



Museums for America

Sample Application MA-249457-OMS-21
Project Category: Collections Stewardship

George Washington University (George Washington University Museum and Textile Museum)

Amount awarded by IMLS:	\$249,576
Amount of cost share:	\$254,978

The project description can be viewed in the IMLS Awarded Grants Search:
<https://www.ims.gov/grants/awarded/ma-249457-oms-21>

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the current Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program and project category to which you are applying.

The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum

NARRATIVE

1. PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

Proposed project: The George Washington University (GW), on behalf of the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, requests \$249,575.88 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to expand digital access to textiles in The Textile Museum Collection that represent the cultural heritage of peoples across the globe, making them available for public study and appreciation. With one-third of The Textile Museum Collection expected to be digitally accessible by mid-2021, the museum seeks IMLS grant funding to digitize an additional 4,000 textiles, bringing the total number of online records to 10,000 – nearly half of The Textile Museum Collection – by autumn 2023. This two-year grant project will support The Textile Museum’s mission “to expand public knowledge and appreciation of the artistic merits and cultural importance of the textile arts” by making it easier for the public and staff to access data on The Textile Museum Collection using the internet. The project will also support the development of future museum professionals by hiring GW graduate students as assistants for the digitization project, providing them with meaningful hands-on museum experience.

The proposed grant project builds on a collections digitization effort begun in 2015, aimed to expand public access to the museum’s collections. The following are the goals established for this next phase of the initiative:

1. ***To expand access to The Textile Museum Collections by increasing the number of digital photographs of collection objects.*** A full-time staff collections photographer, supported by a student to assist with object handling, will shoot and process high-resolution images of collection objects. Weekly photo shoots will take place in the photography studio at the museum’s Avenir Foundation Conservation and Collections Resource Center, which was custom designed and equipped for photographing textiles. While recent efforts have focused on easy-to-shoot objects that quickly boosted volume of records available online, this phase of the project will focus on collection objects that are particularly challenging to photograph. New images will be uploaded to the museum’s collections management system, MuseumPlus, and its accompanying online portal, go.gwu.edu/collections.
2. ***To further increase efficiency in the museum’s collections stewardship, curatorial research and scholarship, exhibition development, and faculty and student support, by bringing together decades of object research and history into a single digital repository.*** A student cataloger(s), in consultation with curatorial and collections staff, will review and edit metadata for 4,000 object records to achieve better consistency with the textile-specific controlled vocabulary designed by the museum over many years. To complete any missing data fields, the cataloger will search through museum files and publications and confer with curators to enhance object records before online publication.
3. ***To increase the discoverability of collection records through partnerships with aggregator websites that reach international audiences.*** Creating linkages with central repositories of art and humanities collections will make The Textile Museum Collection more discoverable by the public and scholars. The museum will partner with Google Arts and Culture, joining 2,000 institutions whose collections are publicly available through Google’s platform. To reach academic faculty and students beyond GW, the museum will upload its digital collections to the ArtStor Digital Library.
4. ***To advance the museum’s commitment to supporting the development of future museum professionals.*** Involving students in the collections digitization project will allow the museum to offer hands-on experience with collections management and digitization to students who are currently pursuing master’s degrees at GW in museum studies, art history, and other museum-related disciplines. As they embark on their careers, these students will impact and inform future collections management, stewardship, and interpretation practices in other cultural institutions.

By the end of the grant period, the museum will expand its searchable, online database by an additional 4,000 collection records representing textiles of cultural, historical, and artistic significance. Each online record will include digital images, making further progress toward the goal of having at least 75% of the collection objects online by The Textile Museum’s

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centennial in 2025. In addition to high-resolution images, each record will contain comprehensive data on the object's origin, date, measurements, style, material, structure/technique, and its exhibition and/or publication history. Website users will be able to email museum staff to share further knowledge about collection objects for possible addition to the data record.

Through its Collections Stewardship program category, IMLS recognizes the importance of exemplary stewardship of museum collections and the potential for technology to facilitate discovery of knowledge and cultural heritage. With support from IMLS, this digitization project will meet these Museums for America program goals by enabling greater and wider use of the museum's collections, not only by museum staff, but also by the GW community, scholars, artists, collectors, and the general public. Through digital technology, the museum will engage local, national, and international audiences in using the collection as a means to discover knowledge and cultural heritage through the universal medium of textiles.

