Art & Craft

Adventures in Textile Conservation

6 November 2024

By Tara Klager

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"Let's call it a domestic textile," says Dr. Michele Hardy when I, once again, stumble over just what to call this item we're talking about. I have said "rug," "carpet," "covering," and "piece" more times in the last ten minutes than I can remember saying in the previous six months but I think I can be forgiven for the confusion—this "domestic textile" could be all of the above.

Professor Michele Hardy with our subject for the day! This domestic textile had been purchased at an annual market in San Francisco and was added to the Nickle Gallery's collection.

"I suspect strongly it is Kurdish, mainly because of the colour palette. It was probably made for use by people as opposed to something that was made to sell. These kinds of textiles—and there's not that many of them in collections—they're made with a particular function in mind. Whether it's sleeping or sitting, it's not something that was made as a gift for a mosque—which many of the big carpets were—or something that was made to be exchanged on the open market. So this is made for people, for themselves, which always makes it a little bit richer from a curator's perspective."

Dr. Hardy is the curator at the University of Calgary's Nickle Gallery. Among her many tasks is to source artifacts for the gallery's collection, items that will in turn become the foundation of shows and exhibitions as well as resources for students and academics. The subject of our conversation today is a large, tightly woven carpet, mainly in dark colours but with glorious squares of shaggy pile in vibrant shades. Although I'm not a weaver, even I can tell that whoever the artist was, she was accomplished and skillful with a refined sense of colour—and yes, according to Dr. Hardy, it was almost certainly "she."

> *"To my eyes, it's filled with love," says Dr. Hardy, fondly.*

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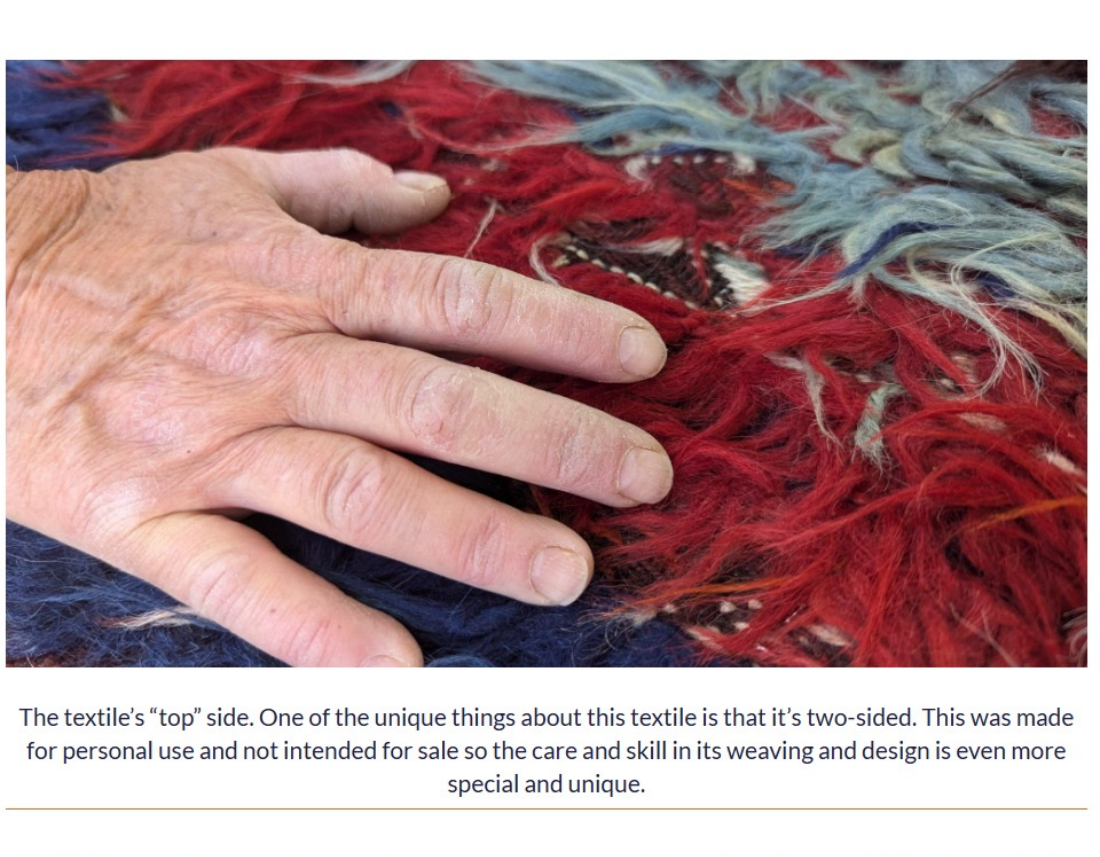
So this is our project, our field of play. Like so many textiles, this one came to the Nickle by a mostly unknown route: Calgary by way of San Francisco and Turkey. "It's from Eastern Anatolia—we say *Turkey* but Turkey and Anatolia are not exactly the same thing," she says. "I was stunned by the fact that this was a two-sided textile—we had nothing like this in the collection.

