



Andrea Aranow: Archived Experiences

Andrea Aranow has dedicated her entire life to a self-propelled, extensive research of textiles. Relentlessly traveling to far-flung corners of the world in search of the new and undiscovered, in a bid to uncover anthropological and sociological meaning behind the fabrics that were once taken for granted. During the past four years, she has worked tirelessly with her son Caleb Sayan to digitize a fraction of her personal archive, making a sizeable part of her collection instantly available for the new digital age.

Writer *Leanne Cloudsdale*
Photographer *JIMA*

I'm sure it's the same for every high school, but at mine, it was the art department where all the cool kids hung out. A faint whiff of secret cigarette smoke amongst the poster paints, piles of unorganized junk ready for the numerous still life drawing classes, and bunches of crusty paintbrushes drying out by filthy ceramic sinks. A haven for freaks like me, a safe zone to reveal my love of collecting and cataloging sea-smoothed shards of glass, washed up by the shore near my folk's

house. It was the one discipline where eccentricity was encouraged, and judging by the state of the classrooms, hoarding was just an accepted part of the creative operation. To be surrounded by *stuff* implied things were in process, and for those of us who preferred shoegaze and Salinger to netball and swimming galas, it allowed us a place to enjoy making a mess within an otherwise sterile institution. Clay modeling, weaving, sewing, charcoal drawing and naive pontificating were all things we were advised to indulge in.

The world is divided between those who collect and those who discard. I fall into the

former camp, and have spent a lifetime being chastised by flatmates and boyfriends for my *habit*. There's a fine line between it being a problem and it being a collection – namely adequate storage. Someone who has proven that foraging is a valid, and at times lucrative career path, is Andrea Aranow: owner of arguably one of the world's largest personal textile archives. Her unfaltering dedication to seek out the unusual and rare spans decades, and I wanted to find out what had inspired this lifelong mission to amass such a monumental portfolio.

A CONVERSATION WITH
ANDREA ARANOW

Much of your life has been devoted to worldwide travel, in a bid to uncover and obtain what has now become a vast, comprehensive selection of artifacts. When did this stop being a hobby and morph into a serious and dedicated research career?

It all stems from an ongoing love of handling textiles, contemplation, wrapping them around myself and watching them in action. I spent around 15 years overseas during the 1970s and '80s, building up my collection of traditional textiles from Japan, China, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Panama, Mexico, Burma, Europe and the US. My first organized textile exploration followed an impromptu visit to the Peruvian highlands, where the warp-faced vertical stripes of the ponchos and mantas seduced me. I'd moved there primarily to work for the Ministry of Culture, but with guidance from the great Junius Bird I started what became my first real formal study of material culture in the remote, mountainous regions of Peru. My findings were so plentiful that half of it was sold to the British Museum, affording me the time for a few years solid research in London, coupled with explorative jaunts to Asia.

My natural rhythm is to travel and collect, and then showcase the items in a different setting, in order to investigate the inevitable questions that public exposure provokes. I've never paid much attention to the most priceless textiles – my main areas of interest have always been those that were used and developed on a popular level. For me it always starts with the visual impact, and once I've decided if I like it enough I'll take the time to dig in and ask myself what makes it so appealing. Sometimes it can be something as simple as the natural dye, or a weaving technique, whereas other times it's all about the story that went before, a need to analyze the design progression. I have to love something in order to start the process of resurrecting the history, of delving deeper. The open gate is always through my eyes – as opposed to an intellectual curiosity.

Deep down, most of us have an insatiable curiosity about the lives of others. People watching is so compulsive; maybe it's just a human instinct – decoding the status quo and then understanding our place within it. Textiles form an intrinsic part of any culture, but how, in your experience, do we relate to fabric specimens that are not recognizable as our own?



Field Notes

01 *Junius Bouton Bird*
Bird was an acclaimed American archaeologist, born in New York in 1907. An internationally renowned expert on primitive South American cultures, he was appointed as curator of South American Archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History in 1931. Unusually for an archaeologist, his studies included textiles, and his pursuit of knowledge saw him explore largely undiscovered areas of the Peruvian Chicama Valley during the late 1940s. The results of this were hugely significant, and he became known as an unrivalled authority in this area. In recognition of his work, he was awarded medals from the Peruvian government, the Explorers Club and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. He was subsequently elected as the President of the Society for American Archaeology in 1961. He died in 1982, aged 74.

02 *Dakota Transit*
Born and raised in Massachusetts, Andrea graduated from Brown University in 1967 and relocated to New York City. She soon moved her sewing and textiles paraphernalia to a studio space, in a disused commercial premises in the East Village. Her unique, handmade garments hanging up in the window soon attracted the attention of local residents, and in 1968, Dakota Transit was born. The custom-made blend of snakeskin and leather pieces sparked an interest from fashion editors at the likes of *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. The success of the label culminated in Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis commissioning Andrea to make specially designed items for them. Her brand continued to prosper throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, until 1974 when Andrea made the move to Peru with her first son on a dedicated textile research trip. She remained friends with Miles Davis until his death.

