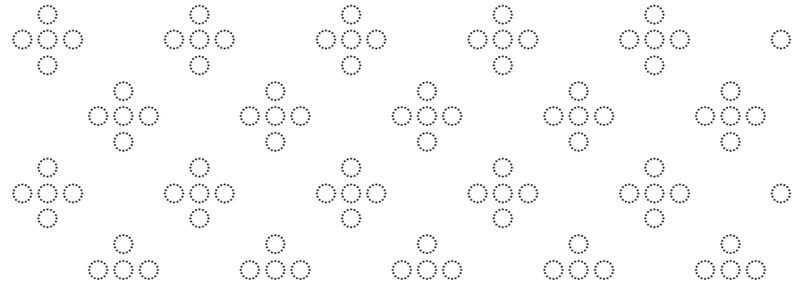

CLOTHING THE SACRED. MEDIEVAL TEXTILES AS FABRIC, FORM, AND METAPHOR

ED. BY MATEUSZ KAPUSTKA AND WARREN T. WOODFIN

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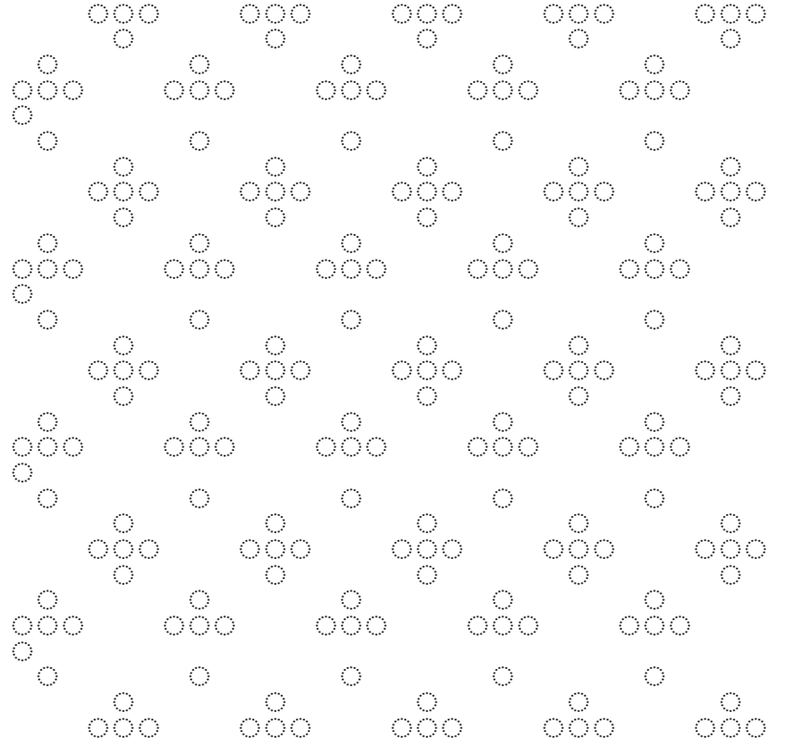

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An Introduction

The discipline of art history was formed in an environment governed by a rigid hierarchy of media: architecture, sculpture, and painting were the arts most worthy of study. Textiles were relegated to a realm for which the very terminology signifies its secondary character: ‹applied arts› (or its German equivalent of ‹angewandte Künste›) or the still more unfortunate ‹decorative arts› or ‹minor arts.› In this schema, painting, the art in which the medium and the image are most distinct from one another, was elevated; textiles, in which the image and the support are coincident with one another, were downgraded to a ‹craft› rather than a fine art. The place of textiles in the study of art further suffered from their enforced feminization in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the cliché of textile and embroidery as ‹women's work› became current. This marginalization through gender has, of course, been pushed back on two fronts: on the one hand, through the reclamation of the true value of women's work by feminist scholarship, and on the other hand, by the better knowledge of the varying configurations of gender and the textile medium in the pre-Modern period.

