

The Dress Attributed to Empress Charlotte of Mexico (1864-1867): Historical Evidences from its Restoration

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ABSTRACT

Textile collections vary, depending on their temporality, their typology, and their material characteristics. When people approach our work, they often ask what we find fascinating about restoring textiles. For us, the answer is clear: they weave the secrets of history into their seams. In the following pages, we will expose a subtle idea regarding the restoration of a dress that is part of the collections of the Museo Nacional de Historia “Castillo de Chapultepec”, of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (MNH-INAH, National Museum of History “Castillo de Chapultepec”, of the National Institute of Anthropology and History). This piece is attributed to the Empress Consort of Mexico, Marie Charlotte Amélie Augustine Victoire Clementine Léopoldine of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. The restoration was significant thanks to the correct decision-making and the close link with the MNH. The result of assertive communication between the parties favored the restoration of the silhouette and of the ornamental elements to a state similar to their original creation.

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KEYWORDS

restoration of historical textiles, Charlotte of Mexico, historical data, identification of materials, silk taffeta, academic training, decision making

When people approach our work, they often ask us what is fascinating about restoring textiles. For us, the answer is clear, they weave the secrets of history into their seams. They are the cultural objects that have touched historical figures in the deepest part of their being; they are the second skin that has accompanied them during the events and narratives that sustain our past.

Textile collections exhibit considerable variation, owing to their temporality, typology, and material characteristics, among other factors. Therefore, their research can be directed towards generating discourse pertaining to historical, aesthetic, or cultural interests, among other factors.

The knowledge derived from the professional practice of conservation makes it possible to provide an object or collection with technical and academic support that other types of research, such as curatorial research, use to develop scripts and subsequent exhibitions (Castillo, 2023, p. 82).

Every time we undergo the restoration of a cultural object, we have to reflect on the fact that any action undertaken implies a great responsibility, and that if it is not reasoned, it may have a direct or indirect impact on the preservation or loss of information about a historical moment. To achieve ethical and comprehensive conservation, we must incorporate the opinions of the different actors that constitute the current context of the piece being worked on (Gallardo, 2017, p. 2). For example, one must consider: 1) the space; that is, the characteristics of the place where it comes from and the place where it will be inserted when it is restored and returned; 2) the collection to which the heritage belongs, which outlines its role within a specific discourse, which can be pedagogical, utilitarian, investigative, or merely expository; 3) that it is equally essential to take into account workers of the location in question, since they will be the ones handling the textile; 4) the current resources to carry out a conservation-restoration proposal and its maintenance; and 5) to users and/or visitors, taking into account the profile of the public that will be in contact with the work (Castillo, 2023).

Each case of study has particularities and exciting data, and, for us, restoration enters the scene from the first moment we seek to

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decipher all them. In these pages, we will explain the restoration of a dress belonging to the collections of the Museo Nacional de Historia (MNH) “Castillo de Chapultepec”, of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). The piece is attributed to the Empress Consort of Mexico Marie Charlotte Amélie Augustine Victoire Clementine Leopoldine of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

The research and restoration of the garment began in August 2022 as part of the textile cultural objects that students from the third semester of the Bachelor’s Degree in Restoration worked on within the Seminar-Workshop on Textile Restoration, of the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía (ENCRYM, National School of Conservation, Restoration, and Exhibition Design). The team was made up of the students: Azul Cedeño, Inés Peña, Ana Barbara Quiñones, Mariana Ramírez and her classmate Dante Chávez; the restoration professors Rosa Lorena Román, Ana Julia Poncelis, and Karla Castillo; together with specialists from various areas; in biology Irais Velasco, in history Olivia Ávila, in textile engineering Claudia Abelleira, and in chemistry Nicolás Gutiérrez, Ignacio Castillo, Javier Vázquez, and Luz López.

The first step when restoring a textile is to investigate it, understand its context, and identify its materials. We start from the idea that “what is known is conserved,” and the more one knows, the better it will be conserved (Laumain & Sabater, 2019).

