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Notes from the field: materiality

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on this and the next earliest copy of the text, now in Doha.⁵ As a nonspecialist, I was struck that so little attention seemed to have been hitherto paid to the colophon as a problematic physical object. Once this documentary anchor had been cut away, our group was able to speculate freely on date and provenance. We followed Savage-Smith on the dating (to the later twelfth century, perhaps?), but on provenance, judging by stylistic considerations of the drawings, we were naturally able to span the Islamic world, from central Asia to North Africa. I myself rather fancied an Egyptian attribution but, more seriously, I hope that further specialist study of this important manuscript will start with a close examination of the thing itself.

Oliver Watson worked at the Victoria and Albert Museum (1979–2003), in Doha, Qatar (2003–5), the Ashmolean Museum (2005–8), and as the director of the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (2008–11). He was appointed the first I. M. Pei Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture at the University of Oxford in 2011 [Khalili Research

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Notes

1. A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, *Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World, 8th–18th Centuries; Victoria and Albert Museum Catalogue* (London: HMSO, 1982), 44, no. 5. Interestingly, the piece had been earlier published as twelfth century, in A. U. Pope's notoriously unreliable *Survey of Persian Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pl. 1277d.
2. Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, no. I.31/63, unpublished.
3. Oliver Watson, "Samarra Revisited: The Rise of Islamic Glazed Pottery," *Hundert Jahre Grabungen in Samarra, Beiträge zur Islamischen Kunst und Archäologie*, vol. 4 (Wiesbaden: Ernst Herzfeld Gesellschaft, forthcoming).
4. A. Soudavar, "The Concepts of 'al-aqdamo aṣaḥḥ' and 'Yaḳin-e sābeq', and the Problem of Semi-fakes," *Studia Iranica* 28 (1999): 262–64.
5. Emilie Savage-Smith, "The Stars in the Bright Sky: The Most Authoritative Copy of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi's Tenth-Century Guide to the Constellations,'" in *God Is Beautiful; He Loves Beauty: The Object in Islamic Art and Culture*, ed. Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with Qatar Foundation and Virginia Commonwealth University, forthcoming).

Tristan Weddigen

Confronted with postwar movements such as Post-Minimalism, feminism, and Arte Povera, which questioned and expanded traditional uses of materials, and faced with an alleged digital dematerialization of contemporary reality, materials have become a field of art historical research, to which Monika Wagner has signally contributed. *Textiles* are not only part of this new field, but, more interestingly, they also challenge established notions of artistic material. A fabric is commonly called a material. Being a technological product and not a raw material, however, the label "textile" is correct only in the metaphoric sense of designating anything, processed or not, that can be used in the manufacture of something else, such as clothes. But, raw material itself being irrelevant to a definition of "textility," and used to designate equally wickerwork, written text, and metal curtains in architecture, textiles should rather be defined by specific techniques of production. Then again, the techniques of assembly implied in embroidery, in weaving, or in connecting the World Wide Web are so diverse that we need to operate with a vague "family resemblance." Textiles are also often understood as a specific medium of art. Yet this definition tends to reduce textiles to material neuters and flattened carriers of visual information—rather the opposite of the meaning connoted by the materiality of mediums that is the focus of today's scholarship. So, "the textile" is a hybrid under which properties are often strung together—material, technology, medium, and metaphor—and only rarely does it refer to one of these in isolation. The study of textiles consequently requires a wide range of methodologies, and it must concern itself with a vast array of objects.¹

The history of artists' materials contributes to the study of material culture. Over time, the appreciation and meaning of

materials and mediums can drastically change. The textile decoration of sacred and profane interiors in early modern Europe is a prominent case in point. Back then, textiles were arguably the most important and expensive means of representation, apart from architecture itself. With the end of the ancien régime and the emergence of modernist aesthetics, textiles have slowly withdrawn from interior design. Moreover, the textile medium was already marginalized in the aesthetic discourse with Leon Battista Alberti's rejection of material in favor of pure artistic form, with the rise of Italian idealist "disegno" theory, with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's spiritualization of art, and with the succeeding modernist primacy of painting among the visual arts, which contributed to its fading, both in art and research, until today. Nonetheless, an emerging history of artistic materials is not content with technological analysis, iconography, or the history of design, but will probably move toward a more comprehensive iconology of materials and history of objects.²

