

COVID: A Case Study: Re-inventing a Textile Conservation Career
Claudia P. Iannuccilli, Studio of Textile Arts
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Summary by Casey Badal

Several years ago, Claudia Iannuccilli contacted multiple medical institutions inquiring how pandemics can be implemented into the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA), Boston's disaster plan, but without success. Fast forward a couple years, the COVID-19 Pandemic struck, proving to be a challenge for people in the museum world. Textile conservators, such as Iannuccilli, faced unique problems during the pandemic that changed the way they operated. Iannuccilli walked us through her work at the MFA, Boston, how the pandemic affected this work, and how it led to the creation of her own company, Studio of Textile Arts.

Claudia graduated from URI in 1982 with a degree in TMD and Theater. She returned in 1994 for her Master's degree. Her coursework allowed her to gain valuable knowledge on the construction of clothing and how it fits on the body. This served as an advantage when she began working at the MFA, Boston. This museum began its textile collection in 1870. It started, like most museums, as a repository of collections for the white and wealthy. Today, museums, including the MFA, are more inclusive and open minded when it comes to both their audience and their employees.

At the MFA, Boston, Claudia found her love for costume collections. She took care of them and even moved the entire costume collection to new storage in 2004. In addition, she also assisted in putting together exhibitions, which was her favorite part of the job. Some of the exhibitions she worked on include Hippy Chic, Hollywood Glamor, and Casanova. Moreover, she conserved costumes. This involves examining garments and treating them as needed. This can include surface cleaning, stitch stabilization, and more.

During the pandemic, the museum was forced to close which caused significant changes. A few employees were laid off in Boston and others were put on furlough. For those that remained, Zoom proved to be beneficial. Employees were able to interact with people from other institutions and collaborate on new exhibitions. Moreover, the prolonged closure allowed employees to take a step back and recognize where they were in terms of equality and inclusivity. The remaining staff unionized, and their pay increased. The museum also offered early retirement packages once they realized the pandemic would be long term. These packages were offered to employees who were 55 years old and had been working at the museum for at least ten years. Iannuccilli was one of the employees that took this deal. She was influenced by the two-hour long commute she was making every day while living in Rhode Island.

During a six-month break, Iannuccilli created her own company called Studio of Textile Arts. With this new company, she can do work that goes beyond traditional conservator duties. She still works with conserving garments, but she also works on exhibitions. She works on her own designs also, which was never an option for her previously. She is now able to satisfy her creative desires while preserving her love for textile conservation and exhibitions.

Costume conservation is a corner of the fashion world that many are not familiar with, and Iannuccilli was able to provide us with some great insight. More than that, she explained the ways in which costume conservation was impacted by the pandemic and how it changed her career. Through the re-invention of Claudia's career, we can see how the pandemic has impacted fashion in the museum world.

