



# Coptic Textiles from the Architect Milan Kovač's Private Collection

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## INTRODUCTION

Numerous museums and private collections worldwide hold extensive collections of Coptic textiles, which represent the unique artistic heritage within the rich and long history of weaving in Ancient Egypt.<sup>1</sup> Unearthed mostly from archaeological excavations of burial mounds, preserved over time due to the arid conditions of Egyptian climate, the majority of surviving Coptic textiles were produced from late antiquity to the Islamic period, approximately from the 3rd to 12th century AD.<sup>2</sup> These textiles bear witness to a diverse range of functional and ornamental uses and were commonly fashioned from linen, wool, silk, or cotton, employing various weaving techniques. Coptic textiles are renowned for their rich ornaments, motifs, and imagery, which mirror the fusion of indigenous Egyptian traditions and Greco-Roman

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1 The authors would like to thank Mr. Milan Kovač for his generous assistance and permission to work closely with his private collections and archival material; where not stated otherwise, the information below comes from interviewing him.

2 For a general overview, see the entry on "Textiles, Coptic" in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, 2210–30.



influences, intricately interwoven with the emerging symbolism and iconography of Christianity.

In the wake of Napoleon's expedition to Egypt from 1798 to 1801, which resulted in the landmark work *Description de l'Égypte*, French geographer and Egyptologist Edme-François Jomard undertook a pioneering effort to describe and classify textiles found in Saqqara, marking the beginning of scholarly inquiry into late antique textiles from Egypt.<sup>3</sup> During this period, individual textiles were incorporated into European collections. Still, it was not until the latter decades of the 19th century that more systematic research began, prompted by targeted excavations unearthing vast quantities of textiles.

The rediscovery of Coptic textiles sparked widespread interest among museums, private collectors, art dealers, diplomats, and researchers alike, leading to an unprecedented increase in demand and propelling a trade in textiles from Late Antiquity. Among those who participated in this fervor was the National Museum of Slovenia (then known as the Provincial Museum of Carniola), which, in 1890, at the peak of this period, acquired a collection of 53 Coptic textiles.<sup>4</sup>

## MILAN KOVAČ AND HIS COLLECTION

For many years, the National Museum of Slovenia collection was believed to be the only Coptic textiles collection in Slovenia. However, except for a brief display upon its acquisition in 1890,<sup>5</sup> the collection has remained stored in the museum depot and has never been presented to the public through an exhibition.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the Department of Applied Arts at the National Museum of Slovenia, responsible for safeguarding the collection, decided to conduct new research and prepare its debut exhibition in 2019. Throughout the process of working on the exhibition catalog,<sup>7</sup> none of the team members involved were aware of

3 Fluck, »The Most Beautiful and Original Thing Created by the Imagination of the Orient«, 93–94.

4 The textiles in the collection of the National Museum of Slovenia were likely excavated in the mid-1880s by a German archaeologist Franz Bock at the Akhmim necropolis in Upper Egypt. Knez, "A Record of the Collection of Coptic Textiles," 17.

5 *Slovenec* 18/82, 11. 4. 1890, 3.

6 In 1963, curator Darinka Zelinka prepared a short description of the entire collection, published under the title *Koptske tkanine v Narodnem muzeju v Ljubljani*.

7 Ciglenečki et al., *Coptic Textiles from the Collection*. The new catalogue, organized according to typological classification, was prepared by Aurore Ciavatti,

a comparable collection of Coptic textiles held in private possession by Slovenian architect Milan Kovač (born in 1940), who brought it to Ljubljana in February 1964 following his study trip to Egypt and Sudan.

This collection only came to light in the spring of 2021 during a more systematic investigation of Kovač's extensive archival material from 1979 to 1988, when he was involved in numerous projects to protect the cultural heritage of Ancient Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Over nearly ten years of activities in Egypt with his architectural bureau based in Sweden, he developed a range of innovative approaches to safeguard some of Egypt's most significant monuments.

Among these were ambitious proposals for an underground museum for the Cheops boat beneath the Great Pyramid in Giza and the exhibition of restored objects belonging to Queen Hetepheres I and other wooden artifacts. He also prepared a study of royal mummies and coffins, proposing an underground mausoleum at Mokattam Hill on the eastern outskirts of Cairo to house them. Kovač designed a prototype of protective mask against wind erosion for the Great Sphinx in Giza and, with the team of ICOM (International Council of Museums), put forward a comprehensive plan for the renovation of the Egyptian Museum at Tahrir Square in Cairo. In Luxor, he conducted measurements of the royal tombs and the tombs of the nobles. He proposed protective strategies and solutions against tourist erosion for numerous monuments in Western Thebes, including those in the Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens, Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, and Deir el-Medina.

Kovač's most notable accomplishment in Egypt was the restoration of the tomb of the scribe Nakht (TT 52), located within the Sheikh Abd el-Qurna region in the Theban necropolis. Despite many of his visionary projects remaining unrealized due to political and financial constraints, he received support from prominent scholars, including the *grande dame* of Egyptology Christiane Desroches Noblecourt, Torgny Säve-Söderbergh, Rostislav Holthoer, Kamal El-Malakh, Hassan Fathy, as well as from public figures such as Prince Philip, consort of Queen Elizabeth II, and Carl XVI Gustaf, the King of Sweden.

