



ABEGG-STIFTUNG

International Colloquium

**Oriental Silks in the Western Middle Ages
Luxusgewebe des Orients im westlichen Mittelalter**

29 September to 1st October 2011

During the Middle Ages various kinds of luxury objects originating in the East – figured silks, ceramics, metal and glass vessels, but also paper – reached Europe via the Silk roads, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, be it as presents in diplomatic exchange or as merchandise. In particular the elaborately patterned, often gold-enriched silks from the Middle East, Central Asia or China were much sought after. Until today, many of them can be found in European church treasuries and museum collections.

Eastern luxury silks were the basic material for the magnificent garments of rulers and clergymen, of the nobility and urban patricians. They were used to decorate rooms for festivities and served as tomb adornment or to wrap relics. Their concrete function in a new context made the imported textiles part of western forms of representation while the unfamiliar pattern designs visually referred to their foreign provenance. Silk textiles with Arabic inscriptions or Chinese motifs and characters were made into liturgical and profane garments for festive occasions, they were represented in paintings both north and south of the alps, and they became models for the blossoming Italian silk weaving industry. All these aspects point to the perception and appreciation of foreign designs in their own right and with a strong effect, matching the effect of the generous use of gold and of the brilliant colours.

Recent research on the cultural exchange between East and West has led to an understanding of the widespread adoption of Eastern silks in western representational culture. Consequently, these fabrics can be interpreted not only as luxury goods or documents for an early developed taste for the exotic, but as an expression of the vivid interest in and the growing understanding of the Orient by Europeans at least since the beginning of the fourteenth century. The regions beyond the Mediterranean have always played a substantial role in the crusader ideology of European rulers aiming towards the recapture of Jerusalem. Under the domination of the Mongols that lasted for about a century, there was not only a strong boost in trade with various regions and centres of the East. Increasingly, political contacts were tied as well, reaching from sending letters to the exchange of envoys. Seen through the eyes of the Europeans, the powerful presence of the Mongol Khans in large areas of Asia changed the political landscape inasmuch as the conception of the Saracens as enemies of Christianity was now accompanied – at least for a while – by the vain hope for potential allies in the Far East.

Perceptions of the East, as they circulated in Europe, were coined to a substantial degree by the travel accounts of William of Rubruk, John de Plano Carpini, or Marco Polo. Besides some fantasy elements these contained quite accurate descriptions of the circumstances and customs in the most varied regions of Asia. In these accounts, the portrayal of the silk fabric production is allowed plenty of space. From these texts – that are complemented by the works of Eastern court historians – emerges a concrete image of the role and significance of luxury fabrics and garments in the context of royal representation in the East. The lavish use of silk fabrics for the clothing of the sovereign and his attendants as well as for mobile feast architecture here appears as a direct expression of the immeasurable wealth and exuberant behaviour of Eastern potentates – whom, at the same time, one tried to approach on a political level.

In accounts of receptions of foreign ambassadors at the English or French court, the Tartar, Turkish or Muslim envoys were usually identified and differentiated by their clothing. The splendid garments made of silk and gold were considered worth mentioning and describing by many of the chroniclers. Even the non-travelling European consumer must have been aware of such contexts, in which the showy textiles not only served as merchandise but also stood for the potential wearer of the textiles in their regions of origin.

The colloquium aims at bringing together the research on Eastern luxury textiles in Western Europe accomplished during the last years in various fields. The single achievements concerning technology, pattern evolution, and processing of the silks shall be highlighted in view of the multifaceted exchange between East and West. A certain focus shall be laid on the tailoring of fabrics into garments and other textile objects, as well as on their use in their respective local context, or on their function as relic wrapper, grave goods, princely or liturgical vestment – as far as the latter can still be reconstructed. Only rarely direct bridges can be built connecting textiles preserved in the West with their patrons or donors in the East. To further clarify the specific character of the distribution and reception of Eastern textiles in Western Europe, objects preserved and used in the West shall be confronted with textiles or garments found in the East and reflecting their use there.

