Tattered Cloth Tells More: Women’s Work and Museum Representation

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

The past two decades posed some challenges for the museum world. Questions about the production of meaning, museum relationships with community groups, and the politics of representation in exhibitions, occupy both museum practitioners and scholars. These questions are further related to the general issues that are at the forefront of contemporary society, which include problems of social inclusion, cultural diversity and social equity (Sandell, 2002; 2007). Most of the discussion has been framed around racial, ethnic and cultural communities and their access to and participation in museum programming. Gender relations and feminist issues have been largely overlooked (Conlan and Levin, 2010: 308). This study considers the representation of women’s work in museums. In particular, I examine portrayals of “culture” and “work” in women’s textile production. Museum literature has documented the subordination (or absence) of women and their work in exhibitions and the hegemonic, patriarchal approach within which they were represented (Porter, 1996; Levin, 2010).
Using an ethnographic case study of a museum dedicated to textile collection, I suggest seeing this museum as a potential challenge to mainstream museums’ traditional approach and silence on the women’s work that has created most textiles on display. I examine the meanings that are produced in relation to the textiles, the organization and dissemination of these meanings through exhibitions and the ways in which the public (visitors and members) responds to these exhibitions. In order to explore these questions, Hall’s communication model (1993) was applied to trace the process of encoding and decoding meanings at the museum. My approach to meaning production is realized through observations of the museum’s committee meetings. The second stage is the circulation of meanings in exhibitions. I examine this through an analysis of exhibitions’ texts and docent tours. Decoding these meanings is realized through surveys of museum members and visitors together with short interviews. My findings suggest that initially, the museum offered some oppositional elements in exhibiting practices. However, a shift occurred towards a dominant, hegemonic view of museum work and re-effacing of women’s work with the departure of the founders.
Acknowledgements

Working on this thesis and raising a family are the “projects” of my life so far. During the years I learned that these are demanding as much as they are rewarding. Trying to balance and integrate this work into my life proved to be at times almost impossible. This thesis could not have been written without the help and support that I received from my family, on the one hand, and my thesis supervisor, on the other. It was David W. Livingstone who first suggested that I refer to feminist thought and writing as a therapeutic process. I feel very fortunate to have you as my thesis supervisor. I, and consequently this thesis, have benefitted from your critical insight and invaluable comments and feedback. My heartfelt thanks for your continuous encouragement and support through the ups-and-downs of thesis writing; it is so much appreciated. My thanks are also to Monica Heller, who was involved in this since I started thinking about the project, many years ago. Your questions forced me to polish my views. Roger Simon’s course on Popular Culture was valuable in shaping my thesis. I enjoyed the course and our conversations about museums. Kathryn Church’s unique position as a sociologist and a museum curator was very helpful. Thanks for “pushing” me to write a personal foreword. Thank you to Amy K. Levin for your interest in the thesis, the close reading and useful comments. I am grateful for the OISE scholarship I received during my studies. I also thank the people at the museum, who generously provided their time, and shared their views about museum work with me. My family grew up with this thesis in the background. More recently, you helped me in critical moments, finalizing the thesis. A big thank you to Koby, Ben and Omri, for your patience and support. Your love sustains me. Maybe one day you will even read this.
Foreword

“Are you a weaver? Quilter? Knitter?” I was asked numerous times throughout the years when I was telling people about my thesis. And my answer was always no, I’m not a needle worker. In fact, I can hardly hold a needle, let alone create something with it. “So, why textiles?” was often the response. Why textiles? I never consciously thought of conducting research related to textiles. However, looking back, I can say that textiles “knitted” my family together. Textiles and fabrics were around the house since I can remember.

Even though I am not personally involved in the making of textiles, I have always loved and appreciated the creativity that is involved in producing them. The idea that a ball of yarn and two knitting needles is all you need to create a beautiful sweater was a fascinating discovery for me as a young girl. But, unlike the tradition in so many societies where the knowledge and practice of textile production is transmitted from mother to daughter, my mother, never taught me anything related to needle work. I also never saw her knitting or sewing or creating anything with a needle.

My father instilled in me this love for textiles. When I was a young girl, he used to travel, as part of his work, to different places around the world, and he always brought back beautiful fabrics, costumes and textiles from these journeys. So, my sister and I had silk kimonos from Japan, Kente cloth from Ghana, block-printed fabrics from Kenya and Uganda, and textiles from Persia (Iran).

My father grew up in a family that was invested in textile production. The family owned a textile factory in Lodz, Poland, which was also known as “the Manchester of Poland”, a leading center of the Polish textile industry. Jews were an integral part of the
textile industry since the 19th century and owned 175 factories by 1914 (http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vjw/lodz.html). My great great grandparents the Librach family, owned one of them. My grandmother used to tell us stories about her grandfather who was a “fabricant” (note the word), an industrialist, who was one of the first Jews in the city to build a large textile factory. And, to my surprise (thanks to google), I was able to find more information about the family:

The brothers Feivish and Henech Librach belonged to the Librach family who were textile manufacturers in Ozorkow and Lodz. The Zgierz magistrate strongly interceded to allow the Librachs to conduct a textile factory with 20 workshops outside of the (Jewish) quarter, and to allow them to live there. The officials of the Leczyca region supported Librach’s request…to live in the house of the Metner heirs on Blotene (muddy) street number 191… The Librachs declared that they would not wear the Jewish garb and that they would send their children to Catholic schools. In October 1849 the Warsaw governing authorities permitted the Librach brothers to conduct a factory and live outside of the quarter. The Librach brothers, the first large scale Jewish manufacturers, set up a textile enterprise in Zgierz. (http://www.jewishgen.org/yizkor/zgierz.html/tocb)

When my grandparents married, my grandfather joined the Librach’s textile business and became a wool expert. However, in September 18, 1939 after the German invasion of Poland, one of the first anti-Jewish decrees was that Jews were forbidden to engage in the textile industry. The Germans expropriated all Jewish businesses (Kozez, A Jewish History of Lodz, Poland http://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/lodz/history.htm).

My paternal grandfather became very pessimistic and decided to flee Poland with the family to Russia. They were moving from one place to another until they “settled” in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Food was scarce, but there was wool. My grandfather offered the Uzbeks to build a thread spinning shop that would speed the process of thread making. His knowledge became a means of survival.

My mother grew up in Krakow outside of the Jewish quarter, beside the Vavel palace. When the Germans invaded Poland in 1939, they bombed the city and especially
the palace. My maternal grandparents were also very pessimistic about the war and decided to leave Poland as well. In a very ironic twist, the pessimists survived. The optimists, the rest of the family, who believed that nothing bad would happen and that in any case, the family as a whole has to stay together in Poland, ended up in Auschwitz.

The Soviet army took my mother and her family to the Ural Mountains in Siberia, to a forced labor camp. Following the Sikorsky Agreement, in 1941, the Soviets granted amnesty to the thousands of Polish prisoners-of-war, among them my mother and her family. Knowing that they couldn’t go back home to Poland, they continued moving from one place to another. Following the sun and the good weather in Asia, they ended up in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. There, my mother and my father met, as young teenagers. They went to the same school that was organized by the Joint Organization. They didn’t go for the learning, but for the soup that was served for lunch. Food was scarce, but there was wool and with the shop that my grandfather built, there was yarn available for knitting. My mother and her sister knitted sweaters, which they traded for a few potatoes or a loaf of bread. For my mother too, knitting became a means of survival. My mother vowed that if she survived the war she would never touch a needle again, and she kept her vow. I never saw her knit or sew. When the war was over, in 1945, everybody went home to Poland to discover that no one from their families survived. The next time my parents met was in Israel, as university students in the early 1950s, and the rest is history…

My paternal grandfather continued to work with wool and fabrics in the emerging textile industry in Israel. Growing up, I remember his fingers going through every garment we were wearing. By touching and feeling alone, he could identify the kinds of wool and whether it was blended with other materials. Everything we wore had to be
made from natural materials, wool, cotton, or linen. He loathed synthetic fibers. He used to say that the garment can’t “breathe” if it’s made of synthetic fibers. This has stayed with me until today.

During my first year of studies at OISE, I came across two articles that form the basic rationale of this study. Linda Nochlin’s classic: “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” in which she discusses the historical, social and cultural barriers that women faced when they wished to become “artists”. The second, by Patricia Mainardi, was very different; “Quilts: The Great American Art” was a look at what women were actually doing, for many years, as part of their work at home. It is a kind of a response to Nochlin’s question, an attempt to explain what women were doing and a critique of the traditional art world:

Women have always made art. But for most women, the arts highest valued by male society have been closed to them for just that reason. They have put their creativity instead, into the needlework arts, which exist in fantastic variety wherever there are women… it is our cultural heritage (Mainardi, 1982: 331).

A visit to the Textile Museum of Canada (TMC)1 in 1993 inspired my decision to focus on museum representations of women’s textile production. Generally, the exhibits on display were very different from anything I had seen before in museums. The textiles were displayed in a way that engaged not only my mind, but also my heart. The space itself was cozy, inviting me to step in. I particularly remember the exhibit: Poke Out Her Eyes and Other Stories curated by Ingrid Bachman and Kai Chan. This exhibit was about the personal meanings and stories that textiles hold in people’s lives. Just like the cloth and textiles that knitted my family together have a special meaning for me.

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1 At the time it was The Museum for Textiles. The name was changed in 2000.
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With So Much Love

You are my heroes, my inspiration.

****

And to my father, Marek,

I miss you

threads of hope

We are the threads that bind us, one to another: we strengthen our babies’ swaddling beginnings, then loosen the ties so they can wiggle in the wind like spring kites soaring to new heights, finding themselves: We are harmonious, sturdy threads carefully woven into the fiber of society, where weak fabric frays;…

We who are strong gather together to tighten the knots and knit a net of safety to catch those falling—a shawl of comfort to dry their tears and wrap their fears in courage.

We teach them to make their own shawls, to become the threads that bind us, one to another—with trust, with love.

- Shirley Vogler Meister
Chapter 1. Introduction

This study considers the representation process of women’s work in museums. In particular, I am interested in specific portrayals of “culture” and “work” as they relate to women’s textile production. These concepts of culture and work are discussed separately in cultural and sociological literature. However, I argue that they are inseparable especially when dealing with women’s work and textile production. Feminist studies in archaeology, anthropology, art history and folklore show that historically and across societies, textile production was in women’s hands, transcending race, class and geographical areas. The making of cloth and textiles constituted a major role in women’s lives as part of their culture and work at home. Building on this academic scholarship I examine museums’ representations of women’s work, specifically in textile production. Generally, feminist-based research of museum work has established that the representation of women and their work in museums is marginalized and subordinate to that of men (Porter, 1988, 1996; Hein, 2010).

Using an ethnographic case study of the Textile Museum of Canada (TMC), I suggest seeing this museum as a challenge to mainstream museums. Its unique collection policies and representation processes in exhibitions emphasize women’s roles in textile production, among other stories related to the textiles on display. Hall’s model of communication (1993) is applied to trace the process of encoding and decoding meanings at the museum. My approach to meaning production in the museum is realized through observations of exhibition committees’ work in order to follow the planning and “thinking” of exhibitions. The presentation in exhibitions is examined through content analysis of labels and docent work in touring shows. Decoding these meanings is the
process of “reception” by the museum’s members and visitors. This is explored through surveys that highlight their views of the museum and through short conversations with random visitors. This process enables an understanding of the full circuit through which museums generate meanings that are then communicated in exhibitions and the ways in which the public accepts or challenges these meanings. Hall’s approach is suitable for this study as it provides a possibility to account for meaning production within each stage of the exhibition process. The conditions of exhibit production in museum work are significant to understanding the ways in which meaning is produced. Once on display, meanings are not only disseminated through the objects but are potentially reconstructed through display methods, label texts and docents’ interpretations. Hall’s model also provides a critical role for the audience in accepting or opposing meanings as well as acknowledging the role the audience plays in constructing their own meanings and understandings, independently of the museum. Hence, the model allows accounting for the possibilities of oppositional practices within the museum.

The theoretical framework of the study draws from Gramsci’s cultural hegemony but more importantly, his notion of counter-hegemony as a possibility for museum practice. I explore whether the museum poses a possibility for oppositional or counter hegemonic practices using Hall’s analysis of dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional possibilities. I attempt to offer a distinction between counter-hegemonic and oppositional practices in museum work using the TMC and other museum case studies. Yet, I explore these issues from a feminist standpoint in looking at women’s textile production and museum work.
Recent decades signal major changes in the museum world. These changes were framed in museum discussions as related mainly to their relationships with communities and the ways in which marginalized groups are represented in exhibitions. More specifically, these changes relate to the production of meaning and knowledge in the museum. The question that arises is who is to speak for the object in exhibitions: the museum has become a site for struggle over meanings that are associated with various groups’ material culture. Minority groups demanded to be included in the process of interpreting their own cultural traditions. As result of these pressures, established museums were forced to become more responsive to communities by changing their working relations and inviting communities to share in the interpretive process. The notion of “community” was often framed along ethnicity, race, and indigenous lines. Gender and women’s representation were largely overlooked in this process (Conlan and Levin, 2010). Feminist museum critics argued that museums generally ignored women’s roles and contributions to the society and when these were presented, it was often in dichotomous terms to the general hegemonic, patriarchal picture portrayed in museums. Since the 1990s there is a growing research, which examines museums, exhibitions and curatorial practices from a feminist standpoint. But, the general claim is that museums were slow in applying feminist-based scholarship in museum work. Feminist research in museums was developed in stages: the first stage identified gaps, invisibility and discrimination in presenting women and their work. The second stage was striving to insert women’s contributions into traditional, patriarchal museums. The third stage offers a critique of gendered power structures in order to bring about change (Banner, cited in Conlan and Levin, 2010: 301). The creation of a few women’s museums in the USA and
Europe, dedicated to women and their contribution to society, can be seen as an outcome of feminist interventions in the museum world.

In contrast, small, specialized (mostly ethnic) museums emerged especially since the 1960s that offered a challenge to mainstream museums by projecting a particular view that had not yet been emphasized in other museums. These were seen as “counterculture” museums by Heumann Gurian (1991) who claimed that they wished to counteract the established view about their specific cultures in dominant museums. To what extent the concept of counterculture as Heumann Gurian used it, differs from an oppositional or counter-hegemonic practice? She did not identify specifically what these counterculture museums might include beyond their projected particular view, which is in contrast to that of established museums. What other counterculture elements could museums promote? My goal in this study is to explore these questions as they relate to museum work, and particularly, the extent to which TMC can offer a challenge to mainstream museums. Can it offer a meaningful picture of textile production that relates to the context of work in the domestic sphere, and to women’s cultural traditions? To what extent does the knowledge offered actually reflect the daily experiences and viewpoints of the women who made them? How can the museum find ways to validate knowledge and experiences of the represented groups? My goal is to identify some of the key elements or features that could serve in understanding museums as oppositional or counter-hegemonic. Empirically, I use observations of the TMC Exhibition Committees in order to follow the process of meaning production. This method was not employed in prior studies that looked at the ways in which meanings are produced in museums. Most studies discussed meaning production by looking at collection policies, museum
documents and exhibitions, in terms of what was included or excluded from the presentation. As such, these studies actually focused on the final outcome, the “products” of museum work, rather than following the entire process of meaning production. This study attempts to contribute to museum scholarship by delineating the process of meaning production in museum committees’ work, the presentation in exhibitions and understanding public reception, in one particular museum. Another original contribution pertains to the analysis of museum audience: most of the research is currently focused on visitors to museums and their understanding of exhibitions. Museum members are a neglected group. Most of the research on members is service driven. Studies of members’ motivations to acquire a museum membership, their understanding of exhibitions, and the organization at large, are limited. By looking at both groups, members and visitors, I can explore the commonalities and differences between them and the extent to which they accept, resist or construct their own ideas about exhibitions. The research data in this study is based on information gathered between the years 1994-1997. The questions that were raised in the study are still relevant today and occupy both museum practitioners and scholars. My findings show that the 1990’s were a transitional period for the museum, a shift towards the professionalization of the TMC. My examination of various exhibitions since then confirms that these changes were increasingly institutionalized at the museum.

**Chapter Outline:**

**Chapter 2** offers a theoretical framework to conceptualize *culture* and *work* using cultural studies and a feminist standpoint. I argue that these concepts need to be understood as a relationship, as they are inseparable when discussing women’s domestic
textile production. Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and counter-hegemony and Hall’s model of encoding or decoding of meanings are employed to understanding possible challenges in museum work. In **Chapter 3**, I provide a literature review of museum development; women’s representation in museums; the production of meaning; exhibition process and public (members and visitors) reception. **Chapter 4** outlines the methods used in the study, which include both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This is an ethnographic study of museum work, processes in planning shows, display methods, and the ways in which members and visitors of the museum make sense of exhibitions. **Chapter 5** is focused on the museum setting: it is an institutional analysis of the emergence of the museum using a content analysis of museum documents and interviews. The findings are presented in three chapters: **Chapter 6** is focused on the production of meaning (encoding), the knowledge that is produced and promoted by museum workers to be included in exhibitions. This is based on my observations of the exhibition committee and the contemporary gallery committee meetings as well as a content analysis of museum documents and my interviews with museum workers. **Chapter 7** is focused on the dissemination process, the presentation through exhibitions. I will examine the presentation of textiles on display: the labels, the format and design of the display. Included here are my observations of the docent group in preparing tours and guiding visitors through the various exhibits as well as the reactions and responses of docents to my exhibit tours. **Chapter 8** is focused on museum visitors’ and members’ responses to exhibitions and their perceptions of the museum. The attempt here is to understand whether visitors and members accept or challenge the meanings that are offered by the museum through the various exhibits. **Chapter 9** offers a discussion and
summary: oppositional possibilities in museum work. Based on the findings of this study, I discuss the potential of the museum to challenge traditional museum practices. I review recent changes within the museum and offer some general recommendations for museum work.
Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework: On “Culture” and “Work”

In this chapter I discuss the theoretical framework for the study, which draws from Gramsci, cultural studies and feminist theories. A review of these theories suggests that the concepts “culture” and “work” cannot be perceived as monolithic, unified social categories. Instead, these theories call for recognizing the multiplicity and contested meanings that could be generated depending on the standpoint through which they are perceived. I will suggest that textile production should be seen as part of women’s cultural and creative production that was integral to their work at home. In other words, I suggest seeing the two concepts as interrelated when dealing with women’s textile production.

On Culture: Gramsci, Cultural and Feminist Studies

The concept of Culture has been researched thoroughly by scholars in both sociological and anthropological traditions. Traditional sociological approaches of culture viewed it as a set of values, beliefs, practices that are learned and shared by a group. Williams (1993:32) wrote that “culture is ordinary; that is where we must start…the nature of culture is that it is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings”…which may include mundane activities that comprise ‘a whole way of life’. Any discussion about the relation between culture and art must recognize symbolic creativity in everyday ordinary culture involved in making meaning. He is using “culture” to mean the arts and learning, the special process of discovery and creative effort. Starting from people, means that most of the learning people do is informal and without the help of educational

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2 For a detailed survey of the concept see in particular, Kroeber and Kluckholn, 1963; Peterson, 1979; Williams, 1983.
institutions. Informal learning, according to him, is part of culture, it is ordinary, it occurs throughout life. Interestingly, he gives the example of Samoan girls who must learn the task of weaving: “she has to “master” several different techniques. She learns to weave palm branches for mats. Usually, some older woman in the household trains her. Then when she is 13 she begins her first fine mat. The fine mat represents the high point of Samoan weaving virtuosity; they must be included in the dowry of the bride” (Williams, 2000:31-52). So, culture is part of the daily work for Samoan girls and it represents a venue for creative expression.

Following this, I use ‘culture’ as comprised of daily practices, which are meaningful to people’s lives. These practices may relate to working situations and/or can be integrated in the community’s life history; however these are the creative capacities from which people draw in their everyday experiences. The approach to “culture” is inclusive and integrates daily aspects within it. The aim is to connect rather than distance or detach culture from everyday life. Using this approach to culture, I follow Gramscian theories, cultural studies theorists and feminist art theories. The basic commonality between these theories is the recognition that power relations in the society are hegemonic. They all use the vantage point of the dominated, the oppressed, that of “the people”. The “people”, however, are not a unified category. Class, gender and ethnicity are integral aspects in constructing “the people”. The notion of “culture” that is offered is one that relates to everyday life practices. Culture is part of “life” and is “popular” in the sense that all can practice it; it is common to most as opposed to “high” culture that is exclusive and practiced by the dominant few. As Bennet (1986) argues, the term, popular culture, was initially used to refer to a collection of cultural forms and practices having
little in common beyond the fact of their exclusion from the accepted canon of ‘high culture’ or dominant culture. Bennett argues that the many practices grouped under the ‘popular culture’ heading are regarded as connected by virtue of the parts they play in relation to broader social and political processes, those bearing on the production of consent to the prevailing social order in both its patriarchal and capitalist dimensions (Bennett, 1986:xii). He argues that cultural theorists and feminists are concerned with identifying aspects of popular culture which serve to secure consent on the one hand, and those which express alternative values, offer an opposition (ibid: xii). But popular culture consists of those cultural forms and practices… which constitute the terrain on which dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural values and ideologies meet and intermingle” (Bennett, 1986:18-19).

Gramsci defines the state as the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies its dominance but also manages to win the consent of those it rules. Culture and specifically popular culture, is placed in the center of the activities of the state to gain that consent. Feminist and Gramscian theories stress the need to challenge forms of domination. The assumption is that it is both possible and desirable for oppressed groups to pursue substantive changes and transform the existing cultural hegemony in order to open the realm of culture to include various popular practices, which are meaningful to different social groups. Hegemony can be referred to as the process through which subordinate classes consent to their position as subordinates, or from the dominant group’s view, it would be the legitimating process of the dominant group’s cultural authority. These are the ways in which the ruling bloc convinces itself and the rest of society that its way of seeing is the one legitimate and
universal way. “The political hegemony of a social class depends on its ability to generate “the spontaneous” consent given by the great mass of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group [class]” (Gramsci, 1971:12).

By introducing the concept of hegemony, Gramsci not only stresses the relations of power but also, a process of relationship between the ways the dominant group legitimates its power and the ways in which dominated groups accept and internalize their subordinate position. This conception of hegemony enables one to see the relationship between civil society and the state, where civil society is the place the dominant class exercises its hegemony. In other words, “civil society is the social space where consent is generated and resistance to dominant hegemony may be built upon” (Garcia, 1992:4). The public museum, as a social institution, is located within this sphere and could be seen as hegemonic strategy to generate consent to its dominant ideology. Bennett (1995:75-80, 109) shows how national museums created principles of collection classifications and order of exhibitions, coupled with the grandeur of the space itself, served in creating a “universal history” in the nineteenth century, that was about Western progress.

Gramsci argues that the bourgeoisie can become a hegemonic, leading class only to the extent that its ideology is able to accommodate, to find some space for opposing class cultures and values (Bennett, 1986: xiv). Cultural hegemony is enabled by the success of articulating working class culture in bourgeois culture, so that it’s altered in the process (Bennett, ibid):

Class hegemony is a dynamic and shifting relationship of social subordination, which operates in two directions: certain (cultural) aspects of the behavior of
subordinate classes may reproduce a version of the values of ruling class. But in the process value systems are modified, through their adaptation… On the other hand, structures of ideological hegemony transform and incorporate dissident values, so as effectively to prevent the working through of their full implications (see Bennett, 1986:xv).

In his cultural writings, Gramsci points to the need to “give shape to a new world of forms worthy to stand alongside those created in past ages” (Gramsci, 1985:44). These forms could be seen as significant attempts that can challenge the already legitimate ones, which are constituted within hegemonic culture. The formation of a new set of standards, new ways of seeing, that must be specific and relevant to the lives of the working class, could be seen as counter hegemonic.

I would also suggest that here lies Gramsci’s argument for a notion of culture, which is more ‘open’ in the sense that, there are manifested attempts at opposition. Williams (1980:37-38) further clarify the view of hegemony to be something which is truly total, which is not merely secondary or superstructural like the weak sense of ideology, but which is lived at such a depth, which saturate the society…in any society there is a central system of practices, meanings and values which we can properly call dominant and effective…which are not abstract but which are organized and lived…it thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society.

Williams refers to this process as dynamic and points to the educational institutions as the main agencies of transmission of an effective dominant culture. Thus, we can see cultural institutions such as, museums, as agents, serving the ruling bloc to reinforce its dominance by imposing the accepted cultural worldview. Museums in this sense serve as gatekeepers by virtue of their control over the cultural forms that they include/exclude for collection and display, and by doing so, the legitimation process is affirmed. But, in the process, some of the subordinate cultural articulations will get integrated into the dominant tradition. Williams talks about the transmission of the
selective tradition that “within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as the tradition, the significant past. But always selectivity is the point: the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen and others are neglected and excluded (ibid: 39).

Although Gramsci does not define theoretically the notion of culture, he provides a general approach for understanding how to locate culture within the larger societal, historical process. Gramsci is interested in situating cultural production in the historical context, relating it to political and social processes within which it exists. He is interested in understanding the agencies by which culture is shaped and to what extent culture is guided by conscious political agency (Gramsci, 1985:13). Gramsci raises some theoretical questions concerning the role of culture: “What the preconditions are for genuinely new art and culture? What is the relation between progressive tendencies in high culture and the formation of a new culture? How is cultural change related to economic and political change and how it can be rationally organized and accelerated?” (ibid: 25). Gramsci’s interest is not so much in the art object itself as in the place it occupies within a range of social practices: “the ways it is conceptualized, thought about, accepted or contested by different social strata in different periods. What interests him in art is the place it holds generally within what he calls “the complex superstructures” of a social formation” (Ibid: 14). This observation is significant when looking at museum work and the process of legitimating various cultural objects in constructing consent and hegemonic relations in the society. Gramsci is less interested with why a work is beautiful in a fine art sense than with what feelings it arouses and how it can act as an instrument
of consent in the elaboration of a new culture. He stressed that art cannot simply be created on demand or “from above” by decree (Ibid: 1985:90-91).

The way Gramsci views folklore, for example, can shed light on how he conceptualizes popular culture, which is rooted in “real” life, in the social experiences of the people:

One can say that until now folklore has been studied primarily as a ‘picturesque’ element...folklore should instead be studied as a ‘conception of the world and life’ implicit to a large extent in differentiate (in time and space) strata of society and in opposition to ‘official’ conceptions of the world. Folklore can be understood only as a reflection of the conditions of cultural life of the people...folklore must not be considered a...picturesque element, but as something which is very serious...only in this way will the teaching of folklore be more efficient and really bring about the birth of a new culture among the broad popular masses, so that the separation between modern culture and popular culture of folklore will disappear (Ibid, 1985:188-9, 191).

Gramsci refers to the lightness or simplistic approach to subordinate groups’ popular culture as a picturesque element, as opposed to an attempt to seriously study people’s everyday lives. Bennett (1988:65) argues that this affects the terms in which the ways of life of subordinate people are presented “through the cracked looking glass of the dominant culture”. Gramsci called for the effacement of the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’, since these were always related to one another:

In relation to folklore, one can recall in this respect the relationship between the so called “minor arts” and the so called “major arts” between the activity of creators of art and that of the artisans (of luxury objects, or at least those without immediate utility). The minor arts have always been tied to the major arts and have been dependent upon them. Thus, folklore has always been tied to the culture of the dominant class and in its own way has drawn from it the motifs which have then become inserted into combinations with the previous traditions (Gramsci, 1985:194).

This, indeed, is another commonality between feminist and cultural theorists who work to blur these high/low cultural boundaries. Generally, they refuse to admit that their ways of
knowing are in any way subordinate or inferior to the dominant, accepted frameworks. Instead, cultural theorists and feminists position their understandings and insights as powerful challenges to the dominant epistemological frameworks (Fiske, 1992:164). According to Giroux (1992:204) both cultural studies and feminism are engaged in a discourse of difference “defined in opposition to hegemonic codes of culture...to challenge some of the most fundamental dominant assertions that characterize mainstream social science...to reject mainstream assumptions regarding culture as a field of shared experiences defined in Western ethnocentric terms” (ibid: ibid).

Gramsci’s analysis of hegemony and culture is devoted to understanding the working class position in civil society. O’Brien (1987:42) argued that Gramsci failed to theorize the social construction of gender relations. She critiqued Gramsci’s “male-stream” approach which neglected to account for the particularities of women’s experiences. However, Garcia (1992) suggests that his analysis can be utilized for the understanding of other oppressed groups. Specifically, it can be useful for feminist politics. Her attempt is to “broaden the Gramscian project of counter-hegemony by incorporating into the analysis the notion of a gendered working class and the sphere of reproduction” with the contribution of socialist feminists (Ibid: 10-11). Gramsci does not examine the gendered division of labor and power relations between men and women resulting from this division. Socialist feminist theory attempts to reconceptualize both the private sphere of human reproduction and the public sphere of human production. According to this approach, “it is misleading to think of the public and private as two distinct spheres: production and reproduction, work and family, far from being separate territories... are really intimately related modes that reverberate upon one another and
frequently occur in the same social, physical and psychic spaces...” (Jaggar, cited in Garcia, 1992:12). Accordingly, says Garcia, “the conception of dominant hegemony implies not only class domination but also male supremacy. An analysis of dominant hegemony must explore the relationship between on the one hand, women’s lack of access to resources and political power and on the other hand, the social constructions of motherhood and “women’s work”. O’Brien (1987:50) argued that in generalizing labor, women’s labor is overlooked, becomes unnoticed:

In collapsing “the reproduction of labor power” into the general category of production, a particular—and necessary—form of labor, women’s reproductive labor is negated. In collapsing women’s productive labor into the general category of labor, the exploitation of women by men at home and at work is obscured. In collapsing the particular ideology of patriarchy into the general category of ruling class (state) ideology, the systematic denigration of women and the legitimation of violence in procuring consent to patriarchal hegemony is ignored.

Dominant hegemony can illuminate the process through which male supremacy is accepted as common sense and as part of the natural order in order to explore women’s consent to patriarchal practices or, in Jaggar’s words, women’s “internalization” of their oppressive “external” reality (Garcia: 14). Following this, the exploration of feminist art history can shed light on the ways in which traditional art theories reinforced values, which reflected and emphasized male supremacy in artistic production. Such was the principle of “universality” in art, where “pure” art was divorced from specific realities and therefore was to be seen as “objective”. But, as Lauter (1990:99) argued, “‘universality’ turned out to be a code word for the preference of a (male) dominant group. Feminist analysis of art has shown that art is not objective in its production or evaluation. In its frequent objectification of women, it represented a subjective point of view identified with men in a culture governed by men”. In the same manner, we can see
other principles which traditional art theories stressed, especially the notion of the artist as “genius” (where genius was a term referred mainly to male artists), a gifted individual whose art is divine, and whose talent has always manifested itself very early, regardless of external encouragement. Following this principle, women’s lack of major achievements in the arts may be understood as a “syllogism”, according to Nochlin who asserted (1971:7):

If women had the golden nugget of artistic genius, it would have revealed itself naturally. But it did not, so that means that women do not have the golden nugget of artistic genius.

This is a central part in the process of gaining hegemony: the need to persuade the society at large that (male) dominance is “simply” a result of a natural process of common sense (see further discussion on feminist critique of art later in the chapter).

For Gramsci, civil society is important as a major arena where consensus occurs and a counter-hegemonic project must be built. Socialist feminists advocate a cultural revolution and struggle to create alternative institutions. Yet, they are aware of the limits that the larger society imposes on the possibilities of change by alternative institutions. Still, feminists argue that the concept of counter-hegemony is significant for social change “because counter-hegemony implies a more critical theoretical understanding and is expressed in organized and active political opposition” (Weiler, cited in Garcia, 1992:18-19). Garcia claims that both Gramscian theory and feminism stress the importance of lived experience and cultural values (or popular beliefs in Gramsci’s words) and both argue that these values reproduce power relations (or dominant hegemony). A basic commonality between feminists and Gramscian analysis is the assumption that it is both possible and desirable for oppressed groups to pursue changes
in their living conditions and challenge existing cultural hegemony. This challenge can be formulated within a counter-hegemonic project in distinct levels.

Counter-hegemony involves the need of various groups to express their interests and goals in a particular manner. It is a process through which subordinate groups resist and break from hegemonic relations. The need is to challenge the popular consensus, or the “common sense”. The working class, or subordinate groups, produces the conditions for organic intellectuals to create counter-hegemonic practices. These have to be part of daily life experiences, not imposed from above. According to Garcia, women must constantly put pressure on governments to defend their interests and more importantly, must have their own independent organizations whose final goal is to overcome their subordinate status (Ibid: 20-21, 23). However, she points to the distinction that Molyneux is making between strategic gender interests and practical gender interests which could be seen along the lines that Williams (1980) proposed, between oppositional and alternative forms. Strategic (or oppositional) interests attempt to transform the existing dominant culture in light of a more satisfactory set of arrangements that will remove discriminatory practices in the pursuit of political equality. These oppositional forms can be seen as counter-hegemonic in Gramsci’s terms. Practical interests (or alternative forms according to Williams) are usually responses to an immediate perceived need and do not generally entail a major strategic change like gender equality. These forms are “left alone”; they offer an alternative version of reality that can be valuable but one, which the dominant culture allows to exist as “resigned areas”, confined to ghettoization within the existing structure. For my purposes in this study, it is important to examine the extent to which it
could be argued that the TMC offered an institutional form to challenge cultural hegemony. What are the oppositional features that could be included in such a project?

Willis’s (1990) work on Common Culture provides a useful account of the everyday symbolic creativity of young people. He is concerned with legitimating youth culture, presenting the conditions under which it exists, the situations and processes in which they develop and have meaning. Culture, as defined by Willis, is comprised of the expressive symbolic practices which frame and order young people’s common experiences, may take place in the home, work, or leisure spheres. Willis is looking at the multitude of ways in which young people humanize, decorate with meaning their immediate paces: their bedrooms, clothing, active use of music, TV, etc. These activities are common in the sense of being everywhere, shared by the group. And he asks: “Why shouldn’t bedroom decoration and personal styles, combination of others’ ‘productions’, be viewed along with creative writing or song and music composition as fields of aesthetic realization?” (ibid, 1990: 20). Willis proposed the term ‘grounded aesthetic’ which is “the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices...There are as many aesthetics as there are grounds for them to operate in” (ibid: 21). Concrete skills, concretely acquired rather than given through natural distinction or gift, are involved in the exercise of grounded aesthetics (ibid: 24). Willis maintains that symbolic creativity in daily life is an integral part of necessary work, which is essential to ensure the daily production and reproduction of human existence. Necessary work is understood as the application of human capacities through the action of tools on raw materials to produce goods and services usually through wage labor, to satisfy physical human needs. Here, Willis is overlooking the unpaid labor of love, at
home, which was a necessity using tools and raw materials to produce goods for family use. This could be argued more specifically in relation to textile production. However, he claims that modern industry has destroyed the possibility of creative work: “Machine production took the craft tool out of the craft hand” (ibid: 9). Again, this could be specifically related to textile production and the shift with industrialization from handmade textiles to mass production and the near demise of sewing as a domestic art with the mass production of textiles. Willis points out that young people are especially involved in another form of necessary work that is, symbolic work, which produces meanings through the application of communicative resources, symbols, images, artifacts etc. and he asks: “What if we make the working assumption that the young are already engaged in imaginative, expressive and decorative activities but they are not recognized?” Here, Willis refers to the dominant culture, which overlooks vital attempts made by subordinate groups to create their own cultural meanings. In the same manner, we could look at textile production that women were engaged with as part of their domestic labor, but nevertheless, poured into these quilts, hooked rugs and other textiles, their efforts and creative capacities to make them beautiful. These creative labors remained largely hidden in the household and the emergence of TMC could be seen as an attempt to change that.

Willis is engaged with identifying the creative capacities young people employ in their daily lives. His work follows the actual practices through which they make meaningful choices and he wants to name these within a youth culture. I will suggest that his approach can be expanded to look at other social groups, namely women but also ethnic/racial groups. Textile production should be seen as necessary women’s work,
which was performed by women throughout history and well into the twentieth century (Dale, 1982; Freeman, 1987) though decreased with the advent of the industrial revolution. We can identify concrete skills, tools, raw materials and human needs in the production of textiles, as well as look at this production as the symbolic creativity that women were relegated to but nevertheless, which was meaningful to their lives. I will be cautious here since class, race and geography determined specific women’s experiences within and across societies, yet, for almost all women textiles constituted a significant practice, as Mainardi (1982:331) claims:

Women put their creativity into the needlework arts, which exist in fantastic variety wherever there are women, and which in fact are a universal female art, transcending race, class and national borders. Needlework is the one art in which women controlled the education of their daughters, the production of the art, and were also the audience and critics. Needlework is therefore so important to women’s culture that a study of the various textiles and needlework arts should occupy the same position in Women’s Studies that African art occupies in Black Studies - it is our cultural heritage.

Mainardi highlights the artistic aspect of needlework. However, I will attempt to show also the aspect of work that is involved in the production of textiles. I will begin with a review of general literature in various disciplines which associates women with textile production:

**Archaeology:** archaeological studies provide basic evidence that link women with textile production: Barber (1994) has researched textile production 20,000 years ago and found that women, virtually always women, produced textiles in different parts of the world. 20,000 years ago women began making and wearing the first clothing created from spun fibers. Until the industrial revolution, fiber arts were an enormous economic force controlled primarily by women. This was the case in the broad zone of temperate
In an attempt to explain why this became the responsibility of women, Barber maintains that textile production was compatible with childcare. The only other early occupation that fits with childcare is food production. These two are what societies worldwide have come to see as the core of women’s work if the productive labor of women is not to be lost during child rearing years (ibid, 29-30). Barber found evidence in preserved burials or as depicted on carvings and clay figurines that women did produce clothing and textiles for household use. She also found evidence to show that in many cases textiles were produced cooperatively, as a form of communal work, helping each other and having “work parties” (ibid: 86). Another example for gender-related textile production could be found in Peskowitz’ (1997) study. She examined women’s work, domesticity and textile production using archaeological findings from Roman Palestine during the first three centuries from a particular view of Jewish women. She is particularly interested in how notions of gender were produced and legitimated and she recognizes that aspects of culture and work were integrated for these women:

Spinning and weaving were simultaneously tasks done as everyday work, and cultural images that proffered social meaning. Looking at spinning and weaving in Roman and Jewish culture, then, is to find examples of how gender was made to work, and to find out how gender was made at work as part, parcel and product of some of the most ongoing, continual and repetitive acts that human beings do. (Pekowitz, 1997:11)

Peskowitz is making a connection between the artifacts of archaeological finds (tools, spindles, loom parts, etc.) and the stories about weavers and spinners that are found in religious texts which were produced during that period (Mishnah and Tosefta). For example, she argues that the equation of women and wool work happens during this time
and is supported by texts (the Mishnah) which directs that a man not teach his son a craft practiced among women (ibid, 61, 77-81).

**Anthropology:** Ethnographic studies across societies suggest the almost universal association between cloth production and women. In many small-scale societies women monopolized all or most of the production process, which played an important role in the family’s economy. In most societies the gender division of labor relegated the production of cloth and textiles for daily family use to the hands of women. There are very few examples where men do participate in the production of textiles, particularly in African societies. These examples show that in specific situations, such as cultural rituals and ceremonies of rulership, cloth is generally in men’s hands but women may participate as producers. In such cases, men’s cloth is exclusively made by the men who obviously, wear it during the event/ceremony (and women are barred from touching it), as is the case of Hausa robes in Nigeria. Still, the production of cloth, for daily use, is largely in women’s hands. Many societies also assign women, rather than men, to exchange or give the cloths that tie the living to the dead, the bride’s family to the groom’s, etc. (Weiner and Schneider, 1989).

**Feminist Art History:** With the emergence of the feminist movement, feminist historians questioned the absence of women from art history on the one hand, and started looking at women’s traditional textile production on the other. They questioned why needlework was never considered part of the “arts” but rather, was relegated to “crafts”.

The main project of feminist art history was to trace the social and political processes through which women were marginalized or ignored in art history. Nochlin (1971) posed the question: “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” How was
it possible that there were no great women artists? The first stage taken by feminist art historians was to “rediscover” women artists, by “digging” for the few lost women artists who worked, against all odds, in different art periods but were not recognized and therefore not included in the writings of art. Nochlin argued that while adding women artists to art history books was an important step it could not serve as a sufficient answer to the question she posed. Instead, Nochlin and other feminist historians argued that there were societal mechanisms that excluded women from the art scene: women were barred from academic art institutions; were denied the opportunity to paint the nude (from the period of renaissance until the nineteenth century) which was imperative in art education; were denied opportunities of apprenticeship; were denied systems of patronage; and could not be part of a salon, an intellectual circle (Nochlin 1971, Chadwick 1990). All these were social mechanisms that were used to prevent women from access to the art world but, nevertheless, were instrumental in the process of becoming a successful artist. Another venue was to question traditional aesthetic theories to show how exclusionary and gendered these were. Central to these theories is the emphasis on evaluating the work of art as an independent object by looking at “internal” aspects such as form, design, composition, color and imagery (Zolberg, 1990). The notion of ‘disinterestedness’ is also part of this evaluation, which follows the Kantian idea of the artist as “genius” and the possibility that art could transcend life (‘art for art sake’) (Beraleant, 1986). These features stressed the importance of the work of art itself, in isolation from the social, economic or political conditions within which it was produced. “Art objects are situated in a hierarchical order to privilege those least useful to daily life” (Lauter, 1990:102-3). The idea of Kantian disinterested pleasure means that “pleasure in the beautiful is a
response to the representation and to the representation alone” (Zangwill, 1992:149-150). Hence, the art object cannot be related to daily necessities. It is beyond life itself, detached from life, and in objective relation to it.

Lauter (1990) clearly shows how biased art can be when it comes to women’s work. She gives the example of quilts, which were not considered as art by aesthetic theorists even though according to their principles they should have:

It is hard to look at quilts...without asking how they came to be devalued by a dominant formalist aesthetic theory, since they are often so obviously excellent in design, anticipating by half a century or more the principles of collage, of geometric abstraction, and even art based on optical illusion. Nonetheless, quilts and their sisters in the larger category of needlework failed to qualify as art...because it was assumed that they were intended to be used and so not sufficiently separate from ‘life’. They also failed to qualify because it was assumed they did not express a unique point of view of a single creator (1990:93).

Lauter shows that “external” factors to the quilt itself were used to dismiss it as an art object. The internal qualities of quilts were not examined to see if the work exhibited any formal properties like geometric design, color composition, etc. Lauter further asks: “Why sewing on cloth with thread is less honorable for aesthetic purposes than pasting newspaper in collage?” (Ibid: 94). This process revealed the way in which these forms have been presented as gendered, in negative relation to creativity.

Parker (1984) examined the historical processes through which embroidery became identified with a particular set of characteristics, consigned to women’s hands. By mapping the relationship between the history of embroidery and changing notions of what constituted feminine behavior in the West from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, Parker argued that art became implicated in the creation of femininity across classes. The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft. She argues that there is an
important connection between the hierarchy of the arts and sexual categories of male/female. This division emerged in the Renaissance, at a time when embroidery was increasingly becoming the domain of women, working from home without pay. The professional branch of embroidery was from the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, largely in the hands of working class women. By the eighteenth century embroidery was beginning to signify an aristocratic lifestyle - not working was becoming the hallmark of femininity. Later, the Victorians presented the link between embroidery and women as entirely natural. The range of twentieth century embroidery is enormous: it has been practiced professionally by artists, dressmakers, teachers, and by millions of women as leisured art.

Feminist art history since the 1970s was committed to raising questions, and challenging art criticism. Feminist art historians contributed to the reassessment of art history’s discourse and to the inclusion of women artists to the debates on the various artistic movements and schools. As such, it should be perceived as a political project (Deepwell, 1995; 2006). A survey show of women artists between 1550-1950, curated by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) had a radical goal of including women artists in art history. The show revealed the commonalities between women artists and men artists in the different movements and schools of art and forced a comparative analysis to examine the impact of gender, race and class in the context of art production (Deepwell, 2006:68-69). On the other end, Parker (1984) discussed the social context of textile production as gendered division of labor, which valorized men’s work and art. Broude and Garrard (1982) further argued that the point is not to elevate women’s textile art to the realm of “fine art” but rather to
question whether the fine arts are necessarily “higher” in any historical or social measure than the traditional crafts that were practiced by women throughout history. And so, for them, the question was “what constitutes a work of art” (ibid: 13-14). In recent years feminist interventions in art history are shaped through exhibitions that aim to provoke questions, and avoid familiar hierarchies, chronology and dichotomy. Withers (2008) discuss two feminist exhibits, in particular: Global Feminism: New Directions in Contemporary Art (2007); and WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution (2007-2009). Global Feminism opened in Brooklyn Museum, New York, where Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party” is permanently presented. However, Withers says, that there was no “dialogue” between the two shows. Global Feminism was organized outside the West and selected alternative modes of presentation, multiple voices, and was not coherent as part of its conceptual design. WACK was a retrospective show of western feminist art since the 1970s. The goal was to highlight feminist contributions to art history since the second wave of the feminist movement. Yet, as Withers argued, the feminist movement in art is still not recognized as a “movement” in the same manner that expressionism or minimalism are. She concludes, that the goals of feminist interventions in art history were about moving beyond hegemonic or single-perspective thinking, in creating more supple and holistic models with the attempt to destabilize the art scene, as these recent exhibits show (Withers 2008:473).

Is there ‘women’s aesthetics’?

Parker’s (1984) analysis of embroidery and Mainardi’s (1982) work on quilts could shed light on the question that Nochlin posed (Why have there been no great women artists?) suggesting that there might be a different kind of “greatness” for
women’s art, based on the unique character of women’s situation and historical experience. Perhaps women did not follow dominant male forms of artistic production but instead used different forms and tools that were distinctive female styles, universally available to them and connected with their everyday experiences. This, Nochlin says, seems reasonable enough since women’s experience and situation in society, and hence, as artists, is different from men’s. Nochlin argues that this remains “within the realm of possibility” but she does not go further to examine this possibility. She argues that within the art world no such common qualities of femininity would seem to link the styles of women artists generally, any more than such qualities can be said to link women writers (Nochlin 1988:148). However, looking at embroidery and textile production, in general, I would argue that this could serve as the link among women historically and across societies, as suggested by Mainardi (1982) and Broude and Garrard (1982): producing objects for domestic use that were both functional and beautiful. In the case of European women who were prevented access to educational institutions and relegated to the private sphere, this was their only venue to express their creativity as part of their work at home and outside the home, professionally. The hierarchy of (high) art and (low) craft was based on gender and class.

A review of feminist writings reveals three main aspects that could be considered as common for women’s artwork: the production of useful/utilitarian objects; related to life, to women’s daily experiences; and the aspect of collective/ cooperative production. During the 1970s feminist artists sought ways through which to valorize women’s personal experiences into art practice to show that these were different from those of men (Chadwick, 1990; Wolff, 1990). They also sought ways to express their particular
histories and realities (French, 1990:40). Women artists worked together, in alternative settings, all-women galleries, to produce and display their art. Textiles and needlework, among other media, were used to express the politics and history of women in the arts (Freedman, 2002).

Schapiro and Wilding (1989) both feminist artists, researched feminist art from the 1970s and they found “clear evidence of a female visual language well established but still evolving” (Ibid: 6). They identified three main subjects of feminist art making:

1) Cunt/body/spirituality: This was an attempt to re-image the female body in opposition to male cultural constructions of woman/body. It was a form of body art, which had to be seen as female effort at recreating the woman image.

2) Autobiography/Narrative: was one of the first forms through which women expressed their experiences, through life stories, street performances, women became curators of their own history.

3) Domestic Arts: in the early 1970s many artists felt connection to the art of their predecessors. Traditionally, domestic creativity was carried on in kitchens and living rooms and the emphasis was on intimacy, collaboration in making utilitarian objects, which were beautiful and comforting and were linked with women’s daily activities. The idea of using fabric as an art material established a context within which to challenge the way art history honored certain materials instead of others. Thus ‘femmages’ are ways to combine fabric collage in abstract paintings. Schapiro created this concept, in order to include activities such as collage, assemblage as they were practiced by women, using traditional women’s techniques of sewing, hooking, piecing (Chadwick, 1990:332). Judy Chicago’s investigations of women’s art led her to conclude that much of women’s art is
based on values and perceptions of reality, which differ from dominant culture. She was engaged in opening spaces for women to express their culture, and such was ‘womanhouse’ which celebrated women’s traditional work and revealed female experiences (Chicago, 1975). The Dinner Party project was her attempt to celebrate women’s achievements through the medium of needlework that historically defined their art and work at home. Some second wave feminists perceived this particular genre ambivalently as they argued that knitting (and other domestic arts) were oppressive to women as domestic chores that enslaved them as housewives (Turney, 2009).

Two textiles shows were presented in Britain during 1988: “Embroidery in Women’s Lives 1300-1900” was a historical account of embroidery, samplers and banners from the suffragette movement. The other show was: “Women and Textiles Today”, a contemporary exhibition that included mix-media as well. Both shows raised questions that relate to feminism and femininity, class, and gendered value system of visual arts (Barnett, 1995).

