

Revisiting to Understand: An Evaluation of the Influence of Conservation on the Display Representation of Hernan Cortes' Funerary Cloth, Mexico

Recapitulando para comprender: una evaluación sobre la influencia de la conservación en la representación museográfica del Pañuelo Funerario de Hernán Cortés, México

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Abstract

This ESSAY draws upon Igor Kopytoff's article "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" (1986) to analyse the cultural biography of Hernan Cortes' funerary cloth, a remarkable item that is part of the collection of the Museo Nacional de Historia, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (MNH, National Museum of History, National Institute of Anthropology and History), Mexico. By examining the way certain practices (i.e. documentation, conservation treatment and display) recently influenced this artefact's representation, it offers a critical perspective by integrating the object's biography. Thus, this essay adds to recent debates regarding the impact of conservation on museum interpretation.

Keywords

representation; object biography; museum display; funerary cloth; Museo Nacional de Historia; Hernan Cortes; Mexico

Resumen

El presente ENSAYO retoma el artículo "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" de Igor Kopytoff (1986) para plantear una biografía cultural del Pañuelo Funerario de Hernán Cortés, un artefacto de gran importancia que es parte de la colección del Museo Nacional de Historia, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (MNH-INAH), México. Al explorar la manera en la que ciertas prácticas (tales como la documentación, los tratamientos de conservación-restauración y el montaje expositivo) influenciaron la reciente representación de este artefacto, se propone una perspectiva crítica que integra su biografía cultural. Por lo tanto, este ENSAYO busca contribuir a los debates actuales sobre el impacto de la conservación-restauración en la interpretación museográfica.

Palabras clave

representación; biografía del objeto; exhibición museográfica; pañuelo funerario; Museo Nacional de Historia; Hernán Cortés, México

Introduction

*Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific —and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.*

John Keats, "On First Looking
into Chapman's Homer", 1816.

This ESSAY draws upon Igor Kopytoff's article "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process" (1986) to analyse the cultural biography of Hernan Cortes' funerary cloth,¹ a remarkable item that is part of the collection of the Museo Nacional de Historia, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (MNH-INAH, National Museum of History, National Institute of Anthropology and History), Mexico. By examining the way certain practices (i.e. documentation, conservation treatment and display) recently influenced this artefact's representation, it offers a critical perspective by integrating the object's biography. Thus, this essay adds to recent debates regarding the impact of conservation on museum interpretation.

Kopytoff (1986), an economist by training, raised interesting issues about the social life of things. Although his discussion on object biographies does not provide a methodological perspective, the concept's potential as a research tool for documentation, interpretation, and representation is clear and has proved useful for anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and other scholars (Yamamoto, Villalobos & Zepeda 2013:75). The way his ideas were further developed by Dinah Eastop (cfr. 2006) represents a helpful breakthrough for conservators, as this paper demonstrates.

Background

The conservation of Hernan Cortes' funerary cloth began in February 2014, when conservator Verónica Liliána Kuhliger Martínez and researcher María Hernández Ramírez² decided to stabilise the textile after having been stored for 70 years in inadequate conditions (Figure 1) (cfr. García-Vedrenne y Kuhliger 2015 53-66). Both the required documentation and the research regarding provenance and dating were assigned to me as part of the requirements to complete the tenth semester of the Restoration of Movable Cultural Heritage degree at the Escuela de

¹ Hernan Cortes (1485-1547) was the Spanish conqueror and founder of Mexico during the early 16th Century (De la Torre 1990:173).

² Kuhliger and Hernández curated the exhibition *Hilos de Historia. Colección de Indumentaria del Museo Nacional de Historia* (Threads of History, Apparel Collection of the National Museum of History). Both professionals are part of the museum permanent staff.

Conservación y Restauración de Occidente (ECRO, Western School of Conservation and Restoration), Mexico (García-Vedrenne & Olgún 2014). The whole project lasted six months, while the cloth's technical intervention was carried out during the last four months, under the guidance of Kuhliger. At the moment, the object was considered to be ideal for a student's formative experience because it offered a didactic challenge and an opportunity to develop practical skills (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66).



FIGURE 1. Reverse of the cloth, treatment in progress (Photograph: Laura Gisela García Vedrenne, 2014; courtesy of: Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia [SC-INAH], México; Reproduction authorized by INAH).

