

Exploring and Recording Textiles in the British Library Collections

Reference: 2017-13-ROS



Supervisor	Liz Rose, Textile Conservator and Conservations Events Manager
Department, Location	British Library Centre for Conservation, St Pancras, London
Start date/timeframe	Ideally after July 2017, though an earlier start date might be negotiated
Duration	3 months (or part-time equivalent – see below) <i>For a part-time placement, the student would be required to spend a minimum of 2 days/week on site at the Library.</i>
Remote-working	This project does not offer scope for remote working – the placement must be conducted on site at the British Library.

Context for placement

Since the British Library’s first Textile Conservator was appointed in January 2015, hundreds of textiles have been discovered within our collections. These range from fabric covers for Torah scrolls and silk escape maps of Berlin, to a Japanese children’s book resembling a baby in a sleeping bag and Captain Cook’s book containing samples of bark cloth from the South Pacific Islands.

These culturally significant textiles are of interest to the wider conservation arena and also help to engage new and existing audiences through the Library’s exhibitions. Textiles from our collections have featured in the recent British Library exhibitions *West Africa: Word, Symbol, Song; Shakespeare in Ten Acts; and Maps and the 20th century: Drawing the line.*

In order to further enhance the visibility of the Library’s textiles, to raise their profile and to increase access, an internal textile database is in the process of being designed and populated. Many of the textiles found to date have not been recorded or catalogued, although most have a shelfmark. If they have been catalogued, then the descriptions of the textiles are often inconsistent.

The PhD placement student will assist with completing the textile database and generating reports, thus improving internal knowledge of textile objects within the British Library collections. This will form the basis for subsequent external promotion.

Expected tasks and outcomes

The main focus of the placement will be to enhance existing records of textile items in the collections for the database, as well as to produce new records. This will involve liaising with curators across collections to view textile items, photograph them and input their details into the database using the Library’s shelfmark conventions, as well as working together with the Content and Metadata teams to ensure the consistency of information and naming conventions. The placement student would then also produce reports from the database in order to profile textiles within the collections and develop a dictionary of terms.

In addition, there will be opportunities for the student to contribute blog posts about newly-added/identified textile items to the Library’s [Collection Care](#) blog and other relevant blogs and public platforms. Depending on the interests and motivations of the student, they would be encouraged to write up their experience of working in a relatively new dedicated textile conservation team for an academic paper, and/or it may be possible to conduct focussed research into the provenance and significance of a selected textile item with the relevant curatorial support.

The placement student will further have the chance to contribute to the supervisor’s work as Conservation Events Manager and assist with holding public tours of the conservation studios and other public events, such as London Craft Week. Depending on the timing of the placement, the student may also be able to assist with preparing textile items for exhibition displays or external loans.

Towards the end of the placement, the student will have the opportunity to deliver a staff talk to update colleagues on the outcomes of the project and to share knowledge of the Library’s textile holdings.

Training and experience expected to be gained by student through the placement

The student will receive handling training of fragile textile items at the beginning of the placement. They will be instructed in naming conventions for photographs and the population protocols of the database, as well as

the subsequent design of the reporting documents. They will learn to recognise different types of textiles and assess their condition for conservation purposes. Given the diversity of textile items in the Library's collections, they will have opportunities to discover objects made from a variety of materials and covering a wide chronological and geographical span.

This first textile-focussed PhD placement presents an opportunity to gain insight into a relatively new and exciting area of the Library's work and to be actively involved in raising the profile of a currently less well-known part of the collections. The student will have the opportunity to work across collections and assist curators in gaining knowledge of items. As well as providing a useful networking opportunity, this will give the student a valuable insight into the workings of the Library, and the diversity of our collections, and will be an opportunity to learn vital work based skills in a multi-faceted team environment within a large organisation.

The placement offers an opportunity to apply IT skills to a practical task and engage with the challenges of information management in a cultural heritage environment. The student will be able to contribute to the completion of an important piece of work that will have a direct impact on future Library development in this area.

By contributing to British Library blogs, the student will gain experience in writing for a wider, largely non-academic audience. By assisting with event planning and delivery, they will gain experience of event management within a large national research organisation that has a different and broader purpose to a university. This will enhance their skills and knowledge of dissemination events and engaging with public audiences.

During the placement, the student will have access to all appropriate training and public events offered by the Library, such as the talks and workshops offered in the Library's 'Digital Scholarship' and '21st Century Curators' staff training programmes

Required knowledge and skills

This placement requires the student to have strong IT skills, and at least some knowledge of MS Access or other database packages.

The ability to keep clear, consistent and accurate records is **essential**.

An interest in textiles or conservation would be **desirable** but is not essential as an induction to the Library's textile collections and to the wider work of the British Library Centre for Conservation will be provided at the start of the placement.