

Collecting Chinese textiles

– a brief historical overview

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The market for Chinese costume and textiles has never been stronger. The range of available materials is larger and more comprehensive than at any time in history, offering unprecedented scope to learn, explore and acquire. Compared to other decorative arts media, textiles, despite their care and handling requirements, remain a bargain. Finding textiles and costumes with age and in good condition takes time and effort, but for the patient and diligent collector there are opportunities to acquire magnificent objects. Only exceptional textiles associated with the imperial household, like the monumental embroidered Raktayamari *thanka* with its Yongle presentation mark, which sold in Hong Kong in April 2002 for HK\$30,874,100.00 (US\$4 million), command prices comparable to other media.¹

Silk trade

Over the centuries Chinese silk textiles have been the focus of conspicuous consumption, hoarding, fashion, trade, tribute, looting, pride and investment. But whether sold commercially or as art objects, price and value are ultimately reduced to issues of rarity and availability, factors that have always been relevant to them. The pre-eminence of silk in the economic and cultural development of China significantly affected, and continue to affect, perceptions of Chinese textiles.²

To the ancient Greeks and Romans, China was known as Seres, the Land of Silk. Sericulture, the cultivation of the *Bombyx mori* moth, appeared in China in the late 4th millennium B.C.E.³ From the 2nd millennium B.C.E. silk production was associated with urban

centers and became inextricably linked with the rulers of the powerful states on the North China Plains.⁴ Patterned silk weaving makes extreme demands: high levels of capitalization, complex machinery, a highly-trained specialized workforce, and sophisticated marketing systems. As a result, silk prices were high and in terms of prestige, silk was without peer. Traditionally silk was a standard of value for taxes, as well as official wages.⁵ It was also the centerpiece of an elaborate state-controlled international trade monopoly that endured until the 4th century C.E. Even after other cultures acquired the knowledge of sericulture, China remained a primary supplier of world markets, a position it still enjoys today.

Minute remains of silk cloth recovered from sites from Central Asia to the Mediterranean and dating from the early second millennium to the mid-1st millennium B.C.E. attest to a wide-reaching Chinese trade as early as the Western Zhou dynasty (1028–722 B.C.E.).⁶ A thousand years later, the historian, Pliny the Younger (c.62–114), decried the fashion for silk clothing among the Roman nobles because it caused a constant drain of gold and silver bullion eastward. Although the overland trade involved many consumer goods, it was silk that subsequently inspired German archaeologist Baron

Figure 1, Embroidered *thanka* with central image of Raktayamari.
Ming dynasty, Yongle presentation mark and period (1402–1424)
11 × 7ft (335.3 × 213.4 cm)
Private collection, Hong Kong
Photography by Christie's





Figure 2, Silk embroidered cotton bedcover or carpet
Ming or Qing dynasty, 17th century, probably made for the
Portuguese market
12ft 4in x 7ft 7in (374 232 cm)
Myrna Myers Gallery, Paris
Photography by Thierry Prat

include silks from Japan, China, Central Asia and the Middle East. Strictly speaking, the Emperor Shōmu's possessions are best described as an assemblage of household items, but the donation of his possessions was an act of pious devotion to garner merit. Once placed within the Tōdai-ji temple, the items became a collection in the same sense that objects in any modern museum are collections.

In the West no analogous examples of the acquisition of textiles can be cited until the 19th century. However international trade, which supplied an increasing volume of goods, including Asian textiles to western consumers, helped form a world view constructed in part from collectors' "curiosities". These cabinets of curiosities and collections increased particularly after the 15th century, when Portuguese and Spanish merchants established direct commerce with Asia markets and suppliers.⁹

Textiles in the art market

Despite a long involvement with Chinese trade textiles, most of which were manufactured to meet European tastes,¹⁰ the disciplined collecting of Chinese textiles as decorative arts to be acquired and studied for their own intrinsic value, is a result of the West's political activities in Asia during the second half of the 19th century. In 1860 the combined English and French forces under the command of James Bruce, Earl of Elgin (1811–1863), sacked the Chinese imperial summer palaces Yuan Ming Yuan in reprisal for China's failure to enforce the Treaty System established at the end of the Opium War (1839–1842). The sanctioned auction of seized goods added to the looting and destruction of this palace complex and placed quantities of Chinese decorative arts made for the court on the art markets of London, Paris, Vienna and New York. A new group of collectors responded to these dazzling imperial furnishings, creating a demand for old Chinese fabrics.

