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Crafting Collections between Vernacular and Institutional Culture

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork and applies theories of crafting and performance to explore how living heritage practices are rethought, reframed, and refashioned when traditional dress and individual garments are moved, reorganized, and transformed into a collection following rationales derived from both family tradition and museum standards. By following one woman's emerging collections, the study sheds light on ways of materializing relationships and shaping curatorial agency through acts of crafting. The study aims to show how deeper understanding of vernacular crafting of collections may inform institutional curatorial practice and heritage-making.

Keywords:

Craft theory; crafting, heritage, performance, collection management.

INTRODUCTION

Kersti Jobs Björklöf opened the garage door. I followed her. We passed a car, tools, a lawn mower, an edge trimmer, tarpaulins, garden furniture, and bicycles and eventually reached a locked gateway to a space of about 8 square meters. Kersti looked at me, beaming with joy and pride. She said, "Erik has helped me build it." Inside, the fully-insulated storage room included floor-to-ceiling shelving that held museum-quality, acid-free archival boxes. Some of these 1.5-meter-long boxes held complete outfits, and smaller boxes held a single object, like a purse or a shawl. Most of them were labeled with the Knis farm's mark, and a short inventory of content. Kersti gently lifted the lid of one of the boxes. She encouraged me "Here, come see here!" She unfolded a layer of white tissue paper and gently removed a *kjolsäck*, a small, richly decorated purse. The embroidered wool looked fragile, but the colors were clear. "Here," Kersti prompted, "feel it." She caressed the back of the bag, feeling the well-worn leather. The purse was dated 1840. While holding this garment Kersti's part in women's crafting heritage began to unfold. (from author's fieldnotes, February 2017)

This project is based on ethnographic fieldwork with heritage-maker Kersti Jobs-Björklöf (1937–) as she organizes her wardrobe of traditional dress into collections to be used for different purposes. Kersti's family has lived at the Knis farm in Tibble in Dalarna for four hundred years. Kersti and I have known one another since the 1990s, when we produced exhibitions together for both Swedish and American audiences. Kersti has now retired, and lives in a smaller house on the farm, and her son Erik with family

has moved into the main house. Together they continue the long-standing Knis tradition of multi-generational living.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the ways in which the crafting of vernacular collections may differ from institutional and professional museum practices. What can popular interpretations of traditional dress converted from active wear to collections bring to professional heritage-making? What garments are included in these emerging collections? What professional preservation methods are activated (packaging methods, cataloging, white gloves, etc.) in the handling of garments? What stories and topics emerge during the crafting process? In what ways can the process of women's crafting vernacular collections inform museum professionals as they create cultural heritage of other people's material culture and knowhow?

For this paper, I draw upon transcribed interviews, fieldnotes and photos from 2017–2020, as well as fieldnotes and photos from earlier visits to the Knis farm. Through this material, I analyze emerging dress collections as *heritage-in-action*, an in-situ/immediate crafting practice and situated performance of heritage.

Crafting collections and traditional knowledge

People engaged in craft, whether on a theoretical or a practical basis, have discussed its definition. Since the early twenty-first century, craft has been approached from several perspectives: the historical, the aesthetic, the contemporary art perspective (Veiteberg 2005, Adamson 2007, Sennett 2008, Rosenqvist 2011). For this paper, I use the term crafting, defined as a process in which a practitioner demonstrates mastery of materials and techniques in the making of the object, paired with the history of craft-making (Glassie 1999, Bronner 2018). These crafting practices tend to be circulated among small groups of people, producing knowledge that responds to, augments, and fills the gaps in between these groups' understandings and those created by larger or more mainstream groups. Such knowledge often sheds light on the negotiation that takes place between vernacular practice and knowhow at professional institutions. Vernacular crafting involves civic society, is voluntary, and operates informally, most often without stability in funding.