In December 2023, on the 60th anniversary of Kovač's first visit to Egypt, an exhibition on his work titled "Architect Milan Kovač: Pioneer of Heritage Science in Egypt" was inaugurated at the Egyptian Museum at Tahrir Square in Cairo.<sup>9</sup> On this occasion, Ali Abdelhalim,

ibid. 185–291. See also Ciavatti and Ciglencečki, "Les textiles coptes."

8 Kovač, *Utrinki arhitektove življenjske poti*, 313–61.

9 The authors of the exhibition were the same as the authors of this article.

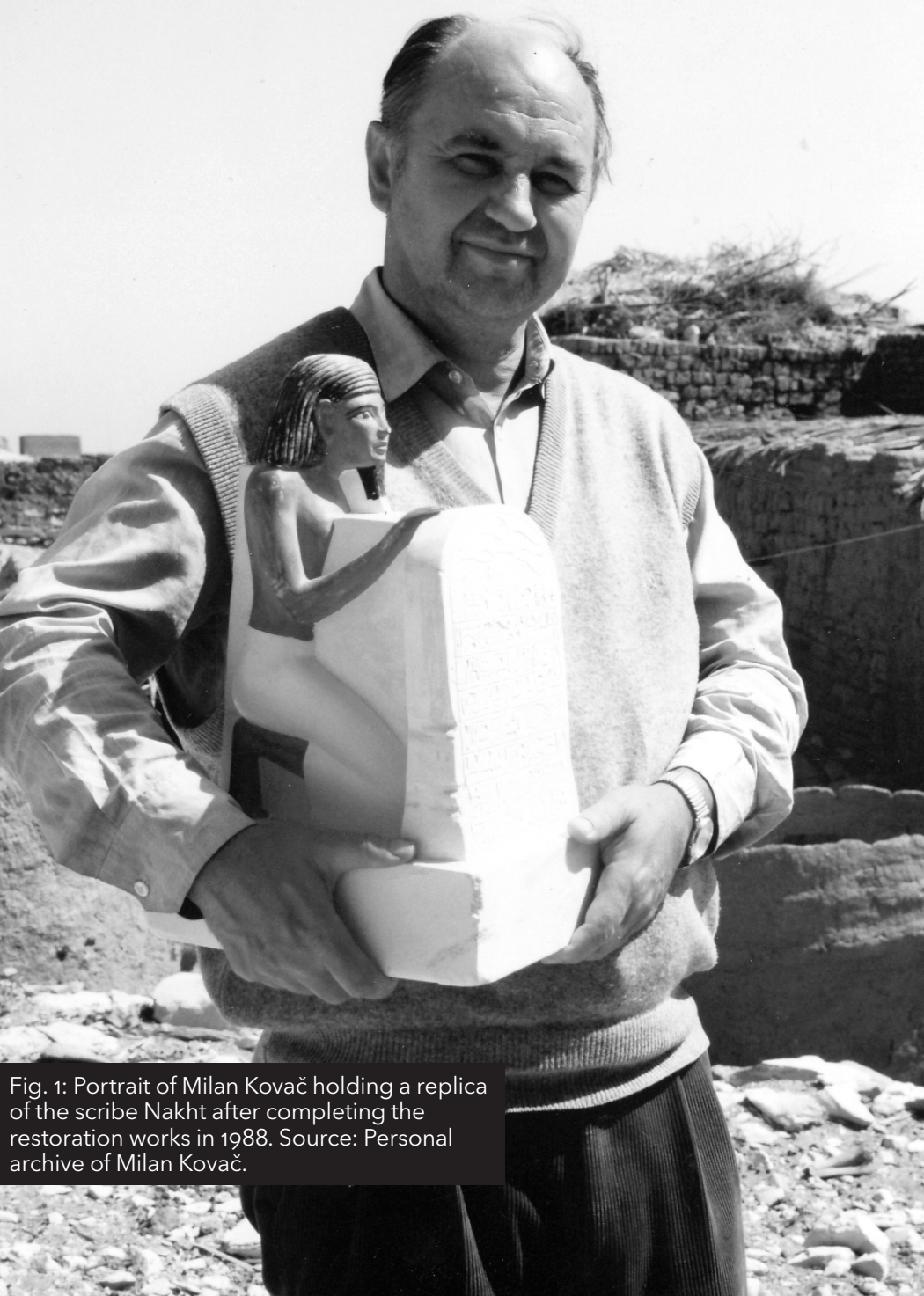


Fig. 1: Portrait of Milan Kovač holding a replica of the scribe Nakht after completing the restoration works in 1988. Source: Personal archive of Milan Kovač.

the general director of the Egyptian Museum, presented Kovač with a Certificate of Appreciation for his long-standing efforts and services in protecting Egypt's cultural heritage.

The purpose of this paper, which forms part of a systematic investigation of Kovač's vast archival material and personal collections,<sup>10</sup> is to explore the circumstances surrounding the acquisition of his collection of Coptic textiles and the history of its preservation. While a comprehensive analysis of the textiles is not the focus of this discussion, the paper provides an initial assessment of their preservation status and highlights the urgent need for restoration and conservation efforts.

