

Baroque textile art for the adornment of religious figures

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¹ BASTIDA DOS SANTOS, A. F., *Los tejidos labrados de la España del Siglo XVIII y las sedas imitadas del arte rococó en Minas Gerais (Brasil. Análisis, formas y analogías. (Doctoral thesis). Universidad Politécnica de Valencia. 2009. pp. 50-142.*

Throughout the Christian liturgical year, dressed figures of the Virgin Mary, Christ and other saints from the heavenly court, from dioceses in eastern Spain, are adorned before they are placed in their respective niches and altars, or prepared for novenas, ceremonial kissing of the feet, processions and other liturgical acts. Their attire is rich in historical detail and constitutes valuable cultural heritage in the field of the decorative arts. A study of the attire produced for religious statuary reveals changes over time, and enables us to reflect on the importance of these works of textile art. Each piece is of great historical and artistic value, full of symbolism, and a window on the historical evolution of fashions, of aesthetic and formal transformations, and other social, economic and technical developments. Taking a selection of the most significant examples, this paper aims to give voice to these unique textile treasures and their expression of faith and ostentation. They form a singular body of cultural heritage, yet one that is little valued and largely unknown. These works warrant greater appreciation and must be conserved for future generations, to combat the loss of expertise and the inappropriate restoration that is driving them towards extinction.

Dressed religious figures are a subgenre within sculpture that emerged mainly in the Late Middle Ages. In creating these statues, the work of the sculptor was primarily that of the head and hands. The conical internal frame was constructed with some degree of articulation, and the rest of the statue was left unfinished so that it could be completed by a dresser. The dresser used textiles and decorative elements of precious metalwork to finish the artistic endeavour begun by the sculptor, so that merit for the final appearance of the icon was shared. The need for a second artist to complete the religious figure led sculptors such as Francisco Salzillo or Nicolás de Bussy to take an active interest in the task, giving precise instructions on the appropriate attire for their work and the materials that should be used to create it. In Spain, where the spirit of the Counter-Reformation had a profound impact, after the Council of Trent (1545) and into the early part of the seventeenth century the production of dressed statues grew exponentially¹. However, it was in the Baroque period,

Baroque textiles for earthly and heavenly royalty. Left, detail of a portrait of Catherine of Habsburg-Lorraine and Queen of Naples. Source: Museo del Prado. Right, tunic of Our Lady of Grace (Murcia). Source: S. Espada.



2 PÉREZ SÁNCHEZ, M, *La magnificencia del culto. Estudio histórico-artístico del ornamento litúrgico en la diócesis de Cartagena*. Alfonso X el Sabio. Obispado de Cartagena. Murcia. 1997. pp. 202-203. BACCHI, A., COLLARETA, M., DESMAS, A. MONTAGU, J., SICCA, C., YARRINGTON, A, *Vestire le statue. Arte, devocione e committenza nella Toscana nord-occidentale*. Pisa University Press. Pisa. 2016.

when changing tastes brought new approaches to religious iconography, that these statues took on a more richly adorned and opulent appearance². Dressed figures of the Virgin Mary and Christ, under their various names, were powerful instructional vehicles that bolstered Catechism and brought greater devotion from parishioners. Therefore, these statues required clothing that was worthy of their heavenly status, with no detail overlooked, and whose magnificence and propriety were carefully watched over in the synodic constitutions from the sixteenth century onwards, to safeguard the boundary between the earthly and the divine. In addition, the contemporaneity of the sacred attire – a device we find in religious representations produced by Flemish painters and Italian Renaissance artists – enabled a slight transformation towards a more human appearance that was more accessible to the faithful. The luxurious fabrics used in the creation of the clothes, drawn almost from the new “fashions” of the Renaissance, were illustrative of status and power. Clearly the Virgin Mary and Christ did not wear such sumptuous attire, but the richness was entirely justified since, as Fray Luis de Ledesma wrote, “*it is right to diverge from the historical truth to educate the simplest spirits, as the richness of the clothes is an indication of glory in heaven*”.

Our Lady of Grace and Good Will adorned with Baroque textiles in the eighteenth-century style. Source: A. Romero (See detail).



3 OLIVARES GALVAÑ, P., “La Seda en Murcia en los Siglos XVI al XVIII” in Seda. Historias Pendientes de un hilo. Murcia, siglos X al XXI. Editum. Murcia. 2017. p. 38.

Lustrous silk, velvet, damask, gold and silver threads, brocade and fine embroidery were the mediums, materials and techniques preferred by brotherhoods and devotees for the majestically dressed figures of the Virgin and Christ. However, these historical textile creations are more than just mere items of clothing to cover the nudity of their statues. They are works of art of great significance, with a rich history of their own, encapsulated in and expressed through decorative motifs determined by the trends of each period. Each piece was executed with such technical skill and artistry that they can be considered alongside haut-relief and painting. The main decoration on this clothing was formed by floral and plant motifs, rich in symbolism associated with the Virgin Mary and the Passion (including roses, thistles, acanthus, vine and palm leaves) as well as the iconography of the Virgin Mary and *Arma Christi*. Thus, when a patron or devotee made an offering of a robe for Our Father Jesus or the Virgin, the statue was imbued with an expressiveness on which the faithful were invited to reflect. These items of textile art, donated to request the assistance, favour or intercession of the Virgin and the Saints, can only be understood in the context of a deeply religious society in which faith permeated all aspects of daily life³.