The studied piece is a dress made in two parts, the first one being the doublet with sleeves (Figure 1) and the other, a wide skirt, both made of silk taffeta dyed in pink, and having an endive on the lace, the sleeves, and the hem. The forearms stand out because they are made with cotton bobbin bertha (Figure 2). Its fastening method consists of hook and eye clasps with a loop both along the waist and on the back. In total, it measures 1.62 m long, and its history is fascinating.

Here we emphasize the unique character of textiles, the result of cultural expressions that respond to social, economic, political, and ideological contexts, and that allows us to study them as a specific universe within cultural heritage (Carta de México en defensa del patrimonio cultural, 2019 [1976]). In this case, the historian Olivia Ávila was the pillar that led us to propose an assertive research methodology, which involved the review of documents, newspapers, and references. This allowed us to sketch 1864’s Mexico, locate the birthplace of the then-Empress of Mexico, and highlight her presence in the Second Mexican Empire (between 1863 and 1867).

As already mentioned, the origin of the manufacture was important, as was the professional support network to approach the

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FIGURE 1. Dress doublet (Photograph: Mariana Ramírez, 2022; courtesy: Museo Nacional de Historia).



FIGURE 2. Photograph of the cotton lace on the sleeves (Photograph: Dante Chávez, 2022; courtesy: Museo Nacional de Historia).

study of it. In that sense, Elizabeth Schaeffer, curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET, New York), shared her appreciation with us and, based on her experience, indicated that the style belongs to 1860, a period in which Charlotte still lived in Europe. The manufacture, therefore, coincides with the European trend of the time, in which textile trade networks were decisive in obtaining silk taffeta and bobbin lace (Ocampo, 1990).

We start with the hypothesis that this dress belonged to the empress, based on the donation letter preserved in the MNH. In the documentation kept there, in a letter written by Dr. Gabriel Moreno Robles in 1965, the following episode is described: the dress in our study is a gift that the empress gave to a maid that she met during an event in her benefit, in the city of Puebla de los Ángeles, named Teresita López. During the festivity, Teresita accidentally bumped into the empress, and because of that carelessness, she spilled wine on the skirt of Charlotte's dress. Teresita became distressed and saddened, and as a way for her to relax, Charlotte gave her the dress (Moreno, 1965).

If we take into account the information in the letter and observe the dress, we notice that in the upper left part of the skirt there is a

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FIGURE 3.
Photograph of the
wine stain on the
upper left side of the
dress (Photograph:
Azul Cedeño,
Dante Chávez, Inés
Peña, Ana Barbara
Quiñones, and
Mariana Ramírez,
2022; courtesy:
Museo Nacional de
Historia).



trace of a stain, and that, due to the way in which it is captured, it could be from the wine mentioned in the letter (Figure 3).

That letter (Figure 4) also mentions María de los Ángeles Moreno Oro, who inherited the pieces of the outfit from Teresita López. Moreno's manuscript has been a significant source of information, as it reveals the owners and custodians of the dress. When it was auctioned, for the benefit of the church, Dr. Moreno acquired it, and on February 4, 1965, he donated it to the MNH. Since then, the dress of Empress Charlotte has been preserved and protected in Mexico. This makes it a vestige that attests to the Second Mexican Empire, and that carries with it the seal that evidences the event narrated in the donation letter.

FIGURE 4. Video made by students to
present the intervention proposal agreed
upon between students, ENCRYM professors
and the MNH (Video: Cedeño, Chávez, Peña,
Quiñones and Ramírez, 2022; courtesy: Textile
Restoration Seminar-Workshop, ENCRYM).



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Years after the donation, the MNH told us that the dress was lent to the Museo del Fuerte de Loreto, in the city of Puebla, where it was exhibited for several years, causing deterioration, such as discoloration, before being returned to the MNH in 2019.

It is always fascinating to find data and information that verifies the life history of an object, and it is even more so when it is possible to recognize the values that over time have been associated or attributed to it, directly or indirectly. In that sense, the change of owners implied that the dress was an object of at least three different perspectives, the evaluation of which can be observed in our time, since it affects the physical changes of the object. With meticulous observation and an organoleptic approach, we identified its general characteristics, the added objects that are part of the structure and ornamentation, and the details generated in the production and/or manufacture process. We also identified stains, wrinkles, folds, abrasions, tears, and intentional alterations. But how can we know if they are intentional?

