

## **Pursuing Partnerships in Planning Exhibitions of East Asian Costume at an American Museum**

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### **Abstract**

This paper outlines partnerships formed in planning three exhibitions of East Asian costume at the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum (TM) in Washington, DC. For these exhibitions, partnerships helped the TM to more accurately, engagingly, and sensitively present subject matter unfamiliar to most American viewers. These partnerships not only provided access to objects and context-building multimedia resources but also allowed the active input of people from the cultures highlighted in the exhibitions. The paper reveals that although delineating and managing each partner's contribution can be challenging, and the division of responsibilities exposes each partner to risk, successful collaborations can leverage the strengths of each partner, expand audience outreach, and engender an exchange of ideas that enriches exhibition content.

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### **Introduction**

In planning exhibitions and related programming, museums often join forces with other organizations. Successful collaborations can effectively utilize each partner's core strengths and facilitate fruitful scholarly and professional exchange. This paper outlines partnerships formed in planning three exhibitions of East Asian costume at the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum (TM) in Washington, DC. Strategic partnerships allowed the TM to bolster exhibition content, reach new audiences, and more effectively incorporate the voices and viewpoints of the peoples represented in the exhibitions.

### ***Bingata! Only in Okinawa***

Organized in conjunction with the Okinawa Prefectural Government, *Bingata! Only in Okinawa* (2016-2017) united curators and collections from the TM and three Japanese institutions—the Okinawa Prefectural Museum, the Okinawa Churashima Foundation, and the Naha City Museum of History—for the first large scale exhibition in the USA to showcase *bingata*, a distinctively Okinawan technique of resist dyeing.



**Figure 1:** Installation of Bingata! Only in Okinawa, The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington, DC

The three-year planning period allowed frequent exchange between Japanese and American museum professionals. Working collaboratively, the curators from Okinawa and the TM developed an object list and story line for the exhibition and a plan for the exhibition catalogue. The partnership proved to be highly successful, with the Japanese curators offering great depth of knowledge and the TM providing insights from its decades-long history of presenting non-Western textile arts to American audiences.

All curators were confident that American viewers would respond visually to the bright colors and bold patterns of *bingata*, but the challenge was to deepen visitors' understanding and appreciation of these objects by introducing the social and historical contexts in which they originally were made and used. Knowing that most exhibition visitors would be unfamiliar with Okinawa's unique cultural traditions, the curators set out to accurately and sensitively distill a very complicated historical narrative down into a few key facts and concepts.

The non-textile archives of the three Okinawan museums offered a great deal of contextual material, and curators were able to include slide shows of rare historical photographs; films of theatrical performances featuring *bingata* costumes; reproductions of eighteenth- to early-twentieth-century paintings; and interactive touch screens exploring topics such as tattooing in the Ryukyu archipelago and its relation to textile design.

The object selection process involved the TM, the three lending museums in Okinawa, and the Japanese government's Agency for Cultural Affairs (文化庁, *bunkachō*). At that time the TM's newly constructed exhibition galleries had been completed only one year previously, and thus the museum could not provide a documented history of stable environmental readings sufficiently

long to borrow *bingata* textiles designated as “national treasures.” Nonetheless, some of the greatest extant examples were approved for display, and many of these had never before left Japan. The lenders determined the amount of time each piece could be on view, which ranged from fourteen days to a maximum of six weeks. As such, most of the objects had to be reinstalled halfway through the exhibition’s three-month run.



**Figure 2:** Installation of Bingata! Only in Okinawa, *The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington, DC*

For the installation, the rotation of objects and labels at the halfway point, and the deinstallation, a team of six curators, conservators, and art handlers came from Japan and worked directly with their counterparts in Washington, which proved to be a valuable learning experience for both teams. This partnership and exchange also extended into public programming. The National Cherry Blossom Festival is one of Washington DC’s largest public celebrations. For the Cherry Blossom Festivals in 2015 and 2016, the TM worked with a team from Okinawa to present family days that included *bingata* making and Okinawan food, films, games, and dance performances. A local affinity group, the Okinawa Kai, mostly comprising members of the Okinawan immigrant and expatriate community, assisted with programming. These events allowed museum visitors to learn directly about Okinawan history and culture through one-on-one interaction with people from Okinawa.

The vice governor of Okinawa and the Japanese ambassador to the USA co-hosted the exhibition opening reception, and the following day the TM hosted a symposium featuring five speakers from Okinawa, including folklorists, curators, and historians of textiles and theater who provided a broader socio-cultural context for *bingata* dyeing.



This project also gave the TM the chance to expand its collection of textiles from Okinawa. During the opening reception the TM was presented with a remarkable kimono from the venerable Shiroma family studio, and members of the Okinawa Kai of Greater DC gave the museum eight garments documenting different techniques and time periods.

With exhibit objects ranging from eighteenth-century court robes to contemporary fashion design, *Bingata! Only in Okinawa* provided an overview of this art form's history, technique, and cultural significance while also offering the opportunity for collaboration and exchange between American and Japanese museum professionals.

### ***Vanishing Traditions: Textiles and Treasures from Southwest China***

*Vanishing Traditions: Textiles and Treasures from Southwest China* (2018) displayed highlights from a 300-piece private collection of Chinese minority garments and jewelry that was donated to the TM in 2015. In creating and implementing this exhibition, collaboration with two Chinese institutions allowed curatorial exchange between the TM and Chinese museums as well as a wide range of exhibition-related public programs.



