

Moving Threads: The Post-Custodial Archive Model Preserving Syrian Clothing Heritage

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Abstract

This project uses the post-custodial model to archive a collection of nearly two hundred privately owned Syrian garments. The collection features clothing and craft techniques displaced from diaspora and war. This project aims to identify workflows and best practices for cataloging an international garment collection in the U.S. using the post-custodial method. This includes focusing on critical cataloguing, an emerging approach for dress collections. The goal is to transform the collection into a museum-quality, publicly accessible archive and share its content through a book, articles, and an exhibition for education and outreach. The primary focus has been database development around international artifacts with multiple titles and work types. Since 2018, fashion historians working in museums and academia have partnered with Syrian American collection owners, engaging MLIS database specialists, Arabic language translators, Syrian culture experts, and historians to bridge knowledge gaps and enhance awareness. The custodians provide context, storage, provenance, and terminology for inclusive descriptions and photography styling. Challenges with this approach include minimal funding for private collections, limited time and team member participation resulting in slow processing, and the potential for conflicting stakeholder goals. Benefits for the Syrian community include more accurate narratives, vocabulary, and representation that promote innovation than in some institutional collections. Benefits for fashion history and library science professions include establishing best practices for clothing complexities, diversifying cultural representation, and valuing material culture.

Keywords: clothing; critical catalogue; database; metadata; Syria

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Introduction

The Weiss-Armush Collection of Syrian clothing is a well-kept, private grouping of traditional Syrian dress that represents some of the region's finest examples of rural craft, with estimated origin dates ranging from the 1850s to the 1970s (Traditional Clothing of Syria, n.d.). The family owners steadily compiled the collection during their government posting abroad, and presently, it is housed with the family in Washington, DC, United States. The intergenerational and vast assembly of garments and accessories features craft techniques that are no longer culturally centralized or taught in the wake of wars and subsequent diasporas.

The primary custodians of the collection are Anne Marie Weiss-Armush who resides in Mexico, and her daughter Maha Armush, currently based in Washington, D.C. American-born Anne Marie lived and traveled in the Middle East from 1975 to 1987 with her husband and daughters, naturalized Syrian citizens. Anne Marie left the collection in Washington, D.C., with Maha due to the instability of the climate and storage availability in her home in Mexico. Anne Marie acquired various dress items and their histories while collecting, often using historical illustrations as references. Anne Marie's background as a seamstress and Fulbright scholar, along with her relocation to the D.C. region with her spouse, a federal government employee, gave her a unique perspective. This enabled her to explore the material culture of garments from various angles (M. Sklar, personal communications, 2021).

This archive stands out from others of Syrian dress for its diverse collection of clothing and craft examples, encompassing various religious and ethnic minorities and regional representations. It is centered on traditional rural aesthetics and techniques, distinct from the European fashion influences that were part of the regional styles during times of French Colonialism and increased global awareness of the fashion industry, impacting the era the family was collecting.

Syria has a history of varied religious, cultural, and geographic groups using techniques of dyeing, embroidery, and metalwork, for example, to purposely tell complex stories through design symbolism...These craft practices can no longer be replicated as the cultural groups who developed them are now dispersed and lives have changed dramatically....As people have migrated to other regions, often the garments are left behind, or the communities are disbanded including their shared craft knowledge. (Sklar, Hill McIntyre, & Autry, 2021, p. 322)

Since 2018, the authors have collaborated with this family to execute affordable, practical, and industry-standard collection management goals. These tasks include digital photography (Figure 1), standardized metadata capture, database development, labeling objects, pest control, improving storage conditions, gathering contextual images and literature support, and collecting contextual support and family interviews.



Figure 1. Brass coin headdress from North Syria, AMW.033, shot in Airbnb 2019, by Pete Duvall/Anything Photographic (Used with permission).

Clothing and textile collections are rising in museums and libraries due to a growth in public interest in exhibitions and programming highlighting design and cultural heritage expression. As a new generation of professionals enters the library and museum fields, institutions increasingly prioritize diversifying cultural representation, valuing material culture across different demographics. This approach is central to institutional missions, archiving methods, and best practices. This medium of textile and dress enables institutions to tell a more cohesive, complete, and respectful historical narrative. However, this shift requires a restructuring around database, metadata, and vocabulary standards to prioritize the complexities of dress details. This cataloging project is a scholarly exercise in applying the post-custodial approach to the clothing sector, which currently has limited controlled vocabularies. Getty, Europeana, and others are not complete and/or are not cohesively used across the clothing archive field. Kirkland's (2019) Costume Core is a metadata framework that attempts to create a more complete and functional vocabulary standards resource, but it is not actively in use yet.

Cataloging cultural heritage objects requires research training that includes using accurate regional vocabulary resources and knowledge of generic clothing cataloging terms. A triangulation of this specific approach to cataloging is proper when there are multiple words for the same object within languages. However, language regarding clothing shifts over time, creating a challenge when describing an object whose date, age range, or gendered assignation is uncertain. For this research, the authors are scholars and practitioners with advanced degrees in fashion history and have experience working in many capacities in clothing and/or institutional archives. Their experiences include teaching in museum studies certificate programs for a research-intensive university and actively collaborating with librarian scholars like Arden Kirkland, leveraging their library and information science (LIS) and costume history background.

Research Purpose/Justification

This project aims to preserve Syria's dress history by documenting and illuminating craft and handmade clothing as a form of identity, community, economy, and artistic expression. This group of 200 diverse artifacts is justifiable as a case study and encompasses multiple problems to work toward solutions for scholarly, practitioner, and public benefit. Through the multifaceted, ongoing transformation of this collection into a museum-quality and publicly accessible archive, the team on this project aims to use digital technology and public formats such as books, articles, and exhibitions to disseminate this content for education and outreach.

The collaboration between museum professionals and private collection owners adds a rich dialogue between the participating parties, benefitting multiple stakeholders such as the owners, the Syrian diaspora community, dress researchers, and museum/library professionals. This project aims to discern workflows and best practices for cataloging an international garment collection in the U.S. and how to do this using the post-custodial method. Both foci are underexplored areas of scholarship and practice. Project goals are to benefit this specific archive and its cultural audience by making it accessible online to the public and providing a workflow for a collegial network to replicate the process in their collections. Findings will help determine appropriate terminology and vocabulary, best practices for working with varied stakeholders, funding solutions, and ways to streamline and standardize some of those tasks for consistency across others using this model. Therefore, we are testing the Costume Core system as part of our methods to focus on how this can be enhanced for dress scholars.

The post-custodial approach is becoming increasingly practiced in general archival work, but less so in clothing practice. As institutions, scholarship, and the public value more aspects of dress history for design culture heritage representation, more effective methods for handling and preserving these objects are needed. Institutions are placing more value on dress objects, despite physical storage remaining at a premium, which can limit incoming clothing acquisitions. The field of dress scholarship is not new, but oftentimes, museums/libraries that house dress artifacts are managed by professionals who do not have area-specific expertise, or certainly not global expertise, spanning a wide range of places/time periods. Additionally, clothing collections are managed by people with a variety of professional training, that may not always include specializations in museum collections or clothing history and care. There is a bridge of knowledge that needs to be strengthened if this area is going to grow in priority for responsible cultural heritage work. The post-custodial model of community stakeholders collaborating with history/museum/library professionals can assist with bridging the gap.

