

OXFORD ASIAN TEXTILE GROUP

Newsletter No. 5

November 1996

ASIAN EMBROIDERIES

On Saturday September 7th twelve of us gathered at Sheila Paine's house for a day of goodies. Sheila welcomed us over coffee in her dining-room and presented the order of the day. Around us were a display of hats from various parts of Asia, and the famous dress which had set her off on her search for the Afghan amulet. Sheila spoke briefly about these and then took us into the sitting-room and did the same for the exhibits there, the highlight being a gorgeous marriage canopy from Gujarat.

We then divided into two groups and one browsed unattended around the ground floor rooms while Sheila took the other upstairs to give a "gallery talk" in one of the bedrooms, for the whole house had been turned into a museum for the day. She then left that group to study in detail the things she had described while she did the same for the other group, and this was the pattern of the day.

In the morning there were two bedrooms devoted to China - with a few examples from Japan - and one to Yemen. The Chinese examples included some embroidered shoes, pathetically small for the tiny, bound feet of women, mercifully a thing of the past. One pair was embroidered on the sole with emblematic scorpions as a protection against those nasty beasts. There were also some gorgeous robes, including a traditional dragon robe. One was embroidered round the border with the symbolic animals giving their names to the cycle of years; another with illustrations to the Chinese opera story of *The Western Chamber*. The differences in taste between the Chinese and the Japanese was clear; the Japanese embroidery was less precise, and one particularly attractive kimono combined rice-paste resist painting with embroidery in satin, long-and-short stitch and couching to produce a free-flowing scene of quails and flowers beside a stream. The coarse Japanese fisherman's jacket was a complete contrast.

The small country of the Yemen is divided into three quite different types of terrain - the hot coastal area, the central highlands, and the eastern desert - each producing a different type of textile and costume. The cut of garments in the coastal area is influenced by Africa, but the embroidery is Yemen's own, with black, gold and white being the predominant colours. Decorated with applied white and silver braid they can be very striking. The women buy the silks for the braid, make it at home, and then sell it back for others to use in making up the garments. In the highland region the embroidery is close packed and the fabric burnished by being beaten with stones.

On the top floor one room was devoted to India and the larger one to Pakistan. We finished the morning session with a visit to the former, where there was a great variety of

material. Perhaps the most gruesome exhibit was a Naga killing shawl of the kind which warriors wore when they went on head-hunting expeditions. Circular motifs of applied cowrie shells represented the nights of the full moon, and small squares embroidered in red represented the feasts that followed when the men returned with heads. By contrast, the delicate Chikan whitework was first made to supply the European market and only later used for the exquisite Indian men's coats of transparent muslin with sequins stitched between the layers. The most labour-intensive piece was undoubtedly the 1930s European-style dress, probably made for a memsahib by her local dressmaker, embroidered all over in intricate floral patterns, blue on white, in imitation of a Manchester printed cotton.

We relaxed and chatted over our packed lunches while Sheila was busy upstairs dismantling the three rooms on the first floor of their Chinese and Yemeni exhibits and assembling in their place selections of exhibits from Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran.

After lunch we repeated the two-group exercise in the re-arranged rooms. The central exhibit in the Central Asian room was an Uzbek embroidered bedspread which was particularly interesting because the large centrepiece was in the style of Tashkent while the border was from Bukhara. The range of items in the Afghan room included a cover for a kalashnikov, a beautifully embroidered symbol of life covering an instrument of death. There was also whitework from Kandahar of a fineness to rival any in the world. At the other extreme was a jacket for a two-year-old boy so heavily laden with amulets in the form of bottle-tops, keys and anything else that would dazzle and jangle to frighten away the evil spirits that the poor child must have been hardly able to move for the weight.

Finally we all came together again in the large room at the top of the house where Sheila introduced her extensive collection of embroideries from Pakistan. A wide range of objects was on show: dresses and trousers for women, gun covers and scarves for the men, jackets for small boys, and hats for all, as well as cushion covers and domestic furnishings. There were examples of the amulet that set Sheila off on her travels in search of its origins, travels that led her eventually to the Palas valley, off the Karokoram Highway and perhaps the most remote and inaccessible part of the country. Amulets were everywhere and, as in Afghanistan, all sorts of things were used. Evil spirits are thought to enter through the seams of garments as well as around the edges, but bright colours and jangly things will keep them out. The differences in style and motif from one part of Pakistan to another was very marked, though they are perhaps lessening as more of the modern world creeps in. Acrylic threads, for example, are now commonly used, and the waste-bins of a material society yield surprising finds for use as amulets or decoration - a jacket, for example, was edged with teeth from zip fasteners without any possibility of one edge engaging another.

