Introduction

Between 2011 and 2015, collectors Carmen and Justo Fernández loaned four tapestries with scenes from Don Quixote to the Biblioteca Histórica Marqués de Valdecilla to be studied and displayed.

The director of the library, aware of the responsibility that comes with safeguarding this heritage, has seen the necessity of design a specific preventive conservation programme to ensure their long-term preservation after the conservation treatment of the tapestries.

The Biblioteca Histórica Marqués de Valdecilla, Complutense University of Madrid

The Biblioteca Histórica Marqués de Valdecilla, Complutense University of Madrid, is a library inaugurated in 2001 with the mission of collecting, managing and preserving collections of old books from education institutions that, historically, have been part of what is the University today.

Carmen and Justo Fernández tapestry collection

The tapestries are from the Royal Manufacture of Aubusson (France), woven on a low-warp loom in the mid-18th century, and represent various scenes from the book *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* following the iconography designed by Antoine Coypel.¹²

The tapestries in the collection represent the scenes:

- Camacho’s wedding (Fig. 1)
- Don Quixote receiving the Order of Knighthood (Fig. 2)
- Sancho’s Dapple (Fig. 3)
- Princess Micomicona (Fig. 4)
Fig. 1. Camacho’s wedding.
Fig. 2. Don Quixote receiving the Order of Knighthood. See detail.
Fig. 3. Sancho’s Dapple
Fig. 4. Princess Micomicona.
The tapestries are on display, with engravings of the scenes from Don Quixote represented in the tapestries. There are also information panels explaining the history of the collection and the conservation process they have undergone.

The exhibition of textile materials is always risky, so it is very important to strike a balance that allows visitors to enjoy the pieces without damaging them. This balance begins with the decision to alternate periods on display and periods in storage at the library storage area. The tapestries are taken down and packed away in summer.

The room where they are on display isn’t just an exhibition gallery, it is used as a lounge for the library users and gets from the spaces open to the public to those accessible only by staff. So, in designing the exhibition, it was important to take into account not only the preservation requirements for the tapestries but also the other ways in which the space is used.

The design for the exhibition began with adjusting the tapestries to a room that houses a huge wooden filing cabinet with unused library files and a seating area with two sofas and a coffee table, used by library visitors. It also took into account that one of the walls in the room has four east-facing windows with white roller shades.

The most serious problems we ran into was with the *Don Quixote receiving the Order of Knighthood* tapestry, above one of the sofas, as users could brush their heads on it as they sat down. To prevent this, we took advantage of the full height of the wall and put it as high as possible, so no matter how tall, no one would brush against it.

---

Another problem was with the tapestries *The wedding of Camacho* and *The Princess Micomicona*, which are displayed alternatively on top of the file cabinet, as both pieces overlap the cabinet. To prevent this area from lying horizontal, where it can accumulate much more dust than the rest of the tapestry, we decided to move the cabinet out 10 cm from the wall to give them space to hang comfortably.

Sancho’s Dapple tapestry is behind a glass door. Far from being a problem, this door acts as a screen, protecting the tapestry from the book carts heading into the reading room.

The tapestries were designed and manufactured to be hung vertically, which is why they are displayed in this way, respecting their original reading. In recent years, new display systems are being studied using an inclined plane, but this system doesn’t fit the needs of this gallery.

To display the tapestries, we used Velcro®, attaching the tapestry with a Velcro® to a wooden slat. It is an effective method, as it distributes the weight along the top edge, unlike the old methods using rings and thread loops.

The slat is made of wood, and to prevent emissions that would affect the preservation of the tapestry, was sealed with Marvelseal 360® (an aluminised polyethylene and nylon barrier film). To make the slat as inconspicuous as possible, the ends were lined with the same colour as the selvedges of the tapestry.

---


The slat is hung on the top of the wall with a system of guides, so when the tapestries aren’t on display, other collections can be shown.

As we’ve said, the exhibition hall isn’t designed for this use and it doesn’t meet the lighting conditions recommended for displaying textiles. To minimise the effects of the light, UV filters have been installed on the windows. We also studied how far in the windows the sun shines, making sure it doesn’t directly hit any of the wall, and therefore any of the tapestries.

One of the most critical moments came during the installation of the tapestries. To ensure the safety of the tapestries, these activities are planned in advance and carried out according to guidelines laying out the process, staff necessary, equipment required and the steps to follow to prevent any damage.
After testing several systems to put up and take down the tapestries, we decided that the simplest and most effective procedure is to use pulleys, so the slat and tapestry are pulled up at the same time, as a single piece. The main advantage of this system is that the Velcro® (holding the tapestry onto the slat) is attached or detached on the ground, on a flat surface, so it can be done without putting the tapestry or the staff at risk.

Once the tapestries have been taken down, the recommendation is to clean the tapestries, front and back, to remove any dust, with an adjustable vacuum cleaner and a soft-haired brush. This cleaning process prepares the tapestry for storage.

When the tapestries are not on display, they are stored in the library storage area, which has the appropriate environment and security conditions to ensure the preservation of cultural heritage.

The best way to store them is rolled up, so a cylindrical storage support have been created for each tapestry, adjusted to the size and specific needs of each one. In addition, the support make it easier to handle the tapestries when they are moved inside the library. Also a two racks made of Ethafoam® (polyethylene foam) have been built for the cylinders to rest on, so the tapestries don't have to support their own weight when rolled up. Furthermore, cotton covers have also been made to protect the tapestries in storage.

7 The recommended cleaning is subject to the availability of the conservation department staff. It can be done every two years if it is not possible to do so every time the tapestries are taken down.
Conclusion

The preventive conservation plan established was designed taking into account the technical equipment and staff available in the library, so that it would be feasible.

Bibliography


