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CRAFTING KNOWLEDGE: EXAMINING HISTORIC TEXTILE PRACTICES AND CITIZENSHIP FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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ABSTRACT

Our western present-day clothing culture is problematic. Clothing consumption have reached unsustainable levels which threatens the environment and the ecosystems of our planet (Directorate-General for Environment, 2022; EMF, 2017). A more resource-conscious clothing culture is needed. The needed change involves industry, but also citizens as their “micro-practices of everyday care and maintenance of clothing hold promise of ongoing, resourceful fashion provision and expression” (Fletcher & Tham, 2019, p. 37 based on Fletcher, 2016). On a similar note, textile citizenship, has been presented as a sustainability strategy of re-skilling citizens, industry and designers driven by, e.g., learnings from historic circular textile practices (CE-PT, 2021). As the concept and strategy has not been fully defined, this Ph.D. project aims to explore the meaning of textile citizenship through hands-on interactions with historic textiles.

Textile objects are a ubiquitous part of human life helping us stay warm, protected and sheltered. However, the influence of textiles and clothing reaches beyond functional use. Textile objects support our various aesthetic and cultural needs, but they also shape and influence our being in the world (Miller, 2010). Material cultures are not only studied as a present phenomenon. In the field of textile archaeology, the term *cloth culture* helps to frame the interconnectedness between cloth-type materials (i.e., textiles and skins), tools, production processes, craftsmanship, and the society and culture being studied (Harris, 2008). In this research, I adopt the use of cloth culture to help unfold the idea that our relation to and use of textile resources are still influenced by multiple factors including materials’ availability, tools and technologies, culture, traditions and heritage, as well as competencies and skills. Thus, my ambition is to link learnings about historic cloth cultures with speculative design research to shed light on future, more sustainable pathways for citizens’ interactions with textile resources.

Based on the above reflections, my Ph.D. project explores historic textile objects through hands-on design experiments to learn from the historic practices considered sustainable today. Not only to further the understanding of the past, but to contribute with knowledge to help us navigate in a world with limited

textile resources. I depart my investigation in museum collections and ask:

1. What examples of sustainable textile practices can be found materialised in selected Danish museums' collections?
2. How can sustainable textile practices from history help define the concept of textile citizenship?
3. What might hands-on investigations of historic sustainable textile practices disclose about future cloth cultures?

The project was initiated in September 2022. During winter and spring of 2023 objects from a study-collection located at Holbæk Museum in the north-western part of Zealand was explored. The collection consists of more than 7000 textile objects dating from mid 18th century to late 20th century and is managed by a voluntary textile guild. Through participant observations (Szulevicz, 2015) I have followed the work of the textile guild and gained insight into the content of the collection. In the following, I present one of the many objects from the collection that exemplifies materialised sustainable practises.

The example is a linen bodice estimated to be from the late 18th century (Kirsten Emiland, personal communication, 09/02-23). The bodice has most likely been altered in size in the bust area, it has been repaired several times using different techniques, and it seems that the straps have been completely replaced (Figure 1). This is a garment showing signs of extensive use and of careful maintenance. In many ways, it represents the kinds of sustainable practices argued as essential in reducing the climate impact of clothing through extended use (Directorate-General for Environment, 2022; Fletcher, 2016; Niinimäki, 2018). Importantly, it also represents practices dependent on textile competencies and skills.



Figure 1: Four sustainable practices on linen bodice.

The forthcoming work includes explorations of further objects from the collection and of prehistoric textiles from The National Museum of Denmark, but it also entails research-through-design (Frankel & Racine, 2010). Design experiments or hands-on investigations drive the inquiry, where the space between past, present and future is explored. The open questions of what the meaning of textile citizenship is, and what future cloth cultures might be, call for a speculative design approach. With inspiration from the method of experimental textile archaeology, where archaeological textiles are reconstructed to advance the understanding of the past (Andersson Strand, 2010), my intention is to work with three case examples of sustainable textile practices by mirroring the embedded textile techniques. The purpose of the experiments is not to make an accurate copy, but to explore and develop a bodily understanding of the embedded sustainable practices to shed a new light on our present-day challenges.

By working with hands-on experiments my knowledge creation becomes twofold. Referring to Tim Ingold's (2013) idea of telling by hand I contribute with materialised knowledge embodied in my crafted objects and articulate knowledge in the form of written reflections. This dual process of making and reflecting is considered central to my methodology and influence the final contribution of the Ph.D. project which takes the form of a monograph (a written reflection) and a compilation of knowledge carrying objects (informing the reflection). At the Nordes conference and in complementation to this position paper, I exhibit the

first attempts of crafting knowledge. The material speculations will be supported by sections from a reflective diary (Pedgley, 2007). I hope this can help fill some of the project's blank spaces.

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