## STUDY TRIP TO EGYPT AND SUDAN (1963–1964)

After completing his studies at the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana in Professor Edo Ravnikar's seminar in 1963, Milan Kovač pursued his diploma under the mentorship of Professor Marjan Mušič. His thesis focused on the pressing challenges of preserving the Nubian temple of Abu Simbel, which has been increasingly threatened by the rising waters of the Aswan High Dam since its construction began in 1960. To delve further into the issues surrounding the endangered architectural heritage in Ancient Nubia, Kovač embarked on a study trip to Egypt and Sudan in December 1963, accompanied by his colleague Miha Kurnik.<sup>11</sup>

They first arrived on Egyptian soil in Alexandria on 23 December, having traveled by ship from Naples. During a brief stopover in Cairo, they visited the city's major tourist attractions, including the Citadel,

10 The investigation and digitization of the private archives and collections of Milan Kovač are carried out as part of the Slovene Egyptology Database (Baza slovenske egiptologije) project, co-led by Mateja Ravnik and Jan Ciglencečki. This collaborative initiative is a partnership between the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (Section for Egyptology and Coptology) at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of Slovenia. The project aims to systematically collect, archive, catalog, and digitize a wide range of materials – including private collections, archival documents, drawings, photographs, maps, and publications – related to Slovenian contributions to the study of Ancient Egypt from the 19th century to the present.

11 Kovač first described their journey to Nubia in a newspaper article under the title "Žrtvovana dežela" ("Sacrificed Country"), published one year after their return in *Tedenska tribuna*, 25. 3. 1965, 3. A more detailed description of their journey is included in his autobiography *Utrinki arhitektove življenjske poti*, 54–111.

the Egyptian Museum, and the pyramids in Giza and Saqqara. Before heading south, they obtained permits from the Ministry of Antiquities to visit archaeological sites in Nubia.

En route to Aswan, they visited Malawi, Tuna el-Gebel, and Tell el-Amarna and spent New Year's Eve in Asyut. Continuing their journey southward and exploring archaeological sites in Abydos, Dendera, Luxor, Edfu, and Kom Ombo, they eventually reached Aswan, known in ancient times as the "Gateway to Africa." From there, they traveled by river steamer to Wadi Halfa on the Sudanese side, where they boarded a train headed for Khartoum. After nearly two days of travel, they arrived in the Sudanese capital on 14 January 1964. As they were advised against traveling further south due to unrest in the region, this marked the southernmost point of their journey. They returned by train to Wadi Halfa, from where they set out to explore Nubia.

During this period, Wadi Halfa was a central hub for foreign archaeological expeditions in Sudan as part of UNESCO's International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia in response to the imminent flooding of the valley caused by the construction of the Great Aswan Dam.<sup>12</sup> As Kovač's thesis focused on the endangered heritage of Nubia, they visited several sites on the Sudanese side, including Faras, Buhen, Khor, Dorgonarti, Meinarti, Mirgissa, and Semna, all of which are now submerged. Due to financial constraints, they traversed a significant part of the journey on foot.

On 24 January 1964, they returned to the Egyptian-Sudanese border and continued toward the temple complex of Abu Simbel, still situated in its original location at the time. At that location, Kovač and his friend encountered members of a Yugoslav UNESCO expedition tasked with conserving and restoring medieval Coptic wall paintings.<sup>13</sup> Spending several days with their compatriots, they were advised to explore the recently uncovered church of Abdullah Nirgi, located a few kilometers north of Abu Simbel, where the Yugoslav team had already completed its work.

After visiting Abu Simbel, they returned to Aswan by riverboat and took a bus to Cairo, where they spent a few days. During these final days of their journey, Kovač acquired his Coptic textiles collection. Leaving Cairo, they journeyed back to Alexandria, facing challenges

12 For more details on the UNESCO campaign, see: Säve-Söderbergh, *Temples and Tombs of Ancient Nubia*.

13 Medić et al., *Participation de la Yougoslavie*; Pirnat, "Snemanje in konserviranje koptskih fresk"; Smolič and Ciglenečki, "Organizacijski vidiki."