Altogether it was a wonderful day. Those of you who were not able to be there may get something of the flavour from Sheila's books, especially her *Embroidered Textiles: Traditional Patterns from Five Continents* (Thames & Hudson, 1990), which contains coloured illustrations of many of the pieces we saw, and *Chikan Embroidery: the Floral Whitework of India* (Shire, 1989). *The Afghan Amulet* (Penguin, 1994) tells the often hair-raising story of her travels in search of the amulet, and I understand she has another book continuing her travels in Central Asia appearing next spring.

Phyllis Nye

Our Events for Winter 1996/97: Please Come

Friday December 13th at 5 p.m.

**Lecture by Stephanie Bunn
Central Asian Felts from Kyrgyzstan**

**at the Pitt Rivers Museum Seminar Room
64 Banbury Road**

The lecture will be followed by seasonal refreshments.

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Wednesday January 29th at 5 p.m.

**Lecture by Betsy Sterling Benjamin
Buddha's Cloth: The History of Japanese Resist Textiles**

**at the Pauling Humanities Centre
58 Banbury Road**

Stephanie Bunn is doing research on Central Asian felts and has been collecting them for the Museum of Mankind where they will be on show from March next year (more about this in the next Newsletter).

Betsy Sterling Benjamin has been living, studying textiles and lecturing in Kyoto for several years.

Neither venue has an official car park, but parking is possible on the roads round about. Anyone needing a map to find the locations, please apply to the Programme Secretary, Felicity Wood, 2 Frenchay Road, Oxford, OX2 6TG, tel. 01865 554281

Meetings are free to members, but non-members are asked to pay £1.

NEW MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Perhaps the most exciting news comes from Australia, where the strong interest in textiles throughout the continent has highlighted the need for a museum to create a focus for textile-related activities nationally. Although there are textile collections in many Australian museums, there is no single institution which has textiles as its focus. The new National Textile Museum of Australia, now being developed, will address this need by building a collection and drawing together textiles which will be available for study and exhibition. The Museum will be situated at Urrbrae House on the Waite Campus of the University of Adelaide, a historic building surrounded by beautiful rose gardens and an arboretum and with views over Adelaide.

Exhibitions will show how textiles reflect the artistic, cultural and technological heritage of people from many parts of the world. The Museum plans to supplement these with lectures by local and international textile specialists. There will also be seminars and workshops to provide a forum for the scholarly study of specific aspects of textiles; and a library will be established and an information service developed to promote textile activities and form links between practitioners and interested people throughout Australia and beyond.

As yet there is no indication of when the Museum will be opening, but a Museum Society is already in existence and inaugural membership (A.\$30) will run until June 30 1997. Further information can be obtained from the National Textile Museum of Australia, Urrbrae House, University of Adelaide, Waite Campus, Fullarton Road, Urrbrae, South Australia, 5064.

Meanwhile, in Berlin there opened in January a new national Museum of Indian Art, intended to be a centre for the preservation of and scientific research into Indian, Southern and Central Asian art in Germany. Previously the art section of the Museum of Cultural Anthropology, established in Berlin in 1873, had held a substantial body of works of art from the area, but the enormous amount of material in the Museum made the hiving off of the Indian collections desirable. The new museum houses about 12,000 artefacts of all kinds, including valuable works of textile art under the patronage of princely India, and tapestries from eastern Turkistan. The library contains some 13,500 books and bound journals, which place it among the most important resources for the study of Asian art in Germany.

Closer to home, the new permanent gallery of Middle Eastern and Indian art in the Royal Museum of Scotland has been open for rather more than a year now, and those of you who may find yourselves within striking distance of Edinburgh are urged to go and see it. It is very strongly textile oriented, with not only many textile examples, but with groups of exhibits showing how textile design influenced other arts, notably calligraphy and book illumination. (Publication of Jennifer Scarce's book accompanying the new displays, *Domestic Culture in the Middle East*, mentioned in the last newsletter, was delayed, but should be available by now.)