This new taste in textiles was influenced by several

Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) to coin the name "Silk Road" (Gr. Seidenstrassen).⁷

While history and archaeology attest to the presence and appreciation of Chinese silk in the West, the East provides a demonstration of the impact of international luxury fabrics on elite society. An 8th century cache of imperial artifacts in Nara reveals patterns of conspicuous consumption and the range of luxury goods moving along the Silk Road.⁸ Over 180,000 textiles belonging to the Japanese Emperor Shōmu (d.753), which were dedicated to the Tōdai-ji temple by his widow, are preserved in the Shōsō-in storehouse. They

Figure 3, Liberty's label attached to Chinese robe
Qing dynasty, late 19th century
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston collection acc. no. 46.810
Photography by John E Vollmer

factors. The Great Exhibition of 1851 and other international expositions held in London (1862) and in Paris (1878 and 1889) raised public awareness of Asian fabrics. Interest in the Orient was also sparked by the British Arts and Crafts Movement, which encouraged a perception of Chinese textiles as art. Marveling at the fineness and accomplishment of non-industrial production, connoisseurs focused on color and technique, reveling in ideals of the “old fashioned” and the “traditional.”

Specialist antique dealers and department stores encouraged collectors, decorators and connoisseurs. Merchants like Arthur Liberty (1843–1917) established his first Regent Street store, called East India House, in 1875.¹¹ From the beginning Liberty featured textiles and objects from Japan, India and China and, in part, the supply came from the wardrobes and furnishings of increasingly impoverished Manchu nobles available on the markets of Beijing and Shanghai after 1880.

During the last half of the 19th century, people like Sir Henry Cole (1808-1882), founder of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, promoted the concept of museums as educational institutions. Notions of what constituted “good” design and an expansionist world view inspired European museums to collect Chinese fabrics and costumes systematically. The earliest acquisition of a Chinese costume in the Victoria and Albert Museum is dated 1863, (the costume is believed to be contemporaneous with that date).¹² The emphasis soon shifted from ethnographic interest to an art historical focus when antique items were added piece by piece in the 1880s and 1890s through purchase and donation. The bulk of the holding of Chinese costume was acquired in 1948 from Swiss collector, Bernard Vuilleumier, who had purchased his collection on the Western art market.

Other early private collections that moved into the public domain include the spectacular Chinese textiles from the William Christian Paul bequest received by



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1930. Elsewhere, the 600 piece collection of costumes and textiles amassed by William E. Colby, a San Francisco attorney, were sold to the Minneapolis Institute of Art in 1941.¹³

Some museums acquired textiles directly from China. Christian missionaries flocked to China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and most returned with at least a few textiles, typical of the period and the region in which they worked. Many of these items found their way into church and, later, public museum collections, because of the fine workmanship or because they were exotic. Among the objects in the collection of the Cincinnati Art Museum are two “Mandarin” robes and a



Figure 4, Embroidered satin dragon robe
 Qing dynasty, probably 1880s, possibly made for export
 Length: 58½ in (149 cm)
 Cincinnati Art Museum, 6.1887.
 Photography Cincinnati Art Museum

Chinese bridal coat accessioned in 1887. These were gifts from a Dr. W. W. Seely and are among the earliest Chinese textile accessions in the United States

Charles Trick Currelly (1876–1958), founder of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, purchased a group of antique Chinese textiles from the London dealer, S. M. Franck in 1908, but the core of the collection, which now numbers over 4500 items, was acquired from 1919-1922. They were bought for the museum in Beijing by George Crofts (d.1925), an English fur merchant based in Tientsin.¹⁴ Other “China hands” involved in buying textiles and costumes include Gertrude Bass Warner (1863-1951), the founder and patron of The Museum of Art, University of Oregon,¹⁵ and Laurence Sickman (1906–1988), director of The Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, as well as the group of patrons that helped shape the collection at

The Art Institute of Chicago.¹⁶

The 1940s witnessed the first series of Chinese costume and textile exhibitions in North America. Catalogues by Alan Priest at The Metropolitan Museum and Helen Fernald of the Royal Ontario Museum, among others, were concerned with typology and dating.¹⁷ Another group of museum exhibitions and publications appeared during the 1970s and 1980s, broadening awareness and appreciation of the cultural, social and economic contexts in which Chinese textiles flourished.¹⁸ A third cluster of exhibitions beginning with the 1995 Hong Kong Museum of Art’ *Heaven’s Embroidered Cloths*, have focused attention on pre Ming dynasty textiles.

