

To Commemorate the Twentieth Anniversary of the Textile Conservation Centre:

Part One: Karen Finch - A Tribute

Karen was born and raised in Denmark and she has often written and spoken about her early awareness of history through carvings and needlework in the local parish church. Her long-term interest in textile techniques began through her embroidery and needlework experience, gained both at home and in school, as well as her training in weaving and design at the Kunsthaandvaerkskole in Copenhagen. While in Copenhagen, she lived with the librarian at the Museum of the Decorative Arts in an apartment in the museum building. Her work at the art school was centred around modern design, but Karen made many friends through her museum contacts. Among these were Ninna Rathje, also at that time a student at the art school, who also went on to research ancient textile techniques. This subject continues to be dear to Karen's heart, as evidenced by her long-term association with the Early Textiles Study Group. She also made contacts at the National Museum in Copenhagen which was closed at that time because of the war. Karen's later approach to the conservation of tapestries was influenced by a visit to Rosenborg Castle to see the work being done to the Danish Royal tapestries there. After art school Karen worked briefly weaving tapestries and carpets before meeting her husband, Norman, and moving to England in 1946.

Shortly after her arrival, Karen started working at the Royal School of Needlework. It is interesting to note that her teacher there, Barbara McCreedy, had been trained in tapestry repair in the workrooms at Hampton Court Palace. At the RSN Karen worked on the repair of historic tapestries and textiles as well as on commissions for new work. After the birth of her daughter, Katrina, Karen continued to do some work at home for the Royal School of Needlework in addition to other activities such as designing toys and baby clothes.

Upon discovering dry rot in their house in Acton, Karen got a job at the Victoria & Albert Museum conserving tapestries. Before this time, tapestry conservation had been considered men's work, and was not supervised by Evelyn Birkhill, who was then in charge of textile conservation. Karen has described her work at the V&A in her article in *The Conservation of Tapestries and Embroideries*, the proceedings of the meeting in Brussels in 1987. Karen's career in training conservators also began at the V&A, where her first student was Kirsten Dovey from Denmark. During the 1984 ICOM Conference in Copenhagen, I was lucky enough to stay at Kirsten Dovey's home with Karen, and to listen to stories of this time at the V&A as well

as war-time Copenhagen. While at the V&A Karen came to know Louisa Bellinger, who was working at the Textile Museum in Washington, as well as Jentina Leene and Johan Lodevijks from the Netherlands, among others. She also made lasting friendships with other curators and conservators at the V&A, including Donald King who became the first President of the Textile Conservation Centre.

After five years Karen left the V&A (she claims that she was temperamentally unsuited to being a civil servant) and began working on the study of historic textile techniques. She continued to treat textiles for the V&A from her home, and also to train textile conservators. One of her early students was Janet Notman, OBE, who Karen has been known to describe as her favourite student despite the fact that Janet subsequently deserted textiles in favour of ceramics. Janet has, however, continued to share with Karen a continuing commitment to conservation training and the development of the profession.

During the 1960's Karen's reputation grew and she became inundated with requests from around the world seeking conservation training. Some of Karen's clients at this time included the National Trust, the Lord Chamberlain's Office, the Geffrye Museum and private collectors such as Charles Stewart. She became interested in the issues involved in treating textiles in historic houses, where they are often on open display. In 1965 she began her long-term collaboration with Danielle Bosworth and in 1974 with Dina Eastop who first came to work with Karen as a schoolgirl and returned to work with her after university, eventually becoming Director of the Textile Conservation Centre. In 1968 Karen and Norman moved to a larger house in Ealing where the conservation and training work continued to grow both in size and in volume. Karen tells a wonderful story about wet-cleaning a Turkish tent in Ealing, when everyone had to crawl underneath it to get from one room to another. The level of demand for both conservation treatment and training was an important aspect in her decision to work towards the founding of the Textile Conservation Centre. During 1970 she documented 11,000 hours of work on a very large number of objects.

