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# Introduction

Certain objects can tell a thousand stories. Visited and revisited, they divulge chapters of their lives, detail by minute detail. In time, the objects become known in more than three dimensions, along with the individuals who created, used, and preserved them. When associated with titans and turning points of history, these objects do not just manifest, frame, and focus our understanding of the past—they also have the power to rewrite it.

Of all objects, articles of clothing provide the most intimate and revealing testimonies. It is not simply that they were physically closest to historical figures as a kind of second skin; but also, as a formation and reflection of the wearer's social identity, they come to embody their personage. Garments that have been reworn by different people over time manifest new identities in each context. What is more, because textiles are formed through sequences of discrete actions—this thread over that one, then under the next—events that punctuate or even puncture their fabric can be plotted within this interwoven grid of intersecting timelines. Signs of wear and repairs demarcate the life histories of both the garment and the wearer. A piece of clothing is a record of one's being.

But, in order to relish the tales an object has to tell, we have to overcome the silence we might encounter when looking at it. It is not that the object must be taught to speak—it speaks whether we hear it or not—but that we must learn how to notice and interpret what it says. So many objects literally talk to us nowadays (our phones, our cars, even our refrigerators) that we may find it hard to hear those that communicate in more subtle ways. This is a book about learning to listen to an object, and the epic stories it tells.

Indeed, this is the biography of a very old tunic conserved by a research institute and museum named Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, DC (fig. 1).[1] The rectangular, colorful, and intricately patterned garment is so much associated with the place that specialists refer to it simply as the Dumbarton Oaks tunic. The object can be stylistically identified as a man's shirt painstakingly created by a weaver of the Inca Empire, or a descendant, who would have called it an *uncu*, the general word for a man's tunic in Quechua. The Incas formed the largest Indigenous empire in the Americas. Their society rose in the 1300s or early 1400s in southern Peru, in the vicinity of Cusco, their eventual capital. In less than a century and a half, they successively conquered neighboring communities to become the most powerful empire on the continent: a multilingual, multiethnic state that dominated the spine of the Andes from the border



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**Figure 1**
Tunic, Inca, c. 1450–1540, 91 × 76 cm, cotton and camelid fibers with natural dyes, Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, PC.B.518



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between Colombia and Ecuador to central Chile, including most of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and parts of Argentina. This sprawl, in fact, made them one of the largest empires in the world in their time.

However, beginning in 1531, the Incas were attacked by the Spanish forces of Francisco Pizarro and, over some forty years, were eventually conquered. There is much to say about these events—which this book will treat extensively. Here at the beginning, I want to acknowledge the great loss of Inca lives and the violence done to their intellectual traditions, art, and architecture. The invaders reconstituted much of the Incas' former territory as the Viceroyalty of Peru. Initially, Inca artists continued to produce works in traditional styles under colonial rule; but, they gradually utilized new materials, copied foreign object types and designs, and responded to changing systems of value. The uncu at Dumbarton Oaks is the surviving artifact that scholars believe most exemplifies the pinnacle of Inca art and culture.

Be that as it may, relatively few people even realize it exists. Indeed, if there is one thing you probably know about the Incas, it is that they built Machu Picchu, now one of the world's most famous tourist destinations. Even those who have not yet traveled to this "new wonder of the world" can likely conjure an image in their minds of the ruined royal estate perched within a verdant cloud forest, thanks to countless photographs on the Internet and in magazines, books, and television shows. Publicized by Hiram Bingham in the 1900s as a "lost city," Machu Picchu has long been peddled by invoking the supposed mysteries of a vanished, mystical civilization. The photogenic stones, lush vistas, and dense mists create an atmosphere that has inspired movies and video games, such that when visiting the site, one can imagine Indiana Jones or Lara Croft sprinting out of the trees. Although this conception of Machu Picchu makes it exciting to visit, it reproduces a problematic cultural dynamic. The city was never lost to local farmers, and we know what became of Inca society. Moreover, the frequent emphasis on their supposedly mysterious or mystical nature is both othering and primitivizing. Most of all, this framing perpetuates in twenty-first-century tourists the mind-set of discovery and conquest shared by both early twentieth-century explorers and sixteenth-century conquistadors. So, although Machu Picchu may be the most popularly recognized achievement of Inca culture, I believe this little-known tunic at Dumbarton Oaks can offer a more accurate and intimate way of understanding the Incas. Instead of casting their civilization as enigmatic and exotic, the tunic's materiality makes it possible to consider their formidable arts and intellectual traditions directly, concretely, and empirically.

A cursory glance at the garment shows why scholars consider it so important: it is the most finely woven Inca textile that has reappeared in the modern world, bar none, and is among the finest textiles from the ancient Andes. It may surprise you that many thousands of millennia-old garments, burial cloths, and other textiles survive to compare it to. While the eastern slopes of the Andes descend into the Amazon rainforest, their western slopes abut a narrow strip of land along the Pacific Ocean that is as dry as their other side is wet. This desert has preserved one of the longest, continuous, archaeological textile records in the world—including, perhaps, this tunic. Because of its quality, the weaving



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was likely created for an important member of Inca society. But who? The list of candidates can be swiftly winnowed. You see, the uncu features a plethora of motifs that the Incas called *tocapus*. Tocapus are found on a variety of other artifacts, but usually in smaller quantities. The tunic is special because it is entirely covered in them. (This is why Dumbarton Oaks officially calls it the All T'oqapu Tunic.) For many decades, scholars have recognized that this style of garment was depicted in illustrated manuscripts from the colonial period that show the style being worn by Inca rulers, called the Sapa or "Unique" Inca. That is, they suggest that this superlative tunic was a royal vestment. Not only does it appear to be the only discernible royal Inca uncu that has been preserved, but it also may be the only known royal Inca artifact in any medium.[2]

