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Textiles and Museum Displays: Visible and Invisible Dimensions

Ruth Barnes

Our museum displays say much about what a society values. As places to remember our history and celebrate artistic creativity of past and present, they reflect what attracts and interests us in our own culture, and in the cultures of distant places and times. Inevitably these interests change and shift over time. In my own work as textile curator in two major museums, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, and the Yale University Art Gallery, over a period of almost twenty-five years, I detect a marked change in attitude to textile history and collections. I am uncertain, though, whether this reflects a general shift in museum attitudes, or whether personal interests and developments in scholarship are responsible.

Both the Ashmolean Museum and the Yale University Art Gallery are teaching museums, established for that purpose as part of universities with international reputations. Their collections cover many fields, from Near Eastern archaeology to Asian art and Western painting. They also currently are, at heart, art museums, not museums of history or ethnography. The latter point may create a certain tension for those curators who value the context these two fields provide.

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford has a significant collection of more than 6000 textiles, many of them remarkable for their value as works of art or as outstanding study collections. The Department of Antiquities has Egyptian Pharaonic textiles, as well as an exceptional collection of tapestry-woven fragments from Late Antiquity (Fig. 1). The Western Art Department has magnificent tapestries and fine English embroideries.



Fig. 1 Tapestry fragment. Egypt, late Roman period. Linen. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford AN 1941.3.

The most remarkable collections, though, are in the Department of Eastern Art, with more than 3000 textiles from China, South Asia, and the Islamic world. Most prominent is an exceptional collection of over 2000 Indian and early Islamic textiles brought together by the Egyptologist Percy Newberry and his wife Essie (Fig. 2).¹

¹ Newberry lived in Egypt for long periods between the 1890s and late 1920s, and during this time he was able to gather his remarkable collection. He offered it to the Ashmolean Museum in 1946. An inventory list was drawn up in the early 1950s, but the collection remained unaccessioned. It was initially housed in the



Fig. 2 Mordan and resist painted fragment. Gujarat, India, traded to Egypt, 13th century. Cotton. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford EA1990.970.

Yet when I started working in the museum in 1990, only some of the tapestries and a few framed ‘Coptic’ textile fragments were on display. The Islamic, Indian and Chinese galleries did not have a single textile on view. When I mentioned the depth of the holdings, even some of my colleagues looked at me with surprise and asked: ‘Do we have any textiles?’

I was initially employed to catalogue the Indian trade textiles. I was fortunate enough to be able to spend several years researching this most important collection – world-wide – of more than 1200 Indian trade textiles for the Islamic market, as well as more than 1000 early Islamic embroideries. A detailed historical and technical analysis could be carried out. Radiocarbon dating at the Oxford Research Laboratory for Archaeology and Art History resulted in a chronology for the material that advanced our understanding of textile production and mobility in the Islamic and South Asian world between the 10th and the 15th century.² Research on the Indian textiles was completed in the mid-1990s, when museum collections were still primarily published in book form.³ Now the collections are also available electronically through the Ashmolean’s website, and they are a major feature of the Eastern Art Department’s presence on the site.⁴ Considering that most of the textiles in the collection had not even been accessioned when I started my research, this is a great change for the better. But we need to remember that it is not enough to make material accessible. It needs to be interpreted, and interpretations may change. Here I want to introduce an example of how collection research sometimes can produce unexpected connections.

Discovery in a Lacquer Chest

Department of Antiquities, but was transferred to the Eastern Art Department in the 1980s. At this stage about two thirds of the Islamic embroideries finally received accession numbers. The Indian and remaining Islamic textiles were only accessioned after my work on the collection started in 1990. See Barnes 1997: I: 3-5, 13-20 for the collection’s history.

² Barnes 1996, 2000, 2007

³ Barnes 1997

⁴ <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/6/1272>

Initially my post was funded by a Getty grant, to catalogue and research the extensive Indian trade textiles. The grant also supported a textile conservator – a position never before held in the museum. Occasionally we ventured a bit further into the collections, to discover new delights not previously exhibited. A special treasure came to light on one occasion, when we were reorganizing some of the Chinese and Indian textile drawers. One drawer was set to rest briefly on an English 18th century Chinoiserie lacquer chest – at a staff meeting the Japanese curator had recently mentioned that it was filled with ‘Japanese armour of no value’. We both were curious, and the lid went up: inside were not odd bits of East Asian weaponry, but all the colours of the rainbow - the chest was stuffed full with 19th century Central Asian ikat garments (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Man's robe, Eastern Turkestan, pre-1869. Warp ikat, silk warp, cotton weft; cotton lining, quilted. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford EAX3977.

