

# TEXTILE SPECTRUM

Leire Vergara



Drawing, design for the embroidery of a Fabrique de Saint Ruf waistcoat. Designed by Fabrique de Saint Ruf, Lyon, France, ca. 1785. Graphite, brush and gouache on paper, 17.6 × 36.3 cm. Gift of Eleanor and Sarah Hewitt; 1920-36-322. Courtesy Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum NY, US. This scene of stormy seafaring, once embroidered in silk on a vest, becomes an allegory of mastered logistics for the 18th c. colonial merchant wearing it.

The void is a spectral realm;  
not even nothing can be free of ghosts  
Karen Barad<sup>1</sup>

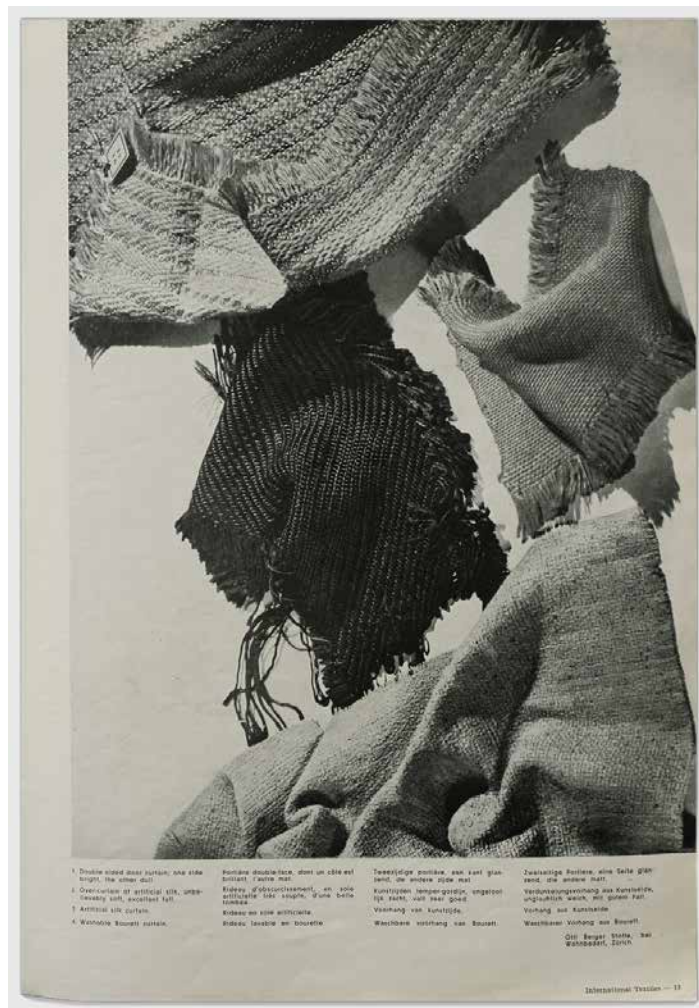
### *1927: Can Textiles Speak?*

When we approach textiles with questions about the past, the only way of obtaining an answer is by paying attention to their materiality, which not only entails taking account of what enters into the range of visibility, but also what is hidden from plain sight dissolved in the texture of their components. The first proof of this becomes evident in their appearance, since fabrics not only reveal their message on the obverse – the face where the weave is more pronouncedly apparent – but also on the reverse – the opposite face where the technical part of their realisation can be appreciated. Fabrics also speak through their imperfections, tears, stains, alterations and remains of applied products. Similarly, they materialise their expression through their repairs and restorations, their fragility and wear. Moreover, their language is displayed on their edges and hidden seams, in all those marginal parts that have suffered from less exposure to light (above all in those pieces that have been on prolonged display), which is precisely where the nature of their colours is hidden. As they have remained covered, the appearance of their tonality has been altered less and there is greater contrast. Fabrics speak of the past through a constant performativity that is articulated on the coarse surface where the accumulated layers of time are concentrated, showing that they are not solidified objects that function as a testimony of a single event, but living materials with their own temporality. Old textiles speak. They speak to us in the illuminated exhibition space where they are usually shown encased in glass vitrines, creating a theatrical distance before our gaze. They also speak in the repository of the museum where they wait in the dark to be awoken from their long lethargies, sheltered from any dangerous contact with light.

The relation between textiles and light leads us to an old modern debate on the modes of optical and tactile perception. It is an opposing duality that the historian T'ai Smith traces in her essay "Limits of the Tactile and the Optical: Bauhaus Fabric in the Frame of Photography." T'ai Smith draws on Alois Riegl in *Late Roman Art Industry* (1901) to introduce the dispute over photography versus painting between Erno Kallai and László Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus (1927). Kallai, a defender of constructivism pessimistic

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1. Karen Barad: "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering and Facing the Incalculable". Octopus Press, Ostrava (2023). <https://octopus-press.cz/en/Octopus-Press> (last accessed 18 September 2023).



Fabrics by Otti Berger, depicted in *International Textiles* magazine, August 1934, Amsterdam. Photographed by Ernst Nipkow (?), distributed by interior design retailer Wohnbedarf from Zurich

Faded fabric with ear-of-wheat motif, unknown date, linen, blue cotton thread, 53 x 30 cm, collection of San Telmo Museoa, inventory number E-003025. Photographed by Hinrich Sachs at Gordailua Repository, Irún, on February 2, 2023. Courtesy Hinrich Sachs/San Telmo Museoa

about the fusion of art and technology,<sup>2</sup> upheld the prevalence of painting over photography, basing his argument on the latter's inability to equal pictorial facture.<sup>3</sup> Weaver and student Otti Berger's experiments with textiles and her texts set out the case in defence of aesthetic singularity beyond painting by demonstrating the haptic potential of a constructed space. According to Berger, the texture of fabrics, their mobility and interactivity with light in space, enabled the perceptual encounter between the optical and the tactile.

Berger provides us with keys to understanding the phenomenology activated with textiles, which transcends physical experience to become a mental event, since, according to Berger, a fabric is also sensed with the subconscious.<sup>4</sup> She gives an example in her writings of the difference between natural silk and artificial or viscose silk, which becomes evident precisely through touch. According to her, this actually offers the possibility of a bodily experience: natural silk offers warmth; artificial silk, coldness.<sup>5</sup>

This debate helps us to once again address the relation of textiles with the image, that is, their capacity not only to project an image, but to be an image – a haptic, mental, spectral, phantasmagorical image. Textiles are situated in the field of perception between vision and touch, between the mental and the bodily, between the patent and the hidden, the present and the absent. It is precisely in the encounter with fabrics that the construction of a new image, or the return of an image from another time, occurs.

