A Treasure from the Deep: The Replication and Re-interpretation of a Unique Shipwreck Textile and its Cultural Connections

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Abstract

This paper will examine the role of replica making in museums through a case study of the author's replication project of an 18th century quilted petticoat salvaged from the shipwreck of the Dutch merchant vessel, the St. Michel, which sank off the coast of Finland in 1747. Creating a replica of this fragile object offers opportunities to both researches and members of the public to examine the object and the methods of its construction in a way which would otherwise be impossible. I will argue that the handling and examination of a replica based on a unique and otherwise unapproachable museum object can re-invigorate interest in traditional dressmaking techniques and can enhance everyone's learning experience about the object and its cultural significance. This object is a part of the wider cultural story communicated by the collections of the National Maritime Museum of Finland and its replication and re-interpretation is a key example of how the museum aims to become a true cultural hub where shared heritage and traditional skills are better understood and celebrated by all.

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Shipwrecks and Shipwreck Textiles

In 1747 a merchant ship left Amsterdam laden with precious cargo. Fabrics, porcelain, spices and other luxury goods had been carried on board for wealthy patrons to enjoy. Its route took it to the Baltic Sea and the treacherous archipelago scattered along the southern coast of present-day Finland. Unfortunately, on a dark and stormy night, the ship disappeared and passed out of living memory, its crew, passengers and cargo forgotten about for over two centuries. **(**Ehanti 2012, 14-86)

The Baltic Sea is a unique preservation environment and a dream for those interested in shipwrecks of wooden vessels. A combination of low temperatures, low salinity levels and low oxygen levels create the optimum environment for the preservation of any wooden artefacts, because *Teredo Navalis*, the wood eating naval shipworm cannot breed or survive there. Unlike in other seas, wooden ships can be found in the Baltic in stunningly good condition despite being centuries old. (Steffen and Montonen 2012, 222-29)

Shipwrecks, and shipwreck finds, form a key part of the collections of the Maritime Museum of Finland. In accordance with the Finnish Antiquities Act all shipwrecks that are over 100 years old are immediately protected sites and every object raised from them automatically enters the collections of the Maritime Museum. As a part of the National Museum of Finland, the maritime museum and its staff work diligently and tirelessly to preserve our underwater cultural heritage and to catalogue, conserve and interpret the information and stories that these wrecks and their objects can tell us. (Nurmio-Lähdemäki 2005, 34-5)

“Shipwreck textiles” is a term used to describe almost any textile-based objects found in a shipwreck context. More often than not this means that the objects have been discovered from the remains of a sunken vessel and have been substantially damaged due to their submersion in sea water for several decades or centuries. These types of objects can include sailcloth, bundles of leather or fabric as well as individual garments such as waistcoats, socks or dresses. These textiles form a unique sub-category of the study of dress and textile history and are rare even on a global scale. To have well-preserved shipwreck textiles in a museum collection is even more unusual.

To conserve and thoroughly investigate shipwreck textiles is both expensive and immensely time consuming and many museums simply do not have the resources to dedicate to such a project. Shipwreck textiles, particularly if they are unassuming in appearance, are often not a priority for large-scale research projects in the institutions that care for them, because, as we all know, resources are stretched thin even at the best of times.

The Treasures of the St Michel

Among one of these unassuming examples of a shipwreck textile is this: Object KM/SMM62001:127 from the collection of the Maritime Museum of Finland. This object might not look like much at first, especially to the naked eye. It is discoloured, deteriorated and extremely fragile and if you attempt to uncover its secrets simply by staring at it on a table, you won’t get very far. However, to me it is nothing short of miraculous.