The fields of Byzantine, medieval, and Islamic art, which from their beginnings were estranged from the dominant Vasarian narrative of the discipline of art history, have long formed a fortunate exception to the trend of ignoring or denigrating textiles. Scholars such as Otto von Falke (1862–1932) [*Kunstgeschichte der Seidenweberei*, Berlin, 1921] and Franz Bock (1823–1899) [*Geschichte der liturgische Gewänder des Mittelalters,* 3 vols., Bonn, 1859–71] pioneered the study of medieval textiles and dress, respectively. Leonie von Wilckens (1921–1997) crossed the boundaries between Byzantine, Islamic, and Western medieval textiles in her important monograph [*Die textilen Künste von der Spätantike bis um 1500*, Munich, 1991], and like a number of other pioneers in the field, concerned herself not only with textiles, but with a broad range of Western art history. Of course, the particular areas of focus in past scholarship have helped to construct the imagination of what constitutes medieval textiles. For later medieval Northwest Europe, tapestry weaving dominates the discourse on textiles. The so-called ‹Coptic› textile material has long been of concern to Byzantinists and specialists in Late Antiquity, while the patterned silk textiles of the high Middle Ages have an undisputed place in the historiography of both Byzantine and Islamic art history. The current, heterogeneous range of textile research also reflects the state of preservation of the medieval material and the various factors that governed what was saved and what was lost.

This book does not draw the boundaries of the medieval period according to strictly chronological periodization. Rather, it takes as ‹medieval› those uses of textiles that reflect categories of thought and modes of expression rooted in the Middle Ages. The threshold between the medieval and the modern shifts, of course, depending on the geographic area or religious context. By looking at a more expansive range for medieval textiles, the papers are able to draw links and parallels that carry forward into the Early Modern period.

The past decade or so has seen a remarkable revival of interest in the medium, both with an efflorescence of technical studies in textile structure and a renewed interest from art historians without specialized textile training. There remains a problematic gap between textile conservation and the art historical study of textiles; all the papers collected in this volume fall firmly into the latter camp. The aim of this book is to highlight for the field of art history both the inherent interest of textile arts and techniques and the applicability of textile metaphors to other modes of representation, as, for instance, the arts of the book. The papers in this volume contribute collectively to the re-integration of textiles within the mainstream of art historical inquiry. These studies, as this volume's title implies, deal with textiles as fabric, form, and metaphor. While none of the essays in this volume directly addresses the structure and mechanical production of textiles, they are each individually conscious of the distinctive qualities of the medium: tactility, mobility, and the coincidence of image and support. As fabric, textiles clothe significant personages or objects and bear potent images woven or embroidered on their surface. As form, textiles can act as screens onto which various meanings are projected or veils behind which the invisible and numinous can be made visible through concealment. As metaphor, textiles can both distinguish social and religious groups one from another and, through the representation of textiles and clothing in other media, project those groups into the imaginary of the sacred.

The volume also aims at joining two historical perspectives of sacred representation: disguise and embodiment. Both approaches to the ritual use of textiles were elaborated throughout the Middle Ages, thanks to the iconological value of vestments and paraments as tools of ritual practice. This is especially true of the Christian liturgy, which, in all of its medieval rites, constituted in part a domain of semantic evocation of sacred history and its actors. Those two aspects, which mediate the relationship between the hidden and the visible, hinge on the dynamic qualities of liturgical actions. One the most important medieval codifications of liturgy of the West, the *Rationale divinorum officiorum* written by Guillaume Durand around 1286, stresses two significant notions—*velum* and *figura*—linked as a dialectic pair that corresponds to our twinned categories of disguise and embodiment, mentioned above. The dynamic tension between these terms helps rhetorically to efface the ontological contradiction between the manifest and the absent. The textile, being in this context simultaneously a fabric, a form, and a metaphor, enabled participants in liturgical actions to see through surfaces and images and to bring opposite notions together: disguise and revelation, delimitation and transparency, hierarchical