### *Circa 1750: Light, Darkness*

A spectrum is a variable condition, an appearance, an image, an apparition based on a continuous reality. Derived from the Latin *specere* “to look, to observe”, the term came into use in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and became more widely used from 1670 with the discovery of visible bands of colour reflected by a ray of light on passing through a prism. Later, with scientific progress, the term “electromagnetic spectrum” was introduced to refer to a whole range of wavelengths of radiation emitted or absorbed by a substance. The visible spectrum occupies a limited part of the electromagnetic field. Multispectral analyses in the conservation of antique textiles take into account the entire physical range when tracing their nature. Fabrics are surfaces on which different types of marks have been impressed, some visible, others hidden, which is

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2. T'ai Smith: “Limits of the Tactile and the Optical: Bauhaus Fabric in the Frame of Photography”, *Grey Room*, no. 25, The MIT Press, Massachusetts (2006), p. 12.

3. Smith: *Ibid*, p. 13.

4. Otti Berger: “Stoffe im Raum”, Prague (1930), cited from T'ai Smith, *Ibid*, p. 20

5. Berger: *Ibid*.

why tracing them involves situating ourselves once again beyond the reach of optics.

The work *There's No Such Thing as Free Lunch* by Hinrich Sachs for the Museo Bikoitza framework in San Telmo Museum delves into the complex composition of the marks and traces emitted and absorbed by the textile medium. In the space of the museum, we encounter a piece of large dimensions manufactured in Flemish linen by the German company Gerriets in the French village of Volgelsheim in 2023. It is a reproduction of an object that once existed in an earlier context, the foresail of a ship belonging to the *Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas*<sup>6</sup> that circulated between 1730 and 1742. The piece concentrates layers of semantic traces, based on a complex game involving a certain binary ambiguity. Its presence in the space points towards the entire dimension of absence; its material condition, its function as a copy, directing our attention to the semiotic field of the negative. The substitute piece occupies the space by negation, even doubling the impact of the original's absence, replicating its mental presence. We are facing a partial reality, an absent presence, an object that is offered to us in order to think about the limits of our own sensorial capacity, of what we can see and touch, of what is not within our reach and escapes us.

To replicate, from the Latin *replicare*, takes us once again to the movement of our body in a constructed setting. This semantic origin includes the act of folding (*plegar*), folding up small (*replegar*), bending in the opposite direction to the rays of light. The great textile mass in the space of the museum consists of a cloth without adornments or added elements,<sup>7</sup> a fabric with a crude tone and a uniform constitution. Its presence points to the volume of pure material in space, a great empty canvas that demands that we pause to consider its naked appearance, the primary base that defines the possibility of the materialisation of a sewn language on its epidermis. An object without the inclusion of any writing that under the light of the exhibition space becomes an image, an appearance, a spectre that pursues the present, a ghost that waits to be confronted. Its material presence is what speaks by omission. It speaks of the absent object, of the original, of its production, its mechanical function on a ship and, by extension, of the social system that made it possible. Its composition expresses some technical evidence derived from the formal aftermath of its original manufacture. Its production in the present tries to replicate the gestures of the work

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6. The Royal Guipuzcoan Company of Caracas: A merchant body that operated in Venezuela, when this was still a part of the Spanish Empire, from 1728 until 1785. It was established through a contract with the Spanish Crown.

7. The model reproduces the original measurements and, although its production was carried out industrially, the way the different sashes are sewn follows the historical logic of manufacturing sails. Important details and elements such as holes and cords are omitted in the search for a way of referring to the original canvas without the exhibited object losing its autonomy. (Conversation with the artist, 24 September 2023).

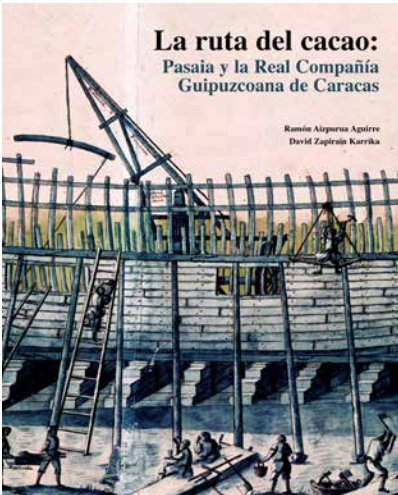
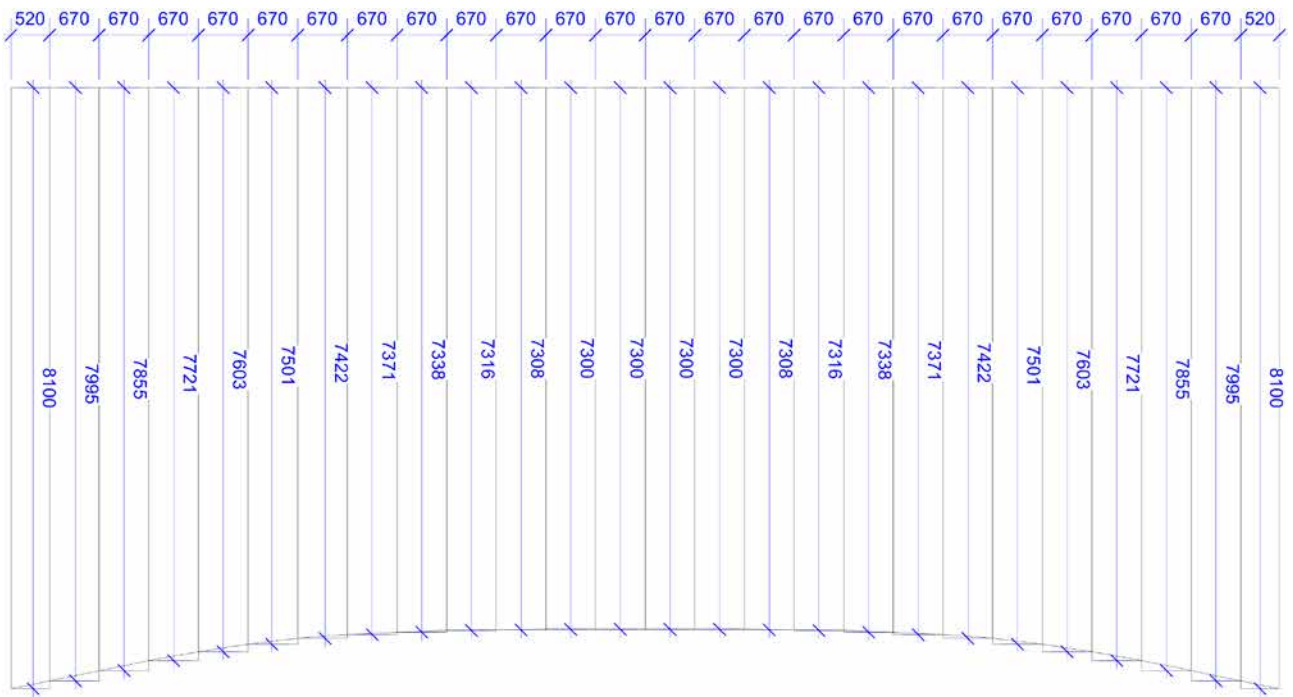