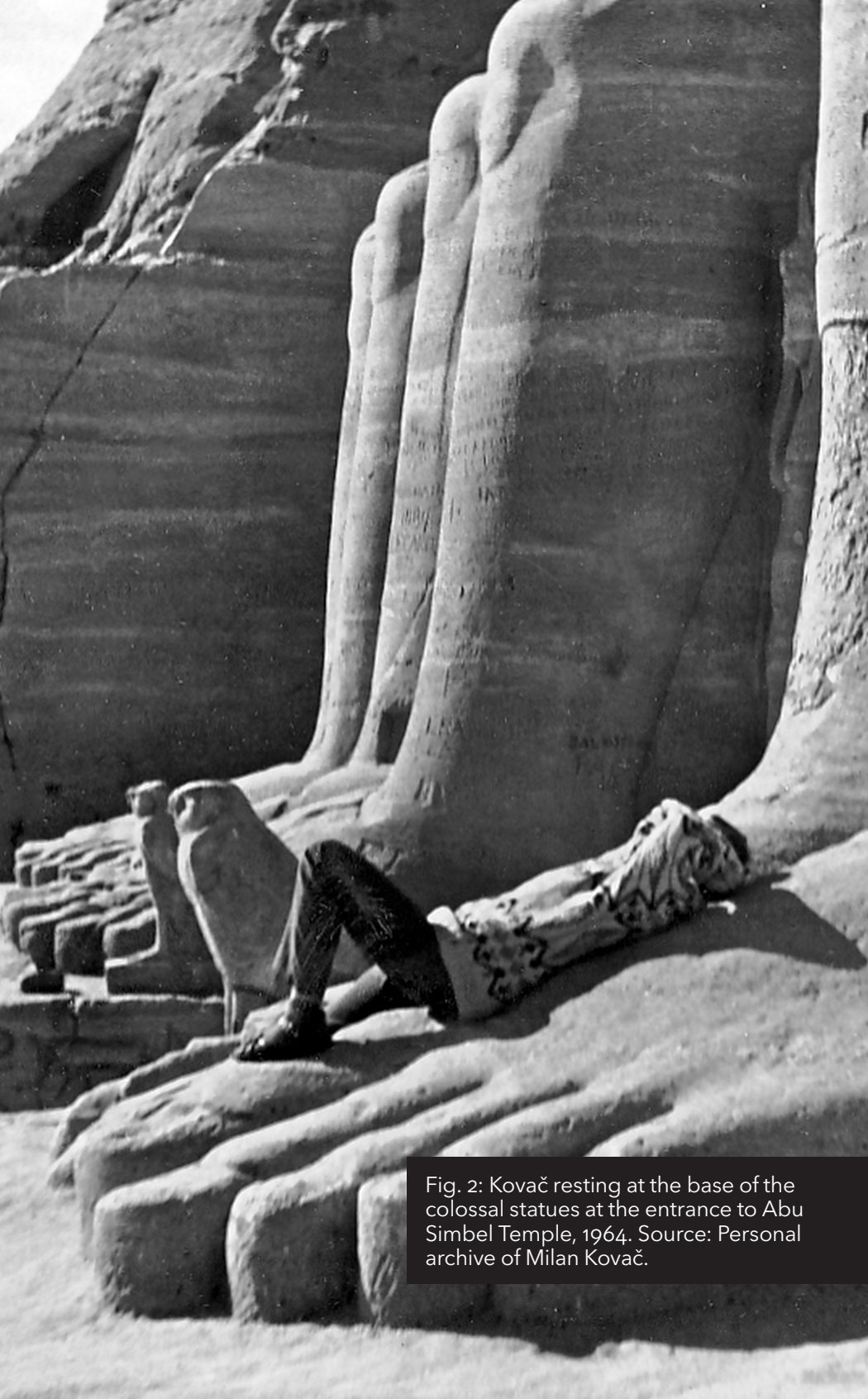


Fig. 2: Kovač resting at the base of the colossal statues at the entrance to Abu Simbel Temple, 1964. Source: Personal archive of Milan Kovač.

securing transportation because of their lack of funds. The captain of the Yugoslav ship refused to accommodate them on board due to their inability to pay the fare, compelling them to board a Turkish ship and exhaust their last remaining money. They traveled back to Yugoslavia by hitchhiking from Naples.

Upon returning home, Kovač completed his studies with a BA thesis titled "Urban Plan for the New Abu Simbel and Nubian Architecture."<sup>14</sup> Soon after graduating, he left Yugoslavia and began working in Sweden, establishing his architectural firm. He returned to Egypt in 1979 and remained there until 1988, dedicating his efforts to various projects to preserve ancient Egypt's cultural heritage.

## THE ACQUISITION OF COPTIC TEXTILES IN CAIRO

Kovač's acquisition of the collection of Coptic textiles is linked to both stopovers he and his friend made in Cairo on their way to Nubia and their return journey home. Upon their first arrival in Cairo on 27 December 1963, they remained in the city for only a brief period, eager to proceed southward. According to Kovač's recollection, while wandering through the city, they encountered a souvenir seller who led them to his shop. Among the displayed souvenirs were various antiques, including numerous fragments of Coptic textiles. This was a traditional antiques market permitted by the Egyptian heritage laws of the time. Kovač inquired about the price, finding it surprisingly low. However, as their journey had just begun, he promised the shopkeeper that he would return on his way back.

When Kovač returned from Nubia in late February 1964,<sup>15</sup> he was penniless. Upon arriving in Cairo, he had to withdraw a small amount of money sent from Sweden. He once again sought out the souvenir seller, though he no longer remembers the shop's location today. He recalls the highly disorganized shop, filled with scattered objects, ancient and modern.

According to the seller, the Coptic textiles had been discovered on an ancient rubbish dump in the Fustat area, Cairo's oldest hi-

14 Unfortunately, the thesis is not retained in the archive of the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana and is considered lost. Kovač published the only surviving parts, which deal with traditional Nubian architecture, in his autobiography *Utrinki arhitektove življenjske poti*, 102–104.

15 The exact dates of their second stay in Cairo, as well as their return journey from Alexandria to Naples, are not known.

