The Bonnie Cashin Collection at DAAP

Conservation assessment and recommendations for future care and use

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August, 2013
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Overview

The Bonnie Cashin Collection at the School of Design, Art, Architecture & Planning at the University of Cincinnati is being prepared for a move from its current storage location which is necessary for its long-term care and use. The collection will be rehoused at the Art Library where it can become a resource accessible to the college and to the wider arts world. The move represents an opportunity to assess the collection, address conservation concerns, and prepare for its future use. As the first stage in this process, short condition assessments were carried out for the entire collection, totaling 200 pieces (which includes ensembles numbered together: a total of 219 individual items were examined).

Above, a portion of the collection on racks during the assessment process.

The collection represents a fascinating and wide-ranging sampling of Bonnie Cashin as a women’s clothing designer with strong examples through the 1960s and 1970s. However, the conservation assessment revealed the collection is endangered due to widespread damage primarily associated with non-ideal storage conditions. In general, the collection has suffered light damage, damage from ill-fitting hangers, dust,
and mishandling. Much of this damage is cumulative and irreversible: the processes are ongoing and more material is being irretrievably lost and damaged every day. However, much of the collection is still in good or excellent condition and relatively simple improvements to the collection’s storage and care will bring these damaging processes virtually to a halt. In order for the collection to be preserved, it is essential that it be

1) organized and cataloged,
2) rehoused using conservation-grade storage materials and methods, and finally,
3) undergo conservation treatment to address previous damage and to prevent further deterioration.

Right, an example of irreversible damage due to storage conditions. This jacket has been damaged by light exposure, causing the lightened stripes down the sleeves, across the shoulders, and along the peak of a crease just behind the shoulder.

Relocating the collection to the library at DAAP is the pivotal first step in transforming the conditions under which the collection has been cared for and making it a useful resource for the University and the fashion world. While organizing and cataloging the collection seem like tasks obviously suited to the library, the role of the library as the professional steward of objects and facilitator of access may be even more important for the Bonnie Cashin Collection. The various tags attached to the collection attest to multiple past campaigns to organize it;
but without a structure of stewardship to oversee the collection, its handling, care, and access to it, it has deteriorated despite the care others have obviously dedicated. In the library, a structure already exists to organize, care for, and provide access to objects, including fragile, special collections. An investment to retrofit a space to accommodate this unique “special collection” will equip the library to not only organize and catalog the collection, but also to rehouse it. Cataloged and safely stored in a way that protects and preserves the collection, it can at last be transformed into an accessible resource.

The impact of the Bonnie Cashin Collection at DAAP may extend well outside the University of Cincinnati with the creation of a digital database managed through the library. A quick internet search reveals both the importance of Bonnie Cashin as a pioneer in women’s sportswear design and the dearth of online research material about her collections. The creation of digital holdings documenting the collection would be a valuable resource the world over while protecting and preserving the collection. Digital collections raise the profile of the collection, the holding institution, and limit the need for actual handling of delicate materials.

The first database necessary to document and care for the collection is included here. The condition assessments were used to generate a spreadsheet and the attached worksheets. The worksheet includes three sections: identification, condition, and conservation. These cover the essential information necessary to begin to organize the collection, to rehouse it, and to address its most urgent conservation needs. Each section is explained in greater detail below, including more general recommendations related to each part of the process.
Guide to the worksheets and recommendations

Identification

This section includes basic identifying information to begin to organize and catalog the collection. In the museum, this is the information we would use to create an object record or file for each piece which would include all the information we have about a piece including what it is, its condition, records of its treatment or display, and location. On the worksheet, a second table is included in this section that lists all the tags from previous campaigns of organizing the collection.

