SILKS OF THE NEAR EAST

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The history of silk in the Near East begins in Syria in the Roman period, with cloth and yarn of the Han dynasty imported from China. Some of the cloth may well have been the delicate Chinese gauze, because during the first two centuries A.D. Roman writers were scandalized by its transparency, saying that the wearers were clothed only to be unclothed. Other types, damasks and embroidered silks, dating from the first to the third centuries, were excavated at Palmyra, the great city in the Syrian desert, abandoned in 273. We know that silk yarn was imported, and woven locally, because fabrics of Chinese silk yarn were found at Palmyra, and at Dura on the Euphrates, dating before 250 A.D., in which the threads are tightly spun, a practice which the Chinese did not then apply to silk. This is most likely the explanation of the classical story that Chinese silk cloth was unraveled and then rewoven; evidently the hanks of Chinese yarn were unrolled, spun in the Near Eastern fashion, and then woven. The weaving of fabrics of Chinese silk yarn was done in the Syrian cities of Antioch, Berytos, Tyre, and possibly Gaza. Besides the imported silk it is possible, if we accept Pliny's Assyrian bombyx, that there was wild silk in the Near East, similar to the tussah silk of India, as several fragments of this nature were excavated at Palmyra, one at Dura, and another in Egypt. In the first few centuries A.D. Syrian traders and Christian pilgrims brought silk fabrics to Italy, France, and Spain.

By the fourth century silk garments, former-
ly so rare and costly that only the emperor, the court, and the wealthy could wear them, were common enough to make a pious Christian complain of people going about covered with landscape and animal patterns, that is, pagan scenes. Late Hellenistic influence was very strong in Syria, and many of the silk fabrics preserved to us have all-over patterns or roundels with two Amazons, or a charioteer and his quadriga, or the Dioskouroi, or tree and plant designs with Greek inscriptions. These silk textiles of the sixth and seventh centuries are firm and closely woven, very different from the thin tissues which shocked the early Romans. One

OPPOSITE PAGE: Persian twill with characteristic Sasanian design of single birds and palmette trees in plain roundels, with space-filling patterns added. VI century. Fletcher Fund, 1946

BELOW: Syrian twill, early VII century. The patterns of Syrian silks of the VI and VII centuries often show pairs of figures in roundels, with trees in the background and palmettes between the roundels. The style is a mixture of Hellenistic and oriental forms. Fletcher Fund, 1937
of them (see p. 109) shows two hunters on horseback, shooting at lions with bow and arrow, a favorite sport since the days of the ancient Assyrians. The pairs of figures are reversed, making a symmetrical composition. The costume is oriental, but Hellenistic influence is seen in the puttees and bare feet, the men’s fluttering capes, and the waving, unknotted tails of the horses. The thick wreaths of the roundel frame, with flowers superimposed on the leaves, and the jeweled palmette trees in the spandrels, like those of late Sasanian art, are both found in the marvelous Umayyad mosaics of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, which were made by Syrian Christians. Consequently, this type of textile must be attributed to Syrian looms.

The composition of all-over roundels containing pairs of reversed figures was popular in Byzantium as well, continuing for centuries. In the fifth century, under Theodosius, imperial silk-weaving factories were established in Alexandria and Carthage, besides those in Asia Minor. Silk was generally called serica at that time, but another word, subserica, suggests that not all the material used was pure, or top-quality silk. That may be why, in the middle of the sixth century, Justinian listened to the monks from India who offered to bring him eggs of the Chinese silkworm from Khotan. Thus Chinese silk could be produced for the first time in Byzantium, and the monopoly held by the Persian middlemen for centuries previous was circumvented.

