THE MEANING OF WEAVING

Textiles in a Museum Magazine

Anneli Palmsköld

What does it mean to study textile objects? Is it possible to use the textiles themselves to illuminate issues of production, use and interpretation? This is the main questions discussed in the article, taking a category of interior textiles from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in museum collections as a starting point. By using phenomenology as a method the researchers' experiences of the studied objects are seen as a way of understanding the textiles to be able to contextualize them in time and place. When studying the textiles the process of weaving, the creation of the patterns and the design of the fabric that follows by the use of them, are some of the aspects to analyze. What do things communicate and how is it possible to understand the message?

Keywords: materiality, textiles, museums, weaving, home decorating

Inside the Storage Room

Brown cardboard boxes in different sizes wait on shelves beside rolls of material covered with silk paper or cotton fabric. Unwrapping the packages, one is overwhelmed by beautiful textiles, made of exquisite materials and decorated with wonderful patterns in many different colours. From the inside of the anonymous boxes and rolls – a whole world of colour and design rises towards you! The textiles are to be handled with care, for they represent important skilfulness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, often representative objects made by women.

The procedure of unwrapping these packages takes place in a museum storage room. That is where most of the textiles are to be found, not as parts of exhibitions but as parts of the enormous collections of objects in museums. At the end of the nineteenth century when the contemporary map of Swedish museums was drawn, textiles were important objects to collect.¹ They were considered to be unique as they represented a historic way of producing and reproducing textiles. One has to remember that industri-

alization started with mechanising the production of textiles. The products delivered from modern factories were just the opposite of these handmade textiles, collected as representations of the premodern world. While modern textiles were made by machines, many in succession and thereby seen as artificial, the old ones were made by hand and considered to be authentic or unique. When discussing art, some theorists argued that the mother of all art was textile art (Semper 1860). To study and to collect pre-modern textiles was, according to them, to take part in constructing art history or the evolution of art. Since fashions and home decorating textiles were the first material areas to be changed as a consequence of industrialization, older homely things were a top priority when collecting for museums. Visiting a museum meant finding other contrasting homes decorated with domestic objects, especially when exhibited in constructed interiors as Artur Hazelius did in his "Scandinavian-Ethnographic Collection" and Skansen.

The older textiles were once hot stuff for the mu-

seum pioneers – as representations and evidence of cultural evolution, as art artefacts or as significant objects for comparing homes and fashion. Encountering textiles in a museum context means something quite different today. From a status as key symbols, they have transformed into rather dead material, considered hard to use for public purposes or research. Since the documentation of them is brief, it seems difficult to contextualize them, for example to discuss who actually made them, how they were used and what people thought about them. But is the lack of documentation only to be seen as a barrier to learning about them? What about using the objects themselves as an empirical base for research?

In this article I will discuss a certain category of textiles – interior textiles from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – in terms of their materiality.² The underlying question is whether it is possible to use the textiles themselves to illuminate issues of production, use and interpretation. At the same time I also focus on methodological concerns for using textiles as a primary source when asking this question: What does it mean to study textile objects?

Starting the Research Project

Most of the textiles in focus have been collected between 1886, when Halland's Museum Association was founded, and the 1930s, when the great period of collecting objects for museums declined.3 The textiles were gathered in the museum collections in different ways. Some of them were gifts, some were given to the museum through testaments and some were bought from individuals, auctions or antique dealers. Searching for good and interesting things to collect went on alongside the receipt of gifts and receiving offers to buy. During the late nineteenth century folk textiles and other objects considered as folk art turned from primary use in farm households to commodities in a new context of urban life, bourgeois ideology and modernity.4 The museums took part in this business as one of the agents involved in

After being collected, the objects were numbered, measured and described in the museum catalogue. The descriptions are vague, and basing inquiry on

them, the researcher cannot separate one textile from another unless they were photographed to be identified. The descriptions can be characterized as visual as they express in words what the eyes can see and the hands can feel. Techniques and materials are often described but patterns are seldom transformed into words. Relevant information about the textiles and about the human subjects creating and using them is missing. Too often the provenance is not known. It seems to me as if it has not been noticed when they were collected. One reason is that the objects were considered as collective representations or specific types in a material categorization based on form criteria.5 Inscribed in this kind of interpretation, the individuals behind each object are of little interest.