Diagram serving as blueprint for the manufacture of a sail according to the European naval textile techniques of the 18th c. Its overall dimensions were calculated according to a historical shipbuilding manual by Basque Jerónimo de Aizpurua, using the foresail of the ship *San Ignacio de Loyola (I)*, constructed in Pasaia near San Sebastián, commissioned by the *Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas* (Royal Guipuzkoan [trading] Company of Caracas). This ship was frequently used on the Atlantic route from San Sebastián to La Guaira in colonial Venezuela to primarily transport goods such as cocoa to Europe. It subsequently wrecked on a Caribbean reef in 1742. Surviving crew member Martin de Aznares' life has been researched and retold in 2003 by Gerardo Vivas Pineda, a Caracas-based naval historian

Cover of *La ruta del cacao: Pasaia y la Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas*, published by the town hall of Pasaia, 2018, using an illustration from the *Album del Marqués de la Victoria*, 1719. Courtesy Pasaia town hall/Naval Museum, Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa, Donostia/San Sebastián

Detail of the canvas made after the *San Ignacio de Loyola (I)*, made in 2023

that adheres to it. Repetition here implies an attempt to approach an initial mark, that of the technological progress of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which eliminates the possibility of any embellishment in the acceleration of the primitive accumulation of capital by the colonial project. Its austere textile facture emphasises the silence and the erasure of this form of violent progress. The image crystallises at the very moment when the light touches its crude surface, illuminating a bare canvas in the purest modern style, in which the colours red, brown, green, blue, black or white on white – characteristic of the embroidered fabrics of the age – are no longer required. In “Lightning”, Michael Taussig writes about the illumination caused by a ray of lightning, which owes its crude clarity of its manifestation in darkness.<sup>8</sup> Our bodies have now become a crystalline substance, he adds, trying to light up the predominance of the excess of solar energy that, for Georges Bataille, supported life and was also the essential law of expenditure. Shadows can also provide protection from a luminous overexposure capable of destroying the details of a surface. And what if the great canvas was instead a screen? an entity that absorbs light to reflect an image? a fabric that now rests from the exhaustion caused by unlimited movement through the ocean? a curtain that invites us to enter into the possibility of confronting different superimposed times? a fabric exhausted after the storm? a large mortuary shroud thrown up by a huge wave of blood? perhaps flames consumed the mast and the original sail when the ship was struck by lightning before it sank?

*1515 (+/- 50 Years): eliz-artzea*<sup>9</sup>

Let's opt for another possibility, that of the great replica-fabric as a gap or entrance to a space-time of diffraction and superposition of all possible histories: the quantic interruption, as Karen Barad suggests, of the imperialism of universal space-time.<sup>10</sup> Hinrich Sachs offers us the following train of thought based on focused attention on other fabrics. The starting point for his observation is found in the collection of fabrics of San Telmo, in particular a set of borders, bands and items embroidered on linen. His initial approach was based on the hypothesis of a possible influence of pre-Columbian embroidered geometries of South America on Basque embroidery motifs. His examination of the embroidered pieces in the repository of Gordailua was of key importance for verifying that the geometry of the embroideries of San Telmo bore no relation to pre-Colombian textile production. After ruling out that hypothesis, he turned

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8. Michael Taussig: “Lightning” *Slug* #20 (2023) <http://www.slug.directory/20-lightning-by-michael-taussig/> (last accessed 18 September 2023).

9. *Eliz-artzea (Postnuptial Offering)*: Basque Ritual of light, rite of offerings and prayers in favour of the deceased ancestors of the house, normally supervised by the women of the family or the community. Bonifacio Echegaray, “Significación jurídica de algunos ritos funerarios del País Vasco” (Juridical Meaning of Some Funeral Rites in the Basque Country). RIEV 1925, volume XVI, facsimile edition (1971), pp. 95–118 and 184–222.

10. Karen Barad: “Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-memembering and Facing the Incalculable”.

his attention to another fabric, the Shroud of Nabarniz. This is a piece that does not form part of the set in the exhibition or the San Telmo collection, but which has served as a referent in the process of investigation for locating the social context and the iconographic roots from which the other embroidered pieces emerged.

The Shroud of Nabarniz, a piece of cloth dating from the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century that is conserved in the Basque Museum of Bilbao, invites us to enter the space-time of its origins. A testimony to the material culture of the society of that time, its function provides information on the ritual forms of life and death in the Basque Country between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>11</sup> Its execution coincides with that of other mortuary cloths of the period which were also made, as was the custom, of white linen cloth. A cross-stitched decoration predominates, woven or embroidered with coloured threads. The piece, like others of the period, was produced on a horizontal manual loom and consists of several panels joined longitudinally. Some of the Shroud of Nabarniz's decorative motifs<sup>12</sup> show a particular singularity and the geometrical elements seen in the majority of the frets were common in the period (rhombuses, triangles, crosses). However, the sixth fret in the series is the exception, as it introduces a figurative group formed of four merchant ships or *carracas*. These were ships used for transporting large cargoes on long voyages and they were the biggest European ships of that period. This specific strip rests on a smaller-sized fret that is introduced for the first time at the top of the cloth. The top fret is comprised of parallel lines symmetrically sloping in the same direction until roughly the middle of the fret, then sloping in the opposite direction. In the sixth fret showing the line of ships, the parallel lines change direction much further to the right, quite asymmetrically. Studies made of the fabric indicate that this decorative device could be read as sea waves.<sup>13</sup>

The Shroud of Nabarniz today bears layers of time perceptible in its deterioration. They have been registered more precisely since the Shroud entered the collection of the Basque Museum of Bilbao. The dates of its registration, of its exhibition history and of the studies made of its composition have become more accessible, tying the object to the recent past as it loses its relation to an earlier time connected to the material conditions of its production and subsequent use.

