

# OXFORD ASIAN TEXTILE GROUP

Newsletter No. 6

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## INDIAN AND SOUTH-EAST ASIAN TEXTILES IN THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

The vast majority of textiles in the V. & A's Indian and South-East Asian department is from India itself, but there are substantial holdings from neighbouring countries. Textiles account for something like a sixth of the approximately 60,000 computer records for the whole Indian and South-East Asian collection. About 80 textiles are regularly on show in the Nehru Gallery, and the remainder of the 10,000 pieces (of which many are small fragments) can be seen by appointment in the Department's study room.

The V. & A's Indian textile collection is the largest and most comprehensive in the world, largely due to the collecting policies of 19th century curators. Large numbers of textiles of all types were acquired, often from the huge International Exhibitions of the 1850s and 60s, and in many cases these are the only surviving examples of textile types that have died out in the Sub-Continent itself. Much of this 19th century material is of a utilitarian nature acquired as specimens of contemporary Indian manufacture, and it is this component that makes the collection uniquely rich. The splendid Mughal velvets and embroideries, 18th century painted cotton chintzes, Kashmir shawls and folk embroideries for which the V. & A. is well known to-day only began to be collected significantly in the 20th century.

The V. & A's oldest Indian textiles are of the "Fustat" type - Western Indian printed cottons exported to Egypt - although their precise source is not known. Some of our pieces may be as early as the 13th century (by comparison with fragments excavated from Quseir al-Qadim) while others are probably 15th to 16th century. Other types of early Indian textiles are notoriously rare, mostly because the Indian climate is not conducive to their preservation, and many have been found in the drier climate of Tibet. The V. & A. has a small fragment of a Western Indian silk, probably from the 16th century, and a larger piece of Assamese silk of the same date, both found in Tibet. The important collection of Indian textiles made for the South-East Asian market may also contain some early pieces.

The Mughal period was incredibly rich in textile production, of which we have several magnificent examples. One of the greatest of these is the painted cotton floorspread, dating from about 1640, thought to have been made in the Deccan, probably at Golconda, at present "resting" after a very long period on display. Other major 17th century textiles include velvets used as floorspreads or hangings and embroidered *qanats* or portable screens. The exquisite chain-stitch silk embroidery favoured by the Mughal workshops is represented by a 17th century hunting coat minutely embroidered all over with animals and flowers, and a superb floorspread decorated with Mughal and European-inspired floral patterns. The same incredibly fine work, done with the traditional Gujarati leatherworker's awl as well as with

the needle, can be seen on the beautiful embroideries of the 17th and 18th centuries made for export to Europe.

The fine collection of domestic embroidery from Gujarat, using the same materials and techniques as the Mughal pieces and often embellished with mirrors, is one of the most frequently consulted sections of the reserve collection. It is rivalled in popularity by the Kashmir shawls. Immensely fashionable at the Mughal court, these finely woven goat-hair shawls retained their popularity until the late 19th century, although by that time the patrons were mostly European ladies rather than Mughal nobles. The V. & A. has some important and very beautiful, early fragments of 17th century Kashmir shawls and a few whole shawls from the 18th century, but most are from the 19th century and made for the European market.

The Museum's collection of painted cotton textiles (chintz) for the European market is perhaps the world's finest, largely as a result of G.P.Baker's generous gift in 1950. The collection, mainly dating from the 18th century, includes large bed-covers and wall-hangings as well as dresses and skirts made for English and Dutch ladies, and some fascinating pieces made for Armenian churches, decorated with Christian images. The extent of the Baker gift - over 60 pieces - ensures that several examples are always on view in the Nehru Gallery.

Indigenous embroidery traditions are very well represented, especially those of Western India and Sindh (now in Pakistan), and the embroidered dresses from Baluchistan are the finest of their type. There are also significant holdings of *phulkari* embroidery from the Punjab plains and embroidered coverlets (*rumal*) from the Punjab hills, including a superb 18th century example depicting the mythical battle of Kurukshetra, which is 9.5 metres long. The *kanthas* of Bengal are, surprisingly, somewhat under-represented, but the collection of fine *chikan* work from Lucknow is excellent. There are sizeable holdings of other types of textiles and whole costumes.