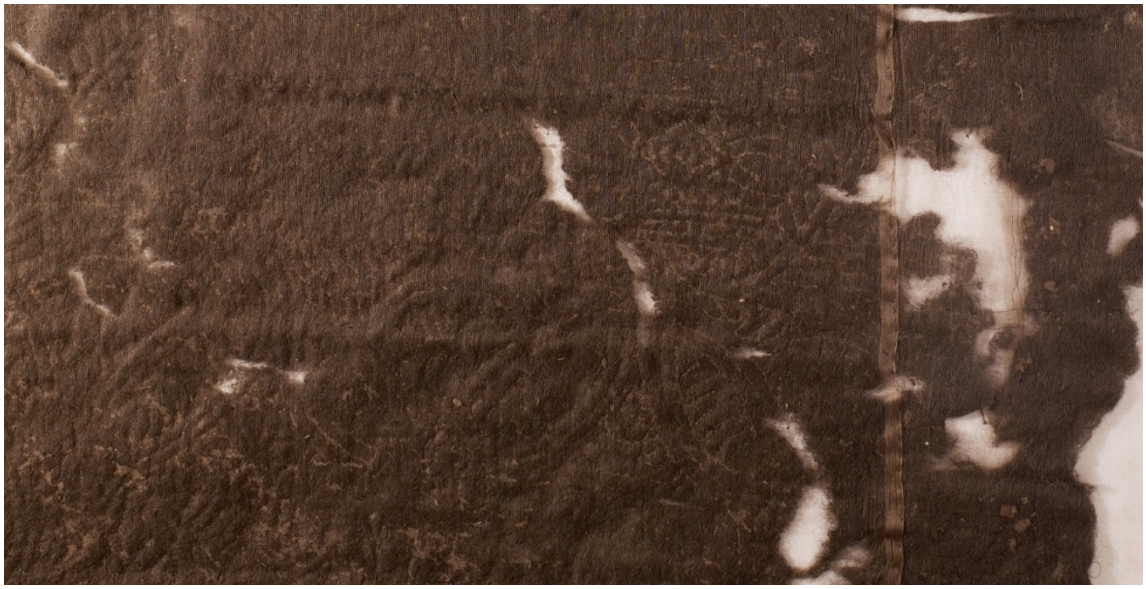

Figure 1. *A close up of the remnants of the 18th century quilted petticoat. Photograph by Markku Haverinen, The Heritage Agency of Finland*

This object is what now remains of an 18th Century quilted women's petticoat after being subjected to the chilling embrace of the Baltic Sea for over two centuries. What we have is a layer of wool batting or wadding which would originally have been sandwiched between two layers of what would originally have been rather luxurious silk fabric.

The story of this object goes back at least to 1747. That year, a Dutch merchant ship called the St. Michel (also known as the Sankt Mikael) was on its way from Amsterdam to St. Petersburg. This shipwreck is one of the most well-known, well-researched and valuable shipwreck discoveries in Finnish history. It was found by fishermen in the early 1950s off the Southwestern coast of Finland near the island of Borstö, and the first dive to the wreck was made in 1956. Further diving expeditions to the site were undertaken in 1958 and in the 1960s. The wreck remained unidentified and was referred to by the name of the island it was closest to, as is customary with all shipwreck finds in Finland. Thus, the wreck became known as Borstö 1. (Ahlström 2005, 84-90)

Various expeditions revealed a collection of stunning luxury goods, which had survived in remarkably good condition. Objects such as Meissen porcelain, gilded snuffboxes, fan parts decorated in Burmese rubies and diamonds, exquisitely carved watches and even a cariole-style carriage were raised from the wreck and conserved for future preservation at the Maritime Museum of Finland. Many of the objects brought to the surface in the 1960s can be seen and admired by museum visitors in the permanent exhibition of the Maritime Museum in the Maritime Centre Vellamo in Kotka.

Figures 2 and 3. (left) *A Meissen porcelain figurine and* ***(right)*** *a Meissen porcelain jug lifted from the shipwreck of the St. Michel. The Maritime Museum of Finland.*

From the location of the ship and its cargo, it had been reasonably surmised that the ship was most likely en route to St. Petersburg where the Russian Imperial Court had an insatiable desire for luxury goods. After thorough archival research Doctor Christian Ahlström identified the wreck in 1971 as the merchant ship St. Michel. Ahlström's archival researched confirmed this and revealed that at least the cariole-carriage had been intended for the use of Empress Elisabeth Petrovna herself. (Ahlström 2005, 95-7)

Out of all the glamorous objects carried by the ship, the petticoat is perhaps the least well preserved. Its true nature is only revealed after the intervention of some strong lighting and excellent camera work. The St. Michel lies at a depth of approximately 40 meters, where the pressure is about 5 bar. Because of this pressure the original quilted pattern of the petticoat has been imprinted on to the surviving wool wadding giving us a surprisingly good idea of what the original garment would have looked like.

Fabric analysis has shown that the wool wadding consists of both very coarse and very fine hairs (Vajanto 2014,122), which would have made the material difficult to work with, but would have provided the garment wearer with extra warmth and would have helped ensure the garment kept its fullness and body. The layer of wool wadding is quite thin, only about 3mm and it is unlikely that its original thickness would have been much greater as evidenced by surviving examples of better-preserved quilted petticoats. It is my opinion that despite being referred to as a "petticoat" the garment is unfinished and was never made up to be a complete skirt, but this cannot be proven without further research.

We also know that rather unusually for a quilted petticoat, the wadding was sandwiched between two layers of silk and that the petticoat was therefore not lined with a cheaper material as many other examples are. The petticoat would have been decorated with small pearls, remnants of which still exists, that seem to have been attached with silver thread.(Vajanto 2012, 136) Analysis of the small remaining fragments of the silk and the wool batting has shown the colours of the original garment are difficult to determine (Vajanto 2014, 122).