Archaeological textiles

The comprehensive archeological surveys of Central Asia began in the 1870s when Swedish geographer Sven Anders Hedin (1865–1952) undertook expeditions to find the ruined oasis sites along the old trade routes. By 1900 British archaeologist Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943) working under the aegis of the British and



*Figure 5, Embroidered silk tabby fragment
Han dynasty, 1st century B.C.E. - 1st century C.E.
19 x 22 7/8 in (48 x 58 cm)
Arthur Leeper Asian Art, Belvedere, California
Photography by Arthur Leeper*

Indian governments, had set out on his own search. His survey, like others, was driven by the desire to collect material from these archaeological sites.¹⁹ Over the next 15 years thousands of “archaeological treasures” including sculpture, painting, metalwork, manuscripts and textiles were shipped to the museums in New Delhi

and London. Russia, Sweden, Germany, France and Japan also mounted Central Asian expeditions. As a result, museums in St. Petersburg, Stockholm, Berlin, Paris and Tokyo also hold important archaeological collections of Chinese-manufactured textiles ranging in date from the late 5th century B.C.E. to the end of the 14th century.²⁰ Geographically this material spans northern and southern centers of Chinese cultural development as well as areas of Central Asia, Mongolian and southern Siberia associated with China through conquest or trade.

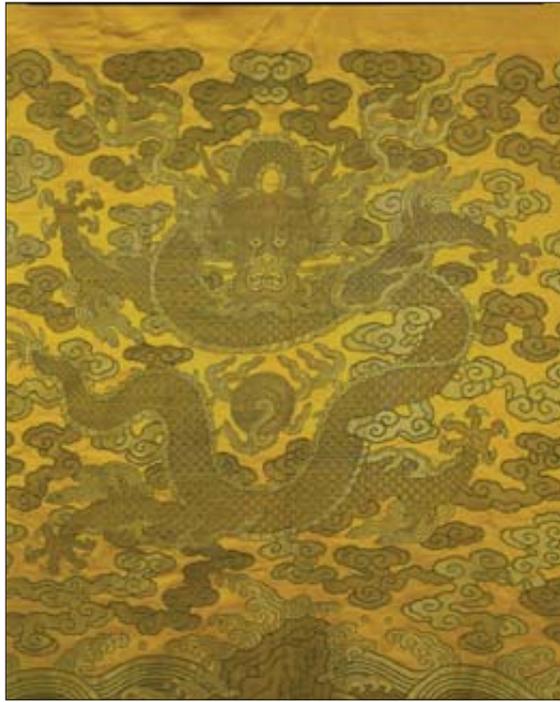


Figure 6, Brocaded satin altar cover (detail)
Qing Dynasty, early 18th century
72 x 46½ x 36¼ in (180 x 118 x 92 cm)
Linda Wrigglesworth, London
Photography by Linda Wrigglesworth

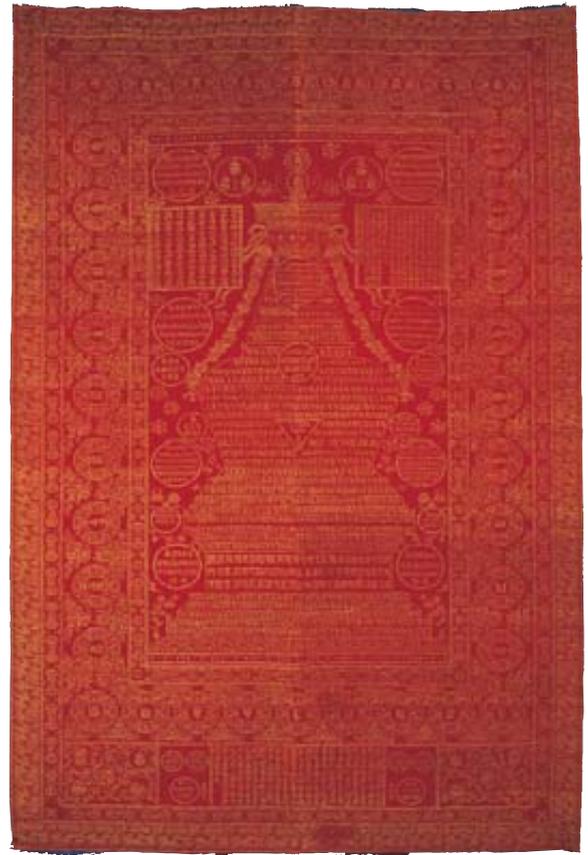


Figure 8, Brocaded satin Dharani sutra funerary cover
Qing dynasty, late 19th century
7ft 2in x 5ft (220 x 150 cm)
Brandt Oriental Art, London
Photography by Alan Tabor



Figure 7, Kesi or slit tapestry weave panel from a dragon robe
Ming dynasty to mid 17th century
32½ x 30 in (82 x 77 cm)
Jon Eric Riis, Atlanta
Photography by Bart's Art Photography

Since 1950 China has conducted surveys and excavations under the direction of the Ministry of Antiquities.²¹ Hundreds of sites have been identified and published; thousands of fragments and whole pieces now form important parts of the collections of the National Museum, Beijing, and Jiangsu, Hebei and Hunan provinces.²²

Cultural attitudes

Excavated and plundered textiles have revealed important information about Chinese attitudes toward the amassing and collecting of textiles. This is because clothing and textile furnishings were key indicators of status. Materials differentiated social classes.²³ In China burial stressed continuity. Today surrogates of cash and consumer goods are burned at grave side; however, in former times, burial was accompanied by the trappings



Figure 9, Embroidered silk gauze robe
Liao dynasty, 10th century
Length: 51 in (130 cm)
Rossi and Rossi, London
Photography by Prudence Cumming Associates

of successful living: servants, livestock and vehicles (or their effigies), furniture, dishes, food, medicines, jewelry, ritual goods and clothing.