Clothing collections require significant physical storage space, preservation materials, and documentation techniques due to the fragile nature of textiles and 3-dimensionality. In addition to those specialized skills, museum professionals' knowledge base and that of the wearers and information surrounding traditional use, are conversely informed ontologically. Traditional dress and costume as a medium are unique in their embodiment and literal physical proximity to underrepresented cultural lineages – something so personal requires post-custodial and collaborative care. This is especially true of non-Western or lesser documented groups' garments in the United States within private collections. This process will benefit our colleagues and the public as the collaboration gains more accurate narratives, robust language choices, and diversified representation. Our work to problem solve around those challenges builds upon that of other scholars, especially in critical cataloguing and post-custodial approaches, and adds in a new object type to focus on, dress, and also, how international objects function in the U.S. space, especially with underfunded collections attempting to shift into this crucial direction but lacking rich resources.

This project has the potential for widespread impact on the outcomes of preserving global clothing and craft history, advancing museum practice for clothing cataloging, and facilitating improvements in cultural inclusivity. This can be performed through more accurate and comprehensive narratives and visual representations than previously recorded, enhanced vocabulary around the objects that reflect clothing, museum, and international language choices, and increased access to knowledge by making a private collection available for public interaction (Olson, 2001). Finally, this project is incorporated into collaborative studies with other dress-history-focused professors, collections managers, librarians, and museum professionals to produce manuscripts and conference presentations as a group, using each of our collections as comparative data (Kirkland et al., 2023; Sklar et al., 2024). Those larger studies focus on student users and workers, cataloging clothing, searchability, discoverability, usability, and professional development for colleagues in the Costume Society of America.

Literature Review

This work takes place in a private archive, meaning it is owned by one family and housed in their residence. It presently has no institutional affiliation and limited public engagement. They

established a website to represent it, and a key research objective is to ensure the retention of the objects while making the content accessible and searchable online for educational purposes.

Collaboration is an exercise that creates an effective post-custodial approach (Flinn, 2020). This is the practice in which an archive is maintained by its creators and the community it represents, to be perpetually updated and maintained with accurate information and representation, rather than the archival data being handed over to an institution for maintenance and interpretation. Consequently, one must work with the archive owners to understand and prioritize the traditional knowledge surrounding the objects while simultaneously employing the best practices in museum processes and scholarship. This process allows the archive owners to retain ownership of the collection and its associated data. The owners also provide physical storage of the collection, and the archivist engages in ongoing dialogue about object provenance and heritage, terminology for inclusive and culturally responsible descriptions, and appropriate styling for photography (Flinn, 2020).

Post-custodial model: A definition

As early as 1981, archivist and scholar Gerald Ham proposed the “era” of the post-custodial model (Ham, 1981). As said in Princeton’s blog article *Diversifying the Archives*, “In a post-custodial model, creators retain custody of their records, consequently shifting ownership and access to the communities represented, rather than being handed over to larger and wealthier institutions. Post-custodial models are rooted in close collaborations and trusting partnerships, which are guided by equality between the parties” (Suárez, 2021).

Canadian archivist and early scholar/advocate of the 1981 Ham “post-custodial” framework, Terry Cook (1992), examined the central tenants of archival practices from the inception of the mid-19th century concept: *respect des fonds*. At its heart, the tension between the fonds as a “theoretical product of both creation (provenance) and arrangement (original order)” (p. 25) emphasized the organic, mutable nature of the archive. The living archive documents the natural relationships of transactions between the creator and the archivist; in this way, creation must be prioritized in the post-custodial era. Accrual and activity documentation enlivens the archive, providing a contextual framework for the static, plasticized “collection.”

Cook’s (1992) reiteration of the fonds’ origins highlights that the archival discipline was once primarily focused on provenance. The information system must proceed from the aforementioned activity of the creative forces, both archivists and creators of origin, respectively – “a direct, one-to-one correspondence between the abstract notion of the creator’s activities and the concrete or physical reality of the resulting records” (p. 28). This framework’s context-oriented approach acknowledges the individual behind the profession, promoting a *life-cycle data management approach* that ensures seamless transitions between archivists. However, administrative quirks and errors define the collections and can simultaneously obscure its provenance. Many fates await any collection; the benefit of the post-custodial approach is that it pragmatically eliminates bureaucracy while minimizing the risks associated with frequent ownership changes. Cook highlights that the digital age only emphasizes the shortcomings of its preceding era, citing Max Weber’s writing on “the classic mono-hierarchical theory of bureaucracy” (1992, p. 31).

The post-custodial era brings a systematic corporatization of data management where subordinate units reporting to superiors are mirrored within the subcategories of the data itself, leading Cook (1992) to question where the archivist situates the fonds— amid “this modern poly-hierarchical administrative maelstrom? Who, indeed, is the records creator?” (p. 31). The conceptual arrangement of the fonds, once correlated to the physical orientation and curation of a given collection (or original order), is more abstract and multi-perspectival in the post-custodial era.

At the crux of Cook’s prolific calls to action, he aims his post-custodial and post-modern approach to an interdisciplinary stage. In an electronic world, the stereotypical archivist, the preservationist of record and custodian, though necessary, must anticipate adapting to the needs of the future. In many ways, Cook (1994) posits himself at the vanguard of a paradigmatic shift, a “reorientation,” one that, in hindsight, continues to ring true for scholars across institutional lines. Cook (1994) identified the struggle to reorientate through simple, dialectic means: “We have paper minds trying to cope with electronic realities” (p. 302). The call demands archivists to look inward and horizontally into the implications of archiving itself rather than the archive. To Cook, this is reified by the shift in media itself, from the paper of record to the digital age just beyond the horizon. In this way, the postmodernist doubts the rationalist positivism of the past but paradoxically relies on history and record to reorient oneself into a position that is simultaneously skeptical of the institution that shapes collective memory.

Finally, Cook (2013) crafts a taxonomy of four distinct paradigm shifts he observes within the archival discipline: evidence, memory, identity, and community. Evidence, as it were, represents the paradigm of archiving as a record of juridical legacy codified in the famous Dutch Manual of 1898 and the writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson in the 1920s and 30s (Cook, 2013). For memory, the advent of modernist thinking and the exaltation of the “historian-archivists” deliberately curated the public consciousness. Identity characterizes a critical, post-modern approach to the archive. Lastly, the community prioritizes participation in the archive to re-orient the archive’s history as an extension of Western hegemony to a place-less repository made accessible to all. Here, one may see the re-emergence of the “total archive,” the further acceleration of the internet where anyone can be an artist, writer, publisher, or archivist. These individuals have begun to forge communal archives of their own through shared and crafted identities. This era beckons for a shift in principles from exclusive custodianship to shared stewardship.

Overall, the benefits of such a reorientation and practice are that objects are not taken away from traditional creators and recontextualized in Western academia and institutions. Consequently, Jimerson (2007) posits that reduced knowledge loss can be a symptom of a top-down structure of how data is chronicled from scholars and institutions instead of emphasizing the original data from the owners (Figure 2).

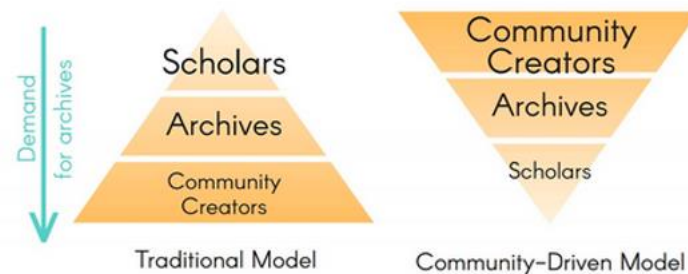


Figure 2. Illustration from Jimerson (2007) of different models for museum professionals and community members to work together.

This specific collection is special in many ways, including its mere breadth and existence. It is our goal to collaborate with the owner to improve its storage and care and make it accessible to the public by documenting the objects' construction, decorative elements, and cultural relevance through academic dissemination and online search tools. This project exemplifies how collaboration between private collectors and museum professionals can bring private collections into the public sphere and encourage cultural awareness and best museum practices.

