



Charlotte Ann Jirousek

August 20, 1938 – February 12, 2014

Charlotte Ann Jirousek, Associate Professor and Curator in the Department of Fiber Science & Apparel Design in the College of Human Ecology, died suddenly and tragically at the age of 75. Jirousek, who was born in Faribault, Minnesota, earned a B.A. in sociology from Hamline University (1960). She served in the Peace Corps in Turkey, and her lifelong passionate love of that country inspired much of her research and writing. She entered the University of Minnesota as a mature student and completed an M.A. in applied design (1982) and a Ph.D. in design, housing and apparel (1988) after working as a social worker, fiber artist, and becoming a leading member of the Minneapolis weaving and crafts community, as well as raising two daughters. She was an assistant professor and curator at the University of Alabama (1988-92) before joining the Cornell faculty in 1992. Her academic focus was the history of dress and textile technologies; the influence of Islamic dress and textiles on the evolution of European fashion; and the history of Ottoman textiles and trade. She was also the curator of the Cornell Costume and Textile Collection, which has more than 9,000 items of apparel dating back to the 18th century, as well as a substantial collection of ethnographic textiles and costume. She curated some 30 exhibitions over the years, ranging from “Textiles of the Andes and Color!” to “Street Fashion and Youth Culture.” As curator of the Cornell Costume and Textile Collection, her expertise in textiles and art history, and her dedication to making the collection easily available to faculty and students, revealed the contents archived there as a treasure appreciated by students, by scholars from around the world, and by the public.

Charlotte was hired to enhance the department curriculum in visual literacy in dress and fashion. She taught courses in design foundations and the cultural and the historical aspects of textile and apparel design. She developed an open-access, comprehensive, interactive textbook to support her course, Art, Design and Visual Thinking, which introduced basic design concepts and the idea of visual language.

She defined visual literacy for apparel designers as including “knowledge of dress and textiles from all times and places, but also including a basic understanding of how other design media and the fine arts contribute to the creative innovation of fashion designers.” Her Ph.D. research established that “even the most visually sensitive students needed—and wanted—depth and breadth in their knowledge of visual culture.”

Charlotte’s graduate course, *Aesthetics and Meaning in World Dress*, was a culmination of her approach to teaching. She adopted an interdisciplinary approach in this course which she explained as examining the “aesthetic and social/psychological relationships between body and clothing in the context of various cultures, including both the Euro-American context of fashion, and the dress/fashion of the rest of the world.” Students worked with garments in the costume collection and the course culminated in a gallery exhibition consisting of a collection of mini-exhibits that, with two or three artifacts each, demonstrated concepts chosen and researched by the students, all organized around a central theme

Charlotte had a profound effect on students, mentoring many of them individually. As one former student stated, “Charlotte Jirousek changed my life, several times over, and always in positive ways. By believing in me, by criticizing me, by supporting me, by encouraging me, and most of all, by teaching me: how to think, how to act, how to make, how to write, how to be. I am a better person thanks to her, and I am sure there are hundreds more who would say the same.”

Charlotte made many other contributions to education. She published Cornell’s first electronic book which she also had hoped to publish as a textbook. She was the first curator of a textiles and apparel collection to make a catalogue of all items available online. She organized and started the New York City study trip for FSAD students; she was a co-coordinator and originator of the India field trip for FSAD students; and shortly before her death she was part of a Cornell student/faculty service learning field trip to Ecuador to support income-generation projects among indigenous populations. She served as the Director of Graduate Studies and most recently as Director of Undergraduate Studies. In this latter role, as a member of the college Educational Policy Committee, she was a leader in significant curriculum changes in the college.

Her research centered on the historic interaction of East and West as expressed in textiles and dress, and on the disappearing textile traditions of Turkey due to industrialization. Charlotte defined her research as the study of the cultural context of dress and textiles. She wrote many articles and book chapters, but the culmination of her research was the book she had just finished in which she “re- examines the history of dress and fashion in the broader frame of reference of western relationships with the rest of the world, particularly the Mediterranean world, from the Crusades through the twentieth century.” Her intent was “to provide a coherent image of the ongoing relationship between West and Near East in the visual culture of dress, focusing

primarily on the Ottoman era.” Her work was instrumental in recognizing the profound and largely unacknowledged interactions between the Ottoman Empire and western dress. Most recently, Charlotte had started a five-year term as editor of the highly regarded journal DRESS, the Journal of the Costume Society of America.

Professor Charlotte Jirousek was an internationally admired scholar and curator. She was a person who held her beliefs strongly and expressed them with clarity and conviction, but who also considered opposing points of view carefully, and would often return to a conversation with a new perspective acknowledging areas of intersection with those opposing points of view. Charlotte had a special relationship with students, bringing the sense of discovery and excitement of her research travels into the classroom, inspiring them, supporting their ideas, helping them enhance their designs with a depth of understanding, and assisting their development as professionals. She modelled strength, honesty and approachability for all of us. She cared deeply about design education, and the Department of Fiber Science & Apparel Design. She is greatly missed by many.

Ann Lemley, Chair; Susan Ashdown; Charlotte Coffman