

Conveying through Fabric: Textile Materiality and Interpretations of Textile

As Adam and Eve were banished from Eden, they were given tunics to wear. This highly symbolic passage in Genesis thereby depicts the wearing of clothes as defining features of humankind. One of the first purposes of fabric, then, appears to have been in hiding Adam and Eve's nude, fallen condition. Although fabric might have originally hinted at the Fall of Man, the gradual evolution of textiles gradually associated fabric with human dignity, and, later on, in the wake of industrialization and the advent of riots in several clothing manufactures (e. g. the Canut revolts in Lyon or the Luddites in Lancashire), with the fight for dignified work. Fabric is therefore not a mere piece of cloth, but a distinct kind of material imbued with a variety of potent meanings.

The invention of fabric — a surface made of intertwined threads — dates back to the Prehistoric times. Originally made to shelter one's body from the weather, it soon also channeled various social norms, e. g. a newborn shall be swaddled right at birth, while the body of the dead shall be wrapped in a shroud. A piece of fabric, furthermore, can generally outlive its original owner, which means that it can be re-used, re-sized and reworked to match fluctuating styles and times. A nonetheless fragile material, fabric constitutes a precious historical testimony when it is successfully preserved throughout the ages.

Beyond its material aspects and purposes, fabric can also be considered an indicator for cultural, social and gender norms across time and geographical areas. Clothing indeed defines status, yet it can also be used to disguise one's attributed social or gender role, as for example did the Spanish nun-turned-soldier Catalina de Erauso, who escaped her convent by dressing as a male.

As suggested by Régis Debray and Patrice Hugues in their *Dictionnaire culturel du tissu* (2005), fabric is thus an “agent of civilization”. Applied to the domestic sphere, textile items such as bed sheets, table-cloths, carpets and curtains can be and are studied as signs of normative display. Tapestries, in turn, is not only an ostentatious home ornament, but also belongs to the history of art because it showcases complex, ancestral techniques of weaving and depicts historical events and/or biblical allegories. Let us think only of the Bayeux Tapestry or the Apocalypse Tapestry in Angers, France.

This interdisciplinary junior colloquium will thus look at the different facets of fabric, focusing on its materiality and social, gendered, and cultural meanings. The outward form and the conceptual substance of fabric should not be treated separately but jointly, and potential tensions arising from this intertwining will also be considered of interest. Contributions from varied disciplines of human sciences, such as archeology, literature, art history or curating, are highly welcome. After all, French writer and poet Paul Valéry compared writing to weaving, as he saw literature as a fabric of artful meaning through threads of interwoven words.

1. Threads of communication

Our first axis is about the communicative quality of fabric. Within its material constitution, fabric is already a carrier of meaning. From a material standpoint, fabric indeed communicates through its color, its physical properties, the quality of its components as well as the techniques used for its creation. These techniques, whether in weaving or decorating it, convey in turn the production line at work behind textiles. Such material elements thus inform us about the origins and social status of who might (have) acquire(d) that specific fabric. Furthermore, as a piece of clothing, fabric serves to protect the body but also to signal the identity of its carrier, thereby revealing a rich network of connotations. It is therefore logical to consider fabric as belonging to a kind of non-verbal language ruling a significant part of human interactions as well as participating in defining identities. Let us think only of uniforms, traditional clothing or the mere style of an outfit: all give the setting of an individual amidst the community. Whatever its use, a fabric can moreover be the surface onto which messages, decorations or slogans attach themselves until the said fabric, through the addition of a material feature, turns into a symbol. Finally, fabric can literally become a verb in specific traditions, as are for instance *quipus* in the inca culture, i. e. pieces of fabrics onto which careful knots are tied and used as a language.