Post-custodial approaches and related, community-based archives are collections of material gathered primarily by members of a specific community, with community members maintaining some control over their use. While post-custodial approaches typically involve objects remaining with their original owners, community archiving may or may not involve relocation to an institution. Nevertheless, the community frequently engages in documentation and narrative construction through group work sessions. Liew et al. (2020) reviewed digital post-custodial and participatory projects. They found that “[t]he collective analysis shows that when projects are designed with a human-centered computing focus and a community-oriented foundation, there is evidence of deeper engagement and sustained participation” (Liew et al., 2020, p. 1). According to Jimerson (2007), post-custodial work is increasing due to the capacities around digital technology within bigger institutions providing practical ways to collaborate with community archives. Becerra-Licha (2017) explained further that “[d]igital archiving, moreover, invites archivists to revisit core assumptions about authorship and authority, about context and hierarchy, and advocacy versus agency” (p. 90).

Collaboration amongst the community and professionals is an equal partnership that values cultural memory and evidence. Recognition that meaning-making is socially constructed allows us to acknowledge that although memory and evidence are traditionally positioned in opposition to one another, when synthesized together, oral narratives and storytelling combined with sociocultural immersion into local communities can enrich our collective histories. In this way, we, as archivists, act as cultural bridges—mediators tasked with mending “fractured archival identities” through shared stewardship and the art of careful archival interpretation (Flinn, 2020,

p. 437). Decolonizing and diversifying content in collections and communities' accessibility to them is integral to modernizing the archival process. The living documentation of the archive acknowledges the mutability of identity through intellectual and cultural exchange. Thus, recognizing what is lost in the transition from process to product to living document can be fraught and, therefore, must be transparently exposed and easily accessible to the masses.

Post-custodial praxis

The surge of activism that began in 2020, particularly the spread of the decentralized Black Lives Matter movement, sparked a paradigmatic shift in archival praxis. Following the movement, Princeton has demonstrated its commitment to fostering socio-cultural progress within the archive by establishing the "Uplifting Silenced Narratives Working Group" within its Special Collections. This initiative aims to elevate marginalized narratives and promote inclusivity. The group strives to create mechanisms that allow easy reporting on once-silenced narratives, bypassing the traditionally complex bureaucratic barriers. These tactics include (a) a dedication to collecting oral histories, (b) engagement in community archiving practices, and (c) the enacting of a post-custodial model. This proposed praxis differs from other decolonial efforts such as repatriation, offering a wholly constructive framework and "also provide[s] an alternative solution to the inevitable issue of limited storage space in archival repositories" while still shifting ownership to those with connections to its original creators (Suárez, 2021, paragraph 7). Contemporary post-custodial models such as Guatemala's Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional (AHPN), Texas's Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI), and the Genocide Archive of Rwanda also thoughtfully engage in professional responsibility for the equity of the archive (Suárez, 2021).

The aforementioned project at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center in Rwanda, which began in 2008 through a collaboration with the UT Libraries (UTL) Human Rights Documentation Initiative, aimed to document the histories of the Rwandan genocide using a post-custodial approach to archival praxis. The model, once employed, aims to democratize the power dynamics inherent in traditional archival practices by decoupling archival records from reliance on centralized repositories. Instead, it focuses on the context of records' creation, prioritizing provenance and critically reevaluating the archive's role in perpetuating power imbalances. This approach established a "third space" between professional archival norms and the lived experiences of communities involved in human rights documentation, offering an alternative to traditional custodial archives that often limit access and control. Initially intended as a custodial archive, the project quickly recognized that such a model would restrict access and fail to address the ethical challenges of documenting sensitive histories, particularly in post-genocide Rwanda. Additionally, out of UTL's custody, funds went directly to the local archival infrastructure, allowing the Rwandan partner organization to develop skills and capacity for sustaining the archive in the long term.

The shift to post-custodial practices was motivated by the need to ensure ethical records management, balancing critical theory with archival praxis. This includes questioning positivist archival models, which can inadvertently reproduce global power structures that disadvantage communities in the Global South. Key principles guiding the project include prioritizing ethical decision-making, facilitating access to digitized materials, and recognizing the political implications of archival work. Even with a thoughtful repositioning towards community-oriented

approaches, the hegemonic systems are often doomed to replicate themselves through the dominating nation's allocation of resources to participatory organizations. These cycles of neglect and subliminal domination require a consistent critical analysis. Ultimately, the project aimed to preserve human rights histories while safeguarding privacy, cultural heritage, and local and archival autonomy (Kelleher, 2017).

Critical cataloging

Critical cataloging is an aspect of the post-custodial approach, emerging alongside the shift into a postmodern era—one defined by subjectivity, collaboration, and the aspirational dismantling of traditional hierarchies. Not only is critical cataloging a specific practice in prescribing language and terms into the annals of history, but it is also an epistemological positioning against the previously perceived “neutrality” of the archive and its stewards.

Perera (2022) illustrates how managing digital data requires critical cataloging, cultural humility, and community engagement (Figure 3).

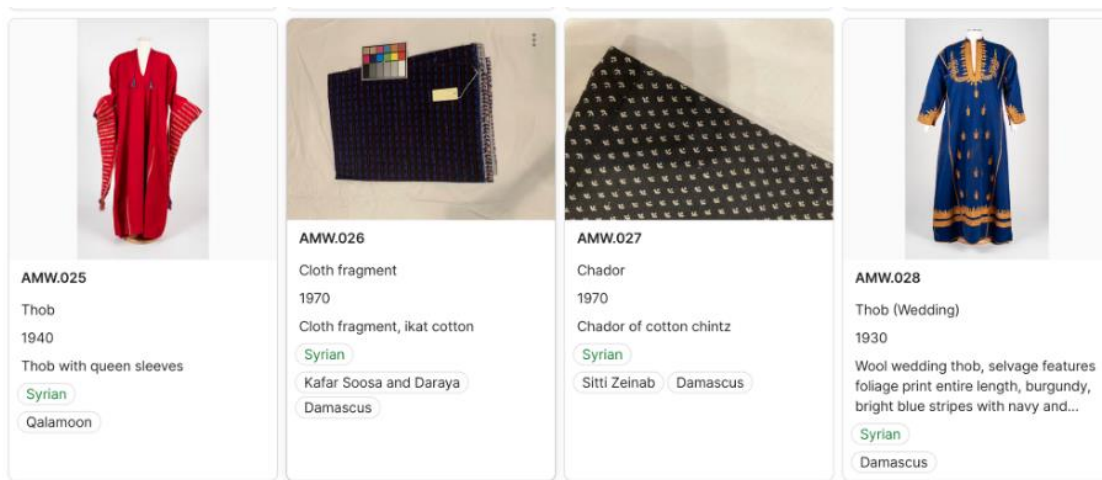


Figure 3. CODA database, gallery view pre-data cleanup, screenshot 2024 by M. Sklar.

American University defines critical cataloging, a subset of critical librarianship, as an effort to address how classification and knowledge organization reinforce systems of oppression (Bruce, n.d.). Drabinski (2015) suggests that critical cataloging acknowledges that classification systems and metadata creation can perpetuate long-standing biases through language and erasure. These prejudices are further proliferated through pedagogy when it fails to encourage the development of “information literacy” amongst the next generation of archivists/librarians. Drabinski (2015) cites Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a roadmap for building the foundation for more critical education and, thus, a more critical intervention of the catalog and, in turn, a more radical archive.

