

# Textile treasure:

## The collection of the Holy Museum of la Concepción de la Orotava

by NATALIA ÁLVAREZ HERNÁNDEZ ,  
Schoolteacher and Official Canary Islands Tourist Guide and  
ADOLFO R. PADRÓN RODRÍGUEZ, Conservator and Restorer of Cultural Heritage  
and Coordinator of the Holy Museum of La Concepción de la Orotava

The first record of Church of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception of La Orotava (Tenerife) dates back to 1503, when a small hermitage was built. In time, the building would become established as a characteristic Canarian church with three naves, side chapels and Mudejar coffered ceilings. However, between 1704 and 1705 the course of history took an unexpected turn when the island was hit by a series of earthquakes; the structure of the church was badly damaged, and it had to be rebuilt from its very foundations.

Thus, in 1768 began the reconstruction of the church that would become the paradigm of Baroque architecture in the Canary Islands: built in the form of a basilica, with three naves, barrel vaults and a dome above the transept. The work was completed in 1788.

From its beginnings, the parish of La Concepción has been home to a large collection of artistic creations, now housed in the seven rooms of the Holy Museum: painting, sculpture, metalwork in gold and silver, furniture and, in the case that interests us here, textiles.

The church acquired this heritage through a variety of means which have all, in their own way, contributed to shaping its history. The first pieces to arrive were bought by the parish factory, above all during the reconstruction process between 1768 and 1788). These pieces reflected the aesthetics of the new project, a process of renovation that ranged over all the arts. The second wave of acquisitions dates from 1767, when the Jesuit Order was expelled from Spain and their possessions passed from the San Luis Gonzaga College to the parish. The third source comprised private donations from families which still today possess pieces of genuine artistic value which they acquired for their old oratories and private hermitages; and finally, after the process of disentanglement in the early nineteenth century, the church's collection was enlarged by the arrival of several pieces from convents.

All these processes greatly expanded the number of pieces in the church's possession. Perhaps above all, its textile collection deserves special mention. Considered one of the most important in the Canary Islands in terms of both quantity and quality, the repertoire of textile pieces of the church of La Orotava ranges widely in terms of style, period and origin.



Damask chasuble from Spain (detail), seventeenth century.

1 SANTANA RODRÍGUEZ, Lorenzo, *Los bordadores en Tenerife durante el siglo XVI*, Anuario del Instituto de Estudios Canarios, 46; 2001, pp. 493-504.

2 PÉREZ MORERA, Jesús, *Oro, plata y sedas: Notas sobre los tejidos y ornamentos de la Parroquia de La Concepción de La Orotava*, Programa de Semana Santa, Ayuntamiento de La Orotava, 2001.

3 PÉREZ MORERA, Jesús, "Casulla de los Mártires", en *La Huella y la Senda*, Islas Canarias, 2004, pp. 572-574.

As early as the sixteenth century the church owned liturgical ornaments<sup>1</sup>, even though nothing remains from those early times because of the fragility of the materials used. However, there is documentary evidence of the existence of a *pallium embroidered in gold and silks* commissioned to the embroiderer Alonso de Ocampo in 1569 and finalized by Gaspar Sanchez, with a monstrance flanked by two angels and the evangelists in the corners and a *set of vestments of red velvet with embroidery in silks*, recorded in an inventory of 1686, described as already *old but healthy*.<sup>2</sup>

The patrimony from the seventeenth century is also very scarce. Among the few pieces in the collection which date from that period are the damasks *of Spain*. Due to their technical characteristics, damasks are among the most durable of fabrics. The damasks *of Spain* come from the cities of Toledo, Granada, Seville and Valencia and display geometrical plant motifs.<sup>3</sup> Among them are four chasubles, two in red and two in green, and an altar frontal which as well as plant motifs depicts pairs of birds facing each other, a very common feature in later models.

In the eighteenth century began the production of what were known as Palma damasks, with large plant motifs such as flowers, leaves, stems, and pomegranates occupying the entire width of the piece. Examples of these





Altar frontal with dragon decoration (detail), Philippines.

Costume with bird design (detail), France, eighteenth century.



damasks present in the collection comprise a range of vestments, chasubles and capes in crimson, green, blue and pink. The collection also includes several damasks from Italy like the one used to make one of the purple sets of vestments.

The eighteenth century was the period of La Orotava's maximum splendour. A great number of acquisitions were made over the course of this century, propitiated also by the reconstruction of the church. Significant purchases were made not only in Spain but abroad, with the incorporation of two altar frontals from the East, one of them decorated with dragons inside medallions embroidered on a delicate background of silk taffeta with threads in different colours.





4 PÉREZ MORERA, Jesús; RODRÍGUEZ MORALES, Carlos. “Oro, plata y sedas. Los ornamentos sagrados“, *Arte en Canarias. Vol. II: Del Gótico al Manierismo*. Gobierno de Canarias. 2008, pp. 251 ff.

Among the European works, the creations of French origin deserve special mention. There are a number of pieces in silk, mostly from Lyon; one of them is a costume of the Virgin made from a silver fabric with birds made with a swivel weave in silk, in which the asymmetrical arrangement, the depiction of nature and the general aesthetic feel all reflect the fascination with the East that prevailed in Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century.

However, the fabrics produced in Spain are the most abundant. For a long time Seville was one of the main suppliers of embroidery, silks and brocade.

