Unravelling the thread:

checking the attribution of a velvet train to Charles Frederick Worth

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The collections of the Terrassa Textile Museum and Documentation Centre comprise a great variety of pieces from all over the world, from all strata of society, and from cultures dating back to the first century CE. Among this diversity, one feature common to most of the pieces is that they are anonymous; we have no means of knowing who made them. In the case of dress and costume we tend to have more information about their creators, as most of them date from the 1880s onwards. One example is the piece that I made the subject of my final degree project: a splendid burgundy-coloured velvet train attributed to Charles Frederick Worth (rec. no. 15396). In my project, I tried to justify this attribution on the basis of evidence from two different sources: the fabrics used to make the piece, and the historical documentation consulted.

I first came into contact with this velvet train during the time I spent with the Museum's restoration service, as part of my degree course. In July 2015 the train was taken out of storage and was sent directly to the restoration workshops to be prepared for display at the exhibition entitled *Xavier Gosé (1876-1915)* held at the National Art Museum of Catalonia. I was immediately struck by this piece, not just because of its majestic beauty but because of its attribution to Charles Frederick Worth, the first great exponent of *haute couture*. I would find out later that this attribution was made by the train's previous owner, the French collector Dominique Miraille, the proprietor of the Musée de la Mode in Albi, France. Miraille also claimed that the train had belonged to Hélène Koechlin, who had acquired it in 1882. Nonetheless, I realised almost immediately that there was no evidence to back up the attribution; the piece lacked the label of the House of Worth and there was no record of any earlier work to demonstrate its provenance.

Intrigued by this situation, I decided to carry out an exhaustive study of the piece in search of proof that would confirm or disprove the attribution. My research was divided into two clear areas. The first focused on the intrinsic elements of the piece that could provide information: I would examine the fabrics, the decorations (embroidery and passementerie), the technique used and the design, as well as its state of preservation and the effects of the passing

The train after treatment.
©Marc Plata

Front view of the train on display at the exhibition. ©Marc Plata

General view of the magnificent embroidered lilacs (Syringa vulgaris). ©Quico Ortega/CDMT

of time. The second part of the study would be a thorough historical analysis, trying to organise the scarce information available and seeking out new sources.

You may be wondering why it is so important to establish whether or not the piece was by Worth. The answer is that Worth, in addition to his huge contribution to fashion, was the first designer to see his creations as unique works of art that should be signed. Therefore, the obvious response is "If he signed all his pieces, what happened to this one?" For the moment, please be patient: all will be revealed at the end of the article.

Before preventing the evidence, it's important to be aware of the importance of signing works of art. If we go back to the Renaissance, when the human condition became the focus of artistic creation, a distinction began to be made between the artist and the craftsman. This is when painters began to sign their works, to underline that these were intellectual creations.

Clothes, in contrast, continued to be considered as objects of use and their aesthetic or material value was ignored; it was frescoes and altarpieces that received the attention. The poor wove and sewed their own clothes, and the rich had theirs made for them; but neither the poor nor the rich had seen their clothes as something worthy of being admired or put on display – far less something that deserved to be signed. For centuries, tailors and dressmakers belonged to the artisan class. Rose Bertin, dressmaker to Marie Antoinette, was the first to add her signature, but it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century when Charles Frederick Worth, famous as the couturier of the Empress Eugénie of France, consolidated the idea of using a label. Nevertheless, Worth conceived his creations or *toilettes* as a *toute ensemble* – a fact that, as we shall see, may have an important bearing on our study. The French historian Hippolyte Taine gives us an idea of the personality of Worth, and of how he conceived his art:

> "This arid, nervous, dwarfish creature [Worth] receives them nonchalantly, stretched out on a couch, a cigar between his lips. He growls "Walk! Turn! Good! Come back in a week and I will have an appropriate *toilette* for you". It is he, not they, who chooses".[1]

1 [P. 187] LAVER, James (1990) Costume and Fashion: A Concise History. Ediciones Cátedra. Madrid.

The imprint of the House of Worth: what do the fabrics tell us?

In this section I present the evidence I obtained during my study of the fabrics which sheds light on the authorship of the piece. I will also describe some of its most interesting features.