- **Permanent accession numbers** should be assigned as soon as possible and attached to the object.
  - Arbitrary temporary tracking numbers were assigned to help organize the collection; they should be discarded
  - Recommend a numbering system in keeping with museum convention or your library cataloging system.
    - Museum registration numbers follow a wide range of formats, but usually include the year of accessioning and an identification number
  - Roughly half of the collection is already identified with a year and season (Tag 1)
    - A possible accession number system could use the design year, which would have the advantage of putting the collection in chronological order
    - Students could research to discover the missing collection years and verify the ones recorded
  - Temporary tracking number tags are on the hangers only and not conservation-safe
  - The convention for textile accession labels is cotton tape with the number written with permanent marker, stitched with the minimum stitches to the center back or another stable and inconspicuous location
    - The Cincinnati Art Museum uses ½” width cotton tape from Wayne Mills, Inc.
  - The various non-original identifying tags from past organizing campaigns should all be removed
    - Not conservation-safe materials
    - Some are actively causing damage (pins, crude stitching)
- Retain all tags in object files
  - **Title** is intended to make reference easier.
    - They can and should be changed if a more accurate or more useful one is suggested
    - Identifying fiber content should be avoided unless it has been positively identified by testing
  - **Description** provides more detail about the construction and material of the object
    - Providing a description of an object in a condition report is an obligation as part of conservation “best practice”
    - Descriptions recorded so far are very basic and should be expanded as research and further analysis are conducted
  - **Materials** are all “best guess” ONLY
    - These should not be relied upon for any kind of publication before testing confirms identifications
  - **Tags** from previous campaigns of organizing the collection are noted with the major campaigns as follows
    - Tag 1 is the circular cardboard tag with metal edge, typically identifying a season and year
    - Tag 2 is a white cardboard shingle with a number
    - Tags 3 and 4 are various other tags including white index cards (sometimes in a pocket), cotton muslin tags with Korean characters, and others
    - All the non-original tags should be removed, put in sample bags marked with object’s accession number, and retained in object files
  - **Recommended for object files**
    - Sample bags from Uline: [http://www.uline.com/Grp_5/Poly-Bags-Reclosable](http://www.uline.com/Grp_5/Poly-Bags-Reclosable)

**Condition**

This section includes an assessment of the basic condition of each piece. Generally, the collection is in good condition. Because most of the damage is related to non-ideal storage conditions, the necessity to address the conditions is urgent before damage progresses.

- **Major damage** is almost all a result of non-ideal storage conditions
- Light damage, especially in a stripe down the sides and across top edges
- Stretching from hanging, especially with knits
- Stretching from ill-fitting hangers ranging from minor protrusions to major holes and loss
- Pin holes or compression damage from attaching skirts and pants to hangers
- Crushing and creasing from overpacked storage, objects draped over hanger crossbars, or inadequately supported
- Delamination from chemical interaction of leather finish and hanger materials
- Dust and general soiling

Left details of a suede jacket showing stretching (top) and punctures from stress and abrasion (bottom) caused by an ill-fitting hanger.
• **Overall rating** was given: poor, fair, good, or excellent
  o Pieces generally rated depending on closeness to estimated original appearance and stability in current condition
• **Notes** records the major condition issues found during a brief assessment
  o Pieces were generally examined on a mannequin and on their hangers
  o More fragile or damaged pieces were also examined flat on the table
  o Condition notes should not be considered comprehensive and are only intended to give a sense of the scope and nature of condition problems

**Conservation**

This section includes all conservation recommendations including storage recommendations (“preventive conservation”), treatment recommendations (“interventive conservation”), and notes on suitability for classroom use. Improved storage conditions is by far the most urgent conservation need of the collection.

• **Storage environment** ideals for textile collections:
  o Stable environment with as little fluctuation of temperature and relative humidity as possible (avoid external walls, adjacent plumbing or heat sources)
    ▪ In the past, conservators recommended 70° +/- 2° and 50% relative humidity +/- 10%
    ▪ The current trend is for conditions to be more responsive to individual collections, climate, and buildings; for this collection, cool and stable are likely to be the most beneficial factors.
  o Dark! Light damage is cumulative and irreversible.
  o Clean space with controlled access, limited traffic, no insect activity.
• **Hanging storage** is generally preferred for several reasons
  o Hanging avoids folding objects
  o Length and bulk of coats makes them difficult to box economically
  o The collection has been hanging and is generally stable that way
    ▪ Changing the mode of storage introduces a new stress while the objects are already adapted to the stresses associated with hanging
  o Delaminating leather finishes are strongly preferred hanging due to their tendency to stick to themselves, causing damage
  o Hanging storage with clamp hangers is preferred for skirts and pants
    ▪ Clamps should be the solid “bar” variety, not narrow clips
• Clamp hangers are typically padded with a polyester felt or thin batting hot glued to the clamping bar and covered in a cotton muslin
  o Hang tags help identify hanging objects without needing to handle them
    ▪ At Cincinnati Art Museum, hang tags are printed on archival rice paper, set with a brass grommet, and tied to the hanger with a loop of cotton twill tape
  o 79 pieces strongly preferred hanging including all long coats, capes, and leather pants
    ▪ approximately 158 horizontal inches of hanging space
  o 154 pieces preferred hanging, including clamps for ensembles
    ▪ 109 hangers, 45 clamps
    ▪ approximately 308 horizontal inches of hanging space