While the other geographical areas are less comprehensively covered than India, there are nevertheless several areas of strength. The Javanese batik collection is extensive and still growing; we have some early (1851) silk ikats from mainland South-East Asia, as well as a good selection of Indonesian weavings and ikats. Burma is represented by some impressive *kalaga* (appliqué hangings), fine woven silks (*luntaya*) and tribal costume pieces. In the Himalayan area, the Tibetan collection includes costumes of a monk and an abbot, most of a ritual dance costume (the striking apron with appliqué mask is on display), and a huge 18th century embroidered and applied *thangka*. The highlights of the Nepalese textile collection are two early embroideries, while Bhutan is represented by an elaborate throne-cover, several woven *kiras*, tablet-woven bands and some pieces given by Sir Charles Bell on his expedition there in 1910.

At present it is impossible to display more than a tiny fraction of the collection, but there will be a chance to see about 100 of our Pakistani textiles, along with loans from Pakistani and U.K. collections, in the exhibition *Colours of the Indus: Costume and Textiles of Pakistan*, to be held at the V. & A. from October 1997 to January 1998.

Rosemary Crill Indian & S.E.Asian  
Department, V. & A.

**PROGRAMME**

Thursday 13th March at 7.30 p.m.

**Christopher Legge, Oriental Carpets, Oakthorpe Road,  
Summertown, Oxford.**

Christopher Legge has kindly invited us for an evening in his shop. He will talk about oriental carpets and show us his private collection. He says members will also be very welcome to bring their own pieces, either to show to the group or to ask him about.

MEMBERS ONLY - see below.

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Tuesday 20th May at 5 p.m. and 6 p.m.

Short business meeting to agree the future of the Group,  
followed at 6 p.m. by

**TEXTILE ENCOUNTERS:  
THE MINORITIES OF GHIZHOU PROVINCE, CHINA**  
by Deryn O'Connor  
formerly of the Surrey Institute of Art and Design, Farnham.

(Those coming to the lecture only are asked to wait outside the door until the business meeting is over. A charge of £1 is made to non-members.)

When the Oxford Asian Textile Group was first set up, our inaugural meeting included a memorable gallery talk by Sheila Paine, and for a while after this offers of seminar talks seemed to fall into our laps. Our *slightly* more formal plan now is to have three open lectures and three members only events each year. I should welcome suggestions for this programme.

I should also welcome suggestions for additions to my mailing list for poster distribution, and would like to hear from anyone who would be willing to pass on lecture information to other like-minded organizations. Publicity is important in a city like Oxford.

Those wanting a place on the visit to Christopher Legge are asked to send me their name, address and telephone number, and S.A.E. for confirmation of their place. Please do the same if you wish a map for getting to either venue.

Felicity Wood, Programme Secretary  
2 Frenchay Road, Oxford, OX2 6TG; phone/fax 01865 554281

## WORLD TEXTILE CENTRE FOR THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The Director of the British Museum announced in November that a donation of over £1m from the Clothworkers' Foundation would enable the creation of a World Textile Centre to occupy some 2,000 sq. metres on the first floor of the future British Museum Study Centre, opening in 1999 in New Oxford Street, within 200 metres of the main Museum. The textiles themselves will be housed in storage of the highest quality and there will be an area for short-term displays. Study and seminar rooms, workshops and other support areas will be provided for the reception and accommodation of visitors. The material itself will be stored in a unified space which will allow viewing of many of the textiles *in situ*. Visitors will be able to view all but the most delicate of the objects, and even those will be available by arrangement. A computerized database will provide enhanced access to the collections. In addition, there will be regular demonstrations by specialist conservators or work on organic materials, textiles and papyrus.

The centre will bring together for the first time some 18,000 textiles at present dispersed around the Museum's many departments. These collections span the Fayum Neolithic period in Egypt, around 5,000 B.C., to the present day, and objects range in size from complete costumes to ancient fragments of only a few square centimetres. They reflect a variety of domestic, ritual and ceremonial uses, and their design may have complex symbolic meanings. The largest collection is held by the Department of Ethnography, and there are also important archaeological groups, such as those from Egypt and the Andes, and historical items from mediaeval Europe and Asia.