Lauter (1990) expressed a different view: she argued that any attempt to define a feminist aesthetic as a separate, alternative category would have the unproductive result of creating a ghetto for women. Moreover, she argued that feminists should not agree that women’s art is definable as a category, since not all ideas, images and techniques represent all women. She also questioned the possibility of a unified category called ‘woman’, since women’s experiences are varied according to categories of class, race, age and sexual orientation.

To summarize, while there are some common principles to women’s art (experience, collaboration, attachment to life) that differ from that of the traditional,
dominant theories, it is difficult to identify clearly what is ‘feminist art’. I would suggest that the question is not whether feminist art can be seen as a unified/separate category. More important is to recognize that all feminist attempts in art were directed toward challenging the hegemony of traditional theories. With Nochlin (1988: xii) we can see feminist art history “not as supplement to mainstream art history but as a transgressive and anti-establishment practice, which means to call many of the major precepts of the discipline into question”.

In the study, I look at the representation of textiles in a museum setting and examine how these textiles are presented and what are the meanings associated with their representation. The question is whether the interpretation that is offered acknowledges the work women put in producing these textiles. I attempt to show that, historically, textiles constituted a major part in women’s lives as part of their work through which they were allowed to express their creativity. Therefore, I agree with Mainardi that textiles should be seen as women’s cultural heritage, one that integrated their daily realities of work with creative cultural forms. However, my goal in following the process of meaning production and presentation is to understand the approach taken by the museum: whether this approach is a hegemonic one or whether this approach signals a counter-hegemonic attempt at transforming modes of interpretation to include women’s contributions.

Next, I discuss the approach taken by sociologists in their studies of work and housework and in particular as it relates to textile production at home, to further examine the inherent linkage between the concepts of “culture” and “work” when it comes to women’s work.
On Work: from the standpoint of women

Housework involves all those activities that maintain the house and service its members. Sociologists have indicated that although housework is one of the major occupational categories, women housewives engaged in doing this work have not been considered as workers (Luxton, 1986). The question that arises is what constitutes “work” and what is the vantage point through which we understand the concept. Smith (1987; 2005) argues that ideological apparatuses, such as the media, education (and I would include museums), subscribe the forms of thought and knowledge that we use. These apparatuses subordinate and marginalize women’s standpoints and the ways in which they experience daily life. Smith suggests that we start from where we actually live in the world, as sociologists and as women. The need is to begin with actual women’s experiences and practice of the world. Sociologists exploring housework, recorded women’s daily activities with regard to the work involved in the home. Women talked, among other things, about cloth making, and textile production as part of their work:

In the evening I get supper and we’ve eaten and washed up by eight. After that, I knit or do some dressmaking and watch television (Oakley, 1974:103).

In our house there was never any spare money, so we didn’t have new, ‘bought’ clothes... so home-sewn clothes were the nearest we got to ‘new’ ones. Mother spent a lot of time sewing and allocating all day Thursday to it... She often worked late into the night and I grew up thinking it normal... The other way we made clothes was by cutting down and re-sewing cast-offs...I was so used to this that there was a family joke about how, when little, I’d say on being given something new by mother, ‘What was it before’? (Blount, 1987:20)

The sewing of the housewife is quite generally pushed over into the evening, as well as afternoon, thus lengthening her day considerably (Perkins Gilman, 1980:74).

These accounts provide us with women’s perspectives of cloth and textile production. These activities were regarded by women as part of their responsibilities for the home
and family, which shows that for them it was indeed work and not a pastime activity. The concept of Work is often presented in dichotomy to Leisure, as its opposite. One is at leisure when not “working”, that is, free from the necessity to labor. Yet, Smith argues that the problem with the concept arises when looking at women’s domestic work:

But women’s existence cannot be comprehended within such frames...Society has organized for women a different relation to the world. Attempts to apply a conceptual apparatus drawn uncritically from the standard sociological frames in these areas, rest uneasily on the actual experience and situation of women as a means of analysis...If we started with housework as a basis, the categories of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ would never emerge...The social organization of the role of housewife, mother and wife does not conform to the divisions between being at work and not being at work (in Fenstermaker Berk, 1980:18).

Smith refers to housework in general, but I would suggest that her argument is especially heightened when looking at the production of household textiles. Making quilts, hooked rugs and various needlework items was a necessary work, but work that also allowed women’s creativity to be expressed, and so women looked forward to performing that kind of work (Mainardi, 1982). Sociologists who studied housework argued that the notion of ‘work’ itself changed with technological developments since the industrial revolution. For centuries the household was the center of production, a work place for both men and women. Industrialization changed this by moving much productive work outside the home as the range of commodities produced by industry expanded and certain work shifted from the home to the public sphere of commodity goods production. Women no longer made their own textiles and clothing, these were mass-produced and the housewife became a consumer of goods for household use (Luxton, 1980:117-18). And so, “work” came to mean labor production outside the home, for pay, and “housework” as service for the family, a labor of love. Hence, the separation of “work” from “non-work”, or leisure. Yet, I will argue that this portrayal highly generalized and
unified women’s daily experiences. Indeed, the process of industrialization largely shifted the roles women played at home (from producers to consumers). But still, for many women, especially from working class, rural areas and ethnic communities the making of textiles and cloth for the home and as part of the family’s economy was necessary and therefore persisted through the industrial era, well into the twentieth century. The case of hooked rugs in Cheticamp, Nova Scotia, is a good example to point to the economic contributions made by women in this area who turned the production of hooked rugs for family use into a major economy second only to fishing (Chiasson and Deveau, 2006). Women continued to quilt, sew, knit and weave for household use (McLean, 2009) but also increasingly began selling their products so these textiles enjoyed use value and exchange value in the public sphere. Dale (1982) studied women’s work and outport life in Newfoundland from 1900 to 1960. She recorded women’s experiences and perceptions:

The women tended the sheep...women ‘ed wash, card and spin wool and knit their men sweaters and mitts and even wool underwear...it was cold out on the sea, you’d need all that or you’d freeze to death...every cent counted...nothing went to waste...everything was used. Only the well-to-do could afford to purchase decorative objects...most women were obliged to make such objects as curtains, tablecloths, floor mats and quilts. The women reserved time in the evening for this type of handwork or got together in someone’s kitchen during the afternoons in winter (1982:19-20).

The women viewed the home as a work place. The organization of the house was set to efficiently carry their daily chores. This handwork constituted part of domestic labor and leisure at the same time. Work and leisure were inseparable categories within their daily

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3 Sharon Irving, Guest Curator for the exhibition of Black story quilts: ‘This is not a poem - This is a summer quilt’ (Textile Museum of Canada) interviewed Black women in Nova Scotia who talked about quilting as part of household economy during 1920s and 1930s. (Exhibition Committee, 24 August, 1995)
life experiences. These objects were necessary for the function of the home and family but allowed women to express themselves artistically:

You know, I can see myself sitting down, and I used to be at the mats, and my husband, he used to be lying down, you know, and I couldn’t get the nights long enough...My dear, I was right dying to be at that work! and when I’d go a little, have so much done, you know, and then I’d sneak it out and look at it and see how nice it looks and I couldn’t sleep thinkin’ about it (Dale, 1982:20).

Textile production can be seen as a necessary function for the household but also as part of women’s task to transform the house into a ‘home’. Women saw it as their responsibility to decorate the rooms so they will ‘show’. There were those textiles made for daily use and textiles that were produced for display. The ‘best’ remnants in terms of color, fabric and those imbued with personal memories, meaning, were saved for quilts and hooked rugs that were displayed in the parlor and other rooms, for guests:

Of all decorations, the most important were the mats...Everyone made a couple of mats each winter to put on their floor. Materials used for kitchen mats were different than those for other rooms of the house...Sure you’d have to make new mats every year for the kitchen, you’d never use anything good for that...Every parlor contained a “fancy mat” or mat made from the best materials available (Dale, 1982:21).

Collins (1992) maintains that the working-class housewife tends to identify status with the appearance of the household itself. He argues that housewives’ activities are primarily in the realm of status production (Ibid: 218). Household status presentation itself is the home, and it includes the cleanliness of the house, the style of its furnishings, and the presentation of food. He argues that cooking is the most ceremonial form of household work in Goffman’s terms: it is a ritual that involves various customs, the display of china and silverware where the housewife then is complimented for her talents in producing a delicious meal. Therefore, it is seen as the favorite housework activity (as opposed to the “backstage” work such as ironing, washing, cleaning, etc.). Also, it is the one domestic
activity that could be considered as unalienated labor in the Marxist sense: “It is craft work: the worker, who controls her own instruments of production, can introduce considerable variety into the process and its products are for direct consumption which includes a symbolic market of status within the community (Collins, 1992:219-220).

I would suggest seeing textile production and its presentation or ‘display’ in the house, as significant and meaningful in women’s lives as Collins suggests viewing cooking. Women indeed controlled the means of production and their products were made for direct use, hence they had ‘use value’ as well as symbolic status ‘exchange value’. Mainardi (1982:331) talks about the functional purposes of quilts but argues,

They had another purpose equally important to their makers, and that is display. Early bedrooms possessed only one piece of furniture, namely, the bed, and the quilt displayed on the bed was the central motif”. Women reserved their ‘best’ quilts for guests or special occasions and these were also exchanged as gifts among relatives and within the community.

Women “exhibited” their quilts and hooked rugs at home and outside the home, at county fairs and churches. Good quilt makers and hooked rugs makers were well known and respected throughout their regions (Mainardi, 1982; Chiasson and Deveau, 2006). Women have always highly valued the domestic textiles they created (Freedman, 2002: 316-17). Much as cooking, quilt-making and hooking rugs, were part of a necessity but one area where women could also introduce considerable creative variety to the process. As mentioned earlier, many women looked forward for their evening quilting time: “I would have lost my mind if I had not had my quilts to do” (Mainardi, 1982:335).

Finally, to illustrate the linkage between aspects of culture and work it is useful to refer to Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez (1974:63) who wrote about Marxist aesthetics and the similarity between art and work processes: he notes that both art and labor share a
relationship to the human essence: both are creative activities by means of which “man produces objects that express him, that speak for and about him”. Therefore, there is no radical opposition between the process of art making and work: both are seen as part of human labor:

When a product of human labor is appreciated for its use value, as a useful object, it can be said to be a product of real human labor. Insofar, as this labor creates use values, concrete individual objects which satisfy concrete human needs; Marx calls this labor concrete labor. In it, a concrete relationship exists between product and producer (Ibid: 190).

Summary

I discussed in this chapter the concepts of culture and work and suggested that for women, and especially when discussing textile production, ‘work’ included aspects of creative expression. Therefore the separation between ‘culture’ and ‘work’ in women’s lives did not exist. I reviewed Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony and the sphere of culture and in particular popular culture, as the sphere where the struggle for hegemony occurs. I examined the notion of counter-hegemony and oppositional practices as a challenge to dominant practices and its possibility for social transformation. Then, I outlined the existing literature on the interconnectedness between women and textile production in various fields of study. I then examined feminist contributions to the concepts of art and work. Now, I turn to museums, and the work done within them in producing meaning, in particular, the meanings associated with women’s work and textile production as well as its representation.
Chapter 3. On Museums: A literature review

A historical review of the emergence of Western museums reveals that in their early stages, museums in the eighteenth century were engaged in the collection, representation and study of objects, which were related to the daily lives of people from all walks of life. As “cabinets of curiosities”, these were general and eclectic collections which encompassed a whole range of the everyday life of various cultures. The display of the unique, extraordinary, was not confined to “high” culture but rather included natural objects, coins, medals, working tools, etc. (Murray, 1904; Impey and MacGregor, 1985; Levine, 1988). However, from the nineteenth century on, it was increasingly high art or “fine” art that became the museum’s focus:

Connoisseurs of painting and sculpture who came to dominate the collecting scene and who sets new standards which ensured that matters of taste and aesthetics displaced curiosity as the common currency of the British collector (Impey et al, 1985:158).

Museums collected fine examples of art and soon became “temples” focused on highly valued items, which reinforced the status and dominance of the ruling class (Zolberg, 1984). The presentation of indigenous artifacts in these temples during the period of European colonialism was understood as reinforcing the dominance and superiority of Western culture over other cultures (Billington et al, 1991:71-2).

European museums were serving as national monuments, providing patronage for high status groups, wealthy elites, who together with artists and cultural entrepreneurs, wished to create a culture for themselves (Zolberg, 1984:381). This process could be seen in nationalistic, masculine and colonial terms, (Levin, 2010:2) thus hegemonic. American museums went through a similar process in that they also changed from generally collecting and displaying a variety of artifacts to narrowly defined museums focused on
“fine” examples of art and culture. Levine (1988:146) argues that American museums were not, in the antebellum period, segregated temples of fine art but repositories of information, collections of strange and doubtful data. But, gradually this approach changed and a debate over the meaning and purpose of culture itself, and the social roles of the museum in that culture ensued. This debate, according to Zolberg (1984) was between elitist and populist visions of the museum as a cultural institution: Elitists saw the main goal of art museums in collecting and preserving high art forms while populists saw the museum as an educational and democratic cultural institution, providing education in and access to the fine arts for the many. It is important to note, that both elitists and populists focused on high art forms and in this sense they display a similar approach towards the museum as a cultural hegemonic institution in the society. The creators of late nineteenth century museums were not interested in the lives and cultural traditions of subordinate groups, as Bennett (1988) claims:

If museums were regarded as providing object lessons in things, their central message was to materialize the power of the ruling class cultural authority (1988:64).

Thus, the development of the museum as an institution of the state, as described here, is in accordance with Gramsci’s view of the ways in which hegemony can be generated within civil society. The museum in the nineteenth and twentieth century practically excluded gendered, racial or ethnic interpretations from its displays. In contrast, Simon’s (2006: 114) approach to museum work relies on democracy and civic life: He maintains that “democracy requires forms of remembrance that help open-up existing relations to public appraisal and possible transformation”. Hence, museums are significant for the democratic civic life of people in transforming public histories into new possibilities.
In the past two or three decades we have witnessed major changes in museums’ visions and social roles, which are reflected mainly in their approaches to minorities’ representation. Museums’ relationships with communities are at the forefront of current museum work and museum literature. A review of the issues which occupy museum professionals in the US, Canada and Britain reveals that these issues pertain mainly to the incorporation of people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds in all aspects of the museum, from board to audience; representation of minorities and their cultural artifacts (such as, identity formation, voice, collaboration) in both museums’ collections and exhibitions; ethical issues concerning cultural patrimony and collecting policies (Harrison, 1993; Sandell, 2002, 2007). Muse magazine conducted the series: Museums and Collaborations (1996); The Canadian Museum Association (CMA) devoted the annual meetings (1996) to the topics of collaboration and relationships with communities. The CMA also founded the Cultural Diversity Program in order to discuss the implementation of such programs in museums.

The debate within the museum “world” was defined and framed in terms of the relationships between museums and diverse communities, but what is at stake is the nature of knowledge that is to be part of the museum exhibit and the power to include other forms of knowledge into the exhibition process. Generally, these critical issues challenge museums’ authority to represent and interpret the histories and cultural knowledges of subordinate social groups. The 1960s civil rights movement, changes in civil society, and the implementation of multiculturalism policy in Canada (1971) influenced this shift in the process of representation; it is manifested by demands made by social groups who rejected the ways in which museums have portrayed their history
and culture. In Canada, various museum exhibits during the 1990s provoked public
debates concerning the knowledge museums used in the exhibition process, in particular
when interpreting peoples’ material culture. Such exhibits as “The Spirit Sings” (1988)
and “Into the Heart of Africa” (1991) provoked reaction among First Nations people,
Blacks and other social groups, who demanded that their voices and ways of knowing be
included in the representation of their cultures. Consequently, museums were forced to
rethink their policies and thus, the Canadian Museums Association together with the
Assembly of First Nations, sponsored a Task Force on Museums and First Peoples
(1992), which recommended cooperative and proactive projects in access, interpretation
and repatriation of material culture.

This process signals a shift in museums’ perceptions from a traditional one that
reinforced the hegemonic dominance of Western knowledge and culture, towards a more
open and inclusive perception, which recognizes “other” knowledges as valid. This could
be seen as an attempt to create legitimate spaces for the presentation of artifacts related to
non-dominant groups. It is important to note, however, that the incorporation of
subordinate people’s cultural content into dominant forms is also a general feature of the
maintenance of hegemonic forms. Hence, it is imperative to study these patterns of
incorporation in museums in order to understand the extent of hegemonic forms operating
at the museum level. Yet, most of museum literatures on incorporating cultural forms
within museum work (i.e. collections, exhibitions) deal with minority-ethnic groups’
representation overlooking gender/women’s issues.

The literature on museums’ relationships with communities reveals various
working patterns used by museums (such as consultation, outreach, appointment of
specialist staff, inviting committees, etc.). However, even when mainstream, established museums such as the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology and the Royal British Columbia Museum, or the Vancouver Art Gallery opened their collections and educational programs to First Nations, they kept their scientific and aesthetic “museum-like” orientations of displaying what they considered the best, quality art (Milroy, 2006). Another example is the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago where “an extensive consultative process has been designed to involve Chicago’s African-American community. The organizers were trying to respond to the knowledge, background assumptions, and concerns their audience may bring to the museum.” (Lavine and Karp, 1991:7). By this process, established museums affirm the final authority to the museum. The Smithsonian Institution conducts audience surveys, has an outreach program and the education departments of its museums schedule many community events. Still, different social groups demand more: “they claim the right to assert their communities’ point of view in the essential activities of the museum” (Karp et al., 1992:11-13). Communities questioned mainstream museums’ authority and control over their knowledge and point of view: Who is to speak? Whose knowledge is legitimate? Today, as Heumann Gurian argues, many museum workers in Canada, the U.S. and Australia concede that

Native people are the legitimate spokespersons for the use and display of “their” artifacts. Thus, the exclusive right of museum personnel to decide what will be included or excluded in their public exhibitions will end. The display of any object without consultation with the group, and by extension, any group affected, may become obsolete (Heumann Gurian, 2005:74).

Yet, consultation is “mere tokenism” says Devine (2010:226). Devine explored the changes in museums’ relationships with aboriginal communities after a Task Force
(1992) made its recommendations. Her conclusion was that most museums did not implement the recommendations as they were articulated in the document “Turning the Page”. These recommendations related to the participation of aboriginals in museum governing processes and their involvement in planning, implementation of exhibitions, training aboriginals as museum professionals, etc. She claims that “inviting” or “consulting” are meaningless if source communities are not allowed substantive influence over elements of collection, conservation, and interpretation (Devine, 2010:226). Transforming the relationships between museums and communities could become a reality if the role of the curator were to be changed “from an expert towards that of the possessor of technical competence whose function is to assist groups outside the museum to use its resources to make authored statements within it” (Bennett, 1995:103-104).

However, Said (1985:91) questioned the possibility of producing knowledge that is “non-dominative and non coercive in a setting that is deeply inscribed with the politics, considerations, the positions and the strategies of power…The right of formerly un- or mis-represented human groups to speak for and represent themselves in domains defined, politically, intellectually as normally excluding them”. This applies, unless they are equally positioned within the museum, as is the case of Australia’s Koorie Heritage Trust of the Museum of Victoria, which employs aboriginal staff in management positions and interpretation of cultural artifacts (Simpson, 2001).

In contrast, the proliferation of small “ethnic”-centered museums, in the past few decades, offer a challenge to authority by focusing on local history as seen by local communities. Such are the U’mista Cultural Center and the Kwagiulth Museum in British Columbia, which may be seen as oppositional since they have demonstrated an ability to
identify unrecognized objects and issues, to attract nontraditional visitors, and suggest new possibilities for the display (according to their original family ownership, or as is the case of the U’mista, arrange objects in the sequence of their appearance at the potlatch) (Clifford, 1988:248; Lavine, 1991:6,151-58). Another example in British Columbia is the Ksan Historic Indian Village where indigenous groups control the process of representation which benefits their culture and their local community (Simpson, 2001). This enables a meaningful exhibition, which is also more relevant to people’s lives. African American museums serve as yet another example: During the Black Consciousness Era (1960s, 1970s) the vast majority of African American Museums were founded. Most of them operated on the principle that museums can be vehicles for social change. Museum professionals were seen as facilitators working within rather than standing apart from, the community. Conscious decisions were made to eliminate the authoritative voice, to ensure museums would serve the needs of the community (Mullen Kreamer, 1992:376).

Minority museums that are “ethnic-centered” enjoy a cohesive relationship with their communities which enable the museum to validate the communities’ experiences, thus, providing the community with the means to see and understand their situation more clearly (Gaither, 1992:60). Gaither provides an example of an educational program based on the decorative appliqué traditions of the old African kingdom of Dahomey. In the program, teenage mothers draw on Dahomean textile traditions to create quilted blankets for their infants. He argues that beyond the lessons in cultural history, the women also gain social and family skills that will help them reconstruct their lives in a fruitful way (ibid: 60). It has been argued that these ethnographic museums can represent “archives
of social knowledge provided it is done thoughtfully, representing the cultures on their own terms does something to redress the historical balance” (Durrans, 1988:150).

Clifford (1988) provides a distinction between majority museums and minority museums and argues that the former tend to tell a universal narrative (that is hegemonic) as compared to minority museums which tend to tell their own story in terms of oppositional culture. These ethnic-centered museums were termed by Heumann Gurian (1991:178) as “counterculture museums”. People of all classes who wanted to preserve a particular viewpoint that has not been expressed in other museums have created these museums. The idea was to counteract the established view of these groups as it was portrayed in dominant museums. According to Heumann Gurian, museums can be categorized into three political categories: Museums that aspire to be or are part of the establishment organizations, self-consciously liberal museums and counterculture museums. These museums could be positioned politically as right of center, left of center and on the far left respectively (ibid: ibid). Historically, she argues that all museums tend to drift toward the right and become more closely related to the establishment and less radical. Heumann Gurian does not discuss further the elements or features of such counterculture museums and their possibility to transform and change current museum practices. I will suggest that these museums generally offer a challenge to mainstream museums by focusing on local and specific histories, which were largely overlooked by established museums. Such museums may offer not only unique viewpoints in terms of their objects, collections and space organization but also, use varied representation and interpretive methods in their exhibitions. Exhibiting processes facilitate the construction of multiple meanings and points of view through which an object can be perceived.
These, I would suggest, may bridge the gap or reduce the tension that exists between the *dynamic* life the object enjoyed originally in its “previous” life and, on the other hand, the *static* museum presentation. A study that used the concept of counterculture museum was done on the Sami people in Scandinavia (Keil, 2004). The study looks at the representation of the Sami people in Finland and their presentation in the specialized counterculture museum. Keil talks about the self-management use of stories, oral traditions from the vantage point of the Sami people as the interpretive mode for exhibitions, which makes this museum a unique counterculture museum.

Bennett (1995:91) is skeptical about the possibility to see the museum as counter-hegemonic:

In the Gramscian paradigm museums are represented as instruments of ruling-class hegemony, then so museums tend to be thought of as amenable to a general form of cultural politics – one which, in criticizing those hegemonic ideological articulations governing the thematics of museum displays, seeks to forge new articulations capable of organizing a counter hegemony. The difficulty with such formulations is that they take scant account of the distinctive field of political relations constituted by the museum’s specific institutional properties. Gramscian politics, in other words, are institutionally indifferent in ways which Foucaultian perspective can usefully temper and qualify.

My attempt in this study is to assess the possibility of TMC as an oppositional museum. To what extent does counterculture differ from oppositional or counter-hegemonic practices in the museum. What elements could be identified as counter-hegemonic within museum work? A distinction should be made between counterculture museums, oppositional museums, and counter-hegemonic museums. Counterculture museum are based on specific community groups, like the Sami people, who wish to promote their culture on their own terms. Oppositional museums promote views, agendas, organizational structures and exhibition methods that are in sharp contrast to dominant
established museums, but they don’t necessarily rely on specific communities. Both pose a challenge to hegemonic museums but they are not counter-hegemonic since they don’t call for a transformation of the museum world in their light.

Can the TMC offer a meaningful picture of not only textile production but also the social and political issues related to the production process, such as the context of work in the domestic sphere, and women’s cultural traditions?

As argued earlier, women’s representation did not constitute a major part in the general debates of museums’ work. So, I turn now to feminist examination of women’s place in museums.

**Museums’ Representations of Women:**

It has been argued that despite the growing scholarly work in the fields of Art, Sociology, History and Women’s Studies, which examined the public and private lives of women, museums are still slow in addressing women’s experiences both inside the home and in the public world of work (Melosh, 1989; Gillam, 2001; Hein, 2010). Women are still underrepresented in museum exhibits, both as artists and subjects (Wolff, 1990:73; Porter, 1996, Guerrilla Girls, 2008) and when they do appear in museums it is often in exhibits related to costume displays and handicrafts (Porter, 1988; 1996; Harvey, 1994; Clark Smith, 2010). Such representations portray women doing some ‘traditional’ women’s activities as part of a leisured pastime. The setting is often that of the upper-middle class home, which denies the realities of working class women especially. Porter (1988; 1996) claimed that the home holds interest not in its own right but as a counterpoint to the world of work. This claim supports Wolff’s argument that those areas of experience and knowledge, which were specifically women’s, were not considered as
“knowledge”. The knowledge producers were dealing with the existing hierarchy of importance in which the public took precedence over the private and the gendered hierarchy between art and craft persists. As Hein notes, utilitarian objects, achieve an art status only when denied their use-context and displayed as art objects (Hein, 2010:56).

In recent decades, museums have begun addressing women’s history and specifically the domestic sphere in exhibits. Yet, as feminist critics argue, these shows illuminate museums’ roles in the larger process of rebuilding a cultural center, a process that reinforces dominant ideology (Melosh, 1989:183) and portrays women in a subordinate, secondary position to that of men (Levin, 2010; Clark Smith, 2010). Critical attempts to discuss museums’ approaches to the representation of women were made since the early 1990’s. In the US, a seminar titled “Gender Perspectives: The Impact of Women on Museums” was held at the Smithsonian Institution, 1990 followed by a book with the same title; in Denmark, an international workshop focused on women in museums was held in 1991. Following this workshop, Museum magazine devoted a special issue (Focus on Women, 1991) to the topic. The major issues arising in these seminars pointed to the lack of women’s representation in museums; participants agreed on the importance of raising the profile and status of women in museums and the need to build collections, plan and design programs which address women’s history, art and science (1991:125). The main point to note here is “the historical fact that the feminist movement in the United States during the early 1970’s by-passed the museum world”. More accurately, it was argued that American museums ignored the feminist movement since its inception (Glaser, 1991:180). Glaser pointed to the general neglect of women as theorists and interpreters of collections, particularly those pertaining to women. Harvey
(1994) reviewed museums’ representation of women and argued that exhibits that concern women were limited in their content to safe themes, which were traditionally “women’s”, such as textiles and handicrafts activities characterized as “pastimes”. In exhibits that featured industry and technology women’s role was marginal and passive. Women’s contemporary position in society was rarely discussed. According to Sandell (2007: 184) museums tend to avoid potentially controversial exhibit content, which could threaten their existence. They are much more comfortable dealing with issues which are within the consensus. Increasingly, museums rely on wealthy private and corporate sponsorship and these donors have little interest in funding revisionist social history.

In England, Porter (1988; 1996) examined the gendered representation of women in museums. She argued that displays of the workplace and industry are preferred over service industries and domestic usage because it is distinctive, dramatic and more closely follows a historical framework. Women were excluded from these public representations. On the other end, small history museums are full of objects associated with women, objects that are handmade, familiar, and unexceptional. However, such objects when displayed are placed within a distinctive discourse: women’s objects and culture do not ‘speak for themselves’ but are spoken for (Porter, 1991a: 160). Thus, she argues, in museums of industry the rhetoric is that of activity: the display shows a dirty, crowded workplace, scattered with tools. The men are workers, producers, as opposed to representations of the home, the parlor, period rooms where the rhetoric is that of cleanliness, stasis, and passivity. Work is absent and women are engaged in needlepoint, which is shown as a pastime (ibid: 161). Such presentation subordinates women and their domestic work. Thus a series of opposites are constructed of: work/home, productive
labor/pastimes, active/passive (ibid: 160). In recent years, she argues, museums have shifted emphasis from reception rooms and parlors to the more private areas as kitchen and laundry, but work is still absent. Even when dealing explicitly with housework, it is through displays of domestic appliances. Thus, housework is presented as a sequence of technological achievements, which reduce housework (Porter, 1988).

Australian museums portray a similar picture: women are on the fringes of museum representation despite the wealth of material in museums’ collections, women’s representations fail to convey the value and complexity of domestic labor. Despite progress in other spheres of life, women remain on the fringes of museum culture. Also historic-house museums fail to show women who lived there and the work that kept the home in operation (Anderson and Winkworth, 1991). As for Aboriginal women, museum collections lack information and objects to highlight their roles in traditional societies (Robinson and Bernard, 2010).

Melosh (1989:198-203) examined two exhibits which focused on the home and domestic labor in the US: “The Light of the Home” presented at the Margaret Strong Museum in Rochester, New York, 1982, was centered around nineteenth-century Victorian womanhood, namely middle class culture. Sections on motherhood, home decoration, housework, leisure, and such focused mainly on selective details of Victorian America. Such presentations exclude working women and their life experiences in the same period. Also, it is important to note, that no discussion of textile production, whether for use or leisure, is mentioned. Women’s experiences in their everyday routines are overlooked. In contrast, “Impact: Technology in the Kitchen” explores housework and its impact on women’s lives. This exhibit, opened in 1985 in Vermont, relies on
feminist studies of housework and informs the public that despite technological changes, the time spent on housework was not reduced. Through a series of five kitchen settings from the 1830s to the 1970s, the exhibit shows the transformations in tools, electrification, equipment, etc. Still, the focus is on machines. Another exhibit, “Men and Women: A History of Costume, Gender and Power” was displayed at the National Museum of America History in 1991 (Clark Smith 2010).

In Canada, a survey of women’s representation in museums has indicated the marginality of women in exhibitions (Harvey, 1994; Gillam, 2001). Their representation was limited to traditional costume and domestic displays, which were presented uncritically. Generally, the domestic sphere is focused on technological progress without questioning why women were relegated to the private domain. There were no collection policies in place for women’s material culture (Reilly, 1989; Harvey, 1994; Knibb, 1994). Exhibitions of housework, which aimed at exploring domestic labor, centered on the use of technology at home.

The National Museum of Science and Technology, Ottawa, explored the history of domestic technology in “Love, Leisure and Laundry: Why housework just won’t go away” (1996). This exhibit tells the history of work in the home by displaying technological changes in domestic appliances, methods of cooking, washing etc. The show emphasizes the kind of work performed around the house and the related technological transformations; yet, the emphasis is on machines, the equipment, instead of who works them. This preoccupation with objects and technologies, according to Stelmackowich (1996) may contribute to the “social denial of housework as real work, where women are seen as secondary, as operators or consumers - rather than inventors or
producers”. Stanley’s (1995) detailed account of women inventors of household technologies is a critical contribution. She chronicled women’s inventions and registered patents of labor-saving machines in five major areas: food-processing, laundry, cleaning, sewing and dressing. Women contributed to the inventions of such labor saving machines as stoves, sewing machines, dishwashing and washing machines, etc. This information could be offered as a meaningful contribution of women in an exhibit that deals with household technologies that are mainly used by women as part of their housework.

As producers, women throughout history were responsible (among other things) for the production of clothing and household textiles for family use or as part of home decoration. This production, which was performed by women well into this century, especially by working class women and in rural areas (Dale, 1982; Hood, 1984-5; Mainardi, 1982), is completely overlooked in the exhibit. The only textile that appears in the show is a quilt, displayed in the entrance as part of the title, but not of the show.

A Press Release for the exhibit (Ottawa, 18 April, 1996) reads as follows:

Home is where the heart is. Home is also the backdrop for the latest major exhibit... LOVE LEISURE AND LAUNDRY takes a light-hearted and informative look at household appliances and technology that were supposed to make our life easier, but did they? Exploring the history of domestic technology (1860-1995), the exhibit chronicles the technical evolution of household appliances and services, and the interplay between society, culture and advertising. It also investigates gender relations in the home, and some of the reasons why technology never did and probably never will eliminate housework (sigh)... You will surely notice the huge wedding cake, and the oversized egg-beater waiting to be used. Nearby, observe gadgets and simple machines including specialty ones used in cooking...Kids can play in a house designed just for them with toy versions of appliances. While they play, parents can observe antiques washing machines being used in the demonstration area... The exhibit concludes by suggesting that we all have significant choices to make about the roles we want to adopt in our households and the domestic technologies we need to perform housework. The choices we will make will shape the next century.
Porter (1991:115) critiques the ways in which museums represent domestic labor: “In historical displays about work, humor is reserved for representations of women. The look and language of museums of industry is serious, dignified, imbued with the weight of tradition and skill...In comparison, the look and language of museums of the home and of housework are light-hearted, places to have fun. Katriel (2010) found the same pattern when looking at the representation of Israeli pioneer women and their work. In line with this argument, Reilly (1989:48) claims that while the skill of a machinist was recognized, the wife of that craftsman was considered unskilled, despite managing a household, producing quilts and clothing.

In contrast, the exhibit “Fabrications: Stitching Ourselves Together” is a case in point to illustrate a feminist-based exhibit. Developed in 1997, at the Red Deer Museum, in Alberta, it was on national tour until 2001 making the TMC its last stop. The exhibit was curated by a feminist sociologist, Dr. Kathryn Church, and comprised of twenty two wedding dresses that her mother sewed between 1950-1995. Church saw the dresses and her mom’s dressmaking scribblers as valuable material culture:

In May 1996 while visiting my parents I watched my mother thumb through her sewing scribblers. I knew these booklets very well but for the first time I really saw them. The social scientist in me recognized these rather ragged objects as original data, a priceless case history of skilled domestic sewing (Church, 2003: 150).

The focus of this exhibit is women’s social history and work at home, which was largely invisible. Church, together with her mother, Lorraine, tracked the brides and the wedding dresses. She interviewed her mom and the brides and their stories formed the text for the exhibit: “I wanted to critically analyze what was going on in the construction of these dresses- for mom, for the brides and for myself” (Church, 2001). Church argues that
questions about the nature of knowledge, what counts as knowledge and who counts a legitimate knower, were part of this project as she struggled to make sense of the three dimensional world of fabrics, patterns and thread, which her mom controlled (Church, 2008). The concept of “work” itself was problematized as well:

Early on I had written mom in as a seamstress who supported the family income. My mother denied this. Her sewing, she argued, was not about earning extra income…it was about love and service, a way of connecting to family and community…What was I, her feminist daughter, to do in this situation?...I was there to celebrate what mom had done, not to subject her choices to my feminist critique…I wrote the argument between mom and me about her work and women’s work generally into the exhibit text (Church, 2001).

The personal stories told by the dress maker and the brides were emotional, and women could connect and identify with them in ways that they don’t necessarily experience in other shows; as one visitor to the exhibit told Lorraine, the display of women’s work meant more to her than an art display where she couldn’t figure out its meaning (Church, 2003: 154).

To summarize, it could be argued that museums are still slow in presenting women, gender relations and women’s work in and outside the home. These issues still do not sufficiently occupy museum professionals and scholars. According to Mayo (1990), meaningful women’s history will not appear in museums until women help shape the way history is defined. This means that there is a need to put women and women’s work at the center of our research and interpretive programs, since these have not been the priorities in museum work. A recent publication on gender and sexuality in museums fills this void (Levin, 2010) and is the first one to focus on women’s involvement in museums and feminist museum scholarship. Levin offers a bibliographic essay which
surveys the scholarship on feminist issues and sexuality and concludes that much more work is still needed in this area.

Feminist exhibitions move beyond just “weaving” women back in. Integrating and promoting a feminist vantage point can highlight women’s experience, and involvement in society. Utilizing feminist theories and research in museum work should be the direction for museums if they attempt to change the current picture of women’s representation. Australia’s museums adopted a “Women’s Policy for Programs and Practice” (Museums Australia, 2000). This policy focuses on the principle that women have an equal right to representation in museum collections, conservation and interpretive programs; Board representation; Education; employment and training. The policy also talks about the priority of oral histories in the documentation of women’s collections and the use of non-discriminatory language. Hein (2010) provides a useful account on the ways in which museums can apply feminist perspectives. She raised the question: “What would a museum without masterpieces and exemplary instances look like?” A feminist-inspired museum without “MASTERpieces” is one that is focused on the collection of ordinary, common, objects from the daily lives of women; the language in labels is not authoritative, not neutral nor genderless; attention is given to the overlooked and suppressed; multiple interpretations are offered; the space itself is set against the “grandeur” which characterized museums traditionally.

**Women’s Museums:** Attempts to address and prioritize women’s history and their working traditions are made through the creation of women’s museums. Most of these museums emerged during the 1980’s in an attempt to focus on a variety of societal issues from the specific perspective of women. Some are art museums, others are history
museums, but they all seem to share a basic commonality of challenging the ways in which women and their lives were (mis) represented previously in museums.

The Women’s Museum in Denmark is centered on the “profound changes within women’s traditions of work and everyday life brought about through industrialization and urbanization” (Sandahl, 1991:172). The museum’s collection is based on objects, archives of oral histories, photos, and written documents. The attempt is to document the ways in which all the different “areas of women’s lives are interrelated...Women’s tradition is oral, and we have found that oral history is our best method of tracing this unity...Our collections are characterized by the chipped, threadbare, the worn and mended, the humble objects of everyday life” (ibid,1991:173). The first thematic exhibition (in 1984) centered on domestic labor and unmarried mothers in the 1930’s: Along with the objects and stories of shirt mending, the museum presents the untold stories of wife beatings and back street abortions. One of the museum’s objectives is also to provide work and employment for women. Most of the women who work on short-term contracts are unskilled and have no experience in museum work. The museum established a reputation for writing the untold stories, thus challenging mainstream museums in which women were invisible (Porter, 1996). In Germany (Grab, 1991), several attempts have been made to found women’s museums. In Wiesbaden a women’s museum began in 1984 with an exhibit of women’s past and present life in the city. In Bonn, the first women’s art museum opened in 1981 as women artists sought ways to present their work. “The creation of a separate feminist infrastructure gave many women the hope and optimism to overcome sexist structures” (ibid: 138).
A different example for a women’s museum can be seen in The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC. This museum is devoted to the presentation of art made by women artists, in the fields of visual art, photography and silversmiths:

NMWA offers the single most important collection of art by women in the world...it provides a comprehensive survey of art by women from the 16th century to the present...NMWA also has several important special collections, including over one hundred silver objects made by 18th century women silversmiths...(http://www.nationalmuseumforwomeninthearts)

The exhibitions “innovatively present women’s artistic accomplishments” (museum brochure). A visit to the museum revealed that textiles are not presented and are not part of the collection. Even quilts, which in recent years gained recognition as an accepted art form, are not part of the museum’s collection or mandate. Through this exclusion, the museum highlights a narrow definition of art and participates in the process where women’s traditional artistic expressions were not valued. It is ironic since during my visit at the museum (August, 1995), I saw the following statement on the museum’s wall: “The history of all times, and of today especially, teaches that women will be forgotten if they forget to think about themselves” (Louise Otto-Peters, 1849).

This museum, while focusing on “high” art made by women, which was historically overlooked by mainstream museums, operates within a hegemonic setting that approaches art within a “fine art” tradition, accepting dominant definitions of art. As the founder of NMWA said: “There is no such thing as women’s art; art is art, but there is art by women that is not recognized yet” (Higonnet, 1994). In displaying art made by women, the museum uses an “additive” approach, which adds women to the realm of established art. While it serves an important goal, it cannot be considered as a counter culture or oppositional museum. Thus, it needs to be stressed that not all specialized
museums present counter culture possibilities. Next, I discuss literature on the process of meaning production, presentation and ways in which museums approach their audience (members and visitors).

**A Communication Model for the Museum:**

This study follows Stuart Hall’s communication model (1993), which examined how messages are constructed, disseminated and received. Until recent years museums used a traditional modernist communication model, which consisted of three units: *Sender - Message – Receiver*. This model was criticized as a one-way, linear direction communication, which concentrated on the level of message exchange while overlooking the complex structure of relations that is inherent in the process of communication (McManus, 1991; Hall, 1993). At the museum level, the traditional assumption was that once “the message” (which can apply to an exhibit) has been constructed, it is then “received” and decoded by the visitors. This model implied “the visitor” as a unitary, passive recipient of the message, or exhibit, who does not question or challenge the message as offered by “the sender” (the museum’s curator or exhibit developer).

However, it has now been recognized that exhibitions are produced to communicate meaningful visual and textual statements, but there is no guarantee that the intended meaning will be achieved. Visitors to museum exhibitions respond in diverse ways. They may or may not perceive the intended messages… (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000:4)

The problematic of this traditional approach was that it ignored the often-competing agendas involved in exhibition-making, the “messiness” of the process itself in terms of the politics and social relations of power that are integral to the process (Macdonald, 1996:5). The traditional model was inappropriate for museum communication according to McManus (1991) since often museums “blamed the victim”, put the fault on the public.
when they “didn’t get” the message created by the museum. This approach may be seen also in the study of museum visiting by Bourdieu and Darbel (1991). They claimed that museum success in engaging visitors depends on the visitors’ ability to decode and interpret exhibitions, which they argued, depended on visitors’ cultural capital. Their book, *The Love of Art*, documented how art museums provide a sense of belonging and cultural ownership to some while other visitors may feel excluded. Thus, the underlying assumption here is that the ability to participate in and understand the museum process depends on the family’s cultural background, a process that is reproduced by this approach.

Museum critics (McManus, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, 2006) suggested instead, that the task for the museum is to use a communication model that allows for both the exhibition developer and the public to participate actively in the process of making sense of exhibitions. McManus (1991:43) developed a model to capture this process:
Here, McManus recognizes the author/message relation and the audience/message relation as two distinct entities, which are independent, but both lead to the same “transaction” which means that both arrive at the same conclusion or understanding in the end of the process. The message, according to McManus (ibid: 42), does not have an independent existence:

It is forged and comes to life as a transaction between minds at the moment of communication. In order to ensure that the communicative transaction takes place, both parties, in our case the exhibition team and the museum visitors, must be able to participate and work actively in the same direction.

Yet, if both have to “work in the same direction”, then there is no room for possible variation in the meaning produced. Moreover, the set of questions (below), which accompany the audience/message relation, does not provide room for the audience’s independent interpretation. The focus is on how the audience needs to understand the message as it was constructed by the museum:
“Who is talking to me?”
“What are they talking about?”
“What are they saying about the topic?” (Ibid: 42, my emphasis)

A possible question that would take into account the independent audience/visitor and would recognize the varied knowledge base and cultural background of visitors, would simply be: How do I (the visitor) understand the message (or exhibit). This question would allow for an active visitor’s response to what they see on display. Macdonald (1996) would see this approach (McManus’s) as text-based, where the author (exhibit producer) is responsible for the message. She recognizes that seeing museums as texts has important implications for analysis but there is a need to move towards elaboration of the ways in which museums are unlike texts: Museums differ in such features as their legitimizing status within the society; their roles in the community; dealing with collections and putting objects on display; dealing with audience that literally enter and moves within them (ibid: 5). These are complex features that distinguish the museum, highlight the social context of its conditions of existence and therefore have to be included in the analysis of meaning production. Hall (1993:507) offered a different communication model, which is more suitable, I believe, to understanding the communication flow at the museum. This communication model takes into account the various stages of the communication process, where each stage is recognized as independent, involved in meaning production, and has a specific structure: production, circulation, distribution, consumption, and reproduction. The underlying assumption of this model is that the production stage and reception stage of the message are not identical but are related, which means that the “transaction” (to use McManus words) is not necessarily the same.
This would be to think of the process as a “complex structure in dominance” sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which, however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence (Hall, 1993:508).

According to Hall, each stage is significant and necessary for the process of communication. In the production “moment” the process requires the means, material instruments, which help shape the meaning of the message. Applying this to the museum, the production of meaning occurs within the social and organizational relations of exhibit development. This process takes into account the museum as an organization and the workers’ negotiations in realizing its vision and goals. The circulation of the “product” takes place in what Hall calls “the discursive” form, which could be seen as the museum’s exhibition. Then it is translated or transformed again by the audience:

The value of this approach is that while each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated. Since each has its specific modality and conditions of existence, each can constitute its own break or interruption of the ‘passage of forms’ on whose continuity the flow of effective production (that is, ‘reproduction’) depends (Hall, 1993: 508).
Hall is aware that each moment or stage is identified independently of the others and holds the capacity to influence the flow of the message as a whole since each stage has its own specific “conditions of existence” which characterize it. He uses the example of television to apply his model: the production of a television program is based on the institutional structure of broadcasting, organized relations and technical infrastructures which is all based on larger institutional knowledge, assumptions and definitions. Of course, Hall recognizes that these basic assumptions and ideas are integral to the wider socio-cultural and political structure of the society. Thinking of the museum, this moment of production is inherent to the work museum workers are doing in thinking and planning exhibitions. In this sense, committee work is the place where meaning is articulated and communicated among museum workers. And of course, this stage is affected by the specific roles museums have in society (as I noted earlier in this chapter). The next stage is encoding the message within ‘the meaningful discourse’: This is where meaning is translated into practice through the use of language and discourse. Hall argues (ibid: 511):
Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse. Discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product not of the transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions.

At the museum level, this could be understood as the presentation stage where objects are “discussed” using labels and explanatory panels as well as docents who communicate the exhibit to the public. The ways in which reality is articulated with regard to the objects on display has to do with the social contexts of the presentation itself. Next, the communication of this meaningful discourse has to be decoded and make sense to the audience. However, as shown in the diagram above, this process does not produce a necessary symmetry between production and reception: encoding meaning structures 1 is not the same as decoding structures 2: Encoding and decoding are not identical and this has to do with the structural differences of relation and position of the encoder/producer of the meaning (television broadcasters or museum workers) and decoder/ receiver (audience, museum visitors). Hall is aware of the differences in social positions between producers who are situated within the institutional framework and have access to particular systems of knowledge, on the one hand, and audience or visitors who lack this position or access. Yet, the audience possesses valid knowledge bases to decode the message in a manner that is congruent with their varied cultural/social understandings. The process also depends on the codes themselves “which transmit, interrupt or systematically distort what has been transmitted” (ibid: 510). This means that the program itself as ‘meaningful’ discourse has a varied effect on the reception process: it may transmit the meaning, interrupt or distort the original encoded meaning. Again, this ‘misunderstanding’ or gap is an outcome of what Hall calls “the lack of equivalence.
between the two sides in the communicative exchange” (ibid: 510). Since there is no necessary identical correspondence between encoding and decoding, the producers of meaning may be said to operate within the dominant preferred code and the audience/visitors may not be following this process as they may have their own conditions of existence. Yet, Hall argues that the vast majority must contain some degree of reciprocity between encoding and decoding moments; otherwise there would not be effective communication at all (ibid: 515). He offers a “hypothetical analysis of some possible decoding positions, in order to reinforce the point of ‘no necessary correspondence’”. This analysis is important for the purpose of my study since it discusses hegemonic and oppositional decoding positions. The first hypothetical position is the dominant-hegemonic position: a situation where the communication process is ‘perfectly transparent’ which means that the decoder/receiver has accepted the message as encoded by the producer, then it could be said that the decoder “is operating inside the dominant code” (ibid: 515). Hall identifies within this position the professional code, which represents the professional broadcasters (or museum workers) who operate within the hegemony of the dominant code and serve to reproduce the dominant definitions:

The professionals are linked with the defining elites not only by the institutional position of broadcasting itself as an ‘ideological apparatus’ but also by the structure of access...it may even be said that the professional codes serve to reproduce hegemonic definitions specifically by not overtly biasing their operations in a dominant direction: ideological reproduction takes place here inadvertently, unconsciously (ibid: 516).

The second position is the negotiated position: decoding within this position contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional codes. The decoder may recognize the legitimacy of the dominant code but may also prefer a more nuanced, local definition that supports his or her particular interest or location:
Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics...these are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logic of power (ibid: ibid).

So, there may be a conflict or contradiction between the level of understanding of the code as communicated by the producer and the personal and particular position of the decoder/visitor.

The third position is the **oppositional position**: decoding within this position would mean that the decoder “detotalises the message in the preferred code in order to retotalise the message within some alternative framework of reference” (ibid: 517). Operating within an oppositional code means that the decoder resists, does not accept the hegemonic code as it was presented and communicated by the producer/encoder. In the study, I will follow Hall’s model to discuss the ways in which the production of meaning is manifested in exhibitions and its reception by visitors. Now, I turn to discuss how museum critics perceive the production of meaning, its dissemination in exhibits and visitors’ reception of these meanings.

