

**“ALL THAT GLISTERS
 IS NOT GOLD”.¹
 THE APPRECIATION
 OF RELIGIOUS TEXTILES
 IN THE NETHERLANDS
 AND THE FORMULATION
 OF SELECTION CRITERIA
 FOR RETENTION
 OR DISPOSAL**

Keywords: religious textiles, liturgical vestments, assessing value, selection criteria, religious heritage, preventive conservation

ABSTRACT

Approximately 25 percent of Catholic Church property in The Netherlands consists of textiles. Selection within liturgical textile collections is a necessity due to the alarming rate at which churches are closing and the sheer numbers of objects within these edifices. It is unrealistic to assume that entire collections can be saved; value, quality and quantity play a role. This paper gives an insight into the formulation of criteria to make a sound selection of religious textiles and to assess the value of this vulnerable and undervalued historical heritage. The selection criteria should do justice to both the scientific and the emotional/spiritual significance of religious textiles. Defining comparative assessment criteria will aid in establishing the object's value in terms of its significance. The assessment of objects should not be seen as a static activity but should be flexible and adapted according to context and changing ethical considerations over time. The manner of selection can be an important step to preserve this specific heritage.

RÉSUMÉ

Environ un quart des biens appartenant à l'Église catholique aux Pays-Bas est composé de textiles. Une sélection parmi les collections de textiles liturgiques s'avère nécessaire en raison de la vitesse alarmante à laquelle les églises ferment, ainsi que du grand nombre d'objets que ces édifices renferment. Il n'est pas réaliste de penser que des collections entières pourront être sauvées ; la valeur, la qualité et la quantité sont des critères déterminants. Cet article offre un aperçu de la définition de critères permettant une sélection cohérente de textiles religieux ainsi qu'une évaluation de la valeur de ce patrimoine historique vulnérable et sous-estimé. Les critères de sélection doivent rendre compte

INTRODUCTION

The author of this article is regularly asked to review the textile collection of a specific Dutch Catholic church (Figure 1). Often the church council is concerned about the condition of the historical vestments, or simply wants to know whether it is possible to dispose of old and worn clerical garments. This becomes an increasingly urgent question as more and more often churches are on the brink of closure.

In the coming years, around 400 Dutch churches of all denominations will have to close. Inevitably, in this current religious climate, more parishes are forced to unite and church buildings are deconsecrated. Each closure causes the inevitable relocation or disposal of hundreds of objects. This is especially significant where Catholic churches are concerned. Unfortunately, not all the artefacts housed within the religious edifice can be placed in the new shared buildings or in a museum context because there is simply not enough space. It will be necessary to assess all heritage objects held currently within the churches and determine what should be disposed of, reused or kept. Church collections are diverse; the reuse of certain artefacts, such as pews or crucifixes, may not cause problems but can be more difficult for other objects, such as textiles. Ecclesiastical textiles, such as chasubles, copes, dalmatics and church linens, are not easily reused, especially if similar garments or textiles already exist within a collection. Furthermore, if the fabric is out of fashion, damaged or soiled it will not be selected for transfer into the new collection.

Each church is, of course, an individual entity but invariably all Catholic churches contain many textiles in their collection; about a quarter of all objects in any average Catholic church collection are textiles. Old or new, handmade or mass produced, fine or worn; most textiles are stored in mixed conditions, often in cardboard boxes, damp attics or other unfavourable environments (Figure 2).²

TEXTILE HERITAGE IN DUTCH ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCHES

Textiles from churches in the Netherlands have to this date barely been researched. Unlike other objects within liturgical collections, such as silverware, religious textiles are rarely valued and this is reflected within the museum sector and specific knowledge therein remains absent. In this

de la signification scientifique, émotionnelle et spirituelle de ces textiles religieux. Définir des critères d'évaluation comparative permettra d'établir la valeur d'un objet en fonction de son importance. L'évaluation des objets ne doit pas être considérée comme une activité statique, mais doit au contraire être souple et adaptée au contexte et aux considérations déontologiques, qui varient avec le temps. La méthode de sélection peut être une étape importante pour préserver ce patrimoine singulier.