"I'm always looking for pieces that provide some insight into the humans that made and used these things and I thought that this particular textile kind of fit the bill and filled in some gaps in the Nickle's collection in some provocative and interesting ways."

Without knowing anything for certain beyond some of the material—the shaggy pile might be something different—as well as its quality, Dr. Hardy reached out to textile conservator Gail Niinimaa. With decades of experience across Europe and more than twenty years at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, job one was to prepare our likely Kurdish domestic textile for inclusion in the Nickle's collection room.

"I put it in the freezer," Dr. Hardy says matter-of-factly. "That's standard practice."

With so much of the Nickle's collection consisting of wool-based textiles, the idea of creepy crawlies piggybacking into the climate-controlled racks of the gallery's storage facilities is enough to make a textile lover break out in hives. A few weeks in subzero temperatures (-15 C to -20 C in a chest freezer, though Niinimaa notes a Calgary winter cold snap works well, too) generally does the trick.

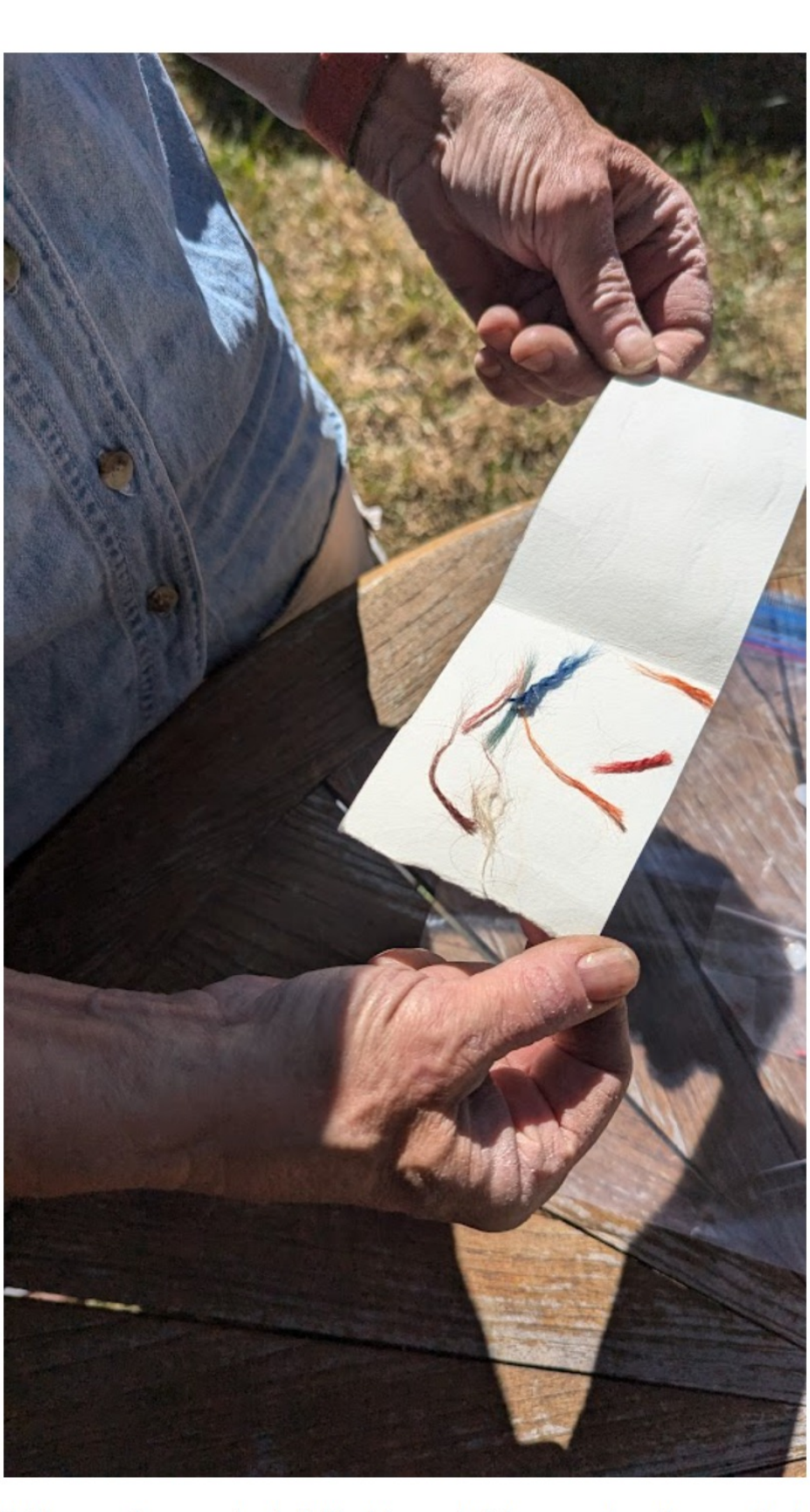


The textile's "top" side. One of the unique things about this textile is that it's two-sided. This was made for personal use and not intended for sale so the care and skill in its weaving and design is even more special and unique.

"I didn't notice any frass—larvae poop—on the piece," says Niinimaa. "The moth damage was fairly old—it wasn't active. It's nice to remove the casings—generally, the damaging part of the insect cycle is when the larvae emerge and eat their way out."

Bending over the rug, I gingerly brush back the pile with one hand, my eyes scouring the line where it joins the brocade weaving. While I look for moth casings, I'm also really hoping I don't find any—there's only one pair of tweezers for removal and there are three of us looking. With nothing in sight—and with a tiny sigh of relief—the next step is to wash away the dust and grime of an unknown history, to make the colours, as Dr. Hardy says, "sing."

Pulling moth casings. The rug was put into a freezer to kill any potential insects. These casings are evidence of long-ago moth activity.