The attire of the religious statues considered in our study is characterised by two aspects: contemporaneity and significance. It was contemporaneous in the sense that the clothing was made with fabric and embroidery work strongly influenced by the royal, courtly aesthetic that was popular at the time: in this case, French, Bourbon, Baroque style, which had been common in Spain since the sixteenth century.

Robe “of the arrival” of Our Father Jesus of Nazareth, from Huércal-Overa. Producer unknown, attributed to the studio of Agustinas Recoletas in Murcia. Ca. 1745. Source: S. Espada. [See more.](#)



The significance of the attire of a religious statue is revealed in its colours and decorative motifs, which are charged with symbolism and iconography relating to the Virgin Mary (such as the Litanies) and the Passion (for example, the *Arma Christi*). The Virgin Mary is the queen of heaven and earth, and to stress this sovereign status over the faithful her statue was dressed in a manner befitting any other queen of Europe. It therefore comprised a voluminous skirt, a close-fitting top or bodice – both in a clearly French style – and a royal cape, richly adorned with lace and silver and gold braiding, as well as ornate blonde lace or lace edging arranged in the form of a triangle, as a symbol of the Holy Trinity or the Holy Mountain. Although contemporary fabrics were used, Christ’s attire was closely associated with the Holy Scriptures, thus his robes were heavily symbolic, and often albs or long tunics sometimes with a long tail to emulate Venetian royal capes. They unequivocally projected the regal status of the figure depicted.



4 RAUSELL ADRIÁN, F.X., *Indumentària tradicional valenciana, matèries primeres color i ornamentació en la roba tradicional*, Andana Editorial, València, 2014. p. 268.

The textile art in our study is divided into two principal areas: patterned fabrics (brocade and broché) and embroidered fabrics.

The patterned fabrics presented a wide range of designs based mainly on floral motifs. In the early eighteenth century, the influence of the Eastern aesthetic can be seen in these fabrics, particularly in what were known as *bizarros*. These were characterised by an unnatural reality verging on abstraction, and on the Baroque aesthetic that predominated across Europe, accentuated by the accession of the Bourbons to the Spanish throne.

The designs were drawn from work produced in other major centres of textile production, particularly in Italy and, above all, in France⁴. Lyon was among the foremost textile cities in Europe, leading the way in forging trends and with a wealth of designers working for the commercial market. Their designs were adapted to the Spanish taste, bringing new decorative motifs and opening new channels of national distribution. Though the most common adornments were flowers, bows, laces, garlands and branches, some new elements could be found such as **birds** or vases, the latter forming rhomboid compositions that were generally symmetrical. During the latter part of the eighteenth century, examples of emerged of vase designs without the earlier symmetry.

An analysis of Spanish designs, particularly Valencian designs from the eighteenth century, shows considerable changes compared to the previous century, in which we can identify two broad adaptations to new tastes. In the first half of the eighteenth century, elongated leaves continued to be used but were more widely spaced, interspersed with elements of Baroque decoration and

Bodice and dress of the Virgen of Carmen (Murcia). Attributed to a studio in Valencia or Barcelona. Eighteenth century. Source: catalogue: "La virgen del Carmen, devoción y culto" (2008).



Cape of the Virgin of Grace (Murcia). Possibly from a studio in Valencia. Eighteenth century. Asymmetric branches combine with laces and ribbons in an undulating, rhomboidal pattern. Source: S. Espada.



5 DE ARTIÑANO, Pedro Miguel, *Catálogo de la exposición de tejidos españoles anteriores a la introducción del Jacquard*. Sociedad Española de Amigos del Arte. Madrid, 1917. p. 22.

arranged symmetrically but not always in a rhomboidal pattern. Later, in the second half of the eighteenth century, asymmetrical motifs were popularised, bringing geometrically founded compositions⁵ created using three bobbins.

Greater thematic complexity emerged, and though decorative elements were inherited from the seventeenth century, they were developed according to the new trends established by French manufacturers, who maintained the prevailing naturalism of the earlier period but introduced greater symmetry into their designs. Wavy designs were combined with vertical strips and rhomboidal patterns. Undulating floral themes and central spaces occupied by branches in a naturalistic style were juxtaposed with baskets or Baroque decorations of bows and laces.



Embroidered tunic and bodice of Our Lady of the Rosary. Convent church of Santa Ana de Murcia. Studio of MM Dominicas of Santa Ana (Murcia). Ca 1755-1760. Source: S. Espada.

6 In fine embroidery, the gold and silver threads do not pass through the medium. Several types of embroidery stitches are used to attach them to the piece.

As in the case of patterned textiles, embroidered Baroque fabrics feature abundant floral and plant motifs that twist and intertwine⁶. Borders of thistles, roses with thorns or acanthus leaves, depicted in close detail and always in relief work, generating textures that lend depth to the motifs. Bows, ribbons and lace also appear as decorative elements. Undulating and ascending structures are frequently bound by branches, which may be symmetrical or asymmetrical.

These many examples of textile art reveal great technical and artistic skill. They speak to the complexity of the maker's task, akin to that of the artist, which required the *sketching and painting*, thread by thread, of painstaking and sometimes exclusive designs that stood the test of time, many being used well into the nineteenth century or adapted to new aesthetic tastes. ●

Embroidered cape of the Virgin of Solitude (Murcia). Anonymous studio. Eighteenth century. Restored by Sebastián Marchante. Branch between undulating geometric structures, tied with a bow. The piece is given depth by the use of texture. Source: S. Marchante.



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