As well as covering a vast geographical range and timespan, the textile collections include examples of a huge variety of materials and techniques. The term "textile" is used to identify both woven and non-woven fabrics and encompasses the full range of weaving, knotting, knitting, felting, matting, embroidery, applique, and similar techniques. A broad range of materials may be used to form textiles, including cotton, linen, silk, wool and modern synthetic fibres. More unusual animal and vegetable fibres, paper, skin, and even ivory, may also occur. Flat textiles may be as much as several metres long, or fragments of a few square centimetres, but many are three-dimensional, as with draped or tailored costume. They may incorporate metal threads and highly decorative elements, such as embroidery, bead and sequin work and applique, and can feature attachments of metal, leather, fur or feathers. Textiles also form parts of composite objects, such as armour or masks.

The oldest items are from Ancient Egypt and date back some 7,000 years. From the Stein collection is a group of fine paintings on silk from Chinese Central Asia, dating mainly from the 7th to 10th centuries A.D.. The ethnographic collection is one of the best of its kind in the world and is particularly strong in respect of Africa, the Americas, the Pacific Islands, the Middle East and South-East Asia. There are some 5,000 ethnographic textiles from Asia alone, including the Charles Hose collection from Borneo, South-East Asian cloths, and Ainu costume from Japan, as well as one of the finest collections of Palestine costumes in the world.

B.M. Press Office

## REPORTS ON O.A.T.G. MEETINGS

### Central Asian Felts from Kyrgyzstan

On 13 December we had a lecture from Stephanie Bunn on Central Asian felt making, accompanied by wonderful slides. Stephanie started her research on the Kyrgyz Yurt, the circular tent of Central Asian nomads, about eight years ago, and she is now writing it up for a Ph.D. at Manchester University. She first visited Kyrgyzstan in 1991, and she has returned for field work from 1994 onwards. She enthralled us with her enthusiasm and expertise, as she took us through the process of felt making and then elaborated on the designs of the large tent blankets. Traditionally the finest felt is made by a woman for her wedding; but although it is mostly women who produce the cloth, men may be involved as well. They may provide ideas for patterns, and they certainly are welcome to help with the laborious felting process.

Traditional Kyrgyz designs are based on scrolls that are cut out as negative/positive patterns, then fitted together to make exact complementary images. This is achieved by placing two felt blankets of different colour over each other, and then the design is cut out of both at once. The coloured patches are switched, and the result is a stunning exercise in complementarity. This means that for each felt rug or blanket there exists a twin with reversed colours. The complexity of designs thus created was a delight to see.

On this occasion we had to be satisfied with slide images of these wonderful textiles. However, Stephanie is preparing a major exhibition for the Museum of Mankind which will open later this year (see below p.7), to which we hope to arrange an outing.

Ruth Barnes

### Buddha's Cloth

Betsy Sterling Benjamin gave a most interesting and informative talk to the Group on 29th January on Japanese wax resist textiles - *rozome* - a technique in which she is both a researcher and a practitioner.

She began by tracing the earliest known examples of the technique, first found in the Crimea about the fourth century B.C.. The examples shown were on wool or linen, using natural dyes such as indigo and rust, and were either block printed with repeat floral motifs or drawn freehand to show mythological subjects. One of the oldest showed a female deity from a Turkic tribe and dated from the first century A.D.. Another, a Coptic cloth from the fifth or sixth century A.D., showed a combination of Christian and pagan themes. The resist technique is thought to have travelled along the Silk Route, reaching first China and then, by the 7th or 8th century A.D., Japan.

Our knowledge of it from this period in Japan comes from a very important collection of clothing textiles which were preserved in a sacred treasure house, known as the Shoso-in,

after having been used in the dedication ceremony of a large Buddha statue in the eighth century. Such was the care with which these items were stored that all 180,000 survived until modern times. Most resist-dyed textiles were decorated using wax stamped on with a metal or wood block. Different amounts and temperatures of wax created different effects, and some cloths were stamped partly on the wrong side to create a shadow effect

There was a break in the wax resist tradition when relations between China and Japan were broken off in the 10th century, cutting off the supply of Chinese beeswax to Japan, and the next examples found in Japan occur in the 16th century and are from India.

The story resumes at the end of the 19th century when a Japanese weaver, Sunumaki Suchuchi, inspired by seeing Indonesian batik textiles on a visit to the Paris exhibition, persuaded the Japanese authorities to allow the Shoso-in to be opened and the precious store of historical textiles to be studied. From this study stems the work of all the 20th century masters of wax resist.

