

BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Lucy Commoner

Art Conservator, Conservator Emerita, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

Conducted by Sarah Scaturro on March 29, 2016 at the Textile Conservation Laboratory, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York, New York

Lucy Commoner (b. 1950) joined Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum as the museum's first art conservator in 1977. She graduated with a BA in Studio Art and Art History from Brown University in 1972, after which she studied textile design at the Rhode Island School of Design. Trained as an artist and weaver, Commoner entered into the conservation field as an Assistant Restorer with renowned textile conservator Nobuko Kajitani, who founded the textile conservation department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In 2016 Commoner retired from her position as the Head of Conservation for Cooper Hewitt, where she was responsible for the preservation of the 210,000 objects in the museum's collection. She then became Conservator Emerita for the museum. She also has been an Adjunct Professor at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center for over twenty-eight years. Besides heading the conservation efforts at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Commoner curated several exhibitions, including *Multiple Choice: From Sample to Product* (2007) and *Folding Fans in the Collection of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum* (1987), and wrote the 2008 monograph on Ethel Stein. She has lectured and published widely.

In her interview, Commoner touches upon her relationship with mentors like textile curator Milton Sunday (whose research archive is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Ratti Center), conservator Nobuko Kajitani, and artist and weaver Ethel Stein. Commoner also discusses the development of the textile conservation field and conservation training, the role of handwork, the relationship between curators and conservators, and how she integrates design and systems thinking into her work.

Interview duration: 58 minutes. Transcript length: 18 pages.

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

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Sarah Scaturro [SS]: This is Sarah Scaturro interviewing Lucy Commoner on March 29th, 2016 at Cooper Hewitt [pause.] Smithsonian Design Museum. They changed the name.

Lucy Commoner [LC]: Yes, they changed the name. [both laugh.]

SS: In the textile conservation laboratory. So my first question is, we are sitting in your brand new lab that you designed, and that just opened with the museum's recent renovation. How did you design it?

LC: Well, having worked in another lab that I had designed myself as well, I knew what I was looking for and I was able to work with the architects on the project, Beyer Blinder Belle, and rethink some of the issues that I found were not working as well in the older lab. And also, being interested in sustainable approaches, I re-used equipment and furniture from the old lab but I was constrained by the space that was available to me. Even though it's about the same square footage, the new lab has different dimensions, length and width, so the floor plan is not the same and it works better than the older lab.

SS: What were some of the constraints of the older lab?

LC: Well, one of the constraints was that we were storing a lot of material in there, archival cardboard, storage tubes, plexi, et cetera.

SS: [laughs.] I remember that.

LC: Yes—you worked there as well. That's no longer an issue since we have our offsite storage facility where there is a room specifically designed for material storage. We store the bulk of our materials offsite, and when we require something, it is sent here. So that really freed up a lot of the space. And I think in comparison to having the wet lab so separate from the dry area in the old lab, it now flows and feels more like one space. So that I think it worked out well.

SS: Do you typically do wet cleaning? What do you do in the wet lab as compared to the dry area?

LC: Well, we have a large fume hood, another big improvement, since we did not have one in the previous lab. That was a challenging engineering issue because they had to basically cut an opening through the entire building for stainless steel ducting that went from the fume hood on the ground floor all the way up to the roof. All the conservators use the fume hood and I view the space as a shared lab, not really just for textiles because it's the largest space we have for conservation. To get back to your question, we use the wet lab for any activities that involve water or chemicals as opposed to dry

activities, such as vacuuming or mounting. We have not been doing wet cleaning but we have the ability to do it. But the wet lab is used heavily by all the conservators.

SS: Who are the other conservators that use it?

LC: We have three conservators who I supervise; one is a textile conservator as well, and a paper conservator and an objects conservator.

SS: And what is your role as the head of conservation here at the museum?

LC: I am responsible for the bigger picture, and that means, being involved, overseeing what's happening in storage and exhibitions and in other activities in the museum that might affect the preservation of the collection. For example if there's going to be an event and they want to bring in some material that could be detrimental to the collection I would be the person they would call about that. Typically, I'm involved with environmental issues, air handling systems, lighting, case design, storage layouts, and materials and finishes selected for use in storage and exhibitions. And I'm involved in various committees that deal with broader issues and policy, such as our recent rapid capture digitization project for the collection.

