Asian Textiles in Trade, February 23, 2004-June 6, 2004

Throughout recorded history, Asian textiles have been important international trade commodities. Chinese silks began arriving in Europe over the Silk Road through Central Asia in antiquity. Indian printed cottons were exported to Egypt at least as early as the 13th century and to Europe in the 17th century. Indian silks and cottons were also sent eastward to Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Chinese and Indian textiles have found their way to Japan since very early times. Shawls from Kashmir and carpets from Turkey graced the elegant women and the great houses of Europe. After the Revolutionary War, merchants brought silks and cottons from India and China back to both North and South America. Markets existed for both simple functional textiles and for elaborate luxury goods, both generally the output of organized manufacture.

The development of trade and transmission of design and technology affected both the producing and consuming cultures. Although the novelty of exoticism frequently contributed to the initial popularity of a new product from afar, importers often later requested color and/or pattern modifications from producers in order to cater to specific markets. Demand for some fabrics became so great that new processes were found to accelerate production. The popularity of Asian goods spurred the growth of new textile industries in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The textile trade has remained vibrant into the 21st century. Some Asian countries have developed large mechanized textile industries to manufacture for global markets. Then again, some entrepreneurs and organizations have continued or re-established craft businesses, providing opportunities for sustainable local development and preserving traditional skills. Examples from the permanent collection illustrate the artistic and technical excellence of Asian textiles and how their trade has connected cultures throughout the world for hundreds of years.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

The Maki Textile Studio, est. 1990
Chiaki Maki, Japanese, b. 1960, (RISD, Textile Design)
Kaori Maki, Japanese, b. 1962, (RISD, Textile Design)
Two Scarves, ca. 2001
Wool, silk; doublecloth and silk, plain weave
Anonymous gift 2002.14.2

Chiaki and Kaori Maki are sisters and graduates of RISD’s program in textile design. In 1990, Chiaki, together with Indian weaver Neeru Kumar, opened Maki Textile Studio, a venture that her sister joined in 1992. The Maki sisters live in Japan, but their studio’s designs are produced in India by village artisans under the direction of Ms. Kumar. The finished goods are marketed worldwide.
Indian  

textile: *Valance*, early 1700s  
*Cotton; plain weave, hand-painted mordants*  
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund  1988.017  

The colorful hand-painted and block-printed cotton fabrics of India began to reach Europe in the 17th century. By 1662, European merchants were sending Westernized designs for these “chintzes,” as they came to be known in the West, to the manufacturers in India. The printed cottons were immediately popular for furnishings and informal attire. This valance, designed in the French baroque style, was originally part of a complete set of matching bed hangings.

Cambodian  

textile: *Skirtcloth or hanging*, late 1800s-early 1900s  
Silk; twill weave, weft ikat  
Bequest of Martha B. Lisle  67.454  

Indian-made silks called patolu were highly valued as trade items in mainland and insular Southeast Asia at least as early as the 16th century. They became so important that the design elements and layout began to be incorporated into local textile production. This fabric is made in the twill weave characteristic of Cambodia, but copies the patolu saris that came from India. It was probably made for sale to the Thai court.
Chinese

*Man's vest*, ca. 1845
Silk; satin damask
Gift of the Williams Estate  75.026.16

Most of the silk fabrics exported from China to the West in the 19th century were patterned to imitate Western styles, such as stripes, checks, and plaids, or small geometric figures or floral sprigs. In contrast, silks with Chinese designs were usually brought back to the U.S. by sailors as gifts for friends and family members. Garments made from these Chinese-style silks abound in New England collections, evidence of the influence of the China trade in this region during the 19th century. Similar silks, such as the one used in the Tibetan coat featured here, were more commonly sold to China’s Asian trading partners, where they were used for both secular and religious purposes.

Tibetan; Chinese

*Man's coat (chupa)*, 1900s
Fur, silk; satin damask
Bequest of John M. Crawford, Jr.  1989.110.100

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Soft silk shawls, either plain or embroidered and embellished with elegant hand-knotted fringe, were one of the staples of trade between China and the West from the 19th into the 20th century and included both Chinese-style designs such as dragons or peonies and Western designs as seen in this example.

For most of the 19th century, such shawls were embroidered in a single color, either matching the ground or in contrast to it. White-on-white was the most common combination. By contrast, late 19th- and early 20th-century shawls are often embroidered with several colors of silk.

The Parsi population in India arrived from Persia (Iran) in the 10th century. Over time they assimilated elements of Indian culture, in particular the sari as a standard woman’s garment. During the 18th century, Parsis developed their own trade contacts with China and began to commission Chinese embroidered blouses, saris, and sari borders. Parsi women’s dress became an amalgam of Persian, Chinese, and Indian design.