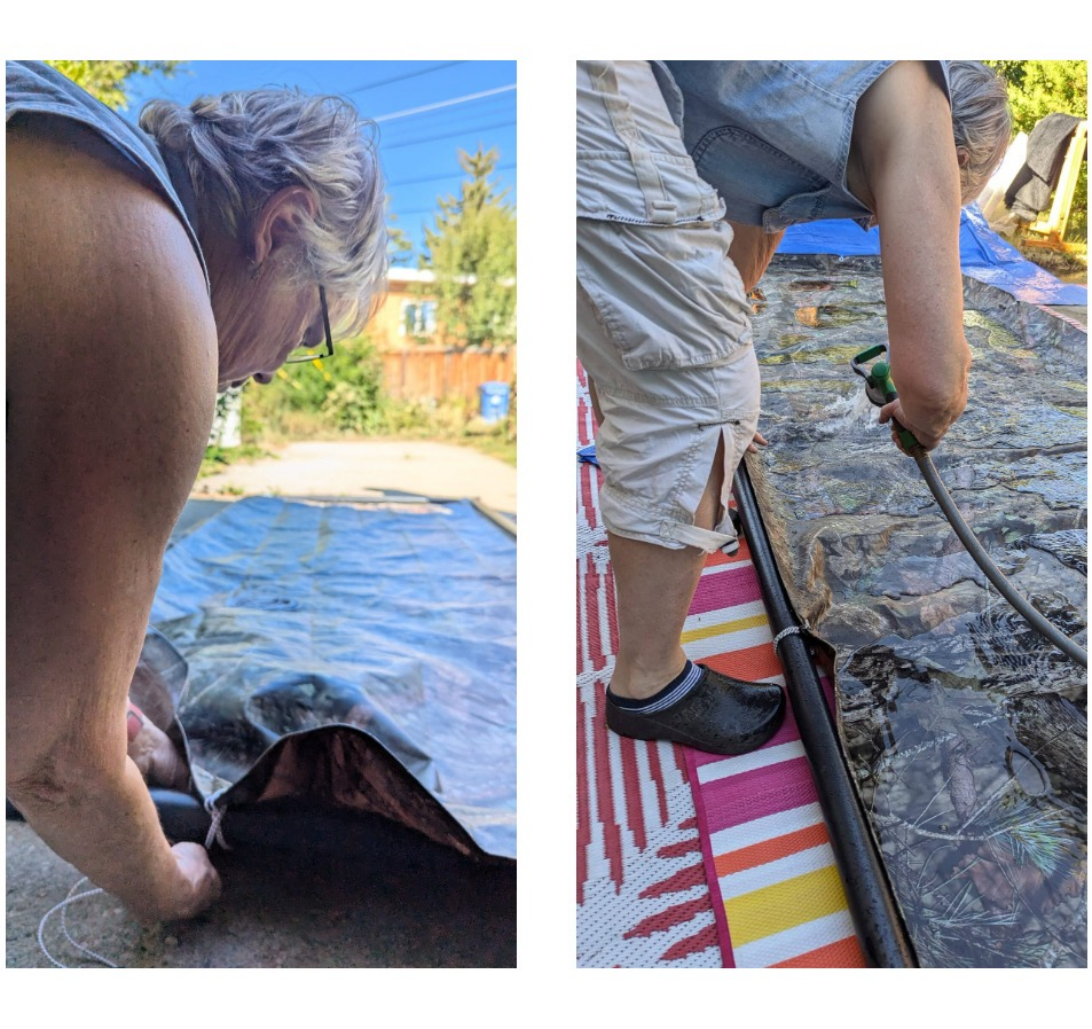


This blotting paper has yarn snippets Gail took from out-of-the-way spots on the rug and tested for colour fastness.