The dating of its production oscillates between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, based on carbon-14 testing carried out on a linen sample

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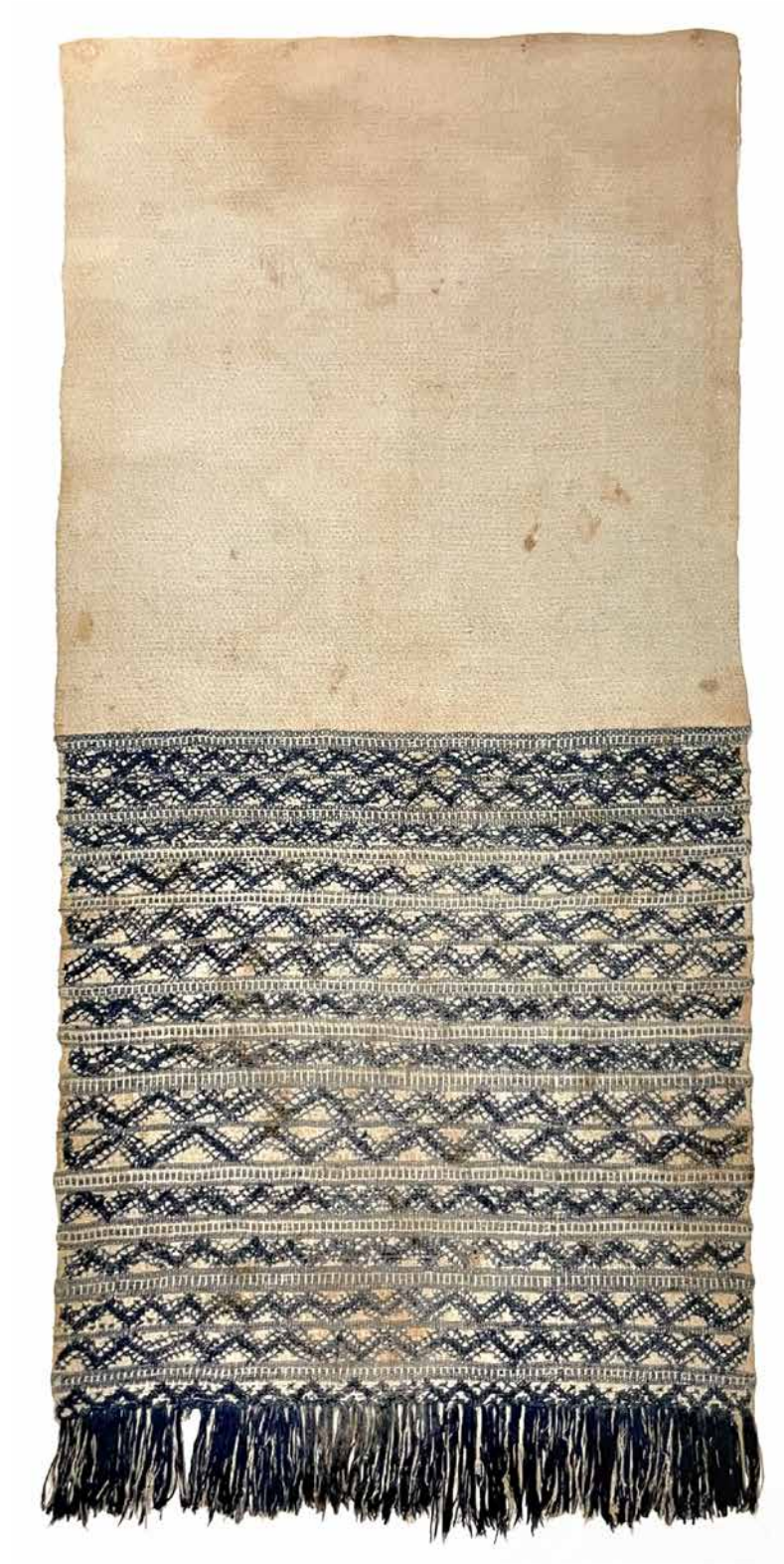
11. Concerning these ritual forms, see for example: Juan Madariaga: "Salvar el alma: en torno a la ritualidad funeraria en el País Vasco" (Saving the Soul: Concerning Funeral Rituals in the Basque Country). In *Heriotza. Ante la muerte*. San Telmo Museoa, Donostia (2019), pp. 81–99.

12. It has nine frets of different heights embroidered with green, blue, brown and golden coloured threads.

13. M<sup>ª</sup> Teresa Jiménez Ochoa de Alda, Amaia Mujika Goñi: "El sudario de Nabarniz" (The Shroud of Nabarniz). Eusko Ikaskuntza, Bilbao (1999), p. 372.



Shroud of Nabarniz (a village in the Basque Biscaye region), dated 1465–1565, raw linen, silk threads in blue, green, brown and gold, 256 × 120 cm. Collection of the Euskal Museoa, Bilbao. Photographed in 1998 by Iñaki Escubi. Courtesy Euskal Museoa, Bilbao



Offering cloth with a wave-like pattern from Legorreta/Gipuzkoa, date of manufacture unknown (but before the end of the 19th c.), linen, blue cotton thread, 101.5 x 50 cm. Collection of San Telmo Museoa, Donostia/San Sebastián, inventory number E-003102. Photographed in 2016 by Ricardo Iriarte. Courtesy San Telmo Museoa



Replica of the Shroud of Nabarniz, realized by nuns of the order of St. Claire at the Monastery of the Assumption, Castil de Lences, Burgos, 1995, linen, silk, 256 x 120 cm; Photographed by Hinrich Sachs at the Euskal Museoa repository on May 3, 2023. Courtesy Hinrich Sachs/ Euskal Museoa