It is often said that the museum catalogues are prepared and created to be sources for research. Since the information is brief, it is very difficult to analyze the catalogue as a text to be read separately from the object. Instead, one has to analyze the text and the objects together as one unit. It is when interfacing textual and material sources that the most interesting discussions can be made. The catalogue alone, though, can be used for legal and administrative purposes as proof of ownership and evidence for valuing the collections in order to insure them.

I have used the catalogue as a written structure representing the collection and as a starting point before studying the actual textile objects. With the help of the catalogue I have estimated the volume of the items, and, at best, I have been able to find out what kinds of textiles the collection contains. When using the catalogue, though, it was important to read the information from a critical point of view. The terminology is for example often inadequate, leading to misunderstandings. The notes on the provenance, the creator or the user that are missing make it difficult to frame and contextualize these actual objects.

The lack of information in the catalogue led me to study the things themselves in order to analyze them on the basis of the questions concerning production and use. When planning the research project I had hoped to find information about the producers and the users of the textiles. My intent was to find the individuals behind the objects, the creators whose important work I was very much impressed by. But unfortunately I could hardly find any information of this kind in the catalogue. When my research project became locally known, I was contacted by private collectors and by persons who had inherited interior textiles from relatives. They wanted to know more about their textiles and offered to let me study them. When interviewing the owners, I soon found out that they also hardly knew anything about the context of the textiles. At times someone knew the provenance, but no one could with certainty give me the name of the producer or the user. The owners were very uncertain about the individuals behind the objects. The reason, as I found it, was that no one had used the textiles for a very long time. The narratives in which they once were inscribed had been forgotten.

My conclusion was to concentrate on the actual objects for the research – the interior textiles as they appear in the museum collection. I was curious about what it would mean to use the textiles as a source for research alongside the more traditional textual sources. What can one learn from things, information that cannot be found elsewhere? And is it possible to reread "dead" material to bring it back to life again?

To Study Textile Objects

Studying textile objects as they appear in museum collections means basically going to the magazine where they are kept in order to bring them out to an examination room. The textiles are put on a large table to be unpacked from the protective covering. The table just outside the magazine is also the place where one can roll out or unfold the textiles to come really close to them. Since the study room and the table are quite small, one can bring forward only a few textiles at the same time. Some cover the whole table, so you have to go around it many times to be able to inspect and to experience the fabric in detail. Some of them are long enough to cross the table several times when rolled out. Noting my observations on paper, I start with questions concerning the name

of each textile, technique(s), material(s), creative concerns, form, patterns, usage, secondary usage, tracks of wear and damage. I also select the fabrics or details to photograph and note why a picture is important in each case.

The phenomenological method of approaching the studied objects is an inspiration. Phenomenology frames the human being as sensory, experiencing and interpreting the world through her senses and through her body. From an individual point of view, "being-in-the-world" means experiencing the world by feeling, smelling, seeing, listening and tasting and not only intellectually by reflecting on it. Studying textile objects in a phenomenological way is to use one's own senses and to transform one's experiences into words when describing them. The simple question is a good starting point. What do I see? How does the fabric feel in my hands? How is it made? Why is it created in this particular way? To go to the things themselves asking this kind of simple questions is to come closer to each actual textile as well as the people who created and used it. This does not mean the researchers' experiences are the same as those of the creators and users long ago. This kind of experiencing through the senses is just as culturally embedded as other expressions of human activities. The method is rather one among others towards finding a way of understanding the textiles to be able to contextualize them.

Inspired by the German philosopher Hannah Arendt, I find the textile objects as results of what she called "work," meaning the human activity which takes tangible forms, such as material objects (Arendt 1998). The textiles materialize practice, individual producers and their creative aims. Pointing out the connection between the textile objects and the conditions of creation means concentrating on these questions: How was each fabric made? What choices did the creator make while producing a peace of fabric? What was more important or less important in the process? What does the actual textile tell us?