Project background and need: Founded in 1925 by collector George Hewitt Myers, The Textile Museum leverages its collections, exhibitions, publications, and educational programs in effort to expand public knowledge and appreciation of textiles as an art form and as a vehicle for building cross-cultural awareness. At the core of the museum's work is the belief that textiles are windows to cultural diversity and should be studied and appreciated as artistic expressions of cultural, political, religious, and social identities. The Textile Museum Collection includes more than 21,000 textiles dating from 3,000 B.C.E. to the present. They represent societies from around the globe, including the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Many of these artworks are especially important in that they represent the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples whose traditional ways of life are at risk of disappearing. The museum also has a small but growing collection of fiber works by American contemporary artists who are inspired by global textile traditions.

In 2012, The Textile Museum became affiliated with the George Washington University. Through this affiliation, The Textile Museum moved from its historic home in Washington, D.C.'s Kalorama neighborhood to a brand new museum facility on GW's main campus in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood, located five blocks from the White House. It reopened to the public in 2015 as the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum. The Textile Museum Collection, which is on perpetual loan to the university, is now housed in the Avenir Foundation Conservation and Collections Resource Center, a state-of-the-art facility on GW's Virginia Science and Technology Campus. In addition to its continued public service, the museum has also become a valued university resource for teaching, learning, research, and campus community building.

To fulfill the museum's potential as a resource for teaching and research for the GW community and the public, full digital access to the collection is of paramount importance, especially given the following constraints that limit in-person access:

- When on view in the galleries, textiles are susceptible to permanent damage from light exposure. Their fragile nature also makes them labor intensive to prepare for display. For these reasons, the museum's galleries exhibit only a small number of objects from The Textile Museum Collection at once, and only for short periods.
- The collection is housed off site at the Avenir Foundation Conservation and Collections Resource Center, located 33 miles from GW's main campus. Although researchers can study objects from the collection there by appointment, the Avenir Center's location is a barrier for many researchers. Additionally, the museum's curators are physically separated from the collections facility, resulting in their higher reliance on collections photography for exhibition planning.
- It is challenging for GW faculty to design curricula and student research projects that leverage The Textile Museum Collection without having broader digital access to explore the range of objects in the full collection.
- In the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally transformed the ways that the international museum community is reaching audiences, bringing new urgency to digital methods of audience engagement and public service.

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To meet demand for increased and easier access to collections data by museum staff, GW faculty and students, and the public, in 2015 the museum began a major digitization initiative. First, a pilot project from December 2015 to June 2016, supported by a \$100,000 gift from a former trustee, helped to establish a process for photographing collection objects in the new Avenir Center's photography studio. It also tested photography equipment options before long-term investment. The pilot project taught the staff valuable lessons about equipment, staffing, workflow, and technique for photographing large and small objects; for example, some objects are better shot from the catwalk, while other objects are better shot from the ground using a customized boom. The pilot project resulted in digital photography for 8% of The Textile Museum Collection.

Next, in 2017 the museum used accumulated reserve funds to purchase a new collections management system (CMS). The staff selected MuseumPlus, a product of Zetcom, to replace the museum's legacy Argus system. Unlike Argus, which was accessible only from specific workstations in the museum staff offices, MuseumPlus is cloud-based and gives museum staff with login credentials access to collection records from any internet-enabled device. MuseumPlus also has the added functionality of a public-facing online portal, MuseumPlus Online. This new opportunity to share the museum's collections online with the public at large underscored the need to further grow the archive of digital photography of collection objects.

After building an efficient process for digitizing the collection based on experience gained through the pilot project, the museum was awarded an IMLS Museums for America grant for a 2018-21 project to digitize another 25% of The Textile Museum Collection. Grant funds supported a full-time collections photographer, which the pilot project had proved to be more economical and efficient than using a contract photographer. Grant funds also supported graduate student assistants to help with object handling and cataloging. Over the course of this grant project, the museum was able to hire six students, each of whom gained hands-on training and experience working with museum objects and databases. With current grant funds due to run out in spring 2021, new funding is critical to retain the collections photographer and student assistants and make further progress on digitization.

Through the combined efforts of the digitization team, in December 2019 the museum launched a collections web portal, go.gwu.edu/collections, giving the public free access to collection data for the first time. **Supporting Document 1** shows the public view and back-end view for two sample object records. As of October 2020, the museum has photographed, digitized, and posted over 5,000 objects to the site, and is on track to have 6,000 digital records available by mid-2021. By emailing the museum staff via the website, public users can submit feedback on their experience using the site and/or share knowledge relevant to individual collection objects that curators might use to enhance the data record.