The talk concluded with a fascinating series of examples of the work of Ozo, Sano, Miyura, Fukumoto, Kabayashi, Takaya and Kitano, all of whom had exploited to the full the technical possibilities of the medium, using splattering and thick and thin applications of wax. Not least among the examples were the speaker's own textiles, inspired by the vibrant colours she had seen on a visit to Australia, and using many different techniques to create a rich effect.

Helen Adams

## **MUSEUMS ROUND-UP**

September saw the opening of the restored Balti Fort in Karimabad, north Pakistan, and its inauguration as a cultural centre and museum. Founded in the 13th century, the fort is located in the Hunza valley close to the Silk Route, and up to the time Hunza became part of Pakistan in 1974 was the home of the Mirs of Hunza who ruled the valley. In 1985 the heir to the last Mir of Hunza appealed to the Aga Khan, as leader of the Ismaili community, to save the building. The project was considered worth-while and restoration work started in 1991. The Fort is a masterpiece of craftsmanship, even able to resist earthquakes, and where possible original construction techniques and materials have been used in restoration. The traditional rooms on the ground floor, which have carved timber pillars, have been kept as they were, but the more palatial rooms above house what is left of the private collections of the Mir, including antique carpets, furniture, ceremonial robes and weapons. There is also an audio-visual room, a library and a study centre.

In the following month the Shanghai Museum was reopened in its magnificent new building, which covers some 10,000 square metres in the heart of Shanghai. It comprises eleven galleries and three exhibition halls, housing over 120,000 objects. The building is in the shape of an ancient bronze vessel, which is perhaps appropriate, since it is for its collection of antique bronzes (of which 400 are on show) that the Museum is best known, but it is strong in all departments. The labelling of exhibits is in English as well as Chinese and is apparently good. It is expected that the displays in the exhibition halls will be changed

every six months. Other facilities include the Min Chiu Library, which houses over 200,000 volumes of history and art books and has a comprehensive computer index system of the inventory, which is accessible to visiting scholars.

Plans are afoot for the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco to move into a new building which will give it twice the space of its present one. When I say "new" building, this is not exactly the case, for the building in question will be a conversion of the Old Main Library, built in 1917 as part of the Beaux Arts Centre, one of the city's most important historic buildings. The architect chosen for the conversion is Gae Aulenti of Milan, already responsible for such prestigious conversions as the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. The Museum hopes to open in its new premises late in 2000.

Editor

## EXHIBITIONS

### **Striking Tents: Central Asian Nomad Felts from Kyrgyzstan**

An exhibition under this title will be held at the Museum of Mankind from 20th March to 31st December this year, showing felt floor covers, most made in the last forty years, that are visually striking both in terms of colourful and bold decoration, and sheer size (up to 2x4m). These remarkable textiles also provide an insight into the changing patterns of life in former Soviet Central Asia over the last 100 years.

Felt has been made and used by Central Asian nomadic peoples for over two and a half thousand years. The yurt, or round tent covered and decorated with felt, is the traditional Central Asian nomadic home. Until the 1930s, when Stalin began his collectivization programme in Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz lived in yurts year round, moving from winter lowland pastures to summer mountain meadows with their herds of sheep, cattle and horses. Felt is a highly versatile fabric, being waterproof and insulating, strong and pliable, and was traditionally used by the Kyrgyz for everything from tent covers, interior fittings, carrying bags and saddle-cloths to hats and cloaks.

Since the Kyrgyz have been leading a more sedentary life, many traditional felt artefacts have fallen out of use. However there is still a lively tradition of making floor felts for houses and flats. These are produced by women, often for their own or their daughters' weddings. The "bright felts" (*alakiiz*) feature designs within the body of the textile, while the closely-worked "mosaic felts" (*shyrdak*) are decorated with cut and sewn patterns. The fine *alakiiz* and *shyrdak* shown were collected by Stephanie Bunn, and those of you who heard her talk to the Group in December will surely want to see this exciting exhibition.

For details of related educational events, including study days and felt-making workshops, phone 0171 323 8043.

