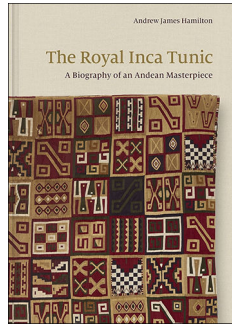


ANDREW JAMES HAMILTON, *THE ROYAL INCA TUNIC. A BIOGRAPHY OF AN ANDEAN MASTERPIECE*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2024, 344 pages with 219 color and 17 b/w ill., ISBN 978-0-6912-5695-5 (Hardback).



Reviewed by
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There are quite a lot of detailed art history and archaeology books that are worthy, but decidedly dull. In contrast, Hamilton's book is as thrilling as a murder mystery, a visual feast that kept me engaged till the last page, and I would happily recommend it to anyone!

It focuses on a single, and singular, object: a tapestry woven tunic which is entirely covered (back, front, inside and out) in colourful rectangles with "geometric" patterns. The tunic (called an *uncu* in the Quechua language spoken by the Inca) was acquired by Robert Wood Bliss around 1949. It now resides in the [Dumbarton Oaks collection](#) in Washington, where it might simply be described as an "Inca tunic, c. 1450–1540, 91x76 cm, cotton and camelid fibres with natural dyes" (p. 2). To those of us working in the Andes or visiting Peru this tunic is an oft copied image, like the Mona Lisa or van Gogh's sunflowers, and we need to be taken back to look afresh and in more detail at the original work.

There is no record of how or where Bliss acquired the tunic. We do not know where or when it was made, nor its history of ownership. Hamilton seeks to fill these voids through a detailed analysis of the object itself: "This is a book about learning to listen to an object, and the epic story it tells" (p. 1). Although we may now

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view it as a work of art, Hamilton emphasises that it needs to be researched as the product of a process of weaving where the hands of the artisan are as important as the concept or design. Where art historians are usually trained to adopt the perspective of an expert viewer, Hamilton focuses on the work as the product of an experienced maker. The book is a powerful lesson in formal analysis and close looking, making it a useful example to share with students and researchers working on any art or object analysis. Hamilton exhorts us not simply to view the surface of an artwork, but to observe its three-dimensional structure, to think about the choice of materials, the sequence of production and how it has been modified and transformed over time. He also explores fundamental questions about “Why do we keep things? What happens in our relationships with objects over long periods of time? Does our keeping them somehow change them? And, when they physically change, does our relationship with them necessarily transform too? Why do we hold onto objects that have outlived their original usefulness?” (p. 274).

The book is really an illustrated detective novel: forensic details reveal different aspects of the cloth’s life (choice of dyes, missing embroidery, harmful tears and healing stitches), documents, images and city architecture provide important clues. There is speculation about the actions and motives of suspected suppliers, makers, thieves and owners including two female weavers (a skilled *mama* and a selected apprentice), a tragic emperor (who never got to wear his new clothes) and great pretenders (who used the cloth to further their own claims). Through its turbulent history the cloth escapes the many agents (indigenous, colonial and natural) who seek to destroy it. Hamilton debunks previous claims that the *tocapu* were a secret writing, but instead finds that faded dyes can be deciphered (like invisible ink) to show how the original design is quite different to what we have all been looking at. When reviewing a “whodunit” it is not usually appropriate to reveal the ending. But I hope Andrew Hamilton will forgive me as I break with that convention and reveal that this book ends with a subtly changed display label: “*Imperial tunic (unfinished)*, Inca c. 1528–33, 91x79 cm, cotton and camelid fibres with natural *and faded dyes*” (p. 294; italics BS). These minor changes belie years of painstaking detective work, but more importantly they add immeasurably to our understanding of the weaving and its cultural value.

This is not just a “well illustrated book”, the photographs and the author’s engaging drawings are essential to conveying how the physical details justify the interpretations. These include reconstruction drawings of the equipment and techniques, and carefully recoloured photos to highlight repairs and faded dyes. Furthermore, great care has been taken in colour checking page proofs against the tunic itself. All the illustrations allow us to get as close as possible to the detail that Hamilton has used to reconstruct the eventful life history of the tunic. These figures, illustrations and drawings are combined with an engaging writing style that speaks directly to the

reader and draws analogies from our lived experience to explore the tactility and significance of cloth.

