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Museum L-A Opens Bedspread Exhibit

“Covering the Nation: The Art of the Bates Bedspread”

LEWISTON, ME -- Museum L-A announces the opening of a new exhibit “Covering the Nation: The Art of the Bates Bedspread.” The exhibit brings together a remarkable array of never before exhibited examples of world famous Bates Bedspreads from the Museum’s impressive and little recognized collection.

Museum L-A has brought in a guest curator, Jacqueline Field, textile historian, to oversee and manage the Museum’s collection for this exhibit.

“After first meeting Jacqueline Field, she asked to see a few samples of Museum L-A’s bedspreads expecting to be presented with a few white and beige pieces. After viewing over twenty pieces, I could see she was stunned to find so many vibrant colors, weaves and designs,” explained Rachel Desgrosseilliers, Museum L-A’s Executive Director, “She told me that our collection is likely a national treasure, and one that certainly has never been seen publically before.”

This exhibition highlights over thirty bedcovers, organized thematically in designs ranging from classical, historical, child/youth oriented, popular culture and abstract screen prints often reminiscent of expressionist canvases. It showcases a history created by teams of highly accomplished Bates & Co. artists and designers.

Field, with a Dip.A (Similar to a M.F.A) from Edinburgh College of Art Edinburgh, Scotland: *Textiles & Designs*, is a textile and dress historian, Professor of Textiles & Design, and former Costume Curator. Her publications include the book “*American Silk, 1830-1930 Entrepreneurs and Artifacts*”, as well as many journal articles and various periodicals.

“Lewiston’s skilled spinners and weavers crafted Bates bedspreads, and another group, with different skills and abilities, created the designs,” explains Field. “This exhibit, with immense appreciation for the actual production, focuses more on Bates design diversity and innovation in the twentieth century.” She went on to state, “As curator I had to make tough decisions regarding what bedcovers to select. Certainly not an easy task given the array of designs and types of bedcovers which includes the five main Bates fabrications: tufting, damask, matelassé, colonial and screen-printing.”

The Bates brand is the ultimate icon synonymous with heirloom bedspreads, appreciated for their quality, functionality and aesthetics. A description from a 1965 Bates catalog: “From the famous Heirloom bedspreads, elegant and timeless to the very newest and unusual Bates bedspreads that tumble dry in the automatic.... Bates has given bedspreads fashion, design, color and styling that they never had before.”

Bates Manufacturing Co. was established in Lewiston, Maine in 1850 by Benjamin Bates, and became one of the largest textile manufacturers in New England. By the end of the 1850’s the Bates Mill “ran” 36,000 spindles and employed 1,000 workers to produce 5.7 million yards of top quality cotton goods each year.

Though bed coverings had been made by Bates Manufacturing since the 1850’s, it wasn’t until after the turn of the century that Bates began expanding into new loom processes to produce such textile goods as damasks, satins, Jacquards, and brocades, and later inventing the tufting process, known as terry.

George Washington was said to have given his wife, Martha Custis, an embroidered design bedcover, as a wedding gift. In 1939 a Bates & Co. George Washington candlewick bedspread design was created. This bedcover became the most sold bedspread in the world. At its peak, selling 200,000 a year, with about 5,000,000 being produced since 1940. For many years, weavers worked seven days a week making this particular style bedspread. A Bates bedspread was considered a “must” for new brides, and households often had several featured in master and guest rooms, revered as family “heirlooms.”

Gifts of Bates & Co. bedspreads also became a tradition with many of the First Ladies of the United States. Throughout the years many White House Presidential teams, including the Carter’s, Reagan’s and Bush’s acquired Bates bedspreads to be given as diplomatic gifts. Purchases were made by Roselyn Carter, Nancy Reagan and Barbara Bush, directly from the Bates Mill. Several former mill workers recall meeting Roselyn Carter, who visited the Bates Mill in Lewiston in 1980, during the Reagan – Carter 49th Presidential campaign period, and toured the facilities. Workers in the mill store remember fulfilling Barbara Bush’s Bates & Co. bedspread orders of “a dozen at a time” during her time as First Lady at the White House.

Protocol for Presidential diplomatic gifts was beneficial to Bates & Co. and the mill store. Gifts for foreign leaders had a major restriction- these items had to be created in the United States. Bates bedspreads became a popular choice for official gifts, and Bates bed covers clearly fulfilled that requirement of “Made in America.”

The Presidential George H. W. Bush family had even earlier ties to Bates & Co., previous to the diplomatic gifting of bedspreads. George, or “Poppy” Bush as he was known, and Barbara Bush, representing Yale University, were a part of Bates Manufacturing Co. history in 1948 when they were on the Bates College advisory board of college students. The “Back to School” board served as a focus group to advise the Bates design team on the current tastes and trends for dorm rooms, and participated in fashion shows and product promotions.

The Bushes were featured in the August 1948 Vogue magazine Autumn Fashion issue, with the caption: “Victoria. Chosen by Barbara and George Bush of Yale, and admired by Joan Walls of Bennington....” This was highlighted as the “*Room that came to school in a trunk.*” The text in the advertisement goes on to read: “Young marrieds on campus make Bates the beautiful basis of a long-range decorating plan. Indispensable at college, these bedspreads and matching draperies stay fresh and bright through four years of wear and washing. After graduation, they are ready to grace a future bedroom or living room.”

