

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**New silk exhibition weaves together Bethlehem Moravians’
and Lehigh Valley’s inspiring fabric-making legacy**

BETHLEHEM, MAY 9, 2023 – Historic Bethlehem Museums & Sites is excited to announce the opening of its newest exhibition, *Unspun: Stories of Silk*. This exhibition, which opens to the public on June 1, is made possible, in part, through generous support from The Helen & R. K. Laros Foundation — the presenting sponsor of the exhibition.

Unspun: Stories of Silk tells the fascinating story of silk in the Lehigh Valley from its beginnings with attic cocooneries in Moravian Bethlehem to becoming a world leader in the silk fashion industry.

This story, told through a collection of special objects, beautiful garments, and fascinating, individual narratives from both the past and today, is so broad that it needs to be told across three museums — plus a self-guided walking tour between them and a virtual companion with additional stories, resources, and collections.

The exhibition opens June 1, 2023 and runs through January 28, 2024. It is presented at the Moravian Museum of Bethlehem, the Kemerer Museum of Decorative Arts, and the National Museum of Industrial History (NMIH).

A combo pass that includes access to all three exhibition sites is \$30 for adults and \$22 for children (7-18). Children (6 and under) are free. HBMS members and NMIH members get into all sites free for the duration of the exhibition. Tickets are on sale now at historicbethlehem.org.

An opening night reception at Kemerer Museum of Decorative Arts is also planned for 6 p.m. June 1. A special preview for HBMS members begins at 5:30 p.m. Reception tickets are free to HBMS members and \$15 for non-members. The event will include admission to the Moravian Museum which is just a short walk away.

“Unspun: Stories of Silk explores the rich history of silk in the Lehigh Valley, and the fantastic collections and resources available here that tell the story of how a fabric impacted the community and employed so many women here,” explained Lindsey Jancay, Director of Collections & Engagement at HBMS.

“Bethlehem is the perfect place to tell the story of silk in America,” Jancay added. “What began as an early experiment with the Moravians building one of the earliest communal cocooneries in Pennsylvania, exploded into an industry that placed the Lehigh Valley in the center of a global silk market. This is a transformation best told through objects and the people involved. If you or your family played a part in the silk industry, please contact us to add your story to the whole.”

From glamorous silk jumpsuits to life-saving parachutes, silk torahs, and exquisite silk needlework, the exhibition reveals the transformative power of this sensuous, strong, and resilient textile. Initially a product only the rich could afford, in a few hundred years, silk became a fabric of day-to-day life in America – and surprisingly, still is today.

We are extremely honored to be a part of Historic Bethlehem's exhibit *Unspun: Stories of Silk*,” said R. Keller Laros III, Chair of the Board of Trustees of The Helen & R.K. Laros Foundation.

“The Helen & R.K Laros Foundation is proud to be a financial supporter of the exhibit and to have been a partner in the research for the comprehensive story of our shared silk heritage. My grandparents, Helen & R.K. would be deeply gratified to have the stories that have long been woven into our community, preserved here in perpetuity,” he added.

Guests will begin their journey at the Moravian Museum of Bethlehem (66 W. Church St.) where they'll find a replica of a 1750s cocoonery and learn about the early Moravians' experiments with silk in the attic of the Brethren's House.

A display of hands-on tasks, including feeding silkworms, collecting cocoons, and spinning thread will bring the daily activities of sericulture (the production of silk and the rearing of silkworms for this purpose), to life.

Visitors will follow the legendary stories of Moravian women and silk — including the Single Sisters' “secret gifts” to notable historical figures and will be able to try their hands at silk embroidery — as it was taught at the Moravian Ladies' Seminary.

Guests will likely be shocked to learn about the nefarious “Mulberry Tree Scam,” a bubble and bust cycle in 1830s that ended silk cultivation for the Early Moravians but not the story of silk in The Valley. By the 1920s, Bethlehem had become one of the world's leading producers of silk — thanks, in part, to the Laros Silk Mills, and the work of Helen and R.K. Laros — who continued the silk legacy in Bethlehem.