At this point, the critical eye of the restorer is essential, and the prevailing responsibility of teachers and students makes exercising it day by day an essential task in the professional training of restorers. Thus, daily contact with objects and meticulous analysis of details allow us to delve to a unique and invaluable extent. The certainty we have of the continuous use of the dress is reflected in substantial modifications. The first and most obvious is the increase in size achieved by adding cotton fabric dyed pink, an element present on the neck and back, to adapt the measurements to those of another person. If we look at the endive in the hem, there is a missing section in the back of equal size as a section of endive in the back, which covers the addition. The story tells itself, among the modifications made, this section of endive is removed to hide the addition and aesthetically homogenize the unity of the object.

As a garment adapts to the stylistic moment of the wearer, there was another material adaptation in this one: originally, the dress was two pieces, but over time parts of its construction were modified, to the extent that it is now a one-piece dress. They removed the waistband of the skirt, which was attached to the doublet, a detail that was determined after careful observation prior to the restoration.

When transforming the dress, the plain weave was altered. In this case, the change caused tears in the armhole and waist, which at the time were corrected with pink embroidery thread. The transformation also reached the initial preparation of the piece, which falls into a historical error, from the beginning of the 20th century.

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ry, a time when one-piece dresses were used more frequently. The modification was made by sewing the waist of the doublet to the full skirt.

At this stage of the restoration, we already have relevant information. We know the object, we identify what it is and what its particularities are, and we notice that in its construction there are characteristics that draw our attention. We immediately take nitrile gloves and get to work—in the literal sense—to take samples and identify the type of fibers that make up each part of the dress with a biological optical microscope. At this moment, Irais Velasco (biologist) fuses her knowledge with our hypotheses and accurately identifies the fibers that make up the piece: silk for the doublet in the main support fabric, cotton for its interlining and lining, cotton in the bobbin lace that is on the sleeves, wool for the filling, and whale boning. For the skirt, silk.

The process continues its course with the support of the team's chemists, who lead the way to identify the materials: finishes, colorants, and associated metallic elements, as well as their deterioration process. As for the dyes, microchemical tests were carried out to identify cochineal and brazilwood, which gave negative results, so, most likely, the taffetas were dyed with the first synthetic dyes. It is noteworthy that the study of an object will always have infinite lines of research, and, in our case, the identification of synthetic dyes is one of them.

It is time to get down to business! With the research in hand, the object analyzed, and the recognition of the mechanism of the material alterations, the work team proposed to stabilize tears and wears and remove the interventions that gave rise to the material instability of the dress. Even though the decision was made on our part, this action must be communicated to all parties involved in the custody and protection of this piece. Then, the students shared with Salvador Rueda Smithers and María Esther Gámez González, director of the MNH and restorer of the collection repository of this museum, the findings and the material repercussions of the different stages of modification (Figure 4). The result was an assertive dialogue in which it was decided to recover the style the dress had when the empress wore it: separate the skirt from the doublet and avoid the spread of mechanical forces that would continue to weaken both elements and, in addition to this, place the endive of the back in its initial place (the hem of the skirt), and, finally, remove the pink-dyed cotton additions that modified the total measurements and generated stretching and tears in the silk taffeta (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

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FIGURE 5. Empress Charlotte's dress. Frontal view prior to the intervention (Photograph: Gerardo Hellion, 2022; courtesy: Textile Restoration Seminar-Workshop, ENCRYM).



FIGURE 6. Empress Charlotte's dress. Rear view prior to the intervention (Photograph: Gerardo Hellion, 2022; courtesy: Textile Restoration Seminar-Workshop, ENCRYM).

FIGURE 7.
Separation of
doublet and skirt
(Photograph: Dante
Chávez, 2022;
courtesy: Textile
Restoration Seminar-
Workshop, ENCRYM).