The coats' accession numbers were prefixed with an 'X', a category used for certain Indian and some Islamic and Chinese objects in the Department that had originally been kept in the University's old Indian Institute. Prior to the foundation of Oxford's Oriental Institute, the Indian Institute provided the teaching in Sanskrit, as well as Indian history and religion, and in general it acquired Asian collections of artefacts as accidental additions rather than as part of a developed collection policy. As the Institute did not have a full-time curator, the record keeping usually remained short and sporadic. When the accession books in the Department of Eastern Art were now checked for the documentation of the garments, it was discovered that they were originally entered merely as 'Shaw Collection, coats from Chinese Central Asia', without further information about the year of accession, or who the donor Shaw had been.

The garments were in excellent condition and looked stunning in their vivid colourfulness; it was therefore decided that the Department should mount a small, temporary exhibition of them. It was my task to curate it, and as the date for the proposed exhibition came closer, I began to give some thought to commenting on the collection. Without further documentation available in the museum, how was one to explain the material? I turned to the previous head of the Department, Mary Treager, at this time already retired. She had been curator of the Chinese collection, which included some Central Asian material. She remembered the coats,

but had no further information about their provenance. Her comment was: ‘they have been around from the beginning of the Department, but probably should have gone to Pitt Rivers...’ This made me think of the Pitt Rivers Museum as a possible source of further information, maybe even for similar material.⁵ I contacted the documentation curator and asked her about Central Asian material among the Museum’s holdings.

The answer was indeed interesting. The Pitt Rivers Museum also had some Central Asian material collected by someone named Shaw, but in this case the collector was referred to more explicitly as ‘Robert Shaw, author of *Visits to High Tartary, Yarkand and Kashgar*’. The collection also had been kept in the Indian Institute initially, but was transferred to the Pitt Rivers in the 1930s. None of the objects were textiles, but included, e.g., carpenter’s tools, tinder boxes, pipes, and writing implements. Still, the connection was a promising lead: was this Robert Shaw identical with the Shaw who collected the Ashmolean’s coats? I spent an afternoon at the University’s Bodleian Library, looking up Robert Shaw’s book, published in 1871, two years after his travels.⁶ It made for riveting reading; not only was it a lively and informative account of travelling in Central Asia in the mid-19th century, but it included numerous references to receiving, and wearing, local garments. Could these be the coats in our collection?



Fig. 4 Robert Shaw. British Library, India Office collections Mss Eur F197/36.

After discovering Shaw’s publication, I spoke to a friend who was at that time reading a biography of Francis Younghusband, infamous for leading the British 1904 expedition into Tibet: she pointed out a photograph in the biography that showed Robert Shaw, dressed in Central Asian costume (Fig. 4). It was included because Younghusband was Shaw’s nephew and a great admirer of his uncle.⁷ The coat Shaw was wearing in the photograph could easily have been one from the Ashmolean’s collection. The photograph itself was apparently from a source in the Younghusband collection in the India Office Library in London. This proved to be a significant clue, although it was dismaying to discover that the India Office Library’s

⁵ The Ashmolean and Pitt Rivers Museums are both part of Oxford University, with their collections potentially available for teaching purposes; the Ashmolean Museum houses the University’s art and classical archaeology collections, and the Pitt Rivers is Oxford’s anthropology museum. It is one of the world’s most outstanding ethnographic museums and often excels in the quality of its documentation.

⁶ See Shaw 1871.

⁷ See French 1994.

Younghusband collection consisted of some 600 items, each containing dozens of documents: the haystack was growing. I decided to start with material relating to Younghusband's mother, who was Robert Shaw's sister.

Among the first ten items ordered up from the archives was a family album written and illustrated by Clara Younghusband, prepared in memory of her brother Robert and giving an account of their childhood in England, Robert's schooling, their travels, and eventually their years in northern India, where she joined him on his tea plantation. Her account included her brother's return from his expedition in 1869, and she described the many coats, hats, cloaks and other items he had brought back, which used to amuse the family greatly, as they all dressed up in them and pretended to be at an Oriental court (Fig. 5).