RESUMEN

Aproximadamente el 25 por ciento de los bienes de la Iglesia Católica de los Países Bajos son objetos textiles. Es necesario hacer una selección entre las colecciones de textiles litúrgicos debido a la alarmante cifra de iglesias que se están cerrando últimamente y los numerosos objetos que hay en estos edificios. No es realista asumir que se puedan salvar colecciones enteras. El valor, la calidad y la cantidad de los objetos juegan un papel importante. Este artículo aporta información para la formulación de criterios que permitan hacer una selección acertada de los textiles litúrgicos, y para evaluar el valor de este patrimonio histórico vulnerable y subestimado. Los criterios de selección deberían considerar tanto la relevancia científica como aquella emocional y espiritual de los textiles litúrgicos. Definir criterios de evaluación comparativos ayudará a establecer el valor de cada objeto en función de su relevancia. La evaluación de los objetos no debería ser vista como una actividad estática, sino que debería ser flexible y adaptarse al contexto y a consideraciones éticas que pueden variar a lo largo del tiempo. El enfoque de la selección puede ser un paso importante para conservar este patrimonio específico.

sense, textile collections within Dutch museums are not representative and thus remain incomplete. Unfortunately, it can therefore be concluded that this is not the first period in which there has been a low appreciation of textiles as an important expression of artistic craftsmanship.

The importance of these textile collections lies not only in their religious significance. Frequently, these objects have an additional aesthetic or social or regional value. These values have developed over time within the religious environment, creating specific textile art forms not seen outside this context.³ It is precisely these textiles that are the manifestation of an important period within the history of the Catholic Church. This period is also known as 'the Rich Roman Life',⁴ a time in which richly decorated textiles played a prominent role in the liturgical practise. This period of opulence and beauty ended shortly after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965).

Several radical changes were proposed during this Council. The church was trying to bring the liturgy closer to the people by reducing the display of wealth. As a result, more sober costumes were used and the amount of liturgical textiles was reduced. The new guidelines set in Rome were the main reason why large numbers of ecclesiastical textiles are today no longer in use. As new vestments took the place of older ones, the old textiles were often moved from their storage to remote spaces in the church building. The most beautiful textiles are therefore often packed in cardboard boxes and stored in damp and dusty church attics, or in damp corridor closets. None of these places provides a constant climate, which is often stated as one of the main requirements for the safe keeping of textiles. Artefacts no longer in use are put aside or discarded, unless they are transferred to a museum context. This is exactly the case in the Dutch Catholic Churches. The reduction of active parishes and parishioners has led to a situation where fewer people are required to undertake more tasks and more often on a voluntary basis. Thus, the priority of maintaining heritage collections is diminished.

For centuries, church buildings have been the most important storage facility for textile heritage collections. The existence today of Byzantine silk fabrics owes, in part, its survival to the treasures and rich materials stored within period graves found within religious edifices. The presence of elaborate and precious 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century chasubles, currently on show and admired in museums, is beholden to the church's function in the past as a depository. But what about the 20th-century textile heritage, which has yet to be studied or valued? Where is this to be housed in the future? And is this in danger of being lost due to an unawareness of its existence?

It has become clear that the depository function of churches will drastically change in the near future (Figure 3). Something must be done in order to save these cultural artefacts and prevent them from becoming lost forever. Due to the vast number of artefacts still present in functioning parishes,



Figure 1

Roman Catholic churches frequently ask for assistance when selecting historical and old religious vestments to be preserved

the first important step is to make a selection of those to be preserved. But who will make the selection and on what grounds?

Who makes the selection and on what grounds?

The Catholic Church has rules regarding the management and conservation of heritage (Code of Canon Law 1283 of 25 January 1983) (Nelissen 2008). Each church is required to complete an inventory of all its artefacts, indicating objects that have (art) historical significance. The Foundation for Ecclesiastical Art and Artefacts Netherlands (SKKN) is regularly asked for help in completing these inventories,⁵ although in some cases they are completed internally. The professional employees of the SKKN designate, during the inventory, a core collection of objects which should not be disposed of or sold. This assessment is based purely on cultural or art historical criteria. This system functions in principle, but the reality is otherwise. Not all churches have been inventoried yet. Often the inventory lists are not up to date or are incomplete; for example, frequently only a few vestments are listed. Information obtained from these lists indicates that after c. 1920 no important vestments were purchased by churches; however, recent research proves otherwise, in fact the opposite is true (van Roon 2010).

