***Hidden Threads***

By Ingeborg Westfall

Remember something you really didn’t want to do? You groaned and sighed; but finally you did it because it would broaden your horizons, it would be educational, and it would show that you were out there savoring all that life offers (even so, you surreptitiously practiced your this-is-so-fascinating face so no one would guess you longed instead to be home watching reruns of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*).

That’s how I felt about the Textile Museum. What a yawner, right? I’ve never woven, knitted, embroidered, tatted, crocheted, quilted, or pursued any other form of stitchery or fabric arts, so to say I knew nothing about textiles is an understatement—but on a blustery day unfit for gardening, off I went.

Needless to say, I was caught off-guard by this charming museum. Established in 1925 by George Hewitt Myers (and still based in his mansion) with a collection consisting of two hundred fifty rugs he’d purchased, the Textile Museum now has holdings numbering more than eighteen thousand, emphasizing fabric and textiles of the Near East, Asia, and Africa, as well as textiles of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Not surprisingly, it attracts twenty-to-thirty thousand visitors yearly, at last count.

Over a year’s time, the Textile Museum presents numerous educational events as well as four to six special exhibits, often consisting of objects from its collection, but from elsewhere as well. Two exhibits blew me away: “Woven Treasures of Japan’s Tawaraya Workshop” and “Sourcing the Museum.” The Japanese exhibit showcases silk textiles on loan from the Tawaraya Workshop, which has produced silk for more than five hundred years under the guidance of eighteen generations of the same family. The assembled thirty-seven works in lustrous colors appear worthy of royalty, and that’s exactly what they are, commissioned for the Japanese Imperial Household and used in coronations, weddings, and other ceremonies. The exhibit contains several of the many fabrics worn by Crown Princess Masako for her 1993 wedding to Crown Prince Naruhito. These and other historic items are, even to these untrained eyes, luminous and simply gorgeous, a celebration of keeping tradition alive.

“Sourcing the Museum” couldn’t be more different. Jack Lenor Larsen, a renowned textile designer, invited eleven international textile artists to use any of the museum’s objects as inspiration for new works. The pieces are presented side by side so visitors can glimpse artistic inspiration.

I was part of a docent-led tour. It was very informative, and the docent’s love for her subject came through; however, I would have benefited from more time in the Learning Center’s Activity Gallery which encourages visitors to try hands-on activities. Here, for instance, you learn that a bright red extract used as a fabric dye for centuries comes from the crushed cochineal beetle (yes, the same dye Starbucks recently pledged to stop using to make some of its beverages redder). I would have loved to have read more about the silkworms, one cocoon of which yields a single, continuous filament thinner than a human hair, used to make silk thread (and maybe even a word about the Madagascar golden orb spider, which produces golden spider silk, but that’s another story).

The Textile Museum is within walking distance of the Dupont Circle Metro stop. Its website is www.textilemuseum.org, its phone 202-667-0441. Ask about wheelchair accessibility; I couldn’t see provisions for that. Admission is free, with a suggested donation of $8 (it’s a private museum)—and there’s a bonus: a short walk to Connecticut Avenue reveals an array of good restaurants, ranging from Thai to Italian to American to French. I can personally give two thumbs up to the Moules (mussels) Provençale at Bistro du Coin.