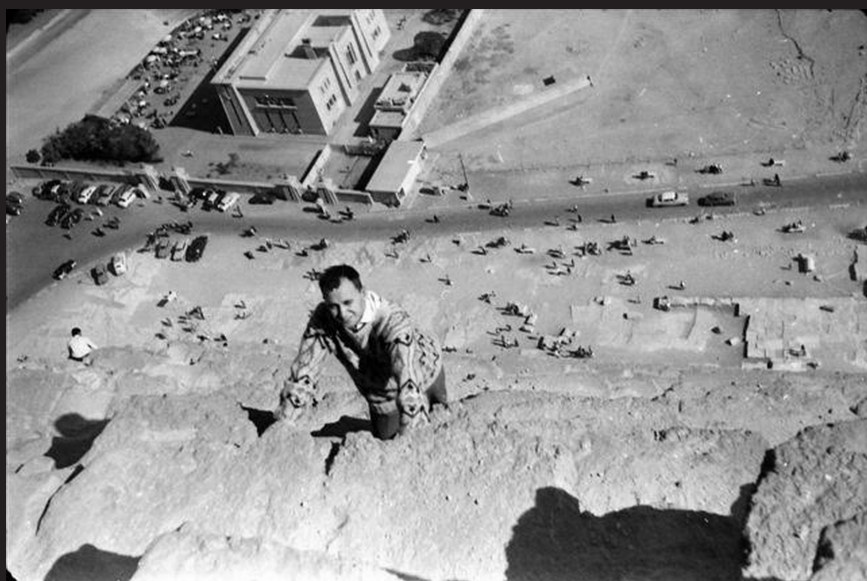


Fig. 3: Milan Kovač ascending the Great Pyramid of Giza, 1963. Source: Personal archive of Milan Kovač.



storic district and the first Islamic capital of Egypt, renowned for its archaeological significance and an important hub for textile production.<sup>16</sup> The mounds in the Fustat area served as rich sources of natural fertilizer and extensive landfill for the nearby swamps. The utilization of this natural resource began in the late 19th century, leading to the discovery of numerous historical artifacts and valuable relics. The seller claimed to have acquired numerous fabrics from this location, enabling him to offer them at a minimal cost due to the general lack of interest in Coptic textiles.

While the shop owner had larger specimens available, Kovač lacked the funds to purchase them, so he opted for the cheapest pieces, which were nevertheless diverse in ornamentation, colors, weaving techniques, and sizes. A revealing detail regarding the price is that Kovač recalls sacrificing a single lunch to acquire the entire collection.

At the time of purchase, Kovač regarded the textiles merely as souvenirs from Egypt and made no effort to verify their authenticity. Although he initially considered studying Coptic fabrics, he never had the time to pursue this interest further, nor did he ever have his collection examined by any textile specialist.

## STORAGE HISTORY AND PRESERVATION OF THE COLLECTION

After acquiring the collection, Kovač folded the fabrics, placed them in a bag, and carried them back home in a travel backpack. Since his return in 1964, he has stored his collection in a cupboard drawer in an unheated room. The textiles, piled on one another and separated by paper sheets, have remained untouched in this position for many years.

In the early 1990s, Milan Ropret, a photographer and Kovač's friend from university, provided cardboard folders of various sizes to accommodate the collection. These folders, the only conservation measurements taken, have served as the provisional storage solution for the textiles. At that time, Ropret photographed three textiles, as Kovač intended to use the reproductions as Easter cards. These photographs, taken three decades ago, hold potential value for comparing the preservation status back then with the present condition.

16 Bacharach, *Fustat Finds*, VII.



Fig. 4: General view of the Fustat area, where the textiles from Kovač's collection were presumably found. Photo by Jan Ciglencečki, 2024.



Fig. 5: The cardboard folders in which the collection of Coptic textiles was stored since the early 1990s. Photo by Jan Ciglencečki, 2024.

When Kovač was engaged in a restoration project for a Roman kiln at Ptuj,<sup>17</sup> he sought to arrange for the restoration of his textile collection at the specialized workshop in Ptuj, known for its expertise in textile conservation.<sup>18</sup> Regrettably, no agreement was reached, and the textiles have not undergone any conservation treatment since their purchase sixty years ago.

In spring 2023, the cardboard folders containing the textiles were relocated from the unheated storage room where they were kept for several decades to an apartment equipped with central heating. It was here that we had our first opportunity to examine the collection.

## FROM ANALYSIS TO CONSERVATION

The first research question that arose was related to the authentication of the collection. The reconstructed circumstances of its purchase in 1964 provide valuable clues, enabling us to assume its provenance to the Fustat area in historic Cairo. However, the claims made by the antiquities seller, based on the present owner's recollections from 60 years ago, need to be corroborated with further scientific analysis. The authentication of Coptic textiles, typically made of dyed linen or wool fibers, is a complex process from both historical and technical perspectives, requiring expertise in textile craftsmanship, art history, and scientific analysis.

When the collection becomes accessible, the research will explore techniques such as tapestry weaving, embroidery, and appliqué while meticulously examining design and stylistic elements.<sup>19</sup> On the textiles from Kovač's collection, these elements are marked by intricate patterns inspired by nature, geometric configurations, figural representations, or religious symbols such as crosses. Authentic pieces typically integrate these symbolic representations in a meaningful manner.