Such crafting asserts group identity, may challenge cultural norms, and provides examples for ways of living a situated life. I argue that vernacular crafting of things is a way of grasping things; to reach cumulative bodies of knowledge, developed, changed, and renewed over generations. Crafting traditional knowledge involves passing on as well as grasping technologies of subsistence, e.g. tools, techniques, as well as skills. It is about learning through and by example. I will argue that Kersti Jobs-Björklöf's emerging collections of folk dress reshape traditional knowledge and perform heritage through acts of crafting. Hers operating *between* vernacular and institutional practice, build on complex networks of female heritage workers in the past. Thus, she both joins and expands these networks; all of whom have used dress and collections to shape an avenue for women craft sustainable resources for the future.



FIGURE 1. *In between.* One of the treasures made on the farm in 1840 and used up until recently and hesitantly being considered for permanent storage. Kersti performs her way of sorting and explains the reasons for including the purse in the collection for preservation and research. Photo by the author.

Crafting heritage *between* vernacular and institutional culture

In the Nordic countries research has been done *on*, *for* and *through* folkdräkt, prepositions that each point out a perspective. Research *on folkdräkt* and its categories of *bygdedräkt*, *folklig dräkt* and *sockendräkt* (Centergran 1996, Liby 1997, Eldvik 2002) focuses on the makers of the garments and how the garments were composed. The second perspective shows how the development of new materials and fabrics, fashion influences, tools, handbooks, and manuals has affected and spurred changes in dress traditions (Bergman 2005, Hol Haugen 2006, Eldvik 2014, Liby 2018). The third approach highlights people's crafting of heritage and identities *through* their situated performances of traditional dress (Gradén 2014, 2017, Shukla 2015). In studies of material objects preserved in museums, Gunnar Almevik has pointed to the hand-made reconstruction as an avenue to understanding the context of the object. He argues that knowledge needs to be accessed *through craftsmanship*, through re-imagining the lived experience and by recreating the object using similar materials and time-typical tools (Almevik 2017). Similarly, museums work to access knowledge through the craftsmanship of curation, through shaping and reshaping the social life of things by creating collections.

In this project, I wish to draw attention to the preposition *between*. I do this to emphasize the relational aspects of heritage-making, how Kersti's crafting collections at the farm serve as an intermediary between:

- Past, present, future
- Traditional dress-makers, wearers
- Private collections and museum collections
- Vernacular and professional museum
- Collectors, practitioners, and researchers

By focusing on the unique performative moments when garments face a shift from one status to another, I am exploring *crafting heritage*, the intermediate state, when categorization is being contemplated and curation is in the making. At a museum, this kind of intermediate state occurs when new acquisitions are being incorporated into existing collections, or when a collection is moved from one storage facility to another and objects are re-cataloged. This intermediate phase also occurs when an individual heritage-maker carefully crafts her family's much-used *folkdräkt* wardrobe into a collection to be preserved for future research, a process of heritagization (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Smith 2006). In this paper, I focus on the considerations, ideals, values, and principles that govern the decisions that the individual heritage-maker puts into motion when crafting collections.

Heritage in action: Moments of performance

Folk dress collections, like dress in general, can be understood as stylized performances of who we are. Analyzed as performance—an activity that is framed, presented, highlighted and displayed before an audience—traditional dress collections, like dress, is affective communication (Gradén 2014, Shukla 2015, cf. Schechner 2006). When worn, handled, sorted, displayed, or crafted to collections, traditional dress is a mode of performance in which body, dress, and the curator of the collection influence and shape each other. These acts of crafting collections and telling stories about them can be understood as moments of performance, revealing in the present the heritage-maker's interpretations of the past, and thus her motivations for negotiating what to save for the future. When analyzing one woman's curation of 150 traditional dresses and single garments at her home, the farm her family has occupied for four hundred years, I have come to think of her skills as crafting material and immaterial heritage and performing traditional knowledge. I ask, how are notions of family practice performed when old and new garments are handled, sorted, labeled, and moved from the traditional *klädskammare* (clothes store), *drawers* and *wardrobes* to purpose-built storage and reframed as collections? How do such transformation of living traditional dress practices relate to traditional dress as a field of knowledge within museums?