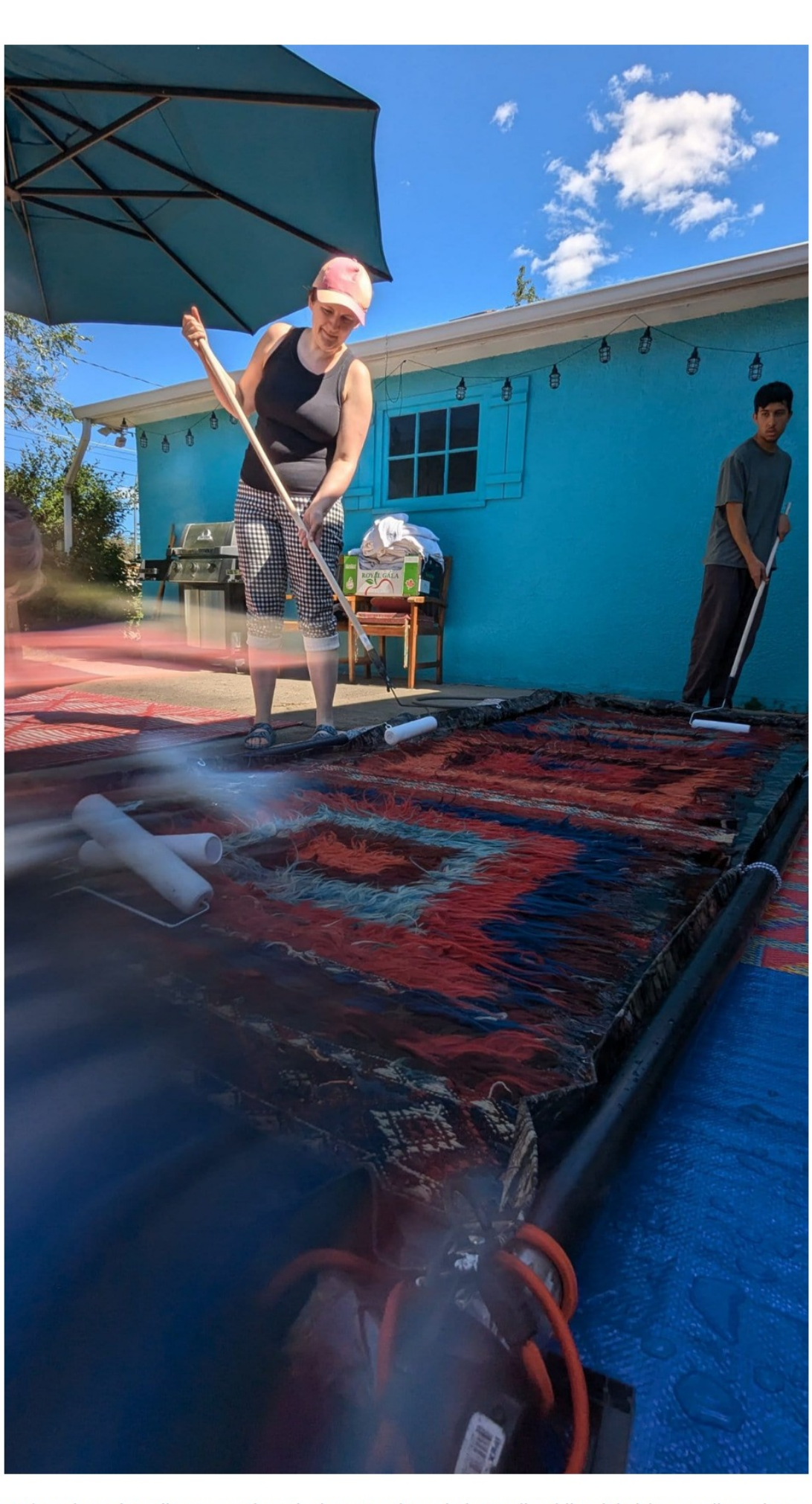
Niinimaa has been to assess the rug earlier and took samples, small threads carefully teased from out-of-sight areas. Soaking them in a concentrated solution of detergent and water, the goal was to check for colour fastness, to see if the dyes used to achieve the saturated blue and red tones would run or bleed into other sections. Knowing how the dyes will behave in water is important—with its long-but-unknown history, anything is possible.

"If it was walked on, if it was a bench covering and people would sit on it—you have to think about how it was used and where that dirt came from," says Niinimaa. "By putting water in it, we are neutralizing and flushing out that dirt which brings more longevity to the textile in the end."

And while some colour transfer is expected, the degree of bleed—as well as material, overall condition and degree and type of soiling—helps to determine the handling method. In this case, having built a shallow bath from PVC plumbing pipe with a tarp fitted and secured inside the perimeter as a membrane, Niinimaa is happy to simply use paint rollers to circulate water through the weaving, gently removing as much of the dirt as possible.

