



Weaving China's Past: The Amy S. Clague Collection of Chinese Textiles

Claudia Brown

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Western admiration of China's silk textiles dates back at least to the days of the Roman empire. The establishment of the Chinese republic caused a large number of imperial costumes, no longer needed for court ritual, to enter collectors' hands. Textiles curators have studied these in depth, yet American museums are just beginning to explore the broader topic of Chinese textiles, and to present splendid examples of the art along with porcelains, bronzes, enamels, and other decorative art traditions of China. This work examines an extraordinary private collection of Chinese textiles of diverse styles, functions, and techniques. The collection is remarkable for its chronological expanse, with works ranging in date from the Song (960-1279) and Jin (1115-1234) dynasties through the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). The book examines the relationship of these textiles to the greater fabric of Chinese art. Pieces in the collection have been subjected to microscopic examination and radiocarbon dating as well as full examination by a textiles conservator, and the results of these studies are included. The yarn type, thread count, weave, and supplementary materials are identified. Several of the brocades feature gold fibers, and these have been analyzed to identify specific techniques. A remarkable discovery was the use of peacock feathers twisted with silk fibers in a kesi woven during the Qing dynasty. The study of Chinese silk textiles, like the study of Chinese ceramics and metalwork, offers a glimpse into a complex tradition in which both organized industry and individual creativity played a role. Traditional China viewed spinning, weaving, and embroidery as divinely inspired arts to be practiced dutifully in the home. Concurrently, however, luxury textiles were commissioned for religious, state, and private use. Silk was essential in China's foreign policy, used along with gifts of tea and silver to pacify borderlands. Together with porcelain, silk became a major commodity for export to Europe. Elaborate techniques were developed for producing complex designs in both brocade and embroidery. During China's later dynasties, textile arts were pursued as fine arts, appreciated on equal footing with painting and calligraphy.

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