Legacy of Collector George Hewitt Myers

Carol Bier, *The Textile Museum*
A CULTURAL JEWEL in the nation’s capital,*

The Textile Museum* is a testament to the vision and unerring eye of its founder, George Hewitt Myers.*

Established in 1925, this small museum has assumed a revered place in the international museum community not only for the quality of its collections and library, but also for its leadership in the study, preservation, and interpretation of the textile arts. Over the years it has been the flagship institution for the conservation and display of textiles around the world based upon the foresight of Myers. Today, The Textile Museum’s exhibitions and educational initiatives distinguish it as a centre of cultural activity and place it at the forefront of contemporary museum currents in North America.

Last year’s exhibition “Rugs and Textiles of Late Imperial China” exemplifies the bountiful legacy of George Hewitt Myers. Early this century the finest and oldest Chinese rugs were not yet in great demand by America’s leading families. As a collector who avidly pursued undervalued carpets, Myers acquired many Chinese rugs after the fall of the Qing Empire in 1911.* These formed a core for the development of an exhibition about the relationship of wool and silk in textile arts of the expanded Imperial domain of China under the Qing emperors. The exhibition also rests upon the foundation laid by Myers for the conservation of textiles, which has led to the development of new methods of display and storage that have become latter-day standards. The vast array of educational offerings associated with this exhibition reflects the concern and support advanced by George Hewitt Myers for the active utilisation of collections to educate, instilling in people of diverse ages and interests an appreciation of good craftsmanship, design, ingenuity and beauty.

Myers advanced these objectives personally. In 1936 he founded the Independent School Art Instructors Association and annually hosted week-long seminars at the Century Club in New York for young men who were art instructors to train them in the fine arts. Fascinated by the stories that textiles could tell, Myers often selected objects from his collection and went on tour, lecturing school and civic groups around the country. He also shared with audiences his experiences and perspectives on collecting. In March 1927, in the early spring social season of Washington, he delivered a lecture for the Colonial Dames of America. After a brief introduction to collectors and collecting, he discussed technical aspects of carpets (warp, weft and pile) and talked about beauty, colour, design, and what he found important about the collection and study of textiles. He said, “the best way to learn something is to buy something. After living with it one either likes it better or not so well. In the latter case one learns a lesson the cost of which is exactly the difference between buying and selling prices.”

Myers came by his knowledge of collecting through insight and experience. Born in 1875 in Cleveland, Myers and his wife, Louise Chase Myers settled in Washington, D.C., on a “little piece of land on S Street,” as described by John Russell Pope whom they contracted as architect to design their residence which is now The Textile Museum. Shortly after moving in to his new home, Myers bought the building next door to house his collections and for their display; the ground floor had an apartment for his mother, Mr and Mrs Myers resided on S Street where they raised three daughters, Persis Chase, Mary Hewitt and Louise Chase.*

Several years prior to the move to Washington, Myers had graduated from Yale University, earning a Masters degree in Forestry in 1902. Forest management remained an area of business interest for years thereafter, but it was his instincts for collecting textiles and inspiring others to appreciate art that captured his passion and forged his dreams. While a student at Yale, Myers purchased an Oriental rug or two for his dormitory room. By 1915 he was acquiring classical carpets from dealers all over the United States and abroad. When he founded The Textile Museum in 1925, his collection numbered about two hundred and seventy-five rugs and sixty textiles, most of which were Middle Eastern embroideries. By the time of his death in 1957, his personal collection numbered about twice as many rugs and about three thousand five hundred textiles! In an exposition of his collecting philosophy...
written in 1931 for the *American Magazine of Art*, he admits that what became his collection "began really with desultory purchases of semi-antique rugs and then gradually went into the earlier periods as the collector accidentally became aware of them and became more able to spend the time and the money to buy them." Reflecting back years later in a lecture to the Oriental Society in 1949 he recalled, "When I first bought a few rugs in the 1890s, I had no thought of buying several hundred. When I first bought textiles in 1910 I had even less thought of buying several thousand. But one thing led to another and the only underlying thought, if any, was to find out what went before a certain piece to make it as it was. This, of course, led back," he said, "to earlier and earlier forms, somewhat logically."

His acquaintances and former staff recall his decisive nature, which no doubt affected his conviction in collecting as well. In early Board minutes he is reported to have criticised the oft-repeated saying, "Let George do it!" Yet, acting as both Director and Chairman of the Board, he seemed to make most of the decisions himself. But he also had a sense of humility and social responsibility that expressed itself in many ways for public benefit. He served on many local and national Boards, including those of the National Symphony Orchestra, American Federation of Arts, National Parks Association, and Boy Scouts of America. He was one of the founders of Community Chest, and a member of the Smithsonian Fine Arts Commission. His generosity and humility is perhaps best expressed in his final disposition. Pursuing his interests in forest management soon after they settled in Washington, Myers began to purchase forest land in Connecticut and New Hampshire, then in Georgia. Of many thousands of acres, he donated nearly seven thousand five hundred acres to Yale University's School of Forestry and it became known as Yale Forest. Located in the northeastern part of the state, it has magnificent trees and lakes. Myers' ashes are interred there in a small family cemetery where the inscription on a plain headstone reads, "This was his forest".