“We are so excited to be able to share this exhibition with the Lehigh Valley community and demonstrate the impact the Laros Silk Mills had on setting the standards for silk production internationally while employing thousands of employees over four decades.” said LoriAnn Wukitsch, President & CEO of Historic Bethlehem Museums & Sites.

“Silk making has a long and storied Moravian and Lehigh Valley legacy. This exhibition will showcase the unique craftsmanship and skill that went into producing so many amazing creations,” Wukitsch added.

The journey continues at the Kemerer Museum of Decorative Arts (427 N. New Street) where visitors will find not only beautiful dresses, undergarments, and housewares, but also displays that bring to life the many remarkable uses of silk — ways that are both to be expected and others that are wildly not so.

Unspun: Stories of Silk at the Kemerer will feature pieces from their own collection that have not been displayed in over a decade as well as pieces on loan from various collections across the Valley and the country. Collaborators range from the National Museum of Industrial History, the Industrial Archives and Library, the Moravian Archives, Moravian University, to the Weitzman Museum of National American Jewish History.

Visitors are guaranteed to see beautiful objects that they have never seen before, including garments from the Annie Kemerer and the Laros Collections, kimonos, kurtas, fans, and even a wedding dress made from a silk parachute.

The show will also include an art installation, featuring silk scarves created by Lehigh Valley-based artist Barbara Schulman and students from Kutztown University's textile and weaving club. Guests can take home their own piece of this important community legacy by purchasing one of these custom scarves. Schulman and students will also lead a community weaving project where attendees can help to collectively create a beautiful piece of art using recycled silk and ribbons.

The exhibition concludes at the National Museum of Industrial History (NMIH) on Bethlehem's south side. There, visitors will learn the stories of the women who worked in the factories that mass produced the amazing products of the silk industry and their place in the push for workers' rights. Expect to also see the large looms and machinery used in silk production while exploring this fascinating era of manufacturing in the Lehigh Valley. This rich period stretched from the 1880s until the 1950s, when mills closed or switched to synthetic fabrics.

“The National Museum of Industrial History is proud to participate in this collaborative effort to amplify the stories of the people, machines, ideas, and natural resources behind an industry with such significance both locally and globally,” said Kara Mohsinger, President & CEO of NMIH.

UNSPUN: STORIES OF SILK

When: June 1 through January 28, 2024

Where: Three Bethlehem locations including the Kemerer Museum of Decorative Arts (427 N. New Street); Moravian Museum (66 W. Church Street); National Museum of Industrial History

(602 E. 2nd Street)

How much: Joint tickets to all three exhibition sites are free to all HBMS and NMIH members and children (6 and under); \$30 for adults and \$22 for children (7-18). Cost includes admission to all exhibition sites.

Tickets and info: historicbethlehem.org 610-882-0450

CAPTIONS:

- 1.) Unspun: Stories of Silk Presented by Historic Bethlehem Museums & Sites opens June 1
- 2.) Detail from Laros advertisement, featuring artwork of John Lagotta.
- 3.) World War II parachute dress, c. 1943. On loan from Meghan Miller
- 4.) Illustration of Silk Worm and Moths: NY Public Library fair use

Historic Bethlehem Museums & Sites (HBMS) is a not-for-profit institution that brings to life three centuries of American history. HBMS tells the story of a town of great influence. It is home to some of our nation's early settlers, the first pumped municipal water system in the American colonies, and one of the world's greatest industrial companies. Bethlehem is located in eastern Pennsylvania, an hour's drive north from Philadelphia and 2 hours west of New York City. Historic Bethlehem Museums & Sites is an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution and part of a National Historic Landmark District — a designated site on the US World Heritage Tentative List. HBMS is proud to be a part of the effort to bring World Heritage Site status to Historic Moravian Church Settlements—Bethlehem. HBMS is part of the multi-country nomination by the United States to the UNESCO World Heritage List of Historic Moravian Bethlehem, Gracehill in Northern Ireland/UK and Herrnhut in Germany.