Among the living, art collecting and connoisseurship were among the attributes of *wenren* (literally, a man of culture) praised by Confucius. The emperors of China, as the most exalted *wenren* amassed spectacular art collections. In 1912 the imperial collections stored in the Forbidden City were nationalized by the Kuomintang to serve as a public museum. Parts of this collection moved with the Nationalist forces to Taiwan in 1949. Among these treasures are *kesi*, tapestry-woven and embroidered scrolls emulating the subtleties of ink

painting. From the 10th century this specialized pictorial textile tradition was considered the epitome of refined aesthetic expression and the names of master weavers and embroiderers are recorded with those of the great painters.²⁴ The Communist government has also supported public art museums. Much of the remaining imperial collection, including the Qing imperial wardrobe, is in the National History Museum and Palace Museum in the Forbidden City.²⁵

Buddhism

In the early years of the 20th century, archaeology revealed another type of textile collecting. In 1900 a monk discovered the remains of a vast Buddhist library and stores of textiles behind a brick wall in a cave at Dunhuang in Sinkiang province. The cache had been sealed in 1035 to protect it from raiding nomads. Dunhuang, on the western frontier of the Chinese



*Figure 10, Kesi or slit tapestry weave table frontal (detail)
Qing dynasty, 18th century
3ft 2 in x 9ft 1 in (96.6 x 277.4 cm)
Jaqueline Simcox, London
Photography by Brian Morris Photography*

empire, was an important oasis on the trade routes crossing the Tarim Basin.²⁶ It became a major pilgrimage site from the middle of the 4th century, when the first of over 400 decorated caves were carved into the rock of the cliff face. Between 1905 and 1907 Marc Aurel Stein and French archaeologist, Paul Pelliot (1878–1945), removed many of these newly rediscovered pieces to London and Paris.²⁷

As a means of gaining merit, Buddhist establishments encouraged the donation of secular luxury fabrics, to be recycled as furnishings to decorate halls of worship and for clothing for the celebrants of ritual. In addition,

monasteries acquired hangings specifically commissioned for public and private worship. Some were made locally in monastery-supported workshops, although Chinese imperial textiles made as diplomatic gifts were particularly valued throughout Asia, as witnessed by the range of Chinese textiles that came out of Tibetan monasteries in Katmandu from the late 1970s. The collections of Mactaggart (Edmonton), Hall (Hong Kong) and Steinhart (New York) are among the outstanding holdings based on these textiles. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum as well as the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg, Switzerland, acquired items on the art markets of Hong Kong, New York, Paris and London.²⁸

Chinese textiles found in Tibet fill a void in our knowledge between the earlier archaeological items from the Han to Tang dynasties (2nd century B.C.E. through the 10th century) and those from the later



Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Fabrics dating from the Liao, Song, Yuan, Ming and early Qing dynasties revealed new patterns and designs, and also provided evidence of techniques that had not previously been recorded.²⁹

Other Chinese textiles in the art market

The growing demand for old Chinese textiles and economic and political changes within China have also resulted in quantities of burial textiles coming onto the market. These comprise two types from two different periods, firstly 5th to 3rd century B.C.E. fabrics and costumes from the water-logged Chu State tombs in Central China and, secondly, Han through Yuan dynasty textiles from the deserts of Central Asia and Mongolia. Interestingly, such demand has also created an environment in which modern fakes have appeared with some regularity.

Conclusions

While the view of Chinese textiles commonly featured in museum exhibitions and catalogues is chronological in presentation and concentrates on their development in encyclopaedic fashion, the definition of what actually constitutes a collection remains fluid and is far less specific. At the time of their manufacture, patterned silk textiles were costly and exceptional and the acquisition of these luxury goods demonstrated status and good taste. Their intrinsic value made them worthy as gifts to peers and retainers, as pious contributions to religious institutions as well as the focus of connoisseurs and collectors. The cultural, social and economic factors essential to their value are no less relevant today, hundreds if not thousands of years later.

BIOGRAPHY

John E. Vollmer, one of the leading authorities on late imperial Chinese costume, is president of Vollmer Cultural Consultants, Inc., a consulting firm specializing in exhibition design and gallery and museum planning, with offices in New York and Toronto. He was curator of the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, until 1983.

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