

## sehepunkte 23 (2023), Nr. 5

### Lesley Ellis Miller / Ana Cabrera Lafuente / Claire Allen-Johnstone (eds.): *Silk*

The allure of silk, more than any other material, helped to generate one of the most intellectually and visually portrayed popular myths - the *Seidenstrasse*, or Silk Road - a term coined by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905) in 1877 to refer to that cultural and artistic Eurasian network that was created not only through the trade of silk but also glass, metalwork, spices, religions, and, foremost, the interactions of nomadic populations with sedentary cultures. As an object of desire, silk has been playing an important role in trade and cultural exchanges between Eurasian empires from the pre-modern world, even after the Silk Road network fell at the end of the Mongol Empire in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, until the contemporary period. Attention has often been focused on Chinese silk and the secret surrounding its production, at least since the beginning of the first millennium CE. In the last two decades, however, attention has shifted to discourses regarding notions of globalization, interculturality, and trans-regionality, and has thus also extended to the Americas. An increasing number of exhibitions on the role of textiles and clothing, as well as various art objects and other items, in the construction of a global identity, have been organized in museums and institutions worldwide in the last twenty years since the seminal exhibition, *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 2014. Textiles, either ancient or modern, have also appeared more frequently in the art market and often sold at very high prices. They have eventually become the subjects of academic discourse and non-academic discussions.

Conceived as the catalogue of a textile exhibition by three museum curators, Leslie Ellis Miller, Ana Cabrera Lafuente, and Claire Allen-Johnstone, the book *Silk: Fibre, Fabric and Fashion* is a visual survey of one of the most important collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Comparing different visual sources, accompanied by sometimes long captions and special sections dedicated to specific topics in each chapter, this work aims to document the globalization of silk and its use in art, fashion, design, and religious spaces in vogue in the nineteenth century and the way it laid the foundations of today's *haute couture* in fashion. As previously stated, silk played an important role in history, and its "actions speak of the longevity and versatility ... as well as its economic and emotional value. They reveal, too, its potential to contribute to the twenty-first-century quest for ethical and sustainable fashion" (24). By captivating the imagination of the reader, the authors accompany them through a spectacular journey across the globe through silks of the modern period. The routes of this journey across the centuries are also well illustrated on a map in the introduction (33), which provides a brief overview of the history of silk, its characteristics, and its importance in societies worldwide.

Through five chapters that are beautifully and richly illustrated, the book provides the reader with a strong visual impression that, somehow, however, might distract from the texts, which, although brief, provide simple explanations and context. With more than 600 illustrations, including designers' sketches, textile swatches, Chinese and Japanese prints, clothing samples, textile accessories, weaving fragments, paintings, and more, this large volume touches on the global trade in silk. Each chapter opens with a couple of portraits and images of the tools or machinery used to achieve the results of one of the techniques discussed. It appears clear that the technical aspects are particularly dear to the authors who want to reinforce the importance of the processes behind the final silk products, besides their artistic value.


The book does not aim to be an academic or scientific work but rather to please the eyes and ears of the general reader with high-impact images and simple language. Nonetheless, it might be overwhelming. While a Chinese 'dragon robe' dated 1700-1800, a reinterpretation of a traditional imperial robe designed by

fashion designer Laurence Xu (b.1974) in 2010, and a 2014 Barbie doll of the actress Fan Bingbing (b.1981), who wore the robe at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013, all appear next to each other (456-57) and are intuitively comparable and assisted by the caption that explains that the imperial robe "has now become emblematic of its imperial past, particularly those made in the distinctive yellow color traditionally reserved for the emperor" (456), some readers may be tempted to speed through the pages and skip the texts, which provide helpful information.

Chinese textiles tailored in Italy (218), Jacquard-woven portraits of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert made in France next to a Jacquard-woven portrait of Chairman Mao Zedong (198-199), a pair of hand-knitted silk socks from Sulaimaniya province in Iraqi Kurdistan (260) followed by a pair of machine-knitted silk men's socks made in Britain (262), and a gown of plain weave silk with warp and weft resist-dyeing by Christian Dior dated 1956 (322) followed by an 1875 velvet gown made with the same technique from Bukhara (324) are only some of the examples that appear in the volume. The authors have not focused on one more than the other or followed a precise chronological order, but have rather given equal value and space to all and, thus, tried to highlight the global aspect of silk and the dialogue between East and West.

The book contains many high-quality images, informative brief captions, and helpful and well-researched sections dedicated to specific topics. Yet, it leaves the less attentive reader, whose eyes might not be trained to look at color hues and tones, design, or textiles, with questions regarding the similarities and differences between the use of the material in the East and West and its role in global fashion. Without any doubt, however, building upon their rich curatorial experience, Miller, Cabrera Lafuente, and Allen-Johnstone arouse curiosity about the use and consumption of silk in the modern and contemporary periods and the book provides an array of opportunities for further investigation.

**Rezension über:**

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