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From fabric to thread

FROM FABRIC TO MATERIAL. That might be the road leading to the origin of my fascination with this collection. It is well known that, in the myths surrounding the origins of a multitude of cultures, the «thread of life» is the main metaphor depicting the start end end. The Homeric tradition refers to the weaving of the Moirai (Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos), a myth extended throughout Indo-European territory and even among Baltic countries where the Norns (the sisters Urd, Verdandi and Skuld) take on the roles of the «weavers of destiny». But this archetype reaches practically all the territories and cultures of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres and dates back to the earliest roots of civilization. These life-governing figures have turned women into a goddess who spins, weaves, sews or embroiders an uncertain destiny that hangs, quite literally, from a thread.

Threads lie at the roots of legendary tales. Capable of stretching in an endless weft that includes extra-material values and even metamorphoses in the purest sense to become a tale, as in the fable of Athena and Arachne (Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*). That cultural legacy reflected in clothing, tapestries and embroidered artwork has enchanted Daniel H. Fruman and Josiane Cougard-Fruman since the early 70s. Their passion for collecting dates back to the Chatou antiques fair in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, very close to Paris, where they acquired a cape that, at the time, they thought was embroidered. Since then, they have collected, studied, restored and preserved hundreds of pieces that have gradually been intertwined on arrival in their home in the immense tapestry of their collection.

To share that collection, they bequeathed a considerable part to the French State in 2011, through the patronage of the Zaleski Foundation, and it is now on display for the general public and researchers in the museum housed in the cloister of the cathedral in Puy-en-Velay, where today is exhibited a selection of works to public and researchers. To put it another way, they unwove on one side to continue weaving on the other, as they have not stopped acquiring

new items. This is precisely one of the aspects that has brought them the greatest satisfaction: studying and preserving their pieces in order to make them better known, as we can see in the publication *Le Trésor Brodé de la Cathédrale du Puy-en-Velay* (2011).

Many of these textile pieces form part of the liturgical garments worn at religious ceremonies. They are used to embellish and communicate certain symbolic aspects through colour (white, red, purple, black, green or sky blue refer to Christ's Passion, purity, the celestial home, etc.), imagery and the materials used: threads of silk, gold and silver, metal or pearls to decorate chasubles, dalmatics, altar-fronts (*antependia*), tunicles, neckbands, stolae, copes, surplices, maniples, gloves and *caligae*. But they have also created «other» collections such as one of American patchworks collected during their time in Washington D.C. and the fruit of their parallel interest in op art and the art of historical avant-garde movements.

Market prices for this kind of material vary as much as the knowledge and consideration people have regarding it. Trading has sometimes mutilated the pieces to increase yield but, at the same time, it has preserved and increased its value within a circuit in which there is a premium on both economic competitiveness and quality. Thus, in their exceptional collection, we can find textiles with extremely varied provenance and format. For this reason, they have wanted to present to us on this occasion the best items by Spanish workshops from the 15th to the 18th centuries.

A magnificent example of embroidery is the *Chasuble with a background of gold and silver and embroidery of flowers* decorated with frills, palmettes, roses and other flowers reminiscent in their quality of a courtly workshop from the beginning of the 18th century. The underlying work is made in silver thread with flat stitch sprinkled with sequins, on which decorations stand out in gold thread and lamé enclosing frames with flowers in polychrome silks in shading stitch and French knot. Another item of identical characteristics to be found in Seville cathedral led them to its Spanish origin. Something similar occurred with the identification of the decorative borders on a chasuble from the end of the 15th century that had belonged to the collection of José Moragas Pomar (1873-1945) on show in Barcelona's Sala Parés gallery in 1959-1960, under number 30 in the embroidery section. In this work, the defining moment was the comparison of the architecture of the canopy over the figure of the saint with the borders of the chasuble of the Constable at the Monastery in Guadalupe. On other occa-

sions, however, it is a study of the iconographic sources and not the technical, stylistic or formal analogies that dictates the provenance of the anonymous pieces.

This is what happened with the *Resurrection Hood*, one of the masterpieces in the collection. They acquired it at an auction in the Hôtel Drouot in 1985 without any clear attribution or provenance. Some time later, during a trip to Venice that took them on a visit to the Scuola di San Rocco, they were able to confirm that the scene corresponded to Tintoretto's work on the same subject and this led to the engraving by Sadeler that must have been used as the model for the composition.