SS: Are these committees here at the museum or at the Smithsonian Institution, which this museum is a part of?

LC: Both. Yes, I've been very fortunate to be included in pan-institutional committees. I've been involved for the past five years in the Smithsonian Collections Space Committee, which is looking at the entire institution and how we store our collections, how can we share space, how can we do this efficiently? Is it best to have leased space, is it best to own space? And that's been very, very interesting.

SS: Has your role changed since you've been here? How long have you been here?

LC: I've been here thirty-nine years.

SS: Wow. [both laugh.]

LC: I was the first conservator to be hired at the museum when it re-opened here in 1976. I came early on in 1977, so I was really on the ground level of thinking about conservation policies for this museum. So, perhaps because of that fortuitous start, from the very beginning, I was thinking about larger issues. I

was responsible for the preservation and treatment of the textile collection. I was very involved in hands-on work with the collection, treating the collection, and exhibitions that involved textiles. But I also started thinking about more comprehensive issues about environment, about storage, about mass treatment as opposed to intensive bench work. And that really has become my focus.

SS: Can you describe what “mass treatment” is and how that is different from intensive bench work?

LC: [laughs.] Yeah, what I’m referring to is something, for example, where you take a whole section of the collection and upgrade its preservation status. Often the way I structured this work was to tie it to an exhibition. For example, we had an exhibition of samplers, and our sampler collection had never been treated by a conservator. It would not have been possible to treat all of the samplers as far as intensive bench work, which would mean to sit down with each sampler, mount it, or clean it, or spend a large number of hours working on one piece. Instead, I decided to upgrade the storage of the entire sampler collection, even beyond the pieces that we were using for the exhibition. And that is a preservation step because the materials that are used in storage affect the physical and chemical stability of the pieces, so that’s what I’m referring to as “mass treatment.”

SS: More preventive instead of intensive.

LC: Preventive, yes.

SS: Do you think this approach that you developed of “mass treatment” was singular in the field of conservation or how does it compare to other conservators in the field at the time that you were practicing?

LC: I think at the time that I became interested in preventive approaches it was not that common. Especially in the field of textiles. And it may have also been partly driven by the fact that this is a small museum, with a very small staff, and limited budgets. So it was a practical approach as well. How can you get the most bang for the buck, basically? You know, what can you do to affect the largest number of pieces for the least amount of time and energy and resources? In fact, a lot of the work was done by interns, volunteers, and I tried to design the mass treatments, preventive treatments, in a way that could be handled by someone who was just learning. So someone with basic hand skills could do this work. It’s a win-win situation. The students are gaining experience and we’re slowly, over time, getting almost the entire textile collection into ideal storage.

SS: Right. Do you think this approach, or, how do you think your approach has affected the field in general? The textile conservation field.

LC: Well, I think people are much more interested in this now. I don't know if it's because of me [both laugh.] but, I know that my storage approach has influenced other museums. But it's also that the field goes through different trends at different times. And I think now there is a little bit more of a return to restoration instead of conservation. There are always ebbs and flows in the field and I think there was a big movement towards preventive conservation that I was a part of.

SS: When do you think that big move happened? Or it started, perhaps?

LC: It's hard to say. It may have started in the eighties.

SS: And then you see it changing today, going more towards interventive or restorative approaches?

LC: I think it's different in museums as opposed to private practice. I think it's always been true that more restoration goes on in private practice because the clients want to see certain effects that are only possible through restoration. So this may be influencing museums as well, but it's only a large or well-funded museum that can really afford to take this approach.

SS: Do you think that Cooper Hewitt being a design museum has any impact on the approach that you choose in addressing an object?

LC: That's an intriguing question. Possibly. [both laugh.] I don't know how to answer that. It's just an interesting thing to think about.

SS: One of the things I've noticed in your previous responses is that you use the word design a lot, so do you incorporate, perhaps, design thinking more than other conservators might, or are you more aware of that?