For example, library archivist and writer Jessica Tai (2021) sees oppressive constructs of the archive materialize through the continued use of euphemistic language, particularly the

terminology used to describe the histories of marginalized communities. In this particular instance, Tai (2021) observed the consistent use of misrepresentative terms like “relocation center” and “internment” when describing the forced incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII, terms that are pushed back on by advocacy groups and the survivors of this oppressive legacy. The proposed question is: What is the impact of archival absence in place of a specific cultural representation? The result is a term coined by feminist scholar Gaye Tuchman: *symbolic annihilation* (Caswell, 2014). To omit or even malign these underrepresented communities does harm and symbolic violence that can only be halted through action.

Through the framework of cultural humility, the archivist acts as the mediator between the living document and the community in which it is represented. By denouncing the concept of archival neutrality, the professional shifts from cultural competence (or perceived competence) to a model of cultural humility. This acknowledgment is necessary to push for institutional accountability by critical means.

At its foundation, the critical framework is functionally the same as the post-custodial model. Tai (2015) cites Cook’s (2013) call to deconstruct the positivist approach present in the taxonomical spirit of the archival sciences. Such an approach assumes competence in peripheral cultures to be artfully sublimated into the encyclopedic knowledge banks of the world. Negligent and harmful, the “neutral” hands of the archivist have a rich history as the purveyors of textual and organized subjugation. One of the key tenets and practices of cultural humility is the implementation of community-based participatory research. To readjust to this pluralistic truth, transnational archival partnerships attempt the “contributive justice approach” enabling community members to exercise agency over their cultural history with the hopes of continuing stewardship and self-determination. Furthermore, community engagement scholars Blanchard and Furco (2021), use the term “engaged scholarship” to propose an agenda of critical, institutional reform that seeks to transform the humanities from areas of detached academic scholarship to those “who engage with the public to advance social conditions and build a better understanding of their discipline (2021, p.36)”. Engaged scholarship and other such pedagogical pivots are tantamount to inspiring the next archivists’ critical reassessment of the archival practices of yesterday.

Research gaps

The post-custodial approach has not been commonly implemented with clothing therefore, the body of literature is still growing. In Arizona, Mexican folklórico dance costumes and community input are used to improve regional archival holdings representing cultural diversity in the area using the post-custodial method (Saladana Perez, 2022). The Australian Dress Register performed an early clothing-based example of the community archiving cataloging method. This project involved the population aggregating the costume data to a shared site (Powerhouse Museum, n.d.). Unfortunately, that site has gone dormant for input but is still helpful for content development. These sparse examples illustrate the unprecedented and much-needed presence of a project like ours to lead the charge in post-custodial and digital archiving practices for historical dress and craft.

With specificity to artifacts or dress from Syria in its neighboring nation, the possibility for factual error, exploitation, and archival neglect is tenfold. In her book *From Dust to Digital*, the Director

of Projects at HERITAGE (The Heritage Management Organization) Maja Kominko (2015) acknowledges the seldom-spoken threat to the regional historical record that is the several Syrian collections still missing to this day. Although Kominko speaks of artifacts of antiquity, the fear of endangerment is endemic to the region and not particularly to the medium or period. Dress collections could benefit from the scholarship and attention the antiquities get from rich, widely Western audiences and patrons. Consequently, attention and care have been brought to creating the Endangered Archives Programme (EAP), an initiative founded to digitize vulnerable documentation, all made freely available online to all independent and academic scholars alike.

As for institutional funding, practices such as engaged scholarship and implementation of critical theory in archival practices require external partners and stakeholders to care about the work—“from doing ‘to’ and ‘for’ communities to engaging ‘in’ and ‘with’ communities” (Blanchard & Furco, 2021, p.19). Blanchard and Furco (2021) also developed four frameworks to investigate academia and public collaboration. Our work herein is perhaps best described by their community-engaged scholarship (CES), which further investigates the relationship between community work and the institution that subsequently funds it.

Cantor and Lavine (2006) define public scholarship as connecting

directly to the work of specific public groups in specific contexts; arises from a faculty member’s field of knowledge; involves a cohesive series of activities contributing to the public welfare and resulting in ‘public good’ products; is jointly planned and carried out by coequal partners; and integrates discovery, learning, and public engagement.
(as cited in Blanchard & Furco, 2021, p. 27)

This project has set goals to achieve the tenets of public scholarship under the umbrella of a research-intensive university. With such premises, consideration of ethics at this stage is equally as important as the work being established on the ground.

These research gaps highlight a crucial need for further exploration and development of post-custodial and community-centered approaches in archiving cultural dress, especially within regions marked by conflict and historical neglect. By prioritizing collaborative efforts, integrating critical theory, and securing institutional support, projects like ours have the potential to redefine how historical dress and craft are preserved, shared, and respected across diverse communities. To remedy this, this project attempts to take charge by allocating public institutional funding to a community-centered archival project, which also digitizes cultural artifacts for access instead of putting them under institutional custody. In these ways, one might be able to close the gaps and contribute to the scholarly discourse at large.

Methodology

Our methodological choices were selected to make this archive publicly accessible online to prepare the content for books and exhibitions and, in a broader scale, to create replicable workflows and templates for colleagues facing similar collection challenges. Some of the methods have been described in a previous article (Sklar, Hill McIntyre, & Autry, 2021) that was published with a focus on small dress collections management and storage improvements prior to the

authors' increased education, which then resulted in a focus on the post custodial approach and critical cataloging.

Background of project

We were introduced to the Weiss-Armush family through a mutual friend and colleague, Jason Hamacher, a Washington, D.C.-based preservationist, photographer, and curator who runs a non-profit gallery called Lost Origins (visit <https://lostorigns.gallery>). Collaborating with the Syrian community in both Syria and the U.S., Hamacher has dedicated himself to preserving cultural heritage through photography and recording ancient traditional Christian chants. His efforts have led to his work being archived in the Library of Congress. Hamacher met the family when they participated in a local Syrian cultural outreach event, including a small informal fashion exhibition featuring their items. Hamacher and the Weiss-Armush family initiated the goal of establishing a more extensive exhibition affiliated with the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival. In 2018, Dr. Monica Sklar was recruited to help shape the expanded use of the dress artifacts within that context. As the exhibition planning progressed and through dialogues with the family, Dr. Sklar recognized that the archive could be preserved and shared in ways beyond the temporary exhibit and brought in Kathryne Hill McIntyre.

Methodological criteria and framework

After initial consultation, it was clear that the family's goals were not to focus on physical storage beyond minor improvement. Instead, they aimed to prioritize public access and content dissemination (Sklar, Hill McIntyre, & Autry, 2021). This became a turning point in our methodology and research questions/justification as we shifted from a physical and light data management goal to a data-focused and online useability goal, bringing photography, critical cataloging, and presentation/access online to the forefront of our purpose. Depending on workspace availability, the authors have either worked in Maha's finished basement, where the storage bins are kept, or transported the bins to an Airbnb or photography studio. The motivation to continue working on the archive meant we shifted to outline the collaboration as an ongoing series of research projects and collection management tasks. This would raise the potential for when the exhibition could be reinstated and provide new opportunities.

The authors had experience with both institutional and private clothing collections, as well as organizing independent events with a do-it-yourself approach. However, they yet unfamiliar with scholarship on post-custodial and community archiving processes. While we lacked the specific language around post-custodial, we all have experience working in small or underfunded museums and counter-cultural public spaces. Additionally, we bring expertise in museum studies, particularly in clothing collections, with a strong foundation in best practices for object handling, data input, and oral history collection. Examples of these practices include: washing hands before handling items, rehousing them into new bins with acid-free tissue, assisting the family with pest control when necessary, and identifying textiles and garment details using industry-specific vernacular, even though English is their primary language. It was inherent to us to consult the owners in many steps of the collections management process as we also had many knowledge gaps around provenance, Syria language and history, and their owner goals.