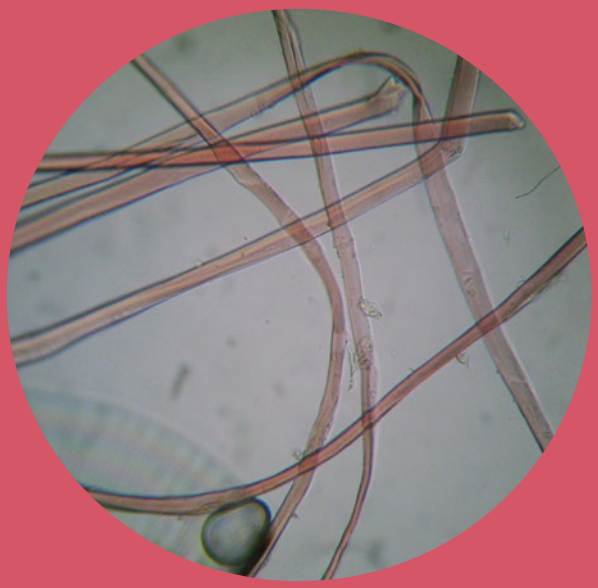
The piece has three main parts; the train, the band stretching up from the waist to the shoulder and bust, and the belt. The outer fabric is a soft Burgundy-coloured short pile silk. The lining comprises several satin pieces in pale pink. All the stitching is done by hand, mainly with silk thread. The piece is attached to the bodice with a grosgrain ribbon and a clasp, which was probably concealed by the bodice of the original dress.

On the right, descending from the belt, is some magnificent embroidery with floral motifs, made from a variety of threads, some of them metal. The flowers bear a strong resemblance to lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) and are arranged in a bouquet with many small leaves. The whole of the edge of the train bears a fringe of brown chenille with gleaming metal decorations.

The study of the fabrics was essential to my assessment of the attribution. The identification of fibres showed that they were all 100% silk and thus confirmed the excellent quality of the raw materials.

▶ The gros-grain ribbon and the clasp: the only point of attachment to the body. ©Marc Plata

▼ Detail of the interior of the lining around the waist. ©Marc Plata



Silk filaments of the velvet pile under the microscope (magnification x 400). ©Marc Plata

The analysis of the weaves produced extremely valuable information, especially with regard to the velvet. The production of velvet is a very slow and complex process and requires high quality materials. This highly prized fabric comes in many different types, varying according to the materials used, the thickness and the length of the pile.

Analysing the weave of the velvet was an arduous task which would not have been possible without the help of Sílvia Saladrigas Cheng, documentalist at the CDMT. I am very grateful to her for her guidance and for her willingness to share her expert knowledge with me.

The analysis showed that the velvet used was one of the finest: none other than Lyons velvet, renowned worldwide for its softness, its thickness and its short pile. The weave, in this case with a double pile warp, creates a dense, iridescent surface, with a short pile that is well anchored to the base fabric. My research indicated a clear connection between this high quality velvet and the figure of Charles Frederick Worth.

The surface of the velvet before the treatment, where the thickness of the pile can be seen. ©Marc Plata

Velvet's weave (magnification x 40). ©Marc Plata

In the middle of the nineteenth century the Emperor Napoleon III was eager to reactivate the French economy, as his uncle fifty years had done beforehand. One of the measures he adopted was to promote the silk industry by encouraging the use of the fabric for new purposes, not just to upholster walls and furniture. Worth, couturier to the Empress Eugénie of Montijo, was called on to make abundant use of silk, but in fact he already had a special predilection for it. In 1870, due to the strong demand, the number of looms in Lyon had doubled since the opening of the House of Worth in 1858. There is also evidence that several silk-makers in the city sent Worth their samples for approval before starting production. Thus, the fact that the train is made of Lyon velvet reinforces the hypothesis that it was made at number 7 Rue de la Paix in Paris.

As for the satin, although it does not have a characteristic weave like the velvet, it is a Duchess satin with a high thread count and body. It was used in high quality linings and gowns.