The tradition of silk-weaving in Sasanian Persia goes back to the third century, when

**TOP: Early Abbasid twill, about 800, continuing the pre-Islamic Syrian style, with a tree bearing grapes, ivy leaves, and pointed-oval leaves with bent tips. Rogers Fund, 1917**

**CENTER: East Persian Abbasid twill of the VIII or IX century with confronted horses in roundels and birds. The drawing is strong and simple, the color bright. Rogers Fund, 1938**

**BOTTOM: Saljuk cloth with a new type of all-over design of octagons among angular arabesques and palmettes. The birds are boldly drawn. XI or XII century. Fletcher Fund, 1946**
Silk of Ayyubid Syria, with a complex design of confronted griffons, foxes, and birds separated by vertical stems and unified by fine scrolling vines. xiii century. Rogers Fund, 1947

Shapur I, the first king, after taking Dura, swept on to Antioch in 260 and brought back captive weavers whom he settled in Khuzistan. The provinces of Fars and Tabaristan, on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea, are also said to have been silk-weaving centers, as well as Transoxiana. Silks found at Antinoe and Akhmim in Egypt are for stylistic reasons considered to be Sasanian imports, dating between the third and sixth centuries. These early silks have bird, animal, plant, and geometric motifs or human masks in all-over patterns or arranged in horizontal rows or lattice bands.

The mature Sasanian style in silks dates from the sixth and seventh centuries, for the rock carvings of Taq-i-Bustan, 600-628, show Khusrau II and his courtiers wearing costumes whose designs are duplicated in extant silk textiles. Certain of the decorative details are in the common language of the Near East, but the composition within the roundel is always of a single figure, animal, or plant, set on a plain background. This is markedly different from the Syrian and Byzantine tradition of two reversed figures in a roundel. In these silks the roundel border is often of pearls and square jewels; the figure may be a boar’s head, the Hellenistic Pegasus, an ibex, a hippocamp, a duck with “Sasanian ribbons,” or a bird holding a jewel or a leaf in its beak. One of the Museum’s silks of the sixth century (see p. 108) has a repeat pattern of a typical Sasanian cock and palmette tree in alternate roundels within octagons and a palmette device in the spaces.

The coming of Islam in the early seventh century was a wonderful thing for the development of Near Eastern art; the civilization it brought about has been called, and rightly, the
Islamic miracle. Instead of the Near East being divided by interminable wars between the Romans and Byzantines and the Persians, it was united. Now a central rule, an all-embracing religion, and the Arabic language provided the foundation for an international civilization, with a free mingling of peoples, unhampered exchange of intellectual ideas, a great increase of trade, and a re-creation of all the arts, in the vast area from Samarkand and Sind to Spain. It is not merely that elements and motifs from the earlier arts of all these regions were used, but that they were combined with new complexity and richness and infused with a new spirit. In contrast to the Hellenistic and later European desire to imitate life and capture its illusions of light and shade and space, Islamic art preferred the simple statement and had a strong tendency to abstraction and an innate capacity for creating pure design. People, animals, plants are shown with clarity of conception, but always highly stylized and often set in unreal backgrounds of intricate foliage or arabesque. One of the distinctive features of Islamic art is the use of Arabic writing; for the first time in history a Near Eastern script was developed into a fine art; the monumental angular early Kufic is worthy of comparison with Greek and Chinese inscriptions. It appears in all media, architectural friezes, stone, metal, wood, and textiles.

Textiles, and especially silk, were very important in Islamic life. The prophet Muhammad himself was a cloth merchant, with agents in Egypt, North Syria, and South Arabia; he paid as much as fifty gold dinars (over $200) for one red cloak; he wore silk garments and had figured hangings and curtains in his house. Within a few years of his death the textile industry was so important that special royal weaving factories (tiraz) were, like the coinage, a prerogative of the caliphate. The special fabrics, also called tiraz, were inscribed with the name of the caliph, the place and date, and all the official formula.

Thus it is no surprise that the earliest known Islamic silk was made in the factory in Ifriqiya (now Tunis), that the main design is the pre-Islamic all-over roundel pattern, with a border combining the Sasanian pearl band and the heart-shaped petals of the Hellenistic Dura flower, and that in beautiful, severely proportioned Kufic letters it bears the words, “The Servant of God, Marwan, Commander of the Faithful.” The reference is to either Marwan I, 683-685, or Marwan II, 744-750. This early silk epitomizes the Islamic spirit and the beginnings of Islamic art. Tunis was one of many silk-weaving regions in the Umayyad empire, the others being Egypt, the Yaman, Syria, Iraq, Persia, and Transoxiana.