Although the tunic's exceptional nature has long been recognized, little else is concretely known about it. We do not know where it was found, or its history of ownership. In the absence of such facts, scholars have treated the singular object—somewhat counterintuitively—as an example of a type. This would be unthinkable for a European royal artifact, for which research into lineages, successions, and inheritances would almost certainly dominate scholarship. In stunning contrast, the question of whom the tunic belonged to has never been the focus of sustained research. As an article of clothing perhaps worn by Inca royalty, the garment might have experienced events of great historical magnitude: coronations and conquests, rituals, even regicide. If it was worn in 1532, it may have witnessed one of the events that most decisively shaped the modern geopolitical structure of the world. Following Spain's conquest of the Aztec Empire, their invasion of the Andes enlarged what is now Latin America by a factor of seven, extending the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, which is currently led by a South American pope. Were it created just a few years earlier, say by 1528, it may have been embroiled in an even lengthier drama: the fates of numerous Inca rulers affected the outcome of the Spanish conquest. Years before the conquistadors arrived, an emperor named Huayna Cápac died unexpectedly, presumably from smallpox. The intruders brought the virus to the Americas, and Indigenous peoples were so susceptible that the pandemic spread faster than Europeans themselves. This catastrophe threw the Inca Empire into a war of succession, which both weakened and distracted it. Two of the perished ruler's sons, Atahualpa and Huáscar, jockeyed for the throne. Eventually, Atahualpa's generals assassinated Huáscar, while Atahualpa himself was imprisoned by the Spanish. A few months later, they executed Atahualpa. In these short years, the last independent emperors of the Inca Empire met various untimely deaths. Had this royal garment belonged to one of them? And, if so, how did the tunic survive when its owner did not? The tunic offers us a rare opportunity to consider how the lives of Inca leaders and their rarefied luxuries shaped this formative period of early modern world history.

Even so, this garment is not important just because it was perhaps associated with one of these Inca leaders—which, even as Indigenous history, is a reductive history of great men. What has also never been sufficiently explained is the object's nature as a masterpiece of Inca art. Its accomplishment is usually evidenced by reference to its extremely high thread count—it has roughly the same number of wefts per inch as pixels in the screen of an iPad in 2021.[3] But



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this numerical quantification fails to meaningfully explain its artistry. What talents did its maker profess? How did they learn and master these skills? Who designed the uncu, and what space was there for innovation? Did the weaver simply meet the Sapa Inca's demands, or were they able to make choices, to infuse the cloth with their own creativity? Let me be clear about my phrasing: here, and throughout this book, I will use "they" and its variants as a gender-neutral singular pronoun as well as a gender-neutral plural. Gender is a concern at the heart of the garment's creation. Scholars often presume textiles to be "women's work" unless they are very good, in which case they may be attributed to men. Because of the near absence of named Indigenous women and artists in colonial accounts of Inca history, it is difficult to understand their achievements. So, who was this weaver? And how could we determine their identity?

The tunic makes it possible to define the very highest echelon of Inca art—arguably for the first time. Many studies of Inca art have been written, to which this book necessarily owes a debt, but what is sometimes overlooked is that the surviving corpus really is decimated.[4] As the Spanish thugs subjugated the Inca Empire, they famously "ransomed" Atahualpa in the town of Cajamarca for a room filled once with gold and twice with silver—and then executed him anyway. This alone yielded a fortune of more than 13,000 pounds of gold and nearly 26,000 pounds of silver.[5] These works were the most precious ritual artifacts of Cusco, ripped from royal palaces and temples. When the Spaniards finally invaded Cusco, they looted even greater treasures. Without hesitation, they melted these masterpieces into bullion. To testify to these destructions, we have only inventories of tersely titled metal objects, their weights, and carat values. Shockingly, the quantity of Inca gold and silverwork that now survives in museums would barely fill the tables of a single study room. Over subsequent months and years, Cusco was sieged, seized, and sacked multiple times. The capital was eventually burned by the Incas themselves in a vain attempt to drive out the Spanish. These actions destroyed the highest stratum of Inca art and architecture. Palaces, temples, gold idols, litters, and baldachins covered in glittering feathers, services of gold and silver plates and cups—all were eradicated. Only a few things survive that provide glimpses of the superior artistic achievements of Inca makers, including sections of walls in Cusco, royal estates like Machu Picchu and Choquequirao, a handful of state offerings made on remote Andean mountaintops, and this one exceptional tunic. The pinnacle of Inca art cannot be studied without this object, and it arguably can only be studied through it.