Using a wide perspective, the colloquium asks for continuity and change in the adoption and reception of Eastern silks in Western culture. Thus, the survey of the Middle Ages will start in Carolingian and Ottonian times, put a certain emphasis on the time of the Mongol Empire, and end with an outlook on the use of (Western) luxury textiles at the court of the Ottoman Sultans at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century.

(JvF)

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Provisional Programme

Thursday 29.09.2011

Afternoon

- Introduction
Juliane von Fircks (in collaboration with Regula Schorta)
- Michael Alram (Vienna)
The Impact of Sassanid Persia on the Political and Economic Situation along the Silk Road
- Regula Schorta (Riggisberg)
Central Asian silks in East and West in the second half of the first millennium
- Anna Bücheler (Toronto/Rottweil)
Textile Material – Textile Meaning: Silk-inspired Pages in Medieval German Manuscripts

Evening lecture (open to the public)

Dieter Kuhn (Würzburg)
Medieval Chinese Silk Fabrics: Technical Versatility and Puzzling Terminology

Friday, 30.09.2011

Morning

- Markus Ritter (Zürich)
Silks in Europe originating from mediaeval Iran [working title]
- Isabelle Dolezalek (Berlin)
Ornament between East and West: same Form – same Function? A Comparative Study of Arabic Writing on Textiles from Norman Sicily and Fatimid Egypt
- David Jacoby (Jerusalem)
Silks at the Time of the Mongols: Aspects of East-West Trade
- Irena Vladimirsky (Achva)
Indian Guests at the Court of the Moscow Tsar (Community of Indian Merchants in Astrakhan', 9th-14th centuries)

Afternoon

- Joyce Denney (New York)
Clothing from the Mongol Empire, with Particular Reference to China and Gold-woven Textiles
- Caroline Vogt (Riggisberg)
A Central Asian Garment of an Eastern Fabric? A Cloth-of-Gold Garment in the Abegg-Stiftung Collection

- Felicitas Schmieder (Hagen)
Western Images of the Mongols. Observations on Clothing of Foreign Peoples on Medieval World Maps
- Lisa Monnas (London)
Textiles and Diplomacy in Venice in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

Saturday, 01.10.2011

Morning

- Maria Ludovica Rosati (Pisa)
The so-called Vestments of Benedict XI in Perugia as an Example of «planeta de panno tartarico albo deaurato de opera curioso minuto por totum». The fourteenth-century Perception of Oriental Textiles in Vatican Inventories and Material Evidences
- Katja Schmitz-von Ledebur (Vienna)
«eyn ander Braun Rok mit swarczen Adelarn und eyn Gugel» – the Eagle Dalmatic belonging to the Coronation Robes of the Holy Roman Empire made of a Chinese silk damask
- Evelin Wetter (Riggisberg)
De panno Tartarico, sarasinorum or de nachone? The Perception of Oriental Silks at the Court of the Bohemian Luxemburgs
- Kristin Böse (Cologne)
Beyond Foreignness – Andalusian Tissues from the Castilian Royal Tombs in S. María de las Huelgas / Burgos
- Nicole Cartier (Mont Saint Eloi)
La Chasuble du Chapitre de Ste Aldegonde de Maubeuge (France)

Afternoon

- Juliane von Fircks (Mainz)
Liturgical Vestments made of Silks from Asia Venerated as Relics of the Emperor – The so-called Heinrichsgewänder in the Alte Kapelle in Regensburg
- Birgitt Borkopp-Restle (Bern)
Striped Gold Brocades with Arabic Inscriptions in the Gdańsk Treasury of Liturgical Vestments
- Michael Peter (Riggisberg)
Early Oriental Velvets and the West. A Transfer of Technique without Technology
- Louise Mackie (Cleveland)
Italy and Istanbul – Italian Textiles and the Ottoman Court
- Summary
Regula Schorta (in collaboration with Juliane von Fircks)