Sarah Posey Museum  
of Mankind

### Other Exhibitions in U.K.

An exhibition which nicely complements the Museum of Manking show is *Nomads - Life on the Move*, at the Horniman Museum, Forest Hill, London, now until mid-January 1998. Covering all aspects of nomadic life world-wide, it includes several whole tents, among them Iranian, Mongolian and Turkish examples, whose furnishings include textiles, as well as a number of whole costumes. Introductory talks, intended for families, are being held at 2.30 and 3.30 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month throughout the exhibition. For further information phone 0181 699 1872.

*The Strip Show* at Nottingham's Museum of Costume and Textiles, open until 22nd May, shows over thirty scarves from the Museum's collections, displaying "a great variety of textures and techniques from Egypt to Scotland, England to India, Spain to the Philippines, and including fabric made from pineapples!" For further information phone 01159153500.

Jewish carpets from a private collection will be on display at the Jewish Museum, 129-131 Albert St, Camden Town, London, from 8th May to 14th September. The museum, which is near Camden underground station, is open from Sundays to Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.. For further information phone 0171 284 1997.

### Exhibitions Abroad

*Gossamer Threads and Golden Dragons: A Selection of Chinese Textiles from the Museum's Collection* - Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, California, 26th February to 29th June 1997.

### Last Chance to See

*Suzani: Embroideries from the Oases of Central Asia* and *Symmetry and Pattern: The Art of Oriental Carpets*, both at the Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., and both closing on February 23rd.

## LECTURES AND EVENTS

Monday 24th February at 2.30 p.m. - Study Session, Gillian Owens on *The Care and Preservation of Textiles*, V. & A.. Free.

Tuesday 4th March - Following an extraordinary general meeting at 6.15 p.m., the Oriental Rug and Textile Society of Great Britain will hear a talk on *The Siege of Vienna and What the Turks Left Behind* by Peter Young, a member of the Society\*.

Saturday 22nd March, repeated on Friday 11th April, 2.30 p.m. each time - Andrew Bolton on *Historical and Twentieth-Century Chinese Dress*, V.& A.. Free.

Tuesday 15th April at 2.30 p.m. - Visit by the Oriental Rug and Textile Society of Great

Britain to the exhibition, *Nomads - Life on the Move* at the Horniman Museum. Slide lecture and guided tour.\*

Tuesday 13th May - following the A.G.M. at 6.15, the Oriental Rug and Textile Society of Great Britain will hear a talk on *Jewish Carpets* by Anton Felton.\*

Tuesday 3rd June at 6.30 p.m. - *Woven and Embroidered Textiles from North Africa and the Middle East* by Caroline Washington, talk to the Oriental Rug and Textile Society of Great Britain.\*

\*All meetings of the Oriental Rug and Textile Society of Great Britain take place in the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square, London, and are open to non-members on payment of £2.50 per lecture. Further information may be obtained from the Hon. Secretary, Joan Langrogat, 5 Beresford Road, Harrow, Middlesex. HA1 4QP, tel. 0181 863 4521.

## PUBLICATIONS

Balfour-Paul, Jenny, *Indigo in the Arab World*, Curzon Press, Richmond, Surrey, 256pp, illus. & colour frontispiece, ISBN 07007 0373 X, January 1997, £45. Based on first-hand fieldwork and practical knowledge, supported by extensive library and museum research, this book provides the first detailed study of the continuous use of indigo in the Arab world for over four millennia, covering the historical background; indigo in the Great Age of Islam; post-Mamluk trade and Ottoman influences; agricultural production; raw materials, techniques and industrial organization of indigo dyeing; indigo in textiles and the versatility of indigo.

Felton, Anton, *Jewish Carpets*, Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 200pp, 100 col. illus., 20 b/w illus., April/May 1997, £35. The first book ever written on the subject. The history covers over 4000 years from Biblical times to the present day; more than ninety individual carpets woven mainly in Israel, Iran, Turkey, Greece and Bulgaria, from the 14th century onwards are illustrated and accompanied by informative commentaries; Islamic carpets signed by Jews are also reviewed.

Lynton, Linda, *The Sari: Styles, Patterns, History, Techniques*, Thames and Hudson, New York and London, 208pp text, 80 colour plates, 180+ b/w illus., ISBN 1-898406-00-6. A guide to the history, patterns and regional variations of this Indian untailed women's garment.

## DEADLINE FOR THE NEXT ISSUE - 19th MAY 1997

Please send contributions to  
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