Rare, royal, radiant. For all these reasons, the magnificent garment already reigns as the *Mona Lisa* of Andean art. But part of why it is so well known and yet so little is known about it is that, for many decades, scholarship on it has been largely consumed by one issue. Since the 1970s, various researchers have sought to analyze its tocapus as a system of writing—despite the fact that both Spanish and Indigenous authors in the colonial period repeatedly stated that Incas never developed one and never indicated that tocapus functioned this way. Although the Mayas, in Mesoamerica, used a glyphic writing system, the Incas used a very different technology for recording knowledge, a device made of knotted strings that they called a *khipu*, which has only been partly deciphered.[6] This absence of written records from before the Spanish conquest is why there are limited



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ways of learning about the Incas, and why it is essential to study their material culture. In spite of all this, the fantastical proposition of a long-lost writing system landed the tunic in *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine.[7] Although these lines of inquiry have been rebuked many times, new "translations" continue to plague the object. The narrow scope of scholarship on the garment overlooks what is actually meaningful about it. This desire to portray the uncu as a text only seeks to mold Inca culture to meet Eurocentric expectations for "high" civilizations—for example, having writing, the wheel, and currency, none of which the Incas chose to develop. With the tunic's fame and reputation ever on the rise, and the same official photographs published again and again, the physical artifact has only become more eclipsed by widespread preconceptions of it. Over time, a body of scholarship has the potential to bury and occlude a work; this book is an attempt to excavate it.[8]

But, as the tunic's historical significance is brought to light, it is also imperative to acknowledge its importance in the present. Throughout the Andes, governments, scholars, and museum employees are aware of the object, but the general public is not. And yet, paradoxically, many people would recognize it on sight. In part because of its gridded composition, its image has come to be known as the *Calendario Inca*, or "Inca Calendar." Its motifs appear on a huge array of objects in Peru. Contemporary highland weavers re-create its patterns as wall hangings to sell to tourists (fig. 2a). Its tocapus border the sign of the Museo Inka in Cusco (fig. 2b). They are printed on wallpaper and drink coasters (figs. 2c, d). Silversmiths form its tocapus using colorful shells and stones, just as woodcarvers transform them into marquetry boxes (figs. 2e, f). Shawls, blankets, and socks bear its likeness (figs. 2g, h). The uncu has even entered global visual culture through websites selling its image on cell phone cases and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, face masks (figs. 2i, j).[9] But its patterns were undoubtedly seen by the largest audience when, in 2016, Peruvian tenor Juan Diego Flórez performed at the Royal Albert Hall in London in the Last Night of the Proms dressed as the legendary founder of the Inca civilization, Manco Cápac. The middle section of his costume reproduced part of the royal tunic (fig. 3).[10] Flórez reportedly chose the costume to be apolitical amid swirling Brexit controversies.[11] But, as he soared through *Rule, Britannia!*, omitting the traditional lyrics celebrating how great empires fall to tyrants, a more veiled critique of European imperialism could perhaps be read. Collectively, these appearances suggest the uncu may be the single ancient Andean artifact that has most seared itself into the visual consciousness of modern society, even as the actual object remains relatively obscure. In effect, the tunic's visage has been sublimated, becoming a symbol for Inca culture and the ancient Andes writ large for consumers from all over the world. Indeed, if you already visited Machu Picchu, maybe you purchased a souvenir featuring its designs and did not realize their source. This study seeks to connect the tunic's appearance—already familiar to so many—with a substantive understanding of its significance.

By now some five centuries old, the garment has patiently accrued stories with which to regale the modern world of the fascinating life it has lived. Who made it? When? For whom? What do its complex patterns really mean? And, above all, why has it alone survived? It is a protagonal object: like a protagonist



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Figure 2

a. Wall hanging, Cusco

b. Sign, Museo Inka, Cusco

c. Wallpaper, Sacred Valley, Cusco region

d. Drink coasters, Patricia de Zela, *Arte Útil*, Lima, Dédalo Arte & Artesanía

e. Silver bracelet with inlays, Cusco, Oro Inca Joyería

f. Marquetry boxes, unknown woodworkers from Chacas, in Lima, Artesanos Don Bosco

g. Shawl, KUNA, Larcomar, Lima

h. Socks, Cusco

i. iPhone case

j. Face mask



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Figure 3
Juan Diego Flórez, Last Night of the Proms, Royal Albert Hall, 2016

in a novel, it can guide us through time and space, recounting its history and allowing us to see the world through its eyes. Like an it-narrative, the following chapters set out to reconstruct the life of this most important Inca garment, from its painstaking creation to its modern conservations, and in so doing, the facets of world history it has experienced.[12] As you will read, the untold tales hidden up its nonexistent sleeves might lead one to conclude that it is not only one of the most important artifacts to survive from the old "New World," but also—because it bridges ancient and modern visual cultures—one of the weightier objects of human history, meriting a perch in the globally recognized canon of art. The *Mona Lisa*, the *David*, the *Venus di Milo*, *Starry Night*, *Water Lilies*, *The Kiss*, and *Guernica* are among the most famous works of art in the world. They are also all European. Works of American art in the European tradition like *Nighthawks*, *American Gothic*, and *Lavender Mist* could be added to this list; but the only work of art from beyond Europe and the United States that has arguably achieved such international recognition is the Japanese woodblock print *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* by Hokusai.



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**Figure 4**
Robert Woods Bliss, St. Petersburg, Russia, c. 1904–7

Thus, the final goal of this book is to change you. If you wanted to read an academic introduction to Leonardo da Vinci or Johannes Vermeer, you could choose from many studies. You could even read fiction like *The Da Vinci Code* or *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Scholarship on "non-Western" art is more often presented in specialized volumes and articles that prevent this knowledge from being widely accessed. This book is meant to teach you to recognize and appreciate a masterpiece of Indigenous American art and, in so doing, to recruit you as part of the effort to break down narrow Eurocentric conceptions of what art is and why it matters.

