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Remounting gilt leather tapestries with Velcro

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Vemmetofte monastery in Denmark has three rooms with gilt leather tapestries which were ordered around 1730 by the Danish prince Carl. The monastery was restored in the years 1890-1900 and all the gilt leather was restored and remounted with nails directly to the walls, where wooden laths were built into the wall. In the ladies’ room on the east outer wall the gilt leather had torn the sewing, and on the west inner wall the leather was torn, and showed several gaps. It was decided to take two pieces of the leather tapestries down for conservation.

When the tapestry from the west wall came down it was soon realized that it was necessary to reinforce all the sewings. It was also clear that two rows of leather were newer, and in poorer shape. The old animal glue was removed mechanically since it would not dissolve in either water or solvent. The edges of each piece were laminated with a backing of calfskin glued on with PVA-emulsion. Gaps were laminated on the back, also with calfskin, and retouched with acrylic colours.

Remounting

There were several ways of remounting the tapestry. It could have been nailed as it had been previously, but it was obvious, that the leather would once again be perforated and easily torn. It was impossible to mount it on frames since the pieces had to fit into the existing panels and onto the rest of the tapestry, which had not been taken down. We tried Lycra, because we liked the idea that the leather should be kept stretched with changes in humidity. However the kind of Lycra we could get hold of was not good enough. Once wet it lost its flexibility.

From our own experience of restoring gobelins we knew that Velcro had been used with good results. Velcro consists of two pieces, one of which is soft and flexible, and the other which is stiff, with ‘hooks’ to grab the soft part. It was decided to use Velcro on the edges of the pieces of tapestry since they would be at the right level on the wall, and they would be easy to mount.

We used the 10 cm soft Velcro which we sewed to polyester linen, and then glued to the back of the leather edges with PVA-emulsion (Vinnapas EP1). The leather was divided into three big pieces and all the sewing was replaced. They were then easier to handle. At the edges where leather met leather we used 5 cm Velcro (Fig. 1). It was very important to use a good deal of pressure to get the Velcro/polyester linen to stick to the tapestry.

When this was done we went to the monastery to remount the tapestry. The stiff Velcro was nailed to the wooden laths in the wall with electroplated nails. The tapestry which was left on the wall was loosened, and soft Velcro on polyester linen was glued on. This time we used BEVA 371 which was easier to work with in situ.

It was then very easy to get the tapestry in place, and easy to adjust it so that it situated on the wall perfectly. The three pieces of leather which had to fit together were assembled at the back with a 10 cm stiff Velcro. There were two gaps which we couldn’t close. On an extra piece of gilt leather we glued the soft Velcro, so that it could easily be put into the gap, and made almost invisible. There is just one problem we still have to solve. It was very difficult to stretch the leather so that it would be perfectly flat against the wall. The Velcro makes the edges inflexible. We glued the Velcro on the leather when it was all slack because we thought that it would grow taut when dried to its normal humidity content. It didn’t. We then hoped that the leather would tauten in the dry wintertime, but it remained as we had left it all year along.

In spite of these problems we think it is a good method because it is so easy to handle the leather when remounting onto the wall, but it requires further research to overcome the problems of stretching the leather.
Fig. 1. Design of the mounting system using Velcro.