Aside from addressing the need for digital photography, the digitization effort provides an opportunity to review object records for any inconsistent or missing data, so that records are as clean as possible for public release. The cataloging process includes updating metadata such as accession number, credit line, country of origin, use, culture, style, materials, structure/technique, measurements, publication history, and exhibition history. In addition to the public benefit, having data records as clean and updated as possible ensures that all museum staff have a single source for finding object information.

The next group of objects prioritized for the digitization effort, and the focus of this proposed grant project, are those that are particularly challenging to photograph. These include ancient or large-scale textiles that are very fragile and require more precise collections care and handling. The museum also seeks to finish digitizing its holdings of Islamic fragments, a grouping begun but not completed during the 2018-21 project. The next phase of the initiative will also digitize new accessions since 2020. Another priority group is objects slated for upcoming exhibitions, including an exhibition of the 100 most important collection objects that is being planned to celebrate The Textile Museum's centennial in 2025.

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To date, digitization efforts have focused on sharing the collections through the museum's own website. Scholars and the public who wish to explore The Textile Museum Collection must proactively find the site, meaning its reach is somewhat limited. In this next phase of the digitization initiative, the museum will establish partnerships with aggregator sites that will increase the discoverability of the collections. The museum will partner with Google Arts and Culture, joining 2,000 cultural institutions worldwide that have made their collections available to the public through Google's platform. The museum will also upload its digital collections to the ArtStor Digital Library, joining ArtStor's 300 international partner organizations. Another website identified for linkage is Museum With No Frontiers, which has a digital repository for international carpet art.

Audiences benefiting from the project: Four primary groups will gain far-reaching benefits from the project:

1. **Museum personnel:** For museum staff who use the collections database to conduct their daily work—especially the registrars, conservators, and curators—having access to digital photography and comprehensive data for a larger percentage of the collection will boost efficiency in the care, study, exhibition, and publication of these collections.
2. **GW community:** Having a larger percentage of the museum collections available online will facilitate access by the GW academic community to support research, teaching, and learning. Faculty and their students will be able to use textiles in the collection to investigate a broad range of subjects including art, history, politics, religion, economics, and chemistry. A key group of students to benefit from the project is graduate students in GW's museum studies program, which is known internationally for its strength in collections management training. During the grant period, students will gain valuable field training by assisting with object handling, digital photography, and cataloging. This training in collections management best practices will be transmitted to organizations far and wide when these emerging professionals accept roles in collections management and curatorial departments in museums locally, nationally, and internationally. The museum is particularly committed to engaging students from diverse backgrounds.
3. **Outside scholars and curators:** Expanding access to collections data to outside scholars and curators, especially those based in distant regions of the globe, will in turn provide public benefit, expanding textile knowledge and appreciation through international publications and exhibitions that include Textile Museum Collection objects. The availability of the collections online will enable the museum to advance the rapidly evolving field of textile studies.
4. **Local, national, and international audiences:** By publishing an additional 4,000 object records online, this project will enable the public worldwide to enjoy free access to The Textile Museum Collection. This includes access by those from the global cultures represented in the collection who can help to preserve and share the heritage of indigenous peoples.

Intended results: This project seeks to leverage IMLS's initial investment in creating a process and platform for sharing The Textile Museum Collection digitally. It will result in 4,000 additional textiles – another 19% of the collection – accessible online. Each data record will have a high-quality image(s) and object information including accession number, credit line, country of origin, use, culture, style, materials, measurements, structure/technique, and publication and exhibition history.

Growing the number of collection records publicly available online will offer scholars, collectors, connoisseurs, and artists an expanded resource for study and appreciation of historical and contemporary global textiles and the diverse cultures who create them. The growth in digital object records will also increase efficiency in the museum's collections stewardship activities, including collections management, conservation, and collection development. It will also benefit curatorial research, the production of scholarship, the development of new exhibitions, and efforts to support academic curricula.

By involving students, the project will also result in a new set of future museum professionals who have training in digitization. As they move forward with their careers, these students will go on to impact and inform future collections management, stewardship, and interpretation practices in other cultural institutions. The museum has succeeded in

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recruiting and training students from diverse backgrounds, including varied racial identity, ethnic identity, gender identity, and military service. In filling the grant positions, the museum will seek to recruit students who bring diverse perspectives to the George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, and to the museum field at large.

Advancing the institution's strategic plan: Expanding online access to the collection directly advances the museum's top strategic goal: to broaden the intellectual reach of The Textile Museum by making its collection accessible to researchers and the public. Secondly, by engaging students, the project advances the goal of cultivating future museum professionals.