LC: Yeah. That's kind of where I was going in my own mind, that I was very attracted to this museum as a place to work. And I see the aesthetic or design aspect of conservation work as a huge part of what needs to be considered. So I like to see that everything done by conservators has a certain visual and design integrity. I think probably many conservators would say that, but, perhaps being in a design museum and being a very visual person, it's much more in the forefront.

SS: And why were you attracted to this museum?

LC: Well, part of it was just luck, that a friend of mine, Ethel Stein, who is a weaver who I've known since I was a child, introduced me to Milton Sunday who was the curator at the time here in seventies. I've always been interested in the material world and art history and fine art but also designed objects, so it's just been a personal focus of mine. And the museum's concentration on the design process—materials and techniques—closely aligns with my own interests.

SS: So you mention Milton Sunday. How long did he work here and what was your relationship with him?

LC: Milton started in 1968 at Cooper Union, when Cooper Hewitt was the museum of Cooper Union. And he stayed with the museum when it moved to the Carnegie Mansion in 1976 and he was here until about 2000. He was basically the person who hired me in 1977. [laughs.] He was a mentor for me because I had studied with him before I became the conservator and he was a real collaborator and advocate for conservation. He understood conservation, he had studied with James Rice at the Textile Museum, even before he was at Cooper Hewitt, and a lot of the ideas I developed about storage were through working with him. I would come up with an idea and he would say “well, that's not going to work for me, I won't be able to open this up easily, and then I'll have to find that piece of tissue to put back on it. Let's simplify this.” It was collaborative. He was a real ally. He also trained me to analyze textile structures, which is a great ability to have. He was a real mentor for me.

SS: Have you had any other mentors in the field or outside the field?

LC: Outside the field, certainly, in my education. I had a lot of mentors, or, enough mentors to make it very meaningful to me where I feel that is an important role that one has—to be a mentor to others. I just think that is a very significant thing to do.

SS: Could you speak about your education?

LC: I graduated from Brown University and my major was studio art and art history and then went to RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] to learn how to weave and do textile design. It was during my winter session at RISD that I studied with Milton and he introduced me to Nobuko Kajitani, who was the head of textile conservation at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. After that, she then hired me at the Met, and I was really an apprentice with her for three years at the Met. My specialty was Egyptian textiles. I worked within the Egyptian department with the head curator at the time, Christine Lilyquist—I consider both Nobuko and Christine to be great mentors, as well.

SS: How was it working with Nobuko and the textile conservation department at the Met?

LC: Well, this was before the department was renovated and expanded. It was very education-based, I would say. Perhaps the exhibition schedule was not quite as challenging then as it is now. And we were able to do research, and it was encouraged. I learned a tremendous amount but there was also freedom to expand your own horizons. It was a much more of a tight, small team of people probably than is possible now.

SS: How many people, how many conservators?

LC: Not everybody was full-time, so I don't know if there were five of us, or something like that. But it was a very intense and very interesting time.

SS: What kind of work did you do on the Egyptian textiles?

LC: I did a lot of analysis, which, you know, they weren't very complex objects [both laugh.] but there were some challenging aspects to the pieces structurally and I did all the treatments and mounting and worked with the architects because this was when the new Egyptian wing was being designed. That was my first experience seeing the whole process of designing a wing, and an exhibition, a permanent exhibition. How do you think about objects rotating in a permanent exhibition? How do you protect objects when they have to be accessible visually? So that was my first experience collaborating with architects and designers on an exhibition and it was really an architectural project.

SS: Can you speak to Nobuko's influence on the field of textile conservation?

LC: Well, I think those of us who were trained by her in the early days have gone on to train a lot of others ourselves, so we all bear the imprint of her influence. I think in this country she was certainly one of the most important textile conservators.

SS: What made her important?

LC: I think she went beyond the physical treatment of the object. She was very interested in their structure, and their chemistry. She was a real researcher. And she had some very creative ideas about how to display pieces without damaging them, and then how to accommodate them back into storage. I think she saw the bigger picture. She had to think about if this piece is in a huge mount are we going to

be able to fit it back into storage? And that is the kind of thinking that I brought to this museum. Although our storage rooms are much smaller so I had to be even more careful about my decisions.

SS: I remember in working for you that you created a very modular system that seemed to work for a wide variety of objects. Is that something that you developed on your own in response to the requirements of what this space was in the museum?