Fig.5 Clara Shaw (later Younghusband) in Central Asian Dress. British Library, India Office collections Mss Eur F197/36.

This was of course very exciting, until I came across the remark that all of these items had 'since been donated to the South Kensington Museum, where they can be seen on display in wall cases'. Was the identification of the Oxford garments with Shaw's expedition possibly wrong after all, or were there further collections at the Victoria & Albert Museum (formerly called the South Kensington Museum)? The old documentation of the V&A was checked, and it did turn out that the entire Shaw collection had indeed once been recorded in the Museum's accession books. Most of them are now marked with the comment: 'Loan withdrawn and transferred to Oxford, 1881', leaving behind in the V&A such treasures as a 'white knob mounted on brass ornament' and a packet of seeds. At the moment we do not know why the family decided to move the collection from the Victoria & Albert Museum to Oxford University, but there can be no doubt that the material documented in the Ashmolean and Pitt Rivers museums was collected during Robert Shaw's expedition in 1868/69.⁸

The part of Central Asia he visited (in the 19th century known as Eastern Turkestan, present-day Xinjiang) had been under Chinese rule for centuries. Its Muslim Uighur population had little in common with its Han Chinese rulers, though, and in the early 1860s a revolt had

⁸ See Barnes 2005 for a further discussion of the collection.

broken out throughout the region, which brought the Muslim leader Yakub Beg to power. He made himself the ruler of Kashgaria, as the region was now called. Eventually his reign extended to Urumchi, Turfan, and Hami, and all of Eastern Turkestan was independent of China for the next ten years. Only in the mid-1870s did the Emperor send out an army to reconquer former Chinese Central Asia. At that time Yakub Beg retreated to his capital, where he died in 1877, either of a stroke or poison.

Robes of Honour in Yarkand and Kashgar

It was Yakub Beg who Robert Shaw set out to meet in 1868. From Ladakh in northern India he travelled to Yarkand and Kashgar. He recounted in his diary (published as his *Visits to High Tartary...*) that when he arrived in Yarkand he was presented with robes, caps, and other pieces of garments (Fig. 6); shortly after his arrival the local governor supplied Shaw's house with all comforts needed, including chairs and a bedstead, but also sent him

a skull-cap such as they all wear under their turban, [as well as] a tall velvet cap turned up with fur,... a pair of high boots, and, finally, a long robe of crimson silk thickly wadded,

which was sent because the weather was getting cold.

There was a considerateness in all this that made me feel quite friendly towards the old Shaghawal (governor) for the trouble he had taken to find out the things that would be agreeable to me, attending as much to my comfort as to the mere show of giving presents (1871: 186-7).



Fig. 6 Skull Cap. Eastern Turkestan, pre-1869. Silk and cotton embroidery on silk, quilted. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford EAX7399.

The presentation of garments was only partly made to assist the comfort of the travellers; just as important was the symbolic intention of the gesture, as the gift of a robe was a sign of honouring the recipient. The custom has a long history in Central Asia and the Islamic world.

By January 11th Shaw had arrived in Kashgar, and on the evening of January 12th he wrote a long account of his first day:

Early this morning all my presents for the King [Yakub Beg] were set in order on trays, and about nine o'clock various ushers and officials came to fetch me...From my

door to the entrance of the palace, a distance of a quarter of a mile, a broad avenue had been formed in the crowd, whose bright robes of various colours had the effect of a living kaleidoscope. Entering the gateway, we passed through several large quadrangles, whose sides were lined with ranks upon ranks of brilliantly attired guards, all sitting in solemn silence, so that they seemed to form part of the architecture of the buildings... Entire rows of these men were clad in silken robes, and many seemed to be of high rank from the richness of their equipments... The whole effect was curious and novel. The numbers, the solemn stillness, and the gorgeous colouring gave a sort of unreality to this assemblage of thousands. In the innermost court, smaller than the rest, only a few select attendants were seated. Here none entered with me except my conductor... Approaching a kind of pavilion, with a projecting verandah roof, elaborately painted in arabesques, I entered a side door. I passed through a small antechamber, and was conducted into a large audience chamber, or hall, in the middle of which, close to a window, was seated a solitary individual, whom I at once knew must be the King. I advanced alone, and when I drew near, he half rose on to his knees and held out both hands to me. I grasped them in the usual Toorkee manner, and at his invitation sat down opposite him (1871:260-61).

