

Careful planning ensures collection longevity

New facility addresses storage concerns for the John M. Walsh III Collection of Contemporary Art Quilts

by Cynthia Wenslow

A primary concern of art collectors is preservation. How is it possible to keep artwork from degrading over time? For collectors of art quilts and other textiles, this is not a trivial issue.

Conservators point to storage conditions as one of the ways a collector can directly influence the longevity of art, preserving both its beauty and monetary value for a lifetime or longer. For art quilt collector Jack Walsh, the topic required careful consideration as his collection evolved.

Now one of the foremost collections of contemporary textile art in private hands, the John M. Walsh III Collection of Contemporary Art Quilts started haphazardly in 1992. “I literally knew nothing when we started,” Walsh confesses. “I had seen Michael James’ work

on television and that was what inspired me to be interested in art quilts.

“I had dabbled,” relates Walsh. “I had purchased two Mennonite quilts, an Amish quilt, a Native American quilt, and a crazy quilt, and I had my grandmother’s quilts. I covered most of the house that I lived in with those quilts, and I had no idea what I was doing.”

After meeting renowned curator Penny McMorris, Walsh began to collect in a more conscious way, with McMorris guiding him. “We’ve been at it for 23 years now, and it’s turned out to be a wonderful experience for me. And, you know, it’s self-feeding,” Walsh laughs.

Walsh became friends with fellow collectors Robert and Ardis James, whose art quilt collection was expansive. “I had gone to Chappaqua, New York, and seen how the Jameses stored

their quilts. I tried to use the same plan,” Walsh says. “Of course, they had 1,000 quilts and at that point I might have had 100. They laid them flat, one quilt, then sheets, one quilt, then sheets, etc. So that was what I did originally. I had two stacks of quilts, 50 each.”

About five years ago Walsh retired from the New Jersey-based business he founded and relocated to the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, where his family had longstanding ties. Walsh set out to find a solution to the dilemma of properly storing his collection, which continued to expand at the rate of four or five acquisitions per year.

Walsh was introduced to objects conservator Lisa Goldberg, who had previously worked with the Smithsonian Institution. “I have moved a lot of collections and specialize in storage solutions,” Goldberg says. “I’m not a textile conservator, but many of Jack’s quilts have components that would not normally be considered textile. I have a fondness for textiles and I quilt myself, so this is like a match made in heaven!”

“The quilts were stored for a long time in a local fine arts storage facility that has humidity- and temperature-controlled space,” relates Goldberg. “They service many of the museums in the area. Jack had his collection there for a year and a half.

“Jack went through a whole process in terms of figuring out what to do about storage up here,” says Goldberg.





Lisa Goldberg and Jack Walsh

“He could have stored them at his home in Elmira, but that wasn’t an option. He could have continued to store them at the fine arts facility and we discussed it. But they would have had to build a racking system for the quilts, and that was going to be expensive, with an ongoing cost.”

“We looked at other museum storage facilities, but that didn’t pan out either. There were many months of discussions before Jack finally said, ‘You know, I think probably the best solution is to build my own place and then I’ve got complete control of it.’”

Walsh had an inkling of what he was getting into. While living in New Jersey, he had created a dedicated storage space for his collection. “I constructed a special room in my house, about 18 feet square, working within the confines of the house as it was designed. I really didn’t build an addition; I took a space and reconstructed it,” explains Walsh.

In upstate New York, Walsh took a different approach, building from the ground up. “Jack worked very closely with an architect who had his own thoughts, and we talked a number of times,” Goldberg says.

Walsh adds, “It took about three months to design and then about six months to construct.”

“I think we would do things a little differently now,” confides Goldberg. “I

wish the space were a little larger. For example, we couldn’t figure out what to do about crate storage and now we’re grappling with that.

“When the architect asked how large, I asked Jack, ‘How large is the largest quilt? Add three to four feet on either side so you can lay it out on the table, and that’s enough,’” Goldberg continues.

Walsh says, “We ended up with about 35 feet by 24 feet, because we’re talking about big quilts.”

“Another 10 feet would have been nice,” Goldberg adds. “But there were space limitations with the site itself.”

The building blends beautifully into its surroundings, looking more like a converted carriage house than an art storage facility. Located on the side of a wooded hill with a creek running in a ravine several yards behind it, the building is accessed through double doors with a keypad lock system. Security measures include exterior and interior live-feed security cameras that can be viewed from anywhere on Walsh’s iPad.

An entry foyer separates the art quilt storage room from the temperature and wind fluctuations produced by opening the outside door. Bookshelves line one wall of the foyer, loaded with reference books and art quilt exhibition catalogs.

Recounting the features of the building, Goldberg mentions that the

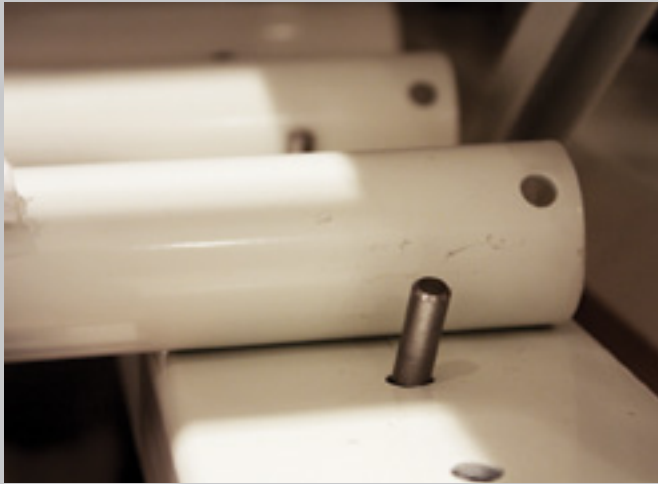
storage room is not more complicated than it needs to be. “Obviously, we could have done a lot more to make this space a super-duper environmentally controlled space, but it’s holding its own pretty well. And we decided to try that. The space is an envelope and we have a data logger, so we’re tracking it,” she explains. “It’s pretty good, and as long as it gets cold, I don’t overly worry.”