Without venturing into detailed analysis, it may be broadly asserted that the majority of textiles in Kovač's collection originate from garments. Much like the collection housed in the National Museum of Slovenia,<sup>20</sup> these artifacts exemplify a diverse array of weaves and

17 Kovač described his involvement in the restoration of the Roman kiln in his autobiography *Utrinki arhitektove življenjske poti*, 420–22.

18 The same restoration workshop in Ptuj was in 2019 responsible for the restoration and conservation of the Coptic textiles collection from the National Museum of Slovenia. Ileč, "Conservation of Coptic Textiles."

19 A summary of this is available in Han, "A Study on the Characteristics."

20 Ciglencečki et al., *Coptic Textiles from the Collection*, 189.

ornamental techniques traditionally associated with tunics, shawls, and upholstery.

With regard to color, the pieces in Kovač's collection can be categorized into monochrome, dichromatic, or polychrome groups. Among the tunic fragments are numerous examples of *clavi*, embellished with stylized vegetal, animal, or human motifs. The assemblage further encompasses *tabulae* adorned with geometric and floral patterns, as well as decorative bands and stripes. A damaged polychrome woolen portrait, circular in shape, stands out for its depiction of a human face – possibly Christ – encased within a stylized cross motif.

A comprehensive typological classification, accompanied by an analysis of weaving techniques, decorative characteristics, and dating derived from comparative analysis, will be undertaken following the completion of protective conservation measures. Investigating the material of the textiles will further illuminate the composition of materials used and their deterioration over time, particularly concerning burial and storage conditions. Both non-invasive and invasive scientific methods will be employed to identify the fibers and weaving techniques, determine the coloring materials, and diagnose the state of degradation. This will enable a comprehensive assessment of conservation needs for proper storage and exhibition, including fumigation, stabilization, cleaning, and consolidation. The textiles will undergo analysis, including microscopic investigations, hyperspectral imaging, X-ray fluorescence, infrared spectroscopy, analytical chemistry, and dating methods.<sup>21</sup>

A brief visual examination of Kovač's collection revealed that the textiles had suffered considerable damage. Numerous small fragments were scattered in the cardboard folders, and some larger pieces were at imminent risk of detaching completely. Upon opening the folders, we also noticed the presence of insects (specifically silverfish) visible to the naked eye.<sup>22</sup>

In preserving these valuable artifacts, urgent conservation is of crucial importance. The condition of the objects must be first assessed by examining signs of damage such as tears, stains, discoloration, insect damage, or mold infestation. Documenting the condition with detailed descriptions and photographs is important to create a conservation plan for proper treatment by qualified conservators using reversible methods. Many of the textiles from Kovač's collection are mechanically

21 For details on these procedures, see: Amin, "Technical Investigation."

22 Silverfish (*Lepisma saccharina*) are small insects that thrive in dark, humid environments and feed on starch-rich materials. For a recent overview of the problem, see Abdallah, "Insect Identification."



and structurally unstable, requiring urgent intervention to prevent further deterioration. This might involve consolidating loose threads or fibers, securing weak areas with stitching or glue, or providing support with backing materials. Gentle cleaning may be required to remove surface dirt, dust, or stains that could contribute to accelerated deterioration over time.

Maintaining optimal environmental conditions is crucial for textiles' long-term storage or display.<sup>23</sup> This includes ensuring stable humidity and temperature to avoid fluctuations that could result in biological infections or fiber degradation. Minimizing exposure to light, particularly ultraviolet (uv) radiation, is essential to prevent fading and degradation of dyes and fibers. Items should be stored in acid-free archival-grade materials such as tissue paper to protect them from environmental pollutants and physical damage.

These considerations will be crucial for formulating appropriate conservation strategies, procedures, and measures to meet the requirements for future exhibitions.

## TOWARDS THE EXHIBITION

The authors wish to conclude this paper by expressing profound gratitude to Mr. Milan Kovač for temporarily loaning his Coptic textiles collection to the University of Ljubljana. This generous act will facilitate further, more detailed research and analysis, thus supporting much-needed conservation and restoration efforts. The preservation measures outlined above are crucial for the work of the researchers, which will be facilitated through access projects at the Slovenian Node of the European Research Infrastructure for Heritage Science (E-RIHS.si) and the SloveNile: Slovenian-Egyptian Heritage Science Platform research group. As part of these activities, Kovač's collection of Coptic textiles will also serve educational purposes and provide students and young researchers from diverse disciplines with the unique opportunity to engage with the material culture of Christian Egypt.

Mr. Kovač's explicit wish is that his textile collection and other collections comprising archaeological, photographic, and valuable documentary materials ultimately find a home in a museum. Displayed collectively as the "Private Collection of Milan Kovač," such an exhibition would stand as a testament to his enduring legacy and commitment to preserving the world's cultural heritage.