2. PROJECT WORK PLAN

Project Activities: The following activities will take place during the grant period:

September 2021 – October 2021: The museum's Registrar, who serves as Project Director, will work with the Collections Photographer and the curators to finalize the list of objects to be digitized and organize it into shoot categories. The museum will also advertise the position of Collections Resident with GW's student employment office and interview candidates. The student hired will be a current or recent graduate student with career aspirations working with collections, ideally enrolled in the GW museum studies program. The hiring process, from advertisement to onboarding, takes 4-8 weeks. The Registrar and Collections Specialist will then perform a month-long training for the Collections Resident on object handling, care, and tracking. The Collections Photographer will review the photography process with the Collections Resident and provide learning opportunities related to image processing and equipment calibration.

October 2021 – August 2023: The Collections Photographer and the Collections Resident will photograph collection objects two days (16 hours) per week. When needed, the Collections Specialist and/or Registrar will assist with object handling and staging for larger or more fragile objects. During the three days per week not spent shooting, the Collections Photographer, assisted by the Collections Resident when possible, will clean up and process images, embed metadata, name files, store them on the museum's dedicated photography drive, and upload JPEG files and details to MuseumPlus. A detailed workflow that has been established for these tasks is documented in **Supporting Document 2**.

February 2022 – April 2022: The Registrar will advertise the position of Curatorial Resident with GW's student employment office. The Registrar and Senior Curator will oversee interviewing and hiring this position, to be filled by a current or recent graduate student(s) with museum and research aspirations, ideally from a GW graduate program in museum studies, anthropology, or art history. Once hired, the Senior Curator will oversee the Curatorial Resident's training. Together, the Senior Curator, Curator, and Curator of Contemporary Art will provide training on research techniques with specific attention to textile cataloging practices. Due to student schedules, the museum expects the Curatorial Resident role will be filled by one or more students over the grant period. For each student hired, there will be an onboarding and training period.

April 2022 – August 2023: Over the course of five semesters, the Curatorial Resident will review object information in the MuseumPlus database and perform research in museum files and publications, in consultation with the curators, to enhance object records. Under the guidance of the Registrar and Sr. Communications & Marketing Manager, the Curatorial Resident will also link object records to aggregator sites, including Google Arts and Culture, ArtStor, and Museum With No Frontiers.

Key project staff: The project team will consist of the following staff members:

Current Museum Staff: The project director is **Tessa Lummis, Registrar** (MA, George Washington Univ.). She first joined the museum's collections staff in 2010, and was promoted to registrar in 2018. Ms. Lummis brings direct experience to this project, having overseen the museum's 2015-16 photography pilot project and the 2018-21 IMLS grant project.

Grant funds will support the full-time salary and benefits for **Breton Littlehales, Museum Collections Photographer** (BFA, RISD), for two years. As a freelance photographer for over 40 years, Mr. Littlehales's clients have included National

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Geographic, the Smithsonian, the U.S. Navy, and The Washington Post and Washingtonian magazines. The museum has benefited from Mr. Littlehales's expertise in all aspects of digital photography, including enhancing and cataloging files and establishing efficient workflows. This position is key to growing the archive of digital collection images available to the public; however, new funding is required for the museum to continue Mr. Littlehales's position beyond spring 2021.

Caitlyn Kennedy, Collections Specialist (MA, Georgetown Univ.), who joined the museum in 2019, will also provide staff support to the project. Specifically, she will assist with object handling before and after photography sessions.

Curatorial staff will oversee the enhancement of collections data records. **Sumru Belger Krody, Senior Curator for The Textile Museum Collection** (MA, Univ. of Pennsylvania), is head of the curatorial department and oversees holdings from the Islamic World. **Lee Talbot, Curator for The Textile Museum Collection** (MA, PhD candidate, Bard Graduate Center), oversees holdings from East Asia. **Caroline Kipp, Curator for Contemporary Art** (MA, Harvard Univ.), oversees the museum's small but growing collection of textiles from the mid-20th through early-21st centuries. Together, these curators bring 35 years of combined experience working with The Textile Museum Collection. The curators, who have experience supervising multiple student interns each semester, will also provide mentorship to the student curatorial resident. Work with data records on objects from the Americas will involve **Ann Pollard Rowe, Research Associate for Indigenous American Textiles** (MA, UC Berkeley). Ms. Rowe was The Textile Museum's former curator of Western Hemisphere Collections. An internationally recognized expert in Central and South American textiles, she has overseen the growth of the museum's collection from these regions over the past 45 years.