**Encoding: The Production of Meaning in Museums**

Museums actively participate in the construction of meaning associated with their collections and exhibitions. Decisions concerning *what* to include in the museum’s collection, and *how* objects will be presented in exhibitions are significant in the process of meaning production. Through these processes museums portray specific pictures and convey their particular ways of knowing. Processes of selection and omission are part of the exhibition design and contribute to the shaping of popular understanding, of “making sense” of objects and exhibits. Hooper Greenhill (2000) argues that questions such as: How are objects and collections used by museums to construct knowledge; which objects
have been collected and why; what is known about them and from what perspective, contribute to the understanding of meaning production in museums. She argues that collections as whole and also individual exhibitions are the result of purposeful activities, which are informed by ideas about what is significant and what is not. Museums’ collections and exhibitions are products of their founders and curators’ visions. Heumann Gurian (1991:179) maintains that the personal politics of the museum director has an impact on the position of the museum: “analysis of their political convictions might reveal not only the tone they take toward their audiences but the way in which they construct a work climate for their institutions’ staff”. Thus, a study of museum founders and directors might reveal the culture of the museum in terms of the kind of collections they will assemble and the kind of exhibits they will produce. It is important to recognize, therefore, that these visions and cultural/political assumptions held by museums founders and directors shape the direction and ‘identity’ of the museum. In chapter five, I examine the politics that informs the TMC’s co-founder in initiating and leading the museum to see whether his vision could be interpreted as countering traditional museums.

In tracing collection policies, it has been argued that in most museums, only ‘fine’ or ‘complete’ or ‘typical’ or ‘best’ material was collected and the rest discarded (Pearce, 1994:116, Hein, 2010:59). Curators privilege certain sorts of materials; ‘good stuff’ is often of high quality, rare, in good state of repair and relatively well documented (Pearce: 240). So, it seems that the extraordinary is privileged over the ordinary, common and familiar, and objects with known provenance are valued more than those that lack documentation. Pearce notes that ‘systematic’ collecting was the approach taken by museums in the past within natural history and human history museums alike. However,
as we know today, many non-dominant groups within society do not have a well-documented history to tell about their past and with the case of perishable material culture (i.e. textiles) much did not survive its use, and the material that did survive, often was in poor condition. Therefore, by collecting mostly ‘documented’ and ‘good’ stuff, museums tend to marginalize and overlook women’s working life and material culture. Torn, worn and tattered cloth tells more about the working history of the objects and those who worked them.

Museum critics have argued that collecting and exhibiting processes produce a tension or a gap between the dynamic origins of the object and its static representation within the museum (Macdonald, 2006). This decontextualization removes in many ways the relationship between the maker and the made object. The unintended result of this process is creating aesthetic effects that are not necessarily congruent with the object’s origin. This tension is produced through specific presentation techniques, which use language to describe and classify objects (Appadurai et al., 1992:37). Since it is impossible to form a complete collection, to collect all the artifacts, which constitute a people’s past, museums collect and display only partial and selective segments from the object’s life (Kavanagh, 1996, Macdonald, 2006).

The museum transforms an object used in daily life to a ‘museum artifact’, once it is classified as a collection item. The tension occurs because these utilitarian objects, like quilts, were not intended for display on museum walls. As part of a museum’s collection, the objects enjoy longer ‘life’. This is especially the case with perishable utilitarian objects, such as textiles and clothing. But, more importantly, their value increases, both financially and symbolically by being placed in a museum collection (Kavanagh, 1996).
In recent years, quilts have gained the status of ‘fine art’ within major museums in the US. However, according to Elinor et al, (1987:8)

This acceptance has been gained at the risk of reduction and containment of meaning - so that a quilt may be analyzed solely in terms of its abstract, formal qualities. The work is thus reduced to less than its actual meaning in the lives of its creators who made beautiful objects for the vital purpose of survival.

To illustrate this argument I wish to discuss an exhibit of old Nova Scotia quilts which was presented at the Royal Ontario Museum in 1994-5. This show was curated by Nova Scotia Museum and toured Canadian museums between 1993-5. On display, were 50 quilts dating from 1810-1952. The curator’s attempt was “to reveal the lives of the women who made them, and rescue them from anonymity”, by tracking down information about the quilts’ makers. However, the focus, as I ‘read’ the exhibition, was on quilting aesthetics. Labels referred to the use of form and design; geometrical designs, use of color and technique, were largely discussed. A review of the exhibition also revealed that:

Many are the best examples of their types in the province. Ranging from functional to fancy they are grouped according to the construction of the quilt top pieced, log cabin, silk and crazy quilts and appliqué. In addition to the immediate visual appeal of the colorful designs there are also spectacular examples of quilting, particularly in the all-white quilts (Sparling, 1994:59). (My emphasis)

This language that stresses the unique elements in the quilt reflects museum tendencies to show the perfect examples, typical designs, emphasizing the extraordinary aesthetic qualities over the social significance of quilts for the women who made them. However, recently museum scholars and practitioners focus their collections on the everyday life, the ordinary as opposed to the extraordinary objects, to highlight local and previously marginalized groups (Macdonald, 2006). Specifically, small museums collect the mundane, rather than the exotic. Macdonald (2002) followed the production of an
exhibition on food at the science museum in Britain. She used observations of the exhibit team to understand the process through which the exhibit was shaped. She also observed and interviewed visitors going through the exhibition to understand how they decoded or recoded the messages. I, too, followed the development of one exhibition from planning stages to installation, much like the work Macdonald conducted. However, I also used observations of the museum’s committee meetings, at the level of the museum, to follow the process of meaning production which relates to the museum’s direction, vision, in planning exhibitions, and developing the collection (accession committee).

**Label Writing:** The language used in museum labels, panels and catalogues is important in conveying specific meanings that the museum wishes to highlight. An examination of these texts is significant to the process of meaning production in the museum. A few researchers have used critical linguistic analysis of texts from selected exhibitions to shed light on social and ideological implications (Coxall, 1991; Ravelli, 2006).

The way that a writer’s choice of language, and the issues that he or she chooses not to address in the final text, transmit both the official policy of a museum and the personal ‘world view’ of that writer (Coxall, 1991:85).

The language used in a label should be accessible and comprehensible to visitors. But at the same time, there is a need to recognize the power of the text in creating specific meanings about the objects in particular and the exhibition and museum in general (Ravelli, 2006). Ravelli points to the manner in which the text is written: whether it is an authoritative view on the particular subject. Another view would “open” the text for debate and questioning, engaging the visitors to ask further and think for themselves. These are choices of interaction between the museum and the visitors. Critical linguistic analysis can uncover the text’s hidden agenda and the perspectives from which it was
written (Coxall, 1991). Therefore, Coxall argues that museum staff needs to be aware and very clear in conveying the messages to the public through the text. She points out that the “preferred truth” of the objects is constructed by the exhibition team’s selections, by what they choose to say and particularly what they choose not to say about them, as well as the viewer’s reinterpretation of what they see. This type of display reinforces current stereotypical attitudes (ibid: 93). Studies that looked at language use in label writing found that visitors depend on the text in forming their views about exhibitions and showed “text-echo” in their conversations about specific items on display repeating the exact phrasing of segments of labels (McManus, 1991:39-40). For example, the use of impersonal language, contributes to a distance between the museum and the visitor (Ravelli, 2006). However, these studies do not examine whether there were conflicting views between visitors and exhibit producers, whether other issues were raised by visitors but not included in label texts. This means that the museum exerts hegemonic dominance over the interpretation of objects in exhibitions. Heumann Gurian (1991) points out that, historically, museum workers preferred certain modes of interpretation, which are formal and intellectual to emotional, friendly or informal strategies. The assumption was that the latter would reduce the importance and respectability of museum work. However, she argues that in order for museums to be inclusive and meaningful to the public, they would have to change these interpretive modes to exhibitions and include emotional strategies and informal interpretation. She talks about objects in exhibitions that can elicit emotional responses and evoke memories and feelings, which give meaning to the artifacts. I would argue that such emotional strategies in exhibitions could be achieved by using oral histories/personal stories and memories as the interpretive mode to objects.
Visitors can connect with these stories and memories on a personal and intimate manner that affects their understanding of the objects and the exhibition. (Weinstein Dintsman and Wood, 1998).

A different strategy for meaningful exhibitions according to Heumann Gurian (1991:187) is revealing selection processes and decisions surrounding the inclusion of objects as part of the exhibition:

Visitors are not used to perceiving exhibitions as the personal work of identifiable individuals. Unsigned exhibitions reinforce the notion that there is a godlike voice of authority behind the selection of objects. But presenting a curator as an individual demonstrates that each producer...has a point of view.

This strategy may contribute to visitors’ sense of participation in museum work as selection choices are revealed and discussed and curators identify their preferences in these selections. However, these strategies do not constitute the only manner through which meaning is produced in the museum. The display, design of the exhibition, installation and positioning of objects in the gallery space create the specific context for meaning production (Ravelli, 2006). The use of photographs, maps, diagrams, and computers draw special attention, which may suggest greater significance (Coxall, 1991; McManus, 1991). Also, docent work in museums involves the production of meaning and I turn now to discuss the literature on their work.

**Docents** or museum guides, are trained volunteers who provide educational activities at the museum, which aims to reveal meanings, not just factual information (Grenier, 2005). They communicate the exhibition’s message by interpreting objects and providing a context through which the exhibition and the entire museum is understood. Docents form a link between the exhibition producer and the visitor. The docents’ role in representing the museum is challenging: they provide an overview of the museum or specific exhibits
using lectures or interactive presentations; they manage the needs of various groups from school-age children to seniors; they need to provide a variety of knowledge-based levels of the topic being covered; they act as “security officers” of the museum, guarding the artifacts while offering a friendly tour (Grenier, 2005: 29-30). The “typical” docent, as characterized in Grenier’s study, is a white upper middle class female whose average age is 50, has post-secondary education with teaching experience, and is not employed full time. She also has a history of volunteerism in the community. Most docents have prior knowledge of the subject matter of the museum (Grenier, 2005; Pekarik, 2008). Pekarik (2008) argues that docents are a dedicated group and feel personal identification with the museum. They are passionate and eager to share their knowledge with visitors.

Docents occupy a unique position in the museum as adult educators on the one hand, and as adult learners on the other. Most of the literature on museum docents relates to their training in becoming docents and their education roles and delivery methods of their work. Museums vary in the types of training they offer to docents: some offer formal training in extensive classroom structures, followed by informal learning on-the-job and others use informal training where docents are expected to learn individually the contents of exhibits from prepared reading lists and much of the process is “hands on” practical tour observations, shadowing in the galleries, dialogue and reflection with peers and other professionals (Castle, 2001; Grenier, 2005, 2009). These studies found that museum educators relied on prior knowledge and situated on-the-job training rather than traditional learning methods and informal learning generally was seen as more meaningful. The area of docent training that relates to interpretation is most significant
for my study. Grenier (2005:35) points that there are guiding principles for establishing a philosophy of interpretation. These principles state:

Docents have an obligation to spark visitor interest as well as reveal *deeper meanings and truths*. The interpretive presentation should be in the form of stories that inform, entertain, inspire and enlighten… injecting passion and *a sense of history* into the presentation (ibid: ibid, my emphasis).

The literature does not discuss *how* these deeper meanings and truths and a sense of history are infused within the presentation. Whose sense of history and what kind of deeper meanings are to be integrated in the docent’s tour? Is the docent free to select a meaning or a “truth” to be stressed as the interpretive mode of the tour? A study that used docent interpretation sheds light on these questions. Katriel (2010) studied the representation of gender and women’s work in pioneer museums in Israel. She examined the interpretations that docents communicated in tours against other interpretive panels and objects within the exhibitions, and concluded that generally docents followed the “official” storyline. Generally, women internalized and accepted the hegemonic view that relegated women’s domestic work to a subordinate status. These are also the issues that I will examine with regard to the work docents are doing at the TMC. I now turn to the last section of this chapter: the museum audience.

**Decoding the Museum Audience** The museum “public” is comprised of members and visitors. It is important to examine the responses of this “public” to the meanings that are constructed through exhibitions in order to follow the process of encoding and decoding. The past two decades signal a shift in the way museum literature is approaching “visitor studies” and their experiences in museums (Karp, Kreamer and Lavine, 1992; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, 2006; Pekarik, 2010). I will begin with a literature review on museum members followed by a review of visitors and their experiences.
Museum Members: Museum members constitute the immediate community of the museum. This group is invested in the museum not only through membership dues but also as an interest group who cares for the institution and its future direction. Surprisingly, most museum literature on public reception or “consumption” of exhibitions is focused mainly on visitors. There is a growing body of literature on “visitor studies” which looks at the ways in which visitors learn at the museum (informal learning) and how they experience the museum. Not much is written about the museum member. Despite the growing number of members’ associations in cultural organizations generally, and museums, in particular, the research on the topic is limited and fragmented (Slater, 2003). Museums, on the other hand, do conduct membership surveys to gain a better understanding of how members use museums. However, these are service-oriented surveys geared to better serve and manage their members. Few studies which looked at museum members, focused on the social benefits of membership in cultural organizations. Glynn (1996) studied the perception of prestige and cultural distinction among members of an art museum. In particular, she explored the frequency of membership usage of two membership benefits: free admission and special events invitations. Her findings suggest that when members perceive the museum as prestigious institution they tend to “use” it more frequently. Another study examined members’ identification with an art museum as a marketing strategy for museums (Bhattacharya et al., 1995). Slater (2003) examined members’ motivations to join a museum and their behavior as members at the museum (the value they place on membership; feelings towards “their” museum; and their usage of members’ benefits). Slater provides a typology of member organizations in British museums according to membership profiles;
purpose/mission; benefits; recruitment methods; structure/governance; fundraising; promotional methods; and evaluation techniques. Membership organizations are also known as “friends” groups or associations. Membership benefits usually include free admission, regular mailings, private viewings, special programs, reciprocal admissions to other museums, discounts in museum shops and restaurants. In some museums, in order to become a volunteer, one must be a museum member first (this is the case at the TMC). Slater’s research was conducted in a large British museum using a postal questionnaire. The response rate was 30 percent. The membership population at this museum was characterized as aging (60 percent were over 55 years) and male (67 percent), wanting to retain links with “like-minded people” and people with a specialist interest in the collections (Slater, 2003: 195). The three most cited reasons for becoming a member were: personal interest (28 percent), free admission (25 percent) financial support for the museum (14 percent). Slater argues, therefore, that individuals do not become members because they wish to support the host organization. Some join for the intrinsic or social benefits they receive such as learning opportunities; sense of belonging; participation in social activities at the museum. Others look for the economic benefits as free admissions.

Slater’s hypothesis that longer serving members are more likely to have a relationship with the museum was rejected despite its logic. He argues that members may feel less committed and more detached over time because the membership organization has grown or because they moved away but retain the membership, etc. My study will explore these issues as well as examine members’ perceptions of the mission and goals of the museum, its exhibitions, and whether meaning produced and communicated by the
museum is accepted or resisted by members. These latter questions were not examined in previous studies.

Museum Visitors: Visitor studies occupy a growing interest within museum research. A review of the literature on museum visitors and the visit experience shows the changes in the approach taken by museums, and their critics, toward the visitors. The first shift can be characterized as a shift from object-centered museums to people-centered museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Hein, 2000). Identifying museums as educational institutions has shifted the focus from the object and the collection towards the visitors, the people, and their interactions with the displayed object. Objects, collections and conservation are regarded not as end in themselves but rather a means to create interactions with visitors (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Hein, 2000). Related to this shift is the change in approaching “the visitor”: in past decades the main goal in studying visitors was to count the number of people who visit museums and address the question: Who visits museums? Demographic characteristics of those who chose to visit museums as opposed to those who did not visit occupied much of the research. A related question was why do people visit museums? This question addressed the reasons or motives for going to museums (Falk, 1998). Research has documented the varied motives which included such demographics as age and level of education; psychographic variables such as attitudes toward leisure, personal interests and cultural background.

The general approach in museums focused on objects, collections and exhibitions and it was assumed that visitors are coming in to “consume” these objects and displays as they are offered by the museum. Moreover, according to Hooper-Greenhill (1998: 214) museum workers have worked within their own worldviews and have assumed that
visitors would adopt and share these same values and assumptions. This idea was coherent with the view that museums are communicating a certain message that the visitor receives through the exhibition. Accordingly, museum workers were firmly positioned as “experts” and custodians, distinct from visitors lacking this role, expertise and knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill, 1998; Sandell, 2002).

During the 1990’s museum research criticized this transmission model within the museum, and this process signaled a shift in focus (both in research and museum practice) towards understanding the visitor’s experiences at the museum. Thus, more qualitative research is done which takes into account how visitors experience the museum and what they learn through exhibitions (Falk, 2009; Sandell, 2007). Research has confirmed that prior knowledge, personal interests, and opportunities to learn influence visitors’ experiences at the museum. Questions such as how visitors conceptualize museum visiting and their experience during the visit and how these related to their own identity are important in exploring the connections between museums and their visitors (Macdonald, 1996; Falk, 2009). Visitors are now conceived as participating in the process of meaning production. Much of the traditional study of visitors addressed how they absorbed the messages intended and created by the museum. Now, visitors are seen as active partners, co-producers of museums’ meanings. Yellis (2010) argues that attention should be given to the full repertoire of feelings visitors might experience during their visit: the moods the display evokes are affected by emotional state and needs of visitors, which in turn have an effect on the meanings produced. He argues that:

visitors don’t make connections we thought would be obvious, or they make connections we didn’t anticipate, often drawing from life experiences or points of view we have no way to know about and that, from our perspective, may not even be germane. (Ibid: 99)
A similar view is argued by Sandell (2007:78-85) who goes one step further to suggest that museums need to recognize that there are multiple meanings and messages to every exhibit. No single meaning is the “correct” and accepted one. Therefore, the role of museums is to offer a range of viewpoints or “messages” for the visitor’s consideration. Visitors are likely to construct meanings that relate to their own personal life experiences and interests and which do not necessarily correspond to the messages offered by museum producers. Pekarik (2010:108) says that visitors in exhibitions are not under the museum’s control. They come for their own reasons, see the world through their own frameworks, and may even actively avoid the attempts of exhibition makers to shape their understanding. Consequently, he advocates a participant-oriented approach to exhibition making, which starts with visitors’ interests and needs and only then proceeds to use museum resources to produce exhibitions that will be coherent with visitors’ life experiences and needs. I believe that this method symbolizes an ideal approach but certainly not a realistic one. It is neither feasible nor manageable for museums to organize exhibitions based solely on visitors’ expectations. Moreover, if the assumption now is that “visitors” constitute a varied group, whose interests and needs the museum should exactly approach within this varied group?

Sandell (2007) suggests using Hall’s communication model (encoding, decoding), which he claims, is focused on what the message means to visitors. Visitors are capable of decoding messages and create their own understandings, so the decoding of the message does not have to follow its encoding. Visitors may also decode a message and resist its meanings. He argues that Hall’s model provides the opportunity to examine all of these possibilities using the positions that Hall provides as confirmatory responses,
incorporated within dominant hegemony; negotiated responses, containing some contradictory elements; oppositional responses that offer a different “reading” that are in contrast to the encoding goals. I tend to agree with Sandell’s analysis. However, he only referred to one part of the model, that which relates to the decoding of visitors’ meanings. Yet Hall developed a model that takes into account the entire circuit of production, circulation and reception process and as I mentioned earlier in the chapter, I will attempt to apply this model in my study. Furthermore, Sandell (2007: 139) recognizes the possibility that:

museums might operate as sites for the staging of interventions designed to confront, undercut, or reshape dominant regimes of representations, that inform contemporary attitudes (towards disability)...These interventions or counter strategies are based on the assumption that meaning is never fixed...and open to change...Counter strategies can be deployed to destabilize existing meanings and to surface new ones.

This is relevant to the questions that concern my study and will be explored to see whether such counter strategies are operating at TMC.

Summary

My goal in this general review was to trace the process of museum development, to show that by and large these cultural institutions were hegemonic in their perceptions and practices. More recent changes with the emergence of specialized “ethnic” museums signaled a shift in museums’ relationships with marginalized communities as well as a change in knowledge production and meanings related to exhibitions. Demands by ethnic minorities to be included in museum work in interpreting their material cultures affected museums’ vision and social roles. These demands lead to the creation of specialized, countercultural, alternative settings by groups who wished to collect and document their material culture on their own terms. This process, in turn, influenced established
museums to open their doors to include minorities in the production of meaning and interpretation process. Issues of social responsibility and involvement and the capacity of museums to bring about social change became central to museum work (Sandell, 2002, 2007). I discussed the various ways different museums responded to this challenge. However, it is important to note that all these responses occurred within a framework that often maintained the power relations between the museum and the community so that the community might be “invited” to participate in various museum processes but the final authority rested with the museum. Finally, I discussed the changes in museums’ approach to the production of meaning, the exhibition process and the ways in which visitors are approached by museums.
Chapter 4. Methods and Research Design

In this chapter I outline the research questions, the methods I used in my study, and my personal position in the project. This is an ethnographic case study of the TMC. The information gathered in the study is based on primary data, both qualitative and quantitative, that I collected for the purpose of this study between the years 1994-1997. I used content analysis of museum documents and exhibition labels, interviews with key people involved in TMC work and observations of committee meetings. I also used surveys of members and visitors and brief conversations with visitors in the galleries.

The general question that guided my study referred to the ways in which the museum represents women’s work, particularly textile production as part of women’s work and culture. More specifically, I examined the meanings that are produced in relation to the textiles, the organization and dissemination of these meanings through exhibitions and the ways in which the public (members and visitors) responds to these exhibitions. Here, the question is whether they accept or resist the meanings that were offered through exhibitions. Or, whether they construct their own understanding and meanings related to exhibitions. This set of questions posed a challenge in terms of methods as every stage necessitated a different method to gather the information. As a result, this study employs a mixed-method design, which, I argue, contributes to the understanding of the process of meaning production within the museum.

In order to explore these questions, I applied Hall’s communication model (Encoding, Decoding 1993) in which he proposed a four-stage process for communicating messages. I discussed the theoretical aspects of his model in the previous chapter, and here I outline his method and the ways in which I will use the model in my
study. Hall suggested looking at the first stage as the production of meaning or a message, the second is its circulation or distribution, the third is the reception of the message by the public and the fourth is that of cultural reproduction. The last stage questions whether hegemony is achieved through the decoding process and Hall offers three possible positions: a dominant-hegemonic position where the viewer decoded the message in congruence with the intentions operated in its production. The second position is the negotiated code where the decoding of the message contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements and the third position refers to viewers who choose to resist and oppose the presented code, which could be termed as the counter-hegemonic position. Hall applied his model to the study of television specifically. I will attempt to apply his model to the museum by tracing how a message, which will be referred to as “the exhibit”, is produced and communicated within the museum.

**Encoding: The Production of Meaning.** In order to examine this question, I needed to trace the process of cultural production in the museum. I opted to use primarily qualitative methods that include observations, interviews and content analysis of museum documents in order to follow the process of meaning production in the museum’s committee meetings. My assumption was that within this space the “action” takes place. Here, I would be able to follow the “thinking” and planning process that is informed by the meanings that museum workers attach to the textiles and exhibitions. Moreover, I would witness the negotiation of meanings among museum workers: how certain issues are debated, what the preferences for interpretation are, as well as the issues that are missing from the agenda. Qualitative methods allow examining in detail and depth specific events that may point to overall trends as well as exceptions (Diamond, 1999:22-
My observations of exhibition committee meetings and contemporary gallery meetings take place between 1995 to early 1997. This is also the time frame for the exhibitions that I include in this study. As a result, the processes that I am able to record are specific to this particular time and space. Only one exhibition could be followed from initial planning through installation, during that time. In addition, discussions during meetings were about future exhibits. I participated in six committee meetings, one accessions/acquisition (annual) committee meeting and eight contemporary gallery meetings. I was not allowed to tape recording these meetings, so I took notes and used the minutes. These observations allowed me to witness first-hand what goes on during these meetings and to follow working processes at the level of meaning construction regarding exhibitions and general programming at the museum. Observations of committee work enabled a view of the actual dynamics involved in museum work and the perspectives of museum workers within the context of their work: what issues were dominating discussions; what were the priorities and preferences, etc. I would argue that these insights would not have been possible to gather using other methods such as interviews or surveys. Being present during discussions on future planning, reviews of exhibitions, and programming for the museum is very different from interviewing museum workers or using a prepared questionnaire, after the discussions have ended. I included the Contemporary Gallery (CG) meetings in my observations in order to see whether there were differences in thinking and planning of exhibits. Also, I wished to understand the internal relationships between these committees. However, I do not include contemporary textile exhibitions in my study since these are exhibitions based on textiles, which were made as a form of art, by textile artists. The museum does not collect contemporary
textile art. I include in my study only exhibitions based on textiles from the collection or textiles that were made by ordinary women for their family use.

In addition to observations, I did use interviews with key museum workers (the museum founder, director, exhibition committee coordinator/ contemporary gallery curator, and collection’s registrar). The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to supplement the observations and to clarify specific issues. I identified specific topics to be covered in the interviews but not the response categories. Interviews ranged from one to one-and-a-half hours in length with the exception of my interview with the museum’s co-founder, Max Allen, which took five hours in total (though not all of it recorded). I used content analysis of museum’s documents such as mission statements, collection policy, minutes of meetings, the museum’s newsletter and the website. These texts provided a general understanding of the “official” goals, roles and perspectives as they are presented by the museum. In analyzing the data, I looked at key issues that appeared during meetings and the ways in which these were discussed in interviews and presented in museum documents. During the time of my study there were major changes in TMC leadership: three directors were involved at the museum. This posed a difficulty since I had to introduce my study and myself three times. Access to meetings, the minutes, visitors’ interviews in the galleries, were affected as a result of directors’ departure, until I regained permission to continue with the study.

I had the opportunity to follow one exhibit from the initial stages of discussion within the exhibition committee through installation (*Art and Utility*). Working closely with the curators (in this case the registrar and a volunteer who works with the collection) enabled a better understanding of museum work in developing an exhibition. I actively
participated in all aspects of exhibition planning and design (see chapter 7 for an exploration of this exhibit). I helped in choosing textiles from the collection, and on the floor, mounting the exhibition. This enabled me to follow the process of meaning production, the decisions about a focus for the exhibition; the how-to in terms of choice of textiles; the display in the gallery (label text, docent work) and the reception by visitors.

**Presentation:** This stage is based on a content analysis of labels and other written material provided in exhibitions together with my analysis of exhibitions: an exploration of the ways in which textiles were presented in exhibitions. Docent work is also included in this stage as docents help communicate the exhibition to the public. In selecting exhibitions for discussion in the study I followed Patton (2002), who advocates a selection of information-rich cases that will illuminate and explain the questions that guide the study. This is a purposeful selection as opposed to a random selection of exhibitions. I included exhibitions that were not only rich in information but also indicative for the purpose of my study. All selected exhibitions were on display between the end of 1994 and late 1997. These were large exhibitions in terms of the space allocated in the galleries and were on display for long periods of time. The study includes all the shows (3) that were curated by Max Allen, co-founder, during this time to support my argument regarding the specific vision that he offered. In addition to these shows, I explored three other shows that were presented at the museum at the time of my study. I selected the show on Black story quilts, *This is not a poem: this is a summer quilt*, since it was discussed during exhibition committee meetings and initially incorporated a community aspect as well as a popular approach to quilt-making as a form of domestic
labor, which is the concern of this study. The second was the acquisitions show *Art and Utility* that was also discussed in the committee meetings. Generally, acquisition shows at the museum were eclectic but now, for the first time, this show had a theme, which focused on household linens, again the concern of this study. The third show was curated by a Macedonian community group independently of the museum (*From Baba’s Hope Chest*). This show served as an example for the changing relationships between museums and communities in recent decades. Since this issue has been prominent in museum literature since the 1990s, exploring this community-based show enabled a contribution to this museology discussion. My goal in following this show was to see whether the meanings that the community provides for the textiles are consistent with the museum’s vision. In other words, the attempt was to explore whether a show that is generated by a community group can be seen as a counter-hegemonic and therefore is in line with the position that the museum’s founder communicates through his exhibitions. In addition, I used participant observations of docent work and content analysis of docent materials used in preparing for shows. The method of participant observation uses the observer’s involvement as an advantage in collecting information. The observer can provide an insider’s perspective on the situation studied as a participant of that specific situation. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the experience as an insider while being able to describe and analyze it for outsiders (Diamond, 1999:79).

To do so I became a docent and participated in docent meetings, followed docents in tours, and contributed a small research paper on specific textiles for the docent handbook. I also offered my “reading” of *Art and Utility* in the form of a tour for docents.
I participated in the process of organizing the show: I helped the curators as they went through selecting the pieces and designing the exhibition.

**Decoding: Public Reception of members/visitors’ responses:** This section is based on both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand how museum members and visitors respond to the exhibitions. The purpose of the qualitative part is to augment the results received in the surveys. Diamond (1999) reviews various observational tools that can be used in visitor museum research, including: counting heads, tracking visitors’ movement within the gallery, brief observations in the gallery using brief questions, recording detailed observations, and behavior-sampling methods. My qualitative part is based on brief informal conversational interviews with visitors in the galleries about their experiences of the shows. This is the least threatening way of conducting interviews, according to Diamond (ibid: 86-87). Visitors may be intimidated by a formal interview during their visit when they haven’t had the time to form an opinion on a subject or the exhibit. A conversational interview is not structured; it is more social and allows for probing or clarifying questions. It is important to note that during my observations in the galleries and conversations, no museum members were present and so all my conversations are with visitors. I tried to arrange interviews with visitors after their visit, but found that visitors were reluctant to do a formal interview. Also, the director asked that my interactions with visitors would be as minimal as possible since they came to enjoy the museum and not to participate in a study.

In addition, I used a content analysis of visitors’ comments in the Guest Book for the Macedonian, *From Baba’s Hope Chest* shows. This is the only show that offered a space for visitors’ comments. Here, I looked for their reaction to the show, so I included
only the more elaborate comments. As for the members, I examined their responses to questions in the survey (findings will be discussed in chapter 8).

The quantitative part is based on two surveys, one with members, and the other with visitors.

**Membership Survey**: I wished to gain a better understanding of who the TMC member is. As mentioned earlier, few studies were conducted on museum members. I felt that it was important to understand the motives of TMC members for joining the museum. Additionally, I wished to understand their views of the museum’s goals and vision and whether they accepted or resisted the museum’s meanings as communicated through exhibitions.

I offered the director to survey museum members in order to understand their views of the role and practices of the museum. The director agreed with the condition that the survey would be kept short (one double sided page) and questions that may offend members (such as ethnicity, time of immigration) would not be included. Also, members’ occupation had to be an open question and this limited my ability to characterize the socio-economic status of members since many answered this question by saying: “retired”; “employed”; “manager”. However, the level of education of members was very high and similar to the findings of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) membership survey, as discussed in chapter 8. In addition, the survey included a few service-oriented questions (about repeat visits, programming, financial support) as this was required by the director. I used a representative sample of the membership list: every second member from each category of membership was surveyed. The mail survey was sent by the museum with a stamped return envelope in May, 1995.
**Visitor Survey:** As discussed in chapter three, the research on museums’ visitors is extensive. My goal was to contribute to the discussion by highlighting points that were not thoroughly researched already. Specifically, issues regarding the communication between museums and their visitors where the application of Hall’s model to the museum can be seen as a contribution.

The visitor survey also had to be kept short (one page double sided). Questions that were deemed by the director to possibly offend visitors (such as cultural background, ethnicity, and level of education) were not included. The survey was administered at the end of the visit, by reception desk volunteers. This administration method was a bit problematic when at times the reception desk volunteer forgot to interview the visitor or when in busy times, she could not complete the survey with the visitors. Questions related to the museum’s service to visitors were included, as requested by the director. The survey was conducted during November and December of 1994. It is important to note that since the two surveys were not administered at the same time comparisons between members and visitors are limited in terms of responses to specific exhibitions.

**Personal position in the project:** I became a member of the museum in 1994 and soon after started volunteering. Staff and volunteers accepted this step very warmly and saw it as a way to “give back” to the museum for allowing me to carry my study there. Yet, my goal beyond giving back was to get to “know” the museum and the people involved in the life of the museum on a regular basis, as an “insider”. Following Oakley (1981), I consider this personal involvement as one of the strengths of the study since it is a condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives/work. My involvement as a member and a volunteer provides greater accessibility
and supportive responses. My initial goal was to get involved in all the various “domains” of volunteers’ work at the museum (collection, library, docents, reception desk, gift shop/book store). But it didn’t happen. I thought that the docent group would be most instrumental for my study purposes, as they are in direct contact with visitors and communicate the museum’s views as these relate to exhibitions. I volunteered with the docents for almost a year: I participated in docent meetings; took part in planning tours; contributed a “research paper” to the Black Folder (a collection of research papers written by the docents on textiles related to exhibitions); observed docents touring exhibitions; offered a tour of the Art and utility show for docents and toured a group of visitors, as a docent. I also volunteered at the reception desk as a preparation for the visitors’ survey. I talked with all reception desk volunteers about the project, asked for their input in terms of questions to be included but also in terms of logistics of the survey administration.
Chapter 5. The Museum Setting: Institutional Analysis

The Textile Museum of Canada (TMC) in Toronto is the only museum in Canada devoted to the collection and presentation of carpets, textiles and clothing. The museum was co-founded in 1975 by two men (Max Allen and Simon Waegemakers\textsuperscript{4}) who were textile enthusiasts and had a private collection that became the basic collection of the museum. The museum opened its doors during International Women’s Year and the co-founders used this event to get their first governmental grant:

I found… working for the federal government during International Women’s Year and I suggested to her that instead of just supporting all this women’s theatre and other modern cultural events, something historical should be done. In fact, there was some history of women’s work in Canada, though history books usually forgot to tell you about it, and that we were collecting it. So we applied for a grant and got $3150 from the secretary of state to put together a hooked rug show for Ottawa. And while we were doing that we put aside $600 for rent for the first six months on the space we’d found on Markham. We used the rest of it to mount the rugs and print the catalogue and truck the show to Ottawa (Ten, 1985:24).

So we incorporated, and the Canadian Museum for Carpets and Textiles appeared in what could politely be called modest quarters. That name was such a mouthful (we decided we had to put “carpets” in it because that’s what most of the people we knew then were actually interested in) that hardly anybody, least of all us, ever used it, and that’s how we finally got around to calling ourselves “The Museum for Textiles (Ibid: 25).

And it was while we were in the basement that… walked in and asked us if we’d like some Ontario government money. And we said “Err, um..” and he said “don’t worry, I’ll do the paperwork.” This was the man who had written the Ontario museum grants legislation, and he was also in charge of administering the money, and thought it was his job to actually give it to museums. An uncommon attitude, I thought…Ontario in those days was officially enthusiastic about small museums, and a whole lot of them got started. Mostly, like us, on a shoestring (ibid: 26).

These are excerpts from a document that the founders wrote on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the museum. The founders chose the birth symbol as the logo for the museum. This is an ancient textile pattern of the Great Goddess of life and fertility which

\textsuperscript{4} Only Allen was interviewed for my study. Waegemakers never responded to my calls and emails.
can be found in various textiles from different parts of the world. In 1981, Allen curated an exhibition of *The Birth Symbol in Traditional Women’s Art* in which he showed sixteen variations of this pattern.

TMC changed its location several times. From a modest beginning in a rented house on Markham Street, it was moved to Bloor Street and finally in 1989, to the present space which was donated by a private textile collector who donated his collection as well. The museum is located in the heart of downtown Toronto on 55 Centre Avenue and it is a part of a complex consisting of a hotel and condominium. The museum houses a few galleries devoted to the presentation of various textiles from the collection and other incoming exhibits, a contemporary gallery for the presentation of contemporary textile art, Fiber Space, an educational resource gallery and in addition, a library, an auditorium, lounge and gift shop. Max Allen left the museum shortly after the move to the new and permanent location. Simon Waegemakers served as the artistic director until 1993 when he was asked by the board to leave the museum.

**The Collection:** The permanent collection now contains over 12,000 pieces of garments, costumes, rugs, quilts, ceremonial cloth and textiles from around the world that reflect the cultural and aesthetic significance that cloth has held for centuries. The collection spans almost 2000 years and 200 world regions (TMC website, 2009). A collection database project began in 1992, using guidelines and standards of the Canadian Heritage Information Network. The collection is divided into sections by type (of textile), region, materials, techniques and period and is accessible online on the museum’s website.
Looking at the first section of type of textile, there are various sub categories such as: footwear, headwear, undergarment, for personal adornment, for animals, for the floor, for windows/doors/walls, for the bed, for the household, etc. A closer look at the sub categories of textiles that were made for domestic use neglects to emphasize women’s contributions to their household economy: “For the Bed” sub-category includes all types of textiles that were made to be used on beds:

There is a remarkable range of textiles made for the bed in the TMC collection. Hand-stitched quilts and woven coverlets provided warmth in the harsh winters for early settlers in North America. Pillow covers are embroidered by young girls in India and Pakistan for their future homes. Woven bedding bags and decorated bedding pile covers from the Caucasus and Central Asia are some of the textiles made to bring comfort and artistry to sleeping areas.

The first reference is for quilts and coverlets and the focus is on the warmth they provided for settlers. However, their makers, the women, are overlooked. In the same manner as the young girls in India prepared for their future homes, young girls in North America quilted and made beautiful coverlets for their future families. In all the examples mentioned it’s the women who worked to “bring comfort and artistry to sleeping areas”.

For the Floor: Hooked rugs to warm and brighten rural farms in early 20th century Canada and luxurious silk rugs laboriously woven by skilled artisans for palaces and mosques in Iran and Turkey demonstrate the remarkable breadth of the collection of floor coverings at the TMC. Other examples include sleeping rugs from Tibet used by monks, rugs from the Caucasus and Central Asia colored with natural dyes, and plant fibre mats from Indonesia (Retrieved June 2009).

Again, there is no mention of those who made these textiles for the floor, the women. Instead, “skilled artisans” are a preferred term to describe the producers. Hooked rugs and quilts were considered part of women’s domestic labor in rural areas until the 1950s (see chapter 2).

For the Household”: Objects made of cloth can serve a multitude of practical uses in daily life. Netted bags with tassels and glass beads for storing dishes from
Afghanistan, knotted pile salt bags from Iran, embroidered mirror covers from China, and woven bags to store family possessions from Uzbekistan are among the assortment of textiles in the TMC collection crafted with skill and ingenuity for use in the household (retrieved June 2009).

Anthropologists and archaeologists claim that historically and across societies, objects for domestic use were made and used by women (see chapter 2). Here, women are not even mentioned. As in previous examples, it’s the culture or geographical area that is being highlighted.

**Region:** The TMC holds a global collection comprised of textiles made by cultures from over 200 world regions. In each area people have shaped their textile traditions using the resources available in their local environments. Alpaca wool from the highlands of South America, cotton from South Asia, and bark cloth from Oceania produce distinctive expressions of textile art. Explore the textiles produced on six continents and learn about the many rich cultures that created them (retrieved on June, 2009, my emphasis).

Again, in all these regions, women were producing textiles but the TMC is focused on the cultural and ethnic aspects of the people.

The storage catalogue of textiles was a volunteer-led project, and it lists information on cultural context, technique, material, registration information, for each object (Strand, v.12: 1997). It is important to note that ethnicity and geography constitute the description rather than utility. The storage itself is also based on geography:

It all began simply enough…I helped unpack the hundreds of boxes in which the collection had been stored for the move to this location...It started by putting “kindred pieces together”. But that soon was not enough; it evolved into a much more elaborate operation...we try to keep geographical neighbors together because styles seldom stay within our political borderlines, especially in nomadic areas. Decisions depend, however, on more than that alone; for example, on the size of the different groupings, the size of individual items; fragility, bulkiness, width, height and depth of shelving...at least we’ll have not just the accession sheets that are in numerical order, but also a new set that will be according to the storage plan, i.e. in geographical order! (Strand, v.6: 1995).
In 1999 a process of digitization of the collection has started, which enabled an on-line view of the collection.

**The museum’s vision:** The museum’s vision and mandate have changed throughout the years. In its beginning, the co-founders stressed the need to have the collection organized in “a public building (not called a museum) with easy access to people who wouldn’t think of going to a museum…” (TEN, 1985: 38). They viewed textiles as art pieces and expressed that in a museum brochure:

Since textiles have rarely been considered a fine art form, they are not commonly seen in a museum setting. The Museum for Textiles challenges and rectifies this view by showing textiles of great power and aesthetic beauty, as a tribute to the skill and artistic vision of cultures from Canada to Burkina Faso (Museum General, 2).

The museum’s first policy (1978) was not comprehensive and related to the collection: “we are interested in material from people for whom textiles were (or are) a major graphic form of cultural expression. The majority of the collection contains noncommercial material that has been designed, woven and embellished by people for their own use. The museum does not actively pursue the collection of archaeological (including pre Columbian) textiles.” The founders’ purpose was to collect those textiles that major museums like the ROM or the Museum of Civilization overlooked:

“This meant not trying to acquire fancy quilts, ottoman court textiles, but instead folk weavings and common, ordinary textiles. Antiquity is not the basis for inclusion in this collection. If your interest is only in seeing the finest that was produced, it is probably best to stay away” (O’Bannon, 1990: 8, 10). Another statement (policy statement Number Two) provided more insight into the purpose of the museum:

The museum was established to serve the need we felt for a new kind of institution, one in which the primary focus is not long term preservation (though
we do not ignore this) but rather increasing public exposure to and appreciation of ethnographic textiles. We hope this in turn will serve an educational function and will help conserve material in private hands. This is a working collection: _accessibility_ to our collected and displayed material by interested people in the present has been our major concern. In this way the museum complements the functions of other institutions whose main concern is eternal preservation (Ten, 1985:33 my emphasis).

Originally, the founders wished the storage to be open to the public:

I never envisioned that the public could not, whenever they wanted, to go up there and look around. I wanted them to be able to see the whole guts of the museum, the way the storage, conservation, everything works in one piece after all, those museums separate the front from the back and don’t let you cross that barrier, and that seems crazy to me.
(MA, Jan 22/97).

A principle related to the collection’s accessibility was to let people touch and handle materials. It was decided not to keep textiles away from the public, behind glass or rope, since in order to appreciate a fabric one has to feel, to touch:

At the same time we wrote the collection policy, we put together another statement that was designed to get people over the idea that we weren’t really a museum at all, but just a store in disguise. The way we handled our material and what’s more, let others handle it, made museum professionals very suspicious (TEN, 1985:32-32).

Allen: Can you recall whether we ever had a philosophical discussion at the beginning about touching cloth? Or was the policy based on the fact that we were in a place that was 12’ square and there was really no alternative? How did we develop the idea that we weren’t going to try to keep the textiles away from the public?

Waegemakers: I think both of us were exasperated with sticking our noses up against the glass cases at the ROM. And yes, it was a specific discussion. It was impossible to put everything behind glass at the beginning, that’s true, but we made a decision not to do it even if we could. We thought the textiles had to be handled by people who wanted to handle them. We certainly wanted to handle them (ibid: 1985:37).

This problem of ‘don’t touch’, which you see in museums as a matter of course is inappropriate when it comes to textiles. Painting and sculpture are made for the eye, ceramics are made for the eye…but with cloth, the tactile experience is actually vital and when I see a piece of cloth that I’m interested in, the first thing I
do is touch it. I often said that a textile museum is a good place for the blind. (MA, Jan 22/97).

However, in later years, the museum staff did not encourage this principle of allowing people to touch and handle textiles. Indeed, over the years there was a shift towards “please don’t touch” policy:

Most textiles in our exhibitions are not in cases. This permits you to look closely at the details of each artifact. In return, we ask that you refrain from touching the items on display (Public, 2000; emphasis in text).

The move to the permanent location in November of 1989 offered the possibility to rethink the vision and conception of the museum. The founders opened this process to the immediate community of the museum members through their newsletter, TEXT, and were looking for input on the name of the museum and its vision:

The move gives us the opportunity to re-name the museum. We have had many discussions about this: Is “museum” a good description of what we are? Does the word “textiles” give the average person an accurate idea of what we have? Should we keep the “Museum for Textiles” just as it is? Please write us with your ideas. In thinking about our name we listed some words we wanted to keep in mind. They include: accessible, adventure, center, exchange, exploration, forum, hands, lives, traditions, work.
Some of the names thought: Canadian Museum of Carpets and textiles; Center for the Study of Textile Arts; Community Center for Textiles; Creative Materials of the Ages; Cloth Legends; People’s Museum of Carpets and Textiles; Textile Center for Research and Exhibition.

When I asked Allen what his “concern” was with regard to the concept of “museum”, he responded:

My original concern about “museums” in general was that they are designed to keep the public from handling material, they are designed to preserve their collections essentially forever, although if you look at that, it’s peculiar because museums are relatively a new institution and who knows whether the museum itself as an institution will exist in 200 years but anyway, most museums think they are going to preserve their collections for eternity, an odd notion… so we had meetings about this before the museum opened (1989) anyway, it’s called a museum as you noticed. I argued unsuccessfully against this.
What it might be? The institutions that I had in mind, that are useful to look at when you try to figure out what a museum ought to do are playgrounds, theatres, parks and community centers, particularly when people are having picnics…I think that the space is every bit as much a problem as the way exhibits are presented (MA, Jan 22/97).

The idea of inviting the museum members for a discussion about the future of the museum, its name and what it ought to do as a public space shows a participatory approach towards the museum’s community. The concept “museum” was problematic for both Allen and Waegemaekers whose idea was an open exchange with the public about textiles. They recognized the concept of “museum” as a public space to be a limiting force especially in relating to the public’s accessibility to the collections. The ideal spaces that are mentioned are in contrast to the “museum” as an institution: they are more open and community-based. This approach could be seen as a counter-hegemonic element in the eyes of the founders. But, this view was not accepted and the word “museum” remained in the title. At that point the museum also adopted a revised mandate, which has shifted from an educational orientation towards a collection focus:

The museum mandate is devoted to the collection, exhibition and study of textiles from peoples around the globe. The program of exhibition highlights the aesthetics of the textile arts and helps to promote an understanding of various cultures. A further goal is to increase public knowledge through publications and educational programs. The majority of the collection contains noncommercial material that has been designed, woven and embellished by people for their own use and for whom textiles are a major graphic form of cultural expression. These textiles are made primarily by women. They might have been worn, slept under, walked on, carried or used as status symbol to dress up the family camel (General, 1989:2) (my emphasis).

This statement emphasizes the significance of collecting utilitarian textiles and cloth that was primarily made by women for domestic use. It should be noted that “conservation” is not included in this mandate, which is in sharp contrast to established museums’ mandate where conservation is often the first purpose mentioned in the mandate or mission.
statement. The focus is on the collection, which consists of worn cloth, hence, not necessarily in ‘best’ condition or “museum quality”. Nevertheless, Allen refers to the aesthetic and utilitarian aspects of textile-making as inseparable: “I was much more interested in showing the relationship between the maker and the made object and what the made object was for. I was much more interested in utility than I was in aesthetics but you can’t separate the two because there is a human impulse to make nice things, especially if you know your mother in law is going to see it, you make it as nice as you can”…(MA, Jan, 22/97). Utility and aesthetics cannot be separated. These are two parts of the same story and therefore should be integrated in any discussion of textile production.

These ideas were reinforced in a talk Max Allen gave on hooked rugs to the docent group (Dec 13/96). In this talk he refers to the home as the context of textile production:

Hooked rugs are part of the cultural history of Canada. Cloth was scarce and women used burlap sacks as foundation—it made hooked rugs alive. In the farm you had a lot of them for free. You didn’t use linen because you had to buy linen as cloth first. In the AGO you find high art that is not amateur but made by professional artists. Here, women (who made these rugs) didn’t call themselves artists but homemakers; they were responsible for making a home…When you talk to women it’s all about sentiment, skill, housework. Women do “lap” work, they knit, quilt while doing something else, talking or watching TV. Men rarely do things as lap work. The “museum” is a public space that is quiet, “safe” space. Objects are “jerked out” of the space they were meant to live in: a house with those who made them, their family. The makers did not expect that their products will end up on walls, didn’t make them for commerce but for domestic use. So the physical space here is on attack, an attack on museums. Here they (hooked rugs) don’t belong to anyone. Here, the “artsy” version is told (“look at the bright colors”). Museums should collect ordinary not only the best and professional examples.

Q: How and what to look for in a rug?
A: look for oomph, vigor, there’s life to it. I like the non-uniformity, the irregularities. What happens when you take a rug and instead of leaving it on the floor you hang it on the wall?
In this discussion Allen not only refers to the home as context of production but to the work involved in producing hooked rugs and the context of their representation in a museum space. Again, his “attack” on museums is important: it highlights the contradiction he sees between the objects as materials of domestic labor meant to be used by their families and the museum context in which they are now presented. This could serve as yet another element in the founder’s counter-hegemonic attempts in problematizing the museum space itself and creating a “different” opportunity for the presentation of textiles, which recognizes this problematics.

A change in the vision and mandate of the museum occurred with the departure of the museum’s executive director, Valerie Greenfield, and the appointment of an interim director, John Vollmer, in 1993.

Its mandate is to help audiences now and in the future to understand the significance of fabric in the lives of people past and present; how textiles are made, how they are used and what they mean. Its collections of textiles and carpets and its public programs are educational resources creating linkages and support between and amongst its visitors, the diverse communities that make up Metro Toronto, scholars, artists…It brings quality exhibitions and programs to new and larger audiences…The Museum for Textile’s mission is to promote interest in the study of carpets and textiles arts, to organize exhibitions, educational programs and to publish and distribute literature (Business Plan, 1993).