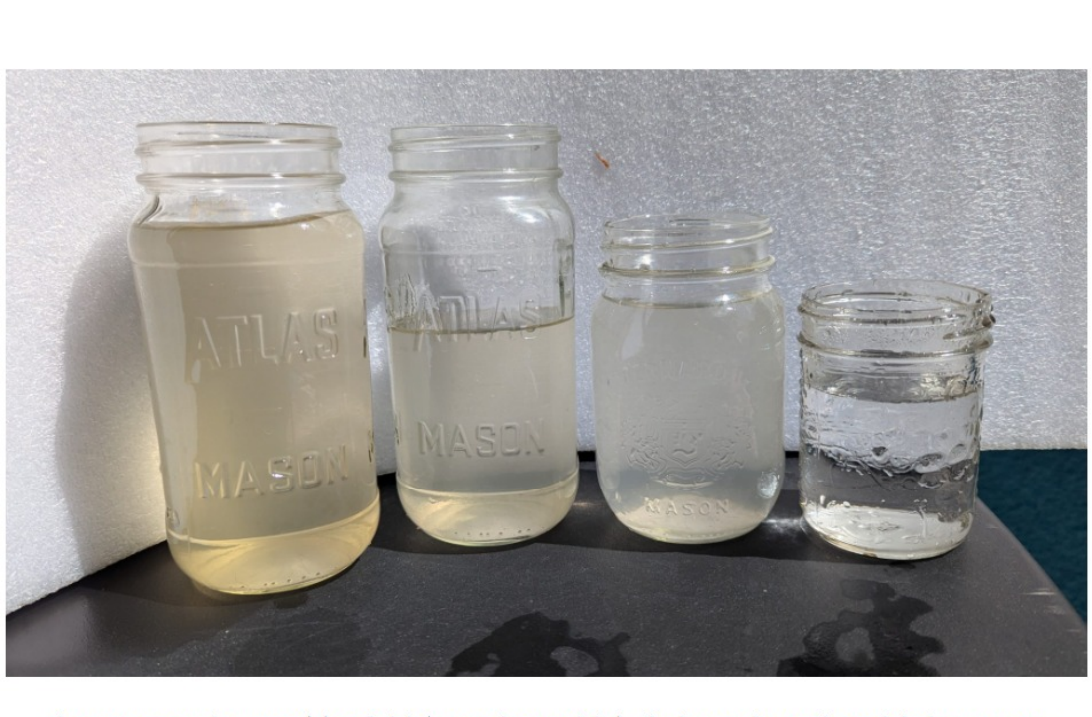


Gail builds and fills the PVC pipe-and-tarp vessel that's big enough to hold the entire rug, lying flat, to a depth of about two inches of water. Gail filled the water bath with regular town water on a very hot day. Some conservators will use distilled water but in this case, Gail