

# The Contemporary Tapestry Museum of Sant Cugat

## Discovering and disseminating textile art through educational projects

by LLUÍS CAMPINS, director of the Sant Cugat Museums  
and HELENA MINUESA, head of education at the Sant Cugat Museums  
Photographs: @LocalPres

In May 2003 the Sant Cugat Museum opened a new site specifically designed to showcase the legacy of the city's textile industry: Casa Aymat, now the [Contemporary Tapestry Museum](#) (MTC) of Sant Cugat.

Since its creation, the objective of Casa Aymat has been to tell the story of one of the most prolific and characteristic artistic movements in Catalonia in the latter half of the twentieth century; one that, towards the end of the 1980s, and after a period of great splendour, fell into such decline that it all but disappeared from memory. This forgotten movement was that of contemporary Catalan tapestry, which through a group of artists that included Josep Grau Garriga,





Aurèlia Muñoz, Josep Royo, Carles Delclaux, Dolors Oromí, Teresa Conte, Maria Assumpció Raventós, Maria Teresa Codina and Mercè Diogène gained a standing comparable to that of major movements outside Spain, for example in France (where Jean Lurçat displayed his mastery of the technique), Poland (where the foremost exponent was Magdalena Abakanowicz), and Yugoslavia.

In continuing to promote the textile legacy of Sant Cugat, the MTC recalls events of the early twentieth century through the figure of Thomas Aymat, the *noucentista* artist who founded the Aymat Carpet and Tapestry Factory, which represented the pinnacle of the craft in Catalonia during the first half of the twentieth century (producing carpets for the Parliament of Catalonia and the tapestry for the grand staircase of the Barcelona City Council building), and the Catalan Tapestry School, established in Sant Cugat in the second half of the century and overtly innovative in its approach to the textile arts.

The MTC is, therefore, a textile museum, since it deals exclusively with textile materials. However, in the wider context of textile museums in Spain, it is unique in addressing textile production specifically from the point of view of artistic expression. This, of course, stems from the fact that the Catalan Tapestry School was, through undeniably a business venture, first and foremost an artistic endeavour. Everyone who participated in it did so from a wholly artistic perspective and with a purely artistic desire. As such, the MTC is also an art museum, in that it is a museum of textile art.



With this in mind, the Museum's mission encompasses a range of dimensions that dovetail around its central theme:

- the technical dimension, showing how contemporary tapestries are created using highly specific plans and technical procedures, very different to those employed for classic tapestries;
- the artistic dimension, since the Catalan School represents a renewal of contemporary artistic language through textile expression;
- the ideological dimension, as contemporary tapestry is associated not only with the desire for artistic renewal, but also – inevitably – with the cultural, moral, sociological and political ideals of Catalonia, which typify the anti-Franco stance;
- the pedagogical dimension, a key aspect in projects developed by the Sant Cugat Museums, where education is integrated as a key constituent of action, and which has been found to be inherently necessary in the socialization of contents that are typically complex and somewhat removed from today's collective imagination.

It is in this context that we can fully appreciate two of the museum's main educational initiatives: *Anna de la llana* [Woollen Anna], and *Fem tapís!* [Let's make a tapestry!].

### **Woollen Anna and her learning suitcase.**

#### **Discovering the world of tapestry in Early Childhood Education**

In 2009, the MTC's educational service undertook to create an educational resource especially for Early Childhood Education. The initiative reflected a desire to bring the heritage of tapestry, and more specifically that of the Catalan Tapestry School, to a wider public, as in the early 2000s it was a subject that had received little attention from the world of museum resources. The ensuing programme was thus designed specifically for children aged 3 to 6 years old, in a formal setting but outside the constraints of the school environment.

In order to generate interest among pupils prior to their discovery of the MTC, the service created a character with whom the children could identify.

Woollen Anna is a puppet created by Anna Roger, based on the findings of a preparatory study by the education team of motivational techniques for children aged 3 to 6 years that could be suited to the subject of a textile art museum. The outcome was the idea of a suitcase with various compartments, in which each differently coloured space would hold a type of tapestry-related



material that could be used to demonstrate the texture, the smell, and the use of the material itself. It was also considered how this idea might be applied to discovering the tapestries of the Catalan Tapestry School.