• **Recommended for padded hangers**
  o Unvarnished, waxed wooden hangers to serve as the base from Max Pack: [http://www.maxpack.com/fixtures/fixtures.html](http://www.maxpack.com/fixtures/fixtures.html)
    ▪ Call them directly and ask for style #1201, what they sell to museums
    ▪ $127.50 for 100
    ▪ Preferred because wood is easy to trim down to match desired shoulder width
  o Plastic hangers are good too, from Plastic Hangers USA: [http://www.plastichangersusa.com/5-plastic-shaper-hangers](http://www.plastichangersusa.com/5-plastic-shaper-hangers)
    ▪ These may be more chemically-stable (less chance of harmful off-gassing)
    ▪ Range from $2.95-5.95 each (depending on shoulder width)
    ▪ $14.99 for 12
    ▪ Call them directly at 1-800-733-6107
    ▪ LB Jet Melt Adhesive, Clear 5/8” diameter x 8” length
    ▪ $141.92 for 11lb. carton
- $5.64 for 24 x 33” sheet
  - Fabrics from Test Fabrics: http://www.testfabrics.com
    - Call them directly, at (570) 603-0432, ask for what they sell to museums, price varies depending on quantities, but mostly around $4/yard
    - Thin batting to wrap hangers, BR-45
    - Polyester felt to pad clamp hangers, POLY 1-4
    - Unbleached cotton muslin, 493U
    - Nylon, 306A

- **Boxed storage**
  - Preferred for all knitwear, objects in poor condition, and most suede objects
  - Boxed storage is ok for the entire collection, but keep in mind these points:
    - Fold as little as possible
    - Soften necessary folds with padding
    - Interleave layers
    - Avoid crushing objects by overpacking boxes
    - Consider using trays to create layers safely and allow objects to be moved with trays
      - Standard boxes will accommodate 2-3 layers
      - At CAM, we create trays with a piece of blue board, ethafoam lifts hot-glued down the long sides, notches for handles on the ends stabilized with a rim of Tyvek tape
  - 61 pieces strongly preferred boxed
    - based on textile boxes used at CAM, approximately 25 boxes
    - approximately 62.5 cubic feet

- **Recommended for boxed storage**
  - A wide range of archival storage boxes are available from conservation suppliers such as Gaylords, University Products, and Talas, so you may want to compare prices and options.
  - Though unbuffered materials are generally preferred, buffered textile storage boxes are easier to find and fine to use
    - Isolate organic materials (such as leather, cotton, and wool) from buffered boxes with a layer of unbuffered material such as tissue paper or a fabric layer
    - 6”H x 18”W x 40”L (30” L also available)
• $25.30 per box
  o Ethafoam for trays from Gaylord:
    • $82.75 for 6 planks, 24 x 12”
  o Blue board for trays from Gaylord:
    • Blue board: $285 for 25 sheets, 40 x 60”
  o Tyvek tape for trays from Gaylord:
    • $9.89 for 15 yard roll

