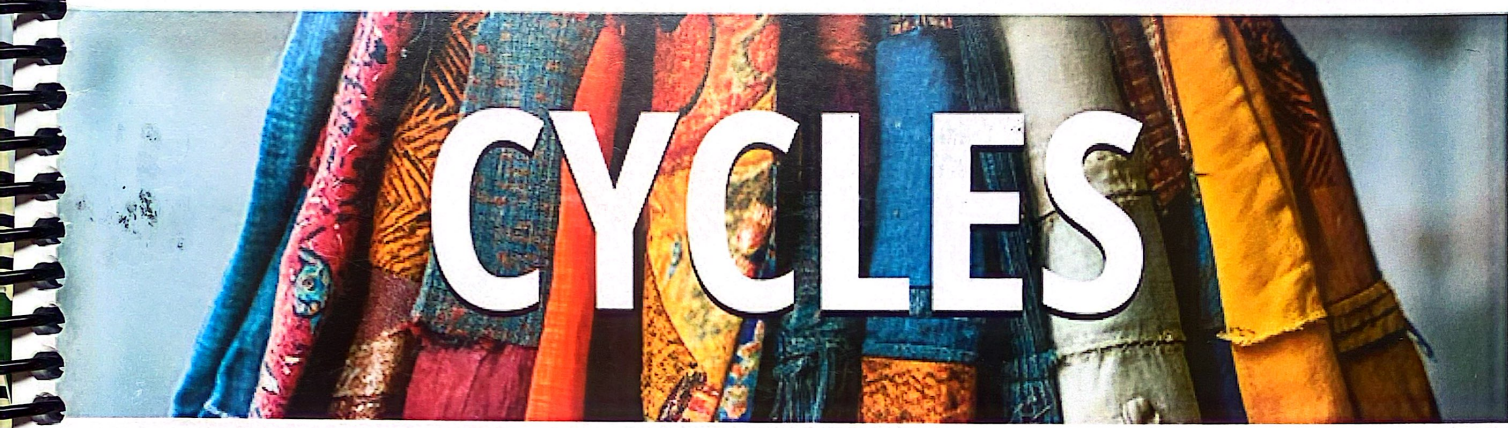




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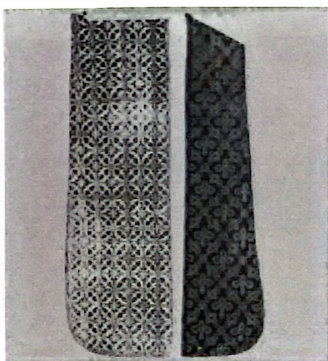


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Costume Society of America
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REFRAMING MEDIEVAL VELVETS: FROM RITUAL TO MUSEUM CONTEXT

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Early 17th-century velvet fragments from the Hispanic Society Museum & Library's collection (H1091, H1092).

Examining textiles through the lens of secondary use draws attention to their history, questioning what they once were and what they have become. From a museological standpoint, these transformations multiply the layers of semantic meaning. Accordingly, this paper addresses the challenge of interpreting museum heritage through the framework of functional reuse and the reconfiguration of meaning.

In this context, the samples of medieval textiles, such as those in the Hispanic Society Museum & Library, are especially revealing (del Álamo Martínez 2012). Its collection includes cut-voided or brocaded silk velvets that were once part of larger items, such as garments or upholstery, as indicated by their shape and snipped seams. Unlike ordinary remnants of fabric, these fragments are treated within the museum as carriers of significant cultural and historical information.

Silk velvets with Gothic patterns were widely employed during the Renaissance for aristocratic and ecclesiastical purposes (May 1938). By the eighteenth century, developments in dress and technology had contributed to the decline of this practice (Saladrigas Cheng 2001). In the nineteenth century, Gothic velvet production experienced a brief revival, and the growth of private collecting and the search for industrial design inspiration made historical samples highly sought after on the antiques market (Cabrera-Lafuente 2018). This contributed to the fragmentation and decontextualization of the original objects. Many of those samples subsequently entered museum collections.

Evidence of reassembling garments into single sheets is found in items at HSM&L, including the two panels of a chasuble sewn together along the ornament line (H935). There also are true puzzle-like samples from multiple small scraps of velvet stitched together, which apparently remained after the alteration of a larger item (H957). Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Museum collection shows cases of constructing "new" chasubles by combining fragments from different garments (16.32.322; 33.95.60). This illustrates how market demand impacted the transformation of velvets from ritual objects into collectible items.

A challenge of representing and interpreting this heritage today is compounded by poor provenance information. Attempting to attribute fragments, researchers compare them with other museum collections, identify items made from similar textiles, find identical samples, and even reconstruct the appearance of complete garments (Moreno Coll 2023). Thus, examining Gothic velvets in museum collections through the lens of secondary use reveals their trajectory from objects of ritual and aristocratic culture to sources encompassing material technologies, artistic traditions, intercultural contacts, and collecting practices, allowing them to be interpreted as multi-layered historical evidence.

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