Crafting collections as heritage practice

As true today as it was in the nineteenth century and earlier, individuals at the farm manifested their social status by wearing fine clothes. People dressed in their very best for regular church services on Sundays and other festive days in the Lutheran religious calendar. Kersti, like her fellow residents in Leksand, knows and follows a shared dress code, wearing select combinations of garments to mark holidays and the rituals of life: baptism, confirmation, weddings, and funerals. As a heritage-maker, Kersti honors this local tradition by dressing accordingly for her regular church visits and following the festive year. As mentioned initially, she also keeps the family dress collection, numbering more than four hundred single objects amassed over generations. Both acts, wearing and keeping, pay tribute to her mother's similar efforts to use and preserve traditional dress for future generations. Kersti is also a professional who spent her working career as an ethnologist collecting, documenting, and displaying regional folk art. Local forms of traditional dress, for both women and men, were at the center of her work as curator and manager at Leksand's kulturhus, the municipally owned cultural history museum, archive, and library. Understanding herself as both a practitioner of a living tradition and a museum professional, she began organizing her family's accumulated items of dress and adornment at the farm, including her own wardrobe. When first sorting the garments, she separated out two groupings and placed them in different dressers in her house: one for the garments she still wears and another for items selected for the purpose of showing to students and researchers. She also created another category for older garments in her possession. These were set aside for preservation and "rest," put into acid-free boxes, and moved into purpose-built storage on the farm. These categories resemble those of typical institutions: props for demonstration; collection items for study and display, with more fragile and valuable items kept safe in special storage, to be accessed only for select viewing. The difference between a typical museum collection and a vernacular folk collection such as Kersti's is found in the more subtle ways the garments are handled—touched, organized, and contextualized.



FIGURE 2. In-house storage for aprons and other garments that are used often. Photo by the author.

Traditions of Crafting Storage

How clothing is stored depends on how the owner classifies it. As a heritage-maker of her own property, Kersti has stored the traditional clothes on the farm in the same manner as her parents, grandparents, and even earlier generations. Until 2016, she kept most of the family's traditional dress and textiles in the farm's *klädkammare*, located in a separate building. This building has been used as the farm wardrobe and community closet. When I conducted fieldwork at the farm in 1994 in preparation for the exhibition *Swedish Folk Art: All Tradition is Change*, the *klädkammare* was still the primary storage space for the farm's collection of about four hundred garments.

In my fieldnotes from the 1990s, I had noted how the ceiling rafters held dozens of aprons and skirts. Solid-colored aprons made from blue, red, and green *rask* (imported, fine wool fabric with a waxed surface) were kept on one rail, while homespun yellow aprons for mourning were separated from the others. About eight winter jackets made of white lambskin (with the fleece turned inward) were placed in between the aprons and skirts. Chests—filled to the brim with skirts and trousers—lined the floors along the thick timber walls. Large and small *svepaskar* (handcrafted wooden boxes) placed on handcrafted benches held ribbons, hats, buckles, and purses. Rag-rugs, handwoven from recycled clothes and bedsheets, covered the wide planks on the floor.

According to my fieldnotes from the 1990s, I was stunned by the assemblage of brilliant colors, textures, fabrics, and shapes in the room, lit only by subdued daylight seeping through the windows. I had also noted the faint smell of mildew, and described conversations with Kersti and Ulla, her daughter-in-law about problems with moisture in the storage spaces. There were other preservation concerns. A few linen shawls had been folded and were now creased yellow. Aprons made of *rask* had faded from being placed too close to the window. In the 1990s Kersti was still managing a museum and was contemplating moving her collection into a similarly climate-controlled space. This idea was abandoned, however, since the farm's *klädkammare* had been arranged by relatives over several generations.