03 *Andrea Aranow Textile Design Archive*
The archive itself comprises over 40,000 textiles, garments, objects, printed materials and original artworks from over 50 countries – 8,000 of which are exceptional artifacts from Japan. In addition to this, approximately 155 cubic feet of physical archival material has been digitized, and with all imagery within the database scaled to 1/1, the resolution is of an unprecedented quality. With a hierarchical taxonomy in excess of 2,300 terms, Textile Hive has created, in the words of studio manager Caleb Sayan, “an empowering platform for the presentation and dissemination of textile knowledge and cultural material.”

- 01 An Edo encyclopedia from Japan, woodblock printed on very soft paper
- 02 Various treasures on a Manchester printed cloth chanced upon in Jaipur
- 03 Cast light frames the room
- 04 Collected keepsakes
- 05 Examining a 1970s printed corduroy skirt



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To enjoy looking at swatches from far-flung countries, it doesn't necessarily have to take place in a museum – I've had people looking at them here in my apartment on the couch. When I accompany them with photos of 70-year-old ladies, all sitting at the foot of a tree in China, wearing no glasses, embroidering such insanely intricate designs, there are audible gasps of, "Oh my God! They don't even draw it first? They just count the threads? What masters of precision!" Take the textiles out of their normal everyday context, to cities like Paris, London or New York and what is considered normal for the maker is amazing for us. But even within the same culture, there is a still a love of seeing other people's things. When I was in Peru I took some textiles up to the mountains, knowing there wasn't a chance the villagers

had ever seen this stuff. They *loved it*. They were thrilled, touching the fabric delicately, working out how they'd spun the yarns and talking amongst themselves about the designs. When you take textiles from one setting to another, there is always going to be something that grabs you. Nuances will be pointed out that were never noticed before.

Of course, big cities like Tokyo, New York and London are always so attractive for their swirl of interesting people and the exchange of ideas, but by 1983 I was ready for more in-depth study, so I took my children (then five and twelve) on the road for a year. We traveled slowly through areas of the People's Republic of China, in zones that had only recently been opened to foreign visitors. My investigations took place in very traditional circumstances, in remote villages where



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the inhabitants and I barely spoke a word of Mandarin, and yet we soon discovered ways to communicate. The physical, non-verbal methods took over, with us pointing, touching, showing and finally trying stuff on. Even though the whole format of their indigenous clothing was almost identical – there was always something to differentiate the clothes between the generations, whether it was a change of motif, or silk thread colour. It proved these women were looking at one another, vying for one-upmanship, competing with women from neighbouring villages in their sartorial choices. The tribal Chinese were so unsophisticated. There was no smothering of emotion. The villagers felt totally at ease running their fingers up the hairs on my boyfriend's arms. When they first saw my sons, they came right on over



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and started inspecting their clothes, examining the seams on the insides of their jackets. They'd never seen anything like it. They were amazed and curious, and of course my sons were delighted – they loved all the attention. They stared at us, we stared at them, and when we were eventually invited into their homes, it was like a mutual staring society!

Bringing it all back home to New York in 1987 gave me a big cross-cultural challenge: how to look through the eyes of designers and discern the essence of their exotic or nostalgic viewpoints? The discipline of such a faceted focus was developed during the 20-odd years my business functioned commercially and certainly informed my collaboration with Textile Hive.

This project has seen you spend the last four years

digitizing over forty thousand items you've collected over the past four decades, in a bid for a sizeable chunk of your archive to be accessible to a captive public audience, as opposed to just fashion industry insiders. Considering the perceived financial value of the collection, what prompted such a purposeful venture?

Rather than selling the whole archive to a private company where access would be limited to employees, my son and I hope to find it a home where it will be available to many people and more fully utilized. I am very much into the idea of passing on this information, because we believe wider access is the best way forward for the collection. Caleb is the architect of this digital operation, and has been careful to ensure users can quickly find what they are looking for using a hierarchical search. We certainly thought about the atten-

- 06 Modern Peruvian dolls created from pre-Columbian fabrics
- 07 Unsigned artwork composed of drawing over a Victorian photo portrait
- 08 Art glass vessel found in Damascus
- 09 Book of Japanese textile design paintings, dated 1915
- 10 A favourite buffalo plaid pairing

tion spans of younger people when we were developing – the main focus was to amplify the width of the searches, both objectively and visually. Speed and ease are both significant factors in the beauty of this product. This is entirely different from the usual methods of academic research, and we've recently felt gratified when professors of creativity say they would consider the digital archive a key asset, ranking higher than subscriptions and trend reports.

Ultimately, how do you feel about devoting yourself to such a distinct lifestyle?

I was never one who could see far ahead. A contrarian by nature, I struggled with conventions while growing up in a small town and completing a requisite BA at Brown University, but from that moment on I freed myself to follow my own curiosities. I loved making beautiful clothes, and then wanted to live among people with different life slants and visual focal points. After absorbing distinct cultures for some years, I sought out the next life in New York, where many cultures mix on the sidewalks. Each step evolved naturally, and it was only years later, long after returning to residence in America, that I noticed my path was a bit unusual. That said, all my creative friends have needed to be inventive to support themselves as they pursued their passions. I like improvisation. The challenge for each of us is to find the right balance to enjoy the trip. —