

Salmon skin, silk and symposia

HALI's peripatetic contributing editor **Thomas Murray** enjoys a packed week of richly varied Asian textile and tribal art delights in Hong Kong

I arrived in Hong Kong in November 2017 with the foreknowledge that the stars were in auspicious alignment for those who love textiles and tribal sculpture. I knew that I could visit Hong Kong University Museum for the last days of 'Fibers of Life: Ikat Textiles of the Indonesian Archipelago', curated by Peter ten Hoopen from his extensive collection (HALI 192, pp.92-95). I knew too that my week would include the opening in the same museum of 'Ifugao Sculpture: Expressions in Philippine Cordillera Art', a friend's collection and a subject very dear to my heart.

The morning of my first day I managed to charm my way into the two-day symposium 'Unroll and Unfold: Preserving Textiles and Thangkas to Last'—the final sign-up day had been three weeks before, but the staff could not have been more generous. For the next 48 hours I contemplated the broad range of topics presented by eighteen world experts. The meeting addressed two themes each day, the first being 'Conservation and Historical Studies on Thangkas', while the afternoon session was devoted to 'Textiles Along the Silk Road'. Fascinating and revelatory, these talks set a high bar.

At the end of the first day of the symposium, we were invited to a reception at the Hong Kong Museum of History and a preview of their special exhibition, 'Miles upon Miles: World Heritage along the Silk Road', showing until 5



1

March 2018. This proved to be a textile lover's delight, featuring some of the most important treasures of Central-Asian textiles that have come to light. Included among them was *The Great Hero* tapestry fragment (4), whose kinship with contemporaneous Late Roman weavings from Egypt commonly called Coptic is not to be missed.

An indigo-dyed painted-resist textile likely to have come from India, perhaps by way of Bactria in the 4th century, displayed marvellous Indic iconography, including a celestial harvest goddess and dragon forms akin to the earliest (10th-century) fragments of monochrome Indian trade cloth found in Fustat, now housed at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (1).

However, the single most important artefact on display was the famous *Yingpan Man*, a tall Central-Asian fellow laid out as found in great luxury, sans bones. He wears a striking death mask of hemp adorned with facial features and gold leaf, and is dressed in fine silks including a tunic that portrays gladiators and leaping goats. He is neither Han Chinese nor Caucasian but rather perhaps an Indo-Aryan trader who amassed great wealth in life. These precious artefacts were loaned from the Xinjiang Museum in Urumqi.

Day two of the conference was equally captivating. The first session covered the topic of 'Court Textiles and Ethnic Costumes'. I really sat up straight when Marion Kite spoke of the challenges of conserving a

1 Blue and white wax-dyed cotton fabric, China, Eastern Han Dynasty. Xinjiang Museum Collection

2 Warp ikat cloth (detail), Kisar, Moluccas, first half 20th century. Hand-spun cotton, 0.75 x 2.80 m (2' 5" x 9' 2"). Peter ten Hoopen Collection

3 Warp ikat cloth, Savu, Indonesia, pre-1950. Cotton, 0.54 x 1.59 m (1' 9" x 5' 2"). Peter ten Hoopen Collection

4 Tapestry fragment with centaur and warrior, China, Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE). Xinjiang Museum Collection



2



3



4

salmon-skin robe from Siberia—not a trivial problem, and one I have had to deal with. My old friend Diana Collins, the doyenne of textile conservation in Hong Kong, chaired the afternoon session, 'Crafts and Art of Textile Artifacts'. Another old friend and much-admired collector, Chris Hall, gave a compelling talk on Chinese rank badges, of which there is an astonishing variety for all occasions. Please wrap up the Ming badges for me!

That evening, Hall kindly invited a committed group of us to view pieces from his private collection. We saw treasures ranging from some of the oldest surviving Han-dynasty robes to textiles of the Republican period and the Cultural Revolution. I loved seeing such quality, and the curators and conservators who were with me each brought their own expertise to the table. This was yet another highlight of this magic week.

The next day I made my way over to the Indonesian ikat exhibition mentioned above. This was one of the primary reasons for my visit. It was the last chance to see Peter ten Hoopen's collection, and I am glad I made the effort.

There are too few Indonesian textile exhibitions these days, especially considering the importance of this world-class dyeing and weaving tradition. Peter, as curator, selected the HKUM as venue to reach the younger generation of students, trying to encourage them to see that these textiles form part of their greater Asian heritage.

Sharing his knowledge and textiles is the result of a deeply-felt ethos, as described on his website, where his collection is posted along with significant essays.

Didactic materials guided a greater understanding of the textiles. Their presentation in the open, not behind glass, made it possible to examine the weave



5

very closely. Many pieces had royal heritage, indicated by the geometric patterns known to be derived from double-ikat silk trade cloths from India, known as *patola*.

Although ikats from the east filled the majority of the space, there were also interesting *pua kombu* by the Iban Dayak of Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo. More subtle Batak textiles revealed sophisticated designs, as did other Sumatran textiles from the south, a Kaur *tapis*, two old Palambang/Bangka Island weft ikat silks, and a double-ikat *geringsing* from Bali as well as a cotton single-weft ikat from nearby Nusa Penida.

Ten Hoopen is to be applauded for his achievement; he has made an effort to reach out to those of us already firmly committed as well as to the next generation—online, in exhibition and through a forthcoming book.

A couple of days later I followed up on Teresa Coleman's invitation to see her long-held private collection of Ming and Qing costumes and textiles, one that could put most museums to shame, and which is now on the market as a complete group.

I must mention the Philippine tribal art exhibition, also held at the HKUM, featuring a private Manila collection. What a turnout! And I mean not only a room well populated with so many *bulul* (rice deities) and *punanham* (ritual boxes), but also the strong support from the Filipino community. Ministers, senators and mayors were all there to celebrate the tribal culture of their country. This is a big change: in the past couple of generations, it was far more their Hispanic heritage that would bring out the cream of society. There were no

5 Qing noblewoman's surcoat, *bufu*, China, 19th century. Embroidered silk satin. Teresa Coleman Fine Arts, Hong Kong

textiles but after an amazing week, it was nice to see some good wood, with an accompanying book.

Also on view were a worthy permanent collection of Chinese cultural items and two great temporary exhibitions, one on Nestorian Crosses, the second, propaganda paintings from North Korea. They put across remarkable statements, including 'Grow more rabbits'—a peaceful ideal!

I had the pleasure to meet Dr Florian Knothe, the HKUM Director and Dr Fong Fong Chen, Curator, both of whom are to be commended for producing such significant exhibitions back to back.