Ancient West Mexican Clothing And Its Ecuadorian Origins: New Evidence Of Maritime Contacts

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ANCIENT WEST MEXICAN CLOTHING AND ITS ECUADORIAN ORIGINS:
NEW EVIDENCE OF MARITIME CONTACTS (Precis only.*)
by
Patricia Rieff Anawalt

Evidence of ancient cultural contacts between coastal Ecuador and the
mountains of West Mexico exists in clothing similarities between the two areas, namely
tunic-like shirts and short breeches for males and a tropical mode of dress for females.
This non-Mesoamerican attire is illustrated in the early sixteenth century codex
Relacion de Michoacan and also appears on mortuary figurines from the deep shaft
tombs of Ixtlan del Rio, Nayarit (400 B.C.- A.D. 400). Coeval prototypes of this West
Mexican clothing occur archaeologically along that section of the Ecuadorian coast
which was the homeland of long-distance merchant navigators. Their trade goods,
described by the Spanish, included local-style garments made of wool, a fabric foreign
to Mesoamerica. The adoption of this exotic apparel by the West Mexican elite implies
an association of great worth and power with those who introduced it. That these
agents were Ecuadorian maritime traders is further suggested by zoological evidence.*

*This presentation will appear in a forthcoming issue of American Anthropologist.

STUDIO AND SOIREE:
THE USE AND MISUSE OF CHINESE TEXTILES IN A EUROPEAN
SETTING
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George Smith's painting, 'The Rightful Heir', exhibited
at the Royal Academy in 1874, serves as a melodramatic
introduction to this paper. Sombre-suited gentlemen are
depicted sitting around a table studying the disputed
will. Two frightened ladies in crinolines and a small
boy in a velvet suit confront the wicked usurper who is
wearing a Chinese dragon robe. This angry Victorian was
not unique in his choice of dressing gown.

The dragon robe, familiar from museum collections all
over Europe and North America, was used in China in the
seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as an
hierarchical garment. It was worn by bearers of rank in
the Chinese bureaucracy. Its salient features are the
hem design of stripes representing water with turbulent
waves above, mountain peaks rising from the water and
symmetrically-placed dragons among clouds covering the
main body of the garment. It closes to one side with
spherical buttons on shanks fastening through loops. The
robe, when worn correctly, was part of an ensemble that
included a plain dark overgarment with a rank badge sewn
to back and front. This overgarment concealed all but
the hem and the horsehoof-shaped cuffs of the dragon
robe.

The furious relative in the genre painting by Smith is as
far as he can be from the dignified mandarin of popular
imagination. How was it that these meritorious
administrators' uniforms, particularly the dragon robes,
came to be transmitted to English drawing rooms even
before the fall of the Chinese empire, and what made them
especially attractive to Europeans?

To answer the first part of that question, how they came
to Europe, we should note three points. First, a Chinese
who had been given rank and office in the civil service
did not have his dragon robe ensemble bestowed on him as
part of his appointment. He, his family or a benefactor
had to purchase the robes. They could be more or less
grand according to his means. They could be especially
ordered or bought off-the-peg. So, in a sense, they had
always been commodities and although this was not how the
foreigners who bought them as souvenirs wished to see
them, it did make them available. Secondly, there were
plenty of them. Twenty thousand civil and military
officials helped govern the country during the Ming
dynasty and the number was not much fewer during the
succeeding Qing dynasty, from which most of the extant
dragon robes come. Thirdly, their use was not confined
solely to officials. Bridegrooms traditionally wore the