Throughout the years spent on this project, the LIS consultant completed the Visual Resources Association's Summer Educational Institute (VRA/SEI) workshop and became certified. The

institute recommended that the additional authors do the same, which they completed in 2022. This enhanced knowledge of post-custodial and critical cataloging provided the project with clear criteria to highlight specific priorities, responsibilities, and processes that could complement our existing workflow. Therefore, this project was not initiated with a theory, template, or framework beyond our professional and personal experiences as dress historians and museum professionals. However, it evolved to incorporate the post-custodial framework overlaid with the dress archivists' criteria around best practices. The resulting approach involves working in person with the objects approximately three times a year for one to three days on-site, along with continuous remote work in cloud-based computer programs, emails, and Zoom calls.

After we established the study's goals and the framework was taking shape, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the objects became clearer. First, this could serve as a case study of a single collection from one family, as this specific collection presented many challenges, each of which could be explored as a separate research question. Within the family's collection, we excluded objects that seemed to be costumes for performance, tourist-trade garments (not meant for regional wearers), modern dress from ready-to-wear commerce that does not represent the regional crafts, or objects with unverified countries of origin. We also excluded one item that is part of the collection but remains framed in the family house, thus making it difficult to work with.

Numeric IDs, language choices, and database development

The family maintains a website of images of the objects, similar historical illustrations, and brief descriptions of the items, divided by gender, age of the wearer, and region. Anne Marie initiated a unique numbering system for labeling items on the website. The authors used her numbering system as a springboard for the first step to starting a rudimentary database. New IDs were aligned with the website numbers to make tracking easier in a traditional museum database. As the website has undergone updates, Anne Marie removed her numbers. Eventually, the family will add the authors' numeric ID system for consistency between the database and the family's public presence. For simplicity, a new convention became the owner's identifier AMW (owner initials) and the object number (e.g., AMW. 001., AMW.002ab if an ensemble). Regarding garments, a standard is to add a four-digit year as the final number to aid in identification. We initially used speculated object dates as part of the unique ID number (e.g., AMW.001.1974); however, the authors felt this confusing as object dating was hard to authenticate. Thus, the object date was removed from the numbering system and plugged into the "date" field of the eventual database. A more common convention in ID assignment is using the accession date. However, the owners did not have records of individual item accessions, and we preferred not to assign the project's start year to all items, as some institutions do.

In the first round of data collection, the owners and the authors collaborated to standardize information using an Excel spreadsheet. This shared document helped determine the necessary fields for initial data entry, ensuring consistency among the family and researchers. Then, working with aforementioned MLIS colleague Arden Kirkland, the team collaborated to build a cloud-based Airtable database with customized fields using Costume Core (similar to Dublin core but expanded to focus on dress terms) and functionality that would provide user-friendly access for the owners with the long-term goal of public access. Importing the Excel spreadsheet

information into this Airtable made the data accessible to everyone in real-time (Kirkland, 2023). In 2023, a shift was made to cloud-based Coda software due to its affordable price structure.

All objects in the collection were entered into the database, with the authors verifying the names of objects with the family and incorporating any additional relevant information at their recommendation. In-person, the researchers attached hang tags to the objects to align with the new ID system, documented additional items found in storage that were not listed on Anne Marie's initial website, and continued reviewing object details to enhance the data. In two different semesters, the first author and Kirkland worked alongside university students who served as assistants while receiving independent study credit in return for helping clean the data and input images (Kirkland, 2019).

Each time the database is worked on in person in D.C., either Maha is present or Anne Marie is consulted by phone regarding issues such as object names, gender, or other cultural details less familiar to the researchers who, despite being experts in textiles and clothing, rely on insights specific to Syria or the provenance of these items. As questions arise during remote work, typically, an email is sent to Anne Marie for clarification or cultural consultation. This level of communication and the attempt to sync with the family website goes beyond the convention when items are donated to a museum and positively reflects our framework.

Interviews

To gain oral history content, the first author has performed two semi-structured, university institutional review board (IRB) approved interviews with the mother, Anne Marie. One interview was conducted via phone and one via Zoom. She shared her life story and how she developed an interest in the culture and craft. Through her interviews and best recollection, she shared the origins of the items, including their artists and makers. Questions used for the interview included: How did you know what to select for your collection? Do you have stories or anecdotes? Did you take photos or record notes throughout your collecting process? What was your preservation of the garments? What are your goals with the collection? Interviews were transcribed with OtterAI and then manually corrected by the researchers. Unstructured interviews have continued with the mother and daughter via the in-person interactions during on-site work with the objects as well as through numerous emails and phone calls. In addition to data clarity, they provide anecdotes, details, and provenance which we work to fold into the description or the notes for the objects.

The authors have also engaged in unstructured interviews with local Syrian community members to gain additional context about the items. Additionally, we had a brief email exchange with an additional DC-based Syrian American community member who also collected garments and brought them to the U.S. We then connected this person with the owner of our collection for further dialogue.

For scholarly insights, we contacted the Zay Initiative (n.d.) and authors/professors/curators in the U.S. and Europe in Arab dress, craft, and cultural history. Those scholars often introduced us to a book or another scholar to help us gain cultural heritage knowledge. We also spoke via phone with a Syrian American woman who provided context on the region's political history and stylistic influences from France. During this interaction, a Syrian American professional Arabic

translator was present to assist when issues with spelling, historic vs modern language choices, and preferred words occurred. This level of research is beyond the norm when items are donated to a museum and not being prepped for exhibit. This inclusion of voices reflects our framework goals.

Photography

Flat photography has been shot for all objects. This has been done utilizing phones to capture quick images set against a plain background (Sklar, Hill McIntyre, & Autry, 2021) (Figure 4). Images are uploaded into the database, and the flat photos aim to capture every item in the record, providing a foundation for researchers or public viewers.



Figure 4. Flat photography process, shot in Airbnb 2020, shot on a bedsheet with a color card and an iPhone by M. Sklar.

Professional photography was conducted twice, with the items being 3D-mounted in the Winter of 2019 and the Fall of 2023 (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Indigo Silk Tie-dyed Ezzi with Tassel, object from Hama, AMW.046 description before data cleanup, in Airbnb 2019, by M. Sklar.

Anne Marie selected all items to shoot and remained available on the phone for consultation. Maha was present to style the items appropriately. The goals of the professional photography shoots were to highlight details in the craft that necessitate a better camera and photographer and to see how the item is worn on a body, which provides content that can enhance public viewing and be suitable for publications.

Photography in Winter 2019 was prepared in an Airbnb and captured a selection of garments and ensembles on multiple dress forms rented from a colleague. A photographer known to the researchers was hired. We borrowed a steamer from a colleague, and supplies were provided by both authors from home and (or) their university, such as padded-out arms to stuff garments. A small museum or private/community collection can do similar for sourcing themselves, as the easily found supplies typically used for this process include nylons, batting, pins, bras, slips, and crinolines. These items are easily sourced in homes, thrift, or local craft and discount stores.

Although the mother selected the items, and the daughter planned to style them, the authors were rushed within the short timeframe and did not sufficiently plan ahead. They went alone to the colleague's home to source dress forms without involving the family, and as a result, they inadvertently neglected to include a head form or dress form with a head. This omission affected the dressing of entirely culturally appropriate ensembles, where wearing a hijab or head jewelry is common. Neither author wears these items themselves. This was noted by the family quickly upon return and was part of the prompt for the second shoot, which focused on best practices in the post-custodial lens to have sufficient dialogue and pre-plan.

A second professional photo shoot occurred in Fall 2023 with the same photographer, this time at his studio. The same teamwork informed the shoot, which is now more advanced with the post-custodial lens. Anne Marie once again selected all items and stayed on a video call from Mexico while Maha assisted in person again. The authors brought dress forms, including a head form, a steamer, a laptop for any on-site data entry, and mounting supplies. In the studio, multiple set-ups were prepared for photography of ensembles on dress forms, head forms for head scarves and jewelry, torso forms for necklaces, body jewelry, and belts, and several small pieces were photographed flat.

