected to become a curator. I had a MBA, so I thought I might end up employed in the art business in some capacity.’ A period of part-time work at Sotheby’s during his MA studies, combined with two bouts of teaching undergraduates proved influential in his thinking. ‘I enjoyed the daily contact with great works of art the auction house gave, but teaching made me realise that my primary interest was in passing on my knowledge and passion for the decorative arts.’ Thoughts of an academic career, however, were superseded by the offer of a curatorial post on the completion of his PhD studies. Textiles provided the opportunity.

‘While living in New York and studying at Bard, I spent seven years studying the technique and history of East Asian embroidery with Korean textile historian and master embroiderer Young Yang Chung.’ Dr Chung had put together an extensive textile collection, which documented the history of East Asian embroidery from the first millennium BCE to the present. In 2004 she moved the collection to Korea and founded the Chung Young Yang Embroidery Museum (CEM) at Sookmyung Women’s University in Seoul. Lee went too, spending two and a half years as CEM’s curator before returning to the US to take up a post at The Textile Museum. In March 2015, The Museum joined with the George Washington University to establish a new museum on GW’s main campus in downtown Washington.
Housing one of the world’s great textile collections – nearly 20,000 items strong and encompassing five continents over five millennia – The Textile Museum seems a natural fit for Lee as a curator. Its commitment to promoting knowledge through material culture combined with its promotion of the artistic and cultural significance of textiles and its academic context, is one that aligns with his own approach to curation. This mutual affinity is apparent in Lee and the Museum’s willingness to challenge boundaries.

Consider some of Lee’s major projects and the links are evident: ‘Blue’ (2008) explored the history of indigo dyeing, via textiles from ancient Peru and the late Mediterranean world, alongside one of the world’s oldest surviving pairs of Levi jeans and works by five international artists. ‘Green: The Color and Cause’ (2011) examined how we learn how to read them, as they combine aesthetics and technology.

‘Stories of Migration: Contemporary Artists Interpret Diaspora’ (16 April-4 Sept) and ‘Ringer! Only in Okinawa’ (November). The former he describes as ‘giving visual voice to one of the most overarching narratives of our time’ through work by 44 artists, which ranges from quilts and hangings to installations and video. The latter will be the first major American museum exhibition devoted exclusively to the sophisticated textile arts of Japan’s southernmost prefecture. Consider that list. There is diversity and curatorial ambition. There is also an evident commitment to the value of material culture.

My academic background in material culture studies informs my work a great deal. Its methodology – drawing on theory and practice from archaeology, art history, anthropology and other disciplines – offers a framework for studying objects as documents to be read and understood. Textiles can be particularly loquacious in this, when we learn how to read them, as they combine aesthetics and technology.

Within the broad frame of material culture, however, Lee is also quick to acknowledge the impact on his thinking of the specific collections with which he has worked. ‘The CIM collection’s focus on cross-cultural exchange and the international spread of techniques, designs and ideas was an indelible influence on my curatorial approach and the historical and cultural breadth of The Textile Museum’s collection has similarly encouraged an expansive outlook.’

Important as exhibitions are in the public sharing of collections and the knowledge therein, Lee is concerned to also emphasise the significance of his collection management responsibilities: ‘A curator’s duties are wide ranging but their primary job is to take care of the objects in the museum’s collections’. It is this role which has taken centre stage in recent years as the museum has moved 20,000 objects from its home of 90 years to a newly constructed conservation and collections resource centre on GW’s Virginia campus.

A long and, at times, challenging task, it is one that has left him heartened at seeing the collection housed in a spacious, state of the art facility. There is a sense of this being a good position, a view that he extends to the current position of textiles. ‘It is an exciting time to be a curator of contemporary textiles as artists and designers continue to push the medium in new directions.’

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