

Context and Conservation: The Study and Treatment of a Tapestry-woven Medieval Aumônière from the Cathedral of Como, Italy



Fig. 1: The aumônière prior to conservation treatments. Como, Cathedral (Abegg-Stiftung, 2018; Christoph von Viråg).



Fig. 2: The aumônière following conservation treatments and reshaping. Como, Cathedral (Abegg-Stiftung, 2019; Christoph von Viråg).



Fig. 3: Microphotograph of the gilt membrane thread interwoven throughout various depictions in the tapestry-weave (Smithsonian Institution, Museum Conservation Institute, 2019; Caroline Solazzo).

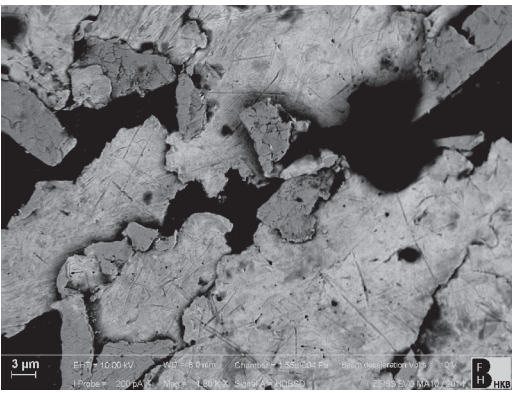


Fig. 4: SEM-image of the gilt membrane thread, demonstrating a light-colored layer of gold over a base of silver (Hochschule der Künste Bern (HKB), Kunsttechnologisches Labor, 2018; Nadim Scherrer).

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Abstract

Created in the 13th to 14th century, the aumônière or alms bag central to this thesis was preserved for centuries in the treasury of the Cathedral of Como, Italy, before being presented to the Abegg-Stiftung for conservation. The object had been stored folded in a silver chest since 1586, during which time, creases had formed throughout its surface. The linen lining that historically formed the shape of the aumônière also held the creases with great tenacity, contributing to the distortion of the object, endangerment of the fragile silk threads and obfuscation of the unique tapestry-woven figurative depictions. Due to the multifaceted nature of materials used in this object, including membrane metal threads, vibrantly dyed silks, starched linen cloth, an iron opening-ring and brass and/or bronze chain links attached to a pendant of the same material, an adaptive conservation strategy was devised. Research into the various components of the object, scientific analyses and surrogate tests aided in the formation of a conservation approach. To establish an appropriate treatment, various humidification procedures were considered, and various tests performed on a reconstruction of the object. A minimally invasive ultrasonic humidification treatment was tailored to meet the preservation requirements for silk, while mitigating risks of oxidation and corrosion of the membrane metal threads and iron ring. Finally, the damaged areas were overlaid with silk crepe-line, and a support form was made to prevent future distortions of the aumônière's surface in case of fluctuations in relative humidity. This treatment allowed the object to be successfully relaxed and returned to its original shape, while ensuring its long-term preservation.

Historical Overview

Based on art historical research, the aumônière can be allocated to the 13th to 14th century, when it was likely commissioned by an aristocratic European household, possibly in celebration of a matrimonial union between two powerful families, a thesis based on the bag's iconography and the coats of arms. For centuries, the aumônière lay in an elaborate silver chest commissioned in 1586 by Bishop Giovan Antonio Volpi for the Cathedral of Como in Italy. This chest, crafted by the artist Gasparo Molo da Breglia served to house this medieval aumônière as well as other reliquary objects of various ages, presumably from the Cathedral's treasury, from the Renaissance onward. Upon the opening of the chest in 2009, the medieval tapestry-woven aumônière in trapezoidal form was revealed. Legendary romantic scenes indicative of the tale of Tristan and Isolde, floating rows of disembodied heads and clustered heraldic symbols emerged in vivid color. Vibrant silks and luminescent metal threads serve to accentuate the intricately woven and mostly repetitive scenes of hunting, chess playing and heraldry, which appear in sequential rows across the object's surface. The conservation of the aumônière was possible thanks to the cooperation of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali (Direzione Generale Archeologia, Belle Arti e Paesaggio), Diocesi di Como, the Chiesa Cattedrale di Como and the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, Switzerland.

Conservation Strategy and Results

Since heavy creases distorted the aumônière, obfuscating much of its surface and endangering its fragile silk threads, a strategy involving the relaxation of the creases evolved. Particular attention was paid to the potential susceptibility to degradation of the black-dyed silk threads, membrane metal threads with unusually well preserved silver lames, iron opening-ring and a metal pendant during a humidification treatment. Scientific analyses revealed that the membrane is covered with a layer of silver over which a second layer of gold is applied. Following the examination of various humidification procedures and surrogate tests on a reconstruction of

the object, a minimally invasive conservation approach was taken. By utilizing ultra-sonic humidification, a modular expansion form and delivery systems in the form of sandwich shaped compresses consisting of two pieces of Gore-Tex™ membrane enclosing a dampened piece of blotting paper, the object could be humidified. This allowed for treatment of the creases, while mitigating further oxidation of the iron ring. Further conservation measures involved the encasement of the embrittled and degraded taffeta lining material found throughout the aumônière in silk crepe-line to prevent material losses. To prevent the reformation of creases in the presence of raised humidity due to a fiber-memory, a modular support form of firm, perforated Ethafoam™ covered in Hollytex™ was inserted into the aumônière.

Conclusion

The investigation and conservation of this precious aumônière has brought fascinating details of its medieval past to light, while also preparing it for exhibition in a future museum that will house treasures from the Cathedral of Como. The extraordinarily well preserved dyes of the silk threads and metal lames of the metal threads as well as its almost untouched state allow the viewer to get a profound understanding of the making of a medieval courtly bag and to experience its almost original appearance even after several hundreds of years.