No tribute to Karen would be complete without mention of the help and support of her husband, Norman, who not only allowed their lives and home to be taken over by textile conservation but also provided administration and financial expertise both before and after the founding of the Centre. Another person who contributed tremendously to Karen's work is her sister-in-law, Greta Putnam, who co-authored *Caring for Textiles and The Care and Preservation of Textiles*.

Karen Finch, together with her colleagues from the UK and around the world, has

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developed high professional standards which have shaped the field of textile conservation as we know it today. This short tribute can only partially acknowledge the debt that I personally, and hundreds of textile conservators collectively, owe Karen for her dedication to textile conservation and training.

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Henri Francis Dupont Museum
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Part Two - The Role of the Textile Conservation Centre

It is impossible to adequately record Karen Finch's work without considering the role and effect of the Textile Conservation Centre (TCC). The Centre was Karen's brain-child and she was Principal of the TCC from its establishment in 1975 to her retirement in 1986.

This opportunity is very timely as the Centre will be celebrating its 20th Anniversary in 1995 and its reviewing past achievements and future plans.

A good starting point for such a review is the paper given by Karen herself at the Joseph Columbus Tapestry Symposium, held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, in October 1989. This paper is entitled "TEXTILES AS DOCUMENTS OF HISTORY AND THOSE WHO CARE FOR THEM". The following extracts give a vivid insight into the principles and experience which guide her work and provide a "snapshot" of her energy and personality.

"The world-wide confraternity of curators and conservators know no political or cultural frontiers - our common concern as scholars is to work together to preserve, interpret and display the objects in our care.

Attitudes to objects of another age may change according to the fashions of the day but the objects themselves must stay as untouched as possible. Properly balanced relationships grow from understanding the basic principles of each others' work and the training that led to it and that may mean a departure from narrow specialisation with all its limitations and a willingness to accept unfamiliar points of view in order to work together as a team.

Choosing methods of conservation on the basis of discussions with owner or curator inevitably leads to an assessment of the conditions of display and storage and how these may be improved within the constraints of the historic interest in the object and its place in a collection.

What may be learned from the work depends as much on the observations and documentation made by the conservator as on the knowledge brought to subsequent interpretation by the historian-curator.

To get full value from the cost of conservation and the accessibility it provides, all aspects of practical documentation must be given priority because through the acts that are

necessary to access the true condition of an object facts may be established of longer reaching consequence than is ever immediately apparent. therefore training must equip the conservator with the knowledge needed to recognise and record the unexpected.

Textile Conservation is now considered a profession, but it is a new profession and, as yet, there are only a few institutions able to give a balanced, structured training aimed at close co-operation between historian-curators, conservation scientists and conservators - including those who will eventually work independently, though it is to be hoped that everyone will have access to curatorial guidance and advice when needed.

The Three Year Postgraduate Course with the Courtauld Institute of Art is based on what I myself would have liked to have known when I began this work. It is aimed at providing the students with the essential knowledge to deal with the common denominators of all textiles, which are their fibres, dyestuffs and finishing treatments together with the factors that lead to their decay and those which may help to prolong their existence.

The creation of the course with the Courtauld Institute of Art and the Textile Conservation Centre at Hampton Court Palace is a perfect example of Teamwork and Co-operation on many levels - by our colleagues in both institutions, by our clients and by the many foundations and private people to whom we owe our funding.

My understanding of the special responsibilities of conservators began to grow while I was still an art student in Copenhagen studying weaving and design at Kunsthåndværker-skolen - housed in the Museum of Decorative Arts. I learned about the fundamental difference between the artistic perfection sought by creative artists and the demands for minimal interference during conservation.

In 1954 I joined the Conservation Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum for work with tapestries. At that time the commercial value of tapestries depended on whether they had obvious repairs involving patches on the back. Repair or reweaving was done by stitching into the surrounding sound areas - with unavoidable visual damage to their design but no loss of commercial value.

For the sake of their integrity as works of art I was eventually allowed to change these methods by taking out the darns and pieces cut from other tapestries and supporting the weak parts onto linen patches with no more reweaved guess-work of what might have been.

I was asked to take an interest in cleaning and in the use of synthetic resins as adhesives but soon learned that more knowledge was essential or I might cause damage to the object as well as myself.

