

A museum within a museum: the textile collection at the Episcopal Museum of Vic

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The dignity of clothes that have been consecrated to God, that have received His blessing (...), that have born witness to the celebration of the most venerable Mystery, should be sufficient to prevent their sale as cheap merchandise, so often leading into unworthy hands and to uses not fit for such robes and ornaments. If one piece and another were to find their way to museums, where they could serve to inform under careful conservation, this fault could be excused; but they are all too often converted into decorative items for lounges and workshops, and this when they are not taken apart and condemned to a life as a chair cover or converted into cushions and placed beneath the feet of all manner of people. Who has not seen maniples used as curtain loops?¹

¹ GUDIOL I CUNILL, J., “La Indumentària Litúrgica”, *Anuari dels amics de l’art litúrgic*, Cercle Artístic de Sant Lluc, Barcelona, 1925, p. 155.

² Father J. Gudiol was curator of the Episcopal Museum of Vic from 1898 until 1931.

³ Joaquim Folch i Torres uses the term “antiquaris d’espardenya” in *Destino 2/XI/ 1957*, in reference to a class of traders who dealt unscrupulously in all manner of wares, who evidently bear no resemblance to the many reputable antiquarians in our country.

⁴ GUDIOL I CUNILL, J., *La indumentària litúrgica*. Vic, 1918a, p. 22.

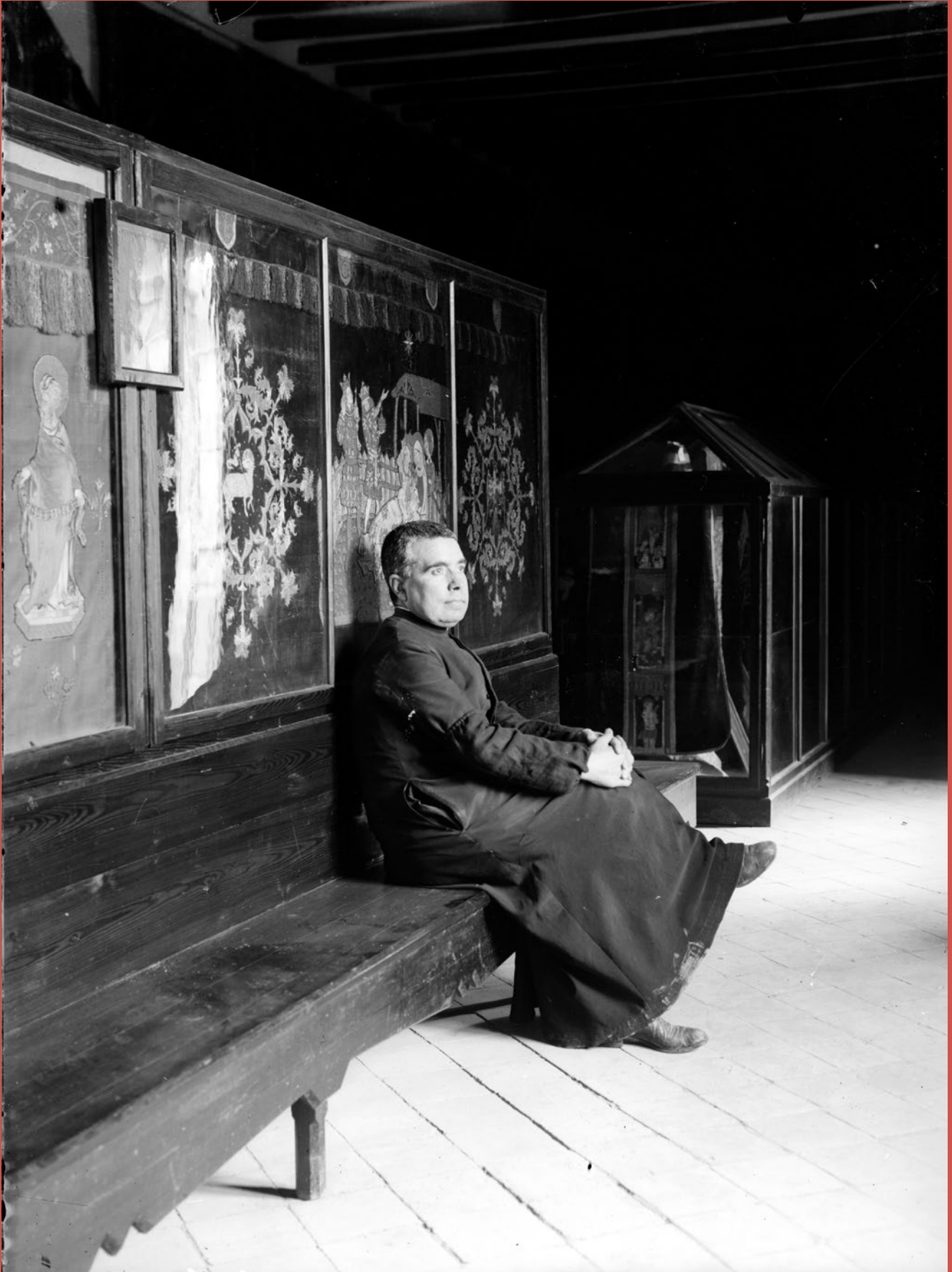
In 1925, Father Josep Gudiol² expressed in these terms his distaste at the ignoble fate of historical items of sanctified clothing and fabric. The trade of these items by “espadrille antiquarians”³, to use the term coined by Joaquim Folch i Torres, contributed to the cruel fragmentation and inexorable dispersion of many Catalan textile pieces, erasing their history and roots forever.

