

# Textiles Revealed Object-based Research

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*Textiles Revealed: Object lessons in historic textile and costume research* explores many aspects of textile heritage from different perspectives. The contributors come from very different academic traditions and professions, ranging from analytical chemistry to textile and costume history and conservation, but the common thread, to use an appropriate textile metaphor, is the centrality of object-based research as a means of developing knowledge and understanding. This approach focuses on the study of actual surviving artefacts as a means of understanding their cultural significance as well as their physical nature and function. Some authors demonstrate how informed and responsive object-based research, which may be located in an historical or conceptual framework or combined with documentary or scientific evidence, can illuminate understanding of textiles and costume. Others take a wider perspective, showing how an enhanced understanding of textiles can aid decision-making by conservators and curators so that textiles are not only interpreted but also preserved appropriately for future generations to study and enjoy.

Textiles are a vital part of any country's heritage – a heritage vividly evident in historic houses, domestic settings and churches as much as in museum and art collections. These holdings illustrate the importance of textiles such as tapestries and carpets in the fine and decorative arts. Textiles also bear witness to the energy of the technological developments that led to the Industrial Revolution, driven initially by innovation in textile manufacturing. Clothing, whether ceremonial, religious, high fashion or everyday, is a crucial part of human social life, transmuting our basic need for protection and warmth into complex social meanings. Domestic textile crafts, such as quilting and patchwork, are both functional and decorative. This breadth – individual art object, industrial product, mass-produced or home-made clothing and domestic creation – means that textiles have resonance for many people in different contexts. Exhibitions featuring textiles and costume have enormous appeal, often drawing large crowds. Paradoxically, textiles have tended to be overlooked as aesthetic objects and have low status in the hierarchy of the fine and decorative arts with a correspondingly low financial value. Contemporary perceived links between textiles and the personal, the domestic and the feminine prevent them entering the classical tradition of 'great art', often defined by a male hierarchy. Textiles are frequently anonymous, either hand-made or mass-

produced artefacts, not often directly linked to an identifiable artist or maker. This does not enhance their status in societies that define the identifiable and the unique as the benchmarks for valuing objects in either cultural or financial terms. However, textiles have played a crucial role in Western social, aesthetic and industrial history; they link many areas of cultural activity and research including art and design history, religious, feminist, industrial and archaeological studies.

### Material memories

The mother gives her child 'things' to play with, handle and name; these things are the contents of his environment and the very stuff of his or her intelligence.

(Shakespeare 1999: 27)

Bruce Chatwin, in his unpublished book on nomads, summarises succinctly the significance of objects among peoples who carry their physical goods with them as they travel. These objects create a world and, with this, a cluster of concepts and language. Textiles may hold personal significance for all of us although we may be more or less aware of this until jolted into this realisation by the sudden sight of an inanimate 'thing' – a discarded remnant of school uniform, a favourite outgrown tee-shirt, a hat worn to a funeral – that vividly revives memories, sometimes pleasurable, sometimes painful, of schooldays, family or friends or of significant social and personal occasions. Material culture studies explore the multi-layered meanings of objects and the way they evoke, contain and reflect human concerns or 'material memories' (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1989). Kopytoff, in his work on the 'cultural biography' of objects, has explored the contextual meaning of objects: 'Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure' (Kopytoff 1986: 67). In other words, artefacts can be viewed as more than 'passive' subjects holding aesthetic or financial value but as active carriers of emerging knowledge about a culture as well as holding value for individuals. This is a highly significant approach to illuminating our cultural activities in both collecting and conserving textiles. The intense involvement required to 'select' an artefact for a collection is itself indicative of complex cultural decision-making: why is this particular textile or costume being selected for preservation? The role of conservation as a physical act of preservation which makes explicit our implicit interpretative decisions has been discussed by Eastop (1998). Removing previous repairs to a tapestry, 'taking back' an eighteenth-century dress to remove evidence of its use as nineteenth-century fancy dress or adding back trimmings to a bed – all these physical actions depend on the decision to identify one phase of the object's life as the most significant for interpretation and presentation. In effect, one stage of the cultural life or 'biography' of a textile is preferred over others. This can, either consciously or unconsciously, result

in the permanent or temporary suppression of other aspects of its meaning: the 'revealed textile' is necessarily a product of its culture. As Orlofsky and Trupin have noted 'There is no such thing as a culturally neutral treatment' (Orlofsky and Trupin 1993: 109).