It is worth mentioning that the historical relationship between the cloth and Hernan Cortes was not clear at first (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). A record in the museum database identified it as the cloth that covered the skull of the conqueror, but there was no associated documentation to confirm this possibility (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). Information was gathered about the final years of Hernan Cortes' life and about the multiple burials and exhumations of his human remains (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). The identification of natural fibres, the embroidery technique, and the making of the bobbin lace were also described to establish the textile's possible origin (Figure 2) (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66).³ Although these aspects were not of great interest to the museum because they lacked focus and a clear connection to Mexican history, they showed a methodological approach for the object's study.

In July 2014, Hernández, under the guidance of the MNH-INAH director Salvador Rueda Smithers, analysed the content of three related inventories which presumably described Hernan Cortes' funerary ensemble. Later on, in

³ The textile measures 750 x 760 mm and is surrounded by a black strip of silk bobbin-lace with grape motifs. It is an example of whitework, in which a fine linen fabric is embroidered with cotton threads to create a symmetrical floral design (García-Vedrenne & Olgún 2014).



FIGURE 2. Detail of lace and its manufacture technique, treatment in progress (Photograph: Laura Gisela García Vedrenne, 2014; courtesy of: Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia [SC-INAH], México; Reproduction authorized by INAH).

the same archive, I came across photographic evidence of the cloth covering the conqueror's skull (*Life Magazine* 1946:43-46) (Figure 3). Both of these were groundbreaking findings that confirmed the object's relevance to the historic events. Once the provenance of the object became clearer, the M NH-INAH director expressed his desire for the funerary cloth to be included in the upcoming temporary exhibition *Hilos de Historia. Colección de Indumentaria del Museo Nacional de Historia (Threads of History, Apparel Collection of the National Museum of History)*.



FIGURE 3. Funerary cloth covering of Cortes' skull (Source: *Life Magazine* 1946:43).

Conservation Treatment

Before its conservation treatment, the funerary cloth's condition was very poor. It had large missing areas at the centre of the linen cloth, as well as several brown tide marks where thread oxidation was evident. Pinning holes, creases and an overall deformation were also visible. The severe fragility of the lace was another aspect to consider. The lace was completely lost on two sides of the perimeter and the remainder was severely bundled and dislocated. Fortunately, the fibres from the foot side edge had not disintegrated, allowing us to determine the total length of the lace strip (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66).

The conservation treatment focused on stabilising the object. The original stitching was documented and removed so that the lace could be treated separately (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). The silk lace fibres were consolidated and backed with a stitched silk-net support. Purified water was sprayed over the embroidered linen cloth and blotted to reduce creases, dislocations and deformation (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). In my opinion, this process also worked as a cleaning treatment, although it was not aimed at completely removing the evidential soiling (Brooks & Eastop 2006:171-181). A plain-weave cotton fabric was dyed and placed as a support for the funerary cloth using self-couching stitching to stabilise areas of loss (Figure 4) (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66).

It is well known that "each intervention is directed by what is seen as the role of the object" (Eastop 2006:526). In this case, the textile was regarded as a museum object



FIGURE 4. Detail of the object's condition after conservation treatment, obverse of the cloth (Photograph: Omar Dumaine, 2014; courtesy of: Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia [SC-INAH], México; Reproduction authorized by INAH).

which deserved conservation treatment, especially because it had been stored under inadequate conditions for such a long time. Therefore, it was decided that areas of loss—both in the lace and the linen cloth—would be camouflaged by simulating a continuity of the textile elements.

Object Biography

In his famous article, Kopytoff (1986:64) introduces the simplified definition of a commodity⁴ —an item with use value that also has exchange value— asserting thereafter that, out of the whole range of things available to a society, only some can be considered to be cultural markers. Things can merge, shift throughout their life, and even experience a transaction. Furthermore, “the same thing may, at the same time, be seen as a commodity by one person and as something else by another” (Kopytoff 1986:64). It is hard to define why and when this occurs, and therefore it may go unnoticed, but it is necessary to identify that a shift has taken place (Kopytoff 1986:65). In this section, an object biography of Hernan Cortes’ funerary cloth is conceived by providing answers to the questions raised by Kopytoff (1986:66-67).