Another example of the more humble side of his personality is expressed in his decision to call his grandest legacy simply, The Textile Museum. That was in 1925, the year Myers turned fifty. It was a very active year for him, one that prefigured many future developments. He founded Mergenthaler Linotype, of which he was a director until his death at eighty-two in 1957. He established the Brunswick Peninsula Corporation for the management of forest resources on land he had purchased in southeastern Georgia for lumber, pulpwood and resin products. That year he also founded Y.E. Booker and Company, an investment firm in which he maintained a financial interest when it merged in 1943 with Alexander Brown and Sons in Baltimore. For textile lovers, all of these events pale by comparison to his founding of The Textile Museum, which opened to the public late in December of 1925 by appointment. In spite of all his investment activities, he always managed to have time for the museum and his collection. He and his wife lived well and entertained frequently, often in the evening after concerts at the National Symphony. He generously sought to share his collection and his knowledge with friends and the public for their general edification. The establishment of The Textile Museum captured a defining moment in the history of Washington's art museums. It preceded the National Gallery of Art (1941). While the Corcoran was well-established, the fledgling Freer Gallery of Art had been open for less
“Rugs and Textiles of Late Imperial China” on view in the McMullan Galleries at The Textile Museum, October 1994-April 1995. The rugs were purchased by George Hewitt Myers: left (partially seen), The Textile Museum R51.1.4, acquired in 1920; centre, The Textile Museum R51.1.6 and right, The Textile Museum R51.1.16, both acquired before 1928. The Manchu coats: left, The Textile Museum 51.73, Gift of Mrs W.R. Hearst; centre and right, from the collection of Shirley Z. Johnson.


7 Caucasian embroidery, 19th century or earlier. Silk embroidery on cotton warp and weft. 117 × 66.5 cms. The Textile Museum 2.6. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1915.
9 Polonaise carpet, Iran, 17th century. Silk pile with metallic-wrapped silk on cotton warp and silk and cotton weft. 200 x 137.5 cms. The Textile Museum R33.5.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1940

10 Turkish carpet fragment, so-called Lotto style, 16th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 162 x 139 cms. The Textile Museum R34.18.4. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1928

8 Indian carpet fragment, 17th century. Wool pile on cotton warp and weft. 54.5 x 49.5 cms. The Textile Museum R63.00.8. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers before 1928

than two years. Other private collections in Washington were just beginning to draw public attention. Down the hill from The Textile Museum, Duncan Phillips had opened three rooms of his private residence, which was referred to as America's first museum of modern art (today the Phillips Collection). And Robert Woods Bliss,* a neighbour across the park, was later to open his home and gardens at Dumbarton Oaks. To survey the local landscape of the 1920s, Myers was an early champion of the arts in Washington. With the opening of The Textile Museum in 1925, Myers displayed his commitment to the fine arts and to the promotion of an appreciation of textiles as fine art.

Myers was a man of inspired vision, a quality reflected in the Bylaws of The Textile Museum. Article II reads:

The objects of this incorporated society shall be to establish, maintain, and add to a collection of rugs, tapestries and other works of art; to foster and develop the fine arts by establishing in connection with such collection a library for use by students of the fine arts; by arranging for and giving exhibitions of rugs, tapestries, and other works of art; by arranging for and giving musical concerts and lectures on the fine arts; in general, to encourage and to promote the knowledge, appreciation, and study of the fine arts; to establish and maintain and add to a museum or gallery for the purposes of housing such collection and library and to be also used for exhibitions, productions, concerts and lectures.

Not just a collector and a connoisseur, Myers understood the critical difference between a collection and a museum: one is an evolving personal entity and the other is a series of concepts embodied in an institution operating for public benefit. He understood the difference between private collecting and institutional collecting, defining the latter with a broad educational intent. He was a collector who sought to maximise the utilisation of his collection for the purposes of research, interpretation and presentation, and he recognised concomitant responsibilities for collections management, records management, and institutional management. His vision for institutional collecting developed out of personal interest and was implemented by virtue of his role as President of the Board of Trustees of The Textile Museum, a post he held as long as he lived. His philosophy was expressed both in his character and his proclivity for collecting and sharing: he sought excellence and promoted it whenever he found it.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, Myers had been introduced to the embroideries of Central Asia, Greece and Turkey. He remarked that he had seen “in the shops of Cairo, Stamboul, London and Paris” many attractive pieces of needlework which the dealers called “Rhodian”, “Yanina” and “Bokara”. These interested him, he said, because “they bore some relation in design and colour to the Oriental carpets” to which he was first drawn in collecting: He bought these embroideries in quantity, along with additional examples of classical carpets and carpet fragments. His concern for antecedents is also evident in his acquisition of numerous embroideries from the Caucasus* and northwestern Iran of the type which compare favourably to the central design of the eagle sunburst

