

# "The story of Irene Tomedi, restorer of the Shroud: "A great emotion and a great responsibility"

Article by Irene Argentiero – SIR Agenzia d'informazione – April 15, 2022

\*25 years after the fire that, on the night between 11 and 12 April 1997, burned in the Guarini Chapel - where the Holy Shroud was kept in a silver case, I met Irene Tomedi in her laboratory in Bolzano. She still remembers the emotion: "I was aware of the great responsibility that had been entrusted to us. Hence my fear"

"Seeing him there, in front of me, I felt a great emotion as great was the fear of touching him".

Irene Tomedi looks at her hands, while her mind goes back to the evening of June 20, 2002. 20 years have passed since Mechthild Flury Lemberg called her to restore the Sacra Shroud.

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In the room, illuminated by large skylights and a series of neon lights, there are two large tables, one of which is made of glass, a precision scale, cabinets and drawers, shelves on which voluminous binders are arranged, a tailor's mannequin, needles, thread, fabric samples, precision lamps and then a sink, ampoules of different sizes and an electric stove.

*Entering Irene Tomedi's laboratory is like entering a sort of operating room. Here the most ancient and fragile fabrics are "treated" and restored to their original splendor.*

Respecting their history and their nature. Since 1983.

Born in Bolzano, Tomedi - who today is one of the most renowned textile restorers in Italy (and beyond) - after attending the art institute in Ortisei, decided to devote herself to restoration. "My desire was to deal with canvases and frescoes, but the then

superintendent of cultural heritage Karl Wolfsgruber told me that there were already too many experts in that field - she says - while there were no textile restorers in the province. I therefore attended the only school of this type active at that time, namely that of the Abegg Foundation, in Riggisberg, Switzerland. After a three-month course dedicated to weaving techniques, I started studying with Mechthild Flury Lemberg". *And it is precisely in the Flury Lemberg laboratory that Tomedi has begun to cultivate what is a real vocation more than a profession.* Because an ancient fabric is not just an object to be preserved from the signs of time, but it is something that - in the intertwining of weft and warp - contains pages of history, faces of people, fragments of life. The reconstruction of weaves of warp and weft becomes, then, a work of research and care that goes well beyond simple restoration techniques. *It is a way to restore life to fabrics and, through them, to the stories they are the custodians of.*

This Irene Tomedi learned from her first year of studies, when she worked on the restoration of the 13th century half silk sheets, with which the coffin of St. Francis was wrapped. Two years later, in 1983, in the laboratory of the Abegg Tomedi Foundation she worked on the restoration of the chasuble of Saint Anthony of Padua. "Saint Anthony - she says - was canonized thirty years after his death and on that occasion his body was exhumed and placed in a chasuble. In 1981, on the occasion of the reconnaissance and exposition of the remains of the saint's body, the chasuble, made of red shamite (silk) with Sicilian braids and gold threads, was found. It had been cut into four parts, one of which had disappeared. The fragments had been used to wrap the wraps of the cassock, bones and remains of the saint's body.

*In 2002 Tomedi was called by Flury Lemberg to assist her in the restoration of the Shroud.* A conservative intervention, based on what had been carried out by the Poor Clares of Chambery in 1534, following the fire that broke out on the night between 3 and 4 December 1532, when the chapel in which the Shroud was kept went up in flames and the reliquary that contained the Holy linen was engulfed in flames. A few drops of molten silver fell on the fabric, burning it in several places.

*That of 1532 was not the only fire that endangered the Shroud.* About ten days had passed since Easter 1997, when in the night between Friday 11 and Saturday 12 April a raging fire broke out in the Turin cathedral, affecting a wing of the royal palace and destroying the Guarini chapel, which had housed the Shroud since 1694. The images of the fireman Mario Trematore who shatters the bulletproof glass case with a club, takes out the wooden and silver reliquary containing the Shroud, loads it on his shoulder and goes out, together with his colleagues from the burning cathedral.

On that occasion the Shroud did not suffer any damage. The fire of 1997, however, accelerated the decision to restore the Sacred Linen, an operation that the Conservation Commission had been discussing and thinking about for several years.