Pleasantries followed, including polite offerings of friendship and hospitality from the ruler. At the end of the meeting, Shaw reports that Yakub Beg called to an attendant, who brought in a pink satin robe, and

the King dismissed me very graciously after the robe had been put on me. I rejoined my conductor at the gateway of the inner court, and returned home through the same brilliant assemblage. At each successive gateway my party was swollen by the accession of those who had been left behind there as not worthy to proceed farther with me (1871:263).

Thus ended the first meeting with Yakub Beg, and Shaw described it with considerable satisfaction, as he assumed that he had made the right impression. Unfortunately, he soon discovered that Yakub Beg had virtually placed him under house arrest, and he was not allowed to leave for the next three months.

Finally, at the beginning of April 1869, Shaw had two more meetings with Yakub Beg. He was now told that he could return to India, carrying with him the message that the ruler of Kashgaria wanted to establish diplomatic links with England. The meetings ended again with the giving of robes of honour to Robert Shaw; at the last encounter (April 6, 1869) he made the following diary entry:

Kashgar, Tuesday... This morning the Sircar⁹ brought me as a parting present from the King bags of gold and silver, and some gold-dust in paper, saying they were for my private expenses. I estimate their value at about £690. Presently he reappeared, with about £45 of silver for the Moonshee.¹⁰ Again, he brought me a robe of crimson satin, gorgeous with gold and embroidery, and a high velvet cap, and other robes for myself, the Moonshee, and all the servants (1871: 358).

⁹ The *sircar* is a bursar or treasurer.

¹⁰ A *munshi* is a scribe.

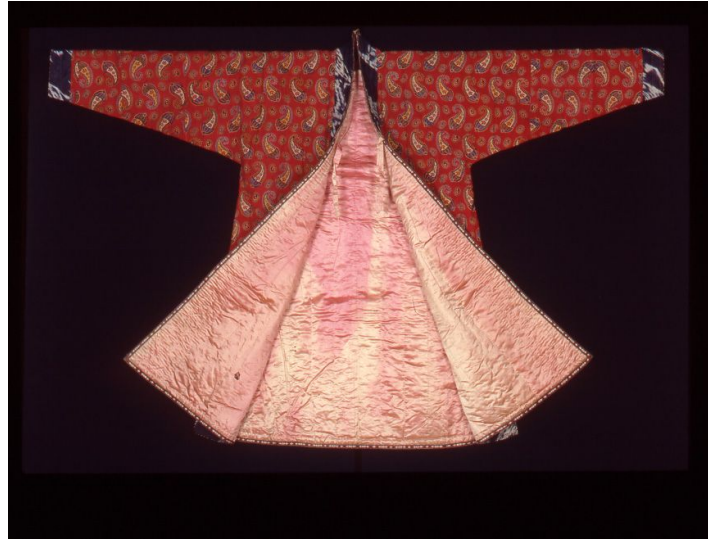


Fig. 7 Man's robe presented to Robert Shaw by Yakub Beg January 12, 1869. Satin silk, cotton lining (inside out). Ashmolean Museum, Oxford EAX3976.

To what degree can one actually match up the coats with gifts specifically mentioned by Shaw? In at least two instances this is indeed possible. The pink robe presented on the first visit to Yakub Beg on January 12th, 1869, almost certainly is identical with a coat in the collection that is of the most intense pink satin, but mistakenly has been accessioned with its lining turned inside out (Fig. 7). Apparently the curator who accessioned the collection thought it impossible that the pink should be on the outside of a man's coat.

The second example is, if anything, even more convincing. Among the photographs in Clara Younghusband's family album is one showing Robert Shaw with the men who accompanied him in his travels. He is wearing an elaborately embroidered coat (Fig. 8). When the photograph is compared to the Ashmolean's collection, there is no doubt: the embroidery of his coat is identical to the work found on the finest of the garments, a red satin robe embroidered with silk and gold and silver thread, with a magnificent yellow, blue, red and white silk ikat lining (Fig. 9). It is the robe Shaw received on the day of departure from Kashgar, 6 April 1869. It has now been connected again with the memory of its first European owner.



Fig. 8 Robert Shaw and his expedition companions after the return from Kashgar, 1869. British Library, India Office collections MS Eur F197/36.



Fig. 9 Man's robe presented to Robert Shaw by Yakub Beg on the morning of April 6, 1869, before his departure from Kashgar. Silk satin embroidered with gold and silver metal thread couching and silk satin stitch, silk warp ikat lining. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford EAX3975.