This version of the mandate highlights two aspects: first, the educational aspect that is expressed through outreach to new audiences, the need to create linkages with diverse social groups. The business plan points to the need to maximize public programs, involvement and exposure. The second aspect relates to “the people”: the importance of textiles in the lives of “the people” who made them and those who are visiting the museum (scholars, artists). The emphasis is on people generally, not women anymore.
During 1994, while in the midst of a major financial crisis, after the departure of the interim director, the museum’s board was forced to rethink its mandate and as a result a new mission statement was adopted.

Because fabric is one of the most important ways in which cultures express their history and creativity, the Canadian Museum of Carpets and Textiles offers people the joy of creation, theirs and others, from around the world. We do this through the identification, conservation and interpretation of the collection, and exhibition of textiles of artistic, historic and cultural importance of all people: by publication and research, and by developing an area of expertise to focus the collection and the work of the museum in a unique way to attract the attention of the public: artists, educators, scholars and those who love and work with textiles (June 1994).

Here, there is no educational goal and no emphasis on public outreach. Rather, the focus is on “professional” museum work: identification, conservation, collection and exhibition of textiles. “Cultures” are the focus group, instead of women within these cultures (as was recognized in previous mandates), who were traditionally responsible for the production of cloth, across societies. In previous statements the goal was exposure to the general public and attracting “those who wouldn’t think of going to a museum”, new audiences. Here, the main goal is to attract professional people (artists, scholars, educators) and finally, “those who love and work with textiles” who are mostly women. Women as producers of textiles are not even mentioned. The revised mission statement was announced during a volunteer meeting with the board’s chair on July 12, 1994, while reporting on the museum’s financial difficulties. Some members expressed their dissatisfaction with the content of the new statement. Others voiced their concern for not being included in the revision process.
In another text (part of a marketing package) there is a more direct reference to textiles as an artistic form away from the focus on utility and creativity of producers who made these objects for their own use:

The Museum for Textiles is the only museum devoted to the collection, exhibition and documentation of textiles from around the world. A visit to the galleries provides the opportunity to experience traditions, skills and creative processes that make the textile arts a particularly engaging art form.

In October 1994, a new director was appointed for the museum. Sarah Holland was to stabilize the finances of the museum and direct marketing initiatives to expand the museum’s visibility. A new brochure for the museum, “Discover a World of Texture and Color” (1995), was circulated:

The Museum for Textiles is one of seven museums in the world devoted exclusively to textiles…The Museum for Textiles provides the opportunity to experience the traditions, skills, and creative genius that make the textile arts such an important visual expression of contemporary and historical concerns. The museum does this through the conservation and interpretation of its collection; the exhibition of textiles of artistic, historic and cultural importance; and research, publication, and educational outreach programs. (my emphasis)

The emphasis is on the artistic significance of textiles: the creative genius; textile arts; visual expressions are of paramount concerns. The language is professional and belongs no doubt to the art world and it is in contrast to the vision and language used by the founders, who talked about the collection in terms of popular production of utilitarian objects made for household daily use by women everywhere. The educational aspect of the museum is relegated to being the last goal of the museum. Conservation is the first purpose, followed by interpretation. The initial approach taken by the founders to collect and showcase utilitarian, domestic textiles that are a testament to the work women do in different parts of the world, is neglected. The focus is on contemporary and then historical concerns, as opposed to the social aspects of the production. Professional
museum work is significant here: conservation, interpretation, research and publication.

This approach is continued in later museum texts:

The Textile Museum of Canada is unique as a collection-based institution which fosters scholarship and artistic production exploring the continuum of the textile arts from antiquity to the present day through its exhibitions and programs. The Textile Museum of Canada is an educational institution with a goal of accessibility to the public and strong community support from its members, visitors, charitable foundations, corporate partners and federal, provincial and local governments (Public, 2000 my emphasis).

Scholarship and artistic production are preferred over the everyday social aspects that were originally the focus for the founders. The educational approach of the museum is back in focus since the opening of Fibre Space, the permanent education gallery (1997). The TMC website’s introduction highlights the museum as “one of Toronto’s most engaging visual arts organizations” (www.textilemuseum.ca). In 2000, a new executive director, Jennifer Kaye, was appointed at the museum and a change in name and logo took place “to reflect our growing national presence and our aspirations to become an integral part of Canadian cultural life” (Board Chair, Ralph McLeod, Nov 30/2000). The new name was changed to: Textile Museum of Canada and the logo changed to a plain weaving pattern of warp and weft which has no reference to women and their involvement in textile production as the previous logo had.

![Textile Museum of Canada logo](image)

**Figure 4. The new logo for the Textile Museum of Canada**
The current mission and vision of the museum is oriented toward professionalism and museum quality work:

**Mission:** The Textile Museum of Canada engages the public by fostering knowledge, creativity and awareness. The museum explores the continuum of textile work from antiquity to the present through all its activities including, exhibitions, collections, education programs, research and documentation.

**Vision:** The TMC promotes an understanding of human identity through textiles.

**Values:** The TMC is guided by four key personal and *professional values:*

- **Respect:** We are audience/visitor centered and provide an accessible, welcoming environment for visitors…we foster generosity of spirit. We believe in community and cultural diversity.
- **Excellence:** We practice *high museological standards* as we preserve and promote textiles of worldwide significance.
- **Education:** We are committed to lifelong learning. We reach out to a broad sector of the population through our core programs.
- **Innovation:** We nurture research and artistic creativity through a range of media and activities. We embrace a diversity of opinions (www.textilemuseum.ca Retrieved June, 2009).

The focus now is on the public, the audience/visitors, rather than the objects and the context of textile production (producers, usage, function). The main idea is to promote the museum as a professional cultural institution of major significance and high museological standards. This recent document is in sharp contrast to the very first museum documents, which were written by the founders, where the goal was to create a “new”, different, kind of museum. Their initial goals were not to promote professional work in preserving textiles, or high museological standards. They focused on promoting ordinary textile work made by women, for domestic use. Their goal was to highlight this work as a form of art and make it accessible to the public. The founder recognizes this shift in approach toward professionalism and “museum standard” work: “The problem that happens when you professionalize a museum, which is what happened to the museum, is that the “professionals” say that they have their turf…” (MA, Jan 22/97). It could be argued that the TMC is turning away from its initial goals and becoming hegemonic, where the focus shifts to professionalization and standard museum work.
**On Space:** The museum’s 10,000 square feet of exhibition space houses small galleries for display. In addition, there is 14,000 square feet for library, lounge, auditorium, education gallery (Fiber Space), offices, gift shop and book store. Fred Braida donated the custom-designed facility to the museum and it is part of a complex of a hotel (Chestnut Park hotel) and condominium. Sensor-controlled incandescent lighting illuminates the galleries and their contents are protected by a specialized environmental system. The permanent collection contains 12,000 pieces, which are easily accessible due to a track mobile storage system.

The space itself was important in the context of presentation. As the objects were not originally meant for museum display, but rather for domestic use, the founders wished to “house” them in a context similar to the one in which they were made and used. The space was important in terms of keeping with the original context within which most textiles were produced:

When I designed the place, I was determined to make the place comfortable both for people and for the cloth. Since most of the cloth was made to be used, you know it spent its life in domestic circumstances; I thought that a residential scale of the individual spaces in the museum is perfectly appropriate. The spaces of the galleries are the size of a space you would find in your house, and I think that both people and cloth are comfortable in that. (MA, Jan 22/97)

**Fiber Space:** The permanent education gallery opened in 1997 and was designed as an interactive resource for visitors (adults and children alike)

Answering the who, what, when, why and how of textile production. Fiber Space has four sections – discover fiber, discover color, discover textiles, and discover meaning. Visitors will be introduced in both a visual and tactile, hands on way to the techniques used to make a wide variety of textiles, from the properties of the raw materials to “gliding the lily”, the final embellishment. Penny Bateman, a museum education consultant, has developed this resource center, drawing on her 25 years of experience as a textile curator and educator at the British Museum…She says, in fiber space I want the visitor to lose him or herself, to become absorbed by the creativity inherent in producing any textile, from the

The four sections of the education gallery do not offer answers as to who is actually producing the textile. Instead, these sections are devoted to the techniques, uses and meanings of various textiles to various groups of people. It is important to note that for the developer of this space, textiles have different hierarchical status and so hooked rugs are “simple” in contrast to “elaborate embroidered works of art” that enjoy the status of art. This view contradicts the initial goal of the museum’s founders who argued that textiles were overlooked by mainstream museums and that the goal of this museum, therefore, was to present all textiles as works of art.

Fiber Space was designed to be a comfortable space for visitors to relax or engage in activities related to textiles that interest them. Ongoing activities include workshops, hands-on demonstrations and tours. A unique feature is the visible storage of selected textiles from the collection that is installed in specially-designed drawers for visitors to study. Penny Bateman, the developer of this gallery, produced a comprehensive design plan (1997) of which she says: “This gallery gives visitors an insight into the art, skill and social importance behind the making and using of textiles”. The idea behind the education gallery was to “be inviting and relaxing in appearance and encourage people to stay”. As for the didactic functions of the space: “There is a logical order…beginning with an overview of a textile, then looking at raw materials, preparing fibers, spinning and weaving, appliqué of decoration, properties of textiles and social use”. The main focus is on materials and methods and only in the end to the social use of textiles. There is also a reference to handling textiles: “Textiles are meant to be touched as well as seen. In this first room you are invited to do both. This is a place to relax, browse, study and
learn by doing” (p.2). It seems that the goal of allowing visitors to handle and touch textiles during their visit to the museum has changed to restricting it within this education gallery only. Furthermore, there are specialized samples for the visitors to touch and feel that are prepared for this purpose, instead of using pieces from the collection. The section that deals with ‘How textiles are used’ focuses on sacred textiles, symbolism, specific messages and meanings in creating and using textiles in various cultures. However, no reference is made to the domestic value and work issues that link the production of textiles in many societies to women specifically.

The education resource team designed themed tours around various topics:

- **Looking at textile art** (an introduction to the elements of art, aesthetics, with attention to why textiles are special);
- **Focus on design elements** (design theory as relates to the textiles on display);
- **Spinning a yarn** (whether through imagery on their surface or through careful study, all textiles have a story to tell. Learn to “read” these textile tales, then tell your own textile inspired story);
- **Wow! Who Did That?** (This tour focuses on a specific culture, sort of textile, and/or maker, currently on display).

The first three tours are focused on aspects related to the appreciation of textiles as artifacts in a museum setting, specifically, their artistic properties. The last tour is designed around social issues that relate to the making of textiles but the focus is on either the cultural/ethnic aspects or the individual textile/maker. No tour examines the specific goals the founders had when they opened the museum. There is no attempt to focus on women as the universal producers of textiles, historically and across societies. Also, no attempt is made to highlight the idea that textile production in all cultures functioned as part of women’s domestic labor for the family’s use. Other planned tours attempted to relate to schools’ curriculum (math focus on patterning, geometry; history
focus on the silk route or the industrial revolution). The same approach can be seen in the introductory panel at the entrance to Fiber space that reads as follows:

Textiles are everyday practical things but they can also be exquisitely beautiful and breathtakingly innovative. They are the result of the imagination, skill and work of the artists, designers, craftspeople and skilled workers who made them. This room is dedicated to them (introductory panel, Jan 20/98).

Again, no reference is made to women, who comprise the majority of textile producers in all the groups mentioned. The reference is only to professional textile producers but not to textile production as a popular endeavor by women historically and across societies.

**Exhibition/Program Committee:** The committee is comprised of the director, exhibition coordinator, administrator, a docent representative, and guest curators (all of whom are women). The committee meets approximately every six weeks to discuss planning and ongoing programming to accompany the exhibits. Some of the exhibits are based on the museum’s collection; others are produced by guest curators or traveling from other museums. A curator was hired in 1998 to work with the museum’s collection.

**Contemporary Gallery:** The museum houses a special gallery devoted to the work of contemporary fiber artists. Until the opening in 1989, there was no gallery in Canada devoted to exhibiting contemporary visual arts in textile media. It often includes experimental work, which pushes the boundaries of this art form.

The Contemporary Gallery presents the opportunity to exhibit, document and discuss contemporary arts, including work drawn from national and international sources. It encourages the thoughtful examination of the concerns of contemporary artists and curators. Because the Gallery is without commercial affiliation, it is able to present new and challenging works that would not necessarily find exposure in a mainstream setting. Each exhibition provides the focus for a range of discussions…these events are designed to involve not only the textile art community, but also the general public, including students of art history, fine art and design (Contemporary Gallery Mandate).
From this mandate, it is clear that the CG is involved in contemporary textile arts, made by people who consider themselves artists, who graduated from art academies and colleges. The CG committee is not interested in contemporary textile production from various guilds, which is (mostly) made by women who enjoy working with textiles. Allen, the museum founder, expressed his view of a contemporary gallery in a different manner:

I thought it would be a very good idea to have a place where contemporary work, not art, not craft, but contemporary work was shown. I envisioned that a lot of that work would not be done by people who call themselves artists. Although some of it would be, it would be like the rug hookers, the guilds and stuff like that...I did not have in mind exclusively contemporary art...I don’t hate all artists but I’ve got an agenda which is different from just showing art...One of the reasons I love this stuff so much is that shows you what people can do with almost nothing. It teaches economy, you don’t have to buy everything, you can make a lot of wonderful stuff without much equipment but with ingenuity and knowledge of what your forbearers had done for centuries (MA, Jan 22/97).

The CG, managed by a committee made up primarily of contemporary artists, organizes its program (General, 1992). A full-time curator for the contemporary gallery is part of the museum’s staff and was also responsible for museum programs before a textile curator was hired. The committee is responsible for review of applications for shows, searching for suitable artists, selecting suitable shows, arranging financing, writing grant applications, developing projects, managing installations, mounting, removing and shipping of shows, as well as publicity. The committee is meeting on a monthly basis and as needed.

Financial support: The museum has received generous support over the years from private donors and dealers who contributed to the formation of the collection through the purchasing of textiles, donating of their collections, or giving funds to the museum.
We certainly can recommend it as a way to get a museum moving. When people interested in starting a museum ask me for advice, I say, “see if you can find a patron”. In the way the Medici’s were patrons of artists, what you need is a patron for a collection (Allen, 1985:29).

The museum also enjoyed the federal and provincial support through grants for the museum operations and in addition, corporate and direct partnerships with business organizations in sponsoring exhibitions. The museum receives only 15% of operating dollars from the government and relies on donations, earned revenue from memberships, admissions, purchases from the museum shops and thousands of volunteer hours donated by a dedicated group of volunteers.

**Board of Directors:** A fifteen-member board is elected by the membership at the museum’s annual general meeting. The board is responsible for fundraising and general policy. A board member told me:

> Board members are not interested in shows, they want money, and they would like to see another blockbuster like the Macedonian show. Board meetings are boring, they are looking at numbers, funding possibilities, and just to keep the doors open (JA, July 30/96).

**Volunteer Organization:** The museum has relied on volunteer work since its inception. Over one hundred member volunteers support the museum activities. They are organized into a Volunteer Committee with subcommittees responsible for the library, docent programs, conservation, collecting and exhibition preparation, reception desk, retail sales, and special events. The volunteer association was initiated in 1993 to organize all volunteers in a structural organization with specific responsibilities. The committee began recording volunteer hours in 1993. During November/December of 1994, one hundred and five volunteers contributed 2112 hours of work at the museum. During January/February 1995, one hundred and fifty one volunteers contributed 2925 hours of
volunteer work (Strand, v.6, 1995). Representatives from each subcommittee form the Volunteer Committee. During Annual General Meetings the volunteers elect a chairperson who represents them on the museum’s board. A newsletter, STRAND (“any of the parts that are bound together to form a whole”), began circulating in September 1994. The newsletter reports on volunteer activities in the various committees and keeps all volunteers up to-date on different issues regarding museum work.

The Docents: Of all the volunteers at the museum, docents are the ones who help interpret textiles in exhibitions. By guiding visitors through the museum, they provide further information and offer their understanding of the textiles that are displayed. A docent is “a teacher or lecturer not on the regular faculty” (Webster NW Dictionary). As the docents describe themselves:

We prefer to think of ourselves as helping people to see the textiles in our museum, rather than lecturing! We study as students; we train to be “soft edged educators” and practice our speaking and presentation techniques; we work with the bibliographies and the information from curators to go beyond what the labels say, geared to the interest of the tour group. A docent - a ‘doer’- one who will take a group of 15 or so of varied age and make the tour experience memorable, meaningful, promoting a return visit, and always celebrating the Museum as a whole. A docent – not a doctor – we do not need to be already experts in the field, but we do need to continually inform ourselves and take special care to be accurate… (Strand, v.8, 1996).

The objectives of the docent group are outlined in a special Docent Book that docents put together for training purposes (Docent Objectives and Commitments, 1992): “To bring together and develop a group of volunteers able to talk informatively but not in a scholarly manner on the exhibitions and collections of the Museum for Textiles in order to assist the museum in its various educational programs.” The Docent Book contains information for docents on textile terminology and techniques; types of dyes; fiber types; general weaving techniques; details of the museum’s collection; FAQ about the museum;
tour assessment sheet; touring worksheets; how to select material for touring; and guidelines on “handling textiles” during tours. The last two guideline sheets are significant for my purposes here: The first (how to select material for touring) guides the docent in preparing a presentation:

What are the main points I have to make to cover the curatorial intention, to give a general description of the textile, its use and cultural context, while I cover my own interest in this area. What are the materials and techniques; is it important to know the raw materials; to what extent is it important for the visitor to know how it was made. Is it important for this group that I relate this textile to a socio-economic background? Is this textile typical to a geographical area or to a tribe or group of people? (my emphasis).

It is clear that the focus of docent tours is on the textile, the object itself, and not those who produced it. Docents generally follow the curator’s theme for the show but are encouraged (by the docent group coordinators) to supplement the tour with topics of their interest. Tours are usually customized for different groups and so, for some groups the processes of production (materials, techniques) are more relevant and for others, like school groups, information on social aspects of production is relevant. It is important to note that these general guidelines focus on “people”, “tribes” “geographical areas” and not the women who actually produce the textiles in most cases.

The second guideline sheet is focused on Handling Textiles: the museum’s conservator put these guidelines together for docents’ use and they relate to the movement in the galleries, taking photographs, food and drinks, etc. For my purposes, the following excerpt is most significant as it relates to touching textiles:

If you need to touch something in the process of teaching (i.e. lifting a shawl to show how it is pieced together)
1. Be gentle.
2. Choose a piece that is in a good condition (not a fragile one) to demonstrate with.
3. Support the item so that everyone can have a look and then gently replace it.
We **DO NOT ENCOURAGE HANDLING** but we do allow it if someone needs to learn something in this way. Do not suggest that everyone feel everything as they take the tour, this is usually not necessary. (Docent Book, 1991; emphasis in text).

It is obvious that the founders’ idea of allowing visitors to touch and feel textiles as they walk through the galleries is no longer supported and encouraged by museum workers.

The founders wished to allow people direct access to textiles, which included handling and feeling as part of the museum experience in order to create a friendly atmosphere.

The founders rejected the idea of guards in the galleries:

> the day a sign goes up saying “do not touch” then… there have been a couple but not in general, and there are no guards. At the beginning what I wanted is grandmothers, not security guards in uniforms, I thought that a grandmother to answer your questions would be ideal and that’s essentially what we’ve got, the volunteers, docents, are grandmothers and there are no people with uniforms (MA, Jan 22/97).

The conservator has to ensure the quality and condition of the artifacts and so the ideal of allowing people to touch and feel is not compatible with keeping the quality of textiles intact.

The docent group is comprised of 10-15 women volunteers (some are more actively involved than the others) who meet twice a month “to study the history, development and manufacturing techniques of a wide variety of textiles. We also keep abreast of the various exhibits in the museum, so we can describe the artists, the historical and geographical background, and the production techniques used in each work in the show” (Strand, v.13, 1997). Here, again the emphasis is on “artists” as textile makers, and the idea is to present the historical and geographical background, which is the context for the exhibit, and techniques of production rather than locating the women as producers in all geographical areas.
**TMC in comparison to other museums:** In order to understand the significance of the museum in relation to other museums, I would like to provide a brief discussion about other museums’ dealings with textiles (the Royal Ontario Museum and the Textile Museum of Washington DC) but will start with the founder’s insight on this issue:

I asked the founder how he saw the emergence of the museum in relation to other museums:

I wasn’t trying to make the ROM crumble to the ground, I didn’t care about them, let them do their stuff. I’m not trying to change the existing institutions, I just set up one parallel to it, you know, there are two ways that social revolutionaries work: one is to take over the existing institution and the other is to set up one next door.

Q: But which is quite different from what existed at the time…

A: Oh indeed, the institutions, the big institutions saw us as a challenge: they saw it as a direct slap in the face and were very angry. The ROM would not speak to us for 15 years, nobody in the ROM, and the Textile Museum in Washington D.C. even worse: they tried to prevent us legally from using the name *Museum for Textiles* because to them we weren’t a museum, we weren’t the real thing, we didn’t have Ph.D. curators, we didn’t have the scholarship apparatus, we let people get at the stuff, that was the main argument, that we were careless with the collection…I was actually very careful with the collection but that care did not consist keeping it away from people.

This is an important comment that relates to the main question in the study: whether we could see in the museum a counter hegemonic possibility. It is clear from the founder’s response that indeed, by emphasizing accessibility of the textiles to the public, allowing touching, opening the collection area to the public and presenting the textiles as utilitarian objects made for daily use, the museum posed a challenge to the established cultural institutions. However, it is also clear that the founder did not have in mind a complete revolution of the museum world. He had reservations in regards to the ways in which museums worked with their collections and his goal was create a “different kind of institution”. In this sense, it could be seen as an alternative to the established, mainstream
museums, a counterculture museum in Huemann Gurian’s terms. Still, the TMC posed some counter hegemonic elements that challenged mainstream museums at the time.

Q: And what is the position (of these museums) today?
A: Much friendlier because we’ve joined the establishment, because they do all the grant business, because they act like museum professionals, because it’s hard to get to the fourth floor (collection), the museum has bought all the professional “crap” and so it’s much friendlier… (Jan, 22/97).

The Royal Ontario Museum’s Textile department:

During the 1990’s, the textile gallery at the ROM was closed and textiles were displayed in the various galleries according to gallery themes. Later, the entire museum closed for renovations. I visited the textiles collection areas at the ROM with the docents from TM on November 12, 1996. We toured the collection with the ROM’s textile curator. The curator explained how textiles were collected and presented at the ROM:

Textiles used to be organized by technique (of production) like in the V&A Museum in London. Now we do it by country. Right now we don’t have a textile gallery so textiles are displayed in various galleries according to specific gallery themes: Canadiana, the European gallery and so on… but we still purchase and there’s on-going research. The best pieces come to museums through research. Curators look for specific examples, typical design, rare pieces not through donations. Curators will look for good quality excellent workmanship. We have some very old pieces from 16th century Turkey, and from India, very professionally done by men; the level of workmanship is phenomenal. Sometimes purchase would be through direct dealing but more often curators research a piece from catalogues, collections that go on the market, auctions… (my emphasis).

Here, the curator talks about the acquisition processes at the ROM that focus on quality and condition of the textiles. The best pieces, rare examples are sought after which value the extraordinary over the simple, everyday, ordinary textiles. This is a major difference between the ROM and the TMC in its initial stages. Professional textile production is highly regarded as opposed to the TMC founders’ approach to collect utilitarian textiles that were “worn, walked over”, utilitarian and common.
With the reopening of the ROM, a new textile gallery opened on 2008: The Patricia Harris Textile and Costume Gallery:

Textiles and costume are records of old and new materials and technologies. They represent the lives of makers, sellers, and users. They reveal changes in economies, trades, design and tastes. Tracing and reconstructing these histories enlarges our understanding of the social and cultural life of the societies that make and use these quintessentially human products. Outstanding examples of Chinese Imperial costume, late Antique and early Islamic textiles from Egypt, Western fashion from the Baroque period to the present day and early Canadian coverlets illustrate the extensive transformation in textile design and manufacturing throughout the past 3000 years. (Retrieved April 8, 2010, http://www.rom.on.ca/ourstories/galleries_textiles.php my emphasis).

A close reading of this paragraph raises a few questions: if textiles represent the lives of their makers and users, who are they? And what are the changes they reveal in economies, trades? What affected these changes? Is it really “societies” who make and use these textiles? What kind of social and cultural understandings are available? Then, again, the emphasis is on the outstanding examples of textiles. There is no attempt to discuss the real experiences of the “makers” and “users” of textiles or the social understandings involved in the production of textiles.

The Textile Museum in Washington DC: I visited the museum on August 23, 1995 and met with the Education Officer for an interview and a tour of the museum. According to her, this museum is “an art museum that celebrates textiles achievements as an art form.” George Hewitt Myers founded the museum in 1925 “devoted exclusively to the textile arts in the Western Hemisphere” (Museum Brochure). “What began early in the century as a private collection has become a nationally and internationally renowned public resource for the textile arts”. In early 1987, the museum approved the following mission statement:
The Textile Museum is dedicated to furthering the understanding of *mankind’s creative achievements in the textile arts*. As a museum it is committed to its role as a center of *excellence* in the *scholarly research*, conservation, interpretation and exhibition of textiles, with particular concern for the *artistic*, technical and cultural significance of its collections (Policy Paper, 1-3; my emphasis).

On the collection: “Myers assembled a *superior* collection of textiles and carpets from both the Old and New Worlds. Early acquisitions included *extraordinary* Pre-Columbian textiles from Peru, as well as *fine* collections from India, China, and Indonesia… The museum is internationally known for its *superb* holdings, with many items among the *finest* of their kind in existence”.

It is clear that the museum values textiles as an art form and the collection reflects this value:

Compared to other great art forms the textiles arts have remained relatively unknown to all but a *privileged few*. The *exceptional beauty* found in textiles and carpets has been little appreciated. The *extraordinary* role they have played in the history and cultures of the world has been too little explored. Now all that is changing. And thanks to the taste and vision of one individual, our nation’s capital has one of the few great international centers in which the *finest, rarest* historic and hand-made textiles can be seen, studied and appreciated (Museum brochure, my emphasis).

The textile arts were never “relatively unknown” or “privileged by the few”. On the contrary, as discussed in earlier chapters, textiles production was in women’s hands in all societies throughout history. Women appreciated and valued cloth and textiles, and this practice served as an artistic expression, which had also a utilitarian function. It was “little appreciated” in mainstream museums’ presentation, but not among women in general. Anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists and archaeologists explored textile production and the role this practice had in history and for cultures of the world. The standpoint of this museum towards textiles is one that focuses on the extraordinary, finest
and rarest examples of textiles as forms of art, overlooking gender relations in the art world generally and in the context of textile production, in particular.

The planning of exhibitions at the Textile Museum in Washington was done within the “Exhibition Task Force” ensuring that there was a balance in presenting different geographical areas. The museum hired a few curators who were responsible for specific geographical areas like the Western Hemisphere, Eastern Hemisphere, South East Asia, and contemporary textile art, and who were professional scholars in art history or related disciplines. According to the education officer is the goal of all the exhibitions is to teach people to appreciate textiles as art: people don’t know how to look at textiles as art objects, the formal qualities like balance, symmetry, form, quality of wool, respect for world resources (Aug, 23/95).

Docents are trained at the museum. There are series of orientations about the history of the museum and about the collection. Curators are providing background and tour shows before openings. In addition, a “gallery strategy sheet” is a tool that docents use in planning their tours. Many of the docents are female relatives of Foreign Service personnel who stay in Washington, DC, for a few years.

An updated version of the mission statement was retrieved from the museum’s website:

The Textile Museum expands public knowledge and appreciation locally, nationally and internationally- of the artistic merits and cultural importance of the worlds of textiles...Today, the TM is one of the world’s foremost specialized art museums.

(Retrieved April 8/2010 http://www.textilemuseum.org/about/history.htm ).

Both the ROM and the TM in Washington view textiles as art forms and present them as art objects to be appreciated as superb and rare examples. This approach overlooks the history of textile production and its significance to women across societies. It clearly contrasts with the approach that was important for the founders of the TMC (Toronto)
who emphasized the relationship between the work involved in producing textiles and the cultural expression that this work provided for women.

**Summary**

This chapter examined the emergence of the TMC: its history and significance for the founders as well as its unique features as described in mission and vision statements that distinguish the museum from other museums. It is possible to argue that the unique approach of the founders in viewing textiles included an integrated view of textiles as part of women’s work and women’s creative capacities in making utilitarian textiles. This view was in sharp contrast to the general, dominant, hegemonic view by other museums as they presented textiles (see chapter 3). The specific point of view of the museum incorporated some oppositional elements that the founders promoted since the museum was established and these include The Collection: The specific point of view of textiles that were made to be used by their makers and their families characterized the museum’s collection which is made of mostly used textiles that in their “previous lives” worked hard for their owners. Accessibility to the collection and artifacts on display: textiles were not mounted behind glass cases. Rope was not used to limit the visitor’s experience and the possibility to touch and handle the materials and gain open access to the collection (as the founders perceived it: “a working collection”) were paramount elements in the vision and actual practice of the museum in its formative years. Domestic scale of galleries in designing the galleries, the founders explicitly thought of a special space that will complement the textiles and provide a context for presentation. The result is a homey feeling at the galleries, which are cozy and intimate. Interpretation of the textiles was informal, using language that is accessible to all, not academic or scholarly
jargon. The language is conversational telling stories of the object’s life, stories of acquisitions, leaving open questions and openly “attacking” traditional museums’ practices. This interpretive mode that offers multiple meanings and stories from various angles of the object’s life provides alternative ways of looking at textiles, instead of one particular voice and is coherent with ideas of oppositional practices that highlight “other” alternative voices that were previously excluded by dominant practices of museums.

However, as the analysis of museum documents shows, with the departure of the founders, this approach to textiles has shifted towards a more professional one that values museum “quality work”. The focus of mission statements has changed to one that views textiles as art. From women, the focus has turned to discussing the cultural/ethnic significance of textiles. This shift is in line with the ways in which textiles are presented in the ROM and in Washington’s TM. Thus, the TMC has become more bureaucratized and supportive of established hegemonic practices since the mid 1990’s.
Findings

Every museum exhibition, whatever its overt subject, inevitably draws on the cultural assumptions and resources of the people who make it. Decisions are made to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to assert some truths and to ignore others...The very nature of exhibiting, then, makes it a contested terrain (Lavine and Karp, 1991:xi).

Here, I begin to explore this “contested terrain” of exhibiting at TMC by tracing the process of encoding meaning as the process of exhibition production (chapter 6), the circulation of meaning in the form of exhibit presentation (chapter 7) and the process of decoding meanings by the public (members and visitors). I specifically look at responses to exhibitions and general perceptions of TMC, which shed light on hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional positions by the museum’s public (chapter 8). I suggest that by following the process of exhibiting everyday material culture, in a museum setting, we can better understand how cultural meanings are produced, disseminated and whether they are accepted by visitors/members of the museum. I specifically examine the meanings of “work” and “culture” as they relate to the textiles presented at the museum.

The findings are based on the analysis of exhibitions curated by Max Allen as well as other exhibitions that were on display, at the time of my study. In presenting the findings my attempt is to follow the stages of meaning production (on a museum level, at committee meetings and at the level of specific exhibitions), circulation (through exhibitions) and reception (by members and visitors).
Chapter 6. Encoding Meanings at TMC

The process of exhibition production and the loci of power within the exhibition team are interesting topics in themselves and deserve further study (Heumann Gurian, 1991:188).

My attempt was to follow the exhibiting process through which planning and decisions are made with regard to the very meanings that are to be promoted in exhibits. My underlying assumption was that within these committees, planning for exhibitions takes place and therefore, discussions of what exhibitions to organize, what to include in exhibits and how to present textiles would be prevalent. This assumption stems from the understanding that Hall, in his model, describes cultural production as based on social relations among producers and the conditions of practice, which are shaped, by institutional relations and frameworks of knowledge. Museum personnel act as mediators of knowledge that pertains to the collection, the histories, culture, and people represented. As such, the museum through the selection of exhibits, privileges a specific “way of seeing”, a specific version for the interpretation of objects that implicates power relations in the production and presentation of exhibitions. Hall calls this the “preferred meaning”.

I observed six exhibition committee meetings, eight contemporary gallery meetings, and one (annual) accessions/acquisitions committee meeting from late 1995 until early 1997. My assumption was that a discussion of exhibits’ goals, content and design would take place within these forums. I also expected this discussion either to form a cohesive curatorial direction within the workings of the exhibition/program committee, or, that conflicting ideas and power relations among the members would reflect this forum as a “contested terrain”. I learned, however, that this discussion did not constitute a significant part of the committees’ agenda. Therefore, I rely also on interviews, museum documents, and the analysis of exhibitions that were developed
during that time. It is important to note that Max Allen was still involved, though not in a formal role, in curating exhibitions and participated occasionally in committee meetings. Yet, when invited to curate a show, his plans/goals for the show were not discussed within the committee. He was given the liberty to plan and organize his shows independently.

I had the opportunity to follow one show from the initial stage of planning (within the committee) to installation. The Acquisition 94, *Art and Utility*, exhibition was developed during 1995 and presented until 1996. This was a show of household linens, the only one to date. I also followed a community-based exhibition *From Baba’s Hope Chest* 1995 (“Macedonian” show). Here, my attempt was to see whether the show offers a different look at textiles (in terms of culture and women’s work) than the one produced more exclusively by the museum. I will start by discussing my observations of the museum committees’ work.

**The Exhibition Committee**: All of the committee members are women. The meetings are scheduled approximately every 6-8 weeks. A review of the six committee meetings reveals that the basic issues, which concern committee members, relate to scheduling of exhibitions (confirming dates for opening, closings) and other programs to accompany them (such as lectures, workshops). Another issue that frequently appeared was related to funding for the various exhibits, applying for grants, searching for sponsors, etc. Generally, members were reporting to the committee concerning progress, arising problems, etc. Still, following the discussions that took place during meetings, a picture could be drawn as to the position that key players at the museum have with regard to the role of the museum and their perceptions toward the presentation of textiles and the
context for presentation in terms of culture and women’s work. Looking at the proposed shows during that time, it is significant that committee members think of exhibits in “ethnic” terms. “The Guatemalan textile show”; “Indian textiles”; “Navajo show” etc. They see a need to address and celebrate “ethnic” events (such as Black history month; Asian heritage month, Chinese New Year and India’s year of independence), in a form of a show (EC: Sep. 10/96, Nov.6/96, Dec.8/96). During my interview with the EC coordinator, I asked:

Q: when considering shows are there any issues or themes that you would like to see included?
A: I think that an example would be 1997. It is Indian year of independence, so we’re definitely planning an exhibition of Indian textiles from our collection to go along with other festivities. Something very small, we don’t have the advertising budget so we can never do a major campaign like the ROM. Reaching out to ethnic communities is very important (EC, Dec 8/96).

Yet Women’s History Month or Women’s International Day was not even mentioned during committee meetings. This is especially significant since the TMC was established during International Women’s Year (1975) and the founders used this event to advocate for the need of this type of museum (see chapter five). This is not to say that committee members do not recognize women’s involvement in textile production, as the director told me:

Yes, so many of the textiles are made by women. I don’t think the fact that women made them would be something that should feature largely in exhibitions. I mean it’s just a given. But I think it is a factor in the museum audience. Women make them, women have always made them, women are much more sensitive to them than men and it makes it quite difficult to get sponsorship. Textiles don’t appeal to men and men have more power in the corporate world. It’s hard to interest people with the work that we’re doing. The museum is a hard sell from that point of view. (June 19/2001)

So, while there is a recognition for women’s work in the production of textiles, it’s “a given”, not necessarily something that would be significant to emphasize, or
problematize, in preparing shows. Marketing the museum was the director’s main goal and therefore, her attempt was to plan shows that would attract and appeal to men since they “have more power in the corporate world”. The contemporary gallery curator was a member of the exhibition committee and a textile artist and she also acknowledged women’s contributions:

Traditionally, in most societies textiles have been made by women and my experience just as a student, as educator in a post-secondary institution, studying in textile studios, is that 99.9% of us are women, but its changing now…I would like to see men and women on the committee, yeah, as participating and contributing to the make-up of exhibitions, to the ideas that go into discussing what kind of exhibitions we want, even though we’re showing predominantly the work of women, I see no reason to not have men on the committee (Dec 8/96).

It seems that “women” are a non-issue to center a show around or even to discuss within other thematic shows. There is recognition of women’s involvement in textile production but not enough to highlight in exhibitions. However, a proposal to organize show on (men’s) ties, based on a private collection, was met with enthusiasm: “it would bring men (to the museum), the board is enthusiastic (about the idea), need to explore” (EC, 5/95).

Another approach to looking at textiles was made by one of the committee members: the suggestion was to have a “corner” (using an alcove) at the museum for “Textile Showcase”: “an interpretive approach to textiles from the collection which relate to relevant events, it can be political, people, visitors need to learn how to appreciate textiles, to have a “finer eye” (EC Aug 24/95). This approach views textiles as forms of art and the museum’s role as one that is involved in educating visitors to appreciate textiles and gain a “finer eye”. These views signal a departure from the approach held by the founders who wished to open the collection to the public, to make it accessible, to
attract new audiences, “those who don’t regularly visit museums”. The founders stressed the utilitarian aspect of textiles, in the domestic sphere:

These textiles are made primarily by women. They might have been worn, slept under, walked on, carried or used as status symbol to dress up the family camel (General, 2).

I was much more interested in showing the relationship between the maker and the made object and what the made object was for, I was much more interested in utility than I was in aesthetics but you can’t separate the two because there is a human impulse to make nice things, especially if you know your mother-in-law is going to see it, you make it as nice as you can... (MA, Jan 22/97).

My observations of the exhibition committee meetings revealed that there was no cohesive curatorial guidance or direction to curators who wished to develop and present exhibitions. More specifically, since there was no exhibition curator at the time working at the museum with the collection, many exhibitions were curated by outside curators who brought their projects to the museum. However, the committee was not directing these curators to emphasize specific topics/issues. During my interviews with members of the committee, I had the opportunity to explore this question further:

Q: In terms of the committee, working with curators, is there any input from the committee in terms of what you would like to see (in an exhibition) or what you would like them to emphasize?
A: There’s none of that. We have a very hands-off relationship with curators. Now, is this a concerted, mandated situation? It’s not, but it’s a very good question, you’ve given me food for thought. We just don’t have that strong direction for the mandate of the committee to say to a guest curator we are looking for this, this and this. (Dec 8/96)

However, during the meetings, the current museum position with regard to the type of knowledge/information that is to be promoted in exhibits was at least raised in forms of questions or clarifications. In several exhibition committee meetings these issues of what knowledge and who is to convey it through the exhibit, came up, though there was never
an explicit discussion of these issues against, for example, the museum’s mission statement or mandate.

**Black Story Quilts exhibition:** (later changed to: *This is Not a Poem: This is a Summer Quilt*). This exhibition of quilts from the Black community was to tie in with Black History Month. The curator talked during the committee meeting about her idea/vision for the show: “to talk about the history of the Black community (through the display of textiles) in Nova Scotia and the work that was done by women”. Her goal was to bring these experiences of Black women living in small communities to the show. Basically, she said, ‘it was an untouched ground’, meaning that the issue was not well researched and documented, and this was going to be an attempt to open up this issue for the public (EC, Aug. 24/95). She traveled to Nova Scotia and met with a group of women; saw their quilts as well as other quilts made by Black women that were part of a museum collection (Nova Scotia Museum of Natural History). She described some of the quilts as “heavily used and quite traditional in their design”. She also pointed that, to augment the show, she wished to contact Black contemporary quilt artists in Canada and the US, artists who use quilting as a medium for their art, as story quilts. In the Upcoming Exhibitions Schedule of the committee (Oct/95) the exhibit was summarized as:

January 20 – June 1996: Quilts and Stories: This exhibition will be made up of 10 historical quilts from African Canadian families from Nova Scotia and Ontario, as well as approximately 6 contemporary story quilts from African-Canadian and African-American quiltmakers.

During the following meeting the question of programming around the exhibit was raised to the curator: “Do you know people who can expand your show, who have vision and can do programming around Black quilts? A museum type, an artist, story teller or an academic?” (EC, Nov. 15/95). The plan that the curator had for the show, was not
considered adequate and the idea was to supplement the display with more “accepted” scholarly work by an artist or an academic.

**Black History Month:** A discussion occurred during the September 10/1996 meeting of the possibilities of using material from the museum’s collection. A suggestion was made to develop a thematic approach. At the following meeting another idea was suggested:

“To consider various researchers of Black history to act as coordinators for the project. A number of people from different backgrounds will come to work with the museum’s collection and choose a piece from the collection that they personally respond to, coordinator will interview participants and write statements re: pieces + people” (EC, Nov.6/96). During an interview, the museum’s exhibition coordinator talked about

Inviting people, academics, to come look at the collection, not necessarily textile academics, but people from the Black community who are academics and who are very conscious of their heritage...that’s one example that I think is very viable, it’s community-based, on their terms, it’s us appreciating that we don’t have this expertise, it’s not for us to do, it’s not ours. I don’t feel that the collection is me...I feel administering it, looking after it, sharing it with the community, letting people know about it... (Dec. 8/96).

What is the sense of a community that is discussed here? Only academics are valued as possible interpreters, so the process of “sharing” is very limited within the Black community. Power relations between the museum and the “community” underline the whole process of collaboration. It’s “us” versus “them”, but the museum still retains its position over the community. Yet the exhibition coordinator raised an important point about the relationship between the museum and communities: the recognition that museum workers are the custodians but not necessarily the experts and communities should share in the interpretation process. The notion of scholarly work is stressed again when the coordinator argues: “I would like to see more scholarly work done with the
collection, we have 8000 artifacts and as you know we don’t have an in-house curator…” (Dec. 8/96). Another example to illustrate the contested role of the curator and the tensions between firsthand knowledge and a scholarly one, is reflected in a proposal sent to the museum by a French woman who wished to curate a show of Indian Sari based on her private collection: she claimed to have a first-hand knowledge of the Indian community and her idea was to center the show around the meaning of cloth to the maker and wearer:

Who is she? Is she Indian or French? A Westerner talk about Indian textile and people?
There’s nothing wrong with that, who is a curator anyway? A Ph.D.? A studied person or someone who lives in the culture?
Yes, but who is she? Has she published? Curated? Is this her first venue? I have no problem with first-hand knowledge but it needs to be substantiated...

The decision was to ask her to provide more information “on curatorial thesis” and to reconsider the proposal in a later stage.

The exhibition committee expressed support for building relationships with communities; however, my observations revealed that every attempt at contacting a specific community was blocked: “Reaching out to ethnic communities is very important (but) the committee and we are quite limited in our abilities to reach out into certain communities.” (Dec 8/96). For example, a proposed exhibit of Guatemalan textiles was considered: “at this time it would be difficult to sponsor a show as there are continuing government and political problems...to include local community would be difficult at this time, as community is fragmented, will respond to Guatemala consulate that museum is trying to feature own pieces” (EC, Nov 6/96). In another example from the Black story quilts show, the curator described (EC, Aug 24/95) her visit to Nova Scotia black communities and meetings with elderly women who told her about the old days of quilting as a result
of necessity, not as a leisurely art form (as it is today). Yet, these observations were not integrated in the exhibit. When asked to consider community programming for the show, her view was that it would be hard to identify the Black community in Toronto. While it is recognized that the notion of a “community” is not a unified one, establishing contacts with members of specific communities can enhance the exhibiting process, empower community members to see themselves in new light and bring new issues for discussion. However, the director expressed her view on community involvement after the “Macedonian” show, which was a community-based exhibition:

I don’t think that the museum should be doing a lot of these (community) shows. It’s important from time to time and here we had splendid clothing but since then no group came to us and said let’s do something... The museum doesn’t seek the involvement for a specific community show. We can go out for consultations (June 19/2001).

Although the museum founders did not attempt to work with communities in the interpretation process of the cloth, they were also not interested in scholarly knowledge as the main interpretive vehicle for understanding textile production:

What did matter was that people make stuff like this (points to the walls of his office, covered with cloth) and the talent is widespread throughout the human race, and the knowledge doesn’t reside in a bunch of people full of degrees from OCA. Some wonderful things are made by people who don’t call themselves artists (Jan. 22/97).

Threadworks: was another example of a show that highlighted the “contested terrain” of exhibiting at the museum, as it related to community versus artistic focus. It was a juried show of 60 contemporary sewing works by stitchery guild members organized by the Wellington County Museum was scheduled for June 1996. Two museum members and volunteers won awards in the show and the discussion in the exhibition committee evolved around the possibility to attract new visitors with this display. Since the works

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5 For more details on the founders’ approach to interpret textiles see chapter 5.
are of contemporary nature, the general idea within the committee was to present *Threadworks* in the Contemporary Gallery (CG). However, this was met with opposition from the CG committee that decided not to show juried work in the contemporary textile art gallery (see further discussion in CG meeting, later in chapter).

During a “post mortem” meeting of the exhibition committee (Sept. 10/96), the contemporary gallery curator said:

We had concerns, having an outside juried guild show, but it turned out to be good, I think (the organizer) did a good job (installing the show). It’s a good community show…

During our interview, I asked her to elaborate on these remarks:

Look at our membership: we are, as you know, an extraordinarily member-driven and volunteer-driven organization, which is unusual for a museum, I think. Many of the guild members from the threadworks guilds are also museum members so I think that by having that type of exhibition…, was a very good thing to do, to express that sense of belonging and it was a very popular show. We measure what’s popular in terms of attendance, and you look at the comments in the book, all very enthusiastic. But it’s not the only measure for a success of an exhibition. Of course, when people say it’s fantastic, super, I love it, all of these kind words and let’s say there were lots of people who came to that show, whereas, an exhibition like Gunnila’s or Fancy or Knit (all contemporary textile art shows) these exhibitions probably didn’t bring in a whole lot of people but once in there, people saw these shows and were actually quite moved by them. We offered a 500-word text that was very insightful and very legible, easy to read, and in fact offered a lot of food for thought

Q: which wasn’t offered in Threadworks?
A: not for me personally, I don’t know that the exhibition’s intention was to offer that. I think the intention, well, is to show some sort of solidarity as a display of “look at what we’ve done”. There’s no curatorial thesis there that was a juried exhibition that was selected outside the museum. Juried exhibitions are very difficult, I think, because it’s not a curated exhibition, this is based (the selection of objects) I’m guessing here, on skill and technique. (Dec. 8/96).

Here, the boundaries are affirmed between “the community” on the one hand, and the “artists” in the contemporary gallery, on the other. According to the CG curator, the show *Threadworks* did not have a place in the contemporary gallery, despite being of a
contemporary nature and very popular, because it was juried and based on guild members’ skills and technique and not curated. A curated show has a “curatorial thesis” which this show lacked. Related to this, was another discussion during meetings that raised the issue of boundaries between the CG and the rest of the museum is the discussion regarding the show of Gabbeh rugs:

Neil Moran’s proposal of an exhibition of Gabbeh carpets discussed. These are new, commercially produced, sold at Elte carpets, not one of a kind, Carpet Alchemy experience a problem for the museum regarding the sale of carpets. Allen referred to the historical precedents, the 1940’s collapse of this industry, the excellence of these carpets, using old dyes, techniques, teaching the townsfolk in Turkey how to make the rugs (so they can live off their work). This exhibition could be included as part of a larger presentation of a variety of rugs one component (Jan 21/97).

During the meeting, the curator for the contemporary gallery rejected the idea of this exhibition “because these were commercial artifacts made for sale”.

MA: Well, it’s the same with contemporary artists; they want to sell their work, don’t you? (the curator is an artist herself).
CC: We don’t live off our art.
MA: But you would like to… what is the procedure in the contemporary gallery when someone wants to buy a piece?
CC: We just make the contact and hope that if there is a purchase the museum will be acknowledged.
MA: So, it’s basically the same but these people don’t call themselves artists, don’t have studios, live in poorer conditions than most artists in North America… (Jan 21/97).

The exchange above between the CG curator and Max Allen illustrates differences in approach to textiles produced as art by artists compared with traditional production of textiles for domestic use. At issue here is what kind of artifacts are worthy of being presented in the museum. The curator of the contemporary gallery is drawing a line between artists who produce their pieces as Fine Art and those who produce it in Turkey (as in this example) as useful products for sale. Yet, both wish to sell their products.
There was an attempt by the coordinator of the exhibition committee who was also the curator of the CG, to make visible connections between the historical textiles in the collection and the work presented in the CG. In an interview, she said:

I would like to see a healthy bridge built between these two, the historic and contemporary galleries in programming and in coming exhibitions that are initiated elsewhere to indicate that there is continuity, that things are related. It’s not hard to strive for those connections; I feel now that I had a lot of influence on the importance and the possibility, the viability… (Dec 8/96)

An example for the planning of shows and collaborating with the CG can be seen with the CG exhibition Spin Cycle: during a meeting, the chair the Exhibitions Committee who is also a member of the CG, talked about a vacant slot that needs to be filled and could relate to the CG show of contemporary textiles made from recycling methods. A discussion of what could fit and supplement the CG Spin Cycle ensued:

MA: “What do you want, contemporary or historical examples? From the collection or outside (the museum)?
JA: “Well, most of what we have is contemporary, so historical and from the collection”
MA: “Sumatran textiles, we have a great collection or, to connect with Spin Cycle, 19th century Ontario quilts which are recycled, red and black, not fancy, poor, coarse, simple quilts about 11 of them”. (EC, Jan 21/97)

This was the basis for the exhibit that Allen curated, *Eleven Simple Quilts*, to accompany the CG Spin Cycle show that focused on recycling methods.