Current practice shows that parish members make decisions about many textiles on their own initiative. They wish to tidy up unused spaces, such as the attic, and the old textiles will be disposed of, with the approval of the priest, irrespective of their historic value. The most important selection criteria used by parish churches (such as: can the object be used? Does it have signs of wear and tear? Is it clean or not?) are based more on functionality or emotional values. These criteria, of course, differ from those held by professionals, whose values lie more in the cultural significance of the object. This dichotomy should be resolved as both aspects should be combined in the selection.



Figure 2

Ecclesiastical vestments: piled in cardboard boxes, often under miserable conditions



Figure 3

Churches are losing their function as an important depository of (religious) textiles

Assessing value and significance

The selection of objects is an important aspect of heritage management both within the Netherlands and abroad. Museums are overcrowded and there is a lack of resources to properly manage all the artefacts held in them. Consequently, selection and rejection is the order of the day. As mentioned, within an ecclesiastical context, this is often an emotional event. It is therefore essential that due care and consideration be taken to clearly define the selection criteria.

In 2010 the Dutch government subsidised a programme to create an assessment plan for movable religious heritage. One of the objectives is to formulate criteria for a uniform system to rate and select movable religious heritage (WKRRE).⁶ This system should be transparent and controllable. Although at the time this article is being written the programme is still incomplete and the criteria not yet fully defined, consensus appears to be at hand.

Particularly thanks to the input from the representatives of ecclesiastical organisations, it became evident that the new system needed to take into consideration both the value placed on the object by the church as well as that determined by a museum or an (art) historian. A curator views textile materials from a different perspective to that of a priest or a verger. A worn, intensively used chasuble that has no (liturgical) value or function for a priest may be valued by an art historian, who might want to store it in a museum where it becomes part of an historical collection, and can be used for exhibitions or research (Figures 4 and 5). The only way to make good selections is when the significance of the object is properly assessed.



Figure 5

The chasuble pictured in Figure 4 was found by the author in a church litter box

There are various systems used internationally and nationally to determine the significance and (non-economical) value of museum objects.⁷ The significance of an object in its original and current contexts must be defined before its value can be assessed. The significance of the object must be based on aspects beyond the material or appearance. The overall significance is about the story the object tells, when and why it was made, the history of its functionality and use; the social/spiritual meaning of the object must be taken into consideration.



Figure 4

Brochure of the firm P.P. Rietfort from the 1930s. Collection Stichting Kerkelijk Kunstbezit Nederland

The Dutch WKRRE uses three important criteria for evaluation:

1. general cultural historical significance including clerical historical significance
2. art historical significance
3. current social significance



Figure 6

The new robe for the statue of *Zoete Lieve Vrouw* of the St. Jansbasiliek in Den Bosch, an example of current social significance. Nelleke de Laat. All other photographs by the author

Figure 7

Detail of an embroidered chasuble by the firm Stadelmaier designed by Wim van Woerkom, dated from the late 1950s

The first two points do not need any further explanation. They are based on commonly accepted historical, artistic or cultural values. The current social significance is a new concept, which justifies the religious and ecclesiastical context of the objects. These aspects are often hard to define. For example, the religious experience or appreciation of the object by a village or community can vary with location or time. An illustration of this is the current social significance of the new cope for the statue of *Zoete Lieve Vrouw* in the St. Jansbasiliek in Den Bosch (Figure 6). This mantle was designed and made by Nelleke de Laat, a local artist, in 2008. The design incorporates many different patches sewn onto the mantel. Each patch was given to the artist by a parishioner and tells its own story, for instance one such patch was cut from a dress of a parishioner's late daughter and even the bishop donated a patch with a special personal meaning. This mantle has thus for a certain group of people, especially those whose patches are sewn onto the mantle of Mary, a very important religious meaning. This meaning can be defined as 'current social significance'.

Once the overall significance of a group of objects is established, comparative values between individual objects within that group are also important to determine. The embroidered figure of Christ on a chasuble by the designer Wim van Woerkom made by the firm Stadelmaier at the end of the 1950s provides a good example (Figure 7). How does this chasuble compare to similar versions housed in museum or other church collections? The only way to answer this question is to evaluate the situation using a couple of comparing criteria. The WKRRE assumes the following selection criteria:

- rarity
- artistic quality
- representative aspects: is the object an important milestone in the development of an artist or style period?
- ensemble value: do all objects together have more value than one thing on its own?
- condition: completeness or intactness of the object
- presentation and educational potential: vestments can be preserved for expositions of church treasures organised in the church on special occasions.