Keeping this arrangement as it was at the farm, she thought then, was keeping her family's heritage intact. After all, she reasoned, most of the garments were in impeccable condition, having been stored in a cool and somewhat drafty space. Being without electricity or heating, the storage spaces offered a low-light environment and temperate climate for most of the year. The storing of dress for easy access, inspiration, and family viewing was, in itself, part of the crafting of heritage and female dress legacy at the farm.

Crafting Collections—Performing Curatorial Change

In the winter of 2017, Kersti had finished moving most of her wardrobe from the *klädkammare* to the new purpose-built storage unit. Instead of walking by apple trees across the front yard to the free-standing timber storage building used for centuries, we walked behind the house to the edge of the property and into the modern garage. Kersti said:

The storage in Källarstugan was much prettier, aesthetically pleasing, and the garments more accessible in many ways. *It really served as the village walk-in closet.* And back then our idea was to keep everything there, just like it had been kept for centuries. It certainly took some time to make the decision to move it all. But källarstugan was no longer good for the garments and especially not for linen garments, some of which had turned yellow. Källarstugan was a bit damp, so it wasn't a really healthy environment for textiles.

For Kersti, moving the garments from their original storage in the *klädkammare* was an act of ambivalence. In the end, it was the future condition of the garments that necessitated the move, a choice that many private collectors and museums must make. Once the decision was made to remove the garments and accessories from the timber structure where they have been accumulated for generations, where to put them then became a challenge. Since many farms were built with a separate storehouse for textiles and clothing, there was no room available to store them in the house. She selected the garage. Why the garage, I asked, and she responded with laughter: "The garage is the only

building on the farm that follows Swedish building regulations (svensk byggnorm) and is therefore also the only building on the farm that is somewhat fireproof.”



FIGURE 3. The transfer of the garments from the center of the farm to its vicinity—from the *klädkammare* to the garage—also marked a change of status. Stored in the garage the garments would become *sleepers*, objects that may be activated, seasonally or to jog memory for select viewing. Photo by the author.

In preparing to move the collection, Kersti had wished for a better overview of the possessions in her custody. Just as any museum would do before a major relocation, she made a thorough inventory before conducting the move. Handled and moved, the oldest and most fragile garments went from being part of a living wardrobe kept for generations in the farm’s timber store-house, to be objects in a carefully crafted heritage collection. Although the status of the items had changed, the move itself maintained the farm tradition of holding the dress collection in a designated building and at the family’s disposal.

To collect, sort, label, and preserve material collections is a way of creating order, making sense of the cultural worlds we live in, structuring individuals into groups, and linking generations. As a heritage-maker, Kersti engaged in these activities to craft a future for local dress before an anticipated audience of family, neighbors, students, and researchers. Combining her professional knowledge with

her own traditional dress practice, she crafts a collection that sits *in between* scientific classifications in museums and folk taxonomies that are based on cultural traditions related to generations of women, to family and to place. The traditional outfits are assembled in acid-free boxes, wrapped in acid-free tissue paper, labeled, and placed on shelves in purpose-built storage. On closer look, however, these neatly-stored garments are also curated according to individual wearers, family relationships, and time lived on the farm.

One day when having coffee in Kersti's kitchen between work sessions in the garage, she brought out a photograph that pictured a group of women seated together and dressed in Leksand garb.

My grandmother never wore anything but her Leksand dress. She worked as *Skansenkulla* for Hazelius in 1897, during the fair and she served coffee to visitors at Bredablick at Skansen. Anna Maja Nylén at Nordiska may have seen this image when she interviewed mother in the 1950s. When Gustaf Ankarcrona, like Hazelius, wished to preserve the Leksand dress, mother always worked to preserve the ways in which Leksand dress was made and used.

Predicated on nationalism and progress, Artur Hazelius' and Gustaf Ankarcrona's representations of women from Dalarna demonstrated the unequal gender relations involved in the performance of Swedish heritage for an international audience.