A shroud in use during a Catholic funeral ritual of the 18th c., as imagined by Josune Urrutia Usua within the comic narrative of *There's No Such Thing as a Free Lunch*, 2023. Courtesy Josune Urrutia/San Telmo Museoa

at the University of Uppsala in 1995, where it was dated to between 1465 and 1565. The registration of the interventions and care that the Shroud of Nabarniz has received in recent decades since entering the Museum's collection on 22 August 1950 contrasts with the lack of information on the piece's provenance. Exactly to whom it originally belonged is unknown, even though it is an exceptional fabric on which a highly uncommon maritime voyage is depicted, a symbol of fortune and prestige in the historical framework to which it belongs. Its precise function is unknown. The piece might have been a privately owned funeral mantle, its design denoting the economic category of the family concerned, although the laboratory tests do not appear to show the existence of particles belonging to a body covered by the material. In contrast, it might have been used as a liturgical cloth in the church of Santa María de Nabarniz in community funeral contexts, as a symbol of an economic power in which the population of the area participated more extensively.<sup>14</sup> Also unknown are details about its manufacture. This might have been realized in a domestic family context, or it might have been made on commission, which appears a more likely possibility given the quality of the embroidery and the distinction of the group of ships. Finally, the site of its discovery is unknown, only that it was conserved somewhere for several centuries, either passing from hand to hand or hidden underground, far from the reach of light.

The amount of care afforded to historical fabrics once they enter museum collections is a reflection of their importance. Concretely, the Shroud of Narbaniz is a relic from a society that was entering the technical and mercantile overseas system of the world economy of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is an object conserved from an initial period of colonial articulation based on the flow of goods that informs us of the forms that sustained "the privilege and inevitable violence that accompanied the construction of the empire",<sup>15</sup> as M. Jacqui Alexander notes.

### *2023: Out of the Spotlight*

Fabrics show their capacity to project images when they are encountered in exhibitions, generating a moment of attention through their presence in a concrete place and time. Their display provides this possibility of a perceptual encounter between the fabrics and the bodies that temporarily inhabit the exhibition space.<sup>16</sup>

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14. This idea is based on the findings concerning the sanctuary of Nabarniz in Aintzane Erkizia Martikorena: "El sagrario en el equipamiento del altar medieval en la corona de Castilla. Algunas reflexiones metodológicas" (The Sanctuary in the Features of the Medieval Altar in the Crown of Castile). *Codex Aquivilarensis* 38/2022, p. 262.

15. M. Jacqui Alexander. *Pedagogies of Crossing. Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred*. Duke University Press, Durham & London, (2005), p. 16.

16. I have extracted this idea from conversations with Hinrich Sachs and from *Rémy Zaugg: The Art Museum of My Dreams or A Place for the Work and the Human Being*, Berlin (2013), p. 9. Hinrich Sachs was co-editor of the English edition of this central text by Zaugg, which dates from 1987.

However, this sensorial articulation is not only circumscribed to the exhibition, but also extends to the repository where historic fabrics normally remain hidden until they are once again requested. The sensation derived from contact with fabrics in the repository could be compared to the effect of enlargement produced by a photographic capture. We could relate the moment of their unpacking to the instant when the camera lens approaches a textile object and the zoom is focused on its texture. A special issue of the Bauhaus journal of 1931 dedicated to its textile workshop includes three entire pages of close-ups of textile samples presented in monumental form.<sup>17</sup> The experience of proximity made possible by the repository also generates a sensation of monumentality when a textile piece is uncovered. When we encounter the embroideries of San Telmo in Gordailua, we become aware of the perceptual potential that is unleashed in this moment. Our attention pauses on each detail, separating out all the encapsulated times in the present, generating an effect of density. However, in the case of the Shroud of Nabarniz, a replica conditions our physical contact with its materiality during the unpacking. Access to the Shroud in the repository is mediated by a reproduction made in 1995 following studies which showed that the Shroud was too fragile to keep on display.

The modern weavers' hands<sup>18</sup> were to make a precise copy of the designs on the mortuary fabric in order to preserve the motifs shown on its original surface. Once again, we have a presence (the replica) that denotes an absence (the original). On this occasion, however, this partial condition refers us to the intricate history of embroideries and their close contact with the development of the printing press during the Renaissance, since the books of patterns made the migration of themes and elements of the fretworks possible. Margaret Abegg in *Apropos Patterns: For Embroidery, Lace and Woven Textiles* introduces us to the evolution of embroidered patterns in Europe,<sup>19</sup> their accelerated proliferation due to the impact of the printing arts and the secular luxury of that period. The art of embroidery appears as a medium that was to be freely reproduced, recomposed and infinitely recycled, assembling unlimited formal arrangements to shape new patterns. The San Telmo embroideries and the Shroud of Nabarniz frets draw on the same economy of recycling and connections can be seen in the design of their geometric motifs. Nonetheless, in the case of the San Telmo embroideries, the designs allude to nature in a more abstract way, while in the Shroud of Nabarniz frets they clearly seem to be at the service of the construction of a geometric composition. This idea becomes clearer when we compare the Shroud of Nabarniz with an offering cloth in the collection of San Telmo that also refers to

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17. T'ai Smith: "Limits of the Tactile and the Optical: Bauhaus Fabric in the Frame of Photography", p. 25.

18. The replica was made by the nuns of the order of St. Claire at the Monastery of the Assumption (Castil de Lences).

19. *Apropos Patterns: For Embroidery, Lace and Woven Textiles*. Stämpfli & Cie AG, Bern (1978), p. 15.

a nautical imaginary. Concretely, the San Telmo shroud makes a clear allusion to the waves of the sea by its use of refined forms, and indigo-coloured waves appear embroidered at the edges of the linen cloth. The maritime references invite us to consider this nautical imaginary. In the case of the Shroud of Nabarniz, this imaginary refers to a type of ship older than 1570, as experts note, rather than depicting the most technically advanced shipbuilding of its time.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the ships depicted offered an established and familiar image<sup>21</sup> which was used as a symbol on the Shroud to indicate the social status and property amassed over the lifetime by the individual or community for whom or which the Shroud was made.

