THE MAUI NEWS
MAUI'S NEWSPAPER SINCE 1900

Print this Page

«--back to story

Preserving the past ... one thread at a time

by LEHIA APANA Staff Writer

POSTED: August 10, 2008

For textile conservator Ann Svenson Perlman, reviving ancient works of art isn't a job, it's a way of life.

"There's no eight-hour day for me, it's a lifestyle that I've signed on to," says Perlman from inside her north shore Maui studio.

The vibrant space feels alive, breathing with creativity. Reference books squeeze between floor-to-ceiling shelves; sewing machines, microscopes and printing equipment are scattered across several work stations that line the room; racks overflow with transparent plastic boxes that reveal bits and pieces of cloth, scraps of raffia palm, thread, paints, dyes and more.

For nearly 30 years now Perlman has dedicated her life to the business of conservation, and during that time has worked with some of the world's rarest textiles, many of which are gloriously displayed in museums, schools and private collections throughout the world. Over time she has gained a reputation as one of the country's leading experts in the field, and says she is one of only two museum quality textile conservators in Hawaii.

Garments are obvious textiles, but it can also be a length of lace, a tapestry, a flag, a bedspread or a doll, and Perlman must know how to handle all of these.

Article Photos



Textile conservator Ann Svenson Perlman examines a suzani (needlework) textile in her north shore studio.

"When it comes down to it, my passion is being a problem solver and figuring out how I can bring an old or damaged piece to the people. That's my only power as a tiny person in this world - to save and share this wealth of beauty," Perlman says humbly.

Any given material presents its own set of intricacies and complications, and the wrong treatment can have disastrous consequences. For even the most skilled conservator, antique textiles can be especially challenging.

"A lot of the stuff I work with are really old and I have to be careful not to do more harm than good," Perlman warns.

That means a large part of her job is knowing when to leave a piece alone - blatant blemishes, stains and tears are vital to any historical restoration. And that, says Perlman, is the difference between restoration and conservation.

For example, if there's a hole in a piece of fabric, a restorer may reweave it to look exactly like the original. A conservator, on the other hand, may back it with fabric of the same color or design, leaving the original undisturbed.

"I do something called passive stabilization where I will put a piece of support fabric underneath the original piece, so it's all independently attached," Perlman explains.

She is quick to point out that because modern dyes and materials don't always mesh well with the original, reweaving can actually do more harm than good.

"So even if technically a person could make it look exactly perfect, certain materials will change over time and you can actually end up with a much more disfiguring piece ... in 10 years it will look like an eyesore."

But in Perlman's world, there is such a thing as "too perfect." She accepts that the object can't - and for historical reasons shouldn't - look as it did when it was first made.

"I don't want to falsely present something as perfect. It's important that people know there has been damage, but that it has been repaired."

She likens it to "selling someone a car that's been in a hundred wrecks" after painting it and making it appear more valuable than it is.

"I have the technical know-how to weave something and misrepresent it and sell it for a lot of money, but that in my mind is completely unethical," she explains.

She has worn several hats throughout her career, including positions with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, UCLA?Fowler Museum of Cultural History and Honolulu Academy of Arts. Her current commission requires her to shuttle back and forth from Maui to Oahu to work with the Doris Duke Foundation on Oahu.

"For years I was an expert in Indonesian textiles, then for a while I was completely thrown into African art, then I really got into Haitian voodoo ... I pretty much throw myself into whatever I'm doing," she

says.

For now, her focus is on an exquisite 17th-century carpet that is believed to originally belong to Prince Jahanjir of India and displayed in the Taj Mahal. The 15-foot-4-inch long by 9-foot-5-inch wide piece is actually one half of a pair. Placed together the two carpets create a hexagon shape with empty space in the center. (See background photo.) The red base is decorated with floral motifs of tulips, chrysanthemums, poppies and more - a testament to the prince's reported obsession with all things floral.

"We traced the carpet to see where it went, but we still don't know how they got out of India at the time. ... But they ended up in the Getty collection, so (J. Paul Getty) bought them and had them for years and years," she says.

Then late tobacco heiress Doris Duke purchased the pair at auction in the early '90s and it has remained in her collection since. Today, one of the carpets is strewn across the oversized table in the center of Perlman's studio awaiting repair.

"The pieces came from New York. They arrived wadded up in a big wooden box. When the collections manager and I opened it up we immediately realized that they were absolutely spectacular carpets and needed the highest level of care," she recalls.

"From the day I saw these carpets come out of their boxes I fell in love with them and I know people had to see them. ... Then finding out that this prince hundreds of years ago fell in love with these flowers and started making gardens and making fabrics - the whole thing intrigued me."

Perlman performed her magic on one of the carpets, which was hung at a Doris Duke exhibition at the Honolulu Academy of Arts. Upon completion, the other half will travel to the East West Center in Honolulu, where it will be displayed during the Textile Society of America's biennial conference in September, which happens to be in Honolulu this year.

Whether patching up a family heirloom for a private client or immersing herself into a museum commission, Perlman hopes to preserve moments in history, one piece at a time.

"Our existence is really based on those who came before us," she says. "If we don't see that history we're denying a huge amount of information and really a huge amount of soul."

Lehia Apana can be reached at lehia@mauinews.com.