

How I use net, and why.

Riddles: I work with nets but not with fish. I work for hours with little to show for it. What am I?

Nets are often a part of my working day. Not every day and not all day, but regularly I will lay fine net fabric on a table, place other fabric upon it, and stitch. Put a normal dressmaking pin alongside mine, and it appears oddly scaled up, like a nail, and a sewing thread is more like yarn. Or I might have textile fragments sandwiched between two layers of net. Then the stitches do not pass through the fragments at all, they just follow their outlines, making little pockets to hold each one, so that at first glance the appearance is of one larger piece rather than a mass of scraps.

Why would I do that? Does the process mend it, so it can be used again? Not generally.

Imagine this fragile fabric has some historic significance. A choice has been made to preserve it for as long as possible. The reason for that choice may be its beauty, or the and skill that went into creating it, but equally the fabric may be rather drab and ordinary, remarkable only in its survival, a rare example of something once so commonplace it would normally have been thrown away.

Consider an item of clothing. It could be something worn by a famous person, for a wedding, a coronation, a presentation at Court. Or perhaps one worn for work, by a servant, soldier, governess, nurse, land girl, priest. It may have been made by the wearer, by a couture house, by a dressmaker, or by a factory worker. It could have been worn once or until it wore out. Light may have faded it, and sparked a physical breakdown. Particles of soil may have cut into the fibres. A spilt drink may have become attractive food for insects. Wearing may have resulted in staining, which in turn led to laundering and ironing, often accompanied by dye loss or shrinkage or scorching. Has darning or patching been necessary after abrasion or tearing? Has the size been altered? If so, parts have probably been cut away, and inevitably there will be multiple stitch holes and puckers in the surface, all speeding up deterioration. At some stage, the garment will have been stored, and in storage faced more danger, to be crushed in a drawer or a trunk, or broken by its own weight as it hung in a wardrobe, and been vulnerable to attack from insects or mould.

You have probably guessed I am a textile conservator, a person called in to examine, assess, and propose a treatment. If funds are available, there will be a favourable outcome. In the most dramatic cases, something so weak it could only be kept in permanent boxed storage can have the possibility of display for many to see and have some sense of how it might originally have appeared.

And when you look at a textile on display, you may not even see the net that supports it.

Eileen Powell 12th February 2021