## Dumbarton Oaks and the Making of a Name

But all good introductions should begin with a name. As I mentioned, the garment is referred to as the Dumbarton Oaks tunic because of the museum that preserves it.[13] The Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection is the life's work of the American diplomat and philanthropist Robert Woods Bliss (1875–1962) and his wife, Mildred Barnes Bliss (1879–1969), whose fortune was amassed manufacturing a laxative called Fletcher's Castoria (fig. 4). In 1920, the couple bought an 1801 mansion named Dumbarton Oaks in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC, to house Mildred's collection of Byzantine art. In 1940, however, with the United States on the brink of World War II, the Blisses entrusted Dumbarton Oaks to Harvard University, Robert's alma mater, as a research institute devoted to Byzantine art.

Paralleling Mildred's passions, Robert Bliss was fascinated by what were then called "Pre-Columbian" cultures, or societies that flourished in what is



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now Latin America before the arrival of Christopher Columbus. (The term is increasingly being retired due to the inappropriateness of referring to thousands of years of Indigenous peoples by the name of the explorer who led to their subjugation.) In 1912, when Bliss was working in Paris as the secretary of the United States Embassy, he bought his first ancient American artifact, an Olmec sculpture from Mexico.[14] Notably, at the time, the Olmecs were so little recognized that archaeologists had not yet named them, and the figure was mistakenly believed to be Aztec—or more correctly, Mexica. Over subsequent decades, Bliss assembled a small but stellar collection of objects from a variety of ancient American cultures, in an array of materials including stone, ceramic, gold, and of course textiles.

What distinguished Bliss from contemporary collectors was that he valued these objects as "art." In the early twentieth century such artifacts were almost exclusively collected as ethnographic evidence for museums of anthropology, archaeology, and, more problematically, natural history.[15] Considering the degree to which the canon of art history is still defined by Euro-American art in the twenty-first century, Bliss's approach was revolutionary—and one he often had to defend. In these same years, artists like Pablo Picasso and Paul Gauguin began taking inspiration from the material cultures of Africa and Polynesia, which was then referred to as "primitive art." Objects from the ancient Americas were also prominently imitated; for example, the Chac Mool from Chichén Itzá was the model for many reclining figures by British sculptor Henry Moore.[16] This art historical study of the uncu is possible not only because Robert Bliss collected and conserved the garment but also because his early celebration of it as "art" launched it into the purview of the discipline. In fact, because of the fame of Bliss's collection, early understandings of Pre-Columbian art in many ways came to be defined through the royal Inca tunic.[17]

From 1947, Bliss loaned his collection to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, making it the finest exhibition of ancient American objects in an art museum anywhere in the United States at that time (fig. 5).[18] However, when Robert Bliss was diagnosed with lung cancer, the fate of his collection came into question. As early as 1959, the Blisses discussed building an addition to Dumbarton Oaks that would allow Robert's collection—which at that point already included the tunic—to be reunited with Mildred's. Philip Johnson ultimately designed the new wing, a breathtaking space comprised of glass cylinders punctuated by marble columns. Unfortunately, Robert Bliss died on April 19, 1962, at the age of eighty-six, a year and a half before the galleries were completed.[19] Nonetheless, the opening of the Johnson wing was planned with fanfare, though it had to be scaled back at the last minute due to the assassination of President Kennedy, and was attended by Mildred.[20] With the arrival of Robert's collection in 1963, Pre-Columbian Studies was formally added to the intellectual purview of the research institute.

And the institute continued to grow. In 1972, Garden and Landscape Studies was added as a third research program, in light of Dumbarton Oaks' extensive formal gardens by celebrated landscape architect Beatrix Farrand. This triumvirate of research subjects is a unique testament to the passions of its founders. Even today, Dumbarton Oaks preserves an intellectual texture



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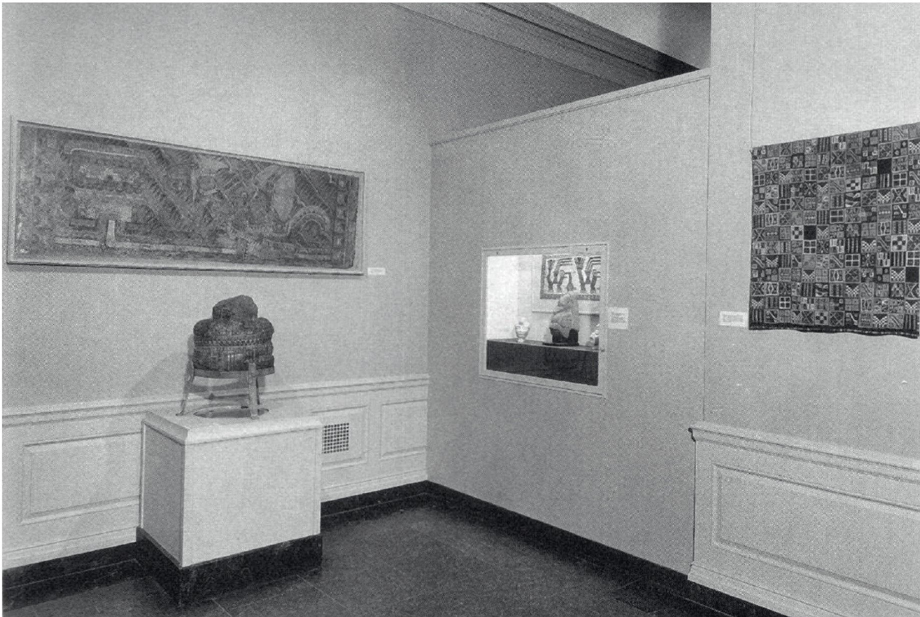

