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Deathly Hallows Swedish-style: The Gloves of Charles XII

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Can objects touch us in the classroom without being touched? How can we learn from the way that they touched others in the past as they were handled, visualized, and displayed? How do the haptic and the affective come together in teaching about emotions in history through material culture?

In recent years, a new approach, ‘history of emotions,’ has shaped historical analysis. Although there are many differences among the humanities and social science scholars who explore this field, broadly speaking they share an understanding that emotions, as they are conceptualised, expressed and performed, are culturally, socially and historically-specific.²⁶ That means that what we think an emotion is, what name we give the physical and intellectual experience we have, and how we give voice or action to it is shaped by the cultures we live in and has changed over time, sometimes in very obvious ways and others more subtle. Extending from this, some scholars consider how emotions are conveyed or expressed through objects, and as objects move across time and space.²⁷

We can explore this last point in more detail through a pair of gloves that once were worn by the King of Sweden. Charles XII (1682-1718) was an eccentric and divisive monarch who ruled through much of the Great Northern War (1700-21) (Figure 1). On 11 December 1718 (new style), he was inspecting siege fortifications at a fortress, Fredriksten, on the border with Denmark when he was shot through the head and killed instantly. Who was responsible for this dramatic regicide remains a dynamic, popular talking point today.²⁸

1. Feelings for gloves

Charles XII’s apparel that day, including his gloves, was preserved in the Royal Armoury, Livrustkammaren, in Stockholm, joining a growing collection of paraphernalia belonging to Swedish monarchs, which included carriages, wedding costumes, swords, pistols, even a horse. Preservation of Charles XII’s final outfit followed the pattern of a predecessor, Gustavus Adolphus, whose coat, complete with a bullet hole, provided an evocative reminder of his death at the Battle of Lützen in November 1632. Here, Charles XII’s clothes became another emotive ‘relic’ for the Protestant dynasty, deathly hallows quasi-sanctifying the monarchs for their sacrifice to the nation.²⁹

The English diplomat Sir Robert Ker Porter, in 1808, described a tactile, encounter with the gloves: “I could not help feeling an emotion ... when I drew on my hand the very glove which had covered his [Charles XII’s], and was profusely stained with his blood.”³⁰ Ker Porter was so struck by these objects, amongst all that he saw in the

²⁶ Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Barbara Rosenwein, *Generations of Feelings: A History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁷ Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles eds. *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁸ Most recently Peter From, *Karl XII:s död: Gatens lösning* (Jacob Wiberg, 2005).

²⁹ See similarly the ‘martial relics’ of the Protestant Nassau dynasty, in Broomhall and Jennifer Spinks, *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries: Feminizing Sources and Interpretations of the Past* (London: Ashgate, 2011), 87-89.

³⁰ Letter from Stockholm, April 1808, Robert Ker Porter, *Travelling Sketches in Russia and Sweden Travelling during the Years 1805, 1806, 1807, 1808*. Second edition. Vol. 2. (London, John Stockdale, 1813), 230.

museum, that before he left, he requested to see the “relics” once more: “I again held them in my hand, and pressed the blood-stained glove to my lips.”³¹ He qualified his response as “chivalric enthusiasm; a certain something the quieter part of the world often impute to romantic folly,” thereby framing his sentiments within a particular feeling culture of refined sensibility in vogue among the intellectual elite of the period.³² These were not sentiments everyone could feel, he claimed, just as his remained a privileged tangible access to the gloves.



Figure 1. Copy attributed to David von Krafft, Portrait of Charles XII of Sweden, 1700. Nationalmuseum. Wikimedia Commons.

Charles XII’s gloves now accrue particular affective meaning as part of the assemblage of his uniform, alongside muddied boots and coat, a blood-stained belt and hat pierced with the semi-circle reminder of the fatal bullet.

³¹ *Travelling Sketches*, 232.

³² *Travelling Sketches*, 231, and John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

Certainly, they form a striking composition as they are currently displayed in the Livrustkammaren, standing upright, suggestively enclosing the ghostly body of a still-present monarch (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Uniform of Charles XII worn 30 November, 11 December (new style), 1718. Image by Göran Schmidt. Livrustkammaren. CC BY-SA.

Modern technologies also create new feelings for the gloves impregnated with Charles XII's blood. The marked stain on the right-hand glove has faded towards a relatively inoffensive grey-brown to the naked eye but is revealed in dramatic contrast through black and white photography. (Figs 3 and 4) Recently, the gloves enabled further revelations as they were subject to new forms of scientific testing. Blood residue on the gloves was compared to DNA traces on a bullet fashioned from a button that was suspected to be the fateful projectile in 2001 investigations by geneticist Marie Allen of Uppsala University.³³ How is their emotional intensity enhanced for researchers who

³³ Marie Allen, "DNA-Analys Pa Kulknappen," Accessed July 2, 2018 <https://www.museumhalland.se/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/kulknappen.pdf> and Ann Grönhammer and Sofia Nestor, *Livrustkammaren: Kunlig Historia I Slottets Källarvalv* (Stockholm: Livrustkammaren, 2007), 31.



Figure 3. Gloves of Charles XII. Inv No 31180.
Colour image by Göran Schmidt. Livrustkammaren.
CC BY-SA.

Figure 4. Gloves of Charles XII. Inv No 31180.
Black and white image. Livrustkammaren. CC BY-
SA.

must wear gloves to handle these artefacts now, providing affective cues about their fragility and consequence? Does their smell of mustiness or leather provoke feelings for them as historic objects?

What feelings have these gloves generated through time, framed for the visitor among the wealth of historical material culture attached to the Swedish monarchy, displayed as part of Charles XII's apparel that fateful day, and in the light of modern technological investigations about Charles XII's death? Can we distinguish different emotional responses of these layers of information that each stimulate the imagination? How do the textual, visual, and material apparatus of their museological interpretation combine to shape the feelings these gloves can evoke today?

Charles XII's gloves provide a powerful example of how objects and emotional performances are intertwined in complex ways through time and space. Emotions matter to what is preserved, what remains to narrate history, and how it does so in changing ways. Examining objects through the lens of 2D images or 3D online representations adds its own layer of affective meaning contrasting with artefacts brought into the classroom. Touch, or the inability to touch, highlights the importance of the haptic as a significant means through which we create affective meaning. To take a class through this kind of material analysis can open up vital student reflections that engage them in new questions at the cutting edge of emerging research.