**Acquisition process:** Accessions Committee meetings are annual and comprise of the registrar, director, board members, the founder, and a volunteer (who works with the collection). I observed one accessions meeting (Jan 22/97) that examined incoming 1996 donations. The discussion during the meeting evolved around the type and condition of textile donations that the museum should accept. The minutes from this meeting list the textiles that were accepted:
Some of the outstanding pieces taken in included a Sumatra wedding skirt; a square wool shawl from Russia, our first of this kind…a pair of men’s hand woven underwear trousers from Quebec, a rare find…a superior “Penny Mat” in pristine condition (my emphasis).

From this, it is clear that the museum’s view of what to collect favors the extra-ordinary, one-of-a-kind item, in the best condition (“museum quality”). This view reflects the general approach taken by museums in collecting their objects (as discussed earlier in chapter 3) and signals a departure from the vision that the TMC founders had. The founders wished to collect non-commercial material “That has been designed, woven and embellished by people for their own use, they recognized the utilitarian aspect of textiles and so their collection was comprised of common, used material. The ordinary, popular production of textiles, by women for daily use was the main goal:

Most of the cloth was made to be used, you know, it spent its life in domestic circumstances…wonderful things are made by people who don’t call themselves artists…I was much more interested in the relationship between the maker and the made object, I was more interested in utility than aesthetics (Jan 22/1997)

During the meeting while viewing rugs, Allen commented that:

Whenever I get to view rugs, I look for the mistakes, the asymmetry; I love to see that because this is the difference between handmade and machine. I like to see the imperfections…what’s wrong with the holes here? Why can’t we show it as is?

Here, he is alluding to a carpet from the collection, “with many damaged areas that was inspected at the request of the conservator who estimated that 100 hours of conservation time required to put this piece in shape” (Jan. 22/97). In other words, the attempt is to preserve textiles so they are in “good shape” and so worthy of presentation in exhibits. The approach viewed by the museum is one that regards textiles in their best condition and quality, “fine examples” as the museum’s director said:

Our collection is growing but not all the textiles are in good quality or museum quality…we have some very good quality rugs with good condition and
interesting designs. You can find a lot of good hooked rugs in the market but we had some good quality rugs. (June 19/2001)

The registrar was introducing the newly accessioned textiles:

We have a few hooked rugs here, need repair plus one that is filthy and not in a good condition.
MA: Not to clean or repair. This is the condition today because of use. We can show it like that.

Again, we can see the difference in approach between museum professionals, who look for “museum quality” which can be translated to best examples, highest standards in terms of collecting textiles in their best condition, repair and conservation, as opposed to the founder, who wished to show the reality behind the production and use of textiles and who does not shy away from utilitarian and worn or “worked out” textiles.

Looking at a men’s long underwear, MA commented: “we don’t collect fashion but this is Canadian, home spun. An addition to the women’s ordinary wear examples, not much men’s wear survived time…”

With regard to North American aboriginal textiles, Allen said:

The ROM has European textiles… let them collect. Let us collect what they are not interested in.

The registrar showed some lace pieces, “white work”:

(This is) 20th century lace examples, interesting that people still had time to do these things…

Note the reference to people as opposed to women. Despite of the growing body of historical studies of lace making in Europe as women’s work, the reference here is to “people”. Secondly, the notion that they had time, it was done as part of leisure, not considered as real “work”.

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After the meeting, the registrar circulated an update of main collecting areas (Acq. 1996) as part of collections management. This list describes the collection by geographical areas:

- **West Africa**: large collection of Adire cloth…*important* robes.
- **Lace**: a newly expanded section, now holding some *important* pieces.
- **Shawls**: European and Indian examples, a *good overall selection*.

Again, the emphasis is on the outstanding, important cloth as opposed to the ordinary. It is clear that the goal of collecting various textiles is to have “good/best examples” of different textiles and the acquisition of textiles is done accordingly.

**Contemporary Gallery (CG) Committee:**

Although I decided not to include contemporary exhibitions in the study because these are *art* exhibits of textiles and other media, created as art pieces by artists, I still wanted to be present at CG meetings. I thought that it is important to follow the ways in which this committee works and its relationships with the exhibitions committee.

The committee meets every four to six weeks. I observed eight committee meetings between late 1995 and early 1997. The committee is comprised of a group of artists who volunteer their time at the gallery. The curator of the CGC chaired most of the meetings and no other museum workers took part in these meetings. One of the members was a board member as well, and reported back to the board. Generally, the discussion involved looking at submissions, preparing grant applications, planning and installing shows. For example: “there is a gap in the schedule, possibilities were discussed…one option would be…to flesh out an idea and come to next meeting with suggestions” (CGC, July 27/95); “This meeting was called to consider possible shows for the June/Oct time slot from the proposals on hand” (CGC, March 13/96).
During the meetings, various issues that relate to community involvement, role of the CGC, curatorial directions etc. were raised. For example, one of the committee members talked about the arbitrary process of selecting shows:

We need a session devoted to evaluation of past performance, reflection of program breadth, *ethnicity* and balance. This should address *community* responsibilities of the CG, mandate and curatorial directions (CG, July 27/95, my emphasis).

The curator’s response:

I think that we need to be more pro-active on racial and social representation. We are doing well with gender representation but less with ethnic based groups. I’d like to have a meeting where we talk about what we want, our mandate, and what is your “dream” show. For example, we got a submission from an American artist and I think that nationality is a consideration (CG, July 27/95)

Here, the mission and direction of the contemporary gallery are being contested. The gallery’s mandate (see chapter five) talks about the artistic goals: “presenting new and challenging works that would not necessarily find exposure in a mainstream setting…exhibitions designed to involve textile art community, the general public including students of art history, fine art and design”. The mandate does not mention community responsibilities, social and ethnic representation. However, during the meeting the focus is on ethnic representation in the committee and in shows. “Community responsibilities” are understood in social/ethnic terms of representation (as opposed to the art community discussed in the mandate). But gender is a non-issue: “we are doing well with gender representation”. It is important to note that, this issue of reflection on committee work (in terms of its direction, goals and responsibilities) was never discussed within the exhibition committee, which is responsible for the entire museum’s programming and exhibitions.
The members discussed the possibility that an outsider be brought in to lead a (future) discussion and names of potential candidates were raised. In a conversation after the meeting the curator elaborated more: “Look at our committee; I think we have a balanced representation of gender but not race; we could do better at that. In terms of artists showing, we had a few shows of Japanese artists but again, not much of ethnic representation but gender representation is more balanced” (July 27/95).

This discussion of gender and ethnic representation in shows and on the committee itself is significant to note: first, this issue was never raised at the meetings of the exhibition committee. The makeup of that committee was very homogeneous (white and female). There was no representation of “other” groups in committee membership. Second, gender issues were never discussed during exhibition committee meetings as potential themes for shows. As discussed in chapter three, women are generally underrepresented in museums and galleries as artists and as subjects of exhibits. Here, in a museum which is devoted to textiles, historically a female enterprise, the contemporary gallery is being sensitive to gender balance in representation but gender as a subject is a non-issue for both committees.

The CG committee members were conscious (as members of the exhibition committee were) of producing exhibitions that would tie in with ethnic and cultural events:

May is Asian Heritage Month, it is suggested that we mount an exhibition… a contact with an artist from Japan, the committee viewed some slides of her work… (CGC, July 30/96). Contact Asian Heritage organization for input (CGC, Aug 28/96).

Information presented on embroiderers from Canada, U.K. and U.S.A. and suggested that a show might include one from each country… One of the members, of Chinese origin, asked: Aren’t we too Euro-centric? What about embroideries from South America? Chinese? (CGC, July 30/96)
Generally, the committee dealt with selection issues of submissions; group versus individual shows; Producing a written brochure or handout for exhibitions; involving students in the work and allowing exhibition space for emerging artists.

A special meeting to discuss curatorial directions and social responsibilities of the contemporary gallery was called for November 16, 1996. After a discussion of the CGC mandate (which I discussed in chapter 5 to show its focus on textile arts) it was decided that no reconsideration of the CG mandate was needed. In other words, the discussion that took place in past meetings about the need for a reflection on the committee’s work (in terms of ethnically balanced shows and community responsibilities of the contemporary gallery), was not at all part of this special meeting. The focus of this meeting was on the leadership of the committee: it was decided that it would revolve among the members and each member will chair a meeting, prepare the agenda and circulate the minutes. Almost all committee members curated shows. The CG curator was expected to assume a stronger curatorial role, providing guidance and direction as her role at the museum expanded to include general programming- “she has the big picture”:

(There is now) greater integration of the CG into the overall operations of the museum. This has been achieved primarily through the appointment of SQ as Exhibitions Coordinator; she is now responsible for all aspects of museum programming, not just the CG. Other contributing factors include JA involvement as board member and chair of the Exhibitions Committee; applications of museum funds to CG; greater acceptance of CG by board and staff…Greater possibilities for contemporary programming, the CG is no longer confined to one regular exhibition space allowing for greater freedom in designing and scheduling exhibitions (CGC, Nov 16/96).

It was also noted that renaming the program committee to Exhibitions Committee entails more “expectations in terms of how and what an exhibition should be, more curatorial work, not just to put stuff on the wall”. An example for the integration of CG with the
Exhibitions Committee was given in producing and collaborating on projects such as Asian Heritage Month where the intention was to have shows both in the general galleries and the contemporary gallery.

**Threadworks** (see earlier discussion in EC) a juried show was suggested for display in the contemporary gallery space but rejected by members of the CGC. The discussion during the CGC meeting focused on community involvement versus “professional” shows:

* We understand the community value, could be presented in the museum.
* The museum is trying to do more popular community ‘thing’, not high quality.
* Juried shows are boring, not appropriate for the museum where no curatorial direction is available.
* It’s good to have the community but… (May, 6/95).

The CG committee rejected the idea to display the show in “their” space. There was an understanding of the significance of this kind of show for the public, the visitors, enhancing the popularity of the museum and inviting new audience but the members of the committee felt that the “quality” was compromised and the museum should not be a venue for juried shows that are “boring” because of lack of critical curatorial direction:

It was noted that Threadworks 95, the juried exhibition organized at the Wellington County Museum had been suggested as a possible CG show. The consensus of the committee was that, even though we support the community-based involvement and enthusiasm generated by such guild based juried shows and feel that it has a place in the museum under general programming, the mandate of the CG is to show critically based work. (CGC, July 27/95)

We (CG) decided not to display juried exhibitions. But the museum can display it. It will bring guild members, new audience. The contemporary gallery is involved in displaying critically-based works of contemporary art nature (CGC July 27/95, conversation with curator after the meeting, my emphasis).

In this statement, the contemporary gallery members distance themselves, as textile artists, from contemporary guild members. The boundaries between art and craft
are fixed. There is a clear difference between the critically based textile art that should be displayed in the CG and the textiles that are produced by women, who are members of contemporary sewing guilds and presented as their achievements and not as critically-based art. Clearly, the production of textiles was divided between textile art that is produced by contemporary artists and critically discussed in the CG and contemporary textiles produced by guild members and presented as juried shows with no curatorial direction. It is important to note that this view was inherently different from the founder’s view when initiating the CG:

I thought it would be a very good idea to have a place where contemporary work, not art, not craft, but contemporary work was shown. I envisioned that a lot of that work would not be done by people who call themselves artists, although some of it would be. Like the rug hookers, the guilds and stuff like that but I wasn’t competent to run it, “to curate” it, and then there came to be a contemporary gallery committee, which consisted of artists and then we got stuff like this, there had been some shows in that space that in my opinion were ludicrous... I don’t hate all artists but I’ve got an agenda, which is different from just showing art. I’ve got a politics of the textile’s museum collection and it’s not the politics of the art world. (Jan 22/97)

Again, we can see the gap between the initial ideas of the founder to create a space for the display of contemporary textile work, which includes textile made by artists, guild members or poor Turkish villagers. And, the current position of CG members who saw the contemporary gallery as a space for the exhibition of “critically-based textile art”, made by artists. Max Allen’s position to open up the museum to various communities, such as the guilds, can be seen as a challenge to hegemonic museum practices. The current position held by members of the contemporary gallery is a retreat to traditional views of presenting works of art.

The work done within these two committees could be seen as part of the process of meaning production on the museum level. Observations of committee meetings
enabled a view of the dynamics of general museum work in thinking about exhibitions, the ways in which the museum is approaching various issues in planning exhibitions and other programs. These issues related to: community involvement and representation; the nature of curatorial work; themes for exhibitions, the kind of information to use in exhibits: first-hand knowledge as opposed to scholarly knowledge. Most discussions within the committees were framed in ethnic and cultural terms. Women’s textile production and gender issues were not part of these discussions. Observations allowed exposing tensions between the two committees. These tensions related to the presentation of textiles as art forms on the one hand and as community-based work, on the other. Additionally, observations of committee work allowed for exposing gaps and tensions between the founder’s views and views of staff and members of the committee.

Next, I turn to examine the planning stages of two shows: the acquisitions show *Art and Utility* that I followed from the initial stages through installation and the community-based show *From Baba’s Hope Chest* that was organized outside the museum. These are used as examples for the process of meaning production at the exhibition level.

**Acquisition Show: Art and Utility** (October 28, 1995 - March 17, 1996)

This exhibition presents recent acquisitions to the museum. The purpose of this annual show is to present the past year’s accessioned textiles and discuss reasons for accepting pieces and the way they fit and complement the existing collection. I followed this exhibition from its initial planning stage through installation. In what follows, I chronicle the development of this show and discuss planning and exhibiting issues that were raised during that stage.
During the Exhibition Committee meeting, the museum’s registrar talked about this year’s acquisition show:

This year we got mainly acquisitions of household linens, two crazy quilts, embroidered towels, curtains, table cloth, bed covers. Donations came from private people, some related to the museum. There were also a few costumes and some African stuff but many pieces related to household use. (Aug, 24/95)

So, it was suggested that the show would center on household linens. The show was co-curated by the registrar and a volunteer who is working on accessions and the museum’s collection. The content of the annual acquisitions show is driven by donations of textiles during the past year rather than thematic criteria. In the past, no theme was constructed for these shows; they presented an eclectic selection of donated textiles. This year would mark the first time the show had a theme and the first time the museum centered a show on household goods; they were never on display before. I will examine the preparatory work related to this exhibit, and the installation processes and ways in which the goals of showing household linens in their context were translated in practice through choice of materials and space organization.

Planning the exhibition:

I joined the curators in preparing for the show. I offered my help in doing anything that was related to the show. However, I did not influence the direction of this exhibit. Working together with museum staff on this show, we had many opportunities to talk about selection processes, the translation of a topic/subject into a display that made sense of the textiles. It was a new experience for me, much like doing fieldwork in an exotic place.

The first step was checking the list of items donated during 1994, which related to household goods. Then, we pulled the pieces out of storage, the collection area, which is
on the fourth floor of the museum. This is the area that constitutes the “back” of the museum, which Allen visioned as shared with the public. However, since the move to the new location, only volunteers who worked directly with the collection were allowed in. I remember the first time I entered the fourth floor: it felt like visiting a forbidden place. I had to sign in. I had to be “guided through”.

We examined the textiles using specific criteria such as: the actual condition of the piece; whether it needed some conservation work; whether it had an interesting story to tell; whether it could be matched with other pieces and then those pieces that the curators loved and wanted to show. This was the order of selection: first, the condition, then the story it could tell. After looking at all pieces, we made lists by grouping the pieces in various categories and made the first selection: Three pieces were rejected due to bad condition and quality. Another piece, a shawl, had to be restored, but it was decided to hang it folded so “the best parts show”. Several lace pieces were also rejected due to programming considerations: a major lace show was planned for the latter part of the year, so only one pair of lace curtains was included. The origin of another piece was not certain, not enough information came with it and it was difficult to identify: one side had a design in the center and the other side looked like a bed cover, made from several pieces of cloth and quilted. The curators thought that there was not enough time for research. Therefore, it was excluded.

The next stage was the beginning of display planning: we took all the material to the galleries and started planning where to hang the textiles and how. Exhibition space for the show has expanded (due to programming considerations) and included a large room and a smaller one adjacent to it. From the outset, the curators visualized a “display,
which would use materials as they function in the real world” (conversation, Sept 7/95).
The curators visualized a domestic setting with a bed dressed; curtains behind the bed; a
dresser with the drawers open to show small “things” (bodices, bonnets); several quilts; a
towel rack; laundry basket full with linens; a children’s corner with a crib, dresses on a
clothes line; baby bonnets, samplers and handkerchiefs. We began “spacing out” the
gallery, taking measures, mounting materials temporarily to look at possible connections
between pieces and other space limitations that appeared with relation to labeling. At this
point two more pieces were rejected: one for conservational reasons as the curators felt it
was too fragile to be on the wall for a long period of time. The other, because the curators
felt it did not match other textiles in terms of color composition. Instead, the curators selected
pieces from the permanent collection to show how a donated piece would supplement
what the museum already had. Next, we made a list for the conservator to prepare the
mounting devices needed for hanging the textiles (rods, stitching Velcro).

**Installation:** The curators worked with three more volunteers to mount the show.
During this process, we were all in the galleries with the pieces around us. Some were
dealing with mounting these textiles on the walls, others finalizing the order of installation
(“what goes where”). There was an ironing board in one corner and a volunteer was
ironing bed linens and towels before they were mounted on the wall. This scene brought a
lot of comments, personal stories and memories to volunteers who saw us working:

I remember my grandma trimming towels; I still have some of them;
When I got married my aunt gave me a set monogrammed and I still use it;
Can you imagine using this towel to dry dishes? (referring to the elaborate embroidery)

The iron board and ironing was also a source for comments and laughter:
I just can’t do this work, I hate it; I love ironing, would do it every day instead of cooking; You remind me of my mother, she used to do it with such a devotion; Well, after so many years, I’m a pro…

All these comments related the textiles to housework and one in particular linked it with the proposed show:

Leave the ironing board as part of the exhibit (everyone laughs), really, I’m serious Would you like me here also? (Asking the volunteer who irons) Not a bad idea…

This comment made the linkage between the linens and the actual daily work involved in their maintenance, seeing it as part of the show. However, it was not “accepted” by the curators who felt that this show was focused on “acquisitions” (in conversation Sept. 7/95).

The focus of the recent acquisitions show was the large donation of household linens. The main goal was to highlight the individual textiles that were donated to the museum and how they supplement the collection. This helps demystifying the work that museums do behind the scenes. This was also one of the goals shared by the museum founders who wished exhibits to tell the full span of the textile’s “life history”: its origin and purpose, significance for the producer but also stories of acquisition, donations, relationships with dealers and collectors are part of the stories that should be told in exhibitions.

How is it that these objects got here? Very important part of their life history and of our life history too…I think that these stories are interesting too and I put them in my shows. And if you think of journalists, they never tell you how they got their stories. In programs I’m doing on “Ideas” we talk about how we got the stories and I think it’s sometimes important to tell that story because that’s as much of the story as the end product is. But museums, they hide the process: there’s the public and here’s the private and you can’t get across that barrier. (MA Jan 22/97)
However, the museum’s response to the recent acquisitions show signals a departure from this vision asserted by Max Allen. The responses the show received within the exhibition committee are indicative:

A good filler, this way we always have something from the collection and the docents love it, we have to keep them happy (Exhibition Committee, Sept. 10/96).

New Acquisitions: in future, new acquisitions exhibition will be assembled with a strong focus and/or direction. Try to work with more experienced curators – suggestion is to be more pro-active with approaching more professional curators. Museum is caught in situation where more professional expertise is required, but lack of resources. JA will bring these concerns to the board. (Exhibition Committee, Nov, 6/96).

The first comment downplays the significance of the show: it’s a “good filler” and the docents are “happy”. It was seen as “filler” even though the space allocated for the show expanded to include two galleries. There is no reference to the importance of sharing with the public stories of acquisitions and donations. The second comment (above, from the minutes) alludes to the curatorial aspect of the show: the need for a strong focus and direction. But, I would argue, that there actually was a strong focus on household linens, which was expressed in the title (Art and Utility) and during the committee meeting, and was actually reinforced in the show through the display method. Yet it was overlooked even when I explicitly pointed out this particular theme to the curators and docents. The response was that there’s a need for professional curatorial work to create the show.

The museum director did not place much significance on the show:

Exhibits of recent acquisitions are interesting for the institution but they are not interesting for the public. I think, generally they are not hugely exciting for the public and it is terribly hard to market. They often don’t have a theme.

Q: but this one had a theme--

A: Yes, household linens and practicalities, and I think it was a fun show, interesting. For teaching purposes it would be good but it’s hard to sell the show
to the public. I just don’t think the public has any desire to come and see it. It’s hard to say (voice change) “oh, come and see our recent acquisition show”, it just you know…if you say come and see some wonderful kimonos, it has a story to tell, and I think it’s very hard to tell any cohesive story about acquisitions other than this is what we’ve got last year to add to our collection and we are pleased to have it” (June 19/2001).

There is no recognition for the significance of exhibiting recent museum acquisitions and openly discussing selection criteria or stories that shed light on how textiles arrived to the museum. The theme was also not perceived as important enough to create a show about “household linens and practicalities”. Unlike kimonos, “which have a story to tell”, the stories that household linens could tell, are “not interesting and hard to sell”.

To summarize, the approach to publicly discuss recent acquisitions may help demystify the ways in which museums work. Museums are built upon the separation of the space in which knowledge is produced and organized, and the public space in which it is viewed (Porter, 1991:160). Therefore, a show that attempts to explore reasons for recent acquisitions can serve as a linking device between the “hidden” space and the public one. As discussed, this was an explicit goal shared by the founders. Yet, during the years, the process has shifted to show only how specific textiles supplemented the existing collection. Despite the curators’ idea to present these new acquisitions in a display that would stress their function in the real world, and despite the fact that for the first time there was a theme for this show, as a result of a large donation of household textiles, the main goal was to highlight the individual textiles that were donated to the museum and how they supplement the collection. There was no attempt to make connections and highlight the general context of home and housework.
From Baba’s Hope Chest: Macedonian Treasures in Canada

Here, I wish to explore the only community-based exhibit that was presented at the museum, at the time of my study. I refer here to the planning process and working relations between the museum and the community. These include power sharing in the preparation process and the tension between the museum and the community over the production of meaning, the kind of knowledge that will accompany the artifacts. Whose knowledge and meaning is appropriate for the exhibition: scholarly knowledge or ‘first hand’ knowledge that is rooted in people’s experiences. I also refer to the ways in which culture and women’s work are discussed in planning stages of the exhibit. My goal in tracing this community show was to see whether a show that is organized by the community, on its own terms, would produce a different understanding of textile production that incorporates women’s work. This show drew on costumes, rugs and textiles, which were loaned from the homes of Canadians of Macedonian descent who live in Toronto. The exhibit is not a museum production, but rather a community’s initiative: originated with a group of Canadian women of Macedonian descent who designed and presented it at the museum.

A visit to the museum during a show of Greek textiles revealed to the would-be curator, Wood, that some of the costumes were actually Macedonian. Wood suggested to the museum co-founder to have a show of Macedonian clothing and textiles as well. It was with his support that the project was launched in 1992.

Karp et al (1992:12) maintained that “The best way to think about the changing relations between museums and communities is to think about how the audience, a passive entity, becomes the community, an active agent. This is a process in which self-appointed or

6 “Baba” means grandmother in Macedonian.
delegated representatives of a community contest a museum’s perspective by articulating a community point of view‖. Here, Wood, “the would-be curator”, challenged the museum’s interpretation of some Greek costumes, and was given the opportunity to show Macedonian costumes:

I said to him (to the museum co-founder) this is really a nice Greek exhibit, but some of these costumes are actually Macedonian. At that point he said he knew but unfortunately most of the costumes came from one collector, and he tried to label the Macedonian ones but there was so much opposition from the Greek community that he wasn’t able to do that and he felt that Macedonian costumes were misrepresented. He talked about this in detail, so I said how about if I give you a show, and he said “a good idea, go ahead”. So that was it, I came home and started to think, I have tons of stuff, my mother has, and I figured it wouldn’t be hard because I knew people brought these things, so what I did was, thinking that it would be better to do this project through a community group, I went to this organization called The Canadian Macedonian Historical Society. I said this is what I like to do, I would like to do it through you, because fundamentally, I am a person that believes in including people, this is how I feel. They appointed me director, on their board of textile committee...I invited people to join me, they were either my friends or they found me, they wanted to participate in a community project, for exactly the same reason that I wanted to. I’ve always been concerned about how to make people think that they have some ownership in terms of the city they live in, the life that they live and the institutions that are in the city. The underlying belief within the whole group is that it’s important to share life experiences with other people. (Wood, Sep 15/95).

This committee, comprised primarily by Canadian women of Macedonian descent, collected the textiles together with oral histories, organized and installed the show, independently of the museum. In this way, Wood, her planning committee and other parts of the Macedonian community became actively involved in museum processes, which related to the representation of Macedonian culture.

Planning for the show began in 1992. The committee’s first task was to locate and document the traditional Macedonian textiles owned by families in the greater Toronto area. There was a need to identify and establish contacts with potential lenders, and gain a home visit to view the textiles. The most effective means of reaching Macedonians was
through publicity on the community radio and TV programs. The first home visit was an introductory meeting. Generally, visits were two to three hours in length and often included an exchange of personal information between the committee member and the lender concerning family, place of origin (in Macedonia) and time of immigration. In most cases, the textiles appeared for viewing close to the end of the visit, once trust had been established. Each garment or textile evoked deep-felt memories. In the process of sharing stories about their experiences, the women revealed their idea of “what life back then was all about”. Each story had several layers to it as the lenders talked about many issues ranging from the techniques used to craft the cloth to the kinds of work women were doing around the house and in the fields. The “work” notion was visible in their everyday discourse. They recalled personal memories and community stories associated with the textiles. According to Wood (Sep15/1995), in the beginning, little thought was given to recording oral histories, and the committee hand wrote statements made by the lenders. However, over the course of time it was evident that these stories had become a central component to the proposed exhibition and the stories of 65 women were audio recorded.

The women talked about family members long since gone but lovingly remembered through the legacy of their handiwork…As immigrants, Macedonian women, seemed to know instinctively that the traditional clothing and the hand-woven textiles would be one of the few legacies from the old country that they could pass on (Wood, 1997a).

During these home visits, while the committee was looking for items to display in the show, there was outpouring of emotions as the textiles evoked deep felt memories and the women explained the importance of these textiles (ibid):

I kept these things because my mother made them with her own hands. They’re a work of art that’s not kept up now…she enjoyed doing this work
My grandmother made the rug when she was 20. The rug originally had two more pieces so it would cover a whole room. My grandmother split the rug and gave one to each of her granddaughters. It is something to treasure. Until about 15 years ago she still used it on the floor of her house.
I see my mother when I look at it because in my early years she was always wearing it.

The fact that Wood, the curator, was herself of Macedonian descent helped to encourage women to share their personal memories and agree to have them publicly displayed, together with their costumes and textiles. Wood and her committee wished to include these personal stories together with the textiles, as the interpretive mode that provides meaning for the textiles and the exhibition in general.

Building a working relationship between the museum and the Macedonian community was a challenging task for both the museum and the community. Originally, Wood saw this opportunity of community involvement in a museum as a model of co-operation between other communities and museums in the future, and based on this received a government grant (from Jobs Ontario Community Action Program; Wood, Sept 15/95). The curator talked about feeling an outsider all through the planning and exhibition time at the museum:

We got very little guidance…throughout this whole time no one (at the museum) sat down and said this is a great partnership, let’s work together…I think they thought of us as funny people who are coming from time to time with this idea. The museum had no involvement except once in a while to stick their noses and to say we don’t like this color or the director wanted the logo of the museum to be bigger…. (Sept, 15/95).

According to Wood, programming for the show suffered greatly because of the disconnect that was between the museum and the Macedonian community. The museum wished to organize lectures that would focus on more scholarly information about the textiles, as is often the procedure with other shows. However, Wood claimed:
If this institution is going to be an inclusive institution you have to think how you’re going to bring people in. It’s not enough to offer a lecture on textiles. A lot of people in some of these fringe communities don’t care about hearing a lecture, they don’t have the skills, they are intimidated by a lecture, so present something else to bring people and once they’re at your door and you make them feel welcome, they may come back. But the director wanted programming that is related to textiles so in other words, if we had a cooking demonstration on Macedonian food, she was uncomfortable and we cancelled. We had 3 music nights with dancing; we had over 100 people on the first night and 80 on the second. It wasn’t enough for her. She couldn’t understand that you had 80 people who had never been to a museum coming in they were comfortable and there’s a spin off…the whole issue is including people, changing the ways these institutions are with people (Wood, Sept 15/95).

The museum director did not view community partnerships as a significant role for the museum and did not support them for future endeavors, as she stated in an interview:

I think (the Macedonian show) was a great success, attendance was great, the museum became much more visible because they had good marketing…I don’t think the museum should be doing a lot of these shows. It’s important from time to time and here we had splendid clothing but since then no group came to us and said let’s do something…

Q: So the museum doesn’t seek this involvement?
A: No. Not for a specific community show. We can go out for consultations… (June 19/95).

Nevertheless, because this show was presented at the museum it was seen as a partnership and The Honorable Bob Rae, Premier of Ontario in his congratulatory message said:

I congratulate the Textile Committee of the Canadian Macedonian Historical Society and the Museum for Textiles for joining forces to make this exhibit happen. You have not only strengthened your community, you have also enriched the heritage that belongs to all Ontarians. Our government is proud to be your partner through funding from our Jobs Ontario Community Action Program (TEXT, museum’s newsletter, April to June/95; my emphasis).

The museum’s exhibition committee expressed a concern over a Macedonian curator who is not professional and lacks the academic requirements for curating exhibitions. The director insisted that in order to curate a show you need to be an academic with a PhD:
She said to curate a show you have to have a PhD, to be an assistant curator you have to have an MA and all of this stuff a day before the opening, it made me ill. Once again she is saying you folks are over here, you have no decision making powers, this is my institution, I will have whoever I wish, you have no right in this (Wood, Sept 15/95).

The possibility of community curation was not considered by either the museum or the community, even though the curatorial focus was already established by myself and the community planning committee. The museum assumed that a professional curator was needed and we accepted that assumption (Wood, 1997:48).

The director indeed referred to the need to rely on academic expertise: Consequently, a few months before the scheduled opening, an outside curator was invited to form a curatorial team. She was an academic whose expertise was in Balkan textiles. She had curated costume exhibitions in the US and specialized in Bulgarian aprons. In an interview, the museum director said:

(MM) is an expert on Balkan textiles and she was going to give a whole background about the history of textiles from that region. I remember she came down to the museum but in the end she couldn’t complete the work. We felt that we should communicate not just the community voice but also a textile voice. The stories were nice, very emotional, but you have to tell more than that (June 19/2001).

In her final report to the Canadian Museum Association, Wood (1997a) discusses major issues arising during the work on the exhibition. Among these are power relations between the museum and the community over interpretation, and she writes:

The museum added another stipulation. It wanted the professional curator to be non-Macedonian. The desire to include a non-Macedonian on the curatorial team begs us to ask the question: Did the museum lack confidence in the community’s ability to chronicle its material culture? (1997a:48).

“The materials in the exhibition were not ancient artifacts that need academic interpretation. Rather, they were made and owned by thoughtful, articulate women who were able to chronicle and communicate the history of the items, methods of fabrications
and the social history of the community. Also, an academic interpretation would have changed the focus of the exhibition. This was witnessed during the short time that MM was involved as assistant curator. Her intent to label material according to various ancient Balkan tribes met resistance from costume lenders who saw themselves simply as Macedonians, not descendants of Pelagonians...It’s probable that the exhibition would have been more detached if this approach was taken... The fact was that I knew far more about Macedonian textiles than MM (the scholar), my community is a living culture and I am a part of that culture” (Wood, 1997a:47-9).

The goal of this exhibit was to acknowledge the contribution of Macedonian women to Macedonian culture and history:

I wanted very much for everyone to understand that these women have a place in our history...because Macedonian community is quite patriarchal and women are decades behind in obtaining equal status within the community, gender issues are really important...that was one thing that I wanted to do for our women, our mothers (Sept 15/95).

During the opening night celebration, with 600 people in attendance and Honorable Anne Swarbrick, the Minister of Culture present, Wood made an emotional speech in which she dedicated the exhibit to all Macedonian mothers and grandmothers (TEXT, April to June 1995). The curator wished the vantage point of women to be central in the show. However, she pointed out that the community had difficulty comprehending the possibility of an exhibition consisting of items that it deemed ordinary, particularly household textiles. “After all, some floors in Macedonian households are still covered in handmade ‘cheregee’ (mats). This jump from domestic use to museum piece was hard to fathom” (Wood, 1997a: 25-6). This was especially explicit with the men in the community and Wood explains that when she was looking
for funding and support within the community, there were problems with the attitudes men had towards the proposed show:

The men held on to the money in the community and when they saw that the show was about women’s textiles, their response to us was why can’t you do a show about icons, military or liturgical clothing, this is women’s work. What do you need the money from us for this kind of work? So we couldn’t get any money, this is one example how little merit these women have within the community, or the textiles (have little merit) (Sept 15/95).

There was no objection to have a “Macedonian” show as long as it contained what the men considered worth remembering in the community’s life: the battles, the church. Prominent male community leaders exerted pressure to change the title of the show. Many objected to the use of the word “Baba” (because of its reference to women) and the fact that the textiles came from Macedonian homes. They felt that instead of asking local families for textiles and costumes, the exhibition would have more status if it contained textiles from the Ethnological Museum in Skopje, Macedonia (Wood, 1997a: 25). Macedonian women, especially older women, internalized their subordinate position within the community and therefore they responded with surprise at the interest in women’s textiles and stories. As opposed to the men, they did value the textiles and costumes, which they (or their mothers) made. But even though they had kept and treasured these personal mementos, they could not comprehend why these treasures would be of public interest.

Wood wished the vantage point of women to be central in the show. Wood (Sep 15/95) and the community planning committee recognized that the stories these women told were inseparable from the objects and they wished to include these oral histories as the interpretive method for the textiles. However, during latter planning stages, the museum questioned the community’s “curation abilities”. And as mentioned above, there
were increasing efforts to control the show by appointing an outside curator specialist in Balkan costumes. Wood refers to these questions in her discussion of “curating”:

For the community, defining the curatorial status of the exhibition was difficult, confusing and very complicated. In fact, our experience proves that a community-based exhibition requires that a museum look at alternatives to the status quo in this area of exhibition planning. The exhibition challenged accepted practice and, within the context of a partnership, raises the following points for discussion: academic interpretation versus community curation; academic qualifications versus community-based knowledge; standard terminology versus creative solutions for defining the process (Wood, 1997:46).

**Politics:** The initial idea to have a show of Macedonian textiles and costumes was as a response to the Greek show of textiles that was presented at the museum in 1992. Macedonia was declared as independent state in 1992, and there was an interest in Macedonian objects. Even though the main goal of having the show was to acknowledge women’s contributions to Macedonian culture, on another level within the larger community of Toronto, Wood wished to highlight the place of Macedonians in Toronto:

I wanted recognition for the Macedonian community. I wanted them to acknowledge that we as a people exist in the city, we are the largest Macedonian community outside of the Balkans and so that was important to me. We didn’t want to involve politics it’s very true because I never saw this as a political issue although fundamentally it is. The sheer fact that it exists in a museum it becomes a political statement…You know that the Greek consulate complained about the show, and this has to do with human rights issues…I don’t believe that in a country like Canada one group has the right to oppose another group. Basically, they wanted us to change all the names of the villages to their Greek names. Now, you can’t do revisionist history…you can’t erase people’s memories. If someone came from that part of Macedonia that’s now Greek, and that village was always been referred to in the family as being Macedonian and it has a Macedonian name, no one can change it in the memory of those people (Sept 15/95).
There were also other concerns with regard to the politics involved in such an exhibit\(^7\). The museum director expressed concern about the “political sensitivity” with regard to Macedonian and Greek political relations:

(Even before the show opened) the director told me: I’m really worried about the Greeks, I don’t want this to turn to another African exhibit. And I said, I beg your pardon, she said, you know, the African exhibit at the ROM and I thought this is great, we just had this wonderful function in this place with all this incredible energy, she doesn’t know me yet, and right away she is telling me you better be careful, I don’t want to have any trouble with this. Those were her first words (Wood, Sept 15/95).

The reference to the show as “Macedonian” influenced the working relations between the museum and “the community” which related to other issues such as power relations:

On a number of occasions, the museum’s response to the Macedonian community caused us feel marginalized...feeling as outsiders was a new experience for us, since most of us are what I call “hidden ethnics”...We are deeply proud of being Macedonian, however, the use of this term made us feel less Canadian, less welcome, less equal (Wood, 1997a:42).

This show that was organized independently of the museum offered a unique view of textiles in a context of their production, which included references to the community’s social history and culture. However, it is evident that the main goal was to highlight women’s contributions to the Macedonian community through the validation of their textile production and work. The idea to use personal stories as told by the women as the interpretive mode for the textiles, affected the kind of meanings that were to be promoted in the exhibition. This approach was clearly in conflict with the use of knowledge that is scholarly-based, which was suggested by the museum staff.

\(^7\) With the exception of JV, who was the only museum director who presented the idea of community curation and supported the community’s committee. The former and latter museum directors felt that a professional curator was needed for this exhibit. For a detailed background of institutional changes at the museum, see Ch.5.
Summary

This chapter was devoted to discussing the ways in which meaning is produced at the museum. Through observations of committee meetings where discussions of planning processes for shows took place, it is evident that issues of women’s work and culture did not constitute a major part of these committees’ agendas. The preference was to highlight ethnic/cultural aspects of textile production and link these to ethnic and communities’ events. Even the show *Art and Utility* that focused on household linens missed the opportunity to discuss women’s work in the context of home. This occurred despite the fact that household linens were produced and worked by women and despite the approach taken by the curators to display the textiles “*as they would function in the real world*”, using a display method that created a home scene. The key in planning and installing the show was quality museum work, conservation issues and artistic criteria in selecting pieces for the show. Other issues that were raised during meetings related to working relations with communities and the nature of knowledge that should be provided. A clear distinction could be made between the founder’s approach in the formative years of the museum (as was more generally discussed in chapter 5) and the later position of the museum staff. Whose knowledge was valued and what do museums need to provide to visitors in exhibitions? The founder wished to tell the full span of the textile’s story: stories of production and use, but also stories of the people and stories about the journey the textile had to go through until it got to its final home (the museum). On the other end, the approach within the museum administration was different: discussions in the committee focused on scholarly work, and academics that can provide interpretations. “First hand” knowledge was questioned; partnerships with communities were blocked:
there was no interest to engage in more community shows despite the success of the Macedonian show in bringing new audience to the museum. Discussions around *Threadworks* in both committees revealed a tension between the CG members, who rejected a “popular” show of contemporary guild members in their space and the exhibition committee. Tensions were also evident during the acquisition committee meeting between museum staff and Allen, in regards to conservation of textiles. I suggest seeing these tensions as “contested moments” within the first stage of encoding meanings at the museum level. As Hall suggested in his model, the process of encoding meaning is imbued in frameworks of knowledge and social relations of power. By observing committee work I was able to identify these processes.

The community-based Macedonian show offered a view of textiles that related to the women in the community and integrated work with artistic creative expressions. This view is compatible with the original views presented by Allen in his exhibits. This show included some oppositional elements at the museum. The show was organized by, and reflected the ideas and views of the women in the Macedonian community, who produced the textiles themselves. The group successfully managed to produce an exhibit from their vantage point. It was organized outside the museum and counteracted the previous ways of presenting these costumes.
Chapter 7. Presentation in Exhibitions: Looking for Women, Work and Culture

We learn to read written text; we do not, as a rule, systematically acquire the ABCs of potentially more powerful media - film, television and museums, for instance (in Porter, 1991a: 159).

In this chapter I turn to the “reading” process of exhibitions. I look at the ways in which the museum exhibits and presents women’s textile production both as part of their work and culture. I will refer to visual forms of representation (objects on display) as well as written (labels), and oral forms of communication (docent tours and meetings) as texts. These are taken to be the actual manifestations of knowledge construction, which are presented to the public in the museum. These practices are an integral part of the process of “making sense” of the artifact and assigning meaning to the entire exhibit. Hall calls this stage: “programme as meaningful discourse”. Referring to this stage as the text of the exhibit does not imply that reality and specific conditions of practice are neglected in the process. As Hall said:

Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse. Discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product of…the articulation of language on real relations and conditions (Hall, 1993:511).

The exhibition is a translation of the encoding stage into a three dimensional medium. However, this translation process involves the circulation of the ‘product’/exhibit and distribution to various audiences (ibid: 508). This stage is the manifestation of the encoded meanings but it is independent in that meanings are re-created within it.

I begin with a review of the exhibits that were curated by the museum founder, in which he dealt with women’s history and work very explicitly. I should note that his shows were not discussed in planning stages within the exhibition committee meetings.
Generally, he offered an idea for a show and did the work involved in planning it on his own. So, I cannot follow the encoded meanings of the first stage.

Rugs That Aren’t “Rugs”: Nomadic Furnishings Made on Loom. This show focused on utilitarian objects that are hand woven using rug techniques (Dec 8, 1994 to May 7, 1995). “The objects in this exhibition, which look like they might be rugs or pieces of rugs, weren’t made to be walked on. This exhibition shows many other ways that flat-woven and knotted-pile “rug material” can be used”:

The nomadic people of Central Asia need furniture that can be easily transported when they move their homes and flocks from place to place. Heavy wooden chests, beds and tables are hard to carry about, so woven “rugs” in many shapes take their place. Rugs (as beds) are slept on and slept under. Rugs (as doors) can be hung across the entrance of a tent. Rugs are shaped into bags and stuffed with all sorts of clothing, bedding and utensils, serving as drawers, cupboards and closets. Rugs are also used as saddle covers, as floor cloth to eat on, in addition to being made into cushions...Men traditionally raised and sheared the sheep, but the rest of the process of making the “rugs” shown here (carding, spinning the wool, gathering plants for dyes and dyeing the wool, and weaving the rug) has always been done by women. (Introductory text)

In the Persian rug manufactories of earlier centuries, the master weavers were men. Children worked at the looms, too, and still do. But the objects shown in this exhibit were made by women.

The exhibition centered on nomadic household furnishings, which were made for daily use. There is a clear note that this was indeed women’s work. The making of these “rugs that aren’t rugs” may be seen as part of nomadic women’s housework. There are other references within the exhibit which focus on weaving techniques, design and pattern variations among nomadic groups. However, the main point to stress here is the perception of textile production for daily use at home. As Allen notes (below), it is important to recognize that this work that women were responsible for, represented also their artistic and creative abilities and so, these two were inseparable:
The value of the objects to the people who made them cannot be underestimated. They are a source of income, they are furniture, they reflect cultural traditions and identity and are the main form of artistic expression (exhibit media release, Dec. 29/94).

The utilitarian objects in this exhibit were not made as “art”. Fine antique examples are not preserved in museums by the people who made them--because of course the nomads had no museums. When an old piece wore out, it was simply discarded or used for patching. No written history of these tribes’ people exists either, and so we are faced with a considerable problem in tracing the development of styles, or designs or even precise areas of origin.

The peoples of the Middle East and Central Asia have used a variety of storage bags from time immemorial, as we would use hard furniture in the West. It is, moreover, remarkable how frequently even the most utilitarian objects in the lives of the Asian tribal nomads and villages are painstakingly and lovingly decorated.

It is important to remember that such decorations played an important aesthetic role in societies which never adopted easel painting and the framed picture.

Allen comments on the conception of “art” and even the “museum” in his writings. He talks about the differences in thinking about art in the West/as opposed to traditional cultures where art is an integral part of other daily activities like cloth and textile making.

It is also popular and common among all women and not reserved to the few.

Five sleeping rugs: No, the rugs aren’t sleeping. They’re made to be slept on. There is no first-hand writing about rugs like this, and no photos of them being woven or in use...They appeared all at once around 1978 in several markets in northern Afghanistan and were referred to as dschulchir, long piled sleeping rugs...they are not ‘new’ but just how many decades ago they were made is an open question.

Here, Allen points to the lack of written information about these textiles. Yet, he openly raises questions and in a way writes the unwritten stories. This style of text writing is not authoritative but rather very accessible to visitors who feel they are part of the dialogue. Allen refers to the ways in which collectors and dealers valued these textiles. They were collecting these “rugs” for their aesthetic and artistic value, disregarding the use value for
the nomads themselves. Since all these items were produced by hand, often only those parts, which were visible in use, were decorated. Consequently,

Western collectors, who generally did not use these objects as they had been originally intended, dismantled and retained only the decorative face, and discarded the plain-woven backs.

In another label, for bath mats, Allen talks about the lack of research that limits interpretation of the objects:

The two small rectangular ‘rugs’ on the platforms just behind you are a mystery...they are said to have been made to be taken by women to the public baths to stand on after bathing. The literature on household weavings made in this part of the world is still skimpy. Ethnographic research may someday reveal that these aren’t bath mats at all, and that this was just an exotic story made up by rug sellers...

In most of the display cases in this exhibit, we have grouped together several pieces from- so far as we can tell- a single tribe or geographic area. In many instances, classifications are difficult. The nomadic tribe’s people move around a great deal and there is a certain amount of cross-trading of patterns and techniques... And the Kurds are right now the victims of a little-publicized war that resembles a genocide campaign. It’s no wonder they tend to view with an aggressive suspicion any curiosity about the ordinary work of women—even though that work was once, and may still occasionally be, the creation of spectacular beauty.

Allen alludes to the close linkage between rug sellers, dealers and the museum in attempting to interpret these textiles. He makes the connection between rug dealers and the objects that end up at the museum. He talks openly about the difficulties in interpreting and does not refrain from raising questions, discussing political issues or leaving the interpretation open to speculation. In other words, he avoids an authoritative text that usually provides a complete version of “this is how it was”. A practice that can be perceived hegemonic as it encompasses a general view of how to look at the object.

Allen toured the exhibit for docents before the show opened. In his tour he talked about his concept of “rugs that aren’t rugs” which meant that these objects were made
using rug techniques but they had a purpose and it wasn’t only to be walked on. He mentioned the utilitarian aspects of the various bags, made the analogy with household furnishings that nomads did not have and talked about these objects as the artistic expressions of women. He joked that in nomad cultures you don’t take art lessons, your mother teaches you…and men are not artists. Most importantly, he stressed the work in producing these “rugs” as women’s work. He also referred to the “working conditions” which women endured: “imagine a tent, one big tent and everybody is around you, kids, goats and you don’t have a table to work on, or another room to go to.” However, docents in the two tours (April 12/95) that I observed pointed to weaving techniques, the uses of the bags as furniture and other artistic elements like design and color. One docent did not mention even once that women were responsible for the entire process of production and that these were made for family use. The other docent mentioned the bags as part of girls’ dowry but did not go beyond that. In preparing for the exhibit, the docents studied the tribes’ names, geographical areas and rug techniques “just in case somebody asks”. Docents did not follow the curator’s (founder) vision for the show but rather chose to highlight other components.

**A Visual Feast (June-December 1995):** This is an exhibition of cloth from 42 countries and cultures assembled from the museum’s collection by Max Allen as part of the museum’s twentieth anniversary. Allen was invited by the TMC to curate this anniversary exhibition. “The textiles tell stories about the people who made them; what they believed, how they lived, and what they hoped for”. The text that accompanied the textiles highlighted the techniques used to craft the cloth, its origin and various uses as well as stories that tell viewers how the object came to be part of the collection. However,
the main point to stress here is the curator’s underlying argument that textile production was historically part of women’s popular knowledge:

All around the world and throughout history, cloth has been woven and patterned mostly by women. Men do occasionally weave and embroider, but generally textile production is in women’s hands...As a rule, cloth in traditional societies was made by women who were not professional weavers. Cloth-making was a skill like cooking or child care that everybody possessed to a greater or lesser extent. And so, there are no “artists” as we understand that word, represented in this exhibition, nor (with two exceptions) do we know the name of anyone who made these objects. (Introductory panel)

Traditionally, a very wide range of cloth objects (clothing, bedcovers, carrying bags, carpets) were made for the personal use of the weavers and their families. Women invested enormous amounts of time making and decorating textiles. As a result, the cloth was loaded with thoughts, feelings, dreams, loves, time, and needs - life itself. This is why traditional textiles never look stale or “old fashioned”. They continue to touch us deeply.