Transforming Experiences and Observations into Words

Most of our sensory-based impressions we keep in silence. As human beings we are capable of feeling, but we do not express every feeling in words. Sometimes we do not need to, and sometimes it is difficult to find words that express what we feel. But not only impressions and experiences can go unverbalized; even practice itself and learning practical skills are processes with few words and more learning by doing. A skilled person uses the body and the senses when judging the moments of production. To sense failure is a bodily feeling of things going wrong. Correcting means to undo or redo some moments in the process of creation. The weaving of the textiles was an individual process, a matter for the woman who sat alone by the loom controlling the creation of each fabric. When teaching young girls to be skilled weavers, of course she had to use words to explain what she did and why. Verbalizing every moment in the process, though, can never be a substitute for the knowledge of skill situated in the body. While learning how to weave, or any other skilled labour, one has to acquire this "tacit knowledge" that leads the person to do good work and to develop her skill. Starting with simple techniques and patterns, the work gets more and more challenging as the skill improves.

One of the problems when using the phenomenological method concerns how to transform the subjective experiencing of the objects into words. When reading the notes from studying the textiles, I soon found out the difficulties in expressing my own impressions. From a methodological point of view I was interested in answering the simple questions in a simple way, not yet to analyze but instead to describe, in order to use the descriptions later as the basis of analyzing contextual matters. Comparing the notes made me aware of how inadequate words can be. Without remembering which textile object every note referred to, it was difficult to tell the differences among them, though the objects actually do differ from each other. The solution to this problem was trying to note differences as well as similarities among the textiles in order to be able to identify each

one of them. Another solution was trying harder to find words, to be able to describe more precisely the meeting with the objects. In short I tried hard to improve the descriptions. The third way was to use photographs for remembering. This struggling over words and the use of the language has made me reflect on the possibilities of communication, and I have come to think of the textile objects as embodying a language of their own – or of their creators.

The Language of Practice

An underlying structure in contemporary Western society is the necessity of knowing how to read and write. Communication, transactions and relationships are based on a textual ground, and writing and reading belong to everyday life for most people. When the textiles of my research were produced and used, the practical skills of the creators and users were just as necessary when coping with everyday life. Not being able to work using the body or practical skills was a real problem for individuals as well as for every household responsible for keeping the members. Even small children, handicapped men and women and elderly people had to contribute to the household work to the best of their ability. When it comes to textiles, a four-year-old boy or girl could be helpful in the process of preparing the linen or wool before weaving. During the weaving process they prepared the spools for the weaver in order to make the work proceed without interruption. When growing older they participated in more and more complex practical tasks that developed their skill.

This familiarity with practical matters must have left its mark not only in practice but also in minds and in relations. The spoken and the written words are then replaced by the language of practice and of skill, materialized in objects made by hand. To study objects, then, is to study the creator and the creative process.

When studying the past one often asks the question of how to represent the speechless people, those who cannot be found in archives and those who are not represented in words. The textual tracks left to us to read, represent a domination of men of age, since they, from a legal point of view, were seen as masters

of the household whereas women were considered to be incapable of managing their affairs (except for widows). But in a time and culture structured by practice, the tracks to look for are not at first textual. Rather, they are to be found in the results of practice – in the objects. Producing textiles, in the sense of weaving, was a female form of household production made for the family's use or for selling. Woven textiles are to be seen as tracks from the women of the past, and when analyzing them we can say something about the conditions of the creator – the woman.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur defines texts as discourses established in words (Ricouer 1988: 33). When reading this definition I was inspired to think of the textiles as discourses established in material objects. To analyze the textile objects, then, is, according to Ricouer's definition, an attempt to discuss the conditions and the context where every textile was produced and used. The question is, in which discourses were they inscribed?

In the following I will point out some examples of the results of my research, putting focus on what production of knowledge a close study of textiles can bring forth. The analysis is based on the observation notes written down when studying each fabric. The discussion concentrate on the issues of the process of weaving, the materials used and how the colours varied.

The Process of Weaving

The interior textiles are made of white linen⁷ as a ground weave with patterns of linen (blue), linen (blue) and cotton (red) mixed, cotton (red) or wool (dark blue). In the weaving process the weaver started by using the white linen in order to enter the work. The first white part (the ground weave), made in a technique called tabby, was followed by thoroughly planned sequences of patterns in weftpattern tabby, type "opphämta". While weaving a long piece of fabric of at least seven or eight meters, the weaver made five or six patterns in a row with white parts in between, followed by the most beautiful and difficult pattern for the centre part, and finally repeating the sequences once again in the opposite order. The popular expression for ordering

patterns like this from a centre point is to "reflect" them. To be able to reflect the patterns one has to remember each detail of them and in which order to weave them. It seems as if weavers knew how to weave a pattern without relying on instructions about the patterns or on woven textiles as prototypes. The skill of a weaver apparently implied a capacity to remember patterns through knowing how to weave them by doing them.