felt the textile was robust and the dye, resilient.



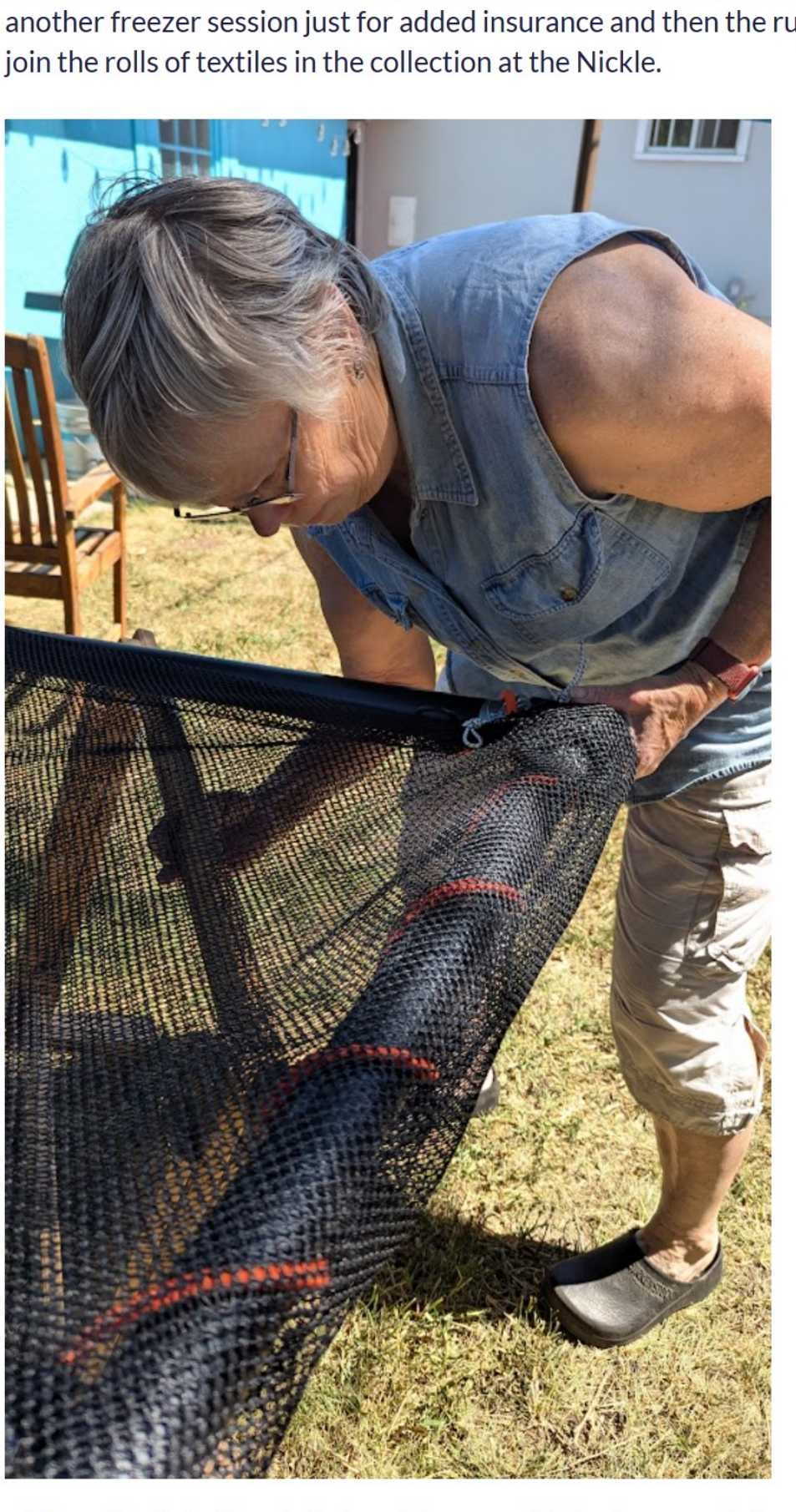
We're using paint rollers to gently cycle the water through the textile while minimizing any disruption or friction to the pile. Each part of the rug received several passes from the group over the course of each rinse.