Data analysis and triangulation

This research project is focused on archiving this collection for public use, making the dress objects and their data the subject while also informing larger best practices surrounding post-custodial approaches, making the owners and our interactive process part of the subjects too. Therefore, we have IRB approval from the University of Georgia to work alongside the owners because they are team members and research participants. The IRB approval also covers the external individuals we speak with through unstructured interviews. This data is reviewed by colleagues when it is pooled with their case studies to form larger studies (Kirkland et al., 2023; Skalar, et al., 2024). Those ongoing collaborations provide a group to comment on improving processes, reporting, and consistency with peers. We have also brought on the LIS consultant (Kirkland) and paid student research assistants to clean the data per existing industry standards as our research works toward expanding those standards for the study. Further data improvements come with verification with translators, Getty, and content experts for terminology and dating. This work is then submitted to professional conferences and academic journals to be placed through the blind peer review process for peer evaluation. Much of our work aims to create templates that can be the root of triangulation when considering dress items. However, until those standards are fully established, we aim to align with existing frameworks from related fields.

Findings

This section outlines key challenges in applying the post-custodial model to the Weiss-Armush family's collection and strategies that may serve as replicable tools for colleagues and other communities working with private collections. The post-custodial model allows families like the Weiss-Armush family to outsource, collaborate, and share affordably. The family does not need to worry about parting with the tactile artifacts of their cultural lineage. The repercussions of storing culturally significant items in the inaccessible vaults of the museum's archives eliminate the attentive and constant care that the associated family, community, or individual could easily provide (Caswell, 2014).

The post-custodial model is a growing approach. Much of the related scholarship discusses the notion that any institutional archive is political. While ideally, it is accurately representative, power dynamics often influence the process. As a result, marginalized individuals or those with less political influence would be represented differently and with inequality. Inclusivity, visibility, representation, and preserving history are all involved in this process. This is true in our case study about the Syrian war, economics, and women's craft.

Best practices and workflows

In this case, best practice means finding ways to incorporate the owners as much as possible for context and find balance where our professional expertise is employed. Rather than providing formal training in institutional procedures, we worked closely with the family to ensure their expertise in Syrian cultural practices was accurately captured. Our job as professionals is to assist with a long-term care plan and those procedures in mind, and we perform the necessary steps to store and catalog the collection. We are admittedly not experts on Syrian culture and traditions, though we are eager to learn. We communicate with the family regarding context and pertinent information to be included in the documentation and respect each other's expertise. In community archiving, this might look more like educating the community on the necessary skills and then stepping back, allowing them to take ownership of the process. However, ongoing post-custodial work is more akin to various workplace roles. In the museum field, we could equate it to the family acting as curator while we act as the collections manager.

Liew et al. (2020) acknowledge that there are many ways to approach this process in their post-custodial and digital archiving work analysis, including the idea of community as a flexible concept in community-based archives. Our methods chosen to work with the Syrian clothing collection are specific to this individual family's and the researchers' capacities. Still, they can serve as a template for similar clothing archives. Most of our process centers around digitization and narrative capture due to the collectors' desire to make the collection broadly available online to share their cultural stories. Due to budget constraints, storage and preventative conservation have not been prioritized, leading us to focus less on the physical aspects. Therefore, we have provided guidance and information to the family so they may make these improvements when they are ready.

Data

The previous citations indicate that digital capacity growth is an appropriate way to overcome some of these issues. This approach enables work to extend outside the family home, with cloud-based or remote access, and wider reach of the objects. Digital archives have the potential to be linked to other search collections as well. This is why, in our case, we have focused more on those aspects of the project than the physical rehousing and storage.

Interviews

Our rationale for using interviews in this study was that the family has knowledge of the objects and their provenance and is familiar with the terms and vocabulary, which supports the post-custodial approach to archiving. This is a real-time work in progress, which includes the family in the narrative and data-building process. This experience differs significantly from donors dropping off objects at a museum, filling out a form, and walking away. The family is involved in the data capture, image documentation, and object styling for proper context.

Photos

During photoshoots, we prioritized items that the family specified as particularly unique. Ideally, there will be a third photoshoot with some of the items styled together as complete ensembles

to match some historic contextual drawings or photos Anne Marie has posted on her website. This will require additional funding and referencing of the artistic renderings Anne Marie has collected to demonstrate how the items would be worn and how they should be photographed professionally.

It was crucial for the process to have two generations of custodians available as they discussed proper head scarf orientation and determined the use of items such as necklaces and belts, both of which look similar and can be easily confused. This is worth considering for our colleagues, as one person cannot represent an entire culture, especially if you have a large width of time or geography. This is where future community archiving could be improved by involving more cultural voices (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Silver jewelry styled by the family in person and one family member on a Facetime call, by Pete Duvall/Anything Photographic, 2023 (Used with permission).

This research illustrates how post-custodial approaches can center cultural specificity, familial knowledge, and collaborative expertise in documenting private collections. While grounded in the Weiss-Armush family's stewardship of Syrian dress, the work gestures toward broader implications for inclusive metadata practices, ethical digitization, and the redistribution of

archival labor and authority (Caswell, 2014; Liew et al., 2020). As we continue to co-develop strategies that balance professional standards with cultural context, this case study offers a replicable, flexible model that resists extractive tendencies and fosters sustained, respectful relationships between custodians, collections, and the communities they represent.

Discussion

This case study explores the critical cataloging and metadata challenges inherent in documenting a private Syrian dress collection, particularly when working outside institutional structures. Our work is grounded in the principles of inclusive, post-custodial archival practice and driven by a collaborative model that centers community knowledge, cultural specificity, and language equity. Through partnerships with dress owners, LIS consultants, and fashion scholars in the field, we aim to highlight the complexities and opportunities that arise when cataloging culturally specific objects using existing, often Eurocentric, frameworks. This article outlines our methods, challenges, and ongoing solutions across cataloging, funding, and collaborative workflows to support scholarly and community-oriented goals.

Critical catalog issues with dress

One of the biggest concerns the authors wished to address with this project is implementing critical cataloging (Bruce, n.d.). Initially, Dr. Sklar also communicated with Anne Marie and Maha to gather information about the collection and object names. They worked together to fill out a basic spreadsheet with as much cataloging information as possible. This was refined, and descriptive words were replaced with standardized information such as the subjective color names “burgundy” or “wine” - changed to simply “red.” This maintains standardized search terms and allows descriptive information to be detailed via the free text description field (Sklar, Hill McIntyre, & Autry, 2021).

Costume Core has been an asset, as has been the process of working with Kirkland as an MLIS. Costume Core was created because no controlled vocabulary is consistently used in dress studies. We refer to Getty, Dublin, or Europeana. However, they are often incomplete, sometimes lack accuracy, and are not always suitable for items like “thawb,” which do not translate well to robe or dress due to them being misgendered (Sklar, Hill McIntyre, & Autry, 2021). Controlled vocabularies are aspirational in clothing collections but are not often properly trained or with enough time to employ. Most people working in fashion archives are trained in fashion rather than museum studies or LIS, and the increase in data work and access to data is a “new” thing in this field. The big institutions have the people and background to do this, but most of the field is radically behind. We have consulted with several scholars and colleagues at institutions such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Indiana University Bloomington, and Grand Rapids Public Museum for related best practices around international and language choices or language choices of smaller communities such as slang and regional words throughout databases in the United States. We have concluded that there are no established standards in our field when considering international elements, such as whether English or another language comes first or whether to prioritize the older or newer terms. However, we reference the standards of related fields. Our field, like many, was very Eurocentric, and all of these issues represent well-intentioned newer efforts now that we understand DEI issues, intersectionality, and the concepts about post-custodial and online access being a part of that movement.