Chita Middleton, Senior Communications and Marketing Manager (MA, Univ. of Edinburgh), will assist with marketing the availability of the online collections to the public. Ms. Middleton has led the museum's communications department since 2014 and oversees the museum's digital communications strategy. She was a key member of the project team that launched the pilot collections web portal in 2019. Ms. Middleton will also work with Ms. Lummis to research, select, and partner with other digital repositories, including Google Arts and Culture, to increase the discoverability of collection records. A graduate student(s) in art history, anthropology, or a related discipline as a part-time **Curatorial Resident**. Over five semesters, the curatorial resident will review, format, enhance, and post digital records in MuseumPlus and partner websites Google Arts and Culture, ArtStor, and Museum With No Frontiers. Given the complexities with student schedules, it is likely that multiple students will serve in this role over the course of the grant period. Job descriptions for the student positions to be hired through the grant are included in the **Resumes** attachment.

Organizational partner: The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum is an entity of the George Washington University. The university supports the museum's facilities and provides operational support in accounting, IT, human resources, and a number of other areas. This project will benefit from these services; for example, GW's human resources department will assist with job postings, background checks, and other aspects of hiring project staff. Additionally, partnerships with GW academic departments such as museum studies and art history will help to identify students, especially those from backgrounds underrepresented in the museum profession, who can make positive contributions to the project while also enhancing their own career training.

Required Resources: This project requires the active involvement of staff from across the collections management, curatorial, and communications and marketing departments. Photographing collection objects requires specialized photography equipment that was purchased through a major gift from the Avenir Foundation. Technology necessary to host collections data includes the MuseumPlus collections management system and its public portal, MuseumPlus Online.

3. PROJECT RESULTS

Changing knowledge, skill, behavior, and attitudes: This project will result in more complete collections data and images available in a single comprehensive collections management system, therefore allowing the museum staff to more efficiently care for collection objects and to share them with the public. Having more objects publicly accessible through the museum's website, and linked through well-known aggregator sites, will expand the reach of The Textile Museum Collection. This will result in students, scholars, artists, collectors, and textile connoisseurs having broader opportunities to learn from the artworks in the museum's holdings and to appreciate the diverse global cultures that these textiles represent. Research using collections data will be easier and more sophisticated, giving museum staff, GW faculty and students, and national and international scholars an improved search tool to explore the collection and include collection objects in future exhibitions, publications, and curriculum development.

This project will also provide lasting experience and training to future museum professionals, providing hands-on instruction in the process of digitization, object handling and photography, cataloging, data assessment and clean-up, and the skills and best practices for using a collections management system. Through this important work, museum staff will succeed in influencing the collections stewardship practices of GW alumni as well as the practices of the organizations where these museum professionals will bring their knowledge.

Measuring success: Project staff will review and evaluate the project on an ongoing basis. As project director, Registrar Tessa Lummis will assess digitization progress on a monthly basis and adjust metrics as necessary to more accurately reflect realistically achievable goals. She will meet with the collections photographer monthly to discuss workflow and make adjustments as necessary. They will meet at the end of the grant period to evaluate the project from the photography perspective. Ms. Lummis will also consult with curators on the progress of cataloging monthly and adjust metrics as necessary to more accurately reflect realistically achievable goals.

The key metric for success is to reach the goal of 4,000 new digital records by the end of the grant period. Throughout the project, the museum will track the number of objects photographed and the number of collections records updated. On an ongoing basis, public users will be able to submit feedback on their online database experience by sending an email to museum staff via the collections site. The museum will continue to measure its accessibility by tracking metrics on public use of the site. To measure the project's impact on GW's academic community, the museum will also track the number of faculty who are integrating the museum collections into their academic courses.

Adding value to the field: This project will add value to the field by granting global access to images and information on one of the most extensive collections of non-Western textile art in the United States, thus enhancing research and scholarship, and ultimately expanding knowledge and appreciation of the textile arts. In providing a training ground for graduate students in museum studies, art history, and other disciplines to work with collections, the project will also prepare emerging museum professionals with hands-on experience that they can carry to their future institutions.

Resources to sustain project benefits: To sustain the benefits of the project, museum staff must commit to continuing to review, update, and add new data records as scholarship expands. Additionally, while this project will make significant progress toward the museum's aspirations to have at least 75% of the collection digitized by The Textile Museum's centennial in 2025, the museum will need to seek additional funding to retain the collections photographer and student residents in order to continue object photography and digitization beyond the grant period.

