

Mending ancient clothing

Volunteers, staff repair museum's Ch'ing collection

By Sandy Johnstone
Of the Emerald

Hattie Mae Nixon bends intently over her work, her needle poking carefully through the delicate silk. At times she can't see the thin thread going through the fine material.

Her work is almost imperceptible to the casual observer. Nixon, a volunteer at the University art museum, is carefully preserving an ancient robe that was worn by a Chinese emperor.

The robe is part of the art museum's permanent collection of Ch'ing dynasty costumes, most of which were donated by Gertrude Bass Warner in 1922, and will be part of the opening exhibit of the museum of Art when it opens its doors Sunday, Oct. 2 for its fall season.

While the museum is closed, due to budget cuts, Nixon and Barbara Zentner, museum registrar, are working to reconstruct garments that have been damaged.

"Our reconstruction work makes them safe to exhibit," says Zentner.

The silk in the shoulders of the robe Nixon is working on has worn out from constant hanging in the museum and the gold thread which winds around the sleeves is loose. After fixing the sleeves to prevent further fraying, Nixon has been tacking down the gold threads to keep them from falling off.

Besides the sleeves, she has also sewn down the threads of the nine dragons embroidered on the robe — bringing her total work on the garment to about 100 hours.

Why so much work for one robe?

This robe is special, according to Nixon.

By law, only the emperor could wear gold so only he wore the garment. This particular robe was worn at least twice, says Nixon. Some symbols were embroidered after the original wearing between 1740 and 1790 and size alterations were made.

Making the emperor's robe was time-consuming. The whole process of simply making the silk was tedious because they used



Hattie Mae Nixon carefully repairs a garment from the museum's Ch'ing collection.

Photo by Mark Pynes

silkworms, says Zentner.

After the cloth is finished, then the design, including 12 symbols that had to be included on every emperor's robe, were embroidered.

Nixon speculates the robes were embroidered by two different people, one on each side, because each side is the mirror image of the other. The difference in the quality of the workmanship seems to suggest that a skilled person worked with an apprentice on most robes, she says.

Nixon admits she gets a bit nervous when working with such delicate old materials, but she has learned to conquer her fear from constant exposure to the task.

Nixon, a former home economics professor at the University, volunteered to help fix the clothes about 10 years ago and has been working at it steadily since.

"I like to do it," she says.

Once she started working with the garments she decided to do a little "detective work" to find out about them, so she researched the era and the clothing.

"I probably know as much about (ancient Chinese garments) as anyone in Eugene," says Nixon. For example, official garments

in China were highly regulated. A badge of material was worn on the front and back of robes, telling people who had to bow to whom.

But not all Chinese apparel was so controlled. Women were ignored for the most part, says Zentner, so they could wear what they wanted.

While Nixon has been able to discover when and where the emperor wore his robe, there is one thing that no one knows.

"We don't know what they wore underneath the robe. No one ever dared to ask," she laughs.

UNIVERSITY
TRAVEL

774 E. 13th
2nd Floor
Smith Family
Bookstore

Airline Tickets At Airport Prices

*As always, no charge for
our services*

- * Computerized Airline Reservations & Ticketing
- * Amtrak Reservations & Ticketing
- * Cruises, Tours, International & Domestic Travel
- * Friendly, Experienced Staff

683-5577

With Your Magicard

10% DISCOUNT

To U. of O. Students,
Faculty and Staff On
Service and Repairs

- No matter where you bought your car, we'd be happy to do your warranty work or other customer service work.
- Lowest hourly labor rate of any authorized Volkswagen dealer in Western Oregon.
- Largest parts inventory south of Portland.
- Service Department is open six full days every week, Mon.-Fri.: 7:30-5:30, Sat.: 8:00-5:00.

SIEGRIST VOLKSWAGEN

1570 South A, Springfield
746-8241

CUSTOM PHOTOFINISHING

Most Slide and Print film
2-3 Hours

*PHOTOFINISHING IS OUR BUSINESS
-NOT A SIDELINE*

OREGON PHOTO LAB

On Campus
1231 Alder St.
683-2500

So. Willamette
2805 Willamette
344-1224

We Use
Kodak
PAPER
...for a Good Look