The catalogue of geometric forms in most of the rest of the Shroud of Nabarniz's fretwork resembles the designs of the embroidery on the borders belonging to the collection of San Telmo Museum. Although this embroidery belongs to later centuries, the similarity testifies to how the motifs continued to be brought together and recycled over the course of centuries, forming the ornamental part of domestic attire and fabrics (counterpanes for beds and different bridal attire proceeding from Gipuzkoan families in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries). According to the historian Uta-Christian Bergemann in *Europäische Stickereien 1250–1650* (European Embroidery 1250–1650), the blackwork embroidery motifs date back to the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, long before the appearance of the first books of patterns<sup>22</sup> around the decade of the 1520s.<sup>23</sup> There is no certainty about how they were designed. However, Bergemann argues that in Spain, collections of samples (cloths with patterns or forms) continued to be more relevant than printed patterns as source material for visualisation up until modern times.<sup>24</sup>

The embroidered pieces in the collection of San Telmo Museum are exhibited directly, without the mediation of replicas, from the moment that they are unpacked in the repository. Their ornamental iconography – which in most cases alludes to nature (made up of plants, leaves, pentagrams of flowers, motifs that formed part of the catalogue of the border designs of bedclothes since the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Europe) – is displayed along their imperfections, stains and discolourations. Although they are original, these embroideries also contain the mechanisms of copying in their formal composition: a long evolution survives in their designs through which patterns and techniques were transmitted and endured over an extended time

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20. M<sup>a</sup> Teresa Jiménez Ochoa de Alda, Amaia Mujika Goñi: *Ibid*, p. 374.

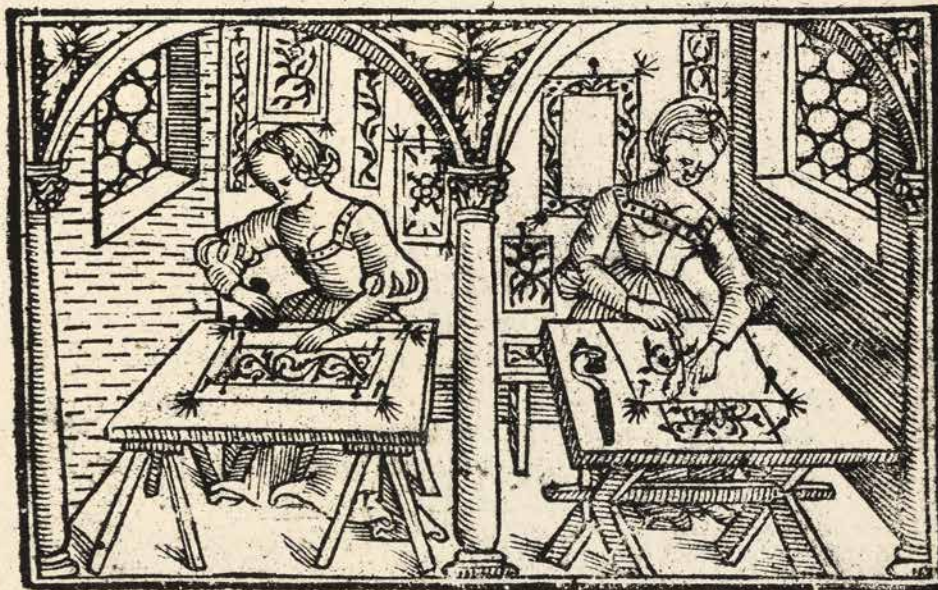
21. M<sup>a</sup> Teresa Jiménez Ochoa de Alda, Amaia Mujika Goñi: *Ibid*, p. 376.

22. "It can be supposed that since the existence of embroiderers there have been more or less complete prototypes, but always in the form of samples and exercises...what we do know is that they existed in great abundance in Spain in the 15<sup>th</sup> century..." in Maravillas Segura Lacomba: *Bordados populares españoles (Popular Spanish Embroideries)*. C.S.I.C, Madrid, (1949) p. 71.

23. Uta-Christian Bergemann: *Europäische Stickereien 1250–1650*, Regensburg (2010), p. 64.

24. Bergemann, *ibid*, p. 66.

E auertisse con el disegno insieme ti apportiamo vn porfido bellissimo e vago a loocchio cosa non mancho da tenerse cara che esso disegno: laquale cosa da noi sono stata con grandissima fatica composta e ordinata a tua vtilita e pochissima spesa. Vale.



Four women transferring preparatory drawings by tracing and dusting to the fabric that will carry the embroidery. Alessandro Paganino: *Libro primo de rechami*. Toscolano, about 1532. Woodcut, collection of Kunstbibliothek, Berlin, inventory number OS 1610. Photographed by Dietmar Katz. Courtesy Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

in the rural areas of Spain.<sup>25</sup> Milfred Stapley in *Tejidos y bordados españoles (Spanish Fabrics and Embroidery)* investigates the evolution of embroidery in rural contexts, which she connects with the Arab tradition – and even that of Egypt and Persia – on the basis of the insistent use of indigo blue and, on occasions, black. According to Stapley's studies made in the 1920s, the rural context thus preserved the confection and circulation of embroidery in the Spanish context, which had survived until that time, even though women in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century had early access to the purchase of different types of cotton to confection trousseau items. Outside the industrial context, embroidered items lasted until the 20<sup>th</sup> century based on domestic manufacturing linked to the cultivation of flax and its use on small farmsteads. This helps to understand not only the drift of an iconography composed of a symbolic archaeology that passes through the accumulation of traditions and the recycling of ornamental forms, but also the evolution of the forms of collective production, most of which were in the hands of women at their point of origin.<sup>26</sup>

The frontispiece of Abegg's book *Apropos Patterns for Embroidery, Lace and Woven Textiles* carries the image of a woodcut from 1532 showing four women working on embroidery. The image shows the distribution of the work, which is divided into different tasks. This is one of the proofs of the artisanal textile production of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in which there appears to be a majority female presence. In it one can also observe the mechanics of the chain production of the designs, derived from fashioning sketches that are first copied from pattern books to be reproduced on the linen pieces at an appropriate size, and that will later be joined together to form pieces of variable sizes depending on their use. The forms of production represented in the engraving point to embroidered pieces made on commission, which respond to the demands of the time – to the flowering of a bourgeois class that would display its social rank using ornaments designed in these workshops. This is the context in which the manufacture of the Shroud of Nabarniz is inscribed; its ornamental logic reflects the emergence of a new social class<sup>27</sup> that seeks forms

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25. Milfred Stapley: *Tejidos y bordados populares españoles*. Voluntad, Madrid (1924), p. 27.