Another new gallery opened last month in the same museum, the Ivy Wu Gallery of Far Eastern Art, named after the wife of the benefactor, a Hong Kong businessman, who made the venture possible. The permanent exhibition is divided into areas on China, Japan

and Korea, emphasizing the cultural differences between the three countries, differences which are not always perceived in the West, and there is also a temporary exhibition area. Textiles on view include Japanese *fukusa* (gift wraps) and kimonos, and an important collection of Qing court dress from 19th century China, including a general's military outfit.

Lastly, at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, after a complete three-year renovation programme, the new South Wing opened to the public in April. Almost the entire ground floor is devoted to Asian art. In eight new rooms, designed by Manfred Kausen, some 500 Buddhas, screens, scroll paintings and items of jewellery are displayed. In the new presentation a deliberate choice has been made not to categorize the exhibits according to geographical area, but to divide the whole collection into sculpture, painting, and the decorative arts. The new division has major advantages; the three categories fit well into the new interior, and it is exciting to be able to see and compare the same art forms from different countries,

Phyllis Nye

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

I do enjoy receiving the O.A.T.G. Newsletter, and thought you might like to know of our latest activities: a very successful textile seminar and exhibition in Adelaide on *Woven Magic: Indian Textiles and their Influence in South East Asia*. Indian cloths were exhibited and complemented by rare textiles from Cambodia and Indonesia, including cotton and silk ikats from Bali, collected between 1973 and 1980, and recently acquired silk ikats from Cambodia.

Our textile study group, which meets monthly, continues to attract a solid core of at least twenty-five people. Next year we plan to have two seminars, one in June in conjunction with the N.S.W. Art Gallery on Indian textiles, and one in September in conjunction with the Powerhouse Museum, but all under the umbrella of the Asian Arts Society of Australia*.

Any further news I will forward; you never know when one of you might visit Australia!

Regards,

Dee Court

2A Keston Avenue, Mosman, N.S.W., 2088

*For further information about this group, see Newsletter no.4 (June 1996) p.9 (Ed.)

Dear Editor,

If any members are likely to visit Edinburgh, perhaps I could offer tea/coffee and conversation about textiles? My particular interests are in the Domestic Embroidery of Uzbekistan, on which I have written an article for the Burrell Collection (based on their textiles and my research in Uzbekistan).

Yours sincerely,
Aldyth Cadoux

27 Gayfield Square, Edinburgh, EH1 3PA 9Tel. 0131 556 9582)

DIARY

November 13th

Gallery talk, *Motifs in Korean Art*, by Elizabeth Wilkinson, 2.30 p.m. at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Meet near the information desk inside the Cromwell Road entrance.

November 22-24

A week-end course on *Oriental Carpets*, held in conjunction with the Oriental Rug and Textile Society of Great Britain, will be held at Wansfell College, Theydon Bois, Epping, Essex, CM 16 7LF. Illustrated lectures and other sessions will provide the opportunity for students to gain, or increase, awareness of the origins, designs and structure of carpets. Full fee £81, single room supplement £8. For further information, or to enrol, please contact the Enrolment Secretary at the College.

January 7 1997

For some months the Victoria and Albert Museum has had to suspend its opinions and appointments services in the Indian and South-East Asian collection while the reserve collection was being rehoused. Both services will recommence on this date,

January 31

Richard Blurton will be speaking on *Painted South Indian Cloths* to the Indian Art Circle at 6.30 p.m. in the main lecture theatre of the School of Oriental and African Studies. For further information about the Circle and its programme contact the Department of Art and Archaeology at S.O, A.S., Thournhaugh Street, off Russell Square, London WC1H OXG.

ASIAN ARTS COURSE

The Victoria and Albert Museum has been running a course on *East Asia: The Arts of China, Korea and Japan* on Wednesday evenings from 18.45 to 20.45 since September. It is obviously too late for anyone to book into the full course, but members may like to know that it is possible to enrol for individual sessions at £22 per time (concessions available). The programme for the remaining sessions is as follows:

November 6 - Korea: Domestic Spheres and Private Lives (including the decoration of the home in the 19th century and aspects of traditional Korean weddings).