*7 Caucasian rugs.*

He also sought to broaden the scope of his collection to areas which were not then popular among his friends and rivals. Drawing upon a wide range of contacts with dealers in the United States and abroad, he purchased Indian carpets and fragments.* Chinese rugs and many fragmentary Turkish carpets. Persian carpets he considered were too much in demand and so he avoided them in the market-place. But he did acquire numerous fragments of Indo-Persian or Herat carpets for study, and excellent examples of Polonaise carpets woven in Iran in the seventeenth century.* Although he already had an intact Lotto carpet of palatial dimensions,* he purchased a fragmentary Lotto carpet* in 1928 for the exorbitant sum of US$18,000! His reasoning, well-respected and admired today, is that the fragment preserves a better quality of drawing than the large carpet which is complete and in good condition.

During a particularly intense period of collecting in the early 1950s, he strengthened his holdings of fifteenth and sixteenth century carpets from Egypt and Spain, making The Textile Museum the repository for the largest number of the oldest surviving carpets in the world, which it remains to this day. His Spanish carpets were acquired in Spain for the most part by an agent. But he reported to his Board of Trustees that he regretted missing out on one major armorial carpet on the market* which was purchased by Robert Woods Bliss. That was in 1929 or 1930, during the Depression. He did, however, succeed in acquiring a complementary armorial carpet* in 1944 from fifteenth century Spain, which he purchased from dealer Adolph
13 Turkish carpet, so-called Lotto style, 16th century. Wool pile on wool warp and weft. 792 x 257 cms. The Textile Museum R34.181. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1926.

Loewi. Little did Myers know that in 1976 The Textile Museum would be able to acquire the Bliss Armorial carpet along with other significant Classical carpets through the generosity of his friends and followers at The Textile Museum.

In the 1930s Myers and his wife travelled extensively to Europe and the Middle East in pursuit of textiles and carpets. In Egypt he began acquiring large numbers of Islamic and Coptic textiles including many fragments with Arabic inscriptions. From archaeological materials found in Egypt executed in tapestry, his interests broadened to encompass textiles with similar woven structures that were preserved in the dry climate of Peru. He was also fascinated by similarities of style visible in tribal rugs from the Middle East and in Navajo weavings from the southwestern United States.

He used his collections for many purposes, not only for personal enjoyment and the entertainment and edification of his guests. Early on Myers drew upon his personal collections for the purposes of education. Often he would select from among his carpet fragments a group of interest and take them with him on tour to classrooms around the country. He lent a group of about twenty Persian silks to the great Persian exhibition organised in London in 1931. And he sent a Persian velvet along with a number of other objects to Japan for programmes with Japanese children. For private use, he had his favourite fifteenth century Spanish runner reproduced in China to use as a stair runner for his Washington residence, and he had the design from his favourite Persian flatweave adapted for his book-plate.

One of Myers' passionate concerns was the potential influence of historic textiles on contemporary art, but it was an area in which he felt he had not been able to succeed in making an impact through The Textile Museum. Early Board reports reflect his disappointment. In his 1931 article for the American Magazine of Art, Myers concludes, "The weaving of rugs and fine tissues combining skilled handicraft with art in colour and design seems to be gone, perhaps a result of the machine age." But he was encouraged by the new productions of Rodier in Paris, Galenga in Rome, and Fortuny in Venice, which he said were "surely worthy of note and give promise of possibilities for the future."

To counter his own disparaging remarks offered as an assessment of modern industrial textile production, he challenged other Board members to consider the wisdom and benefit of utilising historical collections to
inspire contemporary artists and designers, endeavours which continue to be advanced by The Textile Museum through exhibitions, research and a licensing programme.

Always perceptive of historical textiles as indicators of cultural change, George Hewitt Myers knew that to study textiles was to learn about the world. With that understanding he laid the intellectual foundation that continues to sustain the institution he named The Textile Museum.

15 Tapestry fragment, Egypt, Coptic period. Wool tapestry on linen warp. 31 x 25.5 cms. The Textile Museum 71.107. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1947

16 Man’s garment, slit-tapestry weave, Peru, Central Coast, circa 1200-1500 A.D. Camelid fibre weft with cotton warp. 91 x 75 cms. The Textile Museum 91.6. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1928

17 Armorial carpet (detail), Spain, 15th century. Wool pile. 396 x 223.5 cms. The Textile Museum R44.4.1. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1944
18 Tapestry fragment, Egypt, Fatimid period, 11th century. 25.5 × 26.5 cms. The Textile Museum 73.491. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1940.


21 Book-plate of George Hewitt Myers, founder of The Textile Museum.