Figure 5
The royal Inca tunic exhibited at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, during the 1950s

that is increasingly rare amid the corporatization of higher education. The museum collections are exhibited free of charge to the citizens of the world in one of its most international cities. Additionally, the institute maintains a sprawling library, a fellowship program that supports a global community of scholars and a dense schedule of roundtable discussions, colloquia, and symposia. While the Blisses certainly amassed outsize wealth, power, and privilege, their herculean efforts to champion the art of the ancient Americas on the world stage—culturally, aesthetically, intellectually—and the enduring impact they have had on scholarship cannot be overstated. Indeed, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that my studies of the tunic began over a decade ago when I was awarded a Dumbarton Oaks junior fellowship to conduct research for my doctoral thesis and culminated with a one-month fellowship to correct the page proofs of this text. The book you now hold in your hands evidences the fruits of the Blisses' magnanimous vision.[21]

However, because Robert Bliss acquired the tunic as part of his personal collection, long before Dumbarton Oaks became a center for Pre-Columbian research, the mid-twentieth-century history of the object was not professionally recorded. Thus, in addition to questions of who wove the tunic, how, and for whom, we do not know when Bliss actually purchased it, which art dealer he acquired it from, and what other artifacts might have been associated with it. Bliss primarily documented his collection through two catalogs published a decade apart. The tunic did not appear in the first, *Indigenous Art of the Americas: Collection of Robert Woods Bliss*, published by the National Gallery of Art in 1947.[22] It did, however, appear in the second, more lavish catalog, *Pre-Columbian Art: Robert Woods Bliss Collection,* published by Phaidon in 1957.[23] Scholars therefore assumed that Bliss acquired the tunic between 1947 and 1957.



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In 1996, Dumbarton Oaks published a new, two-volume catalog of its Andean collection that specified the tunic was "acquired by Robert Bliss before 1954"—the year Elizabeth ("Betty") Benson (1924–2018) began working as an assistant registrar at the National Gallery of Art. Benson later installed Bliss's Pre-Columbian Collection in the Johnson wing, and was subsequently named the first director of Pre-Columbian Studies.[24] However, because the tunic was already part of Bliss's collection when Benson arrived at the National Gallery in 1954, she was unable to provide Dumbarton Oaks with further details of its origins.

Be that as it may, an obscure photograph in another publication shows that Bliss acquired the tunic even earlier and pinpoints the window of time. Beginning in 1949, the Pan American Union of Washington, DC, published a magazine called *Américas*. Taking advantage of the higher-quality paper, they used the inside of the front cover to feature photographs of American art and culture. The December 1950 issue presented a black-and-white photograph of four tocapus identified as a "detail of [an] ancient tapestry poncho from Peru in the Robert Woods Bliss Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C."[25] The photograph suggests Bliss acquired the royal tunic sometime around or after 1947, when it was too late to include it in the first publication, and before 1950, by which point it was at the National Gallery. To my knowledge, this was the first time the tunic was published, and Bliss may have arranged this press to announce its arrival.

During these early years in the public eye, little was seemingly known about the tunic, and much of it was likely guesswork. In the 1957 catalog, Samuel Lothrop, a research associate and curator of Andean archaeology at the Harvard Peabody Museum, and his wife, Joy Mahler, a textile specialist, described the tunic as "an outstanding specimen of Inca-period weaving" and attributed it to the south coast of Peru.[26] But it is unknown whether this is where the object was excavated, where it was acquired, or where it was simply assumed to have originated. It is also unclear if this information came from Bliss or was surmised by Lothrop and Mahler. Elizabeth Hill Boone, who succeeded Benson as director of Pre-Columbian Studies, suggested the latter, indicating that this coastal provenience was only an estimation based on the assumption that the tunic had been dug up.[27] As I mentioned earlier, within Peru, only the coastal desert (and particularly its southern half) is generally dry enough to yield textiles as well preserved as this. Although it was a reasonable guess, it has never been established that the uncu is an archaeological artifact—an object once buried in the ground—and not a historical object passed down from one generation to the next. If the latter, the tunic could have come from many locales within the former Inca Empire, or even have been transported to Europe during the colonial period. In 2008, Benson recalled that "Mr. Bliss always said that he never bought anything in the country of origin. And he did buy almost everything in New York, I think. He bought few things in Europe."[28]

Although the circumstances surrounding the tunic's reappearance in the twentieth century are unclear, this may have been one of the least remarkable periods of its life—or at least the period most similar to the lives of other surviving artifacts from the ancient Americas. From the late nineteenth century,



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hundreds of thousands of Andean artifacts circulated the globe. Museums and private collectors acquired these objects through scientific excavations, purchases from dealers, exchanges with other museums, and donations. On the ground, especially in Peru, the looting of archaeological sites and subsequent trafficking of antiquities was an escalating enterprise that by the 1960s reached industrial proportions.[29] Such activities would not begin to be successfully regulated until two decades after Bliss acquired the tunic with the adoption of the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property—which Elizabeth Benson played a role in drafting.[30]