November 13, 20 and 27 - are devoted to the arts of Japan

December 4 - Students will have the opportunity to handle objects from the Museum's East Asian collections, under the guidance of curatorial staff.

December 11 The work of modern artists in the three countries, followed by a panel discussion with a variety of experts in East Asian art and design.

Bookings must be made through the V. & A. Box Office at the Exhibition Road entrance to the Museum or by telephone (with credit card) on 0171 938 8407.

EXHIBITIONS AT HOME

Pitt Rivers Museum

Glimpses of Kyoto Life; Japanese Arts and Crafts from the John Lowe Collection, a selection of late twentieth century objects from the collection of a well-known writer on Japanese culture, will be on display from Friday November 1 until September 1997.

Victoria and Albert Museum

A small exhibition under the title *Good Taste and True Principles* is on display until February 16 1997. The display features the Museum's earliest textile acquisitions, a group of fabrics from Algeria, Tunisia, Turkey and Syria bought at the Great Exhibition of 1851 and shortly afterwards.

Liverpool Museum

Those of you who missed the exhibition *Power and Gold* when it was on in Edinburgh will be pleased to learn that it has recently opened in Liverpool and will be on show until April 13 1997. The exhibition consists of jewellery made of gold or silver, cloth, mother-of-

pearl and other natural materials from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, complemented by a display of textiles, which are often given in exchange for metal items. At this venue there will be additional material from Liverpool Museum's own collections from the island of Borneo, which will be on display for the first time, including clothing, jewellery and other items. Further information may be obtained from the Museum, William Brown Street, Liverpool, L3 SEN, Tel, 0151 478 4399.

EXHIBITIONS ABROAD

National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden

An exhibition of Islamic textiles, entitled *Veils Unveiled* is now showing and will continue until May 19 1997. The Museum is at Steenstraat 1, a five-minute walk from Leiden Railway Station. Tel. 071 5168800.

Museum of Ethnology, Rotterdam

Dreams of Paradise, an exhibition of Islamic art, including textiles, is now showing and continues until January 5 1997

An exhibition, *2000 Years of the Silk Route*, will take place from February 15 to August 10 1997. The textiles on show will probably include three of the coats from the Shaw collection at the Ashmolean Museum.

The address of the Museum is Willemskade 25, Rotterdam, Tel. 010 4111055.

Bavarian National Museum, Munich

From China to Byzantium, a selection of early Mediaeval silks from the Hermitage, St Petersburg, is now on show and will continue until January 26 1997. The museum is at Prinzregentstrasse 3, Munich, Tel. 089/ 21 12 42 16.

The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C,

Suzani: Embroideries from the Oases of Central Asia, embroideries mainly from the khanates of Bukhara and Kokand made at home as part of a girl's trousseau.

Symmetry and Pattern: The Art of Oriental Carpets.

Both exhibitions are already on and continue until February 23 1997. They are accompanied by a programme of talks and other events. The Textile Museum is at 2320 S. Street, N.W., Tel. (202) 667-0441

PUBLICATIONS

Riboud, Krishna et al., *Chinese Buddhist Silks/Soieries Bouddhiques Chinoises, 14th - 18th century*, A.E.D.T.A. 1996, 26 Plates, 16 Macrophotos, 42x29,5cm. Text in French and English. Bibliography. ISBN 2-908864-08-8. 375 FF + postage. This is the second volume in the Portfolio AEDTA Series, publishing textiles from the collection of the Paris-based Association pou l'Etude et la Documentation des Textiles d'Asie (the first one was about the Association's collection of Mughal textiles). The documentation is thorough, and the quality of photographs is superb. To order; write or fax to A.E.D.T.A., 60bis, avenue de Breteuil, 75007 Paris, France, Fax (33) 1-45672365.

Chenciner, Robert, *Kaitag, Textile An from Daghestan*, a publication of 171 embroidered panels from the Caucasus, attributed to the 16th to 19th century, A full catalogue and technical analysis of all pieces. London: Textile and Art Publications, 12 Queen Street, Mayfair W1X 7PL. 315x245mm, 208 pp, text, 80 colour plates, 180+ black and white illustrations. ISBN 1-898406-00-6. £75/\$125 incl. postage.