• **Padding and interleaving materials**
  o Padding and interleaving is important for boxed storage because to isolate materials and to avoid creating permanent creases in flattened and folded objects
  o Tissue paper should be acid-free and unbuffered
    • Single sheets can be used as interleaving, be rolled into “sausages” to soften folds, crumpled into balls to create volume in shoulders or sleeves
    • Virtually all conservation suppliers will sell acid-free, unbuffered tissue paper so you may want to compare prices and options
    • Tissue paper sheets (already 30” x 40”) from Gaylord:
      • $109.75 for 100 sheets
  o An alternative to tissue paper is to use 100% polyester or nylon fabric
    • While the initial investment is higher, stable fabrics are a more permanent solution
      • Tissue paper will need to be replaced as it yellows over time (acidifies) and can become soiled and crushed
      • Fabrics can be washed (in conservation detergent such as Orvus Paste) and reused
    • Fabric drapes should have serged or hemmed edges
    • Use resin-free polyester batting to make forms
    • Fabrics from Test Fabrics: http://www.testfabrics.com
      • Call them directly, at (570) 603-0432, ask for what they sell to museums, price varies depending on quantities, but mostly around $4/yard
      • Polyester batting, BR-45
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- Nylon, 306A
- Polyester “silk,” 700-16

- **Treatment recommended** notes for each object based on the condition notes
  - They should not be considered comprehensive, only the highlights of the most obvious conservation needs
  - The entire collection would benefit from minor surface cleaning using a conservation vacuum
    - Generally, the collection is relatively clean and no significant improvement is likely to be gained from commercial dry-cleaning
    - Many pieces still have Kroner’s dry-cleaning tags attached, suggesting they have already been cleaned at least once
    - If any cleaning is to be undertaken, a complete condition record is recommended first as part of ethical object care
  - There is no treatment for light damage
    - Light damage is cumulative and irreversible
    - Light damage can only be mitigated through thoughtful storage and display conditions
    - Light damage has occurred and continues to occur in the current storage space; the only action to address this damage is to stop the accumulation by rehousing the collection

- **Classroom use** was used to rank the ease of using each object, but with the right care and under the right conditions, the entire collection can be used for instruction
  - Objects rated “excellent” were all judged “good” for classroom use
    - Most of these objects require no conservation attention except for improved storage
  - Most objects rated “fair” to “good” were judged “ok” for classroom use
    - Most of these objects require fairly minor conservation attention and improved storage
  - Most objects rated “poor” to “fair – “ were not recommended for classroom use due to their poor condition and vulnerability
    - Despite their poor condition, they can still be safely used as reference material with improved storage which allows them to be viewed without handling

- **Handling tips** for everyone using the collection:
  - Always wash hands with soap and water and dry thoroughly before handling the collection
    - Gloves are NOT always necessary: clean, sensitive fingers are better to protect the collection than clumsy gloved fingers
The collection includes a great deal of leather and metal closures which are very sensitive to moisture and skin oils.

- If extensive handling of these objects is necessary, gloves are recommended.

- Handle objects as little as possible.

- To turn an object over:
  - try to either use a support such as a tray or dropcloth
  - or the “sandwich method”: sandwich the object between two hands and turn rather than holding it at a point or two

- Moving from one location to another is one of the riskiest moments for an object. Take a moment to plan a move:
  - clear a pathway
  - know where you will put the object down: be sure it is clean and clear
  - recruit help if necessary

- Look for and be aware of damaged or weak areas:
  - Avoid handling them if possible
  - Be sure they are supported when moving an object

- Objects should always be repacked by someone familiar with their proper storage.
Action Checklist

1) Organize and catalog
   - Choose numbering system
   - Replace temporary tracking numbers on hangers and in spreadsheet/worksheets
   - Attach accession labels
   - Create object files
   - Remove all old tags and retain in object files
   - Add additional information to files: condition and treatment reports, student research, documentation
   - Add call information to library catalog
   - Launch digital database access

2) Rehouse
   - Install shelving and hanging rails in new storage space
   - Move the collection
   - Pack boxes
     - If using fabric padding and interleaving, hem covers and make stuffed forms
   - Make covered hangers
   - Make covered clamp hangers
   - Make hangtags
   - Add all location information to library catalog and object files

3) Treat
   - Surface clean as much of the collection as possible
   - Address other urgent conservation needs
   - Undertake major treatments as feasible
Further reading


Canadian Conservation Institute. Recognizing Active Corrosion. CCI Notes 9/1, Ottawa: Canadian Conservation Institute, 1989.