The Umayyad dynasty came to an end in 750, but something of the earlier style continued into the following period of the Abbasids, who moved the capital of the Muslim world from Damascus to Baghdad. A small silk with a stylized palmette tree in a roundel (see p. 110) is derived from the Syrian pre-Islamic silks with the Greek weaver’s name Zacharios, but it is probably early Abbasid. Another Abbasid silk in this Museum (see p. 110) with two confronted horses in a roundel is probably east Persian; the drawing is strong and almost crude, the figures are set in empty space, and the colors are contrasting red, green, violet, and yellow. In a silk made about a hundred years later, the famous tenth-century silk of St.
Josse in the Louvre, showing elephants and two-humped Bactrian camels, made in Khurasan or Transoxiana, the animals still have an archaic quality but the Arabic inscription giving the owner’s name, Bukhtakin, is artistically far more developed and elegant.

The Saljuk style is named after the Turks who came in like a fresh breeze from Central Asia in the eleventh century, restoring the purity of the faith and a strong central government, for Abbasid power had by then disintegrated. But the style in all the arts, as well as in silk-weaving, continued uninterrupted. It was a heightening and refinement of the earlier styles, using stylized animals and birds among beautiful arabesques. In a type of compound cloth with designs in cream on a dark blue ground, there are griffons in a roundel set on a
checkered ground; and double star octagons filled with a diaper pattern set among vines with geometric stems and leaves whose tips curl over (see p. 110); and rampant griffons in the interlacings of broad strapwork bands developing out of a central star octagon. One of the most famous Seljuk silks, a twill in green and tan, has pairs of sphinxes among elegant, formal scrolls. Another, a triple cloth in blue, cream, and dark brown, has a pair of mounted falconers. Both of these are framed in elaborate interlaced bands. The old roundel composition continues in a splendid brown and cream double cloth with confronted lions whose tails end in dragons' heads, a motif taken from Ur-tuqid Mesopotamia; the roundel frame contains tiny medallions with other fantastic beasts. In all these Seljuk silks there is a fine balance and proportion between the complexity of detail and the plain, reserved spaces and a superb sense of design. Indeed, the Seljuk style, whether in Persia or Mesopotamia, is one of the high points in all Islamic art.

The Ayyubid silks of Syria, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, are inspired by the preceding Seljuk style. On one example pairs of birds and griffons are contained in undulating bands. On another silk in this Museum (see p. 111) griffons and foxes flank one vertical stem, while flying birds are paired beside the second, the whole being unified by fine scrolling vines bearing the Seljuk leaf and the half-palmette.

North Africa, Spain, and Sicily were very early conquered by the Muslims, and sericulture and silk-weaving were established in the last two by the early tenth century. In Sicily as late as the year 1072 an Arabic tombstone records the name of "Ibrahim the brocade-weaver." The earliest known Spanish silk is a tapestry-woven tiraz with the name of the Spanish caliph Hisham II, who ruled at the end of the tenth century; its style is obviously derived from that of the contemporary Fatimid tiraz. Later the influence of Syria and Mesopotamia became predominant, and silks made in Baghdad were imported into Spain. A minutely woven Spanish silk of the twelfth or early thirteenth century, sometimes attributed to Sicily, has the familiar Near Eastern roundels containing griffons, panthers, and deer, and the Seljuk double-headed eagle. But the roundels overlap, and the four-part palmette design between the main roundels is itself framed in circles which overlap again.

The geometric tendency of western Islamic art, as distinct from the art of the Near Eastern countries, is even more apparent in a gold brocade with two women playing tambourines (see p. 112). Here, instead of foliage or palmettes
between the roundels, the secondary design is a stiff eight-part geometric interlace. Both large and small roundels are connected by a continuous band. The human figures, reminiscent of the Hispano-Moresque ivories of the tenth and eleventh centuries, are unusually naturalistic for textiles. Their dresses have an all-over pattern, and the hanging lamp is just like the glass lamps of the thirteenth century in this Museum.

In the second half of the thirteenth century a stylistic change occurred with the introduction of Chinese influence, a result of the Mongol conquest. The Chinese lotus, peony, and animated birds and animals, the Chinese color scheme of deep blue with pale gold, and equally important, the Chinese satin weave, are all absorbed by the Muslim Near East, from Mongol Persia to Egypt and Syria (under Mamluk rule 1250-1516). An early fourteenth century silk from Mamluk Egypt (see p. 113) uses the satin weave in dark blue for the background, with the twill pattern in light tan. The ogival bands already known in Saljuk silks are here composed of arabesques, and the Arabic inscription is in the cursive Naskhi script, well suited to the pointed curves of the design. A Mamluk silk tapestry has the Chinese lotus on a vine in the beautiful Chinese blue and cream tones.