The Recognition of Textile Collections

When the Ashmolean's director Christopher Brown started to plan a complete renovation of the museum about ten years ago, I was keen to be involved in the development, as I saw it as an opportunity finally to give the textile collections a new prominence. It was highly gratifying to see this taken up, as I was given three new galleries to curate: a textile-dedicated gallery and two galleries devoted to the cross-cultural links that the museum wanted to explore for the first time in its history ('Asian Crossroads' and 'West Meets East'). After years of research on Indian Ocean trade and work on early Islamic textiles with a strong cross-cultural context, the museum's renovation theme of 'crossing cultures, crossing time' seemed perfectly natural to me. Textiles move easily between cultures, and they are well-documented as transmitters of patterns and iconography.

My experience at the Ashmolean Museum shows that ultimately it is the curator's perseverance and commitment that brings a collection to the forefront. He or she has to work with colleagues who may initially not be aware of the relevance of their institution's textile collection. This certainly was my experience in Oxford. We also know that institutions once dedicated to strong textile research may lose that commitment with a change of leadership. One case in point is the Museum of Cultures in Basel, Switzerland, where Alfred Bühler had made research on the museum's important textile collection a priority for himself and his students from the 1940s onwards. Under his leadership, several textile studies were completed that have become standard works in the field. Bühler died in 1983, but his students continued this strong textile research focus into the next generation. However, the appointment of a new director in the late 1990s brought significant changes. She clearly articulated disdain for textiles and filled new positions with curators who had no interest in research on this aspect of the museum's collection. The textiles were rehoused and placed under the supervision of the conservation department. The collection is 'managed' now, but it no longer has an active role in the museum. Institutions dedicated to the study of textiles can

turn into places where bureaucratic management has taken over; access to the collections can become difficult even for the curator, let alone for the visiting scholar or amateur. This is not desirable.

In 2010 I moved from the Ashmolean Museum to the Yale University Art Gallery. In my new role as curator for Indo-Pacific art I am responsible for a much more varied departmental collection, including sculpture, metalwork, and jewellery, although the collection of Indonesian textiles is of foremost importance and quality (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10 Shouldercloth (*limar*), Palembang, South Sumatra, 18th century. Silk, gold metal thread, sequins; weft ikat, embroidery. Robert J. Holmgren and Anita E. Spertus Collection. Promised Gift Thomas Jaffe, YUAG ILE2006.4.145.

My arrival also has sparked off a new discussion in the Gallery about the need to consolidate the storage and access to textiles throughout the museum. The long-term plan is to develop a textile study center that facilitates research on material that – once again – has been neglected for decades. Yet it includes important collections, among them textiles from the late antique site of Dura-Europos, pre-Columbian cultures, and some 2000 textiles that were collected by Phyllis Ackerman, who, with her husband Arthur Upham Pope, did so much to establish the study of Persian art from the Islamic period. The negotiations for space and possible collaboration with Yale's Peabody Museum are still in the early stages. But we are all in agreement that we do not want the center to be managed by its own bureaucracy, but keep it firmly under curatorial control. A study center has to be about access to, and research on, the collections, not about management.

The major part of this paper has dealt with the importance of research on the collections. Even the most dedicated curator only can bring a collection to its full fruition if he or she is given the time to work on it and learns to see it in wider context. No new media can replace this basic requirement. And new media can only reflect what the curator is able to contribute. However, there is no doubt that technological advances and electronic information can greatly enhance our collections. The Yale Art Gallery probably sees itself even more as a place for 'art' than the Ashmolean does. But my department, which focuses on maritime Southeast Asia and its many different cultures, needs to explain the context of the objects we display. Both art historical and ethnological interpretations need to be brought into the display, in order to make sense of the collections. I have just opened a major new exhibition called 'East of the Wallace Line, Monumental Art from Indonesia and New Guinea'. The

exhibition is about the interface between eastern Indonesia and western New Guinea, and about cultures that have cross-fertilized each other for many centuries or even millennia. Yet I do not want to fill the walls of a magnificent display space with photographs, charts and long text labels. Here electronic advances can provide the answer. I have found it in the creation of an app for iPads that are placed into the gallery space at the entrance, and with its help visitors can explore wider cultural contacts and common themes, can look at archival photographs that show the objects on view still in situ in their place of manufacture, and read about the communities who made them.

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