23 Elnaggar et al., "Risk analysis for preventive conservation."

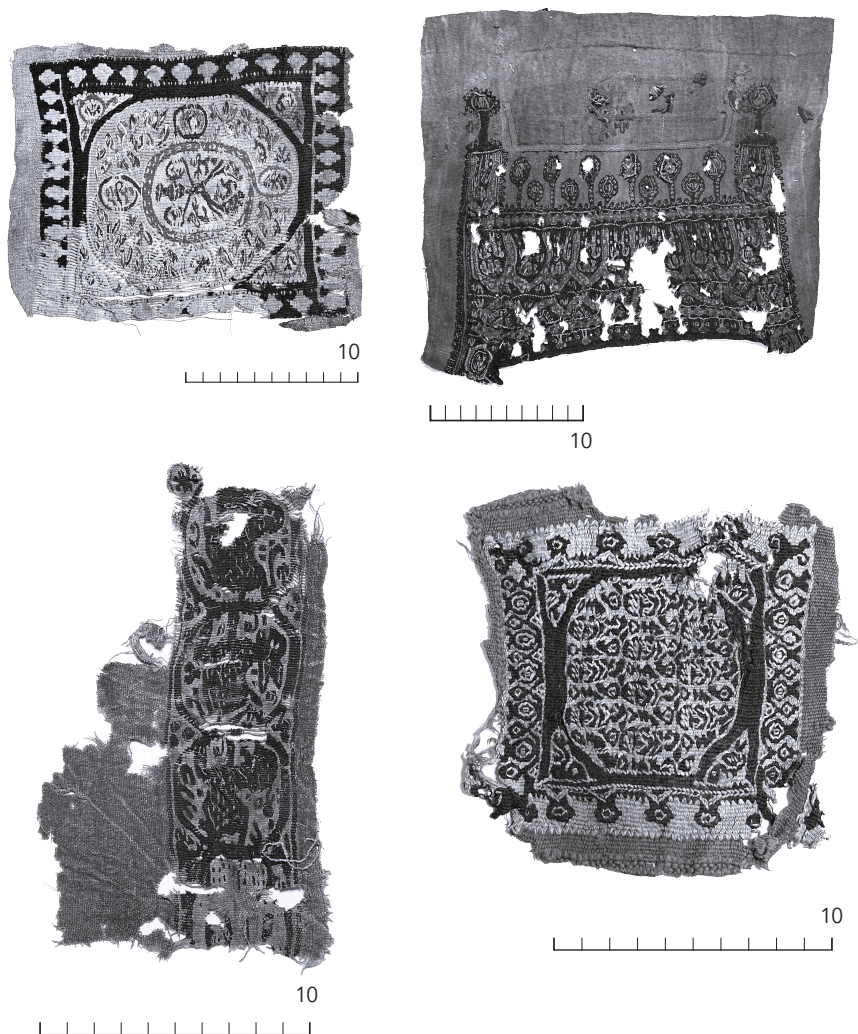
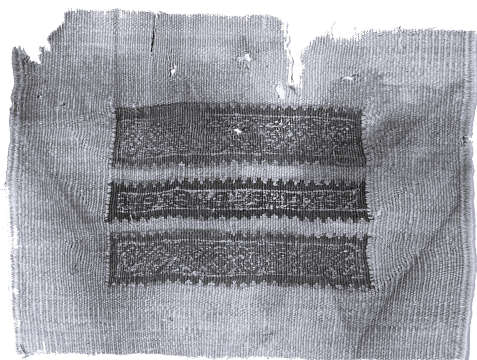


Fig. 6: Milan Kovač's collection of Coptic textiles – visual documentation. The Coptic textiles from Kovač's private collection presented here were photographed in the same order as found in the unnumbered folders, without any particular rearrangement. Smaller pieces are not included in the photographic documentation provided. Further analysis is necessary to match detached fabrics, determine the precise sizes of each piece, and identify the materials used and the weaving techniques employed. Following this, a new numbering system will be introduced in the catalog.