**Figure 3:** *Installation of Vanishing Traditions: Textiles and Treasures from Southwest China, The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington, DC*

During this project's planning stages, the TM hosted a visiting fellow from China. Ai Lan, a curator at the Guangxi Museum of Nationalities with a specialty in Chinese minority textiles, spent three months at the TM through The International Exchange Project for Chinese Cultural Professionals, a program sponsored by the China National Arts Fund. Ai Lan helped catalogue

the collection to ensure correct attribution, and helped develop the concept and object list for an exhibition that would showcase the venerable textile traditions that were quickly disappearing in southwest China.

In planning and programming the exhibition, the TM partnered with the George Washington University's Confucius Institute, a program affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. Through the Confucius Institute, I received a research grant to travel to southwest China, visit most of the villages represented in the exhibition, and learn first-hand about their textile traditions, including embroidery from a Miao master and batik from a teacher of the Gejia people. Most of the garments and jewelry in the exhibition were created for wear during festivals. I timed my trip to visit in February, a particularly popular month for festivals, so I was able to attend several and fully experience the sights, sounds, and motions originally associated with the finery displayed in the exhibition. In Guiyang, I met with curators at the Guizhou Cultural Palace of Nationalities, who looked carefully through the object list with me and offered their thoughts and suggestions for the exhibition. They provided books of recent scholarship on textile and costume traditions of minority peoples living in southwest China, dozens of excellent photographs from around the region, and some newly-produced videos on the topic.

This material proved to be invaluable in the exhibition, which included slide shows of photographs and six two-and-a-half minute films highlighting the lifestyles, customs, and craft traditions of southwest China's minority peoples. This multimedia content deepened visitors' appreciation of the garments and jewelry on view by helping them to better understand the cultural and social contexts in which these objects were made and used. Furthermore, many of these costumes would have been worn for dance, so the films helped convey the visual and aural sensation of their pleats, pendants, and shimmering surfaces in motion.



**Figure 4:** *Installation of Vanishing Traditions: Textiles and Treasures from Southwest China, The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington, DC*

The Confucius Institute sponsored the exhibition's opening reception and public programs, which included interviews with the donor of the collection, Bea Roberts, a family day that celebrated the Chinese New Year, and an ongoing series of lectures and films related to the peoples of southwest China, including a screening of Eleanor Coppola's documentary *A Visit to Miao Country* followed by a live interview with her.

*Vanishing Traditions: Textiles and Treasures from Southwest China* celebrated a significant gift to the TM collection and was the museum's first exhibition to focus on the textiles of China's minority peoples. Partnerships with The International Exchange Project for Chinese Cultural Professionals and The Confucius Institute offered the chance for interaction between American and Chinese museum professionals, and demonstrated the enrichment of exhibition content and visitor experience that can result from this international collaboration.

### ***From Royal Court to Runway: The Flowering of Korean Fashion***

Currently the TM is working on the exhibition *From Royal Court to Runway: The Flowering of Korean Fashion*, scheduled to open in September 2020. The exhibition storyline begins in the late nineteenth century, when Korea first opened to the international community, and shows how Korean clothing and craftsmanship changed over the following decades in response to new political and historical circumstances.

While introducing traditional Korean costume, or *hanbok*, the exhibition will celebrate South Korea's extraordinary outpouring of innovation and imagination in the twenty-first century in fashion, film, music, and other arts—a *hallyu* (Korean wave) in which Korea's cultural heritage often serves as a springboard for new artistic expression.

This exhibition began as a partnership with another American museum. While the TM's Korean collection is modest in size and quality, the other institution has substantial Korean holdings. For two years, I worked with their curator of Asian art in putting together an exhibition that essentially highlighted their Korean costume collection. Early in 2019, however, the other museum experienced significant personnel changes, including the exit of the curator of Asian art. The other museum may remain involved as lenders to the exhibition, but the relationship between our two institutions is no longer a bilateral partnership, and the TM decided to look more broadly for exhibition objects.

A positive outcome of this development has been the involvement of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago as a lender. The Field Museum's Korean textile collection is small but of extraordinary quality, and it has been little studied or exhibited. Many of the objects were sent by the Korean royal government for display in the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, a provenance that renders them particularly appropriate for an exhibition that explores how Korean cultural products have been presented and shared internationally.

Another positive development stemming from the expansion of lenders to the exhibition is a promised gift of Korean material to our museum. This collection is one of the most comprehensive private assemblages of historical Korean textiles in the USA, and its acquisition will represent a quantum leap in the size and quality of our museum's Korean holdings.

In developing the exhibition themes and content, the TM has worked with the faculty of George Washington University's Institute for Korean Studies (IKS). The IKS is planning a major symposium on Korean fashion soon after the exhibition opening, and has been a valuable

conduit for reaching out to the various Korea-focused student groups on campus for their input and involvement. In planning public programming and cultural events to accompany the exhibition, the TM also has begun working with the Korean Cultural Center of the Korean Embassy.

## **Conclusions**

As evidenced by the three examples discussed above, in planning exhibitions of East Asian costume at a non-Asian museum, collaborations and partnerships with other organizations can deepen and diversify exhibition content, reach new audiences, and more effectively incorporate the voices and viewpoints of the peoples represented. While delineating and managing each partner's contribution can be challenging, and the division of responsibilities exposes each partner to risk, successful collaborations can efficaciously leverage the resources of each organization and result in stronger exhibitions and programs.

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## **Photo Credits**

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