2. Interweavings

Beyond its material dimension, fabric also creates dialogue. It allows us to consider technical, social, cultural and even intergenerational communications. Ever since the Silk Road, fabric became a means of dialogue between the East and the West, thereby also establishing tension between two civilizations that would from then on never cease to discover each other. A carrier of meaning, fabric can enrich the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another, for instance as it constitutes a testimony of skill and innovations. Fabric can therefore make us trace back practices from the past that allowed for change in the course of human history, as French historian Serge Gruzinski has already pointed out. Fabric is moreover a collective product where diverse thoughts, languages and cultures intertwine (*métissage* in French, which we chose to translate as “interweaving”), even collide, colonization and recent migration dynamics showcasing the latter. The kinds of interweaving we wish to study are not, however, strictly limited to a violent heritage; rather, we hope that this concept facilitates the awareness of others

and of the world as a shared network. Fabric shall not be limited to a strict conceptualization; we therefore wish to broaden the scope of its creative and intellectual potential.

3. Transfer, alteration, destruction and invention of the woven heritage

Fabric being a fragile material, its very preservation is also of scientific and historical interest. It is indeed remarkable to see how many degradations the few remaining pieces of ancient fabric went through, and how the material nature of these pieces changed over time, as for instance that of mineralized fabrics in ancient sepultures. One could thus speak of “*transmission*”, a term coined in French landscape geography, a field of archeology studying both the transmission and chemicophysical transformations of objects. Such a concept, combined with an awareness of the many meanings attributed to fabric through the ages, can only be beneficial to further the research on textiles.

With the study of these joint processes, so should the heritage recognition of fabrics be taken into account. Specific textiles are already appreciated as tokens of either universal worthiness (e. g. *Al Sadu*, *jamdani*, *dan fani* textiles, as well as the Javanese technique of *batik*, all now recognized as UNESCO World Heritage), or national merit (e. g. flags, uniforms), yet what about household linens or work overalls? How could the role of female practices in weaving and textile industries be better incorporated into the study of such worldwide cultural heritage?

4. Subversive “faux-bric”

One last axis of this colloquium would consist in exploring fabrics that are not textiles *per se* or go beyond the traditional appearance, nature and role of textiles. The recent “wrapping” of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris by French landscape-artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude certainly showcased how a textile installation could transfigure a well-known monument and its usual significance. The very material properties of the textile conceived by the artists were unconventional: a kind of hessian made out of braided polypropylene, it looked either blue or silvery depending on how close the viewer stood from it and, although rigid, created a sensation of drapery. Because of these properties and their visionary unfolding, the collective reading of the Arc was temporarily quite different.

Going further in this optically subversive direction, what about illusionistic textiles made for instance out of stone? Italian sculpture exhibits several examples of works, ranging from those of Giuseppe Sanmartino to those of Giovanni Strazza, that perfectly imitate the translucence and adhesion of veils onto the human figure. This technical tour-de-force thereby raises the question of which purposes such false “fabric” may serve. This colloquium is therefore also open to contributions regarding the materiality and meanings of diverted or subversive textiles, as well as of false fabrics.

❖ Deadlines

Please send your application before **February 28th, 2022**. The organizing committee shall then get back to you before March 12th, 2022.

The colloquium shall take place on **Thursday, May 12th, 2022** at Campus Versailles, located in the Grande Écurie of the Château de Versailles, Rockefeller Ave, 78000 Versailles.

❖ Terms

This junior colloquium is addressed to both PhD students or candidates and young doctors who recently defended their thesis, either in France or abroad. It is interdisciplinary and open to the various fields of both human and social sciences (anthropology, archeology, art history, history, languages, literature, sociology...). Presentation of papers shall be held either in English or French.

We ask you to send an outline of your paper (about 500 words), as well as a brief autobiography (including the title and field(s) of the thesis, if applicable the year of its defense, your university or institution, as well as a bibliography of your published works), before **February 28th, 2022** to the following e-mail address: doctorants.chcsc@gmail.com

❖ Organization

Research committee: Ariane Fennetaux, Anaïs Fléchet, Pauline Lemaigre-Gaffier, Fabienne Médard.

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