The embroidery also provided useful technical and historical information. It is known that lilacs were very much in fashion in Europe in the late nineteenth century, especially in France. The prolific French flower breeder Pierre Louis Victor Lemoine (1823-1911) created many of the 200 or so varieties of lilac that we know today. As a result of his success, the term *French lilac* is used to refer to all kinds of double flower lilac and the flower appears in many artistic representations of the time, for example in paintings by the Impressionists. So, in a symbolic way, its presence adds further support to the French origin of the train.

The flowers, embroidered directly on the velvet, are adorned with small, many-sided balls and round discs. The leaves and stalks are made of cotton thread, giving the embroidery volume and weight.

The study of the threads produced some interesting results. As we were unable to take a sample for chemical analysis, the state of preservation and the surface were sources of valuable information. Through a comparison between the different materials and historical research into the development of metal threads we hypothesised that the embroidery was made with silver-plated copper, because the silver surface of the four threads bears specks of green caused by the rusting of the copper and because of the reddish surface in the more eroded parts of the embroidery.

This finding might be seen as an argument against the attribution of the piece to Worth, since he always used materials of the highest quality. Nonetheless, the bibliography search showed that in the Middle Ages threads of noble metals began to disappear because of their price, their scarcity and (especially in the

Source: Wikimmedia Commons

Comparison between a purple lilac flower and the embroidery. Next to it, the white Madame Lemoine variety, which bears a strong resemblance to the motif of the train.

Source: Wikimmedia Commons

Various close-up images of the embroidery showing the different types of metal threads. ©Marc Plata. See more.

case of silver) the fragility of the metal. Because of this, threads made of noble metals practically disappeared in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards. Therefore, high quality metal embroidery such as the work we find in the train was made with other metals plated in gold or silver which produced more malleable, less brittle threads.

Detail of one of the embroidered flowers, demonstrating the quality of the work. ©Marc Plata

From Hélène Koechlin to the store-rooms of the CDMT

The train was offered to the CDMT in 1996 by Dominique Miraille. The acquisition is recorded in a report written by Sílvia Carbonell, the current director of the museum and at that time the museum's conservator-restorer and historian. The report was based on the information provided by M. Miraille, and on the observation of the piece. The following fragments are of particular interest:

> "The state of preservation of the piece is excellent […] So far we have not been able to confirm that it is from Worth's workshop, although this is certainly a possibility. We have been able to date the piece precisely because we know the exact dates of Louis Andrieux's short period as French ambassador to the Spanish court in 1882. The dress would most certainly have been worn at court, and probably only once or on a very few occasions, as the train has hardly any signs of wear."

During my research I contacted Dominique Miraille once again, who very kindly told me more about the piece, even though almost twenty years had passed since the sale. The most interesting information is summarised here:

> "The Koechlin family, who sold me the court train, were from Toulouse. They were the family of the composer (the descendants, of course). That's all I can tell you about the origin of the piece!
> As for Worth: All the dresses and other garments in that house were by CF Worth. I presume this piece was as well. That's my opinion, looking at the style, the fabrics used and the embroidery – all of the highest quality. But I can't tell you any more about this piece, I'm sorry."

These two sources provide invaluable information about the origin of the train. The report tells us that the owner of the train was Hélène Koechlin, the wife of Louis Andrieux. We also know that it belongs to the period when Andrieux was French ambassador to Spain, in 1882. It is described as a "court train", which identifies its function inside its owner's wardrobe.

Miraille tells us that he obtained it in Toulouse, in a house where there were several other pieces made by Worth. This interesting information gives us an important context. As Miraille states, the materials were of such high quality that he attributed it to Worth. Obviously, his criterion as an expert was reliable; but, as Sílvia Carbonell said in the report, there was no evidence to confirm it. A

study of the Koechlin family tree revealed that the French composer mentioned by Miraille was Charles Louis Eugène Koechlin, Hélène Koechlin's first cousin.

As regards the function of the train, there are many reasons for believing that it was worn at court. Court trains were worn as symbols of status and respect at events such as receptions, royal marriages and coronations. The train was usually worn at the waist, always on top of the dress, which was often not made of the same fabric. The trains were lavishly decorated and were more important than the dresses themselves. Today, queens still wear these long trains or gowns at coronations and official events.