By contrast, the women at Knis engaged in heritage-making to influence their own future; their performances of Leksand dress in dialogue with past and contemporary male heritage-makers. Here in Kersti's kitchen, the stories about dress connects Kersti's grandmother with Hazelius, Kersti's mother's work with Ankarcrona, Knis with Skansen and Nordiska, Kersti's own work with her mother, as well as their connections to curators and professional efforts at museums.



FIGURE 4. Framed photo showing Kersti's grandmother performing local folk life at Skansen in 1897. Photo by the author.

Thus, the garments and photos of their wearers are used to elicit stories from the past, to string together several generations of wearers, and to bring forth historic life events. The material collection that the heritage-maker cares for and shapes anew is both a burden bestowed upon her by the family, which she has shouldered, and a responsibility for crafting a future community. Although the outfits are put to rest in the purpose-built storage, Kersti seems to have no intention of keeping them away from public view. She wants to promote knowledge about them. As a heritage-maker, Kersti is proud that the family traditions have influenced both local and national heritage, from her grandmother's performing life in Dalarna at Skansen in 1897 to Anna Maja Nylén's interest in her mother's skills in dressing others, as she did fieldwork on behalf of Nordiska Museet in the 1950s, to her mother's persistent work to pass on to future generations the complexity of the dress and the relationships and traditional knowledge that come with it.

Crafting vernacular collections as a sustainable act?

The current conditions for heritage in museums have itself been described as based on the values and objectives shaped by visitor numbers and revenue. Although heritage in the form of folkdräkt is loaded with values, some of these current values include "fuddy duddy", "mossig", and not very hip. These terms showcase that heritage, material and immaterial, are created in the present, connects to the past, but also sets a direction for the future. Much of this concerns commercialized heritage, which is not Kersti's primary interest. Kersti is well aware of the shrinking resources at the museum where she used to work, as well as the lack of curators of folkdräkt at the major museums. Crafting vernacular collections at the farm can therefore be understood as an act of sustainability outside of the official museum system. Yet, as a retired curator, making and learning about her collection as she sorts and moves it, provides the opportunity to shape the narrative according to family tradition and needs. Kersti wants to continue the heritage of recognition by performing before students and researchers what she owns and knows:

I want the collections to be used for research, and I want them to be known. One curator came all the way here from the US to study the collections as she prepared for an exhibition. And there have been several students from Sätergläntan, who have studied some of the older garments. Last year, I received five students that each created new garments based on garments in my collection. One worked with the bodice from 1846. She even managed to find red silk, and she sewed the item exactly as it had been handsewn in 1846.

As a heritage-maker, Kersti's wish for the collection to be used is no different from many museums' wishes for their collections to be relevant in the present and used to produce new knowledge. Unlike museums with paid professional staff, the Kersti's engagement is all volunteer work. When she opens her home and performs her collections for researchers, she extends a gift of access and time, but she also anticipates a return gift in the form of analysis and promoted knowledge about her collection. Perhaps even more importantly, though less measurable, she values the ability to ponder on the collection with others (such as myself). These acts of crafting, performed for one another, render new insights for both parties, mutual recognition and extend a sense of community that is propelled by crafting and traditional knowledge, built on shared practice and experience.



FIGURE 5. In the fall of 2020, the collections have eventually transformed the garage into a makeshift research center. The space where the car used to sit has been replaced by tables covered with fabric, prepared for the study of garments as well as archival material. Marie Ekstedt Bjersing, teacher and coordinator at Sätergläntan brings her students to Knis on a regular basis. Photo: Johanna Gullback. By permission of Gullback, Ekstedt Bjersing and students.

At the outset of her moving the collection from the *klädskammare* to the garage, her goal was to preserve the collection for the future. This is still a major goal, but when we speak again in 2019 and 2020, she emphasizes the social aspects and the teaching and learning opportunities that the move has rendered. As a heritage-maker, Kersti welcomes many students from the nearby folk high school, *Sätergläntan*. Whereas the school teaches the technical skills necessary for making textiles and items of dress, Kersti provides the local and cultural context. Just like the heritage-maker's forebears, when they passed the knowledge on to her, she has the privilege of selecting what knowledge to pass on and to whom. Students from *Sätergläntan* take that shared knowledge, study the garments from the past, and then apply what they have learned in their current work, thus providing the tradition of gradual change required for sustainable heritage-making.