The textile’s definite place of origin has yet to be established, although the whitework characteristics resemble traditional Ayrshire embroidery, as well as bobbin lace, commonly produced throughout Western Europe in the nineteenth century (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). Black and white textiles have commonly been associated with funerary practices in a European context (Flavin 2014:129). It is thought that Cortes’ descendants (an Italian family whose surname was Pignatelli) bought, or requested, the facture of the cloth for the exequies that took place in 1794 as part of a death memorial (*cfr.* Almarza 1946:14). This idea is further supported by the existence of the embroidered initials HC (an indication of Hernan Cortes’ property) which were dissociated from the cloth during the conservation treatment and only recently found (*cfr.* García-Vedrenne, in press).

It can be assumed that the textile travelled along with Cortes’ human remains, which were interred inside a wall of the Hospital de Jesus, in Mexico City (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). In 1836, Lucas Alaman⁵ transferred the funerary ensemble to another wall of the temple, hiding it to avoid its incineration, which was likely to have been its fate, as with other relics of the Conquest at the time of Mexico’s independence (Rueda 2010:417). After searching for over a century, Mexican historians finally rediscovered the location of Cortes’ bones in 1946 (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). One year la-

ter, state authorities decided to rebury the human remains and hand custody of the funerary cloth over to the MNH-INAH. The textile was kept in storage until 2014, when it was selected to undergo a conservation treatment, as described in the introduction (García-Vedrenne & Olgún 2014).

The object’s life was redefined during several stages through shifts in its use. Although some of its uses were passive (i.e. the covering of an interred skull or being kept in a storage room drawer), the textile maintained its symbolic function (Muñoz Viñas 2005:45) as long as there was knowledge about its existence. In this sense, the cloth embodies different meanings which are all closely intertwined at each biographical stage, although only some play a crucial role when interpreting the object. In semiology, this communicative phenomenon has been named ‘symbolism’, ‘significance’, ‘cultural connotation’ or ‘metaphor’ (Muñoz Viñas 2005:58).

Kopytoff (1986:67) acknowledges that changing convictions and values shape our attitudes towards objects. This makes it harder to decide which meaning must prevail. However, for the textile to work as a powerful symbol, the meanings identified at each stage should have been considered and priorities should have been established before and during the conservation treatment.

Impact

As Brooks and Eastop (2016:2) explain, displaying an object involves an interactive process, combining curatorial, conservation, and design decisions. After completing the conservation treatment, when the connection to Cortes was finally confirmed, the MNH-INAH director became interested in showing how the object conveyed a powerful symbol. In fact, he told me that he wished to place the funerary cloth in its historical context, manifesting the link with this controversial character of Mexican history (Rueda 2014).

The funerary cloth was of immediate interest to a wide audience: the media covered both the conclusion of the conservation treatment and the display of the funerary cloth (Borghese 2014), and an article describing the findings was published in an indexed conservation magazine (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66). A popular science magazine also included a piece about the textile (*cfr.* Rangel 2016:62-66). When the detached embroidered initials were found, a new article was written to suggest an alternative treatment proposal which would provide the object with a renewed sense of relic and emphasise its significance (García-Vedrenne in press).

While on display, the public, which specialised in cultural topics, welcomed the idea of creating a space in the historical museum for the 16th century founder and unifier of the country, and seemed to approve of the high quality of the conservation treatment (INAH 2015a). Many viewers only perceived the mournful character of

⁴ The author defines a commodity as “a thing that has use value and that can be exchanged in a discrete transaction for a counterpart [for] [...] an equivalent value” (Kopytoff 1986:68).

⁵ Lucas Alaman (1792-1853) was an illustrious Mexican diplomat and politician (De la Torre 1990:104).



FIGURE 5. Display of the funerary cloth (Photograph: Omar Dumaine, 2014; courtesy of: Secretaría de Cultura, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia [SC-INAH], México; Reproduction authorized by INAH).

the object, quite likely because of the space that was designed for it within the exhibition (INAH 2015b). The funerary cloth was displayed beside a mourning dress and a mourning shawl in a room section named *Preserving to transmit* (Figure 5), which focused on the way textiles can activate transmission mechanisms through generations, while managing to trigger some feelings of grief in the public (INAH 2016).