Allen provides an analysis of the dichotomy between Art/craft; West/rest; which is based on class and gender:

The Southeast Asian artistic tradition challenges the way art history is thought about in the West. Western connoisseurs consider sculpture and painting to be “fine arts”, while other media such as textiles and ceramics are generally classified as “crafts”. This hierarchy is based on both class and gender: art is made mostly by men, and mostly to be owned by the well to do. But, in Southeast Asia, textiles are almost always the work of women artists and are made to be used by the maker or her family, not to be sold to strangers. Thus they reflect a different kind of cultural history than the “official” one represented by the great cultural icons we honor in art museums.

This could be seen as an attempt to offer a counter-hegemonic view of textile production and of art in general. He raises and discusses issues that are seldom (if at all) discussed in art museums. Furthermore, this tension between Western and Third World conceptualization of art is best exemplified in textiles from Bhutan, “The Land of the Thunder Dragon”:

Textiles are considered by the Bhutanese to be their highest form of artistic expression and their most important art. Nearly every home has a loom. They regard the visualization and contemplation of color as a spiritual exercise, and
they incorporate virtually every color in the rainbow harmoniously into their textiles.

Art in Bhutan is not reserved to the few who define themselves as artists, but instead, it is a popular endeavor among women, which is commonly practiced, has a use value, and is widely appreciated. Another example focuses on class differences influence the significance of textile production and comes from India:

In Indian households, rich and poor, embroidery is done on garments and home furnishings. For example, TORAN are hung over interior doorways...These embroidered textiles...developed as a substitute for the bas-reliefs carved around the doorframes in wealthy homes. After all, every woman, rich or poor, knew how to embroider, so even if the family couldn’t afford expensive wood carvings, at least they could have beautiful embroidered ‘paintings’ over their doorways.

This text focuses on textile production as part of women’s responsibilities to care for the appearance of the home, as housework. The working process of making cloth is detailed in another label:

It takes lots of time and effort to produce a beautiful and durable textile essentially from scratch. Most of the objects in this show were produced by one person, sometimes with the help of her friends and relatives. Wool sheared from the family flock or locally grown was cleaned, spun and dyed with plant and mineral materials found locally, and then woven on a handmade loom. It is not only the amount of work involved that makes handmade cloth rare in the modern world, but also the fact that the “social fabric” that supports its production is changing...But the stories told by textiles remind us of the skills of people worldwide that are disappearing now.

Another section of the exhibition was devoted to hooked rugs from Ontario, Quebec and Newfoundland. The latter are some rugs from the Grenfell Mission. Women were organized to produce hooked rugs, which were then sold in the US to support the medical missions and their families. Here, Allen refers to economic conditions which forced women to re-use cloth in various ways:

Cloth was too valuable to early Canadians to be discarded when it was “worn out”. Tattered clothing could be cut into small patches and made into quilts. Or its last stop might be on the floor, as a hooked rug. Old shirts, suits and stockings
were cut into narrow strips. Then, using burlap sacking as a foundation, the cloth strips were looped through the burlap mesh in pictorial or abstract patterns, to make a tough and decorative floor covering. Recycling, 19th century style.

The Birth Symbol:

One day in the fall of 1979 while I was taking a bath I was struck by the pattern on a V-shaped embroidery (like the one here), which was one in many textiles I had hanging in the bathroom. I’d been looking at a Toraja funeral cloth at the museum the day before, and here was this Uzbek embroidery with the same pattern. This seemed odd since the two pieces had been made thousands of miles apart by people who had, as far as I knew, no connection with each other at all, and one was warp ikat while the other was cross stitch embroidery. I’d never read anything about the great Eurasian migrations before but soon I was reading everything I could get my hands on...Except for Schuster hardly anybody, as usual, mentioned cloth. But it seemed to me that anyone who looked at oriental rugs on the one hand and Indonesian textiles on the other would be as impressed as I was with the evidence of an ancient connection between the patterns.

Allen provided in this exhibit sixteen textile variations on the symbol from sixteen different geographical areas to show the cultural diversity within which the symbol was found. He noted that it is a unique ancient motif, which consists of a diamond with pair of hooks extending from the top and bottom corners, and in the diamond a small shape that signifies a fetus. As he stated in a catalogue for an exhibition he curated on the subject (Allen, 1981), this is an ancient representation of the Great Goddess whose religion predated the three monotheistic religions and Buddhism. Allen found this symbol on a variety of textiles such as carpets, embroideries, ikats and kilims. He assumed that the symbol survived because women traditionally produced textiles⁸ and the motif is an emblem of female power.

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⁸ It is important to point out that when the museum decided to change its name from ‘The Museum for Textiles’ to ‘The Textile Museum of Canada’ it also changed its logo: the old logo which was based on the Birth Symbol design ceded to a new logo which shows a common warp and weft pattern.
In their studies prior to the opening of the exhibit, docents focused on learning the geographical areas and their textiles techniques. They were occupied with the ethnic groups, the people, rather than the women who produced these textiles:

The people who make Suzzannie are not Persian even though it means “a needle” in Persian. They are Tajik, Uzbeks and I see a reflection in the art of Mongolian Chinese nomads who settled there.
Tashkent was a center of production of Suzzannie, I think (Docent study group, April 24/95).

Docents’ tours of this exhibit also did not generally utilize the information that the curator provides with the textiles. None of them talked about the section on the Birth Symbol. Instead, they talked about weaving techniques, patterns, and geometric designs, colors/natural dyes. I asked why this topic is not included in tours and the response was:

It’s his theory and it is not proven, it’s on the wall (labels) and whoever wants to read can do so.

This pattern of avoiding debatable information is in line with the general “instruction” docents received (by docent coordinator who is a volunteer too) during a docent meeting (March, 29/95):

If it is controversial, eliminate it. We have a time limit (for the tour) and if there’s someone in the group who knows about it (the topic), you’re in trouble.

Other areas of the exhibit were dealt with in the same manner: the curator’s discussion of art/craft and west/rest was not mentioned in tours at all. Similarly, his focus on women’s production was overlooked.

**Eleven Simple Quilts:** An exhibit of eleven traditional Ontario quilts from the museum’s collection that accompanied the Spin Cycle show in the contemporary gallery. Spin Cycle was all about contemporary recycling methods in the textile industry and *Eleven Simple*
Quilts was to show that quilt making was a historical method of recycling. The show, curated by Max Allen, was presented between September 9, 1997, and January 18, 1998.

There was a time, not so long ago in Canada, when many women spun and wove and sewed much of what their families wore. All this effort made cloth much too valuable to waste... in 19th century Canada, old clothes stayed home... Unlike distressed furniture, which can be refinished and reused in its original form, old clothing is often finally “revised” into another object altogether. Thus a suit or dress becomes...a quilt.
The sober winter quilts in this exhibition had a job and a hobby. Their job was to keep people warm. Their hobby was to look nice. Unlike the elaborate, fancy quilts usually shown in books and museums, these quilts put business before pleasure. Some are so substantial that it must have been like sleeping under a sheet of plywood.
These quilts share four characteristics. They are heavy, much used, pedestrian, and anonymous (we only know the maker of one of them). They are also red and black, which is a traditional two-color combination in old Ontario quilts, though infrequently used elsewhere... It takes ingenuity to make a satisfying pattern from scraps. (Exhibit panel, my emphasis).

In this text, Allen refers to quilt production as both women’s “job and a hobby”. While explaining how quilting was integral to the household economy in nineteenth century Canada, Allen points not only to the functions of quilt production but also the cultural aspects of quilts in women’s lives. There is no separation between work and leisure when it comes to textile production. The concepts of “work” and “culture” are not set in dichotomy but are rather inseparable. Here, Allen maintains a similar view to the one argued by Dorothy Smith when she looked at housework in general (see chapter 2) and claimed that the concepts of “work” and “leisure” would not appear had we started with women and their experiences first. Certainly, from the perspective of women’s everyday life, the production of textiles was both part of work and a cultural expression.

Another important aspect to stress in this text is related to the comparison that Allen makes between quilts that are often shown in museums (i.e. “the elaborate, fancy”) as opposed to the ones shown in this exhibit (that represent the quilts in the collection as
well) which “put business before pleasure”. The latter were so substantial, much used, pedestrian and anonymous. Here, he alludes to the different approach taken by the museum, which highlights the ordinary over the extraordinary, by collecting and exhibiting simple quilts, not necessary the fancy or elaborate ones. Again, this could be seen as an oppositional attempt set against the practice of museums in general. As discussed in chapter three, most museum collections consist of the best and fine examples, avoiding material that is not in good condition. Collecting and exhibiting utilitarian textiles stress the social relations of textile production. The value of the quilts that “worked” hard in their previous life, before becoming part of the TMC’s collection, is not diminished, but rather appreciated.

**Summary**

These three exhibits, curated by Allen, explore textile and cloth production from the perspective of women’s work. The curator shows that, traditionally, textile production was an integral part of domestic labor and expressed women’s creativity. Hence, work and culture were inseparable in women’s lives. In the founders’ writings and also through exhibit texts, the notion of textiles as part of women’s work is stressed. Gender and class differences in the production of textiles are discussed. The shows present textiles within a discourse that is in sharp contrast to general museum practice in terms of accepted notions of art, culture and work, where these were usually separated. Allen communicates a clear message about textiles as women’s popular production and knowledge. He refers to stories about the journey of textiles to the museum, stories of acquisition. He raises open questions in his discussion of textiles, which make his text informal and accessible, not authoritative. Therefore, I suggest seeing in these shows some oppositional elements
since these exhibitions convey a specific vantage point that has not been manifested generally by other museums. However, these could not be perceived as counter-hegemonic since women’s groups are not actively involved in the production process of exhibitions, in the manner that Gramsci referred to organic intellectuals who articulate an organic set of cultural values to replace dominant ones.

The following section reviews various other exhibits presented at the museum, during the time of my study, to locate women and the ways in which their textile production was presented.

**Home Is Where The Mat Is** (April, 1993- February, 1994): This is an exhibit of hooked rugs from the museum’s collection that was organized by the museum’s conservator. The introductory text describes the function and process of producing a hooked rug:

> When hooked rugs were first created, floor covering was a scarce luxury in Canada. Wealthy families might have an imported Oriental rug...more often early Canadian floors were bare and cold. The hooked rug solved this problem inexpensively, as the final step in the recycling of hand-me-down clothing. Cloth was too precious to waste, and lots of it ended up either in quilts or on the floor.

A close reading would reveal the impersonal and passive use of language: “Hooked rugs were created”... by whom? “Early Canadian floors were bare and cold. The hooked rug solved this problem”. The passive language used here conceals the work that is involved in producing these rugs. Women, as those who created hooked rugs, and thus, solved “the problem”, are not even mentioned.

Most rug hookers continued to use their own designs... These have been produced since 1909 when Sir Wilfred Grenfell provided local mat makers with burlap depicting northern scenes... The craftsmen have combined materials, techniques and colors.

The discussion indeed revolves around issues of materials and techniques:
To make a hooked rug, a loosely woven foundation cloth is stretched over a frame. A narrow strip of woven fabric...is held in one hand underneath the frame. The rug hook... is inserted down through the foundation cloth... They were finely hooked with unraveled burlap, underwear and silk stockings cut into very narrow strips...
This rug is very typical of Mennonite designs created in southwestern Ontario. These designs often included stars, hearts and tulips as well as other stylized flowers...

A different picture is portrayed in a label text where the words of Sir Wilfred Grenfell are used to describe his mission in Newfoundland and Labrador. Dr. Grenfell wrote an article for the magazine that his missions published about the beginning of the “mat industry” in Newfoundland:

From time immemorial on this coast the women have used all their rags to weave rag mats, and many of the beautiful, clean little homes look delightfully bright with the rugs they have hooked. Long practice has made the women very deft at this work, and I have often noticed they do it so skillfully that the wrong side is almost as good as the right.”...
The idea of earning as compared with begging appeals to our women and a thousand fold to us, who believe above all things in teaching people to help themselves. Hence the mat industry is a bonanza to our consciences, and a solution of the difficult problem, and yet absolute necessity, of putting clothing and a little cash within the reach of many needy women and children.

Historical studies that explored the roles of men and women in pre-confederation rural Newfoundland and Labrador indicate that the home served as a work place and was predominantly the woman’s responsibility. Crafts, in most cases, were made out of necessity and have always been an integral part of the economic base. The Kitchen was the center of the house and women did all the (textile) work there: sewing, clothes washing, spinning, and knitting, quilting and mat-hooking. “The most attention therefore was lavished on the decoration of the kitchen. Of all the decorations, the most important were the mats... everyone made a couple of mats each winter to put on their floor...Sure you’d have to make new mats every year for the kitchen, you’d never use anything good for that. (Dale, 1982: 21; Ford and McDonald, 1979: 96). This research illuminates textile
production as part of housework. Women reserved time in the evening for this work or got together in someone’s kitchen during the afternoons in winter (ibid).

Nevertheless, the show does not provide visitors with this view on hooked rugs as part of the work done by women for the family. Each hooked rug is discussed in isolation from the others, as pieces of art appreciated for their color composition and design:

This geometric design is often referred to as Flame Stitch or Boston Lightning and its shape indicates that it was probably used as a hallway runner. (this is) Geometric Art Deco style design.
A beautiful blend of colors in a design called Northern Lights.

The Grenfell rugs are also discussed within this artistic or aesthetic framework to show the distinct patterns of these rugs:

On this wall are some of the Grenfell rugs made between about 1910 and 1940. Newfoundland rugs were traditionally coarse, with bold colors and unsophisticated designs. The Grenfell rugs, by contrast, are carefully designed by professional artists and look more like pictures for the wall than rugs for the floor. In other words, the local tradition was altered to conform to the ‘New England aesthetic’, because that’s where most of the rugs would be sold”. Local women were given burlap with the professional designs stenciled on, together with old silk and rayon stockings (that) were dyed in appropriate colors and cut into narrow strips for hooking. When the rugs were complete they were collected at the missions and sent to churches and stores for sale.

The Grenfell rugs offered women a venue to earn their living using their creative abilities. However, the women were used as pair of hands to execute the rug. Whereas traditionally, they produced hooked rugs for their homes, controlling the entire process of production, using their materials and creatively designing the rug, the Grenfell rugs were designed by professional artists to appeal to the “market taste”. Thus, this process “robbed” the women from their ownership over the production process and from their cultural/artistic creativity. The notion of “home” is different here: it is used as a work place as well.
Black Story Quilts: “This is not a poem. This is a summer quilt” (January 20 - June 9, 1996). The exhibit included African-Canadian and African-American historical and contemporary quilts. Whereas in the planning stage (chapter 6), the idea was to develop a show on quilts from Nova Scotia’s Black community accompanied by a few contemporary quilts, the exhibit now changed focus and most quilts were contemporary story quilts made by artists, while only three utility quilts represented “the community” from Nova Scotia. In describing the show (which earlier was titled: Quilts and Stories) for the newsletter TEXT the curator says:

Throughout history, African people have told their stories in a number of different ways. Oral traditions have been dominant, sharing history through rituals, stories, song and dance, while material objects such as quilts and other textiles also carry important traditional symbols and images. Quilts and Stories will be made up of approximately 25 textiles: a selection of historical quilts from African Canadian families from Ontario and Nova Scotia and contemporary story quilts... A key piece-Tar Beach 2- by artist and quilter Faith Ringgold, author of Tar Beach and Aunt Harriet and the Underground Railroad, will be featured. Ringgold has used her artistry to bring Black history to children and make Black culture a vibrant part of the contemporary art world. The exhibition will also include Barbara Brown’s quilt, which was featured in the movie How to Make an American Quilt? Starring Maya Angelou, Anne Bancroft and Winona Ryder. The quilts will be accompanied by traditional African textiles, literary quotes, folk dancing, folk singing, drumming, workshops, lectures and storytelling. A greater understanding of traditions, beliefs, values and aesthetics can be achieved when viewed as part of the wider culture of the people who created them (TEXT, Nov 1995 to Jan 1996).

Here, quilts are linked to African culture “of the people” as a means to maintain and also reproduce traditions. This is the material culture that carries important traditional symbols and images of the group. The focus is on the famous artists participating in the exhibition, the extra-ordinary of quilt-making rather than the ordinary production of quilts that were made for use by ordinary women. There is no discussion of the utilitarian aspect of quilt making. Quilting as women’s production is not even mentioned. It is not clear why the
traditional/historical quilts are added to the display, as there is no discussion of their significance.

We are told that the show will feature also folk dancing, singing, drumming, storytelling and literary quotes to enhance the understanding of culture. It is important to note that the literary quotes about quilting do focus on quilt-making as women’s production (see discussion below). The introductory text in the show also focuses on African heritage and the importance of recording of events in story quilts:

Quilts have seen a major revival in the last two decades. An astounding number of books, exhibitions, and products have been created because of the appeal and popularity of quilts. In the rush to clarify, classify and commodity these handmade products, African American quilts have been very narrowly defined within this lore. The quilts in this exhibition are diverse in their forms, designs and places of origin. All were made in North America by Black women between 1884 and 1996. As a whole they express the diversity of peoples of African descent and deny the concept of a monolithic, narrow and easily defined genre. The quilters in this exhibition are all eager to be self-defining. Among the contemporary quilt makers there is a common interest in African heritage throughout the Diaspora. The awareness of an African tradition of recording events in cloth, and the African American tradition of recording and passing on information in quilts, has led to the popularity of the story quilt genre with African American quilters.

It is not clear in what ways African quilt-making was narrowly defined. The emphasis here is on contemporary quilt making among North American women from African descent. The attempt is to show that quilt making among Black women was widely spread and diverse forms were used in the production. Yet, there is no mention of the history of quilting as part of domestic work for family use. Again, the cultural aspect “of the people” is emphasized over the utilitarian aspect of quilts that were made by women and used in the family. Women’s economic contribution to domestic life is not discussed despite the recognition it received from the curator in the planning stage (Program committee Aug 24/95). This approach presents a clear separation between cultural aspects and the mundane work involved in the production of the quilts.
The exhibition consists of eleven contemporary quilts made by women artists of African-American and Canadian descent. In addition, there are three traditional “utility” quilts from Black families in Nova Scotia. The contemporary quilts are made by famous artists and accompanied by literary quotes from books by Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker and Toni Morison who referred to quilts and quilt-making in their stories. All the artists recognize that quilt making serves them as means to reclaim their identity and incorporate their African heritage in a specific medium, which their ancestors used. However, these quilts were not intended for use. Rather, they were made as art pieces to be mounted on the wall. During the opening night, the curator and museum director, both introduced the artists and discussed quilt making as an art form. Quilt making in its traditional, utilitarian form, was completely ignored even though during preparations for the show, (encoding stage) the curator went to Nova Scotia’s Black communities to meet with elderly women in order to choose quilts for the show. These women talked about quilting in the old days, out of necessity for family use. They told her that it is “dying” today; young Black women don’t quilt (curator’s report to EC, Aug, 24/95). The curator felt that this was an “untouched ground” and her attempt was to use the exhibit to document and discuss the history of the women and their quilts.

Yet this information was not included in the exhibit’s text nor was it mentioned in the curator’s tour for the docent group (Jan 17/96). The curator focused on the artistic quilts and the accompanied stories of slavery, the Underground Railroad, along artists’ personal stories. As for the utilitarian quilts, her comments referred to the design and colors which were according to her “dull and plain...they really used handy materials and you don’t see a detailed planning” (of the quilt). She also regretted their bad condition. In
other words, the very fact that these were made of scraps, heavily used, and therefore in bad shape, was not appreciated (which is in sharp contrast to the Allen’s approach in Eleven Simple Quilts). On the contrary, the curator felt she could find “better” quilts... It is not clear why these utility quilts are included since the show highlights contemporary quilt making and the ways in which African traditions and heritage are incorporated within the process:

Europeans brought with them to North America a tradition of quilted bed coverings... Africans brought with them a tradition of geometric piecing and pictorial and abstract appliqué. Slaves within the colonial households and free Blacks participated in all areas of textile production including quilt making. During the nineteenth century, in order to help escaping slaves, quilts were used as coded messages that hung outside of houses along the route to freedom. Sometimes a quilt even incorporated a map. At a time when literacy was forbidden to slaves and many blacks could not read, biblical lessons were made in pictorial appliqué quilts (exhibit wall panel).

In this text, the emphasis is on the aesthetic and artistic design and elements of quilting. As mentioned earlier, the curator wished to point out this aspect of the production as it was overlooked historically. The other aspect that is mentioned here is the cultural aspect of African/ Black/slave quilts. Quilts were used to record stories, memories, and assist escaping slaves from the plantations. The focus seems to be on the cultural aspects, the ethnographic takes over the gender-related aspects of work:

The literary extracts on the walls include the widely read works of Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison’s novel “Beloved” is the narrative equivalent of a quilt. It is structured like a pieced quilt...All quilts tell a story. By viewing them as a historical continuum, we can gain a greater understanding of the traditions, beliefs, values and aesthetics of the African-Canadian and African-American communities and how African culture became incorporated into the history and culture of all North Americans.

The curator prefers to stress the traditions and beliefs of African people and “how African culture became incorporated into the history and culture of all North Americans”.

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It is this sense of belonging to the greater American culture that seems to be the “narrative” of the show. However, the curator’s use of literary quotes from Canadian and American authors sheds light on women’s contributions to their families’ economy through the making of textiles: the writers, in their stories, tell us about the work involved in making these quilts and about the women who made them.

For example: in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt making and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by “an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago”. If we could locate this “anonymous” black woman from Alabama, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers – an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use (wall text from Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens, Womanist Press).

This excerpt directly discusses women’s quilt production, the work involved in the process and the status of women who produced it. The writer refers to the question of quilt production as work and art at the same time. The fact that quilt making was a popular activity among women therefore “she would turn to be one of our grandmothers”. The excerpt also highlights the marginal position of Black women in the society, which relegated them to using affordable materials, the only medium that society allowed. It is significant, as the curator does not refer to these issues herself. Rather, she chooses to focus on contemporary quilt production made as a form of art, which celebrates and reclaims African history, tradition and culture.

Other examples from the literary excerpts that accompanied the show talk about the changing status of quilts from utilitarian to artistic forms, which deserve to be mounted on walls:
After I unfolded the quilt, all seven square feet of it, we stood there in awe for a moment. You wanted to clear a wall in the living room and hang it up. But it had been made to be used… (Wall text, Gloria Naylor, Mama Day)

Here, the authors recognize the dual significance of quilts for women: the utility and artistic aspects, which are inseparable in textile production. Yet the curator did not emphasize this in her tours.

**Docent tours of the exhibit:**

As with other exhibitions, docents received a booklet from the curator that contained background information about the Black community in Nova Scotia, the Underground Railroad to freedom in Canada, slave quilts, and story quilts. They read and discussed this material in their meetings (Jan 17/96; Feb 7/96) and even supplemented with readings on slave quilts from the Antebellum South. However, this information was rarely offered during tours. The utilitarian quilts received very little attention: some docents ignored them completely; others just mentioned in passing through the gallery that these were quilts made by women in Nova Scotia. There was no discussion of quilting as part of home economy or as a venue for women’s artistic expression.

Docent tours of the exhibit focused mainly on the contemporary quilts. They described the artistic elements, symbolism and images used by the artists and referred to them as “works of Art”. They talked about the story quilts as a means to record their ancestor’s history; they mentioned images like ships and boats as symbols of the horrific experiences slaves went through on their voyage to America; the large cross as a symbol of the religion that was imposed on them. Generally, they talked about quilting elements, color composition and aesthetics of the quilts: the use of beads as paying homage to African traditions (Jan 31/96).
In Hall’s terms, we can see a discrepancy between the process of encoding, where the production of meaning for the exhibition took place, and the programme of meaningful discourse, which is the circulation of the exhibition. There is a change in the focus of this show from the planning stage in discussions within the exhibition committee to the presentation stage. Initially, the goal was to highlight women’s experiences in Black communities of Nova Scotia, their contribution to the household in terms of textile production. There were supposed to be about 10-15 traditional quilts from Nova Scotia and a few contemporary artistic quilts. However, the shift occurs when the artistic component of the show is expanded as more quilt artists agree to participate in the show. More quilts made by artists as an art form (story quilts) transform this exhibit into an art exhibit, which celebrates Black cultural traditions but overlooks the context of original quilt production. This presentation favors culture as the traditions and history of “the people” and highlights the aesthetics and symbolism in the quilts. Hence, the idea of textile production that incorporates both women’s work and artistic creativity is marginalized. This shift has to do with the legitimation process of the exhibit. Contemporary artistic quilts made by contemporary artists provide a certain aura for the Black community that cannot be gained through an exhibition of traditional utilitarian quilts.

Art and Utility: Acquisitions 94

This annual show of recent acquisitions had a theme: household linens. My attempt here was to explore what meanings were constructed through the presentation, beyond the curators’ explicit goal. I discussed the ways in which textiles are presented in the show and the intended/unintended meanings that were generated: how the exhibiting
process may have produced multiple as well as conflicting images and meanings that were not necessarily intended by the curators but were, nevertheless, important to emphasize since they have emerged through the exhibition.

The curators highlight in their introductory panel for the show key aspects of acquisitions to the museum, such as culture, technique and provenance:

This exhibition presents a sampling of the textiles donated to the museum in 1994. There are many criteria used when deciding to add a textile to the collection; this exhibition focuses on considerations of culture, technique and provenance. A number of pieces have been selected from the permanent collection to show how a new acquisition can supplement the museum’s collection (Introductory panel for the show).

This is a unique approach in the TMC since selection processes for curators rarely make both collections and display explicit or shared with the public (see chapter three). In the past, the new textiles accessioned to the museum were presented in a show, which stressed the qualities of the objects. However, Allen suggested highlighting selection principles and including textiles from the collection to show how a new acquisition supplements the collection. This approach provides some insight as to how the museum collects objects and insight into processes that take place within museums.

In some of the show’s labels there are references to selection processes: For example, the text for a bed’s coverlet reads: “Boutonne is an ancient weaving technique unique in Canada to Charlevoix County. This coverlet was repatriated from the United States and is a significant addition to the several Boutonne coverlets in the museum’s collection” Yet, we do not know in what ways it is a “significant addition”. Another example is made through the juxtaposition of a new gift with one that the museum already has: “This is an excellent example of 19th century mezzaro. It has a profusely decorated central field with a Tree of Life on a stylized mountain peak. The animals
include monkeys, ducks, zebras…the colors are bright and lively. Pictured to the left is a mezzaro from the museum’s permanent collection. This example of a mezzaro was printed with few colors and is far more subdued”. The suggestion is that the new acquisition is more colorful and vibrant, therefore adds to the collection of mezzaros. Another aspect is the personal stories that donors tell about the textiles: how they got, made or used the pieces. This makes the utilitarian aspect of the textile as well as its relation to “ordinary” people more visible:

This finely stitched flower basket quilt was discovered in Lillian Deurine Bruner Wigle’s cedar chest that had been left to the donor in her aunt’s will in 1981. The quilt is thought to have been made for her aunt’s hope chest by the donor’s grandmother, Beatrice Justina Bruner and was displayed at the Ruthven Fall Fair in 1937.

**Beyond Acquisitions: Constructing the Domestic Sphere**

I suggest seeing in this show another layer, beyond the goal of showing recent acquisitions and that is the construction of a domestic sphere within the gallery. This was not intentional on the part of the curators but it is possible due to the focus of the show on household linens and through the specific display that is chosen for these textiles. The curators’ choice of a display that “uses textiles as they would function in the real world” is central to the creation of the private home in the gallery. The display reflects a domestic setting which shows the very private, intimate part of the home.

However, this home setting and the daily work that is involved in keeping the house “in order”, are overlooked. These housework practices are not taken as an integral part of a
show, which is focused on household goods. The overall context of their use in everyday life, and those who work them, namely women, is absent. The emergent domestic setting is not included in the text that accompanies the show, despite the intention to create a context for the linens that would “show their function in the real world”:

Textiles, created for decorative or utilitarian purpose, most naturally express the culture of a people. Clothing and household furnishings, for peasant or nobleman, shed light on traditions passed down through generations...Textiles are a record and an interpretation of peoples’ superstitions, aspirations, dreams and domestic realities (Introductory text panel, emphasis in text).

The focus is on “culture” and “people” rather than women and their work. Women’s “domestic realities” are not discussed in interpretive labels despite the creation of a private sphere in the museum through the use of a bed, towel racks, curtains etc. The only reference to washing and laundry tasks appears in a sampler’s label: “Laundry was often a communal activity, so trousseau linens were marked and numbered in red...” Here, laundry is mentioned with regard to the girl’s initials only, not as part of housework, but as it refers to the object itself. There is no discussion of the historic gender nature of communal work involved in washing, doing laundry. The laundry basket is displayed with clean linens, neatly folded and ironed, as artifacts without any usable aspect.

This approach is typical of most museums. Research has shown that museums’ representation of women is generally within an exhibition context, which removes and excludes the work involved in the home (see detailed discussion in chapter three). The

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Figure 6. A bed with quilts in Art and Utility

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9 See discussion on language use in Docent section.
usual display would focus on cleanliness, passivity, so that femininity is constructed in opposition to work, productive labor, activity and dynamism (Porter, 1991a). Leaving the ironing board or other domestic tools as part of the exhibit could shed light on working processes related to domestic life. However, none were used in the exhibit.

Language is also a mechanism that is used to ignore the work involved and avoid implicating the person doing the work by using impersonal, passive verbs (see discussion in chapter three). In the show, labels which describe weaving techniques, or in other words, working processes, are indicative: “motifs are formed by a secondary weft that is inserted and pulled up in loops”... “For each stitch the needle was inserted, a bead was pushed”... “Knitted, crocheted or fashioned from fabric they were frequently beaded”. The use of a passive voice masks the active, working process of making these textiles.

Another example which could reflect the work that is involved in making these textiles, or the general work at home, refers to the wall hanging towels which are embroidered in traditional peasant, Ukrainian colors with proverbial inscriptions: “When inclination strikes, the work is not difficult”. It is clear that the woman considers embroidering towels as part of her work at home, not as a recreational activity. In the text we learn that “decorative towels, part of every trousseau, would hang on the backs of doors or add colors to the plain walls of rooms”. It was expected that women would devote time and effort to this kind of work, which constituted both work and creativity. However, the language used in the labels is passive making the work involved, invisible: “decorative towels would hang on the back of doors to add color to the plain rooms”. The use of language is significant in another text where we learn that women used to carry pocketbooks “smaller than man’s, it was also known as “huswif” and was used to carry
needles, pins, threads‖. The linguistic name reflects the social meaning that is attached to these pocketbooks, and yet the linkage is not made clear. These household goods are not viewed as part of the productive labor for the home. A very specific notion of “the home” is considered in another label when discussing the origins of quilts:

In Victorian times, it was considered a woman’s solemn duty to provide a home that was a refuge for her family. It was to be decorated in a manner that created an atmosphere of substance and well-being. Instructions for “fancy work” to decorate a home filled women’s magazines. The challenge for rich and poor was to make something from nothing and to keep idle hands busy. Nothing was to be thrown away. Fabric scraps, collected from family members and imbued with memory, became crazy quilts. If you didn’t have scraps, they could be ordered by mail. Boston’s Jordan, Marsh and Co. department store offered packages of fabric squares by mail for one dollar...Competition between firms fueled the development of books, then kits.

The message that is being conveyed is one which generalizes “Victorian times” to include the society at large while only a very specific segment lived the “Victorian” culture. Upper middle class women were completely outside production processes in the public sphere (see Rowbotham, 1973:108). The general reference to “women in Victorian Times” stresses the category “woman” as a unified one, as if all women shared the same experiences. This approach fails to show the unique position of upper class ladies on the one hand, and that of working women, on the other. A more critical approach could highlight the ideology behind the “Victorian times” and the separation of spheres, in which women were relegated to the private sphere. As part of this ideology, middle class women had to busy themselves at home with lady-like pursuits so as to “keep idle hands busy”. These included all sorts of needlework, and in another text we learn that “Berlin work, introduced in 1804, became the needlework craze of the Victorian era...by 1840 some 14,000 different patterns were available, printed and then hand colored by unskilled, poorly paid women”.

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These unskilled poorly paid women, did not take part in the dominant culture of the time, their hands were busy. Middle class culture in nineteenth century was shaped by cultural institutions, which operated to maintain women’s domestic roles as responsible for making a “home that was a refuge”. Women’s magazines and other consumer media served a major role in reproducing this ideology by presenting specific images of women as mothers, housewives, carers for the comfort of home. Another aspect related to women’s magazines, how-to books and kits, is their standardizing effect on women’s crafts and creativity, since women looked for ideas in these sources. By presenting specific instructions as to how the home should be decorated, these media sources set standards for women to follow (Dalton, 1987).

Class differences and the way they influenced quilt-making, are also important. The interpretive label refers to “the challenge for rich and poor to make something from nothing and to keep idle hands busy”. However, as argued by Freeman (1987:58) economic conditions did matter in making quilts: “well-to-do women had rich remnants, and could also afford to buy additional material. By contrast, quilting among poor women was scrap art”. Recycling indeed was an important part of domestic labor, especially in working class families. Reusing clothes and reproducing old clothes into new ones, or into quilts, hooked rugs etc., was common practice (Blount, 1987:19; Dale, 1982; Mainardi, 1982). These practices could be considered as part of the larger picture of domestic life and economy, as women’s “domestic skills” were needed to provide for their families, thus showing the full span and value of housework. Yet here it is not stressed, as can be seen in another label for a coverlet which points only to the crafting technique without stressing the significance of recycling for poor women:
Catalogne is an historical example of recycling. Salvaged cotton cloth is cut into thin strips and used as the weft with a cotton warp on a two-shaft loom. Few examples of catalogne woven prior to 1900 have survived.

Again, the passive language describes methods of crafting the textiles but masks the activity, the work involved in the process. Moreover, I would suggest that not only class differences, as they relate to specific objects are not addressed, but, class differences within the whole setting of this show, are not discussed either. The bed setting belongs no doubt to the middle-upper class home: lace curtains and the set of heavy curtains on both sides of the bed, illustrate a “Victorian” type home, which is described also in the label: “This Arts and Craft fabric pattern, Crown Imperial, was designed by William Morris...the curtains were made for bedrooms at Dalchosnie, a shooting and fishing lodge near Loch Rannoch, Scotland”. Yet during a tour for the docent group\(^{10}\), the curators said that the idea to have a bed was “to show how beds were dressed”. This is a general claim, which proposes that there was only one way for beds to be dressed, without questioning whose beds were dressed like this. Such an approach, which generalizes a very specific way of life, excludes other social groups and ignores their specific history. This is not to say that the whole show is focused on middle-upper class material culture. There are few examples of traditional, peasant hanging towels and also children’s dresses and baby bonnets from farming families. It is interesting to note that during the docent tour, the curators pointed out “the practical side” hidden in these bonnets: to ease washing and

\(^{10}\) Curators’ tour for docent group: November 8/95.
drying work, women inserted a draw string inside the bonnet which could be pulled out to flatten the bonnet. The point here was to stress the “tricks” women used, the practicalities but not necessary the fact that this was part of their work. Similarly, children’s dresses had tucks sewn to the dress and as the child grew, the tucks were taken away and the dress could be used longer. And again, the “trick” is highlighted, not the work. Labels in the show describe the objects themselves, avoiding these explanations and context, which shed light on the importance and necessity of recycling and working processes.

Generally, historical periods, gender and class differences are not discussed throughout the exhibit. The context of “home” and women’s work in the home, is also absent even though the display method, used by the curators, explicitly points out the attempt to present the textiles “as they would appear at home”. Thus, the private parts of the home are created through the specific display of a bed, curtains behind, towel rack, clothes line and laundry basket, but the work which is involved in caring for the textiles and the women who work them, are overlooked.

During their tour, the curators emphasized artistic qualities of the displayed pieces in an isolated manner, which blocked an integrated view of the exhibit at large. This is in line with the point critics make that curators usually focus on the object and rarely reverse the process to look at the culture or social processes (Grab, 1991; Porter, 1988). This “treatment” of women’s work by museums, which underestimates their productive contributions, can be seen as reflective of dominant views of housework in the society at large (see discussion in Ch.2). The particular case of this show, which ignores women’s domestic roles as they relate to the daily work of caring for the textiles, makes it even more significant, since the museum is devoted to textiles, the tradition of women
throughout history. After all, if the notion of “provenance”, as stated on the introductory wall text for the exhibit is: “the tale that would be told if a textile could speak”, these household goods would tell tales of their use and wear, toil in cleaning, washing and of warming beds, all in the context of their housework at “home”. If women’s work is not addressed in a show on household goods, it is unlikely to appear anywhere in museum exhibits.

Indeed, the curators’ tour for docents did not address household linens as part of a general picture of “home” or housework. Instead, the discussion evolved around each textile as an isolated object. Even though they insisted on using furniture and accessories for the display (such as a bed, towel rack, clothes line with bonnets hanging and a laundry basket) so that the household goods would be presented as “they would function in the real world”, these objects were actually presented as atomized functionless objects. The stories focused on acquisition and how the item added to the collection. Thus, they referred to children’s clothing, kitchen towels, quilts and coverlets, curtains and bed linens without integrating all these textiles into a coherent picture of home-related textiles, for example:

Boys’ and girls’ dresses from the first quarter of the century. Very ordinary, from farming families. The green utilitarian work is done by hand; The lace curtains, sort of glass layered curtains that you would find in a Victorian type house, they are hunting lodge, Arts and Crafts period; The crazy quilt came from the East coast, typical red velvet borders. Marriage quilt the 13th one, complements the two other crazy quilts that we have; the white work, linen that were commercially produced, the blanket is a summer type quilt (curators’ tour, Nov 8/95).

I offered the curators my “reading” of the show and they responded by saying: “Yes, I see your point but you have to understand that the topic here is recent acquisitions to the museum. We would have organized it differently in case it was a show on housework… I would take out the shawls”. Both agreed with me that the present method
of display that used a bed, curtains, towel racks, clothes line and laundry basket, did enable the emergence of “something beyond acquisitions” which was related to the way they functioned in everyday life. However, the curators said that it was certainly not the focus of the show: “the purpose of the exhibit is to show recent acquisitions, it happened that this year we got this large donation of household goods, so we had a topic, but we talk about the textiles.” The theme was secondary and so housework or women’s work, are not explicitly discussed (Dec 15/95).

This understanding is very significant since it assumes the focal point of exhibitions on the object itself, in an isolated manner, rather than looking at general connections and meanings that can be generated by a more integrative approach that considers also the people who produced and worked these textiles. Yet, it is a common approach of traditional museums to center on objects individually.

**Docents:** All docents were delighted with the show, especially because they could personally connect with these familiar household goods. It reminded them of their family members who used to sew, knit and embroider. As one docent said “this show will be fun touring”. When I asked why she thought so and what would the fun part be, she answered: “Well, we all seem to know it one way or another…and don’t forget I’m a weaver”. This perception of “knowing” on a very personal level is important since the docents work as a study group and they generally do research each exhibit extensively\(^\text{11}\).

Docents divide topics for readings and share their study notes in preparing their tours. Yet, no research was conducted for this show and docents relied mostly on labels provided with the pieces in addition to previous information that they gathered on specific textiles (such as quilts, Berlin work, and Arts and Crafts movement). By this,

\(^{11}\) See chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of docent work in the museum.
docents proposed a distinction between exhibits which deal with the most varied, rare and extraordinary, that obviously deemed more legitimate, objective and scholarly study as opposed to the more common, familiar and ordinary that is already known on a very personal level where further study is not needed.

In their tours of the exhibit, docents talked about recent acquisitions and then proceeded to talk about their chosen pieces. The most popular textiles that docents mentioned in their tours were the children’s bonnets, quilts, and William Morris’ curtains since there was something they could say about their history, origin or make. Most docents completely ignored the laundry basket, clothesline, towel rack and wall hanging towels. During a tour (Nov, 20/95) a docent was talking about the process of acquisitions that is mainly comprised of donations from private people and then mentioned the theme for this year’s show, which is “household goods”. She chose to talk about the children’s bonnets that “had a little string to pull flat, that made it easy to iron, as it was adjustable”. She then talked about the sampler, “which little girls had to work on when learning the skills”; the curtains, “from the Arts and Craft movement in the late 18th century Morris reaction to the industrial revolution, factories that produce furniture, rugs, fabrics that stretch the border between art and craft, and the crazy quilt, the 13th marriage quilt with incredible embroidery and a stitchery catalogue, just exquisite embroidery”. This docent as all others preferred to discuss in her tours textile production techniques in weaving (“supplementary weft raised weaving typical to Quebec’s Boutonne”) rather than making connections between the textiles and the display method that linked all of these textiles to the women’s domestic labor.
I presented my “reading” of the show to docents in a form of a tour in the gallery. In my tour I used the introduction to the exhibit to talk about the annual recent acquisition show, and pointed to selection processes for donations. But then I proceeded by saying that usually this kind of exhibit is an eclectic show of the various pieces that were donated while this year, because the museum received many gifts and donations of household goods, there’s actually a theme: Art and Utility. I then mentioned that the curators wished to display the pieces “as they would function in the real world” and indeed, I said, “if you look around the gallery you see that the bed linens are displayed on a bed and the curtains hanging behind the bed, the towels on a rack and there is a laundry basket full of linen neatly folded and a clothesline with children’s dresses and bonnets hanging. This method of display shows the textiles as they are used at home so we can talk about the work that is involved in caring for them”. Then, I continued with a discussion of a few of the pieces but related them to housework.

While my interpretation was accepted by two docents (“it’s a fresh look”), others felt uncomfortable with the tour and the assumptions I made about the textiles on display: “you had a long introduction which usually means that you don’t have much to say about the pieces”; “Why did you speak about women? You mentioned women in your introduction, and housework, instead of talking about what’s up there”. Another comment was: “but you know that women didn’t make most of these linens” to which my answer was that while some of these textiles were mass-produced (bed linens, etc.) all of them were “worked” by women. Other comments referred to “touring techniques” (such as where to stand, or how to move the group): “The real point of the tour is to get them (the visitors) to look at the patterns, texture, techniques, you can avoid technique if you see they are
not interested, and the people‖. The main point I need to stress is the docents’ focus on the object itself, rather than the general subject of the show. They could not understand why I mentioned the menial work involved in the care of these textiles. The context of home and work within the home, as it relates to textiles, were not of any interest, not only because the curators did not suggest it, but also more importantly, it seemed that for the docents there was nothing special or interesting in housework to be emphasized in a museum tour. The hegemonic position of ignoring women’s work and their contributions has been deeply embedded in daily perceptions. Language use is another element in communicating the exhibit’s message, as noted earlier: The use of passive, impersonal language during docent tours masks the real work which is involved in making and caring for the textiles as well as those who perform this work: (“this was done using supplementary weft”; “the tucks were taken as the child grew”, docent tour Nov, 20/95). In all these examples the person, woman, who did the work, is invisible. Docents would talk about the use of materials, the exquisite embroidery, artistic designs of quilts but the makers were often absent.

To summarize, the theme and method of display used in this show offered a possibility for a discussion not only of recent acquisitions but also the construction of a domestic setting: the private parts of the home that usually are not shown to guests (bedroom, laundry, clothesline, etc.) or in museum exhibits. Yet, the connections were not made and the context of home and housework was invisible. My interpretation that raised the work perspective involved in the making and caring for textiles at home was not accepted. The curators and the docents preferred to discuss individual objects, ignoring the context of their general use and those who use them. As discussed in chapter
3, most museums do not problematize housework. It has been argued that museums’ methods of display do not enable a context for showing “work” at home: most exhibits when dealing with the home use displays that are neutral, neat and clean so you cannot “see” the work that is performed in homes. Similarly, here the linens were neatly folded in the laundry basket, the bed was nicely dressed, and the towels clean on a rack, so there is no “work” to be seen. Sociologists who have studied housework argue that the work women do at home is devalued because it is invisible: You only see it when it’s not “done”.

**From Baba’s Hope Chest: The Exhibition:** In this section, I examine the format of the exhibition, the presentation process, looking at the artifacts and the text that accompanied them. I followed the curator during some tours she gave to docents and school children and then I joined the museum docents as they toured the exhibition. The introductory panel to the exhibition states the goal of the show:

*From Baba’s Hope Chest* pays tribute to the mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers who made the many beautiful costumes and textiles that are represented here. The exhibit celebrates their creativity, diversity and skill, and acknowledges their contribution to Macedonian culture. They have left behind an extraordinary legacy. In the same way that threads criss cross to make a cloth, the items in this exhibit weave a collective history filled with richness.

Thus, the goal of the show is clear and explicit in this statement: it is a tribute to women’s work in the community. Their textile production is seen as a contribution to the collective history of the community, their contribution to Macedonian culture. Here we can already see the connection that is made between women’s work in producing textiles and Macedonian culture, generally. In selecting stories for the exhibit, the Macedonian exhibition’s committee wished to have a range of stories from the community’s life and rituals as well as more personal recollections of their past. Thus, community events,
marriage, dowry, work in the house and in the fields, are the foci of the oral histories. Yet, the curator realized in talking to the women that the feelings and emotions evoked when talking about their past, were as important and so she decided to voice these feelings as well.

The presentation of the costumes and textiles was arranged according to thematic experiences and events, the way it would traditionally be displayed at social gatherings. These textiles are accompanied by stories, as told by the lenders, which provide the initial interpretation for the objects. This approach of presenting the textiles does not follow standard exhibit displays that center on objects and labels. Instead, the textiles are surrounded by text that contains stories and memories and provides a unique linkage between the objects and the people. Presenting material culture by reflecting on significant scenes from their community’s life ensured it to be meaningful for Macedonians. The information contained in the labels that accompanied the objects was kept simple and accessible as the curator describes in her final report to the Canadian Museum Association:

The text was straightforward and contained the name of the donor, time and place of construction, and a word or two about the item. The information appeared as it was given to us by the lenders. Presenting information this way was a deliberate decision on the part of the community planning committee. More information about construction methods, materials and influences could have been included, but that would have shifted the focus from the people to the artifact. We did not want the labels to set the community apart from the exhibition. We were aware that exclusive language and format is a form of discrimination that can marginalize people (Wood, 1997a: 28).

Figure 8. Baba’s Hope Chest
The curator’s voice throughout the exhibit is minimal since the attempt was to enable the lenders to speak about their costumes and life as they wished. The stories, as told by the women, help bring the textiles back to life. To illustrate, I provide below a few examples from the exhibition’s text. The curator grouped parts of the costume (aprons, socks) together with stories as told by the lenders:

**Koshula** (under dress): The basic component of every costume was woven during winter months, when there was no work in the fields. The bleaching process that turned the natural color into white was a summer activity. This is the first account of actual work involved in making the koshula:

> When the cloth for the koshula was woven it was very yellow. We had to go to the river to soak it in the cold water, then gather it up and spread it out to dry. Then soak it again in the cold water and pound it with a stick, over and over again, until it turned white. The water was so cold, it hurt my heart.

**Apron:**
A bride would have at least eighteen or twenty aprons in her dowry. Maybe twenty-five aprons. Those people that were rich made lots of aprons. Those that were poor made less.

In our village, we made aprons with different patterns. The aprons all had names. Old mother, chicks, board, wheat, key. The hardest was the bride’s apron. It would be very patterned. Your mind would have to be on your work and you would have to count small numbers of threads...

**Socks:**
The knitting of socks was an ongoing activity for women since they would be one part of the costume that would wear out quickly. Everyday socks were plain: black wool with only a stripe or two for decoration. Special occasion socks were very elaborate in color and design. In some villages, a bride would give gifts of socks to all of her husband’s family. A large wicker tray would be filled with socks and delivered to the bridegroom’s home a few days before the wedding. All the socks would be pinned up on the wall in a
row, starting with the father-in-law’s socks. The socks would stay on display for weeks afterwards while relatives visited to view the gifts.

A woman was never without her knitting needles. She was so adept at knitting that she was able to knit as she walked to the fields. Her hands were never idle.

So as not to waste time, we knit at night. We did not want to be without work. Everything was homemade. After the children went to sleep, women would do quiet work...everything except weaving. We would sit under a lamp and work...The work had to be done...our hands knew what to do. They could feel the pattern the yarn made.

**Loom:**

From about the time I was seven or so, my mother was in the loom. She had four daughters and she had to produce for all of them. What she made for one, she made four times. It was a difficult life for my mother. My grandmother was very particular about what my mother did. If she didn’t do the weaving in a certain way, my grandmother would take it all out. Life was like that there.

These stories portray a picture of hard-working women who not only provided clothing and textiles for the entire community, but also worked in the fields and contributed to the family’s economy. Moreover, we learn about class differences within the community, status and village affiliation, through the various patterns and making of the textiles. In talking about wedding ceremonies and rituals in which textiles were displayed publicly and exchanged as gifts, the women highlight the centrality of textiles and cloth in Macedonian life.

The show incorporated memories by family members who talked about the cloth and their remembrances:
When I hold the cloth, I feel like I’m holding my grandmother’s hand.

The costume evokes images of my great grandmother working on it by the light of a coal oil lamp, earnestly, with determination and enthusiasm. It makes me feel fond of her because I know her to be a beautiful old woman now.

My grandmother brought these baby things with her. I’m surprised they came. I think about my Baba who left all sorts of things behind...these baby things must have been very special. My Baba never went home, never returned, never saw her family again... that’s sad, isn’t it.