"I usually try and save some of the water for the duration of the project so you can see (the progress)," she says. Our growing collection of mason jars does show some headway—jar number one is full of a yellowish tinge that does not inspire feelings of confidence, and I decide not to think about what it might be. After many rounds of filling, rinsing, and draining, Niinimaa is prepared to call it clean, so Dr. Hardy joins her kneeling on the ground and the two of them cover the soaking carpet with white towels—the better to see any fugitive dyes.



The water samples, start (L) to finish (second from right). The jar on the furthest right is water, for comparison.

Rolling carefully from the narrow end, the carpet becomes a kind of woolly jelly roll, the towels soaking up the excess water before it is unrolled, flipped over, fresh towels laid on and the carpet bundled up again. With as much water removed as possible, and now quite astonishingly heavy, we manhandle the rug onto a suspended net to allow as much air circulation as possible. Once it's fully dry, it'll be another freezer session just for added insurance and then the rug will join the rolls of textiles in the collection at the Nickle.



After washing, the textile needed to dry, as flat as was possible. A net was suspended from the frame and propped above ground for maximum air flow. The rug is very thick and the pile on one side is long. Even drying – or as even as can be – is important.

Dr. Hardy presses on the rug-and-towel layers to remove as much excess water as possible.

Click here to watch a video of the washing process.

Dr. Hardy's enthusiasm for the collection is contagious. All the potential questions—all the potential stories—that are wrapped up in warp and weft can be intoxicating, but part of textile's appeal, she feels, can be in simply not knowing for sure.

"We want to know and we want to pin these things down but textiles kind of resist that in some interesting ways," she says. "That mystery, that ambiguity is kind of part of their appeal."

"For me, the appeal of this particular textile was that there was a technological story, there was a colour story, there's a "Let's imagine the life of nomads in Eastern Anatolia" story—it's worth thinking about. Who made this? Why did they make it? Who did they make it for? I think these are good things to think about, these are healthy things to think about. It's a beautiful thing."

Editor's note: In a follow-up with Dr. Hardy, Tara learned that the rug is "a 19th century piece but no further dating information is available."

Tips From Dr. Hardy

So you've got yourself a textile—domestic or otherwise—and you don't know what you're looking at? Some things to consider BEFORE you try to clean it yourself.