The patterns and the sequences are designed to be equilateral in order to be able to weave them in both directions towards and from the centre of the textile. The skilled weaver had to image the result to be able to plan the work. This was necessary not only in order to place the patterns in the right row and to know how to weave them, but also to plan the consumption of material. Since the material was highly valued, this was a very important aspect of the process of production. To handle the material economically was a true proof of skill.

What do the alternating parts of white linen and coloured patterns tell us? At first one can notice the weaver having a high concentration level while weaving the patterns in weft-pattern tabby, type "opphämta". This technique means the weaver cannot automatically shuttle by changing the feet on the tramps and the hands on the raddle. Instead, she has to pick up some of the warp threads by hand in order to create the pattern desired. Weaving the white linen parts between the patterns means, on the other hand, using tabby, the most common and plain weaving technique. There are almost no mistakes in the weaving of the pattern sequences but many of them in the ground weave. In the first case the weaver is concentrated on the skilled and difficult parts of the work; in the latter she eases back while weaving, letting the body find a rhythm for working.

Materials and Colours

Flax was cultivated locally, and it seems as if the linen used in the textiles was the result of cultivating and dressing flax in the households. The process from seeding the flax to the linen yarn ready to be warped and spooled meant a lot of work that took a very long time. When planning textiles one had

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Ill. 1: Detail of a "hängkläde", a woven textile hanging along the walls, with a pattern of blue woollen weft. (Photo: Hugo Palmsköld.)

to image the whole process and not only the actual textile production such as weaving. Since the harvest some years was rich and other years not, access to the material varied.

A linen textile has to be handled with care. If, for example, it is washed in too hot water, the glossy surface characterizing the material is destroyed. Thus the linen turns from cool, steady and substantial to a flimsy piece of fabric. The interior textiles bear witness to having been in good care since the material is not damaged. They have not been washed in a wrong way. The owners have taken good care of them, as one does when handling objects highly valued. The skill of weaving, then, is also a skill of handling the product and the material it is made of.

In the process of turning the flax into linen, one of the phases is bleaching the material from a natural beige tone to a silky white one. When weaving a linen fabric without coloured parts, the common method was to bleach the fabric after it had been taken down from the loom. The pieces of cloth were spread out on a lawn suitable for letting the sun bleach the surface. With loops attached to the fabric, wooden sticks helped to keep it in place and stay unwrinkled in the warm and strong sunshine. Weaving a linen fabric with white parts mixed with coloured parts, on the other hand, meant bleaching the linen yarn before transforming it into textiles. Again putting the linen skein in the sunshine was the best method.

The white ground weaving constitutes a contrast to the pattern originally brightly coloured in blue or blue and red. Studying the fabrics today means looking at far more light colours faded by age and use, sometimes having been directly exposed to sunlight. When the fabric is turned inside out, the original nuances appear as they have been protected. Weaving the patterns means creating a weave with two different sides, since the weft on the backside turns to a negative in comparison to the positive pattern on the right side.

Most of the textile objects have blue linen in their patterns. They may be the older ones, since linen is a domestic material but cotton is not. Comparing linen to cotton requires observing the differences in the surfaces. Where linen is silky and glossy, cotton is dull and does not break the light, making the fabric shine. On the other hand cotton is better when it comes to colours. It is easier to dye cotton than linen and to make the colour fix. That is why the linen patterns are blue and the cotton patterns are red – it is very difficult to dye linen in red. Another difference is how the yarn was spun. Since the linen yarn was a result of the process of cultivating and dressing flax in the households, it was spun on a spinning-wheel or a spindle. The material cotton was desired, as it was bought on skeins or in balls of yarn, ready to be used. Whether it was already coloured in red or dyed after being bought is not clear from the research ma-

With cotton the patterns could be varied more than formerly. The skill of combining red and blue for a beautiful result became important besides the skill in creating beautiful and incessantly varied patterns and pattern sequences. Since cotton was considered a more exclusive material, it was handled with care from an economic point of view in the weaving process and the design of the patterns. It is the blue colour that dominates, and the red cotton was used to emphasize details in the patterns as well as the general impression of the weave.