Kopytoff (1986:64) warns us that “shifts and differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity reveal a moral economy”. Changes in perception and contrasts in ways of thinking may also alter each individual’s definition of a commodity. For example, although the project’s perspective was regarded as ideal by the museum staff (Borghese 2014), it was viewed differently by some outside the museum. Some visitors disagreed with the decision to conserve an object that was related to a “wicked thief and murderer” (NOTIMEX 2014), while others argued that Cortés was the destroyer of Mexico’s culture and religion. Through this interpretation, the conservation treatment was perceived as an act of treason because public resources were being used to enhance the image of a villain, and this was done at an institution aimed at commemorating Mexican history. In contrast, it could be

argued that a forgotten part of Mexican history was revived with this object-based research. Lubar (2007:398) suggests that:

The goal of a history exhibit is to move people from the ideas and the information that they bring with them to the exhibit to a more complex, problematized, and nuanced view of the past. Exhibits should not be limited to reminiscence or commemoration; they should add perspective by aspiring to a greater critical distance and by putting the artefacts in context.

In this sense, a critical view could have been further questioned and explored through the display in order to provide a contextualization for the funerary cloth, which was a conflicting object on its own. As museum staff and conservators, we were left to wonder if Mexican society was prepared to receive this meaningful object. After all, sacralisation can be achieved by singularity (Kopytoff 1986:73) and museums are known as public institutions of singularisation. We cannot underestimate that museums have “significant roles in how nations are performed and materialized, and that they can play a role in processes of reconciliation” (Brooks & Eastop 2016:5). In

this sense, what could have been shown as part of the story of the gathering of a collection in a national museum or as part of a mourning tradition, ended up causing unexpected objections. At the time, I did not realise that the sensitivity of the topic raised ethical concerns. However, I am now curious as to whether this contested vision could have been anticipated by the museum staff. In reality, communicative features and exhibition areas should have been improved if we were aiming to offer a critical display regarding the conflicting views that surround the figure of Hernan Cortes.

Implications

Deciding which life history to preserve is always a conservation dilemma because different views often conflict and cannot equally coexist in one object. This decision about exclusion and selection often becomes the conservator's responsibility. It has proven useful for several stakeholders to carefully consider if "the symbolic, communicative function takes precedence over other original, material functions it could have had" (Muñoz Viñas 2005:57).

In this case, the notion of *historic object* has a broad potential sense (Muñoz Viñas 2005:36). The studied cloth is complex in the sense that it could easily be understood as a ruin, an object of trauma⁶ (Klinger 2013:79-90) or even an archaeological textile (Brooks, Lister, Eastop & Bennett 1996:16-21). Most importantly, at the time of its conservation, one stage in the object's life could not be chosen over another because no information about the context was known from the start. Since no relevance of meaning was acknowledged at the beginning of the conservation treatment, a concept of material truth appeared to be the guiding criterion, instead of an intent to communicate the symbolism (Muñoz Viñas 2005:153). As a result, the conservation treatment did not convey the different meanings the object possesses. Although a discussion regarding different treatment solutions was held, the conservation team aimed to structurally stabilise the textile by following a classical approach (*cfr.* Flury-Lemberg 1988), rather than reflecting on the meaning that the object's condition could evoke.

The effects of ethical and theoretical principles on practice have a clear outcome on interpretation as a process of representation (Brooks & Eastop 2015). In my opinion, in Mexican museums there is still a tendency to dignify an object, as well as to hide the effects of time and the conservation treatment, which is well-received by museum visitors, who are not used to seeing degraded objects. This is further supported by the common belief that visible degradation effects reflect a museum's lack of proper care of its collection.

⁶ Further consideration must be provided when dealing with paradigmatic objects such as these.

In the case of Hernan Cortes' funerary cloth, the acceptance of decay could be considered as an added value. By highlighting alterations, wear and use, the evidence of concealment and purpose could have been conserved, rather than interfering with the original appearance, in which "true nature" varies according to different contexts. For example, some folds, creases and crumpled areas could have been conserved, instead of fully extending and realigning the weave. During the surface cleaning, pH measurements would have been useful to assess the mechanism of degradation, and soiling could have been retained for further chemical analysis. This would have helped to establish an appropriate cleaning process, where evidential matter does not have to be compromised in order to seek hygiene or to obtain a purer state. Finally, the support used for display (*cfr.* García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:64) could have been carved to create a rounder shape, simulating the skull that was once underneath the textile. Although there is less risk of physical or chemical damage when trying to conserve the "original appearance", the object is forced to undergo a significant and possibly unfortunate shift in its biography (Eastop & Dew 2006). Furthermore, the context and meaning generation are underestimated, and this meaning becomes difficult to communicate when the object has lost the material evidence that allowed us to establish a connection.