Shortly afterwards, in 1992, during a tour of Spain that brought them to Plasencia, they discovered a piece with identical characteristics in the city's museum that completed the identification: it is the hood of one of the 14 pontifical copes from the Chapel of the Royal Palace in Madrid, created between 1743 and 1756 by Antonio Gómez de los Ríos, the embroiderer to King Ferdinand VI. The embroidery, done almost entirely in shading stitch with polychrome silks, is decorated with loops, pipes and Baroque pearls, while the external border is woven in gold thread with padded or unpadded flat stitch. It is the only part of the set that is not in Spain, following its theft in the 1920s by an employee of the palace sacristy known by the soubriquet of «el Merluza» who sold them at Madrid's flea market, the Rastro.

Another significant work in the collection is the neckband for a 16th century dalmatic decorated with the emblem of the Dominican order (in black and white triangles with a cross in fleur de lys) and plant-based scrolls on red velvet. The embroidery is flat-stitched gold thread and polychrome silks with highlights in loops, and is identical to that of another neckband in the collections of Madrid's National Decorative Arts Museum.

Since their original ignorance of the technique used in the cloak purchased in Chatou to the present, the Frumans have travelled halfway around the world to know better the collections in museums, churches, antique stores and auction houses, and to learn by seeing, reading and talking with specialists. A patient and erudite odyssey of almost four decades, as there are not so many conservation centres specializing in this kind of work. In Spain, for instance, there are major collections at the Lázaro Galdiano Museum, the National Decorative Arts Museum, the National Archaeological Museum or the Ethnographic and Textile Museum in Plasencia.

For those who are interested in this materia it is necessary to resort to the habitual home of such items in the treasuries and sacristies of churches, convents, palaces and cathedrals. On the other hand, they already have to learn that its exhibition entails presenting them in sealed showcases to control the environmental conditions and prevent access by dust or mites. So rather than being a collector, one has to consider ... Collecting without exhibiting? This is obviously a trick question, and untrue. Conservation and display can go hand in hand provided that the condition of the exhibits is monitored but this adds another level of inconvenience to items that are no longer worn the way they used to be.

Items such as embroidered images have remained in the realm of the collectors of classical art and paintings as a result of an aesthetic appeal close to pictorial schemes, but they rarely attain any great prominence in the art market. However, there are other types that speak for themselves of their ties to pictorial models.

Two cuffs on a dalmatic from the middle of the 16th century in the Fruman collection. Surrounded by a complex decoration with plant motifs, we find the figures of Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine inside separate medallions in an imitation leather box. They are embroidered on carmine velvet in laid gold thread and silks in shading stitch and split stitch yet, despite the difficulties for drawing with this technique, it is possible to observe international hem the imprint of the art of Pedro Berruguete and the models of the Castilian school from the end of the 15th century (thanks to their extraordinary conservation).

Without a doubt, the greatest difficulty for the dissemination and popularity of these items comes from the strict criteria for their conservation and protection. Lighting constraints prevent them from being on constant display and force them to spend most of the time «sleeping» in a cabinet. Exhibitions such as *Las Edades del Hombre* series (The Ages of Man) have revealed part of that rich legacy hidden away out of view in drawers and wardrobes but, its estimate is still limited and the discomforts of preservation of this embroideries and all textiles –specially those associated with liturgy and religion– do not «dress» as many years ago.

At the end of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century, there was an upsurge in the collecting of fabrics in Spain, associated with medieval historicisms that triumphed among both the arts and the taste of the high classes, but this terrain has been less tended for many decades now. To the already referred collection

of José Lázaro Galdiano, we should add those of Marquis of Casa Torres, the Count of Valencia de don Juan, the Count of Las Almenas or the Marquis of Cerralbo, among others, but beyond this generation of collectors that tried to revive the splendor of Spanish medieval material culture, its presence in private collections of the past half century is very limited or almost anecdotic.

To preserve and store the textiles in its collection, Josiane and Daniel have used –among other furniture– an Italian vestment cabinet bought in Italia. It is made on walnut wood from the 16th century. And has recovered its original function far from a sacristy, as we can see on the marks that shaped hundreds of small circular forms. A few decorative carvings and religious sculptures are on it, creating a sacrosanct atmosphere in that corner of the house. Inside the cabinet lies an embroidered treasure that sees the light of day thanks to visits by museum curators, researchers, collectors or simple aficionados who, like myself, take advantage of their knowledge and hospitality.

Perhaps the hardest decision for many collectors is accepting that they cannot display on the walls or international showcases of their homes the conquests that bring them so much delight but, in this case, it is well worth remembering not to be swept away by the splendour of the items and notice more the internal elements and understand the history of the thread with which the Frumans weave their passion for collecting.

By **ALEJANDRO MARTÍNEZ**