Heritage in action: towards new models for crafting heritage, new ways of learning

When I link the preposition *between* to the concept of heritage-making, to performance and to crafting, a new possibility of understanding collections emerge. When Kersti performs her collection before me as she sorts garments in her house and crafts her most precious garments into a collection housed in acid-free boxes, stored in the back of the garage, these performances transform them from objects to heritage items. In Kersti's hands the purse dated 1840 is charged with memories and stories. The act of sorting, handling, and showing her items before a select audience of researchers connects her own body with her mother's and grandmother's and great-grandmother's. It connects her body with previous generations of women who have woven the fabric and made the garments. It links her life as a heritage-worker to women who moved to Stockholm to perform their rural origin before an audience at Artur Hazelius' open-air museum Skansen in the 1890s, and ancestors who have worked for salary, run small businesses and commuted—all to keep the farm.

Whilst heritage studies are often characterized by critical questions about how the past is created through museums' collections, the study of crafting within folkloristics is often focused on vernacular acts. As a heritage-maker on the farm, Kersti Jobs-Björklöf employed her training as a museum curator as well as her training in leadership and academic vision to preserve the collection, but she did not follow the standardized museum taxonomies and practices. On the contrary, much of her life's work has been devoted to understanding, appreciating and sharing the often undervalued artform of crafting. This is true even when it comes to collections. Beyond her commitment to representing dimensions of the craft and folk art of Leksand and Dalarna, she actively created spaces in which heritage

work could occur by gathering artists from near and far, and showcasing their expertise. As a result, heritage was crafted in the ways that ethnographic objects are, in the words of the museum scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “made, not found” (1998, p. 305). Heritage-making in this sense allows the family to play a central and meaningful role in the maintenance of their own traditions in partnership with knowledge drawn from institutions such as museums. The real a sense of heritage takes place in action, when emotions and sense of history are engaged. This is not about the possession of things but the act of passing along traditional knowledge that comes with the object and how it was made.

Based on the study of heritage-maker Kersti Jobs-Björklöf crafting her collections I would like to make the following suggestion: Crafting heritage is both a cultural process and a performative practice that sets standards for how cultural memory and traditions are negotiated, produced, and reproduced, here between family traditions and professional curatorial practice. In this study I have paid particular attention to craft in action—the in-situ process through which heritage is being made. Central to this action are the performative moments (Schechner & Brady 2006) because they have revealed the heritage-maker's interpretations of the past and motivations when crafting her collection for future use. Pairing the performative moments and individual's action, I have approached one heritage-maker's crafting of collections as grounded in the life of the body, the physicality of material and material objects—their feel, their weight, their resistance, their fragility, and their durability (Dissanayke 1994, Glassie 1999) as well as the immaterial heritage of rituals, traditions and clothing practices these are involved in.

This study has shown that a deeper understanding of heritage making emerges between vernacular and institutional culture and how traditional knowledge embedded in these objects may be elicited, but is also indicates *how* objects are brought together, spoken about, and crafted into collections. Building on the fact that the craftsman learns about history through crafting (Almevik 2017, Sennett 2008), I suggest that crafting heritage and traditional knowledge for the sustainable future occurs *between* vernacular and institutional practice, connecting the two. It is a result of the dynamic interchange *between* the heritage-maker, family and her networks; professional and scholarly, when they exchange knowledge. Such situations of heritage-in-action, of sharing and learning in vernacular settings, are not the results of individual agency. This hybrid-crafting of heritage emerges from complex networks of family and professional relations cultivated over time and works to speak to and comment upon professional curatorial practices in museums.

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