LC: Yes, and that again was working with Milton. We were the first ones, I have to say, to start using Metro racks, which were commercial bakery racks. We got the idea of using them as the modular unit in conjunction with our frame sizes that are traditional here, although they are not the frame sizes anyone else uses. I designed the boxes to match the frame sizes and so that they would fit onto the shelves in a modular way. Other boxes are designed to fit the typical widths of loomed textiles. And I think the idea of a system—that is something that appeals to me—systematic approaches. So that was really an idea that I enjoyed developing.

SS: It works really well. [laughs.] We talked a little bit about how you think the field of conservation is changing today. Where do you think the role of bench work lies in conservation with consideration with these larger systems, and other issues we have to deal with like exhibitions, and mounting and storage? Could you talk to me a little bit about bench work?

LC: Well, I think it certainly has a place, as I mentioned, in the freelance world. It certainly has a place. And I think in museums that have large departments and can afford the time and cost of bench work, it is wonderful to be able to take a piece and really bring it back to its original impact. I don't have any negative feelings about it myself, as long as the work is sensitively executed and well-documented. It just doesn't work in this context as well as it would in another. And I don't know whether—I mean, do you notice it coming back or do you see it in other museums more than you do here?

SS: I find that for myself, the more into management positions I get, then the less bench work I myself can undertake and you end up having to give it to your staff to do.

LC: Right, but it's still being done within the institution.

SS: Yes, it is still being done, however, at least at the Costume Institute, we're not always able to execute the full holistic treatment that we want to do—it's more targeting specific areas that are vulnerable during the exhibition or mounting process.

LC: Right.

SS: So I agree with you it's not quite what would be done if we sent it to a contract conservator or a private conservator.

LC: Also I think attitudes are different in Europe where there probably is more bench work being done. But to your point, the handwork that is involved in physically treating something is one of things that attracted me to this field. So it's true that as you become more of an administrator you lose some of that, but I try [laughs.] to dip back in as much as I can because it's just a pleasure.

SS: Right. Let's talk about your familiarity with fiber as a medium and your experiences with weaving. How do you think that has influenced you as a textile conservator?

LC: Well, I feel very strongly that conservators need to have experienced working with the various media that are in their specialty. And for me I started out as a painter and then I found that—this was in my junior year abroad studying art in Rome where the textiles are so incredible—I started incorporating textiles into my canvases and then I started embroidering them and pulling threads and doing all kinds of interventions. I became much more interested in the canvas than the paint. Then I continued with this focus at Brown, and then at RISD. That tactile, visceral involvement with a medium I think is critical to being a conservator. As an artist, I have experience with sculpture and painting, I've worked in a lot of other media and I feel that is a benefit as a conservator. I can look at an object and I usually will have a sense of what it is and how it was made. I know how to identify all different kinds of materials just from experience, research, and close observation. I think that's very, very important as a conservator.

SS: Do you still practice art today?

LC: I do as much as I have time for, mostly drawing.

SS: When you began, what routes were there into the conservation and restoration field?

LC: When I began, the apprentice route was very much accepted and common. I don't know what the percentage would have been between conservators who had come out of training programs and conservators who were apprentice-trained, but it was certainly higher than it is now. It's a little sad to me now that this is no longer a route, because it has a lot of advantages. It has disadvantages, too, obviously I felt throughout my career that I needed to—there were things I needed to learn, I took courses to fill the gaps. I had a very good background to begin with but I did fill in where I felt I was

lacking. But the programs certainly have tried to incorporate an apprentice-like portion of the education, where the students have an internship or study with other conservators. I just find it a loss that apprenticeship is no longer a route into the field.

SS: What do you think besides it being unfortunate that the only way that you can get into conservation today is through a masters program, and then to get into the masters program you have to have sometimes thousands of hours of internships?

LC: Right.

SS: Are there any other, perhaps, side effects of this?

LC: One of the side effects may be the lack of diversity in our field.

SS: Right.

LC: And I don't know. It would have to start a lot sooner in the education process, that diverse students would start to know about this as a field. But then, what happens next? I think that's a problem in our field.