As the collegiate advisors, the Bushes and others from the nation's leading colleges and universities participated in a movie promoting that year's "Back to School" product line. The movie, *Back to School Promotion*, stars members of this 1948 College Board and is narrated by Ed Thorgenson, a familiar radio voice at the time. The movie was filmed in New York City in February 1948 while the College Board, was "in session". Bates began to promote aggressively to the college market, with the College Board presenting and offering opinions on fashions and furnishings. Previously, Bates allocated only \$10,000 a year for marketing to college students, after the "Back to School" advisory board, advertising and marketing dollars jumped to an annual figure over \$200,000. The movie was screened during fashion show programs in New York, Baltimore, Chicago, Atlanta, Boston, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Los Angeles and many other cities. It was said by Bates to have done "a great job in promoting the Bates label across the nation."

In the years following, little was known or remembered about the 1948 film, until it was rediscovered in a basement storage vault in Bates Mill #5 by Museum staff. It is now an official part of presidential history- one of very few video images known of the Bushes at that time period.

"Museum L-A was delighted to have donated a copy of "Back to School Promotion 1948" to the Bush Library in 2011," stated Desgrosseilliers. "We understand that there is little film footage of the former President and Mrs. Bush from that time period and we were thrilled to offer the video from our collection so it could be used in the Presidential Library and Museum's historical presentations."

The extensive archive of Museum L-A reveals a wealth of the Bates bedspreads, including those reviewed and developed from the Bates College Board. In the wake of the Art Deco movement, with its streamlined forms and its sleek, satin clad movie stars, Bates offered consumers a line of smooth high luster damask made from very shiny artificial silk – the first man-made fiber, now called rayon. Over time, popular culture and current events, from Disney© characters to cowboys, dinosaurs to spaceships, found their way into children's spreads. Wartime designs featured the likes of Fight Patrol aircraft and the Pacific fleet saluted the armed forces and comforted families at home.

Herbert Hecker, who supplemented his knowledge of designing at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, worked with Ray D'Amour (50 year textile designer), Fern Pelletier (started as a "yarn man") and others on new bed cover patterns in the 30's through 60's. The hand drawn designs and patterns, once approved went through meticulous steps and processes before the "first" bedspread sample could be produced. During the late 1940's it cost \$50,000 to create and produce each design for a Bates & Co. bedspread. The approved design was then transferred to a series of hole punched cards for use with the Bates Jacquard looms. These operating punch cards functioned, much as a player piano scroll, to guide the weaving process of designs on the looms.

IBM, while working to produce the world's first modern day computers, spent time at Bates & Co. in the early 50's studying the process and operations of the systems Bates & Co. had created and adopted in the mills. It was said that IBM ultimately utilized the systems that Bates had developed for their Jacquard loom hole punch card system, in the creation of the first IBM computers.

In 2000 Bates & Co. stopped the production of bedspreads at the Bates Mill Complex. At present time, Maine Heritage Weavers proudly continues the art of the Bates bedspread at their manufacturing plant in Monmouth, Maine, employing many of the former Bates mill workers and continuing to weave many of the original Bates & Co. designs. The Bates Mill complex still consists of many of the original buildings containing approximately one million square feet on a 10-acre parcel in the core of Lewiston's downtown.

Museum L-A's "Covering the Nation: The Art of the Bates Bedspreads" is an exhibit for children, teens, and adults of all ages. The samples shown and accompanying information is sure to bring back memories from napping on grandparent's beds and waking up with the tell-tale "dots" from the Bates bedspread on the face...to memories of spaceship, cowboy and circus artwork on one's childhood bed. The designs alone will facilitate an appreciation of the men and women who created these bedspreads.

Opening to the public in 2004, Museum L-A has evolved from a single focus subject of the textile mills to a dedicated community and cultural museum. Serving as a place to exhibit and document history it also functions as an extended classroom, community resource, and a showcase of various industries, workers and products. Continual efforts are being made to preserve the historical legacy represented by the mills and the industries of the past. Museum L-A works to encourage collaboration and foster innovation with the goal of honoring the past to inspire the future. The Museum strives to honor the quality products and innovation that emanated from the talent in the surrounding community as well as the local businesses that are still today producing high quality and innovative products.

Honoring and documenting the lives and skill of the workers in the mills is a continual focus of Museum L-A, along with bringing back as many styles of bedspreads created and produced in the local mills. As a special tribute, the Museum is preparing a program asking the public across our nation, and the World, to share their stories and images of Bates bedspreads.

Currently housed in Lewiston's historic Bates Mill complex, the Museum is working to facilitate a move from the current temporary location, to a new and permanent home in what was the Camden Yarns Mill. This new location will allow the organization to fully facilitate its mission and core purposes. For more information contact Museum L-A.

“Covering the Nation: the Art of the Bates Bedspread” opens Saturday, 1:00-4:00pm, July 23, 2016 with a reception and viewing free to the public. On the exhibit’s opening day, there will be a special “Pop Up” boutique with a wide array of Maine Heritage Weavers bedspreads for sale to the public. Proceeds of bedspreads will benefit Museum L-A. A selection of bedspreads will continue to be available at the Museum’s Gift Shop. “Covering the Nation: The Art of the Bates Bedspread” will run through April 30, 2017. Museum L-A is located at 35 Canal Street, Lewiston, Maine in the Bates Mill Complex. For more information, or to set up a private tour, contact Museum L-A by calling [207-333-3881](tel:207-333-3881) or visiting online at www.museumla.org

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