When using blue-dyed wool, prepared in the household, the effect was another than when combining red cotton and blue linen or using only blue linen for patterns. The wool as a material made it possible to dye the yarn in a strong dark blue colour. With this dark blue wool the weaver created a weave with marked contrasts between the dark patterns and the shiny white linen in the ground weave. The pattern stands out, looking like graphic art in black on

white paper. This effect made it possible to simplify the patterns so that the pattern sequences could consist of fewer details. On the other hand, it was when using red cotton and blue linen for patterns that the weaver was able to create the most beautiful product. The pattern sequences are full of details, they are placed perfectly in rows, and the colours and the patterns follow in a nice blend of rhythm, pleasant to look at and expressing the skill of the weaver.

Textile Objects for Decoration

Using the textile objects for decoration meant putting them along the walls and the ceiling in a timber cottage open to the roof and with a window placed in the ceiling, a typical farm house in the south of Sweden during the period. The combined living room and kitchen usually had no panels or any other thing to cover the wooden walls and ceiling. The consequences of living everyday life in this kind of room were dust and soot coming from cooking and the open fireplace sticking to the walls, the ceiling, the timber beams, the furniture, the textiles, the objects and the tools belonging to life in a farmhouse. Since the interior textiles were highly valued, they did not belong to everyday decoration. Instead, they were put up together with painted wall-hangings during Christmas and other festive and ceremonial occasions. The whole room was cleaned, and the linen textiles with geometric patterns were put up together with paintings illustrating well-known stories from the Bible. The room was transformed from darkness to light and from almost no colours to shiny white combined with the bright colours of red and blue from the weavings and also green, yellow, orange and blue painted on the wall-hangings. The strictly geometric patterns on the weavings contrasted with the motifs depicted by the paintings. The transformation itself can be seen as a ritual starting from ordinary routines in everyday life, turning to arranging the room for a certain occasion and winding up in celebrating a festival (Bringéus 1982: 22ff).

While starting to weave an interior textile to be part of the room decoration, the creator knew where it was supposed to be placed. In planning the work she could measure the reach, placing the main central pattern sequence where it was supposed to be placed in the interior. It seems that this place was above the cupboard in the corner beside the dining table. When entering the door into the room, visitors could view the whole decoration with woven textiles hanging along the walls (hängkläden), from the ceiling (drättar), from the edges of protruding shelves and other stationary objects (lister) and sometimes over the dining table (takduk). Beside the textiles on the walls painted wall-hangings were placed. It must have been an overwhelming sight, representing the skills of the female weavers in the household alongside the economic power used to buy painted wall-hangings from a local painter.

When analyzing the meaning of the decorations one has to consider the parallel visual impressions from the interior textiles and from the painted wall-hangings. Studying textile objects, one has

to be aware of the dominance of abstract patterns. One can claim that the technique chosen for textile production sets the limits for what it is possible to create when it comes to patterns. This is true to a point, but there have been other concerns for the weavers to take into consideration while creating. One example is patterns that were named and that were supposed to be used in certain combinations. as a skilled weaver told a collector in 1886. That is to say, there were rules for the weaver to follow when creating a weave. The abstraction of the woven patterns corresponds to the visualisation of stories from the Bible. The first corresponding element is the language of practice, giving form to abstract patterns on textiles, and the latter is the language of religion, visualised and told in a popular form. Possibly the textiles stand for everyday life and the conditions of life structured from a practical point of view. On the

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Ill. 2: Bollaltebygget (the name of a cottage) with the interior of today, displayed for visitors. (Photo: Länsmuseet Halmstad/Jan Svensson.)

other hand, perhaps the painted wall-hangings are representations of religious questions concerning human existence, the meaning of life and death and human fate.

Conclusions

In this article I have discussed parts of the process I have gone through in using interior textiles as a scientific source. In my opinion information that cannot be found anywhere else is given by objects. The process of creating a weave is, for example, inscribed in the actual fabric left to be studied and analyzed. Since this kind of skilled production is practically non-verbal, one cannot find any textual sources from the time describing the process. Even if there were such descriptions to read, it would probably be difficult to follow them without having the product to look at to be able to understand the process. In the process of verbalizing descriptions of the actual objects, answering prepared questions, one soon finds out that there are more questions to notice - the objects themselves generate questions. It is important to be aware of this potential that lies in the objects.