A more phenomenological approach to late medieval and early modern textile interiors shall be sketched here in order to illustrate the potential of an iconology of materials and, more specifically, the possible relation of materials to something as abstract as space. In order to look back onto a vanished textile culture, we might start with its modern reception. In his *Arcades Project*, left unfinished at his death in 1940, Walter Benjamin critically analyzes the late nineteenth-century French *intérieur*. Referring to Theodor W. Adorno's habilitation thesis on Søren Kierkegaard, published in 1933, which portrays the bourgeois flâneur and his inauthentic interiority, Benjamin characterizes the Parisian apartment as the surrogate of a domesticized public space, such as an

arcade, theatrically costumed in fabrics. In Benjamin's account, the upholsterer's art fights against modern glass and iron architecture, disintegrates architectural space itself, and transforms it into an arachnean cocoon or uterine cave. According to him, the prototype of the historicist dwelling is not the house but the case or container ("Gehäuse"), the silk-lined etui, sheath, or capsule ("Futtermal"), which holds the imprint of their occupants and receives the traces of their lives. Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, an archaeology of the bourgeois culture that amassed and commodified all styles dating before the Restoration, layers a modernist stance onto medieval and early modern notions of interior space. Benjamin might have also been aware of Adolf Loos's article "Interior," first published in 1898 and again in 1921 and 1931, which adopts Gottfried Semper's anthropological clothing principle ("Bekleidungsprinzip"), as laid out in his *Style* of 1860/63, and his notion of "truth to materials." What matters most here is that Loos demands the architect start by imagining the emotional impact of the planned interior spaces that are developed from basic decorative elements, such as carpets. Only thereafter shall the architect conceive of a tectonic structure to sustain or "wear" those interior spaces.³

Norbert Elias's understanding of dwelling structures as socially inflected and of spatial dispositions as materializations of communication structures and social formations, which he expounded in his *Court Society* of 1969, has been foundational to the sociology of space and to the study of architecture. Still, while he stresses *decorum* as the expression of negotiated and regulated social distinction, he says little about *decoration*. More to the point, the attempt to link interior arrangement with social practice often fails to accept the de facto multifunctionality of architectural spaces and their ad hoc definition by furniture. Indeed, in premodern residences, habitable spaces or cubicles are constituted by lining a building's architectural cavities with fabrics. The alcove appears as a *mise en abyme* of such textile spaces, a phenomenon that contradicts the Renaissance notion of architecture as transparent geometric space. Thus, Benjamin's analysis of the historicist interior and Loos's conception of architectural space as perceived from within are useful for overcoming two common approaches in scholarship: one that views tapestries as autonomous, decontextualized works of art, akin to paintings, and another that considers wall hangings as superfluous froufrou disguising architecture. Instead, textile decor should be understood as a most vital element of a cultural "habitus."⁴

A close reading of late medieval and early modern visual evidence for textile interiors reveals some characteristics of textile spaces, such as the temporal thickness and aesthetic longevity conferred by narrative tapestries; the ability of textile ephemeral microarchitecture, such as baldachins and balconies, to literally turn inside out, in a manner reminiscent of the topological model of the reversible "sock" described by Benjamin; and tapestries' function as portable iconographic contexts or symbolic spaces fostering a typological perception of a doubled reality and creating immersive panopticons. The late medieval tradition of courtly "chambres," room-filling and often furniture-covering sets of *verdures*, millefleurs, and genre scenes in landscapes, transformed bare architectural interiors into *loci amoeni*, that is,

artificial paradises, as Aby Warburg made clear in his essay "Peasants at Work in Burgundian Tapestries" of 1907. Such *verdures* powerfully suggest the nonarchitectural, spatially ambiguous depth and texture of nature itself. As places of atemporal pleasures and unlikely encounters, they established a "heterotopy." In Michel Foucault's "Of Other Spaces," a lecture delivered in 1967 and published in 1984, the heterotopia is exemplified by the garden as a microcosm and the carpet as a mobile garden. On the one hand, the material and colored flatness of wall hangings was to re-emerge later, as the modernist "carpet paradigm" of abstract art. On the other hand, tapestries undulating in the draft, folded, pulled back, or, especially, hung around the corners of a room created a unique, immersive experience of visual depth by warping an otherwise flat or relieflike picture, which offers an alternative notion of illusion based on the materiality of the textile image in which figure and support merge. This medium-specific effect, which outdoes perspectival panel painting, can sometimes be experienced in museums today, but it was observed and documented already by the Limbourg brothers with the greatest perspicacity in the early fifteenth century (Fig. 1). In their *January* miniature of the *Très riches heures* for the Duke of Berry, a *War of Troy* tapestry is hung around the left corner of the room and wrapped up above the chimneypiece so as to suggest that the turret of the city wall protrudes into the room, that the cavalry enters and storms the real space, and that it crushes the enemy into the tapestry's folds. Tapestries' incongruous and material spatiality adapts to a plurality of moving eyes looking at nonplanar and multifocal images.⁵