26. On the different roles of women in the production and commercialisation of linen, see José Antonio Azpiazu: *La historia desconocida del lino vasco (The Unknown History of Basque Linen)*. Txartalo, Donostia (2006) and José Antonio Azpiazu: *Mujeres vascas, sumisión y poder: la condición femenina en la Alta Edad Moderna (Basque Women, Submission and Power: The Female Condition in the Early Modern Age)*. R&B Ediciones, Donostia/San Sebastián (1995).

27. This ornamental logic would continue to be applied later in the fabrics and embroidery of the Basque Country (including those preserved in the collection of San Telmo) with the aim of denoting a regional privilege proceeding from "universal nobility" that was in effect until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This "universal nobility" "was a factor of capital importance when it comes to explaining the success of the Basque emigrants disseminated throughout the Spanish dominions (...), where due to their origins they could enjoy fiscal as much as privileges and rights of the nobility" op.cit. Óscar Álvarez Gila: "La no-memoria de un pasado inexistente por no buscado: En los orígenes de la leyenda de un País Vasco libre de esclavitud (que no de esclavistas)" (The non-memory of a past that does not exist because it is not sought for: In the origins of the legend of a Basque Country free of slavery (if not of slave-dealers), in: Martín Rodrigo y Alharilla (ed): *Del olvido a la memoria: La esclavitud en la España contemporánea (From Oblivion to Memory: Slavery in Contemporary Spain)*, Icaria Editoria, Barcelona (2022).

and images of its own to represent itself. The modes and conditions of production of the workshops were to undergo alterations in the coming centuries. The most ostentatious embroideries in gold and silver would continue to be produced in specialised workshops,<sup>28</sup> while the simpler ones were to survive based on the *know-how* of female peasant hands that included weaving amongst the numerous tasks of their reproductive labour.<sup>29</sup> The embroidered pieces of the collection of San Telmo Museum belong to this distribution of textile production, in which women in the rural world worked with linen particularly within the domestic sphere. Parallel to this, in the urban world, cotton textile production was to become a highly mechanised industry where the presence of women operators became essential to ensure that the machines never stopped.

#### *Undated: Blind Spot*

The blind stitch and blind stitching in embroidery are often employed to conceal the line made by the thread in lace and at edges and seams joining pieces of cloth. Fabrics reveal and conceal messages through the structure of their creation, making clear this ambivalent game between the visible and the invisible. The Shroud of Nabarniz shows – while also hiding – countless secrets using ornamentation that can be direct or subliminal, abstract or figurative, depending on the communicative intention. Beyond the frets described above, which point to a natural or supernatural setting, to the sea or the nautical technology of the age, the Shroud presents a decorative band that is somewhat more enigmatic. Situated below the second strip of waves on which the ships rest, the eighth fret in the series appears above the final strip of waves on the cloth. The design, a mosaic – formed of different series of geometric elements repeated to produce a dense ornamental ensemble – is striking due to the wealth of resources employed and because it is placed at the end of the piece and between the strips of waves. It is a design that seems submerged in the deep waters through which the ships are sailing, a complex submerged framework that leaves behind their movements. A digitally drawn pattern of the cross-stitching provided by the Basque Museum of Bilbao helps us to enlarge the details of the fret. In it we can make out a line of squares rotated through 45 degrees that rests on a background of crosses similar to those used for the waves, but on this occasion smaller and forming narrower parallel lines, generating a sensation of decorative continuity and saturation. The rhombuses are divided into four new smaller rhomboid boxes in which the same abstract figures can be seen, denoting seriality, repetition and symmetry. The game of elements

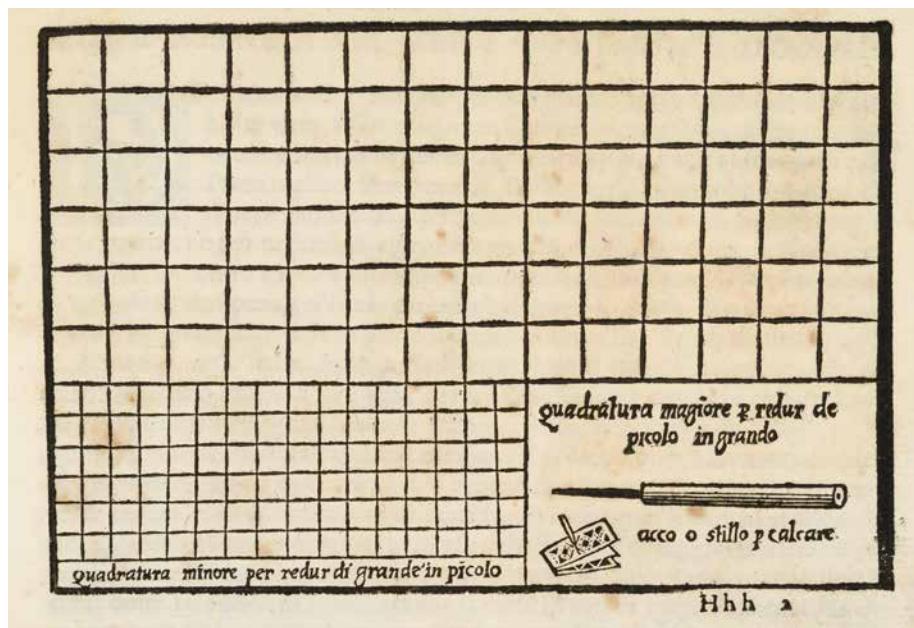
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28. Uta-Christiane Bergemann, *Europäische Stickereien 1650–1850*, Krefeld (2006), p. 65.

29. “Women represented cheap labour for all the tasks of embroidery: as employees in the workshops, as home-based providers to the professional embroiderers, and as autonomous embroiderers in their own homes or in non-guild areas such as noble houses and the court”, in Bergemann, *ibid.*, p. 66.