Janet Arnold told us that an object that had been conserved no longer held any interest for her and this set me to re-examine the methods

of textile conservation then in use and to devise methods that would keep all information intact for every kind of future study.

The next step was to find ways of educating those clients whose main interest had been in appearance and get them to accept the unavoidable marks of age on their objects, as the proper signs of their history.

I had gradually become convinced that a National Institute of Textile Conservation had to be the answer to all these problems - including training of textile conservators at postgraduate level. The Course should enable graduates to take responsibility for the physical safety of textiles in every type of collection in Museums and Historic Houses - and give them the knowledge to work constructively with the historians and curators ultimately responsible for the objects in need of conservation.

Donald King, Keeper of the Textile Department of the V&A, John Nevins, Textile Historian and Alun Thomas, Solicitor offered to form an ad hoc committee to establish the Centre as a charitable Company. The aims stated in our articles of association read as follows:

- a. To support and assist public museums and art galleries and their development and to promote their use and enjoyment by the public.
- b. To promote for the public benefit the conservation and restoration of tapestries, costumes, embroidery and other textile objects of cultural and artistic value.
- c. To provide a permanent organisation to co-ordinate and improve the knowledge, methods and working standards needed to protect and preserve textiles for the benefit of the public.
- d. To promote research into methods and techniques for conserving and restoring textiles and to publish the results of such research.
- e. To educate and train such persons in conservation and restoration of textiles.

The long awaited course in Textile Conservation became a reality thanks to Mrs Stella Newton who persuaded the Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art to let us start a postgraduate course in Textile Conservation in October 1973.

In due course the Leverhulme Trust gave us funding for six years and we were able to offer the position to Dr Anthony Smith at the British Museum, who became the first conservation scientist to work exclusively with textile historians, curators and conservators.

From the beginning, the staff of Conservation-Tutors and Conservation Scientists were in close contact with their colleagues in other institutions in Britain and abroad and encouraged the students to gain further practical experience through vacation work and internships with other conservators in Britain or in their home countries.

It was this close association with museum conservators, curators and historians at all levels that gave the teaching at the Textile Conservation Centre its special character and provides the foundation for eventual specialised work by Textile Conservation Centre graduates according to their future engagements in this vast field.

The offer of a Grace and Favour Apartment at Hampton Court Palace for the purpose of teaching coincided with the charitable status and legal foundation of the Centre and we moved the workrooms from Ealing on April 14th 1975.

In 1978 Peter Lasko, Director of the Courtauld Institute of Art, agreed to add the third year to the Diploma Course in Textile Conservation and I became an Honorary Senior Lecturer of the Institute.

Throughout the establishment the development went according to plan except that the waiting time for the third Apartment was extended by eighteen months. Each new position was established as soon as a suitable person was trained for it. Between us all we succeeded and our achievements were celebrated with a grant from the Worshipful Company of Clothworkers for the Library and Reference Collection shelving and for the foundation of a Bursary Fund, which had been my cherished ambition from the beginning of planning the Centre. But the completion of my hopes for the Textile Conservation Centre include publications of the discoveries and research made by its graduates and, the historians with whom they work on the treatment of textiles collected as documents of history."

These extracts serve to illustrate Karen's commitment to preserving textiles as historic documents. The stress on documentation, investigation, and inter-disciplinary co-operation is a fundamental characteristic of her work. The importance of international co-operation and teamwork are also key facets of Karen's approach. These characteristics remain the hallmark of the Centre's work. The TCC has played a significant role in both the conservation of textiles and in development of the conservation profession, and continues to do so.

DINAH EASTOP

Lecturer

The Textile Conservation Centre

Part Three: Recent and Future Developments

Since Karen retired as Principal of the Textile Conservation Centre in 1986, there have been three directors at the Centre: Mette Simpson (1986-88), Dinah Eastop (1988-91) and Nell Hoare (1991-present). Each has ensured that Karen's original vision continues to be realised through the Centre's work.