The safekeeping of liturgical ornaments, of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, was traditionally a matter for the religious establishment, which considered them sacred objects that must be conserved, protected and handled with respect. For many centuries it was customary for a newly appointed canon to provide his cathedral with a chasuble, which upon his death was transferred to the see, where it would be conserved.⁴ The tradition allowed the *vestis sacra* to be preserved for centuries. However, with the emergence of a new market for historical textiles, nothing could prevent whole robes or decorative sections of them being sold or exchanged time and again.

Certain episodes in the past are particularly illustrative of this phenomenon, such as the decision in 1888 to cut up and divide the pontifical robes that had covered the body of Saint Bernat Calbó⁵. Some of the pieces were distributed

⁵ Sant Bernat Calbó became Bishop of Vic in 1223. His tomb can be found in Vic Cathedral.

Father Josep Gudiol sitting before the frontal of the Altar of the Epiphany. Episcopal Museum of Vic, 1905-1910.



Original pontifical robes of Saint Bernat Calbó and other vestments that covered his remains in later periods, on display at the MEV.



6 GUDIOL I CUNILL, J., “Lo sepulcre de Sant Bernat Calvó, bisbe de Vic”, *Memòries del Primer Congrés d’Història de la Corona d’Aragó*. Barcelona, II, 1913.

7 Currently conserved at the Episcopal Museum of Vic, the CDMT, the Barcelona Textile and Costume Museum, the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, Switzerland, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin, the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum and Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York.

8 The Victoria and Albert Museum was founded in London in 1852.

9 The Musée des Tissus Lyon was founded in Lyon in 1890.

as relics⁶ and others found their way into the hands of avid collectors who sold them to private owners or to museums around the world, where they remain today.⁷

The dispersion of these emblematic pontifical garments was not an isolated occurrence; the same fate befell other historical liturgical vestments, at a time when interest in the study of textiles was still new to Catalonia. The consideration of historical textiles as works of art emerged through successive specialised studies, and textiles themselves were preserved by collectors, antiquarians and scholars, who valued the country’s textile heritage and built private or public collections of great artistic worth.

A dramatic rise in value came with the founding of the first European museums to house dedicated textile exhibits, among them the Victoria and Albert Museum in London⁸ and the Musée Historique des Tissus in Lyon.⁹ The new institutions held sizeable textile collections and were the conceptual basis for the creation of the first Catalan textile collections. This focus brought new value to a genre that had previously received little appreciation, gradually affording it the artistic status it deserved.

The origins of the collection

The collection of historical textiles in Catalonia began in earnest in the nineteenth century, but it was not until well into the twentieth that the practice became widespread. The resurgence coincided with a renewed interest in recovering the *savoir faire* of traditional arts and crafts, a fascination that

10 Asociación Artístico-Arqueológica Barcelonesa. *Exposición Universal de Barcelona. Álbum de la sección de Ropas y Bordados*. Barcelona, 1888.

11 Josep Morgades was Bishop of Vic from 1882 to 1889.

emerged from *Art Nouveau* and Catalan *modernisme*. A new Catalan bourgeoisie, made wealthy by the burgeoning textile industry, quickly took an interest in the private collection of historical textiles, a trend that was no doubt a direct reaction to the unstoppable advance of industrialisation.

Many of the most prominent patrons of the arts were industrialists, who amassed sizeable textile collections that would later be sold or bequeathed to museums in Spain and abroad. Other collectors were artists of the *modernista* school, individuals with great creative sensibilities but also a feel for the importance of preserving anything linked to the arts and crafts of the past. The Episcopal Museum of Vic, for example, conserves textiles that originally formed part of the personal collections of Josep Pascó, Oleguer Junyent and Gaspar Homar. The most remarkable of these, for the number of pieces as well as their quality, was the collection of Gaspar Homar, which the Museum purchased through an antiquarian in 1934.

The origins of the textile collection at the Episcopal Museum of Vic, however, are much older, stretching back as far as the Archaeological-Artistic Exhibition held in Vic in 1868. The event was organised by a group of art and archaeology enthusiasts belonging to the local literature circle, who gathered together a large number of artistic objects from churches, convents and private houses in the region. The range of items on show included a sizeable collection of tapestries and religious ornaments, most of them on loan from Vic Cathedral. The interest attracted by the exhibition raised public curiosity in Catalonia's artistic heritage and prompted the organisers to create their own Archaeological Museum, with a permanent collection of exhibits provided by members themselves and obtained from excavations in the area. Shortly after, the collection was broken up and passed to the newly created Episcopal Museum of Vic.

