

Giving an object its voice



Elizabeth Lahikainen in 1998 working on the chair in which Abraham Lincoln was shot. Photo courtesy of The Henry Ford.

Elizabeth Lahikainen is a textile conservator associated with PEM who specializes in upholstery conservation. She has treated numerous pieces in the museum's collection over the years, including nearly a dozen pieces of furniture currently in the American Decorative Art Galleries. She spoke with us about the techniques, ethics, and challenges of her field.

What is object conservation?

Conservation is the process of treating objects first to halt deterioration and then to prevent it. It begins with stabilization of the parts and often moves into some type of cleaning. Sometimes restoration is involved but always in a manner that doesn't destroy any original material and is identifiable as something new. Also, conservation has a strict code of ethics: not making the object into something that it never was, not improving it beyond its original state; using materials that are archivally sound, meaning they will not deteriorate over time; and reversibility—the technique and materials used in conservation need to be reversible. A large part of conservation treatments end up undoing what good-natured souls have done in the past. Often, these repairs have advanced the problem, especially in textile conservation. Repairs to a textile that are not executed with a high degree of expertise can actually make a hole bigger over time if the stitches or materials are not appropriate.

Tell me about the work you did on the 1804 Federal-style sofa, carved by Samuel McIntire, in the museum's collection.

While much of the underupholstery is more modern than the frame, we were able to reuse most of it for this presentation. We did, however, reconstruct the seat cushion to the high loft of a down cushion. This traditional treatment has decorative brass nails on the fabric edge, but using metal fasteners again and again creates a split in the frame. In reinterpreting this piece, we glued all of these nail heads on so as not to damage the historic frame. So you can imagine how much work is involved in really following through. If it has a complicated design, just mapping the fabric (making a plan for cutting) can take up to three days.

When you work on an object, especially one that was created by a renowned artist, do you feel a sense of connection with that artist?

Yes, but not in the way you might think. What makes my work successful is disengaging from how intimidating the whole process is. Paying attention to the subtleties of how the object is constructed and the evidence of how it looked in previous times leads me through the treatment process. If the object was made by somebody famous, used by somebody famous, or is worth a lot of money, that can be distracting from the mission of treatment. But actually, the success of being able to interpret the object is being able to disengage from those things that you find intimidating and use them more as information in putting together the story.

There are two things that are required in upholstery conservation. First, you have to exercise every possible avenue of preserving the original materials. The next requirement is interpretation—using all the historical information to reclaim the story. If the person doing the treatment engages in their own opinion or their own preferences then they are telling their story rather than the story of the artifact. Listening only to the object is what is going to give it its voice.

What was one of your favorite pieces to work on in this gallery?

The McIntire child's sofa is very special because it's the only one known. This was a challenge because the sofa is tiny and the proportions must be correct. Once the sofa was de-upholstered, the nailing pattern was evident in the wood because of the impression of the nail heads. So while we knew the size of the original nails, that size was not available to purchase. I just happened to have a box of them in my stock of materials, so that was a little miracle. I felt privileged to work on a piece that is so rare and beautiful and present it in detail that is exactly accurate. ■



Elizabeth Lahikainen with child's sofa, ca. 1810, carving by Samuel McIntire, United States.

BELOW: Federal-style sofa, 1804, Nehemiah Adams, carving by Samuel McIntire, United States.