But the absence of reliable information has caused scholars gradually to question what the tunic fundamentally is. Although it was first described as an Inca-period object, it was included in a 1961 exhibition of colonial weavings from Peru at The Textile Museum in Washington, DC, that suggested it was "probably woven for a high ranking Inca during the late 16th century who employed traditional symbols without regard to their restricted use under Inca rule"—that is, a garment made *after* the Spanish invasion.[31] Uncus transformed in significant ways under colonial rule, as chapter six will explore. The question is whether the Dumbarton Oaks tunic is an original or a later copy. It was again identified as a colonial object in 1991 when the uncu appeared in the National Gallery's exhibition *Circa 1492*. Elizabeth Benson, who wrote the catalog entry, stated without further explanation that it "may have been made shortly after the Spanish conquest."[32] And, in 2004, the garment was again identified as potentially colonial when it was featured in the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition, *The Colonial Andes: Tapestries and Silverwork 1530–1830*.[33] In all these instances, however, a definitive argument for why it should be considered colonial has never been articulated. Presently, Dumbarton Oaks estimates the tunic was created between 1450 and 1540. This ninety-year range straddles both the Inca and colonial periods, essentially hedging bets. So, which is it? How can we tell? While the difference may only be a few decades or years, the distinction is crucial for understanding the garment's cultural importance.

Ultimately, the tunic raises more questions than answers: Who made it? With what techniques? For whom? How did Bliss acquire it? And where was it throughout the centuries? More unsettlingly, is the tunic an archaeological artifact that survived buried in the ground or is it a historical object passed down through the centuries? And what would this difference mean for its cultural significance? More profoundly, is it even an authentic, royal, Inca uncu or a later rendition of one produced under Spanish rule? Thus, while the Incas are often marketed as the mysterious inhabitants of Machu Picchu, the tunic actually presents a veritable mystery of what it *is* in almost every basic sense. Because of the absence of Inca, colonial, and modern textual sources discussing the object directly, its true identity can only be determined through careful empirical analysis of the physical object. What this means is that—as in the very best detective movies—the evidence is already staring us in the face. To uncover the life history of this masterpiece, to determine what it is and what it means, we need to learn how to see the signs and how to piece together the clues. My hope is that much of the satisfaction in reading this book derives from learning how



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to analyze and understand this seminal work of Inca art as much as from my delivery of conclusions.

## On Knowing from Objects

It is on this last point—learning how to analyze and understand an object—that I want to end this introduction. For the reasons discussed, a small group of people cares passionately about the tunic. I see it as a puzzle whose answers will help us better understand Inca art, the modern geopolitical formation of the Americas, and Indigenous sovereignty. Because of this, I want to increase the number of people who know about it and agree that it matters. But to succeed, I have to persuade many of you who might never have imagined reading a book about an old Inca textile, or even art history, that there is a bigger takeaway. A year or two after reading this book, the particulars about the object and my argument will be hazy in your memory. At that point, what will you remember that still informs your perspective? I hope this:

Think about an object that is important to you, that you use all the time, that you would have a hard time living without. For me, the object that comes to mind is my cell phone. I treat it somewhat reverentially, not only because it would cost hundreds of dollars to replace but also because it allows me to connect with other people, takes and archives my photographs, provides the soundtrack to my life, wakes me up, tells me the time, the temperature, where to drive, and a host of other functions. I would be lost without it: socially isolated, late, and under- or overdressed for the weather. But what do I really know about my phone? It is practically an extension of my forearm, and yet I have no idea how it was made, what it is made of, or how it functions. If it breaks, I am incapable of fixing it. At best, I can clean the screen. It is an alien object I have shackled to my wrist, barely asking any questions of it—aside from scores of Internet queries.

And yet, I know that when I get a new phone, by day's end I will not even think about this one. It will be lucky if it survives in the back of a drawer, languishing in the dark, its battery uncharged. It will not be passed on to my heirs as the thing that I once held dearest. It will not be laid beside me in my grave as an inalienable possession, enclosed in an ivory box, encrusted in gold, or dusted in cinnabar.[34] And it will not be ceremonially burned or ritually killed, its too fragile screen for once intentionally shattered. Should archaeologists ever care to look for it, they will find it indecorously dumped in a landfill.

What do you know about your all-important object? Could you identify what it is made from? Could you explain how it was hewn? Do you know who made it and where? What would happen if it became damaged? Who might fix it and how? And what do you anticipate its fate will be? If you know the answers to these questions, then it must indeed be a remarkable thing.

If, like me, you cannot answer these questions, you are probably one of the many rather than the few. The shallow and transient relationship I have with my cell phone is ubiquitous in our modern lives and the defining aspect of our material culture. Most furniture is no longer made in an obvious way. It is particleboard with foil veneers and plastic hardware. We may assemble it from



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graphic instructions, but even as we make it, we still may not understand how it is made. When we move, we might not take it with us, because it is easily damaged and cheaper to buy a new one than to transport it. Nowadays, who acquires furniture with the expectation that it will become a family heirloom?

Of all our material culture, these issues most affect clothing—the subject of this book. Although we may be able to identify the brand of a garment in our closet, it was likely physically made by someone on a different continent. We could possibly name its fiber (because it is printed on the label), but what could we say about its fabric and construction? Few of us make our clothes or have clothes tailor-made. We purchase apparel ready-made and own many days' or even months' worth of clothes at a time. When we buy a garment, we anticipate that its presence in our lives will be temporary, perhaps confined to a few years. During that period, how many times might we don a particular shirt? Some clothes, like socks, may have shorter lifespans due to frequent use. Instead of darning a sock with holes, we throw it out. We do not repair clothing because it is cheap, and fashions change quickly. This behavior produces a staggering quantity of expended clothing that far outweighs demands for secondhand reuse. Even so, we expect high-performance fibers that are resistant to wear and that consequently will not decompose when they join my phone in a landfill.