Secondary sources also provide ideas on how to approach this. Active collaboration with the family in person and on Zoom provides valuable cultural context and vernacular as we share images back and forth and physically hold up items for their input into their history.

It has been determined that it is unclear without this cultural input, as clothing scholars or museum professionals might be non-experts in a specific cultural area. Thus, we need assistance from someone familiar with determining an object's name, purpose, and gender, such as the garment owners and scholars in the field of dress and, more specifically, Arabic dress. This process has helped recognize items like a necklace versus a belt or a headpiece orientation or the age and/or gender of the wearer it was made for. This process of metadata input analysis allows us to document challenges of international language clarity and search term issues that may arise when using databases once this becomes publicly searchable.

Researching the appropriate language terms for titles and descriptors was difficult as the authors are not experts in the regional culture or its clothing terms. The authors found solutions around object names, although the debate over using the historical name versus the contemporary name continues to be on the table. The owner uses older, pre-war, and pre-diaspora terms, while the translator we consulted informed us of more commonly used contemporary language. We also consulted Getty Vocabularies for additional guidance.

We concluded that a best practice would be to list the Arabic language term first, followed by the English translation in parenthesis, referring to Getty spelling. Variations in spelling or naming would be recorded in a secondary field labeled Alternate Title (Figure 7).

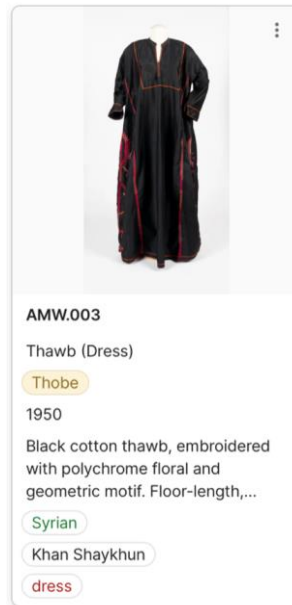


Figure 7. After data cleanup with family owners, authors, LIS consultant, and Arabic language translator consultant, by M. Sklar.

Funding challenges and solutions

There are many considerations regarding the costs of this project. Free or inexpensive software, such as Airtable, which includes an app, helps mitigate expenses as the image drops right into the data. This function would be easy for a community archive to perform, but it also clogs up the database with larger files, so image naming is a factor that could be improved to streamline that process.

There have been two revisions of a coffee table book proposal with rich descriptions sent to a university press in 2021, which indicated strong interest upon the first review. However, it was suggested that we expand in preservation, photography, and provenance gathering and likely pay for our photography and printing costs related to photos. Since, again, this project is primarily noninstitutional, to make the book accessible by the community rather than only in academic circles, it was decided that independent publishing is likely the better direction to match the project's mission and its budget. Anne Marie has expressed a desire for a third professional photoshoot to capture the items as ensembles since she has multiple pieces historically demonstrated to be worn together in illustrations. This shoot would accomplish everyone's goals. Since this is not a self-financed collection beyond storage, there is reliance on that process to progress the project. As a result, not all ideal images will be captured. The book layout designer

is working in exchange for trade, editing another author's work, which presents another challenge.

The authors received support funding for the upcoming publication and the open-access website featuring professional photography of the dress collection. The university provided these funds, with part of the support granted in exchange for teaching additional classes alongside the research funding.

Also, since it has no institutional affiliation, it relies on grants or professional time counting as a scholarship for the museum/faculty workers. This reduces the amount of time spent on the objects compared to if they were donated. However, attention to the specific objects is heightened if they were donated and are now part of a vast collection. Expertise remains intact by maintaining the family connection, as it is more of a research project and less of a series of objects donated to a larger institution.

A challenge is the time museum professionals spend on grant development, securing the funding and planning work, which ultimately takes away from time spent on the actual project. To fund the work, the authors have applied for several grants and secured funds from the University of Georgia, Pasold Research Fund, Costume Society of America (CSA), and the University of Georgia Junior Faculty Research Grant. A challenge that has risen is that many grantors do not want to fund the preservation of private archives in their physicality, rather they prefer to support institutional archives such as universities or historic houses. A series of small-scale grants/awards has been the best route to fund the work. Additionally, Dr. Sklar participates in a program at their university to teach freshman seminars as a teaching overload compensated by research funds.

The NEH and IMLS grants are primarily for institutions like IMLS Digital Humanities Advancement Grants. A few, such as the NEH Institutes for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities, invite "novice and community participants" but have only four yearly awards. CLIR awards state, "Applicants must be U.S. nonprofit academic, research, or cultural heritage organizations" (Council on Library and Information Resources, n.d.) and describe the IRS tax-exempt classifications that do not apply to many small private collections. Perhaps one approach is that private archives establish themselves as small nonprofits or foundations. However, cost and time are expended on those endeavors. VRA does offer smaller-scale grants for private collections and independent workers. However, not many have been awarded, and they have received numerous submissions. Some societies, such as the Embroidery Association, offer members funds, but they require membership first. Curationist, however, does offer funds for independent workers, although they are small funds. Thankfully, it is possible to do some of this work at a low cost, and the templates outlined in this manuscript aim to outline affordable models.

The lack of grant funding for independent workers, particularly concerning the post-custodial model of archives, continues to marginalize collections that are either not formally accessioned into institutions or decidedly kept private. While it is somewhat practical for the Principal Investigator (PI) to be associated with an institution to vet their ability to do the work, it seems reasonable that, in lieu of institutional affiliation, they could submit a CV detailing their training or qualifications. Many professionals work outside traditional institutions, and it can be difficult to secure full-time positions in this field.

If funding agencies continue to prioritize institutional archives over private or community-driven efforts, the preservation of marginalized cultures will remain in a cycle of being deemed “other”. It is unclear where the funding support would come from, as wealthy art collectors represent only a small portion of private collections. Additionally, smaller, underfunded institutions that hold items like dress collections or other internal objects often lack the resources to secure support.

Some solutions have been conceived to get over this funding hurdle. For this project, it has been feasible to utilize Dr Sklar’s faculty/professorial start-up funds and additional grants that Dr. Sklar has been able to secure through her institution. These funds have paid for her travel, some supplies, the photographer, and some MLIS data assistance, with the understanding that the scholarship from the project will lead to publications to support tenure requirements and reflect well as a research institution (Lee & Cifor, 2019).

There are still struggles in seeking funds for coffee table book production, as the number of images is not cost-effective for a university press, and the low number of units to be produced makes it not cost-effective for the mass market. Thus, independent press is the most effective way.

Project team members and workspace challenges and solutions

Another challenge we have faced is whether the post-custodial process is slower than a traditional donation to an institution and if it impedes access and representation in the public sphere. Maintaining the archive privately, such as in a home, has limitations due to the family’s personal and workspace challenges and solutions. Therefore, the work cannot always be performed during usual business hours.

Our roles in this project are different from that of an institution. The owners/donors provide storage, language, and object history knowledge. As clothing scholars and museum professionals, we can provide standardized terms and guidance for storage standards. However, we are merely consultants in this aspect rather than custodians in the traditional institution sense. We have also consulted other institutions and collections with items like these for guidance on cataloging terms. We have consulted our colleagues at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Grand Rapids Public Museum (located in Michigan, USA) on their collections’ international objects and how they determine their cataloging standards. Within the wider Syrian diaspora community, they can inform this work as we consult other collectors or those who have language and/or cultural context expertise.