ASSESSING THE VALUE OF RELIGIOUS TEXTILES

Ecclesiastical textiles have, amongst others, at least two clearly defined values: firstly, their value as functional objects in the liturgy including the emotional experience they evoke, and, secondly, the presumed cultural heritage value. Both aspects should be considered equally during the selection process to avoid a one-sided valuation. Little (art) historical knowledge exists within the ecclesiastical environment, which can

be accessed by art or church historians; on the other hand, as users, parishioners and clergy are specialists in the knowledge regarding the function and social/religious significance of the object. Good cooperation between both groups is a very important condition for the assessment process.

The WKRRE assessment system is applicable to ecclesiastical textiles because it focuses on the significance of religious artefacts from different points of view. Why would you isolate textiles as a specific group? That reason lies within the urgency of the problem. A fuller understanding of the significance of religious textiles is vital and urgent. Without this knowledge the redundant collections will inevitably perish due to their intrinsic vulnerability and the rapidly changing situation in churches.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Value is not a statistical fact. Assessing the value of heritage is a continual process and religious textiles certainly are not an exception to this rule. This is clear when considering the developments of the last 50 years. Additionally, the Dutch assessment system for movable religious objects has not yet been judged on its own merits. Important questions remain: how can a large quantity be judged? Who will carry out the assessments? In the near future this assessment system will be put into practise in Dutch churches. The author will follow this process closely. This paper is based on the ongoing investigation for her PhD at the University of Amsterdam.

CONCLUSION

Religious artefacts are a vulnerable heritage, which deserve to be handled with scrutiny and great care. Textiles richly decorated with gold and silk and skilfully designed form part of a culture that is broader than that solely of the Roman Catholic Church. Selection can be a useable way to manage conservation and preservation issues. In this way, limited resources can be effectively deployed. The selection process has to be primarily based on the significance of cultural, historical and social values. This is essential when considering the little studied area of liturgical vestments, which, unlike other heritage objects in this sector, remain neglected. A fuller understanding of value is vital; without this knowledge, the redundant collections will inevitably perish due to their intrinsic vulnerability. It is hoped that assessing the significance of ecclesiastic textiles together with the establishment of criteria for selection will stimulate the careful use of this rich heritage and safeguard it for the future.

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NOTES

- ¹ Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (II, vii).
- ² This subject has been previously discussed during the symposium 'The preservation of religious textiles' in 2005, organized by the Textile Committee in Den Haag (see Lugtigheid 2006).
- ³ Flags and banners for unions and other institutions are an exception. The same design ideas and construction techniques have been applied to ecclesiastical vestments. Most churches also have several historical banners.
- ⁴ The term *Het Rijke Roomse Leven* refers to the style of Catholicism in use in the south of The Netherlands in the period between ca. 1860 and 1960, a period that was rich in rituals and full of ostentation. The precious vestments of the Roman Catholic churches were covered with gold and silver during this period.
- ⁵ The Stichting Kerkelijk Kunstbezit in The Nederland (SKKN), founded in 1977. The mission statement of the SKKN is to promote knowledge and interest of historical objects and art housed within Dutch churches and monasteries. They try to reach this goal by unlocking the art and cultural possessions in Churches and monasteries; in addition, the link between movable and immovable objects is stressed.
- ⁶ *Het Waardestellend Kader Roerend Religieus Erfgoed* (WKRRE). The project was initiated by the Museum Catherijneconvent in partnership with the SKKN. There is close teamwork between the representatives of the following institutions: the Catholic, Protestant, and Old Catholic Church, the Erfgoedcentrum Nederlands Kloosterleven, the Instituut Collectie Nederland, the Rijksdienst Cultureel Erfgoed, Erfgoed Nederland and museums with ecclesiastical heritage collections. The plan of approach has been primarily written with regard to heritage that is released from closing churches and monasteries. Guiding principles are based upon the rehousing and disposing of movable religious heritage.
- ⁷ See for example: www.significance.collectionscouncil.com.au (accessed 15 April 2010). A similar assessment system for mobile heritage is used in The Netherlands (Kok 2006).

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