Our relationship with clothes presents a stark contrast to the experiences of our forebears. In the mid-1800s, in *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx famously discussed a coat as a quintessential commodity.[35] He frequently pawned his coat, his wife's shawl, children's clothes, and even his housekeeper's clothes in order to acquire, among other things, the paper for his manuscript.[36] Clothing was so valuable because the fiber had to be grown and processed by hand. It had to be dyed with natural dyes that required harvesting and processing. The cloth had to be woven, often in people's homes because it was so labor intensive. Then a seamstress or tailor had to transform it into something wearable. Because of these many onerous forms of labor, clothing bore an extraordinary value relative to other goods, and comprised some three-fourths of objects in pawnshops in England at that time.[37] In the present, however, most pawnshops will not even accept clothing, with the possible exception of wedding dresses, furs, and certain handbags.

The human relationship with textiles has changed more in the last three hundred years than it did in the previous three thousand. Our alienation from and apathy toward the production of clothing is characteristic of our attitudes toward textiles more broadly. A textile touches our skin nearly every minute of every day, from the garments on our back to the carpet under our feet, the sheets on our bed, and the towel that greets us when we exit the bath; and yet, what do most of us actually know about them? How is fiber spun? What is a mordant? A warp? The Industrial Revolution aimed to mechanize the production of textiles to increase output and profits, while reducing the manual and intellectual burden their making entailed. But as textiles were produced in mills and factories, spinning and weaving became more removed from daily life, allowing us to forget. As machinery yielded greater volumes of cloth, its cost decreased. Cloth became more accessible and expendable. The inventions of chemical



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dyes created cheaper, more vivid, and more durable colors, undermining the long-established hierarchies of rare natural dyes. The world became a brighter and more colorful place, but the cultural importance of many colors faded. As well, the inventions of synthetic fibers made threads cheaper to produce, easier to regularize, and less prone to wear. They could be blended with natural fibers to impart these qualities and cut costs, but this caused the identities of fibers to become less defined. The Industrial Revolution even resulted in structural changes in the kinds of fabrics people wore. Machine knitting was invented, creating jersey cotton, the ubiquitous stuff of T-shirts. Our disdain for a torn blouse or a rug with a hole in it and our inability to mend them show how fully the Industrial Revolution eradicated knowledge of cloth—precisely what activists called the Luddites feared.

Consumerism, materialism, and the mechanisms of capitalism have allowed us to accumulate huge quantities of objects. The Industrial Revolution and mass production succeeded in making them available without most of us having to create them ourselves. Globalization means that we do not even see them being manufactured, because production takes place in distant factories. The inventions of synthetic materials can leave us unsure of what we are even holding in our hands. Is it a plastic? What is plastic? So, as we acquire more objects, we know less about them, what they are made of, and how they were made. We value them less and get rid of them faster. Our epoch is creating an archaeological record so dense with junk that future practitioners of the discipline may well just throw up their hands. And if we could not fathom subsequent generations displaying our objects in museums—why should we even want them in our lives?

This is why I believe the story of the royal Inca tunic has value for us today. It has been an all-important object for its entire life: first for its maker, then for its wearer, for the society who revered it, for those who preserved it, for Robert Bliss, for Dumbarton Oaks, for scholars, and for modern Andean peoples. Most important, in each of these relationships it was likely valued for different reasons. It fostered new meanings as it changed hands. Some are well remembered, but others have been forgotten. This book sets out to reconstruct its evolving importance, allowing us to reflect on its similarities and differences with our all-important objects, perhaps causing us to reconsider our relationships with our material world. Maybe learning how it was woven will spur you to rethink what constitutes a luxury garment. Perhaps this knowledge will encourage you to take a little longer getting dressed in the morning, because as you don a shirt, you pause to study its seams, to better understand the object that will encase and present your body to the world. Hopefully, this deepening of your attention is not restricted to clothing. Examine your coffee mug, your kitchen table, or even how this book was constructed. (Apologies to e-book readers.) Consider how and why the objects that surround you have their particular forms. What are their virtues, their flaws? How do they please or frustrate you? The organizing consultant Marie Kondo advocated that people de-clutter their lives by throwing away objects that do not give them joy, but that really does not address the root of the problem. What if instead we became discerning enough not to acquire junk in the first place? If we can learn to take greater intellectual inter-



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est in the objects around us, in how they were made, where, and by whom, we might reduce and even reverse two of the most damning consequences of our addiction to cheaply made products: the poverty and working conditions that makers of objects are subjected to—such as the 1,132 garment factory workers who died and 2,500 who were injured when the Rana Plaza building collapsed in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2013—and the trillions of tons of ever-increasing waste that suffocate the earth and oceans.

Some might argue that nothing supersedes these issues of social and environmental consciousness, and rightly so. But, were they grave enough to prompt someone to read a book about an obscure textile, we might have hoped these crises could have been forestalled in the first place. So, I will add another, more direct, and perhaps more urgent concern: the way the digital age is reshaping how we interact with objects. Because we conduct so much of our lives through our cell phones and computers, many activities that occupy our time do not involve manipulating objects in real space. We may drag and drop files on our computer screen, but those actions are not subject to gravity or friction. (Rather, these forces apply, but to our finger on the touchpad and not the icon on the screen.) Such experiences cultivate a distorted sense of space, movement, and objecthood. We may use our finger to toggle a button on a screen, and feel the satisfaction of having flipped a switch, perhaps even hearing a click, but in reality there was no connection formed by putting two wires in contact. The image was a simulacrum, just changes in the colors of pixels. We may only meaningfully confront this when the digital switch does not work, for example, in the infuriating non-act of unsuccessfully connecting to a Wi-Fi network. An actual switch might not function because there is dried paint between the parts, so you push harder, or take it apart and fix it. But when a simulacrum does not work, it has nothing to do with the rendering. The problem is elsewhere, in no way connected to the action of your finger, and you cannot use your finger to solve it.