SS: What were some of the advantages of being an apprentice, or entering conservation through the apprenticeship route?

LC: One thing is that you probably would not have entered through that route if you didn't already have a lot of familiarity with the material, and already have substantial hand skills. So you're not coming to it cold.

SS: Right.

LC: Which, with a graduate program—yes, you have to have a certain amount of previous experience, but I think people who started as apprentices, it was part of their lives for many, many years before that in some form. So you're entering already prepared, you hit the ground running. Another issue besides the educational background that you might be lacking is, who is training you? You are completely dependent upon the quality of that person. You're not getting any of the diversity, to use that word again, of viewpoint. So the idea of working with multiple people is really beneficial because, otherwise, you can come out with very set ideas and they might not really work. I think it's important to be exposed to different conservators during your training.

SS: Do you think there were a lot of craftspeople or artisans that entered into the conservation through the apprenticeship route?

LC: I don't know—I'm guessing that's true. But I don't really know.

SS: Ok. What do you think about the science requirements for conservation?

LC: Oh, I think that's critical. I had a lot of science and I grew up in a scientific family so to me it was—I felt that I had a basic understanding of fundamental scientific principles as they apply to the field of conservation. I think that's very important.

SS: Can you tell me about your family?

LC: [laughs.] My parents were both academics. My father [Barry Commoner] was a scientist and one of the founders of the conservation/ecology field in this country and my mother [Gloria Gordon] is a psychologist. My brother is a mathematician [Frederic Commoner], so I was the odd person out being interested in art since I was very young. Where my father was interested in the physical/natural world, I was always interested in the material world, but it's the same impulse—conservation. It's the same impulse to preserve what we have.

SS: Wow, that's really beautiful. [laughs.] So let's see here. I want to go back to some of your roles here at Cooper Hewitt, in particular, when you curated several exhibitions yourself. Could you talk about curating at the same museum where you are also the head of conservation?

LC: I feel very appreciative that the museum allowed me to do that. They saw that I was interested in folding fans [*Folding Fans in the Collection of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum*(1987)], and then I also became interested in our sample book collection [*Multiple Choice: From Sample to Product* (2007)]. And being a small museum, you can cross those departmental boundaries. And it was fascinating for me. I think actually my study of folding fans gave me an education in the history of the decorative arts in miniature. It has put everything in place for me because the same trends that you see in the evolution of the design of folding fans, you see in all other kinds of decorative arts, so it created a structure that I could anchor myself to [laughs.] in my own understanding of the pieces that I'm working on. The experience was terrific in that sense, and also to see the curator's point of view, because sometimes you might feel that conservators and curators are at odds. But I've always felt quite sympathetic to the curator's point of view and I've always tried to facilitate what the curator wants in a way that doesn't compromise the

preservation and safety of the art. So this experience, it felt very global in the sense that I was trying to interpret these pieces and put them into a context, and at that same time I was involved in doing it in a way that met all my conservation standards. It was a large, encompassing kind of experience. And I like that. I like the combination of—which is what the conservation field has—this combination of history and science and art and engineering.

SS: So you mention curators and conservators being at odds. Could you maybe explain a little bit of what you meant about that?

LC: Well the typical thing that could come up is: you have piece that is very light-sensitive, a textile, and the curator wants it brightly lit.

SS: [laughs.]

LC: Now, that doesn't usually happen here. Sometimes an outside designer comes in and they don't have the training that our curators do about conservation issues. And they feel, "we really want to spotlight this particular object." So that could be a conflict. Or the way in which something is shown. I might feel something needs more protection and the curator might say "I want it to feel more accessible, so we don't want plexi in front of this particular object," or "We don't want this object in a case." But there are always solutions. And one thing I pride myself in is not really saying "no." There's a way to work this out and I enjoy the creative problem solving that is involved.

SS: Right. I definitely think I learned that from you.

LC: Oh! That's good. [both laugh.]

SS: It's how to approach compromise.

LC: Yes. Compromise is a huge, important skill to have in this field. Actually, I remember I gave a lecture at AIC [American Institute for Conservation] on compromise. Both the theme of the entire meeting and my whole lecture were on compromise.

SS: And how was it received?

LC: [laughs.] Everyone understood. [both laugh.]