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Collaborating with the MNH in making decisions for the intervention of this dress was necessary and constructive, since it reflected the importance of involving the various specialized areas in this proposal and demonstrated that restoration is better done in partnership with the participating sectors and institutions, in this case, the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museografía (ENCRyM) and the Museo Nacional de Historia “Chapultepec Castle” (MNH). As seen in the diagram (Figure 8), integrating efforts is part of our work as professional restorers, so our responsibility as specialists does not end the moment a piece leaves the workshop, but rather it is part of our professional task to facilitate the dissemination of the knowledge acquired to all those who guard, investigate, and enjoy the pieces. The approach from the restoration process provides direct observations of the object, its relationship and interaction, both its material and sociocultural meaning, which is why it constitutes valuable information from a primary source, which allows for the contribution of knowledge from the discipline to what is already written in other sources and references.

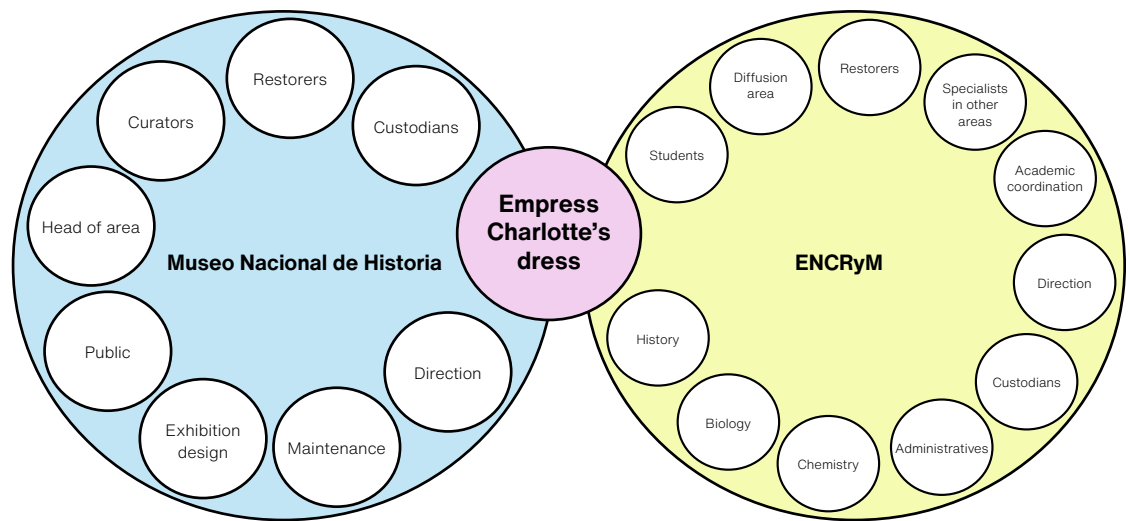


FIGURE 8. Actors involved in the decision-making for the intervention of Empress Charlotte's dress (Diagram: Karla Castillo Leyva & Ana Julia Poncelis, 2024; courtesy: Textile Restoration Seminar-Workshop, ENCRyM).

The final result of this journey remains before the eyes of those who read us (Figures 9, 10, 11, and 12) and of those who, we hope, can enjoy as much as we do this unique piece that revealed to us parts of its journey through the history of Mexico.

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FIGURE 9.
Photograph of the
end of the skirt
process (Photograph:
Gerardo Hellion,
2022; courtesy:
Textile Restoration
Seminar-Workshop-
ENCRYM).



FIGURE 10.
Photograph of the
end of the doublet
process (Photograph:
Gerardo Hellion,
2022; courtesy:
Textile Restoration
Seminar-Workshop-
ENCRYM).



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FIGURE 11.
Photograph of the
end of the process.
Front view of the
dress (Photograph:
Gerardo Hellion,
2022; courtesy:
Textile Restoration
Seminar-Workshop-
ENCRYM).



FIGURE 12.
Photograph at the
end of the process.
Rearview of the
dress (Photograph:
Gerardo Hellion,
2022; courtesy:
Textile Restoration
Seminar-Workshop-
ENCRYM).



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