The digital age has forged a disconnect between the actions we believe we are performing—opening, closing, copying, pasting—and what we are actually doing. We digitally interact through coded reflexes—tap, double tap, tap and hold, tap and drag, left click, right click, swipe left, swipe right—that have no other utility in the real world. These actions do not teach us how to use our bodies with dexterity as we estimate the mass, dimensions, and fragility of something in order to move it, amid atmospheric variations like a brisk breeze or a roving light. Moreover, in the digital world, there are no ways to exploit physical properties to make tasks easier. We cannot wet our fingertip to lift a page, using adhesion to engage the surface of the paper. We do not keep our fingernails long enough to pick up a needle, transforming our bodies into a more precise tool. And, because the digital world is always on, we do not have to consider the temporality of tasks, of completing something while it is still daylight so we can see. There is an unbearable monotony and predictability in scrolling through our digital landscape, an ever-replenishing, dimensionless stream of posts that precludes actual interaction with the world we live in.

The confluence of industrialization, mass production, and globalization with the rise of the digital age means we not only increasingly lack cerebral knowledge of objects and of the processes by which they are made, but also



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are depriving ourselves of the embodied knowledge that can only be learned by our hands through making. This is a serious concern because embodied knowledge—the particular way to hold a tool, the consistency of clay in your hands, the proper tautness of a thread—is often not written down. Consider how we react to ancient accomplishments like the Great Pyramids or, indeed, Machu Picchu. We might ask, stupefied, how they could have been built without heavy machinery. Crackpots may claim they were created by aliens, but the building of ancient wonders seems impossible only because we have lost the practical, experiential knowledge of how to use our bodies to achieve such feats. Our sense of awe and disbelief is heightened because of the magnitude of these structures; but if the tools to build the Great Pyramids and the tools to make a yard of cloth were placed in front of an average modern individual, the result would be the same: nothing. As we march steadily into our digital futures, we must choose whether to carry forward—not in our hands but through our hands—the manual skills that human innovators long experimented to discover, practiced to refine, and taught in order to preserve, and which in turn have sustained human civilization for millennia. As it is, cooking is one of the few forms of making that is still performed by a majority of people throughout the world on a daily basis. It should not be surprising that making's last refuge lies in the most basic way of sustaining human life: eating. But if, as a civilization, we do not make a conscious effort to preserve embodied knowledge, we will lose these skills, and should we ever need to discover them again, we will have to start over, picking up some artifact from the past, furrowing our brow, and exclaiming, "How the hell did they do this?"

And that is exactly what this book is. The kind of embodied knowledge that allowed for the creation of the royal tunic must be reconstructed through careful study of its material evidence. This is our best chance of revealing what the garment is, who created it, when, and for whom. In this sense, this book is a cautionary tale that demonstrates why we must pay more attention to the material world. For many, it may also serve as an introduction to art history—a field that is often underestimated. Even one of the most erudite US presidents, Barack Obama, once committed a gaffe when, in commenting on jobs and higher education, he suggested that "folks can make a lot more potentially with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree."[38] In his later apology, he admitted how previously studying art had given him aesthetic pleasure. But these words of support miss what art historical study really offers. It is not to determine what is pretty or valuable. Rather, for me at least, art history allows us to understand the roles of objects in our lives, why we make them, keep them, and what those objects therefore tell us about ourselves, our past, and our future. From this perspective, Obama's statement is an opportunity to make a valuable point: art history is not opposed to manufacturing or trade jobs; it exists in symphony with them, promoting appreciation of the manual, the dexterous, and the masterful in the physical world.

However, learning to analyze and understand objects also means recognizing and accepting different forms of evidence. We are largely people of words. This text makes that clear. Words provide clarity and assurances. They seem resolute. Sometimes it is not enough for people to show us they love us;



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we want to hear them say it, too. Testimonies direct from people's mouths may seem like the surest form of evidence. But people lie. They also die. As such, historians relish in written documents, often called primary sources, to learn about the past. This book will use many primary sources from the colonial period for information—especially in the next chapter. Scholarship can conveniently quote primary sources to present evidence. But when writing about objects, it is much harder to present physical evidence so readers can examine it firsthand. In this book, photographs and illustrations I have drawn attempt to document this materiality. Even so, physical traits may seem more open to interpretation because they are not, literally, all spelled out. But one advantage that objects have over human subjects and textual sources is that objects cannot lie. A broken pot will not tell you it is whole. A fork will not tell you it is a spoon, and it can never hold soup. Even a forgery will not tell you it is authentic as long as you ask it the right question. Indeed, with objects, the challenge is figuring out how to phrase your query to learn the desired answer. The physical evidence is, in its way, definite. The other advantage of objects is that as long as they are carefully conserved in museums, they do not die—or, at least, they can long outlast the humans caring for them. They can be preserved for future generations who can continue to ask them questions about the lives they have led, perhaps aided by new and more powerful technologies. The royal Inca tunic is not some long-dead artifact but a living witness to a period of human history far outside our own experience that can tell us firsthand about the past. Moreover, as its life is still ongoing, listening to its perspective may help us make different choices about our future—and its own.



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