*The Linen Market at St. Domingo (St. Domingue, Haiti), 1770s, coloured engraving by Italian-born Agostino Brunias. "Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in The Early African Diaspora," accessed September 29, 2023, <http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/767>. The image is in the public domain, available under CC by 4.0 attribution*



Grid system for enlarging and reducing design drawings. Cesare Vecellio: *Corona delle nobili e virtuoso donne. Libro primo*, Venice, 1591. Woodcut, collection of Kunstbibliothek, Berlin, inventory number OS 1634. Photographed by Dietmar Katz. Courtesy Kunstbibliothek, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Digitally rendered pattern after one of the embroidered frets of the Shroud of Nabarniz, drawn by Maite Jimenez Ochoa de Alda in 2014. Published by Euskal Museoa, Bilbao

seems to be perfect until we notice certain alterations, reflected in the figures within the smaller diamond shaped areas, a type of capital letter “S” accompanied by its inverted image. In the majority of cases, the figures face each other, one being a reflection of the other, although in a random way; at times the same figure will appear repeated, breaking the symmetry and the mirror effect. It is a design that functions like machinery indicating movement, a mechanics of rotation, a technical, economic and social assemblage perhaps, which sustains the oceanic routes along which the mercantile enterprise circulates. The cargo<sup>30</sup> is hidden in the ships and, in an opaque way, shapes a complex system of sale, exchange and exploitation that makes the incessant traffic of the merchant ships possible.

Similarly, the fabric – linen, the weave on which the design of the frets rests – contains hidden information about the economic and social structure of the age. José Antonio Azpiazu provides important documentation on the evolution of the economy that developed around linen. In *La historia desconocida del lino vasco* he presents the rapid changes undergone by the textile fibre, with its exploitation increasing significantly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century following the massive introduction of flax by the Portuguese, altering the local economy of earlier decades that rested on two basic elements: iron and whaling.<sup>31</sup> The economy that arose around linen quickly began to expand, creating circuits of production and a division of the manufacturing process, inserting itself into trade routes with Europe and the colonies. The following details related to the cargo of the merchant ships illustrate this: a ship left Zumaia bound for Seville and from there to the West Indies in 1581 carrying textile-related material (e.g. black, blue and white thread, needles from Milan, pins, scissors from the Basque town of Bergara, etc).<sup>32</sup> As Azpiazu explains, textile goods proved easy to transport and generated a high profit; the lesser weight and volume of the merchandise meant that capital was attracted to the textile trade.<sup>33</sup> Women were inserted at several levels in this complex, new, hyper-connected mercantile economic structure formed around the recently inaugurated colonial cartography, creating an extractivist structure that encompassed

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30. In relation to the possible cargo of the ships represented on the Shroud of Nabarniz, it is worth drawing attention to the study of the slave trade by José Antonio Azpiazu *Esclavos y traficantes. Historias ocultas del País Vasco (Slaves and Traffickers. Hidden Histories of the Basque Country)*. Tarttalo, Donostia/San Sebastián (1997), pp. 53–54: “It should come as no surprise that by the year 1523 these Biscayan merchants were already trading in slaves in America. Their business is inscribed in the most absolute legality, forming part of the quotas controlled by the royal officials who controlled the royal licences”. More recently as well, the essay by Ana María Benito Domínguez *Iturritxiki*, concerning the ship commissioned by the Portuguese Crown that sank in the Bay of Getaria between 1522 and 1524, and from which were recovered tin shackles, wire, haberdashery items and copper plate, materials that refer to the international slavery of the age.

31. José Antonio Azpiazu: *La historia desconocida del lino vasco*. Tarttalo, Donostia/San Sebastián (2006), p. 21.

32. José Antonio Azpiazu: “Documentos en torno al mundo del lino” (Documents Concerning the World of Linen). Unpublished (2023). Information discussed in a conversation between José Antonio Azpiazu, the author, Hinrich Sachs and Susana Soto (3 March 2023).

33. José Antonio Azpiazu: *Mujeres vascas, sumisión y poder: la condición femenina en la Alta Edad Moderna*. R&B Ediciones, Donostia/San Sebastián (1995), pp. 83–84.

the wealthiest strata of society in command of maritime businesses, down to the most subaltern strata formed of the collective working body that made possible the production of textile goods.

Now, let's return once again to the replica sail that rests in the San Telmo Museum. Let's return to thinking of it as a place of entry, intersection and encounter between times beyond the linear idea of history as a point of space–time diffraction – where, as Karen Barad explains, a particle can be in a state of indeterminate coexistence between multiple spaces and multiple times according to the theory of quantum physics: past, present and future. The waves of the sea that appear embroidered on the offering cloth in the San Telmo Museum's collection of embroidery and on the Shroud of Nabarniz refer to the multiple waves created when an object collides with an aquatic surface, which is another way of showing how a particle can occupy several points at the same time.<sup>34</sup> The crude canvas unfurled beneath the museum's light source<sup>35</sup> demands that we concentrate on the idea of silence, on a break in the space that points not to a vacuum but instead to a cavity that contains a record of the chain of erasures on which its materiality rests. Erasures on erasures, a way of empire building that has been and continues to be linked to a logic of emptiness. The large piece of linen is presented in the museum as an object of mourning, of contact between places and times, and as a fabric for paying respect to the ghosts of the past and future.

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34. Karen Barad: "Troubling Time/s and Ecologies of Nothingness: Re-turning, Re-membering and Facing the Incalculable".

35. The piece also raises questions related to its future presence in the repository, the conditions of its storage as a new object that is incorporated into the collection of San Telmo Museum.



Detail from the wave-like pattern of an offering cloth, linen, blue cotton thread, collection of San Telmo Museoa, inventory number E-003102. Photographed by Hinrich Sachs at Gordailua repository, Irun, Gipuzkoa, on February 2, 2023. Courtesy Hinrich Sachs/San Telmo Museoa

*Odol-iturrija* (The Fountain of Blood), song by Ibonrg and Enrike Hurtado. Cover art by Nikole Hurtado Vergara. Published by Repetidor, release date: December 16, 2021. The song's lyrics are inspired by the poem "La Fontaine de Sang" of Charles Baudelaire (1857), translated into Basque by Lauxeta in 1930. Courtesy the artists and Repetidor



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Coat of arms of the city of Donostia, San Sebastián, which have remained the same since 1682, with the representation of a three-master under sail. The version depicted is part of the iron cast decoration of the present Santa Catalina Bridge across the Urumea River, constructed in 1870. Photographed by Josune Urrutia on October 26, 2023. Courtesy Josune Urrutia