The task, which was entrusted to Mechthild Flury Lemberg and Irene Tomedi, was to remove the patches and the Holland cloth lining that had been applied by the Poor Clares in 1534, to then anchor the Shroud on a new lining, stopped by a invisible seam with silk threads.

*“The restoration was necessary because, over time, the fabric continued to burn- explains Tomedi. It is a chemical process. The oxygen present in the air continued to fuel the combustion of the tissue. In some places we found that the burn had also gone beyond the patches that the Poor Clares had applied in 1534”.*

The restoration of the Shroud lasted just over a month, from the evening of Thursday 20 June to the evening of Tuesday 23 July 2002.

“These were days of intense work - remembers Tomedi. Everything that has been removed has been cataloged and stored in special slides. The Holland cloth, every single patch, as well as the burnt fiber that was sucked up by the linen was placed in systematically labeled containers”.

*To document, every day, down to the smallest detail, the work of Tomedi and Flury Lemberg was sr. M. Chiara Antonini, secretary of the Commission for the conservation of the Shroud.”* He didn't leave us for a moment, he was always there, next to us, with his notebook, in which he wrote down our every single movement”, recalls Tomedi.

Once all the patches and burned parts had been removed, the Shroud was photographed and examined thanks to a video microscope made available by Tomedi. In the third phase of the restoration the Shroud was fixed on a new lining. The cloth, a raw linen, was donated by Flury Lemberg. Her father had bought it some fifty years earlier in Holland (once again a 'Dutch cloth', like the one used by the Poor Clares of Chambery). Washed several times to defrost it and to restore its softness, the cloth has been left in its natural color, an intense ivory.

“All the seams - explains Tomedi - were made with two-ply silk thread. A natural fiber, silk, resistant, which does not damage the linen fiber of the Shroud. *A linen that has a particular herringbone pattern, which I found a few years later during the restoration of some leggings like gaiters, dating back to 700 BC ”.*

While she talks to us about the silk thread he approaches a cabinet and, in a drawer, shows us many colored braids. They almost look like hair. “The silk thread - she explains - is bought in skeins. Then you need to untangle and weave it, so as to facilitate the work of the seam. It is an operation that requires a lot of patience and a lot of precision”. How much patience and precision requires dyeing the thread. “The silk thread is then dyed in the same color as the fabric we are going to sew - continues Tomedi. *We did the same for the Shroud as well. We found the right shade of color and dyed the silk thread”.* For each shade of color there is the corresponding "recipe". This can be understood by looking at the large binder in which Tomedi has collected

the various samples with their respective weights over the years. We think in milligrams and for this you need a precision slingbar. A slight variation risks ruining the success of the work.

“The seams - adds Tomedi - were all made flat. The various parts of the Sacred Linen were stopped with special weights and the seams were made with curved needles”. While talking about him she shows us one of the leads he uses in his laboratory, which also acts as a pin cushion for a series of needles, as fine as hair, in which it is difficult to see the eye with the naked eye. “This - she says, taking one in his hand - is for example a surgical needle”.

Listening to Irene Tomedi talking about the restoration of the Shroud one is fascinated. Twenty years have passed, but through her words it is like returning to the "new sacristy" of the Turin cathedral, where the works took place. Among the many, there is one question that stands out above the others.

**“Is the Shroud true? Personally, I am of the opinion that it is true.**

They tried in a thousand ways to imitate it but they never succeeded. I have analyzed the individual fibers of the fabric under a microscope and there is no trace of color. Nothing. It's just linen. Under the microscope you can't even see the difference of the burn”.

Irene Tomedi is today the "doctor" of the Shroud. She is contacted whenever some minor change is recorded (due to subtle changes in humidity) or she has to be pulled out of her case - where she is currently stored with argon gas - for an ostension. “To protect the Shroud even more, the optimal solution - she concludes Tomedi - would be to keep it in a horizontal position, even during the ostensions. Lying on a support, without fixings. This would protect the fabric, which in itself is very delicate, from moving display cases and variations in temperature and humidity”.