

Woven with Silk: Rockefeller Asian Textiles, June 10, 2014-March 8, 2015

In 1919, Lucy Truman Aldrich (1869–1955)—the eldest daughter of Rhode Island senator Nelson Aldrich and the sister of philanthropist Abby Aldrich Rockefeller—embarked on a voyage to Japan, Korea, and China. This journey activated a lifelong appreciation for the finest examples of textile artistry and sparked a brilliant collecting career spanning three decades. Aldrich made five more collecting trips during the 1920s, with repeat visits to Japan, Korea, and China and forays to India, Indonesia, and Egypt, amassing many hundreds of spectacular textiles from these regions.

Since Aldrich's return from her initial voyage, the textiles she collected have found a place of honor within the RISD Museum's galleries. In 1951 she dedicated a gallery for their display in memory of her sister. Another of Aldrich's collections, that of early European porcelain, is on display on the Museum's 3rd floor in a gallery devoted to this material.

Between 1934 and 1955, Aldrich gave more than 700 garments and textiles to the RISD Museum, forming the nucleus of the Museum's renowned Asian textile collections. Two of the most significant groupings of Nō theater robes and Buddhist monks' mantles outside of Japan are included in these holdings, as are exemplars of Chinese, Indian, Thai, Indonesian, Persian, and Ottoman court and religious textile arts. The textiles in this gallery span Aldrich's collecting career, from her days as a novice to her choices as a seasoned expert, affording the study of a diverse array of Asian textile traditions and illuminating the skill and effort of the artisans who fashioned these extraordinary objects.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Japanese

Mantle Worn by a Buddhist Monk (Kesa), 1786 - 1838

Silk and gold-leaf gilt-paper discontinuous supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.284



This Buddhist monk's mantle shimmers with life as gilt-paper wefts stream across its surface. The gold threads set off silk squares depicting bamboo leaves and chrysanthemum clusters. Here material luxury translates to the spiritual realm as gold refers to the infinite light of Buddha and the combined motifs express rejuvenation and longevity.

Despite the mantle's lavish materials and technical virtuosity, its patchwork arrangement retains a pointed allusion to Buddhism's Indian origins. Monks following the historical Buddha's teachings renounced all worldly pleasures but their robes, which they stitched together from scraps of cast-off material. Temples often received textiles such as this one as gifts, expressions of the donor's piety.

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Japanese; Edo

Nō Theater Costume (Karaori), late 1700s-early 1800s

Silk, gold-leaf gilt paper; twill weave, continuous supplementary weft, discontinuous supplementary-weft patterning

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.474

This robe, patterned with chrysanthemum blossoms and a golden bamboo lattice similar to the adjacent kesa, was created as a costume for a character in a Nō play. A theatrical genre developed in 14th-century Japan, Nō uses drama, dance, and music to present stories based on Japanese legend and literature. The complex karaori weave structure, characterized by long silk wefts that float over the surface and appear to be embroidered, is an advanced technique that was nurtured in the Nō theater world. Karaori was used so frequently for Nō robes that the term has also come to denote the box-sleeved robes used mainly for female roles.



Indian

Man's Coat (Chogha), late 1700s

Silk and gold-wrapped thread compound weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.264

For centuries, weavers in the northern Indian city of Varanasi produced sumptuous silk and gold fabrics for wealthy patrons, including Mughal royalty. Iconic Indian patterns such as the repeated flowering tree (buta) in gold-wrapped silk thread on the man's coat and the meandering vines with ornate buta motifs on the woman's sari reveal the power of Mughal aesthetic influence. The tree of life motif migrated during the 16th century from Persia to India, as did the emphasis given to the motif by weaving it in gold thread. Muslims long have related gold to power and honor. Hindus, too, have an ancient history of associating gold with the sun and its purifying and life-giving properties.



RISD MUSEUM

Indian

Sari, late 1800s

Silk, metallic-wrapped thread; continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.319

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Persian; Indian; Mughal?

Sash (patka), first half 1700s

Silk and gold-wrapped thread compound weave; continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft patterning

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.529

The small floral sprays dancing across the interior of this Persian sash closely approximate those adorning the adjacent Indian woman's sari and man's robe. The designs and the use of gold thread illustrate the fluid exchange between Indian Mughal and Persian court cultures through the 19th century. Royal Indian workshops supported traditional Persian craftsmanship, with Mughal rulers of northern India importing not only Persian court artisans for their own royal weaving workshops but motifs such as the Persian flowering tree, or buta. Over centuries, this realistic floral motif became the stylized, teardrop-shaped mass of swirling vegetation known in Europe as paisley.



Chinese

Buddhist priest's robe (kesa), 1700s

Silk; tapestry weave

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.273

The bold pictorial design of this Buddhist monk's mantle was created using the slit-tapestry technique known as kesi or k'o-ssu, a term roughly translated as "carved silk." Weavers in China have used this technique, thought to have migrated from Central Asia, for centuries, as it allows the weaver to "paint" with thread through the painstaking hand manipulation of extremely fine silk weft yarns.



RISD MUSEUM

The individual squares contain renderings of Buddhist motifs such as the lotus and flaming jewel, imperial Chinese symbols that include the phoenix and the five-clawed dragon, and antique vessels symbolizing Confucian values of connoisseurship and respect for the past. The lanterns may indicate that this robe was made for the Buddhist Lantern Festival, held the last day of lunar New Year celebrations.

Chinese; Manchu

Man's Court Robe, 1736-1795

Silk and gold-wrapped thread slit-tapestry weave (kesi) with fur trim

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.390

Only artisans working for the Chinese imperial household would have possessed the time and skill required to create this intricately woven silk robe. Strict rules of dress for the 18th-century court reserved a particular hue of yellow—its dazzling brightness meant to evoke sunlight—solely for the emperor and his consort, and the design seen here features the imperial five-clawed dragon and other symbols restricted to the emperor's use. The sun, moon, mountain, and constellation represent the four annual sacrifices made by the emperor, and the fu character and axe stand for his power to judge and punish.