To study material objects created in the past is the example for this discussion. But the lack of information from interviews, conversations and text documents is not only a problem when studying history. Even if it is possible to encounter informants asking important questions or doing participant observations interpreting experiences textually, still there are areas not to be verbalized. Some things are not talked about, and some things are expressed by gestures, by glancing, or by mediating through the body, in practice or by using objects. To analyze culture is also to be aware of this kind of communication and to find ways to discover the underlying meaning.

The capacity of generating questions and representing silent communication are two aspects to be aware of when trying to understand materiality. A third point is viewing and analyzing objects as materialized discourses. As the literary theorist Edward Said has pointed out, orientalism is not only to be found articulated in words, but also materialized in books, films, institutions, collections and so on (Said 1993). When analyzing objects one can go the

other way around, asking which discourses are to be materialized in them.

The American publisher and social anthropologist Robert Plant Armstrong has analyzed African sculptures in order to find the cultural essence of them. His works are inspired by phenomenological theory, as he says:

in this philosophy lies the only option open to the anthropologist if he is to [...] emerge into a study of man that is blessed with those meanings that do justice to the dignity, the subtlety and richness of man himself (Plant Armstrong 1971: XV).

By studying the things themselves, the sculptures, he finds the essence of them to be concentrated in two words: *intensive continuity* (ibid. 1971). These words also unify the style of the African culture in Plant Armstrong's analysis. His conclusion is that objects have the capacity to concentrate cultural essence, as they are culturally embedded. Another way of putting this is to say that they materialize structures and discourses.

Understanding materiality is a way to overcome the lack of documents and information when studying things as they are. It is to analyze the objects in order to find the communicative dimension that lies in them. Understanding materiality is also an effort to understand the cultural essence of the objects, discussing what cultural structures would be materialized in the objects, in the making of them and in their use.

Notes

- 1 Every county had its own museum on regional cultural history and art beside Skansen, the Nordic Museum, the Historical Museum and the National Museum, all located in Stockholm.
- 2 My thesis (in progress) focuses on the production, use and interpretation of this category of interior textiles from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The textiles belong geographically speaking to the province of Halland, on the west coast of Sweden. Starting from the objects themselves, as they appear in museum collections, I try to link close scrutiny of them with material from archives and primary textual sources, to analyze

conditions of their creation and decoration. Aided by theories on phenomenology and materiality my approach is to situate the textiles in suitable contexts and historical times. The most important question is, what did the textile objects mean to those who created them, decorated rooms with them and studied them? This essay is the result of a methodological discussion concerning the material. I am grateful for the proof-reading of the article by Timothy Cox, Ph.D.

- 3 Most of the objects in the regional museums of Sweden and in the Nordic Museum were collected during this period of almost fifty years. When it comes to the textile objects in my study, approximately 60 percent were collected in this first period.
- 4 Alexis Engdahl was a collector of objects for the Nordic Museum in Stockholm in the 1880s. He travelled in different parts of Sweden to find interesting objects to collect and to document their context in words and by illustrations. During a visit in the southern part of Halland in 1885-1886, he wrote to his principal, Artur Hazelius, the founder of the Nordic Museum and of Skansen. The letters describe the situation of competition among many collectors to find the most fascinating objects. The sellers took advantage of the situation when charging the best price for each object. Engdahl also expresses an anti-Semitic attitude when complaining about "the Jews" from Poland who, according to him, bought everything from the farm households in order to export the objects to earn money by selling them to collectors and museums abroad (letters from Alexis Engdahl to Artur Hazelius, September 6, 1884 and May 12, 1885).
- 5 Practically speaking the lack of professional full-time employees is another reason. The Regional Museum of Halland in Halmstad was for example run by amateurs in Halland's Museum Association until 1928, when the first professional curator of the museum was employed.
- 6 The interior textiles were produced locally to be used in the households. They were inscribed in a local tradition of decorating rooms for certain events.
- 7 I have found a few examples of a white linen warp and a white cotton weft.

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Anneli Palmsköld is a Ph.D.-student at the University of Lund, working at the Regional Museum of Halmstad, Sweden. Her thesis in progress focuses on the production, use and interpretation of a category of interior textiles from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Starting from the objects themselves she analyzes conditions of their creation and decoration. Aided by theories on phenomenology and materiality the approach is to situate the textiles in suitable contexts and historical times.

(anneli.palmskold@hallmus.se)