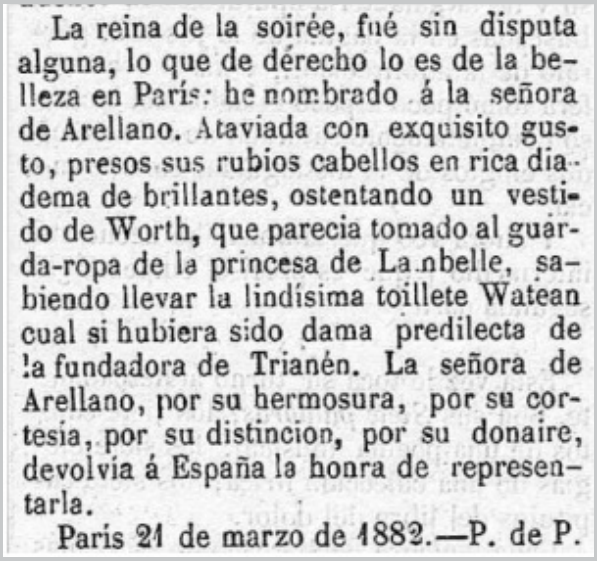
It was not until the 1850s that the train began to be worn from the shoulders, a development attributed directly to Worth [Philip Mansel, 2005]. The train was worn in different ways in different countries. For example, in England it was usually draped over one arm as a sign of respect while in France it was allowed to trail along the ground, also as a sign of respect. Broadly speaking, the length was an indicator of social status: the longer the train the higher the wearer's rank. At the Spanish court the length might vary depending on the marital status of the wearer, although some of the reports are contradictory. Therefore, in view of its characteristic form and the excellent state of preservation the idea that it was a court train rather than the train of a more normal dress gains fresh support.

According to Miraille, this court train was brought to Spain by Hélène Koechlin; so let's look at her life and the reasons why she came to Spain. Hélène Koechlin (1851-1928) was married to Louis Andrieux (1840-1931), her second (and rather temperamental) husband, with whom she had three children. She always accompanied her husband, who held various positions during his political career, including that of French ambassador to Spain, a post he accepted due to his good relations with Spain during his time as prefect of police in Paris. He decided to accept the honour conferred on him as a temporary mission, for six months. "Je n'étais donc pas tout à fait étranger à l'Espagne quand j'y arrivai dans les premiers jours d'avril 1882"[2] he writes in his book.

The press of the day has also provided invaluable information, because it followed M. Andrieux's trajectory from the moment he was appointed, his arrival in Spain, and his short but intense stay in Madrid. Receptions and visits occupied a large part of his time. "Be as Spanish as you can", said his friend Ruiz Zorrilla, and Andrieux did his best to follow this advice.

In his book Andrieux tells how impressed he was by his welcome. The Duke of Fernan Nuñez (the Spanish ambassador to France) and his wife did him the honour of travelling from Paris to receive him in Madrid. He was invited to a

2 "So I was not a total stranger to Spain when I arrived in the first days of April 1882" [p. 300] ANDRIEUX, Louis (1926) À travers la république. Editorial Payot. Paris.



La reina de la soirée, fué sin disputa alguna, lo que de dérecho lo es de la belleza en París: he nombrado á la señora de Arellano. Ataviada con exquisito gusto, presos sus rubios cabellos en rica diadema de brillantes, ostentando un vestido de Worth, que parecia tomado al guarda-ropa de la princesa de Lambelle, sabiendo llevar la lindísima toillete Watean cual si hubiera sido dama predilecta de la fundadora de Trianén. La señora de Arellano, por su hermosura, por su cortesia, por su distincion, por su donaire, devolvia á España la honra de representarla.

Paris 21 de marzo de 1882.—P. de P.

La Opinión newspaper, on 4 April 1882.

great reception, dinner and ball with the city's elite. "Ce haut parrainage me fut précieux car d'instinct l'ambassadeur de la République était tenu en observation à la Cour et dans les salons, comme un chien chez le vétérinaire"[3]. For an event of this kind, attended by the Spanish king, certain matters of protocol had to be followed; for example, the ladies were to wear a court train. Thus, accepting Dominique Miraille's premise that the train was worn at the Spanish court between these dates, Hélène Koechlin may have worn it at this first official reception (described with great excitement by Andrieux, at which the couple were presented to King Alfonso XII and Queen Maria Cristina) and would have ordered it previously from Worth.