At the turn of the twentieth century, with August Schmarsow, Alois Riegl, and Heinrich Wölfflin, an art historical concept of space emerges that is not based on architectural and perspectival definitions and techniques. In combining the "history of seeing" with the history of representational techniques, Erwin Panofsky's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* in 1927 still offers a master narrative for the history of visual space. Panofsky describes early and high medieval pictorial flatness as a Neoplatonic repudiation of the Aristotelian topological notion of place, in favor of a qualitative, bodily two-dimensionality, conceived as an immaterial fabric made of light, lines, and colored surfaces. Late medieval art then discovers the transparency of the picture plane and creates boxes, niches, and textile baldachins in order to form a pictorial and sculptural space for human figures. The transition from medieval discontinuous space to infinite *res extensa*, from relational space ("Aggregatraum") to absolute space ("Systemraum"), began with the invention of linear perspective and was later theorized by Isaac Newton. As Wolfgang Kemp remarks, pictorial space from Giotto to Jan van Eyck can be described as a carved-out relieflike cavity, furnished with figures and objects, constituted by their reciprocal relation, both spatial and narrational. Here, textiles follow or replace the walls, fabricate alcovelike spaces, and are lifted to open the view through the missing "fourth wall." Early modern perspectival space, instead, gives a view through a continuum in which textiles, hung or folded, are reduced to two-dimensional planes symbolizing the opaque materiality and deficiency of pictorial representation.⁶

The fact that textiles defined the experience and idea of



1 Limbourg brothers, *January*, from *Les très riches heures du duc de Berry*, 1412–16, illumination on vellum, $11\frac{3}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{4}$ in. (29 × 21 cm). Musée Condé, Chantilly, fol. 1v (artwork in the public domain; photograph © RMN-Grand Palais (Domaine de Chantilly)/Rene-Gabriel Ojéda)

interior space from the Middle Ages well into the nineteenth century, as Benjamin and Loos acknowledge, contradicts a one-dimensional, modernist, evolutionary narrative. The reconstruction of a premodern “textile discourse,” which has been obscured by the paradigm of perspectival transparency, can profit from phenomenological and topological approaches, as sketched out in Foucault’s lecture and explored by Gilles Deleuze, that emerge with the recent “spatial turn” in the humanities and social sciences. Medieval and early modern textile interiors testify to a notion of space as something material, opaque, sensorial, discontinuous, non-Euclid-

ean, folded, polyfocal, social, and topological. For instance, Jan Vermeer’s boxlike, furnished, textile *intérieurs* have been recently associated with a relational understanding of space endorsed by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christiaan Huygens against Newton’s theory. Instead of a *longue durée*, bodily understanding of space, art history assumes the breakthrough and pervasiveness of the perspectival idea of space since the quattrocento, defined as something transparent, immaterial, neutral, rational, uniform, and infinite. In the history of visibility, the instauration of the perspectival *tableau* and the idea of absolute space have eclipsed an earlier, but

long-lasting textile spatiality, which contemporary art and architecture, today, help to re-discover.⁷

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Notes

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2. Leon Battista Alberti, *De statua—De pictura—Elementa picturae*, ed. Oskar Bätschmann et al. (Darmstadt: WBG, 2011), 235–37; and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik III* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), 11–16.
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5. Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (New York: Pantheon, 1983). Cf. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1968); Pierre Bourdieu, "Post-face," in *Architecture gothique et pensée scolastique*, by Erwin Panofsky (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 134–67; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); and Martina Löw, *Raumsoziologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001).
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8. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold*, ed. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992). Cf. Karin Leonhard, *Das gemalte Zimmer* (Munich: Fink, 2003). My note from the field here is part of a larger research project conducted at the University of Zurich. See also the *Textile Studies* series published with Edition Imorde, Emsdetten: Philipp Zitzlsperger, ed., *Kleidung im Bild: Zur Ikonologie dargestellter Gewandung* (2010); Tristan Weddigen, ed., *Metatextile: Identity and History of a Contemporary Art Medium* (2011); idem, ed., *Unfolding the Textile Medium in Early Modern Art and Literature* (2011); and David Ganz and Marius Rimmel, eds., *Kleider machen Leute: Vormoderne Strategien vestimentärer Bildsprache* (2012).