These objects carry messages that go well beyond the physical, and speak with a visual weight that often cannot be conveyed through text. The role of the conservator is not to evade those aspects, but to incorporate the *pathos* of the object in the *logos* of its treatment and long-term preservation in order to allow the object to speak with its own voice, even if that voice expresses damage repair (Klinger 2013:88).

By placing an overall opaque and dyed support fabric (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:53-66), the current post-conservation condition of the object gives the false impression that less damage occurred to the linen cloth and the lace. It intends to show that the object is complete in appearance and closer to its pristine condition. I have to admit that I was unaware of the object being altered to a preferred state, that is, a vision of how the textile looked when it was whole (possibly similar to the stage where the Pignatelli family placed it over the conqueror's skull), ignoring 200 years of the object's biography.

With regard to the display, it is hard to imagine the use that was given to the cloth, as well as its funerary context, without the presence or the picture of Cortes' skull. I used to take pride in the fact that the support fabric was dyed in a way that properly matched the linen cloth, and that my couching could not be seen unless there was brighter light in the room or someone indicated where the stitching was placed. However, if I had to conserve this

object again, I would aim for a different solution, namely, to stabilise losses without camouflaging degradation effects (Phillips 2016:228), promoting the concept of acceptable damage (Eastop & Dew 2006). This does not mean that no action would be taken to stabilise the textile, but rather that the approach regarding the visibility of the intervention would differ. Looking forward, this kind of conservation approach could still be put into practice. It is necessary to promote alternative readings of cultural heritage objects by widening our understanding.

Critical Evaluation: Documentation, Conservation Treatment and Representation

When we started the conservation of Cortes' funerary cloth, the artefact was just an "ethno-historic piece of evidence that was expected to provide ethnographical and historic sciences with raw data for researchers to interpret" (Muñoz Viñas 2005:61). With regards to the documentation process, the most important accomplishment was acknowledging the significance of the funerary cloth, which had been forgotten by scholars after being stored for so many years. However, as described above, the interpretation of the object through its display sparked a controversy based on anomalies in cognition, inconsistencies in values, and uncertainties in action (Kopytoff 1986:89). The tone of the discussion might have been controlled if only the conservation treatment had considered the object's biography, and provided it with the ability to convey its historical meaning.

Setting aside display aspects, the conservation decisions were solely made by Kuhliger and me. Since more than 30% of the linen cloth was missing, it became evident that the textile lacked support and it was argued that handling was to be precluded. We considered using silk crepelaine as a support to evidence missing areas. We also thought about framing the textile to emphasise its archaeological character. It can be said that this was the moment when we decided on a meaning. Since the decay of matter was so striking, we did not think through for whom or why it was being conserved; we only aimed at structural stabilisation. Although it is possible that my supervisor had an idea about how the funerary cloth would look like after the intervention, I had no expectations regarding the final result because of my lack of experience. As is so often the case, the condition of the artefact was the dominant factor determining the conservation treatment, rather than it being the role attributed to the textile (*cfr.* Eastop & Dew 2006).

Damage was assessed, although we failed to step back to look at the larger picture, taking into account the photographic evidence which proved that the stains, tears and holes had not been caused by lack of museum care. Rather, these effects were a consequence of the funerary context in which the object was rediscovered. Ironically, it was even said that carrying out the intervention and the re-

search simultaneously would not affect the direction of the conservation treatment, even though new information was found (García-Vedrenne & Olgún 2014). I believe that dismissing reflection because it seemed self-evident was an error and that discussion about conserving the meaning or the matter should have been promoted. "It is no coincidence that the word *matter* covers both physical forms (for example, the three states of matter) and what matters (significance)" (Brooks & Eastop 2016:15). The complexity of the values attributed to the object demanded an exploration of the range of possibilities of representation.

After the conservation treatment was completed, we thought that "knowing the historic context [had] allowed us to make a relation and understand its current condition" (García-Vedrenne & Kuhliger 2015:64). However, we neglected to consider that this stage was not supposed to drastically terminate a transaction within the object's biography and that it could be useful for other researchers in the future. Although one intends to make a rational decision, instinctive judgement is often involved in determining the relationship between the creator's intent, the artefact's evolution and its material (*cfr.* Keyserlingk 1998:47-49). In this case, seeking visual completeness was inherent in the conservation treatment and was possibly influenced by the need to please the public's taste. Some people are not ready to see damage as an added value because degradation can hinder the appreciation and legibility of an object (Muñoz Viñas 2005:109). The belief that an object's true nature relies mainly upon its constituents (material fetishism) (Muñoz Viñas 2005:90) was clearly embedded in our minds.