A major question is whether the weaving was created at the height of the Inca Empire somewhere in the vast territory stretching from Santiago in modern Chile to the borders of Colombia, or in the aftermath of the Spanish Conquest when Inca styles were being adapted to bolster the identity claims of the surviving indigenous elite. Rare illustrated colonial documents (Murúa and Guaman Poma) show that although the use of the rectangular motives (called *tocapu*) was a common feature of weavings associated with the Inca state, the all-over coverage (with *tocapu* from the neck to the base of the shirt), is depicted as the exclusive dress of the Inca emperor himself. This, in combination with the quality of the weavings, is used to argue that the Dumbarton Oaks tunic was woven for just such a personage.

One of the features of this tunic is the use of thirty-three miniaturised representations of another style of *uncu*, those that were worn by Inca military guards which had a black and white checkboard design. Imagine the Inca emperor wearing his *uncu*. With more than 10 percent of the 312 *tocapu* as miniaturised representations, from any viewpoint the observer would notice these miniatures on the emperor in relation to the military guard wearing their full-size versions as they surrounded and protected him.

Hamilton locates his observations of the finely spun cotton warp and camelid weft threads of this Inca tunic within a review of the long and astounding (pre)history of Andean textile techniques out of which the Inca developed. He calculates that the Dumbarton Oaks tunic required 5 miles of cotton and 19 miles of camelid thread. This would have been accessed through the Inca imperial administration to gather the finest materials (including the fleece of wild vicuna, possibly gained from royal hunts) that had to be spun to consistent quality and dyed with natural colourants (including indigo and cochineal). Hamilton draws on his own experience of spinning, dying and weaving to understand material qualities and writes to help us identify with the “finger movements, arm movements, moments of concentration, friction, frustration, repetition, and monotony” that the original makers experienced (p. 107). This included experimental work with dyes and a re-creation of the tunic to see how it would look worn on a human body rather than hung up as a square of cloth. Hamilton also focuses on the construction of the loom and how the weaving was orientated. Like a detective novel, it is the occasional minor mistakes that reveal the perpetrators methods: weaving a *tocapu* in the wrong direction, selecting the wrong colour thread or subtly altering the pattern to squeeze it into a confined space. And identifying the first two rows that were woven helps to explain how the *tocapu* are positioned in the tunic. (Each *tocapu* is placed to avoid ever being next to, or diagonal from, the same design, and to ensure a colour contrast with the border of neighbouring *tocapu* – and not to be read as a secret language). The materials and quality of weaving, as well as the exclusive design

suggest to Hamilton that the tunic was woven in an *aqllawasi* (house of the chosen women) like a nunnery where women were cloistered away to provide services (prepare food and beer, and perform religious duties) and to weave the finest cloth for the Inca. A location where skills could be taught and protected for exclusive use. Like a detective novel the investigation sometimes returns to earlier observations that gain new significance, for example the width of the weaving and subtle differences on the two sides that suggest that two female weavers were working together: an exceedingly skilled expert working next to an apprentice in the final stages of honing her skills who nonetheless occasionally makes minor mistakes. Another of Hamilton's original observations is that the zig-zag design that should have been added to the hem of the tunic was started but never finished. "Its unfinished state likely reveals it was being woven around 1532 as the emperor's new clothes, but Atahualpa was assassinated – potentially making this Inca-period garment an eyewitness to one of the most pivotal events in human history" (p. 296).

The book goes on to consider who may have claimed the *uncu* in the colonial period and the various hands it may have passed through. Here again the speculation is grounded by observations of the sequence of repair and wear on the tunic. Hamilton also chases references in documents, letters and wills that report on the acquisition, use and disposal of Inca-style clothing in the early colonial period. For instance, Sayri Tupac (the son of Mano Inca) who came out of the Inca refuge in Vilcabamba, sold some of his clothes to pay for a trip to the new Spanish capital in Lima, and gave *uncu* in his will to his military captains. As Hamilton acknowledges, much of this is speculation when we cannot know who actually held the Dumbarton Oaks tunic, but it serves to put observations of deteriorating aspects of the tunic into a historical context, to think about why we keep things and how our relationship to an object is tied up with transformations experienced by the object itself.

We cannot be certain of all Hamilton's suppositions: there is an outside possibility that the tunic was made in the very early colonial period, it may not have been made in Cuzco, and if it was made for an emperor in Cuzco, it would most likely have been commissioned under Huascar (rather than Atahualpa). But, the detailed observations, analysis and scholarship of Hamilton's research are secure. Anyone reading this book will learn a huge amount about the Inca and colonial Andes, the production of textiles and how to undertake skilled object research. Who else could make the detailed recording of the spin and ply of threads read like the twists and turns of a detective novel? Cutting through the fabric of time to find a Royal Inca tunic. Hamilton has provided an example of how thrilling art history and archaeological writing can be.