C.Y. Stephens Auditorium Curtain Conservation

Ames, IA – In the autumn of 2013, Iowa State initiated an ambitious textile conservation project to bring the main theater curtain in C.Y. Stephens Auditorium back to life. The conservation of the curtain began last August 2013 and the project will conclude in May of 2014.

The first two months of the project were devoted to repairing the back lining of the curtain and the remaining seven months of the project will be devoted to cleaning and repairing the front art tapestry. Conservation will be largely carried out by Kate Greder, Textile Conservation Fellow with University Museums under the oversight of Beth McLaughlin, Senior Conservator from the Midwest Art Conservation Center in Minneapolis, MN. Iowa State students Amy Lowery and Claire Kruesel are also assisting with conservation efforts throughout the duration of the project. The nine month project also includes research about the tapestry, the Kawashima Textile Mill in Kyoto where it was loomed, and the donors—J.W. “Bill” and Dorothy Fisher, formerly of Marshalltown, Iowa.
When the newly constructed C.Y. Stephens Auditorium opened in September 1969 with an unprecedented five-night concert series by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, the moment heralded a new era in the fine arts for Iowa State University, the state of Iowa, and indeed the Midwest. Iowans came out in black tie and taffeta to mark the auspicious opening of the majestic auditorium, which in 2004 earned the honor “Building of the Century” from the Iowa Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

C.Y. Stephens Auditorium had been conceived as the crown jewel of the Iowa State Center and a vital focal point for the arts at Iowa State, so it was fitting that the stage curtain be as reflective of this Midwestern cultural renaissance as the building itself. Iowa natives and Iowa State alumni J.W. “Bill” and Dorothy Fisher, lead donors for the construction of Fisher Theater, commissioned the Kawashima Textile Mills in Kyoto, Japan, to weave the 80-by35-foot curtain on what was then the largest loom in the world. (image at left)

Designed by the artist and sculptor Ryokichi Mukai, the curtain – a true work of art – was named Giniro-no-kigou translated as Silver Code. Largely an expression of abstract symbolism, Silver Code expresses the sciences and technology at Iowa State.

Now, after 45 years and more than 3,500 curtain calls, this magnificent work of art is in urgent need of conservation and repair. Work has already begun, with textile conservators undertaking several life-saving measures. The remaining months of the project will be devoted to cleaning and repairing the face of the curtain by conservation fellow Kate Greder, a meticulous process that must be completed by hand.

The construction of the Iowa State Center from 1966 to 1975, and especially that of C.Y. Stephens Auditorium, was a turning point for Iowa State University. President James Hilton’s vision was to transform Iowa State, both intellectually and physically, from its historical roots in agriculture and engineering to encompass the fine arts of human attainment as expressed in arts and education. This legacy is manifest in Silver Code. Iowa State is fortunate to have a tapestry of this magnitude.

“This large-scale textile represents decades of both innovation and artistic expression for the Iowa State community. In the 1960s, the Iowa State Center project was conceived as a state-of-the-art group of visual and performing arts cultural facilities furthering the land-grant mission of a holistic education for students of all disciplines. Over 45 years later, the Iowa State Center and its partners continue to present world-class performances, exhibitions, and learning opportunities for the students of Iowa State University. Silver Code is emblematic of this relationship between arts and academics.” – Lynette Pohlman, director, University Museums, Iowa State University
IMAGES: Left, Kate Greder, conservation fellow, working on the front of Silver Code. Photographer Wyeth Lynch. Right, before (bottom) and after (top) cleaning.

Media Information
To schedule interviews and/or to photograph, please contact Allison Sheridan (515-294-3342 aclone@iastate.edu).

Images available upon request.

For more information on University Museums, call 515-294-9500 or visit our web site at www.museums.iastate.edu.

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