Gavin, Traude, *The Women's Warpath. Iban Ritual Fabrics from Borneo*. A comprehensive catalogue of Iban textile design and history, with a full discussion of the naming of patterns and their significance, beautifully produced and illustrated. Many of the photographs are the author's own, taken during her extensive research visits to the Iban of Sarawak. The catalogue was published for an exhibition recently held at the Fowler Museum, UCLA. Los Angeles, UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History (1996). 100 pp, 69 colour illustrations, 44 black and white illustrations. ISBN 0-930741-51-x. Softbound \$22.00 (also available in hardbound at \$ 40.00).

Asian Art and Culture, published three times a year by Oxford University Press in association with the Arthur M, Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institution, has devoted its Spring/summer issue 1996 to *Indian Textiles and Trade*. Contributions cover e.g. the Mughal embroidery trade, the Kashmir shawl, the *Patola* trade within India (to Kerala), and Indian textiles in Nigeria, as well as the ideological role of cloth in the Indian independence movement. As all issues, there are numerous illustrations, many in colour. ISBN 0-19 - 510708-x, Vol.IX, No. 2. Annual subscription to *Asian Art and Culture* is £30 or \$45; contact Oxford University Press Journals, 2001-Evans Road, Gary, NC 27513, USA. A subscription would be a perfect Christmas present for someone who enjoys reading articles about Asian art, but is put off by the huge bulk of advertisements found in the commercial journals!

Arts of Asia Volume 26, Number 1 (1996) is entirely devoted to the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., its history and collections of Eastern Hemisphere textiles (which means the Islamic and Asian collection). The single issue can be ordered from the book shop at the Textile Museum, 2320 S Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20008, USA, Fax 1-202-483-0994. \$12.50 plus postage.

OTHER SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

The Oriental Rug and Textile Group in Scotland -

- meets monthly on Wednesday evenings at 7,30 p.m. in the Hunter Building, Edinburgh College of Art, Lauriston Place, Edinburgh. The programme for this winter is; November 13, *South Asian Textiles in the Collections of Glasgow Museums* by Anne Lovelace; December 11, A.G.M. and *Show and Tell* session; January 15, *The Three Cs: Collecting, Collectors and Collections* by Keith Frost; February 5, *"Clothed in the Mysterious East": the Reception of Chinese Dress in the West* by Verity Wilson; March 12, *Embroideries of the Aegean: Ottoman. Turkish Influences on a Traditional Craft* by Carol Humphrey. For more information about O.R.T.G.S. please contact the Hon. Sec., Gavin Strachan, 8 Bellevue Crescent, Edinburgh, EH3 6ND (tel. (day) 0131 556 0606 or (evening) 0131 556 5034), or the Chairman, Jennifer Scarce, at the Royal Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh, EH1 1JF (tel, 0131 225 7534).

The Oriental Rug and Textile Society of Great Britain -

- holds monthly meetings at the School of Oriental and African Studies on Tuesdays at 6.30. The immediate programme is; November 12, *An Introduction to the Carpets and Textiles in the Buirell Collection* by Dr Ulrike al Khamis; December 10, *Weaving Techniques in Bag Faces* by Melanie Venes; January 14, *Some Rugs and Textiles in Islamic Painting* by Barbara Brend. The Society also organizes visits and other events, the next one being a weekend course on oriental carpets at Wansfell College (see above p. 6). Further information about the society can be obtained from the membership secretary, Ruth Bellairs, 7 Champion Grove, London, SE5 6BN.

The Textile Society -

- aims to unite scholars, designers, teachers, practitioners, artists, collectors and all who share an interest in any aspect of textiles. It is an active society, which organizes a number of events for its members throughout the year; visits to museums, private collections and centres of manufacture and design, study days and conferences. An annual event is the Antique Textile Fair ~ the next will be held on March 16 1997, The society has a study collections group open to all members, and administers an annual bursary scheme for students. The annual magazine, *Text*, contains short papers, reports, information about events, reviews, and international news and comment. Members also receive a newsletter twice a year. For further information and application form for membership apply to Mr Walter Bowyer, 173 Brettenham Road, Walthamstow, London, E175AX, enclosing S.A.E..

DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE - 11 FEBRUARY 1997

Please send contributions to
Phyllis Nye, Hewel Barn, Common Road, BECKLEY, Oxon, OX3 9UR
Tel/Fax 01865 351607