It is difficult to find any references that link Worth directly with Hélène Koechlin. Nevertheless, there is a fragment from an article that does seem to suggest a connection. Worth was the first great international fashion designer and caused a furore for more than thirty years; the ladies of high society queued up to hire his services. Mme Andrieux fitted the social profile perfectly, and her elegance and distinction was described in the press of the day.

The following account appears in *La Carta a Paris*, dated 21 March 1882 and published in *La Opinión* on 4 April, shortly before the Andrieux moved to Madrid. The report says that Louis Andrieux organised a spectacular dinner at their home in honour of Sr. Arellano, the Spanish *chargé d'affaires*, which was attended by several members of parliament. At the end of the article, the reporter refers to the "queen of the soirée", the wife of Sr. Arellano; she was wearing a magnificent dress made by Worth "which seemed to have been taken from the wardrobe of the Princess of Lambelle". This seemingly unimportant information provides us with a link between Worth and Hélène Koechlin.

Many ladies commissioned Worth to make their dresses on the occasion of their presentation at European courts. Some of them were Americans who were eager to make a good impression in the old continent, and for this reason today European *haute couture* is well represented in the museums of the

3 "This support was most valuable to me; the French ambassador was examined at court in the salons, like a dog at the vet". [p. 300] ANDRIEUX, Louis (1926) À travers la république. Editorial Payot. Paris.

Above, the dress worn by Frances Fairchild; below, the House of Worth label sewn into the bodice ©Wisconsin Historical Museum object. Rec. no.: 1945.960,a

In the first image, Frances Fairchild in Madrid in 1880, wearing the dress made by Worth. In the second, an interesting photograph taken around 1895, in which Frances Fairchild (right) wears the dress while posing with her daughter Caryl (left), also wearing a court dress. The photo was probably taken in Madison, Wisconsin, where they lived. ©Wisconsin Historical Museum. Images: WHi-47621/WHi-476191

United States. Frances Fairchild (1845-1924), a contemporary and probably an acquaintance of the Andrieux, is of particular interest to us. She was the wife of the governor of Wisconsin, Lucius Fairchild, who was sent as American consul to France in 1872. In 1880 the couple were living with their daughters in Paris, and early that year they were told that they were to move to Madrid, where Mr Fairchild had been appointed minister plenipotentiary in Spain. For her presentation before the Spanish king and queen, Mrs Fairchild placed an order with Worth, who designed a court dress using his favourite cloth, lilac velvet, combined with a lavender-coloured satin. Mrs Fairchild kept the dress until the year of her death in 1924 and both the dress and the documentation are now housed at the Museum of Wisconsin.

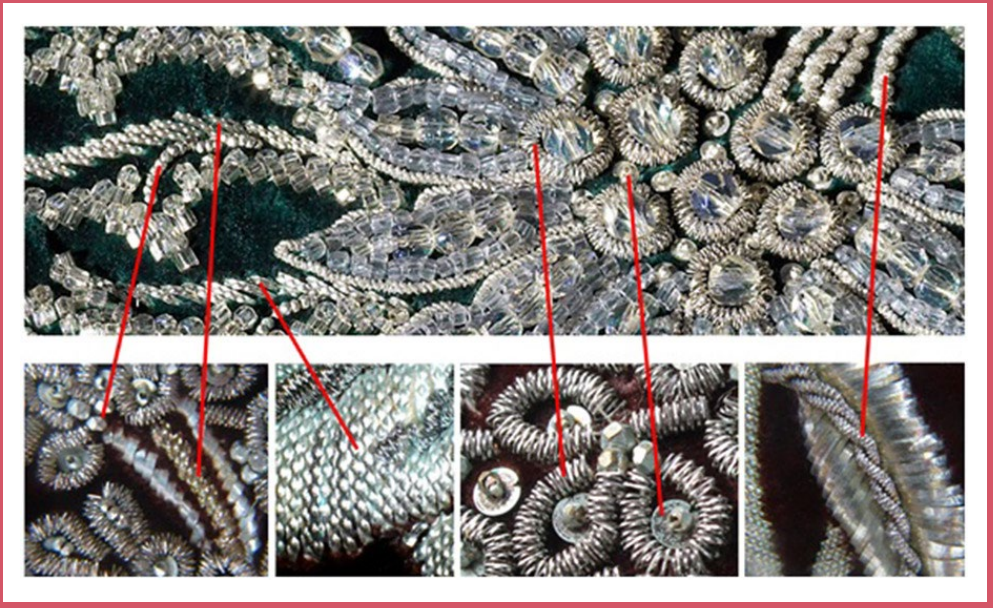
Mr Fairchild gave up his post in late 1881 and the family returned to the United States in February of the following year, just when Louis Andrieux was appointed French ambassador to Spain. It is highly possible that the two diplomats would have been introduced in Paris, and perhaps their families would also have met.