These stories illustrate the links between objects of material culture and the women who cared for them. Only through these stories do we truly understand the reasons for keeping the pieces of cloth, and passing them on: “Through the oral histories the costume lenders spoke directly to the viewer and this allowed the viewer to enter into a dialogue” (Wood, 1997). The personal memories that accompany the textiles as the interpretive mode are the encoded meanings for the exhibition. It serves as the linkage between encoding and decoding of the meaningful discourse, according to Hall’s model.

These remembrances evoke feelings and personal attachments that bring together a meaningful collective women’s history that is, to use Clifford’s observation: “an active testimony to a living moment through the mediation of someone who did not observe and analyze but who lived the object and for whom the object lived” (Clifford, 1988:247).

Now, I wish to turn to the dissemination process that was done through docent tours of the exhibit. The curator prepared a folder for each docent with articles on the history and politics of Macedonia as a general overview for the exhibition. In addition, she met with the docents after the opening and toured the exhibit providing information on the planning process and general information on the Macedonian community in Toronto. In her tour for docents and on other tours, Wood talked about the costumes that came from the private collections of Macedonians who live in Toronto; the personal
stories that accompanied the various costumes and textiles; the general story of the exhibit which focused on women and immigration (therefore relating to the general public, as Toronto is comprised of different immigrant groups); the history and politics of Macedonia (she pointed to some aprons and chemises that were black and not the usual white and mentioned the 1903 uprising against Greeks where thousands of Macedonians died and women in mourning made them black (Wood tours March 2/95; Sept 10/95). While walking through the exhibit, she referred to the costumes (the layers and different parts of the costumes, the color, design, etc.) and the work involved in making them. Generally, Wood focused on women’s contribution to their household economy by producing cloth and textiles for family use as well as highlighting the domestic sphere as a workplace for women. She referred to the differences in costumes and cloth between women who lived in mountainous areas and had less work in the fields than women who lived in the plains and worked in the farms and the fields. The former produced more ornate costumes than the latter because they had less work outside the home in the fields. Wood in her tour focused on the women and their stories. She pointed out how through the aprons and belts one could see differences in social status (those wealthy in the village used more silver coins on their belts) and the apron signaled the marital status of the woman. Later on, docents chose to focus their tours on the costumes themselves, they talked about the various parts of the costumes, the designs, colors, etc. They avoided the history and political aspect altogether and occasionally referred to some of the other items above. When I pointed out that this approach differed from the way Wood toured the exhibition the response was:
The primary function of a tour is to help people to see the objects. The theme was thought of by the curator but we talk about the objects so we can talk about the theme in terms of the objects (docent tour, March 29/95).

The docents did not discuss the social relationships that were expressed by Wood. For them, the artifacts, the objects, are of importance more than the stories that the people told about these objects.

The political aspect of the show was a sensitive issue (as discussed earlier) and there was an organized session for docents on how to deal with the “politics” of the show. The curator was asked by the museum to hire a PR agency in order to brief the museum workers on the politics of the show and how to deal with complaints and questions. The PR representative generally said that:

This is a cultural not political show. We had one complaint on the opening night. If a member of the media shows up, you can say that you are volunteers, not spokespersons, take their name and contact number…People may ask where is Macedonia? What are the borders? There is no map on purpose. The show is presented as Macedonian costumes, cultural not political, it’s about creativity. The costumes come from the homes of people who consider themselves Macedonians but it’s about costumes.

The museum administration recognized the potential political risks of this exhibition and therefore the attempt was to diffuse any political challenges by focusing on the objects themselves, the costumes.

To summarize, my goal was to examine the ways in which a community-based exhibit constructs its understanding of culture and work. My attempt was to show that people’s stories could add new insights to the representation process and highlight neglected issues of their history. Moreover, the use of stories and memories as the interpretive method for the objects on display validates the experiences of marginalized groups and also empowers them as members in the community. I discussed the ways in which the exhibit wove together textiles and text, which belonged to Macedonian women,
and suggested seeing the exhibit as an attempt to include women’s vantage point within Macedonian collective memory. The stories, as told by the women who donated the cloth and textiles, portray a picture of women who actively participated in the everyday life of the community. They had a major role in their own family’s domestic economy and also contributed to social and community events. As demonstrated, textile production was not only necessary for everyday use by all Macedonians, but was also central to family rituals and social events where parts of the ceremony evolved around the presentation and exchange of textiles. Observing the docents tour this exhibit it was apparent that they chose to focus on the objects, costumes themselves, the designs, colors, but generally avoided the history and politics of the community even though the curator discussed these issues in her tours and provided reading material for docents in preparation for tours.

Summary

Looking at presentation processes in different exhibitions within the museum it is clear that the exhibiting process is a “contested terrain”. Developing exhibitions, assigning meanings to objects on display, and disseminating it to the public is a process through which museums actively participate in cultural production and communicate these meanings to their publics. However, the findings from this chapter suggest that this cultural production is not necessarily consistent across exhibitions. Exhibits that were curated by Max Allen carry a very specific voice that differs from other exhibitions discussed such as the Black story Quilts (This is not a poem) and Art and Utility (Acquisitions 94). All three exhibits curated by Allen, attempted to highlight textiles in the context of their production and included references to the work involved and the
creative capacities of the women who made these textiles. Hence, women’s work and culture were inseparable. He also refers to the notion of “Art” in the West as opposed to “other” cultural traditions to show that in other cultures, art is not separated from daily life practices as it is in Western culture. In this regard, his method of display and the meanings that were created through the show can be seen as oppositional practices, which aim to convey a vantage point that is not generally shared and accepted by other established museums.

Various other exhibits that were produced at the museum at the time did not share these views. *Black Story Quilts* started as a community show of household quilts. But the exhibition changed its focus when more contemporary quilts made by Black artists were incorporated into the show to the point where the utility quilts became invisible. As discussed earlier, the presentation of these quilts was in sharp contrast to the way Allen discussed *eleven simple quilts*. He focused on the ordinary and common or popular production. Here, the approach was to emphasize the extra-ordinary contemporary artistic quilts. The show that I followed from the initial stages of planning through presentation (*Art and Utility*) also did not use the Allen’s vision. Despite the fact that it had all the “ingredients” to discuss household linens in the context of home, the focus was on aesthetics instead. And so the opportunity was missed. The show was object-oriented and not people-oriented.

The community-based show (*From Baba’s Hope Chest*), which was organized outside the museum, presented a similar view to that of Allen’s. The curator, Wood, wished to highlight the contributions made by women to the Macedonian culture. She focused on women’s work and their artistic abilities in producing functional textiles that
served the community. Again, women’s work and their creative productions are seen as inseparable. I would suggest seeing this show not only as counterculture attempt that is in line with the conception suggested by Heumann Gurian (2005) for communities who struggle to present their own culture on their own terms but also as oppositional. As the initial objective of the show, was to counter an exhibit of Greek textiles and costumes that showed a large number of Macedonian costumes as Greek. Macedonians suffered from this political containment, which in fact, was hegemonic. Moreover, the attempt from the beginning was to offer the community’s version of the story, independently of the museum. Hence, it could be seen in opposition to standard museum practice.

So, it seems that all museum workers do not share this vision of possible oppositional practices at the museum. I would argue that the founder of the museum had this vision and goal, yet after he left the museum in the early 1990s, museum workers followed a more standard “professional” approach that could be seen as more hegemonic.
Chapter 8. Decoding: Members and Visitors Responses

“Counting visitors or visitors who count?” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1988)

This chapter details the ways in which the audience (members and visitors) “make sense” of the work and vision of the museum. Following Hall’s model for communication, this is the linkage between encoding and decoding. Hall offered three possible decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated position and oppositional position. I will attempt to examine the findings in light of these positions. The question is whether members and visitors accept the meanings offered in exhibitions, negotiate and resist or construct their own position in opposition to the museum. Specifically, it is important to identify whether members and visitors express similar understandings of the museum. Moreover, whether the audience accepted Allen’s vision for a “new kind of museum” that is fundamentally different from later TMC’s administration and traditional hegemonic museums.

I begin with an exploration of the membership survey followed by the visitors’ survey. Then, using personal observations, analysis of written responses (visitors’ comment cards) and interviews, I discuss specific responses to exhibitions by the visitors.

Membership Survey

The purpose of the membership survey was to understand how the museum’s immediate community perceived the vision and practices of the museum. In addition, the goal was to portray museum members. The mail survey was sent during May 1995 to a representative sample of members: every second member within each category of membership was surveyed.
Table 1: Distribution of TMC membership sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>sent</th>
<th>received</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/dual</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total number of questionnaires sent was 381. I received 199 responses, which represents 52 percent response rate. This response rate is much higher than Slater’s (2003) received in his study of a British museum. He also used a postal survey and received 30 percent response rate.

I will start with a description of members’ social and educational characteristics to portray a picture of the museum’s membership.

Table 2: TMC Gender information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

91 percent of the respondents are women. A comparison with the Art Gallery of Ontario (1987) membership survey revealed that 70 percent were women and 30 percent men. In Slater (2003) British survey, 67 percent were male members. Women overwhelmingly comprise the TMC’s immediate public community.
Table 3: Percentages of TMC members reporting on practicing art as a hobby or profession

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Related to Textiles</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related to Fine Arts</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not practice</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages are computed for each category separately. 71 percent of participants in the survey (N=199) reported that they are actively involved in textile production either as part of leisure or paid employment. In this regard, the museum meets their personal interests. This finding also supports the claim made by Mainardi (1982) about women’s participation in textile production as well as being the audience when textiles are displayed publicly. The AGO membership survey did not have any similar question so patterns could not be used for comparison.

Table 4: Percentages of TMC members who belong to other cultural institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museums/galleries</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile related</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance arts</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No membership</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally, over three-quarters of TMC members belong to other cultural institutions as well. Almost 50 percent belong to other textile-related institutions such as various guilds, textile centers, the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C. etc.
Table 5: Distribution of TMC members by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 to 34</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 64</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 and over</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 5 shows, about two-thirds of TMC members were between 35 and 64, about one quarter over 65 and less than 10 percent under 35 year of age. This compares with the AGO membership (see below) which had somewhat younger members (about one-fifth under 35) and less between 35 and 64 (around 40 percent). Slater (2003) found that most of the members in his survey were older (55 years and over). The TMC membership was distinctly “middle aged”.

Table 6: Distribution of TMC members by level of education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College or University</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College certificate or diploma</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate university</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some Graduate University</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate university Degree</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most members acquired some form of post-secondary education, and more than a third are university graduates. This picture is very similar to the one portrayed by the AGO’s survey (1987). In this regard, museum members appear not to be different from other
galleries’ members as generally highly educated (the categories used by the AGO’s survey were different: some secondary education; completed secondary education; some post-secondary; completed post-secondary, but the results are very similar).

**Table 7: Distribution of TMC members by length of membership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2 years</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 5 years</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 9 years</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the respondents are members between 3 to 5 years. A comparison with another membership survey (AGO: 1987) shows a similar representation in all categories (22%, 23%, 28% 14% respectively).

**Table 8: Distribution of TMC members by number of visits during the past year**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 to 2 times</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 5 times</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 or more</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not visit</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most members (almost 75%) visited the museum between 1 to 5 times during the year. The AGO (1987) survey used different categories:
- 1 to 2 times   16%
- 3 to 10        64%
- 10+            16%
- did not visit  4%

TMC members were more likely than AGO members to visit only once or twice during the year. Nearly 40 percent of TMC members visited once or twice, compared to less than 20 percent of AGO members. Conversely, 80 percent of AGO’s members visited 3 or more times during the year, compared to only 55 percent of TMC members. This could
be explained by the extensive programming at the AGO compared to the TMC. Also, 30 percent of TMC members live out of town, in other provinces and internationally, which contributes to fewer visitations.

Table 9: Distribution of TMC members as volunteers at the museum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regularly volunteering</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally volunteering</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering volunteering</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just a member</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to volunteer at the museum, one must become a member first. 18 percent of members surveyed are also volunteering at the museum. In comparison, Slater’s (2003:196) British membership survey found that from a base of 1055 respondents, 31 were current volunteers and 57 were past volunteers which represent less than 10 percent of volunteers in his sample. TMC’s members are more actively engaged as volunteers.

What was it about the museum that attracted you to become a member?

This was an open-ended question: the following categories represent the various responses. I first read the responses to find common themes, and then developed the categories. It should be noted that 192 members answered this question but each member could be counted more than once since in their responses, some members offered more than one reason. Therefore, each category constituted a variable and percentages were computed for each category.

Below are some examples of the comments made by the members from which I formed the various categories:

Personal interest and involvement: “my interest in textiles”; “a love for textiles”; “I’m a weaver, interested in all fiber arts”; “a weaver, drawn to textiles”; “textiles are an integral part of my profession”; “sell Indian and African fabric”; “I have always loved
textiles, a love planted by my grandmother”; “part of Canadian embroiderers guild; cloth is our second skin”; “interested in textiles for 40 years or more”; “a lifetime interest and a chance to be with people who share my interest”; “textiles are a passion of mine”.

The collection, exhibits: “the depth and variety of its holdings”; “the vastness of the collection”; ‘special collection”; “a show when it was on Bloor St.”; “Baba’s Hope Chest exhibit”; “superb displays”; “small but significant collection”; “varied display of textiles—a continual learning experience”.

Museum uniqueness: “the small family feeling made me feel welcome”; “intimate surrounding of exhibits rooms”; “accessible textiles available for close examination”; “the fact that we may touch and textiles are not kept in glass cases”; “interest in supporting the arts of less known groups”; “it preserves materials that are culturally, historically and artistically valuable, particularly, many items not considered Art by other museums”; “its dedication to cloth made by people for themselves”; “the struggle of founders to get it going”; “textiles as they were introduced by the founders who imparted their knowledge with an intensity and excitement that was contagious”.

Recommendations: “have a friend who is actively involved”; “friends who are also members”; “a friend who volunteers”.

Museum benefits: “the newsletter keeps me up-to-date”; “I became a volunteer”.

Contemporary gallery: “its contemporary gallery and also the community of artists which I could access”; “wanting to support contemporary textiles”.

Table 10: Percentages of TMC members' comments on reasons to join the museum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal interest</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The collection, exhibits</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum uniqueness</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museum benefits</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary gallery</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages were computed for each category separately. 51 percent of respondents in the survey (N=192) indicated personal interest or involvement in textile production as part of leisure or work to be the main reason for becoming a member. In this case the museum promotes a shared view and interest among its membership that allows the formation of a cohesive community of very textile-oriented and engaged women who support the
Slater’s (2003) survey of a British museum shows a similar pattern of personal interest as the most cited reason for becoming a member. The collection and exhibits were the second most cited reason shared by 30 percent of respondents. 26 percent of respondents said that unique features of the museum were a reason to join the museum. It is interesting to note that only four percent of members surveyed mentioned the benefits as a reason to join the museum. Slater (2003) in his survey found this reason to be the second (25 percent) most cited reason to join the museum and the third reason cited in his survey was financial support for the museum, which in my survey did not appear as a category. However, some members referred in their answers to this reason: “interest in supporting the arts of less known groups” which is indirectly supporting the museum financially. Only two percent of respondents refer to the contemporary gallery as a reason to become a member. This is in contrast to the actual practice at the museum level as the museum employed a curator for the contemporary gallery but not for the collection. By that, the museum signaled the importance of contemporary exhibits and contemporary textile art over the traditional collection that was not managed by a curator. Most members valued the historical and diverse textile collection and exhibitions, not necessarily the contemporary textile art gallery and exhibitions.

**What makes the museum significant to you in relation to other museums?**

This was another open-ended question. 187 of the members answered this open question. Below, are some examples of the comments from which I formed the categories. Only one new category appeared (beyond the categories in the previous question) and it relates to the specific focus of the museum:
Museum uniqueness: “it does not draw a big wide black line between “craft” and “art” the way conventional galleries do”; “its ability to explore cultural expressions in ways that larger museums cannot”; “its exhibitions are an opportunity to see art forms not assembled in other museums”; “its small size and inviting premises”; “museum’s policy of encouraging and allowing to touch the textiles”; “accessibility of artifacts”; “the intimacy with which one can relate to the works”; “its congenial atmosphere”; “not big and overwhelming, I can feel “at home”; “presenting textiles as the work of common folk who frequently made them for love, not profit”; “viewer friendly as compared to ROM”. “I like its size and layout, it’s cozy”; “interest in supporting the textiles and exhibits of less known groups”.

Focus on textiles: “special attention to fabric arts”; “the very fact that it specialized in textiles”; “its focus on textiles”; “unique to textiles”; “it concentrates on textiles”; “it’s intense regarding its subject”; “there are very few textile museums in the world”; “emphasis on textiles”

Personal interest and involvement: “I feel it’s my museum because it’s about my special interest, I feel welcome”; “it is my first love”; “the fact that one can participate in programs and make a contribution”; “meets my personal interests”; “the fact that as a volunteer I can be directly involved and work with the collection”. “I am fond of embroidery in all its manifestations”; “love of textiles, clothing, functioning works full of integrity and depth in life”; “I am a needlewoman”; “my interest in knitting and needlepoint”; “I design textile prints, have a special interest”.

Collection, exhibits: “its dedication to collection and preservation of textiles from around the world”; “good explanatory notes on historical background”; “the sheer beauty of the rotating displays as they are charged to preserve rapidly fading textile cultures in the world”; “historical, cultural and ethnic exhibitions”; “its small enough to take advantage of textile shows offered by ethnic communities” (refers to the Macedonian show).

Table 11: Distribution of TMC members’ comments on museum’s significance in relation to other museums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museum uniqueness</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on textiles</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interest</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection, exhibits</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most members referred to the museum’s unique features and focus on textiles as key factors that set the museum apart from other museums. This means that the unique features of the museum and its focus on this material/medium are recognized and shared by members. The personal interest category moves down to be the third category as the significant attribute of the museum in relation to other museums. So, when comparing this museum to other museums, members acknowledge its unique features and focus as most significant factors. The museum’s unique features include the museum’s space (cozy, intimate domestic environment), accessibility of textiles (not behind glass, ability to touch), open storage, ordinary collection (common utilitarian textiles), specific point of view not expressed by other museums (“textiles made by common folk for their own use”; “textile made for love, not profit”; “does not draw a big line between craft and art”) and a reference to the founders (knowledgeable founders; philosophy and ideas of the founders; excellent presentations/lectures put on by the founders).

Table 12: Percentages of TMC members’ views regarding the need to address specific issues that relate to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textiles as art</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic/cultural creativity</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s creativity</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No need for specific issues</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other issues</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The director, who wanted to know whether members thought that TMC should address specific issues in exhibitions and programming, initiated this question. Each issue is expressed in terms of the proportion of the members who felt it needed to be addressed. More than half of the members thought that textiles should be addressed as a form of art. 44 percent of members thought that ethnic and cultural creativity needs to be addressed.
A third of respondents pointed out that women’s creativity needs to be addressed. 26 percent thought that there was no need for specific focus.

In the last category, 6 percent of members referred to “other issues” that should be addressed including: the history of textiles; the impact of technology and computers on textile production; contemporary textile design.

Table 13: Percentages of TMC members indicating the need to target mainly visitors from:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textile enthusiasts</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority groups</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other groups</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No need to target</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, the director initiated this question. Each issue is expressed in terms of the proportion of the members who felt these particular groups needed to be targeted. Textile enthusiasts are those who are engaged in textiles as part of their hobby or work. Over 50 percent of members voiced the need for the museum to work closely with textile producers in the community. This is significant: “textile enthusiasts” are mostly women as well…but it seems that members preferred this category to openly talking about “women” or other social groups. It should be noted that this category of “textile enthusiasts” was added to the survey by the director who thought that the museum should attract more rug dealers (who are usually men). Only 23 percent of members thought that the museum should actively engage women to support the museum. About 30 percent thought minority groups should be targeted, while a similar proportion stated that there was no need for a specific target group.
Other groups mentioned by respondents included children, art and design students, tourists, and guilds’ members.

The last question in the survey was an open-ended question for members’ comments, thoughts and suggestions. The comments were very supportive of the museum. Members suggested various ways to increase the publicity and visibility of the museum in Toronto; suggested collaborative projects with other museums; commented about exhibitions, programs, and newsletter. Members talked again about their passion for textiles:

“My job has made it difficult for me to pursue my personal passion (textiles). I come from a long line of tailors and stitchers, the membership provides me with a bit of a nourishment (perhaps more than a bit)”; “as someone with personal intense interest in form and fabric I have enjoyed any display for the pleasure of seeing what human hands and imagination have created. I appreciate the skill involved in producing fabric”; “I very much appreciate having a museum to visit that is of my own interest”.

A few commented on the atmosphere and accessibility of the museum:

“The personal touch is your ace to play and most effective. The physical space is conducive to a club like home away from home, encourage it”; “My concern is that the museum will get too technical and therefore inaccessible to those who maybe aren’t interested in technique but do have an interest in textiles”; “the museum is really accessible, I like it”.

Other comments related to the museum’s public:

“Women are your natural audience. Certain groups can be targeted for particular exhibitions but all textile guilds should be informed on a regular basis”; “Because the museum is both specialized and small, relevance is an important factor to local, provincial and Canadian activity. It’s important for the museum to be seen as connected to the people it serves e.g. ethnic groups.”

This final thought can shed light on the main question that guides my study in regards to the possibility to view TMC as oppositional. Here, the comment suggests the close association between the members and the museum needs to be responsive to the community it serves.
To summarize, museum members are mainly adult women, highly educated who are interested and involved in textile-making either as their hobby or paid work. It seems that this personal interest was also the main reason for members in joining the museum, which confirms Slater’s (2003) membership survey of a British museum where he found this reason to be the most cited. However, his second most cited reason was related to museum benefits (free admission to the museum) which in my survey were cited as a last reason with only 4 percent of members surveyed citing it. The second reason to join the museum was related to its unique features. Slate’s respondents in his survey did not cite this reason at all. So, TMC members can be characterized as a cohesive group, which shares textiles as a personal interest medium. This group also values the unique features of the museum which support the unique vision the founder voiced for the museum and therefore can be said to be oppositional to the current administration.

The second open question that asked what was significant about the museum compared to other museums is also important in relation to the main research question about the possibility of the museum as an oppositional museum: here, the unique features of the museum served as the significant aspect compared to other museums: members recognized and appreciated the unique features of the museum such as the layout; cozy atmosphere; intimate and domestic surrounding; accessibility of textiles, ability to touch and handle the artifacts. These features were important for Allen as well when he designed the space and were part of museum policy and integral to exhibitions that he curated. These are important aspects to consider especially in light of general public perceptions of museums and galleries as cold, intimidating, overwhelming, temple-like places (OAAG, 1994). Members also commented about the specific ways of presentation
as part of the museum uniqueness: discussing textiles as material culture of less known 
groups; textiles made by “common folk” for love, for their own use, not profit.

A few members/respondents attached lengthy letters with their responses to the 
survey. One member talked about the personal contact with museum staff that 
characterized the early years of the museum:

“Your membership survey presents a long awaited opportunity to make a number of 
points about your museum. The first might be that it used to be My museum. I should 
say, at the start, that I am a rug collector. I have been involved with the museum since it 
opened. It has changed greatly over the years, in some ways for the better (location, 
space) and in many for the worse. The early years in this location retained much of the 
personal flavor of the original three premises. But no longer. There was a circle of people 
one could almost rely on meeting. As such, the museum was a source of information, 
gossip, contact. People brought in their newest acquisitions to show-off and discuss. 
Now, as a member, I have no idea who the staff is. I can no longer drop in at lunchtime 
and be shown the latest acquisitions. There’s no one left who knows anything about rugs. 
There may well be no one who knows anything other than administration or conservation. 
On the plus side, there are more exhibitions at any given time. Conversely, there is less 
incentive to visit frequently as exhibitions remain in place for interminable periods of 
time. This comment reflects opinions expressed to me by a number of friends”. (#271)

The “personal flavor”, domestic scale of galleries, intimate atmosphere and accessibility 
were greatly appreciated by members and can be seen in contrast to the public images of 
museums and galleries in general: a study of the OAAG (1994) found that the most 
common response by visitors to the question: “What, if anything, bothers you about 
public galleries?” was that galleries are elitist and intimidating. Other issues referred to 
the atmosphere (dark, quiet, and not accessible). Another question about the image of 
public galleries referred to the kind of images that come to mind when one hears the 
words “public art galleries”: the words and phrases mentioned by respondents were: 
“shrine, intimidating, marble, reverence, snobbery, lifeless, cold, exercising control, like
banks, stodgy, boring. The word *comfortable* was used as a wished-for atmosphere” (OAAG, 1994).

Another letter came from the Canadian Embroiderers Guild’s Chairman (who is a woman):

“In response to your survey, I send you this letter. I hope you are able to expand the influence of the Museum beyond your walls and out into the hinterlands. The Ontario Network of Needleworkers may be a source of good contemporary stitchery for you. It also contains about 1000 members who would be happy to come in and see the exhibits if they knew about them. This means an exchange of membership lists, but it would build you a very supportive base of textile addicts. Our guild always announces what you are up to…May I suggest that you pick up where the Crafts Council falls down, and support the wonderful work being done by stitchers right here in Ontario? I can assure you people would pour in to see the work. If you would like to discuss the possibility of working with the Guilds to establish a base of enthusiastic members, as well as offer support to them in the way of exposure of their work to the public, and aim to touring parts of the shows to small galleries around the province, I would be willing be one of the front line troops… Thank you for your interest in what we think about textiles and the role they play in our lives. As I said on my survey page, cloth is our second skin. We have always made it, and used it to swaddle new babies, wrap the dead, to seduce, in ceremony, on floors, in sails, nets and kites. Cloth evokes memory in all of us, good or bad. That is why I believe you should not become a “Woman’s place”. Avoid appealing to only one half of the population. Yes, women do most of the work of fibre, but we then present it to the world to wear, to fondle, to enjoy, to worship in. Fibre should continue to connect members of the population as it has since the beginning of our human race. I regard textiles as Fibre for the Soul! Your enthusiastic supporter, (#83).”

In the last part of this letter, the writer resists the idea of the museum as catering for women. This stand is in line with docents’ views of the museum as well as the director who didn’t think that gender or women should constitute a theme for exhibitions. Yet it seems that members do appreciate the unique features and focus of the museum especially as they stand against the practices of “other” museums. In this sense, the members see the museum as oppositional to other museums. Members see the fact that a cohesive community of “textile enthusiasts” can be formed around the museum as a positive outcome and source for continued support for the museum. This interest to
belong to a museum that reinforces their special interest in textiles, to be with like-minded, is distinctive about the members of TMC as compared with other museum members (Slater, 2003). I argue, therefore, that this supports the potential to seeing TMC as oppositional.

**Visitor Survey**

The purpose of the visitors’ survey was to understand how museum visitors perceived the vision and work that was done by the museum. Whether the visitors accepted the meanings offered by Allen’s exhibitions, much like the members who showed an understanding of Allen’s vision for a “new kind of museum”, and therefore legitimated the museum, or whether the visitors offered their own constructed understanding of exhibitions. In addition, the goal was to have a general picture of the audience to the museum, a portrayal of the museum’s visitors.

The survey was conducted during the months of November and December 1994. Reception desk volunteers administered it at the end of the museum visit, before leaving the museum. The conditions under which the survey was administered dictated that it should be short, clear and that it would not contain any question that might offend visitors (i.e. cultural background, level of education). Consequently, the only SES question refers to occupation/profession. It is important to note that most of the exhibitions that I review in this study were not on display during the time of survey administration.

The total number of visitors to the museum during these two months was 998. The total number of visitors who agreed to participate in the survey was 230, representing
23 per cent of the museum’s visitors. The low response rate may be due to the way it was administered, at the end of the visit before visitors left the museum.

**Table 14: Distribution of TMC visitors’ sample:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visitor</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Member</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Public</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>230</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of the visitors were from the “general public”. Very few members came to see exhibitions during the time of the survey, (members who are also volunteers and came to do volunteer work were not surveyed).

**Table 15: TMC Visitor distribution by first visit**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>230</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike general museum/gallery “goers”, most of the TMC visitors are visiting for the first time. The reason may partly relate to the assumption that because it is a specialized museum, that once they saw quilts, weavings and rugs there is no point to visit again. Additionally, it may be related to the lack of advertising and extensive programming that usually attracts people for repeat visits.
Table 16: Distribution of TMC visitors by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>205</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women constitute the vast majority of visitors to the museum. One of the visitors added a comment beside this question: “women are your natural audience”. This is a significant finding that was confirmed by the reception desk volunteers at the museum who said that “it’s very rare to see men coming in and when they do, they are often with their wives or other women. It’s really, overwhelmingly women…” (DC, Feb 25/96). This point should be underlined since studies of museum/gallery visiting indicate that both men and women visit museums more or less equally (see chapter 3 for a review of museum visitors).
Table 17: Distribution of TMC visitors who belong to other cultural institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museum/gallery</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles related</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance art</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of the above</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums/performance</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

40 per cent of visitors were not members of any cultural institutions. However, 51 per cent were members of various cultural institutions, with 14 per cent of visitors belonging to textile related guilds.

Table 18: Distribution of TMC visitors by involvement in textiles as a hobby or profession

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hobby</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General interest</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
57 per cent of the visitors are actively engaged in textiles as part of their hobby or occupation. An additional 10 per cent have a general interest or “love” of textiles. Hobbies included weaving, quilting, knitting, embroidery, and sewing. Professions included designers, store owners (specializing in textiles, clothing), textile teachers, fashion designers, collectors/dealers, dressmakers, seamstress, and textile artists.

**Table 19: Distribution of TMC visitors by age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 34</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 64</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 or over</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally, the museum caters to middle-aged adults. Very few visitors were under the age of 20.
Table 20: Distribution of TMC visitors by issues that the museum needs to focus on…

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic/cultural focus</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s creativity</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textiles as art</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All of the above</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No specific focus</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>230</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than a third of respondents thought the museum should not focus on specific issues. 20 per cent of visitors thought the museum should promote textiles as a form of art. Only 13 per cent of visitors thought that women’s creativity in textile production should be part of museum work and about the same number of visitors preferred cultural and ethnic aspects to be the focus of presentation. If we were to integrate all those responses who favored some focus, then 54 per cent of visitors thought that a thematic focus for the presentation is needed.

The “other” category refers to a focus on historical textiles, archaeological findings, and textiles as historical documents, costume and clothing history.

**Summary questions:** Would you share with us your experience at the museum today? What were your expectations? What did you enjoy most? Do you have any other ideas, comments, and suggestions regarding the museum practices in general?
Generally, comments on museum practices were very positive and supportive. There was not even one negative comment or complaint. However, there is no information on those visitors who did not answer the question and those who did not participate in the survey. 51 visitors did not answer these questions, representing 22% of the sample.

Responses were grouped into 7 categories:

**General comments:** Visitors referred to the quality of display, variety of exhibits:
“Expected variety – found it”; “The great variety of the collection was appreciated”; “I like museums to have diverse exhibitions, thought provoking, quirky”; “I believe museums should be moving toward specialization, this museum a successful example”.

**More Information:** Visitors were asking for more details, stories, historical interpretation on cultural meanings: “not enough historical information”; “the whole museum is wonderful, think differently tell more about uses in various cultures”; “a flyer would help me appreciate the pieces as works created by people with a message”.

**Atmosphere:** Visitors appreciated the museum as a friendly space which was “inviting” “intimate” “cozy” “pleasant” and accessible: “the whole atmosphere is simple, delicate, lively”; “nice flow of galleries”; “the museum is comfortable in receiving”; “nice to be able to get so close to see details”; “enjoyed the ability to view closely”.

**Traditional textiles:** Visitors expected to see on display more traditional, historical textiles: “show more from your own collection”; “expected to see more quilts in a textile museum”; “I would have liked to see native Canadian textiles”; “expected more hand-woven material, more quilts”; “I like to see Pre’ 1900s textiles”; “more historical fabrics”.

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**Information on technique:** Visitors asked for more details on the process of textile production, natural dyes, and materials: “would like to know more on dye sources”; “more information on technical process would have been welcomed”.

**Contemporary works:** Visitors, who were mainly artists, pointed the contemporary gallery: “should show contemporary trends in Canada and elsewhere”; “open exhibits of contemporary craft”.

**Summary**

Almost 90 percent of visitors are women and about half of them were actively engaged in textile production either as part of leisure or work. For 70 percent of them it was the first visit at the museum. Generally, visitors were supportive of museum’s work: they appreciated the variety of exhibits on display; they liked the friendly, warm and intimate atmosphere in the galleries; they enjoyed the ability to view textiles closely. They were interested in the social context and meanings associated with textiles. They were less interested in production techniques. Very few visitors wished to see more contemporary textiles on display. Most of them expected to see traditional textiles. This was also the finding in the membership survey. This is important since the contemporary gallery is a significant part of the museum: exhibits are organized year-round and the only full-time curator at the museum is an artist serving as a curator for the contemporary gallery.

**Comparative view of TMC members and visitors:**

In this section, I wish to discuss some distinct differences between members and visitors. A discussion of museum audience has to take into account these differences, in understanding the museum and its particular vision. Women constitute the majority in both groups (91% of members and 89% visitors) and both members and visitors are
actively engaged in textile production as part of their profession or hobby (71% of members and 57% of visitors). The TMC audience is comprised of a highly interested group of textile enthusiasts. TMC attracts an audience who shares an interest in this medium. However, beyond this shared interest, there are some distinct differences between the two groups. For 70% of the visitors, this was their first visit at TMC. Members, obviously, visited the museum more during the year: 37% visited once or twice and another 37% visited between 3-5 times during the year. 18% of the members visited the museum more than 6 times.

Table 21: Distribution of TMC members and visitors by age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>% TMC members</th>
<th>% TMC visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 64</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 and over</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most of TMC public is adult women between the ages of 35 to 64. 27 percent of the members are 65 and over while among the visitors only 14 percent are of that age. More young adults between the ages of 21 to 34 are likely to visit the museum (22 percent) than members (7 percent).
Table 22: Distribution of TMC members and visitors who belong to cultural institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% TMC members</th>
<th>% TMC visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Museums/ galleries</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile related</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance arts</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No membership</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TMC members are also members in other cultural institutions. They also have high levels of education (see table 6). This finding supports Bourdieu and Darbel’s (1992) argument that members of the dominant groups find ways to enhance their cultural capital through memberships in cultural organizations. I have no data on levels of education among visitors to TMC.

Table 23: Percentages of TMC members’ and visitors’ views regarding the need to address issues that relate to:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>% TMC members</th>
<th>% TMC visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textiles as Art</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic/cultural creativity</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s creativity</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No specific focus</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Looking at this table, it is clear that overall, museum members are more opinionated than visitors with regard to the issues that TMC should address. As members, they have vested interests in TMC: they are familiar with the institution and feel more committed to its vision and practices. Most of the visitors thought that there is no need for TMC to address specific issues (46 percent). As most of them visited TMC for the first time, it could be understood that their level of familiarity with the institution is much different. Most members (55 percent) thought that TMC should focus on presenting textiles as art. This finding supports the general view arising in the open questions where members talked about the uniqueness of TMC in viewing textiles as the arts of marginalized groups. Yet, when it comes to addressing textiles as the creative expressions of social groups, more members (44 percent) thought that textiles should be addressed in ethnic terms and 34 percent of members thought women’s creative capacities should be addressed.

The open questions in both surveys illustrate some fundamental differences between the members and the visitors. Exploring the responses of visitors to the open question shows that generally, they enjoyed the visit and were supportive of the museum. However, their responses were short, brief and somewhat simplistic compared with the detailed simplistic responses of the members. I should note that members answered the survey questions within the comfort of their home as opposed to visitors who were asked to fill the form during their visit. Generally, visitors talked about the informative exhibitions and the variety of textiles on display. They, too, mentioned the congenial atmosphere in the museum which they thought was “an inviting place; pleasant; simple; lively; comfortable”. They expressed a need for more information about textiles in exhibits,
more traditional textiles on display, as opposed to contemporary textiles. On the other hand, members were far more knowledgeable about the museum, its history, the founders and the specific vision that the founders promoted in the early years of the museum. Some also criticized the different approach of the new (after the departure of the founders) administration, which directed the museum towards professionalization and traditional museological standards.

**Conversations with visitors at TMC:** Here, I provide a summary of some “conversations” with visitors to the various exhibitions that were discussed in the study. These are treated as “conversations” rather than interviews since there are very few of these conversations, which were un-structured and short. I should note that no members are included in these conversations.

**Black Story Quilts: This is not a Poem. This is a Summer Quilt**

The show brought Black Canadians to the museum. It is important to note that until this show opened, not many Black visitors were seen at the museum. The opening night was populated with Canadians from the Black community together with family and friends of the contemporary Black artists who were exhibiting their quilts. The opening included music, dance and storytelling. During the time the exhibit was on display, one could observe small groups of Black Canadians visiting the museum. Most visitors went through the utilitarian quilts very quickly and devoted most of their visit to the artistic contemporary quilts. They read the labels and panels and commented on the quilts. I talked to seven women altogether who came to see this show in two separate visits. The first group was comprised of three women from Toronto who came to see the show. The show was publicized on CBC radio, the curator appeared on TV morning news, and there
was a press release. The visitors heard about the show from the media. They viewed the show in terms of their collective historical experiences, as the contemporary story quilts focused on African traditions, slavery and the journey to America. The women appreciated having this show at the museum, a show that discussed their collective past. However, no one spoke of the quilt as a women’s creative form, produced for utilitarian purposes. Even though they mentioned that their mothers and grandmothers quilted until recently and they remembered quilts being used at home. All the contemporary quilts were made as art pieces for the wall not for the bed and consequently, they were seen and discussed as art objects by the visitors. It is important to note that the visitors talked about the “general story” of the show in collective terms of their particular social history. The other group was made up of four younger women in their twenties or thirties (two were out of town) who also focused their visit on the artistic quilts, reading the panels and literary quotes, commenting about the uniqueness of using literary quotes in shows. They seemed to know about the artists and were interested in the artistic aspects of making quilts. These brief conversations illustrate that visitors generally responded to the display and theme presented in the show. The exhibition focused more on stories of the Black community, their collective history and culture, and less on women’s work in producing the quilts. Consequently, the visitors were interested and spoke more about quilting as an art form to communicate their history and memories. The utilitarian quilts were ignored.

Recent Acquisitions 94: Art and Utility

I talked with five visitors who came to see the show. It was their first visit to the museum and they all came to see other shows but while here, toured the museum. They generally devoted approximately five minutes to the show, walking around, reading
quickly some of the labels, and skipping others. I was interested in their views, the ways in which they saw this exhibit. My first conversation was with two women who told me that they came to see quilts. They moved around the display and I asked them what they thought about the show: “I like the baby bonnets, the crazy quilt and the lace curtains. The little bonnets are cute”. When asked about the general display their response was: “I like the photos, they add a “real” touch”; “I love the crazy quilt, this is a piece of art”. The “general picture” of presenting household linens and housework did not emerge in their conversations.

Another woman came alone and looked at the towels on the rack when I approached her: “I love the embroidery on this towel (Swedish towel) it’s interesting to see kitchen towels in a museum”. When I probed she said: “because usually you see exotic materials and you don’t think of kitchen towels as such”. I asked if it was a good thing to have on display and she said: “Sure. I just didn’t think of it as part of a museum, collection or exhibition”. This woman was the only one who commented on the towels presented as an art object in a museum setting. The fact that these were not exotic and yet found their way to the museum was surprising for her.

The two other women who came together were retired teachers, and they were fascinated with the crazy quilt. They said that they used to quilt when they were young but did not do so any longer even though now they had more time. They thought it was an interesting show of household goods. They talked about their memories of relatives who used to making similar embroidered towels but they mentioned the quilt, set of curtains and bonnets as the interesting pieces. All five visitors referred to separate objects within the show rather than the general picture of home-related textiles. When I asked if
they could talk about the general display and what it reminds them, they talked about “the home” “domestic surroundings of a wealthy lady” “a bedroom, but certainly not my bedroom”. However, these issues only surfaced with my questions.

**From Baba’s Hope Chest: Visitor Responses**

During the seven months that the exhibition was on display, attendance to the Museum more than doubled (compared with the same time period in the previous year). It would be appropriate to talk about *families* of men, women and children rather than individual visitors, since one could frequently observe two and three generations of a family visiting the exhibit together. This was a refreshing scene at the museum. Moreover, until the show opened the museum did not even have a “family” category for admission fees, simply because families did not usually visit. In her report, Wood summarized visitors’ responses to the show:

> Three comment books were filled with shared memories and outpourings of personal reflections. Clearly, the exhibition made people feel worthwhile. It allowed people from all ethnic communities to relate to the exhibition on a very personal level, as opposed to an intellectual level. (Wood, 1997a: 9).

A closer look at visitor comments revealed the powerful message of oral testimony and memories. As one visitor said “This exhibition is truly magical. The objects truly become alive as the stories unfold through them. Thank you for a wonderful memory-rich experience”. Many entries in the books begin with “I was born in... or “I came to Canada when I was a young girl...” Visitors of Macedonian descent wanted to tell their stories too. The inclusions of personal stories in the show made them feel comfortable and welcome to share their own experiences. Thirty six percent of the comments refer to

---

12 The Total number of comments was 843. However, about half of them included names only or were limited to describing the show as “beautiful”, “wonderful” etc. I refer here to the more in-depth comments and so the total number is 398.
memories, Babas, or mothers: “Beautiful treasures – bring back a flood of memories”; “I wish I could share stories with my Baba. This exhibition helps me imagine what her life would have been like back in Macedonia”; “I now see my grandmother’s works at home in a different light from my childhood.” Thirty-one percent of the comments are thank-you notes for having such a unique, special, unforgettable show. Visitors thank the committee, the Macedonian community and the museum: “Thank you to the Macedonian community for taking the trouble to gather together all these stunning and fascinating items and to write down such heartfelt personal reflections”. Twenty six percent of comments refer to Macedonian identity: “I’m proud to be Macedonian”; “I fought so hard to shed my heritage and be Canadian that in the process I lost myself. I am now trying very hard to reclaim that lost self”. Six percent of comments refer to emotions evoked by the exhibit: “it brought me to tears”; “such a moving experience”; “seeing this exhibit has pulled at my heart”.

**From “Women” to “Macedonian”**

It is interesting to note that while 36 percent of all comments do pertain to the main goal of the exhibit, being a tribute to Macedonian women. Many others (26%) refer to the exhibit in terms of a renewed identity. Macedonian identity came up as a major issue also in a focus group\(^\text{13}\) with costume lenders who perceived the exhibit as a “Macedonian show”. Despite the explicit effort made by the curator to present the exhibit as part of women’s history and women’s contribution to Macedonian culture, many saw it in terms of their ethnicity: “the show helped Macedonians realize that they are Macedonians.” “With this show I know I’m Macedonian...an awakening”; “My family all came down to

\(^{13}\) Focus group discussions were conducted by Lord Cultural Resources, after the closing of the show for the purpose of writing a report to the Canadian Museum Association. I am using transcriptions from the focus group held with costume lenders, May 13, 1996.
see it. A good Macedonian experience and very pleased to be part of it”. “It was nice to feel Macedonian again”. During focus group discussions, costume lenders spoke, again, about the “Macedonian” experience. They rejected the idea of a women’s show:

“I didn’t go there thinking it was a women’s show, I looked at it as a people’s experience”
“We don’t think that way, men’s job or women’s job”
“It’s always the women like glue keeping things together. Through exhibitions like this we can fight divisions (within the community)”.

Though the objects on display were made and later protected by the women, they are taken as the community’s material culture. Indeed, these objects affected daily lives of all Macedonians, women and men, as they were an integral part of family and community events. However, as asserted by Wood, the curator, they had little value for Macedonian men. A shift seemed to occur with the presentation in a museum setting. A greater degree of respect was conferred to these ordinary, everyday objects once they were viewed on public display. Now, the textiles are more appreciated but not necessarily the women who produced them:

“Never realized what the costume meant until the museum...then it registered to me what our people did and how hard it was...”
“We were born here, not interested in the old country. When I saw the costumes and the work it made it valuable”
“Bringing back a whole culture that hadn’t been around for such a long time. It made people appreciate what they had at home, some old clothing.” (Visitor comments; emphases added)

I observed these families as they walked through the exhibition. Three and in some cases even four generations of the same family with the Baba and Grand Baba providing explanations and recalling personal stories from the family and village life. For all the three Babas (grandmothers) that I talked to, this was their first museum visit since they came to Canada (forty or even fifty years ago). They came because this show was about them: their life, their history, their tradition, their work and culture. There was a personal
connection that made the visit valuable and meaningful. In many cases the grandmother would guide her grandchildren, show them the objects, and talk about how she and other women used to make these same objects when they were young. The exhibition opened for these women a space to teach their kids a chapter in their family’s history. The grandmothers were showing the children the different parts of costumes, talking about the work they had to perform in producing these clothing and textiles, and demonstrating how to use a loom.

I talked to some of the visitors who came to see the show. All of them were very excited and emotional as they talked:

I consider myself Canadian. I didn’t know much about my family’s history. My grandmother lives here many years, her English is very poor, and she’s also very conservative in her views. We have at home many of these aprons. I saw them so many times but I really didn’t “look” at them, you know...

Another group of visitors consisted of a grandmother, her two daughters and their kids:

My mother (the grandmother) heard about this show on the radio (special Macedonian hour) and begged us to go. I’m so glad we came. It’s the last weekend and she wanted the kids to see it. She was literally in tears when she walked in.
The grandmother was walking through the gallery with her two granddaughters, showing them what she used to do when she was their age:

I didn’t have time to play like you do. I had to work work work…My mother showed me how to knit socks when I was six…of all the work I loved my embroidery best, look how beautiful this is (pointing to an apron)…

Yet, it is difficult to say whether remembering the women means also a renewed place within Macedonian culture, or a “membership” in the community. Though this was the initial goal for the exhibition, as clearly expressed throughout the display, visitors did not necessarily accept it. Many visitors, mostly of Macedonian descent, wished to respond to the exhibit through their Macedonian ethnic identity, as they felt empowered by the presentation of their community and culture at the museum. This may be related to the political changes in Macedonia as it gained independence in 1992 and people of Macedonian descent were expressing their pride in political identity. This show represents an interesting shift between encoding, the production of the exhibition, and decoding processes by the visitors who prefer to construct their understanding of the exhibition in relation to their ethnicity, as a renewed identity with the Macedonian community.

Summary

The TMC audience can be said to be comprised of highly interested group of women, textile enthusiasts. For members, their personal interest and involvement, passion for textiles, was the main reason to join the museum. They talked about the unique exhibits, museum space and collection. The significance of the museum for members in relation to other museums was its unique features, which included the museum atmosphere (cozy, intimate, home feel); accessibility of textiles; possibility to touch and
handle material; interpretation of textiles in ways that differ from other museums. By expressing these views, members reflected the vision and approach taken by the founders. This approach involved deliberate decisions in planning and designing the space of the museum, which they saw as vital to the presentation of textiles. More than half of members said that the textiles should be presented as art. Allen refers to this issue in his exhibitions as well. He referred to the absence of textiles in art museums in the past stressing that textiles were not considered art forms worthy of museums’ collections and display. In this regard, members voiced this same idea and the need to collect and present textiles as forms of art. 44 percent thought that ethnic and cultural creativity should be stressed and a third of respondents pointed to women’s creativity in the presentation of textiles, reflecting the founder’s recognition of women’s production. Many thought that the textiles should be presented using all three components (textiles as art; ethnic creativity and women’s creativity). Most members thought that textile enthusiasts should be the main target group of the museum. Visitors were also supportive of the museum and pointed to the unique atmosphere, cozy and intimate surroundings and enjoyed viewing the textiles closely. 36 percent thought the museum does not need to focus on a specific group and 20 percent thought that textiles should be presented as art. Very few pointed to women’s creativity as distinct from ethnic creativity. The difference between members and visitors could be related to the fact that as members the women are more engaged, interested and familiar with the museum’s vision and work. They visit and participate in programs compared to visitors, for most of whom it was the first visit at the museum. Very few respondents in both surveys mentioned the contemporary textile gallery. This
finding is significant since the museum had a curator on staff for the contemporary gallery but not for the general collection.

My conversations with visitors to the various exhibits suggest that most visitors respond to the objects on display and the information that offered on panels and labels. In other words, the visitors I talked with often reiterated what they read and saw on display. They did not offer a new or different view of the textiles and the exhibitions from the one that was offered through the presentation. The visitors to the Black story quilts exhibition (This is not a poem) understood the show in terms of their collective history as an ethnic group. Even though the curator initially wished to highlight women’s work in producing textiles for family use, the fact that the presentation included only three utilitarian quilts and mostly contemporary artistic quilts changed the tone of the show. These artistic quilts made by well-known artists were story quilts, which told the stories of slavery and the journey of Black people to North America. This focus on the community’s history and culture was also the way the visitors responded to the show. The three utilitarian quilts were not attracting the attention of visitors mainly because they were not presented as central to the show. Even though they were on display, they were invisible in terms of their message of daily women’s work. A similar picture could be seen with the Macedonian community show (From Baba’s Hope Chest). Here, the goal of highlighting women’s contributions to the Macedonian community in terms of their work and culture was expressed very explicitly at the production and presentation stages of the show. Yet, as discussed, most visitors to the show referred to their collective identity as Macedonians, when responding to the show. It is possible to argue that both groups (Black and Macedonian) suffered from marginalized positions in the larger Canadian
society and perhaps these museum exhibitions served in strengthening the collective identity of the groups and therefore they preferred to view the exhibitions in ethnic terms.
Chapter 9. Oppositional Possibilities for Museum Practice

This study is situated within the broader questions that occupy museums and those who have studied them in the past 20 years. These are questions of representation, the politics of meaning construction through exhibitions and the relationships between museums and their visitors. These questions are further related to issues of social equity, diversity, and power relations as they effect on the society at large. The question that directs much of museum work is the extent to which museums, as social institutions, play a significant role in changing ethnic and gender relations in our society. The discussion in this chapter attempts to evaluate oppositional possibilities in the museum. I discuss my findings in light of Hall’s model and review recent changes and developments in TMC. I then offer a set of recommendations based on my study and discuss some open questions for further research.