The learning suitcase connects us with the materials used in making tapestries: wool, cotton, jute, yarn, plastic thread and cardboard, among many others, all of which are present to differing degrees in the works of art displayed in the Museum. To fit with Early Childhood Education curricula and the capacities outlined for the early years of life, the programme prioritises working with these materials and textures in experimental and hands-on learning activities. In terms of curricular content, contemporary tapestry serves as a vehicle for working with the senses, with the wide range of materials, colours and smells it evokes. The intention, therefore, is to take textile art – a concept seemingly unrelated to anything a child might find familiar – and present it on a child's level, decoding it in their eyes and through the prism of their particular interests. This is achieved by focusing largely on the use of the materials, the colours, shapes and textures.

Beyond this, the learning programme includes a tour through the museum space. Prior to this, pupils take part in a preliminary activity at school to



generate interest in the visit based on an intriguing premise: Woollen Anna has lost a suitcase full of objects that must be identified and then delivered to her at the museum.

Teachers are provided with resources on content that will later be discovered in the museum. The entire programme has been developed by the education service of Sant Cugat Museums, and is adapted to the needs of each group and the specific requirements of the teachers involved. The Museum thus offers its services to schools with a view to establishing a synergy that builds mutual benefits.

For a minimal cost (for a box, a puppet, and various materials for the activities), Woollen Anna and her suitcase of surprises has had a significant impact. From February 2009, when the programme was first offered to schools, through to June 2016, requests were received for a total of 73 groups, representing some 1,946 pupils. In terms of educational levels, P5 is the most frequently represented group, with a total of 1,270 pupils, followed at some distance by P3 and P4, with 292 and 271 pupils, respectively. Other groups that have used the resource include first-year primary pupils, with activities tailored to their needs, and teacher training groups that have worked with the concept of the learning suitcase as an example of an educational tool for use in the discovery of heritage with children.





### ***Let's make a tapestry! Working with the education community***

*Fem un tapís* [Let's make a tapestry] is a collaborative initiative set up in 2014 between the Tapestry Museum and local schools to teach students about textile art, encourage hands-on work founded in regional history, and raise greater awareness of local cultural heritage.

Over a period of five months, two teachers from the Joan Maragall primary school in Sant Cugat del Vallès received training in tapestry-making, in order to pass this knowledge on to their students, who would then help the youngest pupils at the school learn the basics of weaving. The initiative is rooted in the philosophy of service-learning: knowledge is passed on from teacher to student, who then presents it to the youngest learners, establishing an effective cooperative learning framework. Just as we help young children to tie their shoelaces, we can also show them how to make basic stitches and knot a tapestry...

The activity arouses the children's interest by teaching them to learn by doing. Theory and practice are inextricably tied, as the art of tapestry-making can only truly be appreciated through the creative process. Indeed, the verb "to make" (in Catalan, "*fer*") is the very essence of the initiative, as reflected in its name: Let's make a tapestry!





This said, the practical aspect of the programme draws on a solid conceptual base. In their training, teachers receive three months' instruction from a tapestry artist in the relevant tools, knowledge and skills, so that they can later pass this on to their students with due rigour and clarity.

Tapestry-making provides a global learning experience. On one hand, it naturally develops hands-on and interactive work, involving fine motor skills. At the same time, it serves to build a specific social environment: as we work on a piece, we relax, find moments for friendly and enjoyable conversation, enhancing our use of language and communication, and incorporating new vocabulary and new ways of expressing ourselves and relating to one another in a world increasingly dominated by the digital technocracy. In addition, the language of mathematics is also very much a part of tapestry.

Ultimately, this is a programme that combines multiple learning activities, and connectivity between areas and subjects, utilising the Museum as a learning environment in close collaboration with schools; these are, after all, two worlds built upon the same concepts of inquiry, dialogue, and building together.

The *Let's make a tapestry!* programme starts at the museum and then moves to the school, so that the initial experience is taken to the school environment and each of the two worlds is equally enriched. To use an apposite metaphor, this approach weaves the two settings, symbolically but also in

practice. Through *Let's make a tapestry!* both the schools and the Museum are contributing to the recovery of a legacy that seemed condemned to oblivion. By a process we could liken to osmosis, the direct involvement of the educational community grows, and in turn leads to a growing desire for knowledge of textile art among society in a wider sense.

Thanks to the wide range of possibilities offered by this artistic heritage endeavour in the field of education, since 2009 the educational service of the Sant Cugat Museums has developed several distinct but complementary initiatives addressed all possible publics, from formal education to groups at risk of social exclusion. Like thread in a loom, these initiatives have woven complicities between the community and the Museum that, though subtle, hold great emotional and affective potential. ●