### Meaning and value

Textiles have the potential 'to absorb' evidence of use by retaining patterns of wear, food residues, soiling from work and bodily fluids, human and animal hairs, as well as insect parasites. (Brooks *et al.* 1996: 16)

Textiles are so closely linked to human experience that this in itself can lead to them being undervalued as familiar and domestic. Soil, damage, repairs and alterations may all be valuable evidence, concealing or revealing information about the history of a textile. The closeness of costume to the human body leads to a close link with an individual. This can enhance value when the textile is linked to a significant historical figure: garments belonging to Nelson, an English naval hero and Tipu, the defeated Sultan of Mysore, India, have significant emotional resonance for different cultures and political structures. However, the clothing of an anonymous individual can be devalued precisely because of its personal links with the body and, at least in some cultures, its associated links with soiling and embarrassment. 'Rubbish theory' (Thompson 1979) has a lot to offer the textile specialist here. In this stimulating approach to the cultural significance of objects, Thompson argues that objects may be considered as falling into two different categories – 'durable' and 'transient'. Objects in the durable category are perceived as having and retaining value while transient objects lose value over time and are not considered sufficiently important to be retained. Tracing the movement of objects between these two intellectual categories enables changes in the meaning and value of objects to be explored. It is perhaps not accidental that one of Thompson's key examples is a textile artefact – the Jacquard loom silk pictures woven by the Coventry manufacturer Thomas Stevens in the late nineteenth century. However, it is also significant that these miniature woven pictures, celebrating a range of mythic figures such as the English highwayman Dick Turpin or well-known tourist locations, are identified with one known named maker, albeit through an industrial process. They are also pictorial and thus aesthetic judgements made about them relate to an accepted value system developed for looking at images on canvas or paper. Thompson (1979: 13–33) analyses their shifting value. From a relatively cheap transient (industrially mass-produced) souvenir, Stevenographs were considered to be valueless or 'rubbish' after their initial period of popularity until revaluation took place. Partly as a result of research and exhibition, they have become highly desirable and expensive collectibles – 'durable' in Thompson's terms. An artefact needs to be seen as a 'durable' to jus-

tify the expense and time taking it into a collection and then lavishing either preventive or interventive conservation upon it. However, Thompson also argues that 'the rubbish to durable transition is an all-or-nothing transfer' (Thompson 1979: 25). To conservators, familiar with the depressing effects of degradation on textiles, this seems a startling notion but Thompson's concept of durability is intellectual whereas conservators initially deal with physical reality. We are concerned with ensuring that conceptual durability is matched by physical durability. Conservators have all seen objects 'rejected' because they have degraded; they are removed from display or placed in less environmentally stable storage because they have been damaged by human touch, pests or light. Much of a conservator's work is actually engaged on the edge of this transition between rubbish and durable: we are dedicated to physically enabling chosen textiles to remain in the intellectual durable category rather than allowing them to slip back into 'rubbish'. This responsibility for maintaining artefacts in a particular stage of their material life means that it is vital for conservators to be aware of the motivations and justifications for their actions.

### Object-based research

It is the evidence of the practice of costume that museums hold, and which is needed to give substance to evidence gathered from other sources.

(Buck 1998: 5)

Close study of the object provides information on its appearance, texture, smell, materials and construction techniques as well as evidence of use and wear. Information from such visual physical study can be extended through analytical techniques. Buck recognised the importance of research direct from the object – the object is the basis for new knowledge and understanding and a means of informing and illuminating other historical sources. Curators and conservators can work together to tease out the literal, metaphorical and material associations of such contextualised artefacts. Curatorial expertise identifies stylistic trends and proposes dates for undated garments and objects. The conservation perspective, based on detailed examination and identification and, in co-operation with analytical specialists, adds to this body of knowledge through the study of fibres, dyes, construction methods and patterns of use and wear. Object-based research derived from analysis of physical evidence within the textile itself may change ideas about materials and construction and hence about date, origins and manufacture. Combining evidence from object-based research with archival and contextual research using design and art history methodologies will enhance both interpretation and conservation approaches and facilitate public understanding and enjoyment while improving standards of scholarship. Again Charwin neatly encapsulates the value of such evidence when describing the significance of

textiles in nomadic culture: 'A much darned and patched piece of blue cloth is often far more expensive to buy than a new piece, because patchwork carries the imprint of human association' (Shakespeare 1999: 107). Curators and conservators are responsible not only for identifying such 'hidden history' but also for making conscious and appropriate decisions about how such physical evidence should be preserved and presented.

### Karen Finch's contribution to textile conservation

Textile conservation is a relatively new field, normally tracing its roots back to the 1964 Delft Conference. It is a distinct but unusually interdisciplinary activity that engages equally with the intellectual and the physical. As her own essay in this volume demonstrates, Karen Finch has always stressed the importance of effective identification and understanding of the components of textile artefacts and their condition as vital in developing appropriate conservation treatments.

Since its establishment, the Textile Conservation Centre has done much to establish the profile of textile conservation in the UK (Eaton *et al.* 1995: 37). Karen Finch's insistence on the preservation of textiles as culturally significant objects permeated her approach to conservation, turning the simple act of looking at a textile into a voyage of discovery and always insisting on making links with other disciplines. In this way, she created a tradition that enabled conservation to develop on both a conceptual and practical foundation, taking the authenticated object as a basis for the development of knowledge, understanding and enjoyment.

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