1. Safety first! Some dyes from certain historical periods are notoriously toxic. From the Victorian era, Niinimaa says purples and greens were particularly hazardous. For textiles dating from this period—or for textiles with unknown dye agents—it is better to let a professional take a look.
2. Think about critters, particularly if you have other natural fibres in your home. Niinimaa suggests bagging a new-to-you textile in clear plastic wrap, and letting it sit for several weeks to see what, if anything, shows up. If there is insect debris, throw it in the freezer and then bag it and observe it again. "You do it because you want to know if there's something on your piece," she says. "Most importantly, you want to know if you've got rid of it."
3. If there are any signs of moving colour, let a professional take it on. Anyone who's ever turned all their white socks pink thanks to the addition of a red item in the laundry knows that dye moves. A professional assessment can help to identify if a textile is likely to come through the washing process with its colours intact.
4. Just as colour moves, so does fibre. Anytime a textile is washed, you will lose fibre says Niinimaa. Choosing a washing method to avoid this is important.
5. While it seems like getting fibres wet is the highest risk, Niinimaa points out that even when drying, things can go wrong. Drying textiles can change their shape and some may need to be blocked. Knowing how to dry textiles evenly is also important to avoid warping or puckering, particularly in areas where there is a difference in density i.e., around heavy embroidery.
6. Consider the environment the textile was in and where it is now. If conditions are very different—for instance, going from a humid environment to a dry one—there is a process to acclimate the textile to prevent damage. Make sure you get good information.

All images courtesy Dr. Michele Hardy/Tara Klager

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About Tara Klager

Tara Klager is a first-generation regenerative fibre farmer raising endangered and heritage breed sheep hard against the Rocky Mountain foothills in Alberta, Canada. With a passion for the land and a firm conviction that her role is to safeguard and steward the amazing place she gets to call home, Tara, and her husband Bob, have worked to build community with a wide range of representation - from LGBTQ2+ to Indigenous organizations to fibre enthusiasts and members of the public, Tara provides a place and framework to encourage discussion and interaction between a variety of groups and people. Whether you're interested in animal husbandry and welfare, endangered sheep breeds, the variety of practices that go into regenerative agriculture and how you might apply them to your own context or fibre and all its possibilities, Tara invites you to the homestead, a world of people, place and permaculture. Welcome to my frontier!

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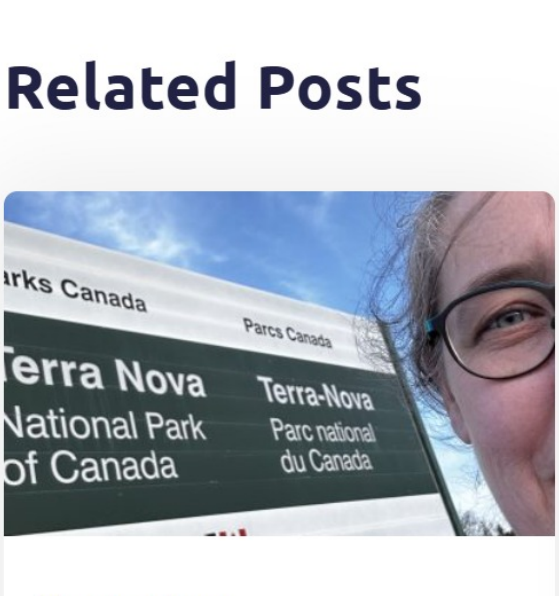

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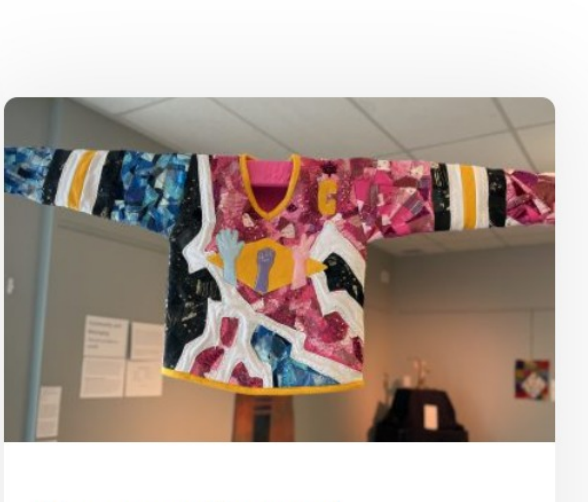

Community and Belonging: How Do We Heal Our World?

by Elana Goodfellow | Oct 9, 2024

Artist Elana Goodfellow curated a multi-disciplinary art exhibit earlier this year. The theme was Community and Belonging, and the objective was to investigate how we might reduce othering and increase belonging in our communities.

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