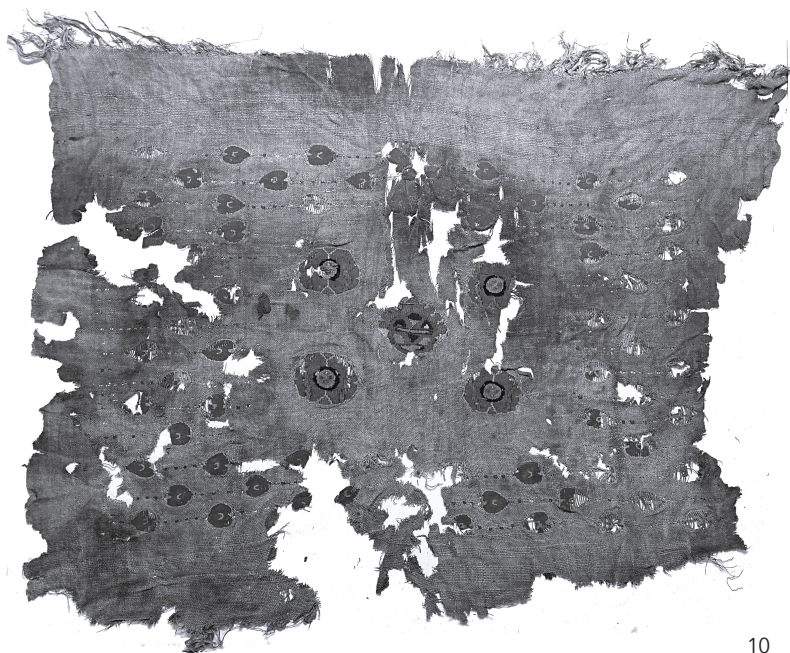




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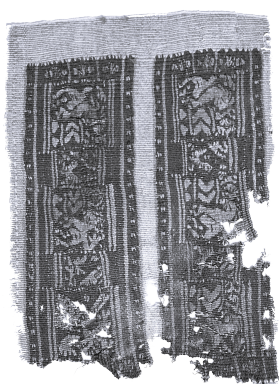
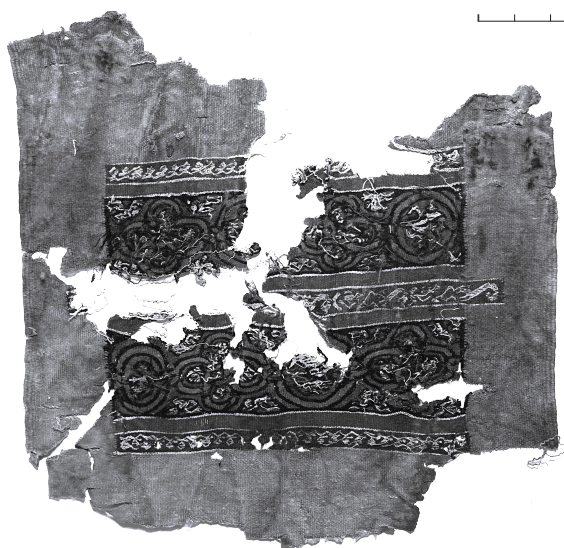
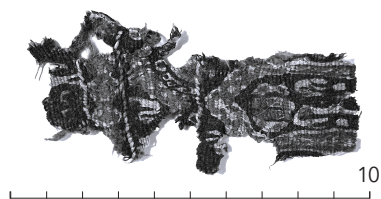


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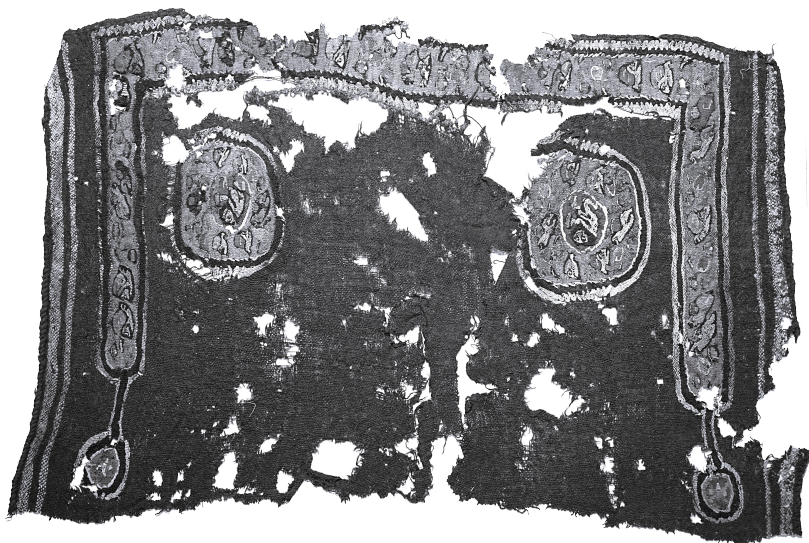
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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the purchase and preservation history of a previously unknown collection of Coptic textiles from the private holdings of architect Milan Kovač (b. 1940). Acquired during Kovač's study trip to Egypt and Sudan in 1964, the textiles were obtained from a souvenir seller he met while wandering around Cairo. The seller claimed they originated from an ancient rubbish dump in the Fustat area, Cairo's oldest historic district and the first Islamic capital of Egypt, renowned for its archaeological significance and as an important hub for textile production. The collection of Coptic textiles that Kovač has held in private possession for six decades has undergone minimal conservation efforts and remains in urgent need of restoration. The article outlines the collection's authentication, analysis, and conservation plans. The paper concludes with the first-ever publication of photographs of the entire collection.

**KEYWORDS:** Coptic textiles, Christian Egypt, private collections, Milan Kovač, Fustat

Koptske tkanine iz zasebne zbirke arhitekta Milana Kovača

## IZVLEČEK

Članek poskuša rekonstruirati okoliščine nakupa in zgodovino hrambe prej neznane zbirke koptskih tkanin, ki se nahaja v zasebni lasti arhitekta Milana Kovača (r. 1940). Zbirko koptskih tkanin je Kovač leta 1964 med študijskim potovanjem po Egiptu in Sudanu kupil od prodajalca spominkov, ki ga je po naključju srečal med sprehajanjem po Kairu. Prodajalec je trdil, da so bile tkanine najdene na antičnem smetišču v Fustatu, zgodovinski četrti starega Kaira in najstarejši islamski prestolnici Egipta, ki je bil pomembno središče za proizvodnjo tkanin. Zbirka koptskih tkanin, ki je v Kovačevi lasti že šest desetletij, je bila deležna le minimalne zaščite in jo je nujno temeljito restavrirati. Članek obravnava načrte za avtentifikacijo, analizo in nadaljnjo hrambo zbirke. Članek zaokroža prva objava fotografij celotne zbirke.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** koptske tkanine, krščanski Egipt, zasebne zbirke, Milan Kovač, Fustat