During this time the academic work of the Centre has been further developed thanks

particularly to the work of Janey Cronyn (Head of Studies and Research 1990-1993). These developments were recognised in 1993 when the Centre was granted full academic integration with the Courtauld Institute of Art and the University of London. Among the features of this new formal relationship is the awarding of Recognised Teacher of the University status to Mary Brooks (Head of Studies and Research, 1993 - present) and Dinah Eastop (Lecturer in Textile Conservation). Another feature is that the Centre must now undergo Academic Audit along with the other Courtauld departments. In the most recent Audit various aspects of the Centre's academic work were particularly commended. This new status and success is tribute to Karen and to the work of the Studies and Research staff over recent years. It is fitting that Janey's successor as Head of Studies and Research, Mary Brooks, is one of Karen's former students.

As one tangible demonstration of the importance of Karen's work to the Centre and textile conservation in general, the Centre's Library and Reference Collection was renamed the Karen Finch Library and Reference Collection in 1994.

The Centre is celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 1995. We were all delighted when, in the first month of the Centre's twentieth anniversary year, her Royal Highness The Princess Royal graciously agreed to become the Centre's patron. This followed Her Royal Highness' visit to the Centre in June 1994 when, in her capacity of Master of the Worshipful Company of Woolmen, she presented the Diplomas to graduating students and the silver medal of the Woolmen's Company to Alison Chester.

Among the events being organised to mark the twentieth anniversary is a series of three one-day conferences looking at "Challenging Problems and Creative Solutions" in conservation today, (please contact the Centre for further details), and the first graduate exhibition, "Challenges and Solutions, to be held at the Courtauld Institute of Art from September 21st 1995 to January 7th 1996. There will be an extended Alumnus event for former students and staff and a founder's reception will be held in Karen's honour, attended by those most closely involved in helping Karen turn her vision for the Centre into reality. In addition, the Centre's work will be featured in an exhibition at the British Museum, "Textiles from Masada" (June 1st to October 29th 1995), the Centre having conserved all the exhibited textiles and raised sponsorship to cover the cost of both the conservation and the exhibition. All of these events will serve to highlight Karen's achievements and those of the Centre; another important objective of these activities is to raise public awareness to the work of textile conservators.

The Centre has a forward plan which guides its development. An active fundraising

campaign is underway to raise the resources required to ensure that the academic work of the Centre can develop further - both in scope and quality. Among the plans for the future are the development of a greater range of short courses and internships, an increase in research and development activity and the production of a biennial research publication. As the first stage in the development of short courses for continuing professional development, which will be tied in with the NVQ system, we plan to offer a range of pilot courses in the summer of 1996.

The Centre's contribution to textile conservation internationally has been immense. Some facts and figures about the Centre serve to emphasise how significant its contributions, and thus the importance of Karen Finch's contribution to the development of the profession of textile conservation.

- Over 155 of the world's trained textile conservators have studied at the Textile Conservation Centre.
- Former students work in over twenty countries world-wide.
- The Centre has the best library for textile conservation in the UK and possibly in Europe.
- The Centre has the unique resource of the reference collection, arranged by Karen to illustrate textiles technology.
- The Centre has a larger team of trained textile conservators than any institution worldwide.
- The Centre's Conservation Services department has treated over two thousand textiles including well over 200 tapestries.
- The Centre has achieved all this and yet has never received government revenue funding.
- The Centre's fundraising efforts have been highly successful, including a Getty Grant Program Challenge Award, the securing of named Bursaries to cover students' fees and the establishment of an educational Development Fund.

Karen's pioneering work helped to establish textile conservation as an international discipline, based on preserving textiles as historic documents. Her publications, and those by her former colleagues and students, have helped to enrich the conservation profession by encouraging informed debate of key issues and practices.

There can be few professions where one individual has had such an immense and lasting impact as Karen Finch in textile conservation; indeed Karen's contribution to the profession was recognised in 1976 by the award of the OBE. The fact that the Centre is celebrating twenty years of achievement and development is thanks to Karen who had the vision to see that a Centre was needed and the persistence to turn the vision into reality!

NELL HOARE

Director

The Textile Conservation Centre