subordination and general invitation to witness. Moreover—and this topic is crucial for the present book—textile media of sacred representation offered not only ‹screens› for the liturgical projection of imaginary *figurae*, but, in the case of vestments, also made it possible to define the whole pictorial domain of embodiment anew through the fact that they were put on by the celebrants themselves during liturgies and thus were presented to the people as clothing on living bodies. This activation of a textile image as a tool for crossing the boundary between *mysterium* and *res* implies a connection with and through various shifting layers of pictorial references. These were shaped according to theological doctrines of substantial presence, the iconology of images, and the language of liturgical gesture. Within this complex framework, textiles helped to unfold in visual terms the transition from ‹having a body› to ‹becoming a body› through the re-enactive aspect (*anamnesis*) of the liturgy.

Warren Woodfin's contribution to this volume explores in particular this theme of the liturgy—in this case, the Byzantine liturgy—as a historical reenactment of the life of Christ. While the mystagogical commentaries on the liturgy attribute specific meanings to the various articles of priestly vesture, the iconography of surviving liturgical vestments is surprisingly poorly matched to the symbolism encoded in the texts. Rather, the stereotyped cycle of narrative scenes from the Gospels, which appears with frequency on embroidered vestments from the late Byzantine period, helps to articulate the role of the celebrant as a stand-in for Christ himself.

The chapter by *Branislav Cvetković* links the actual garments worn by the secular leaders of medieval Serbia and Bulgaria to their broader political aspirations. The variations on local, ‹orientalizing,› and ‹Byzantinizing› modes of dress reflect the changing self-understanding of these kingdoms as they increasingly sought a place as the heirs of Byzantine imperial rule. The incorporation of these modes of dress into religious painting not only provided a familiar iconographic model for the ‹robes of glory› of the blessed, it also provided an ideological legitimation for the ruling élite, presenting their role as a divinely-ordained reflection of the court of heaven. His study provides a model for how seemingly mundane patterns of textile ornament could draw meaningful connections between representations of earthly and heavenly realities. It also suggests how much significance we may habitually overlook in the category of ‹mere ornament.›

It is in the nature of textiles to interact with other media, but they are also able to cross boundaries of technique and turn into imaginary, pictorial architecture. In *Barbara Eggert's* essay we get an insight on how in 14th and 15th centuries the theme of the Mass of St. Gregory—a subject that itself duplicated liturgical actions in the form of textile depiction—evolved into an iconography that allowed elaborated architectonic scenarios to appear on liturgical vestments (chasubles, dalmatics, tunicles, and copes). Eggert analyzes the textile imagery worn by the celebrants on their bodies according to the liturgical exegesis of space; thus she demonstrates a series of symbolic cross-relations that interlace between real architecture and its textile representations.

These observations are followed by *Christine Brandner's* paper, which undertakes an iconographic investigation of the vestments of the Order of the Golden Fleece. The absence of motifs that might directly link the sacred depictions on the *Burgunderornat* with the knights' order or, particularly, with the donor of the embroideries, allows the author to turn her attention to the performative qualities of the vestments in their ritual use. The typological concordance of holy figures and scenes illustrated in the embroideries appears, on the one hand, as a means of delineation of the order's structure, including its political alliances, and of its incorporation in the history of salvation. On the other hand, Brandner also addresses the spatiality of vestments themselves in this context and aims to reconstruct the visibility of images in the folds of fabric when they were worn and put in motion on the celebrants' bodies.

Barbara Baert's essay treats the tactile quality of textiles in the iconographic context of the *Noli me tangere,* Mary Magdalene's expressly non-tactile encounter with the risen Christ. Her subject is the more poignant for being embroidered (in all probability) by religious women to adorn an altar from which they were physically excluded. The depiction on the whitework (*Weisstextil*) frontal of Mary Magdalene—who is allowed to receive the word of Christ's peace into her hand but not to touch him or his garment—moderates a whole series of associations: between the nun's white habits and the frontal, between word and flesh, between hearing and touching. Here the concept of textiles as ‹women's work,› which in other times and places could potentially be either a false or a marginalizing characterization of the medium, helps to cement the connection between the religious community and their altar.