SS: All right. You had mentioned at the beginning of the interview about Ethel Stein and I know you had also had a relationship with Lenore Tawney, as well. Could you speak about your relationship with fiber artists?

LC: My father and Ethel Stein's husband were at Harvard together. And Ethel Stein's husband was an architect and actually he was one of the first green architects so he and my father had a lot in common. As a child we spent time with them and Ethel taught me to weave when I was very young. As I mentioned, she was the one who introduced me to Milton Sunday. She introduced me to Lenore Tawney, I didn't really know her well, but I had been to her studio and saw her several times. But she was not someone with whom I had an ongoing relationship, although I am a great admirer of her work.

SS: Have you worked with artists in the preservation of their objects at all? Their artwork?

LC: That's not really come up for me, very much. Because I'm mostly working with our collection.

SS: Do you do any freelance conservation?

LC: I haven't for many, many years. I used to do work for other museums but I rarely did any work for individuals.

SS: Getting towards the end, actually. Could you speak to the role of conservators today?

LC: In museums?

SS: Yeah, in a museum context.

LC: I think, at least in a museum like this, with a small staff, conservators are really part of a much bigger team. We're working closely with registrars, with curators, with building management people, with security. We're very integrated into the whole museum's functioning. And I like that. Again, it's the comprehensive, encompassing activities that I enjoy. I don't know how it is in other museums as far as, whether conservators are brought into these larger discussions. You know, for example I was part of a small team of people involved in the recent major renovation of this museum. I don't know if it is true in other museums that conservators are brought into many projects where they really can contribute. I think as long as the conservators in a museum have a kind of collaborative ability to compromise and look at the bigger picture with other staff members, they should be involved in a lot of these larger projects.

SS: Does that mean they might not be, do you think in some areas? That they might not be involved?

LC: Well, I think it depends on the institution and it depends on the individuals. Because if you set yourself up as someone who is just making constraining rules and saying “no,” you will not be included in those wider discussions. But the more you view the museum as a whole, and see the larger goals of the museum and not just your own personal viewpoint of “how am I going to protect this collection?” then the more you’ll be included.

SS: Can we talk about collections management and the rise of that profession?

LC: Yes. Collections management and the type of conservation that I’m interested in are really very close. Unfortunately here, as a small museum, we don’t really have that many collections managers, but I think they are vital to museums with large collections. And certainly in the Smithsonian there are many collections managers. But I don’t know how integrated they are with conservation, which I think is such a natural connection. I think there’s a lot to be learned between those two fields.

SS: When did you see the role of collections manager really develop?

LC: Yes, that’s fairly recent. Probably, I don’t know, maybe twenty years ago? I don’t know—what do you think? I’m not sure when that term started to be used.

SS: It still seems like the term is a little contested in a way because it kind of combines registrarial functions with preventive conservation functions.

LC: Right.

SS: So even at the Met Museum every collections manager in each department has a different function and a different reporting mechanism. So it’s very different.

LC: Yeah.

SS: Is there anything I missed that you want? You covered a lot of the questions.

LC: Teaching?

SS: Teaching! Yes. [both laugh.] Talk to me about teaching.

LC: Well, we were talking about mentoring and I really feel that it’s very important for conservators to

teach if they have that ability and again I'm grateful to Cooper Hewitt that they've supported my teaching activities.

SS: That is great.

LC: I've been teaching for the NYU [New York University] Institute of Fine Arts Conservation Center for twenty-eight years. And that's been very interesting because most of their students are not going into textile conservation. There have been a small number who have specialized in textiles through that program. But everyone else is learning about textiles and I really enjoy following those students. I feel like I have colleagues all over the country in different specializations, in different museums, who I can call on and collaborate with and watch their careers develop. To me that's just been so great. And I also find it stimulating as a conservator to have students asking you questions. "Why are you doing it that way?" Or "What were you thinking when you developed this idea?" It makes you reflect, and I find it very interesting. And challenging. Teaching, as well as mentoring. I'm sure I've had, I don't know, over my career probably fifty different pre-program, within-program and post-program interns who I was working with directly in addition to all the students that I taught in classes. I think it's very important.

