When an object enters a museum’s collection, it typically is accompanied by a story. Each piece is labeled with a unique number connecting it to records about who owned it, when and where it was created, and when and why it was given to or purchased by the museum. The RISD Museum’s Costume and Textile Department cares for more than 30,000 objects. When a 2003 inventory revealed 1,400 works without accession numbers, they were set aside and placed into inventory boxes. Since then, these objects have been inaccessible, and their stories have remained unresolved.

Through careful sleuthing we are working to uncover how and why these pieces came to the museum. Clothes and textiles are extremely personal objects. We wear them, use them, and repair them in unique ways. An object’s history is an intrinsic part of its value, and the recovery of lost stories is a form of repair. Mending and patching the biographies of objects is part of caring for our collection.

— Anna Rose Keefe
Conservation Assistant
Costume and Textiles Department
RISD Museum

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

These pieces went uncatalogued for decades, so they were never given accession numbers. The two floral panels were once part of the same skirt; one part was acquired in 1982, but the date when the second panel came to the museum is unknown. Original paperwork for the casaquin jacket mentions that the cuffs were missing, yet they were found in an inventory box 40 years later. Decades after museum staff planned to decline the donations of the seat cover and valance, they are still here. The floral textile and chasuble on the right were never accessioned, probably because they are heavily patched.

Why was each of these works kept in limbo? What should we do with them now? Questions like these help staff repair old records and shape the museum’s future.

French; Probably
*Skirt Panel*, late 1700s
Polychrome silk taffeta brocade
Museum Collection INV2004.651

Found Uncatalogued; Unknown source
INV2004.651 Museum Collection
French; Probably
*Skirt Panel*, late 1700s
Polychrome silk taffeta brocade
Gift of Mrs. Paul Fletcher  82.076.12

French
*Casaquin*, mid 1700s
Silk brocade with supplementary metallic-wrapped wefts and metallic bobbin-lace trim
Gift of Mrs. Kenneth Shaw Safe  63.010.1

Spanish; Probably
*Chasuble*, 1700s
Polychrome silk brocade, patched together, silk woven trim, linen plain-weave lining
INV2003.403
Historically, museums have often prioritized textiles that look new over those showing signs of wear. These objects arrived on the same day in 1981, as part of the same donation. The largest piece of the textile was given a new number, 81.131B, while the irregularly sized and repaired pieces were left unlabeled, then forgotten in storage. That these scraps had been saved and carefully repaired speaks to how highly work by Jean-Baptiste Huet and the Oberkampf factory was prized, both for its visual appeal and technological innovation.

Christophe Philippe Oberkampf, French, 1738-1815
Jean-Baptiste Huet, French, 1745-1811
*Medallions Antiques*, ca. 1800
Cotton plain weave with copperplate printng
Gift of Miss Mary L. Crosby  81.085a

These items were catalogued properly when they arrived, but as the objects went on and off display, the labels that connected them to their records were lost.

The distinctive materials and techniques that make these works noteworthy today—peacock-feather yarns, metallic-wrapped threads, and raffia cut pile—were all described in their original records. By examining details listed in museum records, including fiber contents, measurements, motifs, and embellishments, researchers reunited the unlabeled textiles with their original biographical data, bringing them back into circulation.

Turkish
*Embroidery Fragment*, 1700s
Undyed cotton ground, silk embroidery
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lorin A. Riggs  1991.112.1

Indian
*Embroidery Fragment*, late 1600s-late 1700s
Cotton muslin ground with chain-stitched mochi motifs and silver-metallic badla embroidery
Gift of Francis Crosby Whitehead  71.109.36
Congoese
*Textile Panel*, late 1800s - early 1900s
Cut-pile raffia embroidery, made from leaves of Raphia vinifera
Gift of Brown University  22.078

These textiles illustrate past attempts to repair object records. Without a digitized database to search through, matching textiles with numbers is all but impossible. In these cases, earlier matches later proved false when more recent research revealed another, better match to a record. The top, middle, and bottom examples each show a pair of textiles that was mistakenly assigned the same number.

The original index cards for each textile are shown above. How much information would you need to match an object and a record? How important is color in identifying the correct object? Technique? Motif? Material? Measurements? Would you have made the same choices?

Greek
*Embroidered Textile Length*, 1700s
Linen plain-weave ground, silk embroidery
Mary B Jackson Fund  41.079

1997: Labeled as “Found in Collection” S1997.024
2003: Labeled as unknown donor
INV2003.242 Now: Mary B Jackson Fund 41.079

Greek
*Embroidered Textile Fragment*, 1700s
Linen plain-weave ground, silk embroidery
Museum Works of Art Fund  47.618
Azerbaijani
*Textile Fragment*, 1500s
Linen ground, silk embroidery, silk lining
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke  15.117

Persian
*Embroidered Textile Fragment*, 1600s
Linen plain-weave ground, silk and linen embroidery
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke  17.043

2003: Labeled as unknown donor INV2003.206
Now: Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 17.043

French
*Casaquin Cuffs*, mid 1700s
Silk brocade with supplementary metallic-wraped wefts
Museum Collection  INV2004.215
Probably; Algerian
*Embroidered Textile*, 1800s
Silk-satin ground with couched-satin embroidery stitches
Bequest of Lyra Brown Nickerson  16.481

2003: Labeled as Unknown donor INV2003.243
Now: Bequest of Lyra Brown Nickerson 16.481

Indian; or; Pakistani
*Embroidered Textile*, late 1800s-early 1900s
Cotton
Gift of the Estate of Mrs. Gustav Radeke  31.194

Japanese
*Buddhist Altar Cloth (Uchishiki)*, 1800s
Polychrome silk brocade with silver-gilt paper wefts; silk embroidery
Gift of Charles B. Hoyt  27.081

English; French
*Textile Fragment*, 1720s
Polychrome silk brocade with silver-metallic weft yarns
Gift of Pamela A. Parmal  1996.4

American
*Ugly Bonnet (Capote-écran)*, ca. 1830
Silk exterior, silk ribbons, wire frame
Gift of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities
60.034.10
Chinese
*Rank badge*, 1800s
Silk
INV2004.434

Italian
*Chasuble fragment*, 1600s
Polychrome silk brocade, gold gimp edging
Gift of the Estate of William E. Brigham  63.011.111