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THE VELVET REVOLUTION

Triumph of Ornament: Fifteenth-century Italian silk-weaving
 Abegg-Stiftung
 Riggisberg, Switzerland
 26 April – 8 November 2013
 Reviewed by Thomas Murray

Like nature's own Swiss clockwork, spring comes every year to the high Alpen meadows of Riggisberg: flowers bloom, cows graze, birds sing anew, glacier-covered mountains peek out from receding mists and the Abegg Stiftung opens its doors for the season. And, as always, a new exhibit of textile masterpieces is revealed. This year was no exception, with 15th-century Italian velvets being the theme, making good use of the fact that the foundation is blessed with perhaps the greatest collection in the world of these rare, very difficult to create, textiles.

The crowd arriving on the appointed day was composed of scholars, collectors and returning alumni of the Abegg Conservation Program, as well as current students and their mates – some old friends, all textile lovers. We were made welcome with fabulous hors d'oeuvres, meats, sweets and the finest of wines and waters.

Fortified, we were invited to the state of the art amphitheatre, overflowing with enthusiastic invitees. Senior curator Dr Michael Peter introduced his subject with well-prepared remarks and wonderful images: velvets so beautiful, luxurious, and regal that they were suitable for kings and cardinals; statements of sophistication, wealth and prestige in both secular and ecclesiastical contexts. By the end of his talk, even the non-German speakers knew that these textiles came with multiple layers of complexity, were very beautiful and clearly dear to the speaker's heart.



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Velvet, arguably the pinnacle of the weaver's craft, did not appear in 1400 *ex nihilo*; there were prototypes, Asian and European, from at latest the thirteenth century. It is said that the Chinese developed their own cut loop silks, but via a different technique to that used in Italy

Velvet is known in the West as a woven decorating technique that employed raising supplementary warp threads over a wire or fine metal rod. When the wires or rods are removed, loops are created, resulting in the three-dimensional sensibility so characteristic of velvet. Sometimes these silk loops are also cut to create open pile, and there may be differing pile heights, or areas of void, with precious metal threads of gold and silver showing through (1).

Dr Peter demonstrated a stylistic and technical progression that took place over the 15th century in weaving centres such as Venice, Genoa, Florence and Lucca. The first steps were stripes and spots, and from this humble beginning came, within the next one hundred years, some of the finest and most sophisticated patterns known, including pomegranate, artichoke and pineapple compositions.

These changes were incremental over ten and twenty-year intervals. As a layman, it was not always easy to determine which design came first. Simple did not always come before complex. In fact, by a number of measures, the opposite was true, for by the 16th century there came into being plush red, blue and green velvets, with thick



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pile and bold designs, that could hardly be called late and decadent. That would come, but not for another century or two.

After the lecture, we entered the museum proper and made our way to the special exhibition area at the back. This was easier said than done, because it entailed bypassing highlight after highlight of the permanent collection, re-installed in 2011, including the famous Late Roman tapestries from Egypt, Byzantine silks, Sogdian roundels, complete ancient Central Asian costumes, and so on.

But those who made the trek across this temple of textiles, so well suited for meditation and contemplation, were richly rewarded. Expressed in thick silk plush, this impeccably cleaned and mounted display brought to life all the points made during the introductory tutorial. One velvet I

was drawn to is perhaps the earliest on view, from the fourteenth century, a cloth with a repeat of cows' heads as an overall pattern (1).

I also liked being able to see some stunning 16th-century Ottoman velvets nearby the special exhibit, but not officially part of the show. These are thought to be direct copies of Italian velvets, following the marketplace success of the time for such luxury goods.

In sum, the Abegg has lived up to its reputation as Europe's finest textile museum and conservation department. They have with this show, as with all their efforts, done honour to the vision of Werner Abegg, a true friend of textiles if there ever was one.

Be forewarned, one viewing is not enough. You will want to come back again, as I have, to enjoy masterpieces of textile art in a most lovely bucolic setting.

1 Velvet showing eagles and cows' heads; one of the earliest known examples of a velvet with a figurative design. Italy, last quarter 14th century, silk. Abegg-Stiftung, 171

2 Gold-brocaded velvet (detail), Italy, ca. 1430-1440. Large blooms, leaves, tiny flowers, raspberries and patterned vines make up a pattern repeat that is an incredible 2.20 m high. The sophisticated, differing pile heights relate to the height of the metal bars that the threads were raised over. Gold thread has been used as a supplementary warp and the metal is visible on the voided areas. Abegg-Stiftung, 1976

3 Liturgical vestment made of two gold-brocaded velvets, Italy, ca. 1460-1480. Italian velvets of the 15th century were exclusive and expensive. They were affordable only for the very highest social circles and

were made into magnificent secular outfits or liturgical vestments. Abegg-Stiftung, 630

4 Multicoloured velvet with flowers and fruits, Italy, 1420-1430. Distinctive colour combinations and a powerful contrast between the background and meticulously drawn motifs add to the charm of this velvet, where even the tiniest flowers, elegantly curved stalks and serrated leaves are clearly visible. Abegg-Stiftung, 179