Image in profile, showing the white moiré skirt, train and emerald green velvet green bodice, corded at the back. ©Indianapolis Museum of Art. See more.

The resemblance between our train and Mrs Fairchild's dress is undeniable – especially the bodice, which is finished in lace and uses almost identical materials. Although this dress appears longer, there is probably little difference in the measurements. The photographs show that this dress bears the label inside the bodice. This may explain the absence of a label in the train; the train was considered part of an ensemble, and the label may have been attached to one of the other pieces. This is another argument in favour of the attribution to Worth: studies of photographs of Worth's creations show that most of them bore the label inside the bodice.

Worth also dressed royalty, including the Russian royal family. This magnificent green velvet dress belonged to the Russian princess Maria Maximilianova Romanovskya of Leuchtenberg (1841-1914) and dates approximately from 1888. The dress comprised a white moiré skirt, a bodice and an emerald green train measuring some 3.65 metres. It is embroidered all around the train and in part of the bodice with transparent glass balls, sequins and strips of silver (metal thread). Made in the traditional Russian style, this court dress was acquired by the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 2006 in an auction. It is a clear example of how the great designers, including Worth, had to adapt their creativity to the official norms established at each court. Even so, the piece bears some similarities to the dress of Frances Fairchild, such as the pleating around the gown and the general structure in the form of a narrow laced bodice. All the indications are that the CDMT's train might have had a dress of similar characteristics.

Apart from the general resemblance, the high quality of the images of the embroidery shows that the train that Worth made for the Russian princess



Comparison between the embroidery in the train of the Russion princess (above) and in different parts of the train of Hélène Koechlin. The resemblances are very clear. ©Indianapolis Museum of Art i ©Marc Plata

shares several elements with our train, such as the lilacs. This is a further indication that the two garments most likely came from the same workshop.

This is the sum of the evidence that I was able to gather during my final degree project. Of course a conclusive attribution is very difficult; in fact the aim of the study was just to piece together all the possible indications that the train might contain. Nonetheless the evidence found provides a sound basis for the attribution, especially with regard to the materials, whose extremely high quality is reflected in the final result and also in the present state of preservation of the piece after so many years. In addition, the notable similarities with the court gowns made by Worth provide firm support for my hypothesis that the train was worn at a reception or at another event at court, either in Spain or elsewhere.

Future studies of the train could compare it directly with other pieces made by the designer and dated to the same era, in order to see the similarities between the fabrics and the execution, and to analyse the dyes and metals used in the embroidery. And from the historical perspective, it would be fascinating to find a photograph of Mme Andrieux to gain an idea of her physical appearance.

The band that covers the right arm and the bust remains something of a mystery since I have not found any references (either visual or written) either in court gowns or ordinary dresses. The function of this fairly unusual design was most likely to cover part of the low neckline typical of court dresses. As I mentioned above, designers were constricted by court etiquette and had to adapt to the requirements of their clientele – as both these designs demonstrate (and especially the Russian one). But if we observe the creations of Worth when he was not under these restraints there is an element that appears repeatedly: the presence of the label only on the bodice, where Worth would insert a ribbon bearing his name around the waist. This may be why the train preserved at the CDMT lacks his signature. ●