Quilted petticoats were extremely popular garments in the 18th century and examples of them have survived in museum collections particularly in Europe and North America. Though they have been referred to as "Dutch" petticoats in some scholarly literature, the style was used in many nations including Sweden, France, Holland, Britain and the North American colonies. Sometimes the garments have survived in their unaltered state, but many quilted petticoats were re-fashioned into other garments or turned in to bedspreads after their style and cut fell out of fashion. (Pylkkänen 1982, 62-9)

The Replication Process

The remnants of our petticoat were previously interpreted and displayed at the maritime museum in 2012 in our exhibition "Spoils of Riches: the Stories of the Vrouw Maria and the St. Michel." Since then a decision was made that due to its extremely fragile nature the object will most likely not be displayed to the public in any continuous manner in the near future. Because the extant textile has restrictions for research, cannot be displayed, and certainly cannot be handled by any members of the general public, I was determined to find a way to share its story with a wider group of people without compromising the object. Building on the work of scholar Hilary Davidson, who has demonstrated the value of replicas in material research in returning "the function of wear" to the garment (Davidson and Hodson 2007, 209), I determined to use replication to restore access.

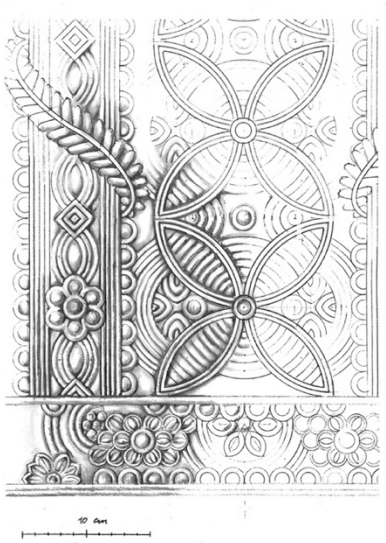

Figure 4. *An artist's impression of the original quilting pattern on the quilted petticoat. The Finnish Heritage Agency.*

Due to budget and time constraints as well as the particular nature of the fabric required for the replication project, the choice of potential materials for this project were limited, but historical accuracy was still integral to the project. I procured heritage woven silk in a duck egg blue shade from a specialist heritage weaving company, the Whitchurch Silk Mill in the United Kingdom, and purchased ready-made 100% wool batting as my best option for the wool wadding.

It was extremely important, in keeping with my aim of telling the story, that I involved members of the public in the replication project. Using social media, I reached out to a community of historical sewing enthusiasts and recruited a small but enthusiastic team of volunteers to work on the project. Over the summer of 2019 four sewing days were organised in both Kotka and Helsinki to ensure the project remained easily accessible to participants from different parts of the country. Using an artist's interpretation of what remains of the original pattern on the textile, we meticulously transferred the pattern to the fabric, and we have now begun the process of quilting, which continues at a steady pace. The finished panel will go on display in the permanent exhibition of the Maritime Museum with an anticipated reveal date of spring 2020, and will permit museum visitors to learn more about the original object as well as the replica. The next step will be a complete, wearable replica petticoat.

Figure 5. *A detail of the replication process: transferring the pattern on to the silk. Photograph by Maija Pollari.*

The Replication Project in a Wider Context

But why go through all this trouble? Why attempt to replicate a textile we actually know very little about and that isn't even Finnish to begin with?

This object is the very essence of both tangible and intangible European and global cultural heritage. Though the St. Michel was not a Finnish ship and sank in Finnish waters by mere chance, its objects tell stories of cultural phenomena which crossed national borders. Just this textile can tell us about 18th century fashion, luxury consumption at the Russian Imperial Court, manufacturing techniques, merchant shipping, global cultural connections and the devastating consequences of shipwrecks in the Baltic Sea. It is an example of intricate and exquisite traditional artisanship that can still be researched and cherished but also re-invigorated by replication.

By giving the public an opportunity to learn new skills and to work with heritage materials they can achieve a better understanding of how an 18th Century quilted petticoat was made, what the difficulties are in making one and how much skill and time it took to achieve an end product as complicated and luxurious as the object in our museum collections.

How can we preserve cultural heritage and traditional skills if we are not involved with re-invigorating the practice of those skills? How can we be a participatory museum if we don't actively involve members of our communities in our projects? The National Museum of Finland and the Maritime Museum have strategic goals that their public programming be approachable, meaningful, participatory, enchanting and surprising. We want to educate and inspire people and we want to do this in an approachable and fun way. These types of words can often feel a little vague, but they give us the freedom to try out new ideas and to come up with new approaches and community projects.

This textile replication project has so far been a success: every member of the sewing group has learned something new. The majority have expressed an interest in knowing more about shipwreck finds and many are keen to get started on a quilted petticoat project of their own! The fact that what they are making now will one day be in a museum exhibition has not only inspired them but permits a public ownership of a public museum and of an object which has been extremely private due to conservation needs.

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