Conclusion

Like the many biographies that a person can have, Kopytoff (1986:68) recognises that we cannot subtract ourselves from our time and place and, therefore, "biographies of things cannot but be similarly partial". Correspondingly, Eastop (2006:516) argues that "conservation as a practice changes over time, constrained both in ideology and by the limits of technology. Thus, conservation provides an exemplary model of the material culture in action". These are reminders of our inability to separate ourselves from our present time and background (Keyserlingk 1998:49). Hence, looking back, I am aware that a conscious analysis of the object's biography was not done because the research was carried out at the same time as the treatment.

The present condition no longer represents a stage in the object's biography, but rather a new historic moment in which the funerary use of the cloth was unintentionally set aside. I still believe that the conservation treatment followed current ethical guidelines and that the treatment was executed with great care and quality, since extremely fragile silk fibres were rescued and no motifs were reconstructed, as no intent to deceive was pursued. However, Dinah Eastop's analysis allowed me to better

understand the rhetoric of textile conservation within the general discourse of material culture. On reflection, and with the theoretical principles now available to me, I can see that determining an object's significance is pivotal to formulating the conservation treatment approach. In this particular case, damage was evocative and historically evidential. Therefore, it should have been treated as a priority, emphasising the stage where the object was degraded because of its funerary context and undeniable function for covering a skull.

When applying Kopytoff's concept of a commodity to the studied object, I suspect that the funerary cloth was not considered a commodity from 1947 to 2013. It was not until 2014 that a pioneering shift in its singularity took place. Kopytoff (1986:73) mentions that "commoditization, then, is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being". It is not enough that the object exists; it also needs to be. In this sense, although the utility of the funerary cloth has not reached its end, it can be said that the object is no longer a commodity (Kopytoff 1986:68).

One final question that Kopytoff (1986:66) raises but that has been intentionally left unanswered is "did the object have a well-lived life". Within a museum context, I believe that this can only be resolved by a collaborative decision that incorporates the beholders' values. By providing a definite answer, it is somehow assumed that the object has reached its terminal stage, which is often the case when something ends up being preserved in a museum collection.

In Mexico, objects that belong to a national museum's collection have been singularised by pulling them out of their usual commodity sphere (Kopytoff 1986:74). Therefore, museum objects are considered unique, uncommon and incomparable, without equivalent value. However, these things were once a commodity and "in no system is everything so singular as to preclude even the hint of exchange" (Kopytoff 1986:70). By offering research and interpretation in return, the museum can terminate the transaction in a discreet way.

Focusing on the context of Mexican textile conservation practice, I believe that our rationale must be clearly and firmly justified before carrying out remedial treatments. This specific object was not irreparably damaged because it can still be re-treated if a desire to emphasise another meaning ever exists. The published documentation successfully identified the risks of losing the textile's meaning. However, a problem lies in the fact that many objects are being treated in this manner and therefore losing their capacity to evoke meaning. This has been identified as a moral dilemma in textile conservation, where the cultural conditioning of conservators is a factor that influences their way of operating (Keyserlingk 1998:47). Conservation is currently focusing on fostering debate about decision-making, the effects of these decisions on the material evidence, and how it is presented. Our guardianship

should ensure that the artefact is able to give accurate testimony of its past in the future (Keyserlingk 1998:47).

The outcome of this project exceeded any of the didactic purposes that were planned for me as an undergraduate student. It would have been too ambitious to find an emerging conservation student who was capable of such reasoning, but looking back, two issues are clear: the treatment of powerful and symbolic textile objects implies a huge responsibility for professionals still in training, and the final decisions are being taken solely by the conservation team (Keyserlingk 1998:48), who tend to give a new sense of completeness to objects. I do not consider that the conservation treatment completed in 2014 was inappropriate; on the contrary, it was fortunate that the textile could be successfully exhibited and researched after being stored for 70 years. Nevertheless, I do believe that it is important to revisit our completed projects and reflect on how our ideas have evolved while we grow professionally. This example of conserving Hernan Cortes' funerary cloth shows how necessary it is to get a range of professionals involved in the identification of an object's meanings if we wish to reflect on the conservation of symbolic values.

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