The textile dimension of touch plays also a significant role in *David Ganz's* essay on medieval book furnishings as object-related metaphors of the Incarnation. The outer wrappings of Ottonian Gospel books serve in this context as interactive coverings of the codices, which are treated and symbolized as bodies. Thus, they let us revalue the metaphorical meanings of clothing as a medium of concealment as well as enrich our view on the relation between nakedness and adornment in the medieval culture of revelation.

Tactility—or the illusion of tactility—is also a theme running through *Anna Bücheler's* chapter on the inner parts of the Ottonian codices: their textile-patterned pages. These pages, which ‹clothe› the word of scripture like a garment, help to express the theological paradox of Christ's person: simultaneously human and divine, corporeal and spiritual. Her codicological analysis of a product of the Echternach scriptorium shows that the textile as a medium of concealment both clothes and binds together the individual Gospel books, thus linking the allegorical level of the metaphor with the domain of fabric's materiality. The textile pages thus highlight both the essence of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and its concrete liturgical expression through the book.

Avinoam Shalem's essay on the draping of the Kaʿba in Mecca with its woven and embroidered textile, the *kiswa*, establishes the genealogy of an aniconic textile that is, paradoxically, one of the most iconic images associated with Islam. More than one scholar has pointed out the pervasiveness of the textile as both medium and motif in Islamic art. In this case, pertaining to the holiest site of the Islamic faith, the architectural monument is almost wholly subsumed in its textile covering, its interior for all intents and purposes suppressed in favor of its surface, or, to put it another way, a building that is effectively turned inside-out by the textile draping of its exterior. Furthermore, the act of clothing the architectural monument of the Kaʿba becomes assimilated to the ritual of clothing a human body in a robe of honor or decking a bride for her bridegroom. Thus, through the medium of the textiles, what might be a stark and prismatic work of architecture becomes anthropomorphized as a clothed body.

If the draped Kaʿba is a signal example of the prevalence of textiles of an architectural scale in the Islamic world, *Michael Gnehm's* contribution presents the shadow side of this trait: its transformation into a symbol for the ‹Oriental› and alien. The tent, a form of mobile architecture favored by Islamic dynasties from the time of the first conquests to the Ottoman Empire, comes to stand for a universalized ‹other› that, through a series of binary associations, can symbolize luxury, femininity, and heresy in opposition to vigor, manliness, and Protestant rectitude. By tracing the tent—or textile architecture—as an orientalizing visual metaphor, Gnehm's essay indicates one of the paths by which textiles were alienated from occupying a central place in the artistic production of the West to being marginalized as ‹minor› or ‹ethnographic› arts in the art historical discourse of the 20th century.

The majority of the papers collected here were initially presented in the context of colloquia and guest lectures organized in 2010–2011 under the aegis of the project at the University of Zurich, entitled *Textile: An Iconology of the Textile in Art and Architecture*, sponsored by the European Research Council (ERC) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). For the opportunities to present these scholars and their research, both in initial colloquia and in this published form, the editors would like to thank first and foremost Tristan Weddigen, whose support made possible the inclusion of this book in the *Textile Studies* series. We would also like to thank the individual authors who have patiently endured many rounds of editorial queries and discussions, as well as Noah Mlotek, who capably copy-edited several chapters.

With the present volume, we hope to contribute to the still-growing field of art historical study of textile representation. The papers collected here bridge the gap between iconology and material investigation. Thus, they strive to reconstruct the meanings of textile objects in all stages of their existence, from their patronage and manufacture, through their use and re-use, to their reinterpretation as they move across the boundaries of generations and cultures.

By bringing together several different aspects of cultural practices and ideologies of veiling—from the Byzantine rites of faith and power, through the Western object-based performance of liturgy, to the topoi of concealment in the Islamic world and in the Western stereotype of it—these studies contribute to the understanding of textiles and textile imagery as a mode of human expression that transcends the restrictions of geography, culture, or period.