It was in this context of cultural effervescence that the Bishop of Vic decided to participate in the 1888 Universal Exhibition in Barcelona, exhibiting a large collection of artistic objects from his diocese, most notable among them a series of Romanesque panel paintings and textile pieces of great artistic value, including the famous 'Witches' Cloth' and pallia of the Annunciation, the Evangelists, Epiphany and Piety, all from the Monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses.¹⁰

The success of the exhibition, which received three gold medals, one of them for the magnificent fabrics and embroidery, encouraged the Bishop of Vic, Josep Morgades,¹¹ to set up the Episcopal Archaeological-Artistic Museum of Vich – now the Episcopal Museum of Vic – and was a clarion call to the deans of his diocese to conserve the artistic treasures held by

Display of liturgical dress in the former building of the Episcopal Museum of Vic, 1934.



12 Circular by Josep Morgades, Bishop of Vic, published in the *Boletín Oficial Eclesiástico del Obispado de Vic*, 15/07/1889. [Arxiu i Biblioteca Episcopal de Vic].

13 Josep Gudiol i Cunill published various studies on textiles, the most prominent of which can be found in *Nocions d'Arqueologia Sagrada Catalana*. Vic, 1931-1933 (revised Edition, updating the original 1902 version); *La indumentària litúrgica*. Vic, 1918; "Per la història de la tapisseria a Catalunya", *La Veu de Catalunya*, 1918.

their parishes. Bishop Morgades reminded them that they had the obligation to safeguard all of the historical objects in their churches and invited them to transfer their works of art to the Museum, where such valuable religious heritage could be suitably looked after.¹²

In 1891 the Episcopal Museum of Vic opened its doors to the public, presenting a large collection of textiles and liturgical vestments gathered from the trousseau of the bishops and canons of Vic Cathedral, the Monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses and churches in the local area. The ceaseless efforts of the Museum's first curators to expand and diversify the collection would lead to a number of important acquisitions from antiquarians and private collectors, including many ancient textiles of distinct styles from different periods, gradually shaping the collection we know today.

It was Josep Gudiol who set the initiative in motion, demonstrating a keen understanding of how to stimulate interest in recovering and investigating the forgotten textile treasures of Catalonia's churches and cathedrals.¹³ During his time as curator and in his work as a researcher he worked tirelessly to spread knowledge and encourage wider study of the Museum's textile collection.



Sketch by Federico Correa of the plans for the textile and clothing gallery. Federico Correa and Alfonso Milà were the architects who designed the new MEV building, opened in 2002.

The current collection

Today, the [Episcopal Museum of Vic](#) has some 2000 exhibits, making up a distinctive collection that is internationally renowned for the variety and prestige of its textiles. The richness of the textile and clothing collection makes it a veritable museum within a museum, and to ensure the correct conservation of each exhibit a dedicated exhibition space was created with its own unique design, setting it apart from the other galleries in the Museum. The space houses a representative selection of artistically valuable historic textiles and an exceptional collection of liturgical vestments that perfectly illustrates the history of this form of religious ornamentation.

The textiles on show at the Episcopal Museum cover a period stretching from the ninth century to the very recent past. The earliest pieces are Coptic and Byzantine fabrics, and Hispano-Arabic textiles such as the renowned altar frontal known popularly as the ‘Witches’ Cloth’, a *unicum* of its type. These are followed by a series of velvets and silks produced in Italy and Spain between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, adorned with rich



▲ The textile and clothing gallery at the Episcopal Museum of Vic, in 2005.

▶ Coptic textiles mounted on protective backing.



Altar frontal known as the “Witches’ Cloth”, Al Andalus, first half of the twelfth century. From the Monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses MEV 557.



14 An excerpt from this article was published in French in 2010: Verdagner Serrat, Judit. “*Fastes de la Couronne d’Aragon*” *Dialogue entre les broderies et les tissus du Musée des Tissus de Lyon et du Musée Épiscopal de Vic*. Ed. Musée des Tissus Lyon et MEV. Lyon-Vic, 2010. pp. 16-19. The catalogue was compiled for the exhibition in Lyon in 2010, which was a joint initiative of the Musée des Tissus and the Episcopal Museum of Vic.

needle-painted embroidery, the finest examples of which are the robes of Abbot Vilalba and the meticulously detailed altar frontals from the Monastery of Sant Joan de les Abadesses. In the fourteenth-century chasuble of Bishop Bellera the Museum also has an example of *Opus Anglicanum*, an exceptional representation of embroidered goldwork and coloured silks. Items from subsequent centuries include Flemish tapestries, upholstery fabrics with large plant motifs, extravagant *bizarres* and exquisite imitation needlework, displayed alongside printed calicos and early examples of block-stamped fabrics from the late 1700s. The textile collection at the Episcopal Museum of Vic is completed by sets of liturgical vestments from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with innovative designs¹⁴. ●