Mold is cited as a potential issue for textiles stored in warm and humid climates, but Goldberg says it isn’t a large concern with Walsh’s collection. “This building has never gotten relative humidity high enough to cause problems. It has to be above 55% typically, with no air movement,” she says. “There is air movement in here when we want it. There is a fan, and an external exhaust fan as well. So, mold could be a problem, but it’s not a problem here, or hasn’t been yet.”

The windowless inner room where the collection is stored is lined on two sides with powder-coated metal racks holding the art quilts. “We designed the racks to hold 150 art quilts,” says Walsh.

Several lower shelves on the racks hold wooden crates. “We just moved into this space a year ago, and it’s still in progress,” says Goldberg. “The wooden crates, I would like to see them be moved out of here, but they hold objects. We are going to be putting shelving up here to take the objects out of the crates, but we first have to find a place for the crates. Also, we don’t have a good system yet for how to deal with all of the hanging hardware. Right now it’s stacked in the corner, but obviously that’s not what we want.”

To minimize stress on the fibers that could come from being folded and developing creases, all the art quilts



are rolled on acid-free cardboard tubes that have been cut to size and labeled for the various quilts. Each art quilt is interleaved with cotton fabric before rolling. Many of them also have polyester batting rolled inside to add soft cushioning and make sure that there is no stretching.

Goldberg points out that she uses only heat-bonded polyester batting. The distinction is an important one; spun-bonded polyester batting is manufactured using adhesives that can contain formaldehyde or other volatiles that can damage the art quilts. When batting is used, the batting is lined on both sides with acid-free tissue paper to ensure that the polyester doesn't touch the artwork.

"The decision to roll a quilt face in or face out depends on the construction of the quilt and how many attachments there are, what kind of attachments," Goldberg says.

Each rolled art quilt ends up with a cotton cover to protect the outside surfaces, held in place with strips of torn cotton that are tied tightly enough to secure the bundle, but not so tightly that they place unwanted pressure on the art quilt inside. Finally, each roll receives a label identifying the art quilt inside by artist and title.

The packaged art quilts are placed on long rods that are then placed on the racks. The rods are secured with pins inserted into the rack on either side to prevent them from rolling. The racks are constructed from powder-coated steel uprights, with spacers to provide horizontally stored layers of quilt rolls at adjustable intervals.

"There are lots of designs for handmade quilt or textile racks like this that are used by various collecting institutions," Goldberg says. "You can make a rack on a chain that lowers and raises from both sides; you can make one out

of wood that levers out; you can install rolling racks that allow storage of multiple layers; you can go high end and purchase specially designed aluminum ones which are lightweight and really beautiful.

"However, this is what we settled on for a number of reasons. This option seemed to us to be more efficient for this particular room and it's easier to store the rolls horizontally and get more in. We can lift them out with ease. It's a very simple design, but I love it," affirms Goldberg. "And we could get more rods and fit more shelves in if we wanted to space them differently"

The construction of the art quilts in the collection adds some complications for safely storing the work. Not only does Walsh primarily collect large works, he collects art quilts that incorporate some nontraditional materials.

"Some objects have inherent vice," Goldberg says, "so if an object has



Anne Kingsbury, Circus

144 x 60 inches
Overall (left) and detail (above)

photos by Karen Bell

wood, plastic or some other material as a part of it, there's not much you can say. It is what it is."

Gesturing to a large crate, Walsh asks, "Are you familiar with the work of Anne Kingsbury? She works a lot in ceramics and leather and suede and so forth. This is the circus quilt. It's 12 feet by 5 feet. It weighs 75 pounds."

Goldberg says, "A wooden crate is not the best solution for storing it, but because of its weight, we had limited choices. The quilt inside is padded and folded in such a way that it won't be damaged, and the crate is fully lined inside."

Walsh delightedly describes the art quilt. "It has three rings. The lion tamer in the middle, the high-wire act on top, and the bareback riders down below.

Around all three rings, the audience sits and is comprised of 367 individually made little ceramic figures." Walsh notes, "It took Anne three years to make."

Even though most art quilt collectors don't have all the same challenges presented by Walsh's circus quilt, Goldberg says it's a good idea to take some of the collection's storage precautions and apply them to a collection housed anywhere. "You just want to make sure you're reducing the basic risks to your artwork by using any common-sense measures that you can take."

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Protect your art quilts

Recommendations from Lisa Goldberg

- Avoid storing and displaying art quilts near windows or strong light sources
- Don't store or display art quilts near heating vents or heat sources
- Roll stored art quilts on acid-free tubes whenever possible, covering them with clean unsized and undyed fabric
- If art quilts must be folded for storage, pad the folds to prevent creases and place them in acid-free boxes
- Minimize unnecessary handling
- Avoid wide fluctuations in temperature and humidity
- Avoid keeping your art quilts in a room where food is located or served to prevent spills and discourage pests
- Keep storage and display rooms clean and as dust-free as possible
- Use HEPA filters on vacuum cleaners
- Handle the work with respect and care