



CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

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Mr. John D. Watts, esq.
39 Mares Hill Road
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Dear John:

It was a pleasure meeting you this past weekend at the home of Elizabeth Tashjian. As I mentioned to you in our conversation, I think it would be of tremendous historical and cultural significance to preserve the papers, collections, and art that currently comprise the Nut Museum in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

As I'm sure you are aware, the Nut Museum is a nationally recognized site that has been written about in numerous publications devoted to "odd" museums across the United States (see attached clippings). In my courses on Museum Studies at Connecticut College, I have always included a segment on the Nut Museum in order to encourage students to think broadly about the nature of "the museum," the history of collecting and exhibiting, and the relationship between science and art. In many ways, the Nut Museum stands as a contemporary example of the fifteenth-century noble tradition of the so-called "cabinet of curiosities." Elizabeth Tashjian, and her eclectic museum, were indeed local treasures that will be sorely missed.

I would propose to preserve Elizabeth Tashjian's records (letters, brochures, videotapes of her television appearances, and all documents relating to the museum), her collections (nuts, artifacts fashioned from nuts, and nutcrackers), and her original artwork (paintings, embroidered rugs and textiles, masks, and sculptures), as well as her ornamental robe displayed in a museum case in the dining room, and her bicycle (which was part of her eccentric identity as she traveled through town). I have already spoken to Jeffrey Anderson, Director of the Florence Griswold Museum and Old Lyme Historical Society. He was extremely enthusiastic that Connecticut College might have an opportunity to preserve the material and intellectual contents of the Nut Museum, as an archive and tribute to one of the most fascinating aspects of recent, local town history.

In the short term, I would propose that my students and I catalogue and archive the entire contents of the Nut Museum, and then recreate the exhibits of the Nut Museum at

Connecticut College or a local affiliated museum. To this end, I would like to photograph and videotape as soon as possible the dining room and ballroom in Elizabeth's home in order to preserve an accurate visual record of the museum's displays and contents.

The exhibit that I propose to curate with my students would present the history of the Nut Museum as told through Elizabeth's collections and art, and would also highlight her nationally recognized fame (illustrated by a video presentation of her appearances on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, *Late Night with David Letterman*, etc). I plan to seek outside funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (as well as other relevant funding sources) to help pay for the publication of a catalogue to the exhibition. The catalogue would include photographs of Elizabeth Tashjian, her collections and art, interviews with local residents and friends who knew Elizabeth and her museum, as well as essays by nationally recognized scholars and authors (such as art historian Karal Ann Marling of the University of Minnesota, David Wilson of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, and travel writers Jane and Michael Stern). I would also explore the possibility of traveling the exhibition to such national venues as the Museum of American Folk in New York City, the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, and the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles. The exhibit would be a tribute to Elizabeth's life and to the cultural history of this unique institution that she created. Obviously, I have not yet contacted the aforementioned catalogue-contributors or museums but simply want to give you a sense of my goals and vision for the preservation of the Nut Museum, and the intellectual, educational, and aesthetic benefits that would accrue from the conservation and display of its contents.

In the long term, our goal is to preserve Elizabeth's records, papers, collections, and art at Connecticut College. So much local history gets lost through oversight and inattention to the cultural and historic importance of collections, exhibits, and institutions. For the past several years now, for example, I have been trying to find the history of a late nineteenth-century museum in Mystic, Connecticut which was devoted to natural and manmade curiosities collected by local sea captains. The building, collections and all its records have vanished; and there is virtually no material trace of this once vital and important site. Here, with the Nut Museum, we have an opportunity to preserve in its totality an important cultural and aesthetic legacy, and I am delighted that you and the Probate Court are willing to consider this proposal with such an open mind and generous spirit.

I enclose a copy of my professional resume so that you may familiarize yourself with my credentials. Please let me know if you would like to discuss further any aspect of this proposal. I very much look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely yours,

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of Art History and Architectural Studies
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