

EXPANDED SUMMARY

Inventory and conservation of the Mantles of Our Lady of Penha, patron saint of Espírito Santo: revealing and preserving sacred Craftsmanship from Espírito Santo

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Introduction

The clothing of sacred sculptures can reveal fabric compositions and craftsmanship that have changed with the introduction of machinery and new tools during certain historical periods. Sewing methods, combined with embroidery and finishing techniques, indicate how garment-making practices are passed down from generation to generation, characterizing, in our case, primarily the religious and cultural traditions of Espírito Santo.

Through the Inventory and Preventive Conservation Project of textile garments from the sculptural collection of the Convento da Penha, in Vila Velha–ES¹, we uncovered artifacts that embody cultural, artistic, economic, and religious characteristics of the Espírito Santo region.

The original sculpture of the Virgin of Penha was commissioned from Portugal to Brazil by Friar Pedro Palácios in 1558, arriving in Espírito Santo in 1570. It is a female dressing sculpture with natural hair and articulated arms at the shoulders. It measures 76 x 30 x 29.5 cm, has glass eyes, and holds the Child Jesus on her left arm, which measures 26 x 13 x 8 cm.

By cataloging the textile garments of the patron saint of Espírito Santo, the aim was to highlight the value of both the textile artifacts and the dressing sculptures themselves, a type of cultural and religious heritage that has long been overlooked by the history of sacred art and the fields of conservation and restoration. In doing so, we encourage reflections on a broader perspective of what constitutes sacred art and clothing collections, whether in Espírito Santo, other Brazilian states, or even in other countries.

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Development

The inventory and conservation procedures applied to the collection of the Convento da Penha enhanced the understanding of Brazilian sacred sculptures as well as textile sets within religious settings. Through the inventory process, it was possible to correlate the data observed and analyzed in the pieces with information recorded on forms dated 1997. Additionally, a listing was prepared by the project's museologist to facilitate the management of these artifacts and ensure the accurate definition of their exact locations.

We emphasized descriptions and analyses during the process of completing the inventory and conservation records for the cloaks of Nossa Senhora da Penha, treating them as documents that capture production methods, construction, finishing, processing, and final manufacturing.

Traditionally shaped by the religious customs that sustain it, and also influenced by the fashion system that retrieves and updates it in secular daily life, the cloak predominantly constitutes the garments of the Virgin Mary. Since the medieval period, it has been affirmed "(...) both on the earthly and celestial planes, as a symbol of protection" (Hernando, 2008, p. 11)², associated with the Mother of Jesus.

Regarding the Virgin of Penha, we identified that the majority of cloak fabrics are made of satin, totaling 16 pieces. Following that, we found taffeta in 12 cloaks, tulle in 8, brocade in 4, organza in 3, crepe in 3, zibeline in 1 cloak, twill in 1 cloak, crochet in 1 cloak, and lace in 1 cloak.

As for the technical procedures of textile preventive conservation, these were implemented with the necessary care for the proper handling of the garments. Among the steps carried out, we highlight the evaluation of the conservation status of the objects through organoleptic examinations (performed with the naked eye) and with the aid of magnifying lenses.

² El manto fue, tanto en el plano terrestre como en el celeste, un símbolo de protección, que a partir de la Edad Media apareció asociado a la Virgen (HERNANDO, 2008, p. 11).

These actions allowed us to properly confirm the diagnostic assessment of the pieces. This diagnostic evaluation involved investigating each piece for traces and clues (interventions) in the textile objects, providing insights into their life trajectory, whether through indications of the piece's circulation, such as darts and wear marks, or through signs of deterioration, such as stains, tears, and other types of dirt.

Following this initial analysis, appropriate storage methods for the pieces were defined. Artifacts in better conservation condition were stored vertically on padded hangers and covered with non-woven fabric (NWF) covers. More fragile pieces were stored horizontally in corrugated plastic boxes or rolled with NWF and placed in covers made of the same material.

The preventive conservation of textile garments helps reduce damage and the aging process of inventoried objects. Since these are more delicate items, they require careful diagnostic evaluations to define the work plan and suitable storage methods. The purpose of textile preservation is to prevent direct interventions and delay potential restoration needs.

Conclusion

The inventorying, conservation, and maintenance of the textile collection in question will have a positive impact, as they contribute to the better preservation of these cultural assets from the Convento da Penha. Furthermore, they encourage the development of other related projects focused on this type of object, which has often been marginalized in the fields of art history, fashion, and conservation and restoration studies.

We recognize that there is still a significant gap in information regarding the textile garments of the patron saint of Espírito Santo. However, through the listed activities, it was possible to uncover the craftsmanship involved in the creation of her cloaks and other garments that adorned her. This also applies to other sculptures dressed in textile garments from the sculptural collection of the Convento da Penha.

By studying the clothing of sacred sculptures, we can understand textile production methods and finishing processes, observing various types of embroidery and the use of diverse materials. Thus, we consider the collection of the Convento da Penha to be a valuable historical and cultural heritage that will attract not only Catholic devotees but also restorers, historians, and other researchers with unique and curious perspectives on this type of object¹.

References

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