My goal in this study was to examine the representation of women and women’s work in the TMC and the extent to which the museum might offer a challenge to traditional representations. This is a feminist study, which looks at the ways in which the museum chooses to present textile production that historically and across societies was in women’s hands, as feminist research has now established in various academic fields. Deepwell (2006) examined feminist curatorial strategies and practices since the 1970s and raised the question: What does it mean to describe a curatorial practice as feminist? She contends that it is necessary to distinguish between an approach that simply adds art made by women and a feminist approach, which provides a specific perspective (Deepwell, 2006: 68). She argues that since the second wave of the women’s movement museums have been somewhat more open to feminist initiatives within their programs.
But her point was to “unsettle the simplistic relation or automatic assumption that feminist programming will only come from women curators. Often such initiatives came from men who hold positions of power within an institution” (Ibid: 66-67). This was the case for the TMC or in its original name: The Museum for Textiles. The founders of the museum were two men who were very interested in carpets and textiles and the history of their production. From the inception of the museum, they were committed to tell the story of textiles as an everyday practice that expressed women’s creative capacities while providing for their families’ needs, as Allen said in the interview:

In order to notice this problem you have to have a political consciousness, feminist consciousness… I’ve got an agenda which is different from just showing art. I’ve got a politics of the textile’s museum collection and it’s not the politics of the art world (MA, Jan 22/97).

Their goal was to discuss the multi-faceted stories of textiles including the social and political context of textile production, context of work, functions, aesthetics and even the stories of how these textiles, which were never made as art forms, ended up in the museum. This, according to Deepwell (2006:75-76), was also the feminist challenge: it was a multi-faceted challenge to modernism, as it re-examined art practices and methods of display. She says that in the second half of the twentieth century, changing concepts of art produced new models for exhibition, which prioritized context (the social, political) and aesthetic debates informing the work itself: “The focus on women’s shared experiences as the content and as a determining factor in the form of the work itself became the distinguishing mark of feminist art practices: the question of what constituted the work as feminist became a social, political and cultural issue” (ibid: 76).

Exploring the ways in which dominant museums presented textiles since the 1970s, revealed that museums generally ignored feminist studies in various academic
disciplines that established women’s involvement in textile production historically and across societies. These aspects of work are largely invisible in exhibitions. These textiles are usually presented as the products of *people* or *weavers* in various social groups, as ethnographic material culture. This approach masks the roles that *women* played as major producers of textiles and clothing for domestic use. Alternatively, in cases where women are presented working with textiles, they are usually seen as doing some “traditional handicrafts” as part of their leisureed pastime. In the late twentieth century, the hegemonic approach to textiles and especially quilts, in dominant museums has been to show these as art forms, or as ethnographic material culture, masking their “gendered work” history.

**TMC: Counter-Hegemonic or Oppositional?**

Against this hegemonic view of women’s representation in museums, I asked whether the TMC could be seen as counter-hegemonic or an oppositional museum. I asked whether TMC practices could be seen as oppositional practice that challenge the dominant practices of museums regarding the presentation of women, or, alternately, whether the museum suggested a counter-hegemonic approach that constitutes an attempt to transform museums’ work at large. Both approaches represent a move away from the established hegemonic representations of women’s work and textile production. These are moves beyond dominant modernist modes of exhibitions towards understanding the multiple possibilities for both the work museums do and the ways in which the public perceives this work.

Hall’s model of communication was applied for understanding this question by following the entire process of meaning production, its circulation and reception at the museum level. Sandell (2007: 78-85)) claims that Hall’s model enabled an understanding
of the audience as an active player in the communication process. As such, he sees the significance of this model in the relationship between museums and their audiences. I believe that the model can offer more than that: a general approach to the understanding of museum work in the production of meaning (much like Hall offered for understanding television) from the initial planning through the display itself and the ways in which it is received by the public. Understanding this process can shed light on hegemonic or oppositional practices.

The advantage of using this model lies in the independence of each stage within the process to create and recreate meanings. Hall recognized that encoding meaning is a process that depends on social relations of production and frameworks of knowledge within the museum. This includes much more than looking at collections or exhibitions. It entails an understanding of the structure and social relations within the organization, and allows exposing tensions and competing positions in museum work.

The next stage is the “meaningful discourse” which can be applied to the circulation of meaning through the display. Every sign (or object in the exhibit) connotes a quality, meaning, according to Hall. The understanding of the sign is in relationship to wider ideologies in the society. The denotative level of meaning is fixed but the connotative level is open to more active transformation (see Hall, 1993: 513). Applying this to the museum would mean taking into account presentation methods, label writing, as significant in the production and circulation of meaning. The last stage involves the decoding of the message (exhibit) by the public. The discursive programme (the exhibit) has a varied effect on the audience who decodes the exhibit according to their knowledge bases. Hall is aware of the “lack of equivalence between the two sides of the
communicative exchange” and offers an analysis of three possible decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic position where decoding is in line with encoding; the negotiated position which is a mix of adaptive and oppositional codes; and oppositional position where decoding is in contrast to encoding, resisting the meaning proposed. By using this model and these decoding positions, it is possible to evaluate the positions of museum workers on the one hand and members and visitors, on the other.

**Encoding: The Production of Meaning in Museums**

Exhibition making is perceived as a “contested terrain” and the discussion of meaning production in most museum research is directed toward the decisions museums make concerning what to include or exclude from their collections and exhibitions. I argued that these decisions are the explicit expressions of museum work, which represent the final outcomes, or “products” of the museum. I examined the work of the TMC Exhibition Committee in the planning process of exhibitions and programs at the museum as the site of cultural production where struggles over accepted and desired meanings take place. In addition, I relied on museum documents and interviews as well to understand the “wider ideologies”, which shape the work of the museum. My analysis of the museum’s exhibition committee work was based on the assumption that within these forums a debate on priorities for the museum, selection criteria and planning processes, are negotiated among museum workers. Consequently, my assumption was that a specific view is privileged over “other” ways of seeing textiles. One of the major findings was that committee members discussed exhibitions in ethnic/cultural terms, either as organizing thematic shows around ethnic textiles or as organizing shows to celebrate
ethnic/cultural events such as Black History Month or Chinese New Year. In this way, the committee followed dominant museum practices as described earlier.

Gender, on the other hand, was a non-issue at these committee meetings and hardly appeared in discussions. Women’s History Month or International Women’s Day were not mentioned as possible events for organizing a show, even though International Women’s Year was formative for founding the museum in 1975. This finding represents a shift from the initial focus of founders in the early stages of the museum development, where women’s contributions to textile production were acknowledged in museum documents and discussed in exhibitions. This is not to say that women were not recognized as major contributors to textile production by the current staff (comprised of women). Rather, this recognition was not considered as significant and as a possible focus for exhibitions. Consequently, feminist issues relating to the production of textiles were simply not on the agenda of committee discussions. The contemporary gallery, on the other hand, was gender representative among its members and in exhibitions. Both male and female artists were part of the committee and were represented in shows. However, the concern of committee members was again, around ethnic representation in shows as well as the ethnic composition of members within the committee.

Here, in a museum, which is devoted to textiles, historically a female enterprise, the concern of the exhibition committee is around ethnic representation, and the contemporary gallery is sensitively concerned with the representation of gender and ethnically balanced shows. This shift from Allen’s focus was also reflected in the changes made to the mission statements, where initially the focus was on textiles as a popular women’s work but later the changes were directed towards textiles as a “higher” aesthetic art form.

My exploration showed that in the early years the founders of the museum were actively engaged in creating the “museum’s ideology” through vision, mission statements, collection policy and exhibition work. The founders’ focus was on the need for a new kind of institution, which would be in contrast to “other” museums. This idea encompassed a general view of the role of the museum and the practice of collecting, exhibiting and conservation. A feminist perspective for museum work which is offered by Hein (2010) includes the same issues that Allen promoted for the museum: attention to the space itself; collection of common, ordinary, objects; rejecting canonicity; use of language that is not authoritative, not neutral nor genderless; multiple and alternative interpretations; the museum as a forum for debates and generally, attention to the overlooked and suppressed.

The founders’ approach offered a new vision for museum practice, which was largely in contrast to hegemonic museum work, at the time. Museums generally based their roles on collection and preservation of the most varied, extra-ordinary and “best quality” artifacts. Accessibility to displays and collections was never seen as the role of conventional museums.
**Between Popular Production and Artistic Production:**

My observations of the exhibition committee meetings revealed that questions related to *what* should be included in exhibitions and *how* it should be presented did appear during discussions. Observations allowed exposing tensions between the exhibition committee and the contemporary gallery committee on issues related to the presentation of contemporary textiles in *Threadworks*. The boundaries between art and craft in textile production were fixed within the museum. This is a useful example to stress Hall’s assertion about the social relations of meaning production and competing frameworks of knowledge within the museum which impact on the exhibiting process.

Observing the work of the acquisitions committee revealed the gap between Allen’s vision and the later approach of the museum’s administration. The latter’s approach is in line with conventional museums’ approach to valorize the quality and conditions of objects and the collection of rare and unique objects and textiles over the ordinary and common ones. My observations show that the museum has changed its approach to collecting, adopting this dominant approach: The observations of the acquisition committee allowed exposing the differences between Allen’s view that conservation of certain textiles was not necessary and that they could be displayed showing imperfections, as opposed to the current staff’s approach that refers to “pristine” condition and one-of-a-kind examples. This change in approach was also reflected in the planning stages of the acquisition show, *Art and Utility*, which served as an opportunity for me to follow an exhibit from the initial stages of planning in the exhibition committee through installation.
I expected the show to focus on housework and the ways in which these textiles were used in the context of home, as the curators reported during committee meetings. Yet, this understanding shifted during the presentation stage when the curators insisted that the focus of the show was recent acquisitions and they wanted to discuss the individual objects and the ways in which they supplement the collection. There was no attempt to make connections and highlight the context of home and housework as it related to household linens. This exhibit can serve as a case in point to show the shift between the founders’ approach in attempting to bridge the boundaries between the “private” space in the museum and the public areas of exhibitions, and the current approach that does not value this type of exhibition and approach. In this sense, the museum presents a shift from being “people” centered to “object” oriented whereas much of museum work and scholarship today is in the opposite direction.

The Macedonian exhibit, *From Baba’s Hope Chest*, presented an opportunity to explore a community-initiated exhibit at the museum. By including this exhibit in the study I wished to contribute to the growing museum literature on the relationship between museums and communities. The central question was who is to speak for the objects? Is it the museum professional or the people whose culture is/was based on the production and use of these objects? Some museum critics have argued that the essence of museums does not lie in the objects and collections. Rather, the museum’s essence lies in the stories and memories that are being told about these objects (Heuman Gurian, 2001). Still, the main question is the point of view through which the story is told and the object is understood. Hence, growing numbers of museums have invited community groups to share in the interpretation of objects as part of their social responsibility to be
inclusive and responsive to the public. The Macedonian case was unique in that people in the community approached the museum to organize a show of textiles. Yet, issues of power sharing in producing the show and tensions between the museum and the community over the meanings, the kind of knowledge that should accompany the textile as interpretive mode, characterized the planning process. The community curator’s approach to use oral history, memories, from women’s vantage point as the interpretive mode for the exhibition provided an emotional, intimate view of the textiles. The group effectively resisted the director’s demand to include an academic interpretation by a fashion history scholar, which, they claimed would change the focus of the show and the meaning of textiles for the women in the community. The community’s curatorial control of this show demonstrated the potential for counter-hegemonic forms of museum exhibits. But the fact that there were no other later attempts to initiate community-based shows undermines the possibilities for change at TMC.

This show is an example for the “contested terrain” in the exhibiting process. Despite the fact that Baba’s Hope Chest was an ethnic community exhibit which the museum supported in principle, the community had to struggle to insert their own interpretation to their material culture. Power relations in the production of meaning turned this exhibit into a contested terrain. The question of the knowledge to be used to interpret the textiles is contested.

In concluding this section on meaning production at the museum, a distinction could be drawn between Allen’s approach to interpretation and the meaning of textiles on the one hand and the later, more conventional, position of the museum as reflected in committee discussions, and planning shows, on the other. This view was also reflected in
the work of the Macedonian community and their interpretation of the textiles as integrating both work and culture. Both can be seen as oppositional to the conventional museum practices. However, there is a need to distinguish between them: Allen, the founder, incorporated an innovative approach to museum work which largely contested dominant approaches by focusing on popular, everyday textile production. However, he did not work directly with women or community groups to present their vantage point. Rather, he presented textiles on their behalf. The community-based exhibit shared the same approach to change conventional ways of seeing and was “grassroots” initiative. The group managed to control the exhibit but exerted limited control of the museum as an organization and did not transform TMC practices as a result.

The museum subsequently moved towards a “professional”, institutionalized, mainstream stage where “quality” work, academic and scholarly interpretation, was valued and constituted most discussions. First-hand knowledge rooted in people’s experiences was questioned; partnerships with communities were not encouraged. It is interesting to note that the issues, which were raised by Allen and characterized the museum’s work since its inception in 1975, became the focus of museum scholarship only in the past two decades. In other words, the museum was ahead of its time when it was established in 1975 in promoting an innovative and unique vision for museums and an understanding of textiles as a popular production, part of domestic work and as a creative outlet for women. However, with the departure of the founders, in the early 1990s, the museum has shifted direction away from some of these more radical views, and changed its focus from women to ethnic/culture production; from the context of work in the production of textile to the context of art and aesthetics; thus, it has become a more
conservative, conventional museum. While museums in recent years are generally shifting away from being object-centered towards becoming more people-oriented, the TMC is moving in the opposite direction: becoming more centered on objects.

I argue that the process of meaning production at the museum can be followed within the various museum committees where such production is actually “at work”. Observations of committees’ work enabled a deeper understanding of the dynamics of museum work that would not have been possible by using content analysis of museum documents and interviews only. The latter may serve to complement the insights that were gathered at the committee meetings. But the main advantage of these observations was that I was able to see the practice of museum work: what was actually going on during discussions. These do not usually appear in the meeting minutes. This method contrasts with interviewing museum workers outside of their working context, as well as merely using museum documents that spell out the vision and purpose of the museum in a theoretical manner, which is not necessarily translated into practice. Therefore, this method of observation provides some promising research tools for understanding meaning production on the museum level, beyond the analysis of collections and exhibitions.

Presentation of Meaning in Exhibitions: Looking for women, work and culture

This stage refers to the ways in which meanings are circulated and communicated through exhibitions and docent work. A review of the exhibits curated by Max Allen shows that these three exhibits closely reflect the main ideas, which appeared in the various museum writings around its inception. There are three common “threads” that run through these exhibits: First, all three exhibits explore textiles from the perspective of
women’s work, which is also recognized as highly creative. Hence, work and artistic/cultural expression were inseparable in women’s lives in all the various examples that are presented within these exhibits. In the exhibition *eleven simple quilts* Allen says, “Quilts had a job and a hobby. Their job was to keep people warm. Their hobby was to look nice”. **Second**, it is recognized that mainstream museums show the most extraordinary, varied, elaborate, and fancy textiles that are in their best quality and condition. Here, the TMC featured textiles which were heavily used, walked on, slept under, worn, etc., but still worth collecting because they presented the popular, common women’s history of work. **Thirdly**, these textiles should be considered as art simply because “they played an important aesthetic role in societies which never adopted easel painting and the framed picture” (*Rugs that aren’t Rugs*). Allen elaborates extensively about the contrast in understanding Art in the West as opposed to non-western societies: the conception of art in the West is not widely shared by people outside the western world. In all three exhibits Allen provides a comparison between the notion of art that is presented in western museums as opposed to non-western cultures where art has always been part of everyday life and had a useful aspect.

Allen’s approach to textiles is anthropological since it reflects on art as the actual experience for women in various cultures rather than the dominant aesthetic approach used generally by museums. Anthropological studies (Conrad 2006: 493-502) of art in non-western societies challenged the concept of art itself, as it was understood in the West. First, they show that many cultures lack terms that can be translated easily as “art”. Yet, even without a word for art, people everywhere do associate an aesthetic experience with objects, sounds, tastes and even events that have certain creative qualities. In many
cultures, the role of art lacks definition because it isn’t viewed as a separate activity. Often, it has a specific purpose, function, such as religious/spiritual or utilitarian, which relates to the everyday life of the people. The TMC museum in its earlier, formative years adopted an anthropological view in discussing textile production, which was also feminist-based. However, current museum workers have adopted a more professional/conventional approach, which contrasts with this vision.

**Labels and Text:** It has been argued that the ways in which labels are written can promote inclusion or exclusion (Heumann Gurian, 1991; Ravelli, 2005). There are strategies that can encourage interaction both between the viewer and the object and between the viewers themselves. Writing labels that are conversational in tone may help viewers feel included in the process of “making sense” of objects and the exhibition, in general. The strategy used by Allen in writing labels for his shows was informal in style and accessible to viewers. This style was conversational and not scholarly or authoritative; this method allowed for multiple and alternative voices of interpretation, raising questions and recognizing the lack of documented information. These label-writing strategies were largely absent in dominant museums’ presentations of textile production and women’s work. It is only recently that museum scholars like Hooper Greenhill (2000) and Sandell (2007) have proposed that museums should offer multiple meanings for their visitors’ consideration as every show can be seen from different points of view. In this sense, the founder’s interpretive approach to the presentation of textiles was a radical innovation, at the time.

**Docent Work:** Docent tours focused generally on the individual objects on display, talking about different dimensions such as color, design, patterns, and techniques
of production. The artifacts were at the centre of the tour, rather than the women who produced these textiles and their stories. The objects, rather than the subject, were understood by docents, as the primary goals of touring an exhibition. Docents studied and indeed, incorporated information beyond the text of the exhibit. Often, they ignored some of the information that was provided by the curators, stating that it was not substantiated. This was apparent in *Visual Feast* when Allen discussed the Birth Symbol and in *Baba’ Hope Chest*. Docents avoided debates or controversial issues. Their tours followed an accepted script. As museum volunteers entrusted with the role of presenting the museum to the public, their goal was to highlight the museum as a professional cultural institution. This mode of presentation could be interpreted as hegemonic and is in accordance with Katriel’s (2010) findings concerning the interpretations docents offered in Israeli Kibbutz settlement museums.

The exhibition, *This is not a poem*, which focused on Black story quilts, can serve as an example to discuss changes between encoding meanings that were emphasized by the curator during planning stages in committee meetings, which transformed during the exhibition phase. The initial goal to stress the roles women played in the domestic sphere contributing to the family’s economy, changed with the inclusion of more contemporary story quilts made by artists. The result was a show of contemporary quilt-making by “artists” as opposed to quilts made by ordinary women as part of their daily work at home. The few utilitarian quilts that were presented remained effectively invisible. Therefore, it is significant to note that in the presentation process, gender issues are neglected or remain marginal while artistic traditions are emphasized. Thus, quilting as a textile production that integrates both women’s work and culture is not manifested
explicitly in this circulation stage even though this was the initial goal in planning the show. This is a good example to highlight Hall’s model, which recognizes the independence of each stage in the process that has the potential to change meanings. Hall claims that changes in meanings can be produced in each stage of the communication model. These changes reflect his assertion about the “fluidity of meanings” according to preferred readings. Generally, this preferred reading is associated with the audience “readings” but here, the significance lies in the attention to fluidity in the presentation stage by museum workers.

The Macedonian community show presents the textiles in a unique form that contextualizes the cloth in the environment within which it was produced using women’s oral histories. These presentations portray the women as active participants in the everyday life of the community. The display of cloth and textiles is arranged according to thematic community experiences. This approach does not follow the standard hegemonic display of objects and descriptive labels. The curator acknowledged that this form of presentation allowed for a direct communication between the costume lenders and viewers. This testimony highlights aspects in women’s lives that were previously suppressed in the community’s collective history. Thus, the presentation in the museum can be seen as an effective tool used by the women to reclaim their place within the community.

*Art and Utility* presented an example of the difference between denotative and connotative aspects of the textiles in Hall’s terms. Even though the display shows the context of “home”, work is invisible. The display, indeed, creates the private parts of “the home” in the gallery through the use of bed, curtains, laundry basket and a clothesline but
the context of work and women who “work” these textiles was absent. This “treatment” of women’s work by the museum underestimates their domestic labor and contribution to the household; this is typical of most museums and is reflective of dominant views of housework in the society at large where women’s work at home is not valued as “work”.

And so, despite the presence of home-related accessories of housework in the gallery, household linens were not addressed as part of women’s work. Instead the focus is on aesthetics, decorative and cultural elements of the objects. In Hall’s terms this is a change between the first and the second stages of meaning production within the museum.

It has been argued that museums’ methods of display do not enable a context for showing “work” at home: when dealing with the home, most exhibits use displays that are neutral, neat and clean so you cannot “see” the work that is performed in homes. Similarly, here the linen were neatly folded in the laundry basket, the bed was nicely dressed, the towels clean on a rack, so there is no “work” to be seen. Sociologists who have studied housework argue that the work women do at home is devalued because it is invisible: You only see it when it’s not “done”. It could be that a different display, one that shows the home unorganized and unclean, where there is work to be done, would not allow ignoring the work and the women who traditionally were doing it.

The point to note here is that if women’s work is not addressed in a show on household goods, it is unlikely to appear in other shows at the museum. A review of later exhibits at the museum to date (2011) reveals that there has been no other show which addressed household textiles in the context of home and housework since Art and Utility.
Decoding: Audience Reception

Understanding the ways in which museum members and visitors responded to the meanings offered at the museum through exhibitions is key to following Hall’s model of encoding and decoding. Audience responses contribute to the understanding of hegemonic reproduction or the possibilities for challenge. Hall’s model provides an opportunity for reception of meanings that are not necessarily congruent with the encoding of curators’ intended meanings. Thus, it allows for a negotiated or oppositional decoding by the audience. Much of the current research in visitor studies is in this direction as well (Sandell, 2007; Pekarik, 2010; Yellis, 2010). Visitors do not necessarily follow and accept the meanings of exhibitions as they are offered by museums.

Most research on museum audience is focused on visitors. My findings show that TMC members and visitors are distinct groups beyond sharing personal interests and love for textiles. TMC members have a vested interest in the museum and therefore should receive more attention. The members (largely women) understood the museum in similar ways to those offered by Allen, who proposed an innovative view for the museum, the collection and exhibitions. Members appreciated the unique features of the museum’s space, accessibility, ordinary, common textiles (made for love and use by owners, not for profit or art), and the specific point of view (in contrast to “other” museums). These features could be seen as oppositional, in contrast to the practice of mainstream museums. Members expressed views, which were closer to the founder’s vision than to the later museum administration. At the time of the main field work in this study, accessibility to the textiles had become more limited, touching was not encouraged, the collection was not open and the point of view was shifting towards the hegemonic
practices of established museums. In 2011, accessibility to the textiles is formally not available to TMC visitors. The use of glass cases and ropes to distance people from getting close to the textiles is more commonly seen at exhibitions (even in pictures posted on the website one can see the glass cases). Visitors are reminded on the website about “Artifact Safety”.

For the founders, allowing people to touch and feel textiles was part of a deliberate decision of accessibility to open collections. According to Barr (2005:104), in recent years the “embargo” on touching objects in museums is being questioned:

> Blind and visually impaired people’s demand for access through touch is challenging not just because it brings rights of access into conflict with museum conservation but rather concerns over conservation may mask and serve to legitimate preconceptions about who should have access to collections? What counts as dirt? How artifacts should be enjoyed. Resistance to touch is less a concern for preservation than it is a defense of territory of expertise.

And so, the direction of the TMC today is towards “excellence”: “We practice high museological standards as we preserve and promote textiles of worldwide significance” (on the values of the museum see [http://www.textilemuseum.ca/about/mission.cfm](http://www.textilemuseum.ca/about/mission.cfm)).

Members and visitors differ in their reception of meanings: most visitors did accept the offered interpretation in exhibitions. Such was the case in Art and Utility where visitors reiterated the information that was offered in labels. Only after my probe, they “saw” other possibilities. This approach by the visitors could be interpreted, following Hall, as accepting the encoded message, thus working within the hegemonic position. Visitors to both community-based shows: the Macedonian and the Black quilts show could be understood as decoding the exhibits from oppositional or negotiated positions, in Hall’s terms. Despite an explicit focus on women’s contributions in terms of
work and culture, visitors to these shows, who were mostly from the community, preferred to understand the shows in community or ethnic terms. The shows for them told the collective history of the community and offered a sense of empowerment. Visitors to these shows did not necessarily accept a feminist approach and preferred to interpret this show as part of their history. Museum exhibits of marginalized groups’ material culture help to validate the community’s history and collective identity.

Applying Hall’s communication model to examine meaning production at TMC, its circulation through exhibitions and public reception, can contribute to the understanding of museums as cultural producers, and exhibitions as contested terrains for competing cultural positions. The model is especially significant to understanding meaning production in museum settings since it takes into account not only the varied positions of the audience, but the specific conditions of exhibit production, as I perceived it through observations of committee meetings.

**Recent Exhibitions, Recent Changes**

In this section, I wish to provide an update on the museum’s vision and the exhibitions that were presented between the years 1997 to 2011. Allen, though not involved in the daily work of the museum, has curated a few exhibitions since 1997. A review of the themes and content of these exhibits shows that he continues to communicate his vision and ideas about textiles and the multiple stories conveyed through cloth. A few later exhibitions, which he has curated, are particularly significant for the purpose of my study as they relate to women and their role in textile production: *Gather Beneath the Banner: Political and Religious Banners of the WCTU* (1999), and *Living in Afghanistan* (2002). However, the museum has adopted new mission and vision statements for dealing with
the collection and exhibitions, which point it towards a professional art organization committed to quality and professional excellence.

The introduction to the TMC’s website currently reads as follows:

The Textile Museum of Canada is one of Toronto’s most engaging visual arts organizations…the permanent collection celebrates cultural diversity…the TMC has gained international recognition for the quality and importance of its collection, the excellence of its exhibitions and programming. Visitors can experience the traditions, skills and creative processes that make textile arts so engaging (http://www.textilemuseum.ca/about/ retrieved 3/11/2011, my emphasis).

The focus is on visual arts, cultural diversity (not women) and the quality, excellence, of collection, the extra-ordinary, rather than the ordinary. This is a reversal of the approach that formed the foundation of TMC in 1975 and in contrast to some progressive work at museums today such as Women’s Museum in Denmark that collects worn, chipped clothing as part of women’s history (http://kvidemuseet.dk). The mission of TMC is to “engage the public by fostering knowledge, creativity and awareness” and its vision is “to promote an understanding of human identity through textiles” (ibid: ibid).

The TMC museum’s website documents a selection of past exhibits since the early 1990’s, using categories through which one can search the exhibits. The categories are: around the world; Canada; clothing; communication; economics; fantasy; home; identity; mapping; narratives; nature; politics; signs and symbols; tradition; women. It is important to note that the exhibits that I chose to examine in my study are not documented in the website, nor are other shows that were on display during the 1990s. A review of the exhibits that are documented within the various categories shows that most of the exhibits were not based on the museum’s collection but rather presented within the contemporary
gallery and guest-curated by contemporary textile artists. The most relevant categories that relate to my study are: Home; Women; Clothing; Canada.

**Home:** nine exhibits are featured in this category, of which five are contemporary textile art exhibits. Of the remaining four, three exhibits focus on ethnic groups (India, Afghanistan, Philippines). The exhibit *Stitching Women’s Lives: Sojuny and Khatwa from Bihar, India* (Sept. 1999-Feb 2000) show quilts of Adithi, a self-help co-operative in Bihar, India. The village women tell their stories through quilting and in the words of the curators: “these textiles are an innovative form of contemporary folk art”. Here we can witness again, the distinction between textile arts and crafts, as the women from Bihar are not considered artists even though their quilts are not made to be used but to “tell stories”. *Living in Afghanistan* (June 2002-October 2002) was curated by Max Allen and Natalia Nekrassova and was based on the museum’s collection. This exhibit focused on homemade textiles made by women for their family’s use:

> In recent months Afghanistan has been in the news almost every day. The Afghanistan shown on television seems to consist of furious men, rioting, fighting...But, there is another Afghanistan whose culture is ancient, diverse and truly extraordinary. We hope this invisible Afghanistan becomes visible through the observation of textiles in this exhibition...Afghanistan is one of few places in the world where even today, home-made textiles are still produced and worn. Wool, silk, rugs, embroideries...are all still made by women to warm and decorate themselves, their husbands, their children and even their animals...young women are taught to weave, embroider...and these traditional dresses are highly valued with the best ones still carefully kept in mother’s trunks for future generations.

Here, Allen continues to emphasize the work women do at home which is regarded both as work and artistic production. The exhibit *Islands of Embellishment: Transforming Traditions in Philippine Textiles* (Feb-June 2003) “highlights how artisans and designers...refashion cloth making into contemporary visual statements”. The show
focused on contemporary textile production within the home or in small workshops that enables “female artisans” to access new economic opportunities. Members of the Philippine community in Toronto loaned garments to be displayed in the exhibition but were not involved in the process of making this exhibit. Another show in this category is *Poke Out Her Eyes and Other Stories* (1993). The two textile artists who curated the show “invited people through calls of submissions to tell their stories about cloth that held personal meaning”. The textiles were accompanied by the personal stories as the people told them. Except for Allen’s exhibit on living in Afghanistan, these exhibits do not discuss the home as a unit of textile production, or textiles as a form of housework. These shows are not based on the museum’s collection. It is important to note that most of the exhibits that Max Allen curated throughout the 1990s and until today do incorporate this vision but are missing from the website’s documentation of past exhibits. In addition, the exhibits that are examined in my study could be included in this “Home” category, especially, the exhibit *Art and Utility*, which shows household linens. All of these exhibits are overlooked.

**Women:** Eight of the ten exhibits included in this category are based on contemporary textile art. The other two exhibits are *Stitching Women’s Lives: Sojuni and Khatwa from Bihar, India* (1999-2000) and *Business Women: Textiles and Commerce of the H’mong, Southeast Asia*. These two exhibits focus on contemporary attempts to create economic opportunities for women. Neither relies on the museum’s collection. Again, the exhibits that I examined could be included in this category, especially those curated by Allen. In addition, the museum displayed textile shows that focused on women’s involvement in textile production, but they are all absent from the museum’s website documentation.
One such show is *Gather Beneath the Banner: Political and Religious Banners of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union 1883-1932* (1999) which was curated by Max Allen and Wendy Harker from the Toronto archives of the W.C.T.U. Others are *Mothers of Invention* (2000) concerned women’s inventions in textile-related tools and techniques, co-curated with feminist archaeologist Barber, and *Fabrications: Stitching Ourselves Together*, curated by a feminist sociologist (Church 2001). Another show that could be presented under this category is the Judy Chicago (2009) survey of work since 1971 which was curated by Allyson Mitchell, a contemporary artist and academic.

**Clothing:** This category consists of eight shows, of which six are contemporary textile art. The other two are *Living in Afghanistan* (2002), which was curated by Max Allen and discussed above, and *Cloth that grows on Trees* (2007) also curated by Max Allen. Yet, many past exhibits which focused on cloth production and clothing in various cultures are absent, including all of the shows examined in my study.

**Canada:** This category presents nine shows and all of them are based on contemporary textile art. Canada has a long tradition of textile production (quilting, hooked rugs), which was largely documented at the TMC through various exhibitions. Moreover, this tradition was the impetus for opening of TMC in 1975 as a museum dedicated to the collection of these textiles. Yet, the website only presents contemporary textile art shows under this category.

**Community exhibits:** Two community-based shows were presented at the TMC--the Macedonian show and Fabrications. But neither is documented in the website. Both share some common features: both were initiated outside the museum world; both are based on textile production as part of domestic work, to provide for the family and the community;
the mode of interpretation is personal, intimate, based on memories and stories; both are successful in attracting visitors who are not “museum goers”, people who never visited museums before; both elicit powerful emotions among the visitors in ways that were not observed in other exhibitions. It is clear that if museums wish to expand their audience this is one of the ways they can use community partnerships, which allows the people to present their culture in their own terms. This would make it more likely that museums are seen as relevant to people’s lives.

Three other exhibits involved community consultations: Business Women: Textiles and Commerce of the H’mong of Southeast Asia (1998), Indian textiles Stitching Women’s Lives (Sept 1999- Feb 2000) and Islands of Embellishment from the Philippines (2003). All three were initiated, organized and curated by the museum. The exhibits integrated textiles and costumes from the respective communities in Toronto; however, the people from these communities were not involved in the development of these exhibits. Yet, these exhibits discuss women’s daily experiences in the context of their culture. All of the shows are contemporary examples of women’s involvement and accomplishments in the market economy and are guest-curated by artists and academics.

Mothers of Invention: 25 Millennia of Innovation (May-October, 2000)

I turn now to explore this exhibition, which was “one of the Museum for Textiles’ Millennium projects” (Text, summer 2000). As the title suggests, the stated goal was to trace the historical development of spinning and weaving through archeological sources and examples from the museum’s collection. The exhibit was created and based upon the work of archaeologist Dr. Elizabeth Wayland Barber in her book, Women’s Work: the
first 20,000 years (1994). Barber was the co-curator of the show (together with the TMC’s curator Marijke Kerkhoven). The press release for the show reads as follows:

*Mothers of Invention: 25 Millennia of Innovation* explores the key developments in the textile arts, as invented by our ancestresses that can be traced back to a single pre-historic thread. The exhibition demonstrates through artistic and cultural expression using the medium of textiles, the earliest artifacts made by humans…(May, 5/2000, my emphasis)

This is the only time “women” are mentioned in this press release. There is no mention of the specific central role women had in creating these textiles as it is discussed in Barber’s book. Moreover, in my examination of the text and labels which accompanied the show, the words “humans,” “people,” “ancestors,” “spinners,” “weavers,” “European textile workers” etc. are commonly used to refer to the makers or producers of the textiles throughout history. These are gender-neutral terms, which mask women’s primary role in inventing and working with thread, as discussed extensively in Barber’s book. Different ethnic groups are mentioned, such as “Chinese,” “Egyptian and “Eastern European” but not the women within these groups as those who primarily worked with textiles. This method of presenting the artifacts makes the gender and identity of the makers – all of whom were women – invisible. They are not acknowledged, nor is their work. Thus it brings into question, why the exhibit was entitled “Mothers of Invention.” Where are the “mothers?” How and why were these “mothers” connected to textiles? These questions are not part of the exhibition yet they are the focus of Barber’s book. In the first chapter, Barber begins by saying:

For Millennia women have sat together spinning, weaving, and sewing. Why should textiles have become *their* craft par excellence, rather than the work of men? Was it always thus, and if so, why? (Barber, 1994:29)

She ends the first chapter saying:
What, then, is the history of this relationship between women and textiles? When did women begin to take up and develop the fiber crafts? How did women and their special work affect society, and how did the societies affect them? These interactions will form the story of this book (ibid: 41).

Hence, Barber’s book is feminist research on the relationship between women and textile production. Yet, the exhibition is not presented from a women’s perspective: it is about technique, the “how” of textile production, not “who” (the female producers) or the linkage between the women and their production. As such, the exhibition cannot be defined as centered on feminist questions. This example illustrates the focus of TMC on objects and techniques of production rather than the social history of women’s work with textiles. I suggest seeing this exhibit as yet another example that points to the lack of interest and focus on women’s work in TMC. It is important to note that this exhibition cannot be found on the TMC website list of past exhibitions.

This review of exhibitions shows that the TMC clearly prefers to highlight contemporary textile arts in exhibitions and on the website. This selective documentation of exhibits in the website excludes women’s perspective in textile production historically as one that integrated the creative capacities of women on the one hand and was a form of housework, on the other. Changes in vision and direction of TMC can be seen also by looking at the website: The focus is on “international recognition”; “quality and importance of collection”; “excellence of exhibitions and programming”; “high museological standards” (www.textilemuseumcanada.ca).

These changes symbolize a move towards professionalization of TMC and aspirations to a center-stage position as a dominant player on the national and international museum scene. This direction is quite different from the vision the museum founders had, as well as the direction of current progressive museums such as the
women’s museum in Denmark which echoes that same vision: The latter museum opened in 1984, recognizing that women’s labors have left few material traces and therefore “collections focused on women’s lives implies searching for what has been lost, worn out, or eaten up”. (http://kvindemuseet.dk) This museum displays permanent exhibitions on housekeeping and housework, women’s lives in history, family and work life, etc. The focus is on the ordinary daily experiences of women’s lives and not professional preservation or high museological standards.

TMC did not continue to foster the critical perspective that Allen brought to the interpretation of textiles. It was quite surprising for me that although the TMC staff was comprised of women they were not interested in emphasizing a feminist approach. Rather, they adopted a traditional hegemonic direction in museum work. The denial by these women of space for women in the interpretation and programming served a purpose that I understood as an attempt to be accepted and treated seriously as a professional mainstream museum. It is far safer for the museum to engage in cultural diversity, celebrating cultural events in the context of ethnic textiles than promoting a feminist approach. Working within a cultural framework is in line with Canadian multiculturalism policy and reflects the cultural diversity in Toronto.

**Recommendations and some open questions for further study:**

Based on this study, I would strongly suggest applying Hall’s model as a method for museum research of the process of meaning production, circulation in exhibitions and reception by the public. Hall’s model allows examining this process in ways that were not considered previously by museum scholars. Hall examined the entire circuit of communication and applied it to understanding television. In the same manner, the model
could be utilized to understand the process through which meanings are produced and shared by the museum as well as the examination of oppositional possibilities.

- Using observations of museum workers “at work” in committee meetings enables an understanding of the actual process and struggle over meanings in planning exhibitions. Further, an opportunity to follow an exhibit from initial stages of planning to installation and audience reception can highlight questions of hegemonic/oppositional tendencies among the public.

- Audience studies in museums generally examine visitors, not museum members. Research on the role and place of museum members within the organization is currently limited. Most of the research on membership is market-oriented in terms of museum services to manage their members (Slater, 2003). The study of museum membership and their understanding of museum work is a neglected area in museum scholarship. More research needs to be done on members (as opposed to visitors) as a social group with vested interests in the museum. The findings in this study show that members and visitors are distinct groups in their understanding of the museum. Most of the visitors were visiting the museum for the first time as compared with the members, who were informed about the museum and its vision as defined by the founders.

- Museums need to utilize more feminist theory and research if they are to be responsive to gender issues in society. Deepwell’s (2006) and Hein’s (2010) research on what constitutes a feminist exhibition and what the contributions of such exhibitions are, remain relevant today in the search for equitable representation of gender relations. Museums are slow in incorporating a feminist
perspective in exhibitions despite the growth of feminist studies in academia. Ethnicity, race and cultural indigenous issues are routinely discussed in museum exhibitions, and community groups are invited to take part in museum work. However, this is not the case with women and women’s issues. An attempt to explain this discrepancy has to take into account the characteristics of multiculturalism policies, on the one hand and the stigma that the word “feminist” still connotes in the public, on the other. Yet, museums, as cultural producers, should take a lead in the process of changing attitudes in our society. Levin (2010:49-50) notes the value of incorporating feminist theory in museum work from collections to interpretation, which can highlight new angles for exhibitions and challenge “art” as a gendered concept. Hein (2010) outlines specifically how a feminist perspective may contribute to changes in collection policies, language use and multiple interpretations.

- One of the “contested terrains” in exhibiting material culture is the question of interpretation. First-hand knowledge, oral history, stories of acquisitions vs. “expert” scholarly knowledge, as methods for interpretation are issues that still need to be studied. Lagerkvist (2006: 55-56) provides a useful analysis of the conflicts that arise from these methods: the “politics of universalism” which is based on ideas of equality, all social groups should be mainstreamed into society and its institutions on the one hand, and the “politics of difference” which recognizes the distinct identity of social groups, on the other. The latter should offer more freedom for groups to define themselves as they wish. Allen, Wood (Macedonian show) and Church (Fabrications show) offered personal insights to
the understanding of objects on display. Their usage of language was informal yet informative. Appadurai et al (1992) pointed to the inherent problem in the presentation of cultural objects that were never made for museum display. They maintain that there is a gap between the dynamic life these objects enjoyed in the real world and the stasis of the museum. A personal, intimate mode of interpretation that integrates stories from the object’s previous “life” is the means to overcome this gap. The two community-based shows (Baba’s Hope Chest and Fabrications) used personal stories in interpreting the textiles. These evoked powerful emotional responses by visitors who connected with the exhibitions in ways that were not observed in other exhibitions.

- The question of what constitutes counter-hegemonic practices in museum work deserves further research. There is a need to study more specialized small museums such as women’s museums around the world in order to understand counter-hegemonic possibilities for social change. Small, specialized museums have the potential to pose a challenge to dominant museums and transform conventional work in museums as long as specific groups initiate and mobilize for social transformation. The women’s museum in Denmark could be regarded as counter-hegemonic as:

  It started as a grassroots initiative and built in close co-operation with women of all ages and social classes…it is a child of the women’s movement…there is no end to the subjects that can be illustrated with women’s situations as a starting point. (http://kvindemuseet.dk)

This example demonstrates the capacity of the museum to offer a feminist vision as it emerged from the women’s movement initiatives to change general attitudes about women. Large, dominant museums, in major cities do not generally exhibit controversial
shows that would pose a political or social challenge. These museums are generally part of the consensus, and relate to the canon. Peripheral museums are more adventurous and daring in this regard and therefore, can offer specific visions (Hein, 2010: 54; Ginaton, the curator of Tel Aviv Museum, in an interview, in an Israeli newspaper (http://www.nrg.co.il/online/47/ARTZ/318/980.html retrieved Dec 24/2011, in Hebrew).

In conclusion, the potential for oppositional practices of the TMC in the formative years of the museum was demonstrated. The intent of the founders was to challenge conventional modes of museum work, collection practices and exhibition modes. However, these intentions can be said to have faded away with the departure of the founders in early 1990s, even though members still echoed the original “ethos” four years later (at the time of the main field work for this study). The unique features that were offered by the founders in opposition to other museums, such as the homey space, specific point of view in exhibitions and an accessible collection of common and utilitarian textiles, could be understood as oppositional forms to dominant museums. However, these do not constitute counter-hegemonic practices: the work in the museum was not rooted in women’s lives, the founders never worked with women’s groups with the goal of transforming their lives, and they never called for a complete change in general museums’ work. The TMC has continued to evolve in recent years in a different direction, demonstrating hegemonic values compared to recent progressive initiatives in other museums that are in line with the feminist vision that was promoted in founding the TMC in 1975. Grassroots initiatives in/forming the women’s museum in Denmark together with a clear feminist vision and perspective for museum work could be seen as
key factors in identifying it as counter-hegemonic. As for TMC, the potential for oppositional practice is probably part of its history, not future.
MUSEUM FOR TEXTILES - VISITOR SURVEY

DATE:

Hello, the museum is conducting a visitor survey and would appreciate it if you could answer a few questions for us. Thank you for your time and valued comments. Please return completed form to Reception Desk.

1. Visitor, are you? (please circle the appropriate response)
   1. Member
   2. Student
   3. Senior
   4. General audience

2. How did you learn about the museum?
   1. Friends who visited here
   2. Member of the museum
   3. Newspaper, magazine
   4. Radio, television
   5. Hotel/tourist information
   6. Other. Please specify: ___________________________

3. Are you from?
   1. Toronto
   2. Out of town (Canada)
   3. U.S.A.
   4. International

4. Is this your first visit to the museum?
   1. Yes
   2. No

5. What is your reason for this visit to the museum? (circle up to 3)
   1. To see the general collection
   2. To see a specific exhibition. Please specify: __________
   3. Gallery tour/talk
   4. Research in the library
   5. Purchase in the Book/Gift shop
   6. Other. Please specify: ___________________________

6. Do you think the Museum for Textiles should focus more on issues related to:
   1. Ethnic/cultural creativity
   2. Women's creativity
   3. Textiles as Art
   4. Other (please specify) ... ______________________
   5. Do not think the museum needs to focus on specific issues.
   please turn over...
7. To which of these cultural institutions do you currently belong or subscribe?
   1. Museum/Gallery
   2. Textiles related (such as weavers guilds etc.)
   3. Performance arts (such as opera, symphony, theater)
   4. None of the above.

8. May we ask your age group?
   1. Under 20
   2. 21 to 34
   3. 35 to 64
   4. 65 or over

9. Please circle:
   1. Female
   2. Male

10. Do you have a continuing interest or involvement in textiles as a hobby or profession? What is it?

11. Please tell us what is your occupational status?

12. Would you share with us your experience at the museum today? What were your expectations? What did you enjoy most?

13. Do you have any other ideas, comments, suggestions, regarding the museum practices in general?

Thank you again for participating in the survey. Your input is valuable to the museum. Please return the completed form to the reception desk.
Appendix B

The Museum for Textiles: Membership Survey.

The purpose of this membership survey is twofold: first, to provide members with an opportunity to tell us how the Museum can serve them better; and secondly, to provide the Museum with a better picture of its immediate public community.

About the Museum in general

1. What was it about the Museum that attracted you to become a member?

2. What makes the Museum significant to you in relation to other Museums?

3. Do you think that the Museum needs to address specific issues that relate to [please circle the appropriate response]
   a. Ethnic/cultural creativity
   b. Textiles as Art
   c. Women's creativity
   d. Other issues [please specify]

4. Do you think the Museum needs to target mainly visitors from
   a. Ethnic, minority cultures
   b. Women
   c. Textile Enthusiasts
   d. Other groups [please specify]
   e. Do not think that the Museum needs to target specific groups.

Membership Information

5. What type of membership do you have?
   a. Individual - $30.00
   b. Contributing - $100.00
   c. Family/Dual - $45.00
   d. Supporting - $500.00

6. What would encourage you to join at a higher level of membership?
   a. Free guest tickets
   b. Free exhibition catalogues
   c. Reciprocal privileges at other museums [Bata Shoe Museum]
   d. Higher discounts in the shop
   e. A level between the contributing and supporting levels - $250.00
   f. Other

7. How long have you been a member of the Museum for Textiles?
   a. 1 to 2 years
   b. 3 to 5 years
   c. 6 to 9 years
   d. 10 years or more

8. To which of these cultural Institutions do you currently belong or subscribe?
   a. Museums or Galleries
   b. Textile-related Guilds, professional/hobby organizations
   c. Performance Arts [such as, opera, ballet, symphony]
   d. Other [please specify]
   e. Do not belong to any cultural institution except the Museum.

9. How often did you visit the Museum for Textiles during the past year?
   a. 1 to 2 times
   b. 3 to 5 times
   c. 6 or more times
   d. Did not visit during the past year.
10. What draws you most to the Museum? (please circle up to three)
   a. Openings
   b. Tours
   c. Library
   d. General viewing
   e. Lectures
   f. Specific exhibitions
   g. Gift/book shop
   h. Volunteer work
   i. Other

11. What would bring you back for repeat visits?
   a. Films
   b. Sunday talks focusing on one exhibition
   c. Workshops
   d. Guided tours (once a month)
   e. Special tour "behind the scenes" on conservation methods, study rooms and collection storage
   f. Special lecture series
   g. Other

12. How actively are you involved in the Museum?
   a. Regular volunteering
   b. Considering volunteering (please contact Claire Holzberg or Susan Griffin at the Museum at (416) 599-5321)
   c. Occasional volunteering
   d. Member

Background Information

13. What is your highest level of formal education?
   a. Elementary school
   b. High school
   c. Some community college or university
   d. College certificate or diploma
   e. Undergraduate university degree
   f. Some graduate university study
   g. Graduate university degree

14. What is your age group?
   a. Under 20
   b. 21 to 34
   c. 35 to 64
   d. 65 and over


16. What is (or was) your occupation? (please be as specific as possible)

17. Do you practice any art as a hobby or profession?
   a. Yes, and it is related to textiles.
   b. Yes, and it is related to the fine arts.
   c. Yes, and it is related to other crafts.
   d. No.

Please feel free to use the space below or use a separate sheet for any other comments about the Museum.

It would be helpful if you would put the first three digits of your postal code to help identify regional preferences.
Thank you for participating in the survey, your input is valuable to the Museum. Please mail this form, in the return envelope provided, to:
The Museum for Textiles, 55 Centre Avenue, Toronto, Ontario. M5G 2H5
Attention: Elise Dintiman
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