The bird and floral-sprig motif on the blouse with black ground is reminiscent of 17th-century Persian textiles, while the blouse with the red ground combines a border of Indian peacocks with a field pattern of Chinese birds and flowers.
Chinese

Blouse, late 1800s-early 1900s
Silk, satin weave, embroidered with silk twist in knot stitch
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich  55.277

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Indian

Shawl, 2nd quarter 1800s
Cashmere; double interlocked twill tapestry weave
Gift of Harriet S. Bucklin  02.006

Fine textiles with tapestry-woven borders were first used as sashes and shoulder cloths by Indian and Persian noblemen. By the late 18th century, shawls were being imported into Europe and America as a new fashion for women. Shortly thereafter, European merchants began sending instructions to their Indian counterparts, suggesting changes in design and color combinations to make the shawls conform to Western tastes and needs. This example – the first Kashmir shawl acquired by the Museum – shows the elongated, scrolling motifs and wide borders characteristic of the mid-19th century.

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Indian; Gujarati
*Textile fragment, 1400s-1500s*
Cotton; plain weave, resist-dyed
Museum Acquisition Fund 34.751

Fragments of madder- and indigo-dyed cotton textiles found in archaeological digs in the medieval Egyptian city of Al Fostat, near Cairo, have been dated to between the 13th and 18th centuries. Documentary evidence also records an important trade during that time between Egypt and Gujarat, one of the most important cotton-printing regions in India. These fragments came into the Museum’s collection in 1934 as Egyptian examples. In 1938, a French historian presented evidence that they were, in fact, made in India.

China Seas Design Studio, est. 1972
Inger McCabe Elliott, Indonesian
China Seas, Inc., est. 1972
"Lim Bamboo" textile length, 1983
Cotton; plain weave, batik
Mary B. Jackson Fund 1987.137

China Seas, Inc., was founded in 1972 by Inger McCabe Elliott in an attempt to bring the traditional Indonesian craft technique of batik to broader markets in Europe and the Americas. Elliott encouraged batik artists to experiment with color and design and even to produce yard goods with repeat patterns that could be tailored into garments or furnishings. In spite of Elliott’s interest and other attempts to support this local cottage industry, the number of craftspeople involved in batik continues to dwindle.
Javanese
*Hip wrapper*, after 1925
Cotton; plain weave, batik
Gift of Paula and Leonard Granoff and Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2003.40.7

The port towns of Java’s northern coast saw the mingling of traditional textile-making techniques with design influences from Java’s many trading partners. Batik, a complex technique in which plain white cloth is patterned by drawing a design with wax, then dyeing and re-waxing the cloth for each color required in the design, has a long history in Java. In the mid 19th century, Dutch and Chinese influence along the North Coast popularized new styles, which replaced the traditional blues and browns with bright colors and geometric motifs with flowers, birds, and butterflies.

Reiko Sudo, Japanese, b. 1953
Nuno Corporation, Japanese, 1984-present
*“Feather Flurries” textile length*, 1993
Silk, feathers; doublecloth with interchange
Gift of Reiko Sudo 1994.058

Nuno Corporation opened in Japan in 1984 and since has been one of the most important producers of cutting-edge textiles in the world. The use of new materials and technologies are a hallmark of Nuno design. Reiko Sudo is artistic director of Nuno and has designed some of the company’s most interesting and innovative fabrics. Company headquarters are in Tokyo, but its products are sold around the globe.

Indian; Gujarati
*Textile fragment*, 1400s-1500s
Cotton; plain weave, resist-dyed
Museum Acquisition Fund 34.766

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Indian; Gujarati
*Textile fragment*, 1400s-1500s
Cotton; plain weave, resist-dyed
Museum Acquisition Fund  34.767

Indian; Gujarati
*Textile fragment*, 1400s-1500s
Cotton; plain weave, resist-dyed
Museum Acquisition Fund  34.758

Indian; Gujarati
*Textile fragment*, 1400s-1500s
Cotton; plain weave, resist-dyed
Museum Acquisition Fund  34.757
Turkish

*Fragment of small patterned Holbein carpet, 1500s*
Wool; knotted pile, symmetrical knot
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke  12.008

Carpets displaying octagonal medallions and elaborate interlacing have become known as “Holbein” pattern because the 16th-century European artist Hans Holbein depicted such carpets in several of his paintings. This style was known in the West a century before Holbein, and it is possible that it was produced in Turkey specifically for the export market.