



Malta Centre for Restoration
Incorporating The Institute for Conservation and Restoration Studies
Bighi, Kalkara CSP12 – Malta

Area C- Textile Techniques

Ms. Gabriella Perra, “Artisitc Techniques in Textile Conservation”, Malta Centre for Restoration, May 2003, Malta [*The moral rights of the author have been asserted in terms of the international copyright law*].

The existence of a vast textile heritage is hardly known. When talking about cultural heritage, paintings, sculpture and architecture are the first to come to mind and in fact the study of the history of art has largely related to such heritage. Within a book on history of art it is quite rare to find an illustration and/or description of a textile artefact as an expression of the temporal and geographical culture that produced it. Yet every community throughout history produced textile artefacts, which, as with paintings, sculpture, and architecture, reflect the taste of the time. It is quite easy to understand what motivates the creation of a hierarchy in artistic production. In fact, when referring to a painting or sculptural work, one talks about the artist and his/her creative genius but when discussing a textile artefact, one refers to the craftsman whose trade is linked to the production of items for every-day use.

However, the value of the textile artefact lies not only in its creator. That which is probably most fascinating about the study of textiles is the uniqueness of every individual artefact. Apart from documenting the style and taste of a particular culture, the textile artefact embodies in itself small yet unique characteristics that are linked to the life of a person. Often this is extended to several generations of people who would have owned, used and personalised the artefact. The textile artefact, unlike the painting conceived to be admired actively participates in man’s daily life in a direct way. With the passage of time, the textile artefact’s organic fibre continuously absorbs and gathers information. Possibly no other form of human expression is capable of recounting the past with such depth and intimacy. Every textile artefact embodies an element of history. This, together with the techniques and materials used in its creation, encourage the study and preservation of textile patrimony as cultural and artistic evidence. In



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fact the ethical principle of the textile artefact, understood as the preservation of the material content together with the historical value linked to the artefact, is a recent concept. It was during the 1950s, at the wake of all the philosophical discussions on the ethical of conservation and restoration that had already centred on the so called fine arts, that it was deemed important to study and define methodologies for the preservation of textile heritage.

This resulted in the birth in various parts of the world of institutions and schools for the conservation of textile artefacts. Since then the field of textiles conservation has steadily and rapidly evolved. Several techniques and methodologies were tested and their results have been the subject of several ethical discussions.

Such thoughts generally seek to address the aesthetic value in integrating losses through methodologies that imitate the original or through the replacement of worn-out parts. It has become clear that certain restoration interventions involving integration lead to compromising the originality of the artefact so that the old and the new are in competition on an aesthetic level.

Today conservation of textile artefacts dictates the need to respect the original value of the artefact. The textiles conservator is required to evaluate the possible options for treatment with priority given to the conservation of the artefact for future generations rather than the aesthetic presentation of the work. Moreover, the conservator is required to be capable of assessing every individual artefact in the light of its historical, technical and functional uniqueness. Thus the projected conservation treatment is tailor-made to suit the needs of the particular artefact.

In fact, textiles conservation often deviates from certain standard regulations for treatment. The complexity of manufacturing techniques and the diversity of materials used in the artefact make it difficult to apply standard treatments.

Textiles include:

Tapestries. These are complex artefacts because of their large size, the importance of their iconographic content, the legibility of which cannot be ignored when considering choices for conservation treatment.



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Embroidery

Lace

Carpets

Costumes and accessories. These are complex because of their three-dimensionality and the presence of different materials alongside each other.

Flags and banners

Liturgical vestments

Textile furnishings

Thus textiles are complex in their presentation of various techniques and often the conservator chooses to specialise in or has a preference for a particular aspect of those listed above.

The textiles conservation course here at the MCR is intended to prepare conservators capable of carrying out historical and scientific research together with documenting every phase of conservation treatment. (It is aimed at producing conservators capable of handling all textile artefacts individually and within a conservation team.)

The part of the course concerning conservation treats the different types of textile artefacts separately, addressing aspects relating to the history and manufacturing techniques of the particular textile, its composition and properties, damage and decay from a scientific perspective and, naturally, conservation treatments. Conservators from different countries are brought in to handle different elements of the course according to their particular specialisation. This aspect of the course provides the student with the opportunity to experience and evaluate different methodological approaches to textiles conservation used in the main centres, institutes and studios of conservation and restoration.

(Although several techniques exist for the manufacture of textiles, for the purpose of this course tapestry technique has been chosen and shall be treated from a theoretical and practical point of view)

TAPESTRY TECHNIQUE



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The term tapestry is usually applied to European production of textiles usually of a large scale whose pictorial decoration is created through a weave of coloured yarns.

In actual fact, from a technical point of view, the term defines a type of woven structure made of a series of vertical yarns called warps that are generally neutral colour together with horizontal weft yarns in a variety of colours in plane (or plain) weaving and with discontinuous wefts.

Two terms in this phrase need to be further clarified. The first is 'plain weave' that indicates the simplest type of weave that is made through passing the weft between the warps, alternately over and under the warps. The other term is 'discontinuous wefts' that indicates the type of weaving using coloured wefts only in the area required by the design. This type of weaving in areas of colour results in the discontinuous build-up of the fabric. Another characteristic of textile weaving is that during the weaving process the coloured weft is pressed down to completely cover the neutral warps in order to create fully coloured areas.

This technique has been used for centuries and was used by various peoples and cultures.

The European tradition is certainly the most complex. In fact, several technical devices were developed to create large tapestries with such complex representations. The tapestry weavers perfected and refined this technique considerably in order to be able to simulate the effect of pictorial chiaroscuro with the use of yarns. In fact the painter was involved in the manufacture of these tapestries. It was the painter who executed the model/sketches/preliminary designs for the general composition of the representation. Cartoons were then modelled on the sketches. Cartoons were executed in the tempera technique and they reproduced the different areas of colour necessary to create the various gradations of tone. The cartoons were used during the weaving process and were placed beneath the warps so that the tapestry weaver could follow the design. The warps were stretched on two types of looms – the "high warp" and the "low warp". The high warp is a vertical loom. With such a type of loom the warps were stretched vertically on two cylindrical wooden beams placed one at the top and the other at the



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bottom. The tapestry weaver sat before the warps and as he/she built up the tapestry, the worked area was rolled into the lower beam while new warp areas were unravelled from the top beam.

The low warp loom is a horizontal loom. The beams support the horizontally stretched warps and are placed one in front and the other behind. In order to understand this better, one should refer to photographs of such looms. These may be seen in *Encyclopaedia of Trades and Industry*, by *Benis Diderot*.

With both types of looms the tapestry weaver worked upside down and usually work progressed from one short side to the other with the representation rotated through an angle of 90 degrees. This means that the tapestry was only seen in its entirety once the work was completed after it was dismantled from the loom, rotated to the correct position and turned the right way up.

Chiaroscuro effects, shading, and modelling are obtained through different technical solutions. One of the main techniques, apart from the alternation of colour, is obtained through contrast in the use of silk and wool wefts. Since wool is thicker and more opaque it was used for shadows and for darker and more intense colour while silk which is more luminous and fine was used to highlight the drapery folds and to emphasize volume.

However, the most effective way of creating volume in the chiaroscuro is known as hatching “battage” a type of “tratteggio” technique consisting of the alternation of parallel lines of colour so that from afar the effect is one of a gradual transition from one colour to another.