The donors are a part of this Syrian community and have lived, worked, and/or traveled in many countries in the region. The donors have potential differences with the broader community as Anne Marie was born in the United States, and Maha has lived there since her youth, at least part-time. Both remain highly knowledgeable about the social and political evolutions of the region. Anne Marie spent time organizing fashion shows, and Maha organized an exhibition of garments, although neither was dressed in traditional fashion.

There are also dynamics regarding ownership and who the project truly belongs to. Maha referred to the forthcoming text as “our book,” which created goodwill and promoted positivity around

the collaboration. This Syrian collection is an example of how a primarily remote project can be successful through digitization and data sharing. Dr. Sklar can only come to D.C. a few times a year from Georgia. Ms. Hill McIntyre lives in the DC metro region and works as a museum contractor, where Maha has a full-time job and other local commitments, and Anne Marie resides in Mexico. We have only met her in person a few times during one trip to the United States, but through virtual work, calls, and emails, we can accomplish more than would have been previously possible. Our work opportunities on site are typically three to four times per year and are usually single-day sessions on a selection of objects. During these work sessions, we perform photography, item tagging, cataloging, or preparing for a larger deliverable, such as a grant proposal, manuscript, book, or presentation. We also typically work remotely individually and in Zoom meetings one to two days per month.

The collection is housed in the family home, and there is minimal space to work in a basement that also serves as the family office, guest room, and children's playroom. There are no worktables or places to lay our objects for review, so it is not an ideal archival environment or workroom to support supplies. There are also pets in the home, and Maha often works in the office within the same space as our processing.

The team must bring all supplies, such as gloves, sheets, hang tags and pencils, pins, steamer, color card, laptop computer, and tissue. We also supply the dress forms, racks, hangers, and mounting/padding supplies for photoshoots. Commuting to the home, bringing supplies, and setting up every session takes up a significant amount of work time and resources and is not an ideal work environment. This is typical of private collections with items stored in homes and is a very different experience from working within an institution with a designated, secure workspace. Therefore, the store conditions for the cultural objects are sufficient but not ideal. Currently stored in large plastic bins on top of one another, the condition of their custody can pose safety issues and hinder best preservation practices and organizational optimization.

The digital preservation process has proved beneficial for remote work on book development, presentations, and publications, as it can be difficult to schedule work on-site. Detailed photography has facilitated access to the collection as needed, decreasing the handling of the textiles, some of which are fragile. This accessibility will be beneficial for future researchers.

Our LIS partner crawled the family website with a program and copied and pasted all content into the database, allowing us to access all data in one location. We will then work collaboratively or have administrative logins add the numeric IDs, which will require mutual trust in the data management. A long-term plan for access and management of the family website is in development, especially as the information goes public and becomes part of the community archive and knowledge additions or corrections come inbound.

The conflict in stakeholders' goals refers to ideas written about by Blanchard and Furco (2021). While we all share the goal of preservation, documentation, and access, museum professionals desire scholarly dissemination through conferences and publications. The community values public interaction, such as exhibitions and mass-market books. Obtaining supportive grants can be more difficult as these do not yield academic outputs.

A balance must be struck to achieve the shared goals and meet the professional and community measures of success. We have attempted to work from both angles in our project, often with the

process documentation as scholarship and community-facing output. All of this speaks to the complications around academic institutional employees' annual deliverables such as manuscripts and conference presentations, the lack of sufficient funding support, and the challenge of collections management or public-facing, non-peer-reviewed materials (books, exhibits, websites) being accepted toward academic promotion. There are also challenges with noninstitutional professionals not having routes for compensation unless they are written into institutional partners' grants as consultants and are often practitioners, not academics. Publishing is more at will for the collegial "good." Finally, the private owners have personal motivation and cultural rewards but often no professional, monetary, or esteem reward. There are a few rare exceptions, such as the newly developed Mary Doering Award from the Costume Society of America (CSA), recognizing public collectors engaged in outreach. However, eligibility requires existing CSA membership.

Conclusion

This case study served to answer questions about best practices and workflows that can overcome some of the hurdles of small, underfunded, private, and/or international objects in the U.S. This focus on dress objects, post custodial approaches, and critical cataloguing, all in conjunction, is a newer line of inquiry. These findings guide future projects in post-custodial archival practices. As Liew et al. (2020) indicate, there are multiple ways to do these projects, and this served as a template. Ideally, the employment of the post-custodial model in our case study serves as a framework for community archiving, allowing museum professionals, such as us, to collaborate with the community. This project aims to perform these tasks for this collection and serve as a case study in the post-custodial model for clothing or design collections to learn ways to streamline and improve the process, as community access and collaboration are fundamental for critical cataloging and cultural humility.

When working with this case study, the post-custodial approach helped contextualize and situate Syria's clothing culture within traditional preservation approaches. This is particularly significant because most institutional dress collections in the U.S. predominantly feature designer or everyday wear of a white, affluent background. Therefore, efforts to perform collections management tasks around other types of dress and make that research accessible adds to the body of knowledge on what constitutes dress. Teaching our peers how to work with these objects also lessens their burden and increases their likelihood of doing it. For many collections, the idea that a silhouette, weave, or pattern must only be shown in "Western" designer garments while categorizing others as merely "ethnic" is outdated. There are ways to incorporate international and other private garments from otherwise marginalized or niche communities to expand classroom representations, design knowledge and inspiration, and cultural documentation. It elevates cultures when search results include objects from diverse cultures rather than just familiar runway looks. Additionally, this content has been and can continue to be used in teaching dress and craft history courses and museum studies.

Related benefits to the field include an instance in which the owners notified us that a major institution improperly styled a Syrian garment in their online collection catalog. The authors' professional network has been used to communicate these matters. Working together creates a bridge between the professionals and the knowledge keepers.

An unseen archive in a private home can be successfully activated in the academic and public spheres, and this project is moving towards achieving that goal. This project exemplifies how the post-custodial method and digitization of private clothing archives promote cultural responsiveness and sensitivity, enhancing education and outreach with more inclusivity.

Limitations

The limitations of this work have been consistent funding, physical space, and the time capacity allotted to the project by team members, technology advanced beyond our knowledge, and a lack of prior literature or formal training in these areas dealing with the specific concerns of our collection. Some challenges have been overcome and outlined in the findings, and some are yet to be explored further.

Future research

The Syrian collection represents private archives and the international language around dress for more exhaustive research and development. For the data we have, goals include naming the images, standardizing all of our data that has been entered quickly or before we developed standards, selecting a best-of image for thumbnails, and potentially conducting one more professional photoshoot to capture a few complete ensembles. We then intend to write and, hopefully, secure grants to build a publicly searchable site using the archival open-source software, Omeka, and possibly aim for DOI minting of the database content as a different form of scholarship than our articles and conference presentations. We will also work with the family website to update it, so it has numeric IDs, captions, and images using metadata. We are working toward the coffee table book production and will have a corresponding small exhibit when it is released.

Though our project currently involves a single family, there is potential for it to evolve into a larger data set of more cases with other Syrian collectors in DC or the U.S. at large. This has been postponed thus far due to a lack of funding and time/labor constraints. Also, there are discussions regarding the collection's future as family members pass away, move away, or generally lose time or interest in its preservation. Therefore, the data has been saved in the cloud to keep it active, in progress, and non-proprietary, which takes some of the pressure off the family for maintenance. The collaboration increases the chance of sustainability for the content availability for others.

The case study will continue to be tied to other scholars and practitioners in dress collections via ongoing joint publications continuing to explore new research questions. Dr. Sklar is also working as part of a national society on open-access educational resources (OER) modules to teach this method to others, including students, colleagues, and the public using this collection and their home institution, similar to the VRA/SEI certificate but explicitly aimed toward those who work with dress collections. Those lessons will include the post-custodial process and critical cataloguing.



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