Reminiscent of Sevillian models is a crimson costume of the Virgin of the Dormition, in a bizarre design with floral elements and silver braid. The exquisite foliage in this costume bears witness to a profound admiration for nature. The use of a wide range of colours in the flowers seeks to achieve a naturalistic effect – *individual portraits*, as Professor Pérez Morera<sup>4</sup> would say – motifs of great symmetry and a technique that reproduces the *effect of painting with threads* so typical of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Cadiz was also an important focus of production of the works in the collection. Among the examples of embroideries from Cadiz are the capes of *viaticum*, made in silver fabric with floral embroidery in gold relief.



Cape of *viaticum* (detail), Cadiz,  
early nineteenth century.



Chasuble from the chapel of Our Lady of Carmen, Cadiz, late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century. [See detail.](#)



5 A.P.M.N.S.C. 148.  
1.3.1.1. (Legajo cuentas de fábrica: Cuentas dadas por el Mayordomo Antonio Monteverde y Rivas, 1819-1827).

6 We thank Arabella León Muñoz, of the Moncada Silk Museum, for identifying the designs.

From the end of the eighteenth century or the beginning of the nineteenth is a chasuble of white satin silk embroidered in coloured silks, metallic threads and sequins. The decoration comprises three vertical stripes and the two sides have twisted loops which differ from each other. The front has the same decoration and the back displays the eucharistic allegory of the pelican feeding its young.

Another nineteenth-century piece and also from Cadiz is the *pallium of Corpus*<sup>5</sup>. Paid for by the Monteverde family – one of the main promoters of the feast of Corpus Christi – it was made in smooth white satin silk with highly symmetrical embroidery in gold relief, and in its centre mystical lamb above the Book of the Seven Seals, which bears the initials of the Seven Sacraments. The whole of this motif is made in coloured silks and surrounded by gold embroidery, using laminated threads, silk twists and brocades.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth, Valencian silk production was at its peak. The city was one of Europe's leading producers and was home to several highly acclaimed silk manufactures. The Museum has several pieces made by one of these manufactures, the Garín factory. From the same factory are designs such as [San Felipe](#), Nacimiento, Reyes, Escorial, Alcázar, Cáliz Corona, Blasco and Jacquard, in chasubles, capes and costumes of the Virgin<sup>6</sup>.





Mitre of Bishop Luis Folgueras y Sión, 1769-1850 (detail), twentieth century.

7 PÉREZ MORERA, Jesús, *El arte de la Seda: el tejido litúrgico en Canarias (Los ornamentos de la Catedral de La Laguna)*, Revista de Historia Canaria, 184; 2002, pp. 275-316.

Also from the nineteenth century is the set of pontifical ornaments of Bishop Luis Folgueras y Sión, the first bishop of the Diocese of Tenerife, which was established in 1819. The cape and its matching mitre are made of a series of embroideries on white silk with motifs and techniques typical of the French fashions of the time: the Empire style, a figurative symbolism depicting eucharistic allegories, and the use of sequins and embroidery in gold and silver<sup>7</sup>.

The vestments of Corpus, or the rich vestments of the parish, are among the most emblematic sets of liturgical garments in the collection. This suit was commissioned to Lyon by Antonio Monteverde y Rivas, in charge of the factory between 1819 and 1827, and was made out of a silver fabric with flowers inside a lozenge-shaped grid formed by laurel leaves worked in gold. The ladies of the Monteverde family made the suit and enriched the fabric by adding and sequins. The piece is still used in the celebration of the Infraoctava of Corpus Christi.

Antonio Monteverde also acquired another series of pieces in an attempt to revive a ceremony that was falling into disuse, among them an embroidered





Vestments for the celebration of Corpus Christi (detail), Lyon, 1819-1827.

8 GOYANES CAPDEVILLA, José, *Las Antiguas Industrias de la Seda en Tenerife*, Talk at the Círculo de Bellas Artes de Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Tenerife, 1938.

9 DARIAS PRÍNCIPE, Alberto, *El papel de la Iglesia en el desarrollo de los textiles en Canarias: el caso de la seda*, *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos*, 58; 2012, pp. 857-890.

standard which he obtained in Cadiz together with other materials (gold thread, glass, and sequins) for the creation of the banner of the Sacramental Brotherhood which was made by his wife, his mother-in-law and sisters-in-law.

The production of what was known as *island silk* expanded notably in the late seventeenth century<sup>8</sup>. There were silk-making centres in La Gomera, Gran Canaria and Tenerife, where the climate allowed the cultivation of mulberry trees and silkworms and stimulated the development of the industry. One of the towns most involved in silk production was Icod de los Vinos which produced taffetas and a range of other fabrics. In 1777, there were five looms in La Orotava and in the Puerto de La Orotava the Cologan family had a factory.

These workshops seem to have been the origin of the island silk items in the collection. One of them is a [taffeta “guitar” chasuble](#) in red and white with yellow silk braid of great originality, currently used in the ceremony in honour of San Isidro and called the *turronera* by the townspeople, because of its likeness with the typical Canary *turrón*<sup>9</sup>.

As we can see, the Museum’s “Treasure of La Concepción” collection presents a very extensive set of resources for the study of textiles. Here we have presented just a brief introduction. Further studies are needed to explore specific textile types in more detail: the linen, for instance, merits an in-depth study, given its abundance inside the collection. ●