SS: Has there been a shift in the students over the time that you've been teaching?

LC: That's an interesting question. I did notice in the very beginning, the students—I have taught for several graduate programs for FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology] and for our program [Master of Arts in the History of Design and Curatorial Studies offered jointly by Parsons School of Design and Cooper Hewitt], but the main contact I've had with graduate students has been for the Institute of Fine Arts. And in the beginning, the students were very aggressively, intellectually hungry. They were just fantastic. And then there was a period of time when they seemed to be less—they were more passive. They seemed to be asking you to just give them the information. And then it switched back again. So now I'm seeing again this very vibrant, intellectual type of student who is just hungry to learn. Using their own eyes and minds to come up with their own conclusions. Much less passive. So I don't know what that was about, or if anyone else ever experienced that shift during this time period. It's something I noticed.

SS: Do you think it has anything to do with the visibility of the conservation field in general? I mean, do you think the visibility is getting larger or less?

LC: I don't know. It may have had something to do with the type of students who were applying, or the people who were assessing those students in the application process.

SS: Interesting.

LC: Yeah.

SS: What about conferences and journals? Can you talk to me about your experience sharing information, getting information?

LC: Yeah, I think that also is a critical part of any conservator's role, to be sharing information through publishing or lecturing. Unfortunately, many people don't have the time to do that. And that's certainly changed over time in the field. When I first started in this field it was a much more leisurely pace, truthfully. It really was. You could spend months writing a paper if you wanted to. And that's just not so feasible anymore. But I think it's important and also conservators really need to go to conferences and hear what their colleagues are saying and keep up with the field. That becomes an issue of time and money for travel. But luckily here we're able to get small grants so that the conservators can participate in conferences.

SS: You've mentioned diversity a few times and I was wondering if you could speak to what I think is a typically female-oriented field. Would you agree?

LC: Especially in textiles, yes. The students who I have are usually ninety-percent female.

SS: Any reason why? Just the nature of textiles?

LC: No, even in the other specialties. There are a lot of women. In a certain way, it's a fantastic field in that there's no problem—you don't have to break through any glass ceilings! [both laugh.]

SS: We're winding down, but could you speak about ethics, conservation ethics and the role you feel it's played in your approach and your career?

LC: The AIC—the American Institute for Conservation—has established a code of ethics and practices, and that's something that's constantly evolving. All conservators need to be aware of these documents. Through the AIC, I've been very aware of the code of ethics my whole career. But I think it's a living document that the field is constantly reassessing. There are certainly conflicts of interest that one has to be aware of and also being a Federal employee as part of the Smithsonian there are a lot of ethical considerations that we have to look at. So it's something that's usually in the forefront of my mind.

SS: What did you think about the proposal for certification for conservators that had been put forward at AIC a few years ago?

LC: That was so difficult. I think it's related to this issue of the older generation of conservators who came through the apprenticeship system and how does that fit in? But there was an awful lot of discussion and lack of agreement about how this would be done. It seemed as though they were getting close to a solution, but it never materialized. However, being a Fellow of AIC is sometimes used as de facto certification.

SS: Right.

LC: And certainly a lot of the considerations that were put into those applications would be similar to certification. It seems like it would be a good thing to have.

SS: And you yourself are a Fellow of AIC?

LC: Yes.

SS: And when did you become a Fellow? A while ago? [both laugh.]

LC: Since 1988.

SS: Any other things that you want to mention?

LC: I could say that my paternal grandparents, my grandfather was a tailor and my grandmother was a seamstress. So textiles were in my blood and I learned to sew when I was very young from my grandmother.

SS: Did you know about this field, that it existed?

LC: No. I really only knew about it once Ethel Stein introduced me to Milton and Nobuko. In college I had never heard about it. I'm sure now that's not the case; awareness of the field is much wider.

SS: And how old were you when you first met Nobuko?

LC: That was when I was twenty-two or so.

SS: That's still pretty young.

LC: Yeah. For me it's the perfect field.

SS: Right. I agree.

LC: It just fulfills all of my expectations for fascinating and challenging work.

SS: Right, right. Great! [both laugh.] Thank you.

LC: Thank you. That was thought-provoking and interesting!

[End of interview]

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