After the year 1500 the whole character of Islamic art changed. The old repertory of griffons, sphinxes, and the like and the composition based on the geometric plan disappeared, and the style became pictorial. Scenes in manuscripts illustrating Persian poetry, separate album pages by court painters, and also European figures are for the first time used in silk textiles. The three powers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Persia, and Mughal India, had great wealth, worldliness and sophistication. Their rich brocades and velvets, for use at the court, often have gold and silver backgrounds; they are

*Persian double cloth shot with silver thread, a marvel of minuteness. Actual size. About 1600, when Europeans appeared for the first time in Persian art. Rogers Fund, 1942*
painting into silk, the weaver, forming an all-over pattern, subtly overlapped the design unit, and, as the youth faces always in the same direction, he avoided monotony by changing the color of his dress. A double cloth of about 1600 is minute in scale (see p. 115): Europeans in a ship in their quaint foreign trousers and hats, a Chinese duck and fish, a rowboat, are all done in a lively right and left repeat, whose unit is not three fingers wide. This is technical perfection indeed.

Flowers run all through Safavid silks and velvets, single sprays, or bunches tied with ribbon, or growing plants. A velvet whose color scheme of black and white and gold appeals to our modern taste (see left) combines an almost illusionistic realism in the rock and the

sumptuous and spectacular, whether designed on a fine scale for garments and cushions or on a large scale for hangings. The style of this period as a whole has qualities akin to those of the baroque in Europe.

A Safavid brocade of about 1550 (see p. 114) is taken from the Persian landscape scenes in contemporary manuscript paintings. The park with its conventional cypress and flowering almond tree is meant to be a “wilderness” because of the lion and the leopard; but it is a far cry from Omar Khayyam’s “A flask of wine, a book of verse—and thou.” In translating the

left: Velvet in the Safavid flower style. The design combines realism in rocks and butterflies with the convention of artificial composite flowers. Early xvii century. Rogers Fund, 1930

below: Indian velvet. The flower designs of Mughal India, in contrast to the Persian, have a charming life and naturalism, perhaps because of the fine sympathetic botanical paintings made for Jahangir. Rogers Fund, 1930
butterfly with the extreme of convention in the Chinese cloud and the stylization of the composite flower. By a remarkable tour de force, the two stems of the plant have pierced though the leaf while growing upward.

Persian manners, poetry, and art, tempered by the Hindu tradition, were a predominating influence at the Mughal court in India. Jahangir, the great art patron (1605-1628), took time from his concern with the state to order paintings made of birds, animals, and plants. Perhaps it is because of this direct turning to nature that the Mughal flowering plants of the early seventeenth century in manuscripts, rugs, and velvets, while at first glance stiff and poised, have a life and intimacy that is full of charm (see p. 116).

The silk brocades and velvets of Ottoman Turkish textiles: below, a velvet; at right, a brocade. In the xvi and xvii century brocades and velvets of Ottoman Turkey, carnations, tulips, and hyacinths are crisp and delicate, but the chief effect is always of strength and boldness, because of the vigorous lines of the ogival composition. Rogers Fund, 1917, and Anonymous Gift, 1949

Turkey borrowed their ogival pattern from earlier Near Eastern design and their great lanceolate leaves and scattered flowers from Salavid Persia. Yet in spite of the finely drawn flowers the Turkish fabrics always have a sweeping vigor of line, and a rigid strength that make the Persian silks seem over-delicate and effeminate by contrast. The brocades, usually designed for garments, are on a fine scale, while the velvets, used for hangings, are large and bold in design. The formal ogival pattern is typical of the sixteenth century; later, freer patterns of diagonal and vertical floral sprays and branches were developed. The earlier Turkish textiles have a close relation with Venetian velvets, so much so that the two have sometimes been confused. Many Turkish brocades and velvets were made for the Italian market and Venetian textiles imitated the Turkish style. The Italian pomegranate of the fifteenth century also appears in the Turkish silks.