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NEW

DIRECTIONS: Examining the Past,
Creating the Future.

A FRAGMENTED TREASURE ON DISPLAY. THE TURFAN TEXTILE COLLECTION AND THE HUMBOLDT FORUM.

Mariachiara Gasparini

In 2011, the first time I saw a few fragments of the Turfan textile collection, held in the *Museum für Asiatische Kunst* (Museum of Asian Art) in Berlin, I had no idea that they represented only a small part of a range of about three hundred fifty compounds that, different in style and technique and datable to between the eighth and the fourteenth centuries, comprised the collection. The fragments were gathered, together with wall paintings, architectural wooden structures, sculptures, and other tools of daily use, during the four Prussian-Turfan expeditions conducted by Albert Grünwedel (1856-1935) and Albert von Le Coq (1860-1930) at the beginning of the last century, between 1902 and 1914, in the Xinjiang Province of China. Brought back to Berlin, and preserved in the original *Museum für Völkerkunde* (Ethnological Museum), during World War II, the collection suffered many losses, items which, luckily, were photographed, and therefore preserved in analogical form in the archive of the present Museum of Asian Art in Dahlem, south-west Berlin.

Discovered along the Northern Silk Road around the Taklamakan Desert, the majority of the weaving fragments were gathered in the city of Kotscho (or Gaochang, according to Chinese sources), near the present Turfan, capital of the Uighur Kingdom established in 856. Today the squared fortified city appears to be completely eroded, but during my fieldwork, in the summer of 2014, I was able, by following the original map drawn by Grünwedel, who marked important locations with Greek letters, to identify the sites where most of the fragments and objects were discovered (Fig. 1; 2).



Figure 1. City of Kotscho today, Xinjiang Province, China. Image by author.

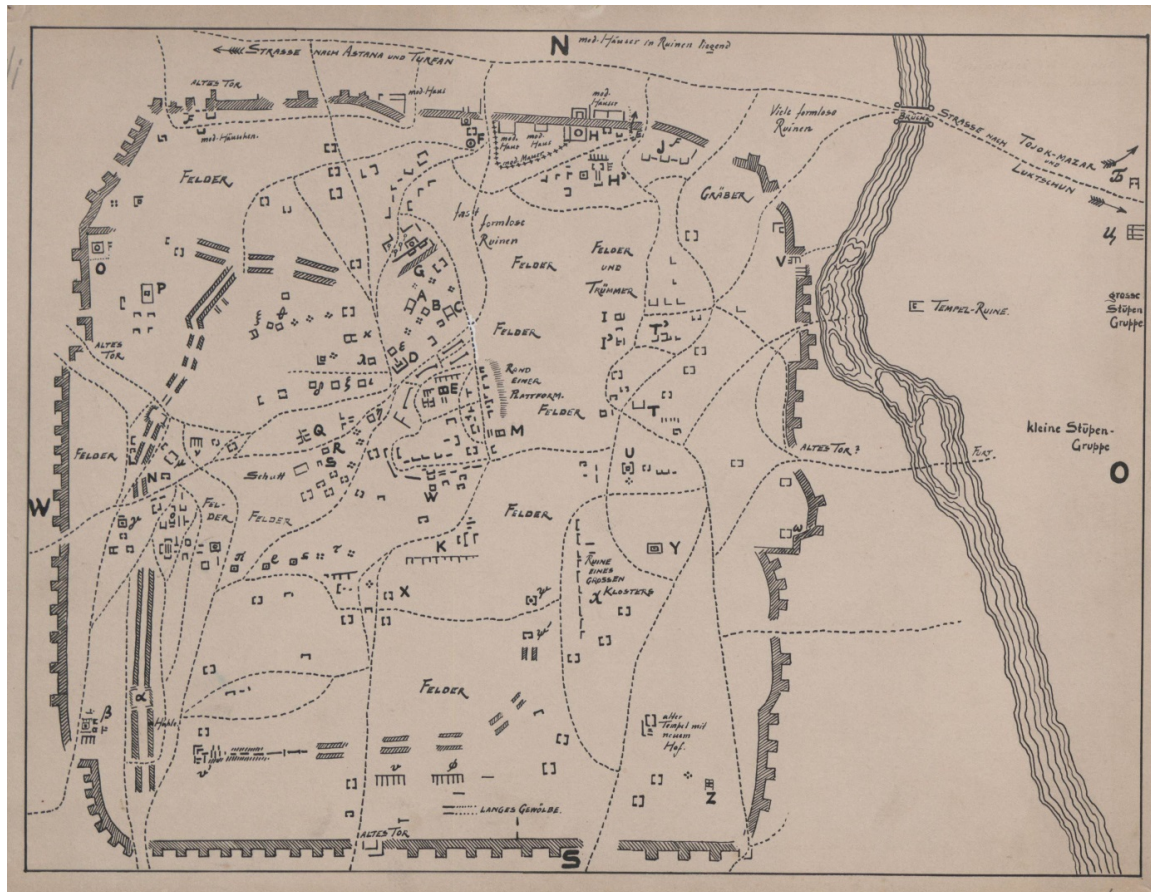
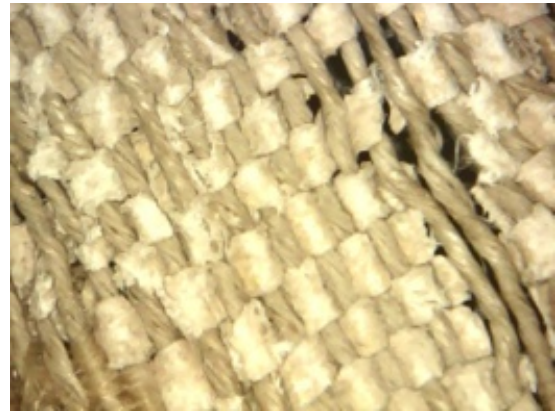


Figure 2. Map of the city of Kotscho drawn by Albert Grünwedel. Turfan Collection, Berlin (MIK6572). © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Museum für Asiatisch Kunst.

The technical analysis and the digitizing of the collection that I undertook in the summer of 2012, thanks to the Department of Central Asian Art of the Berlin museum and the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) at the British Library, have permitted me to identify not only the structures of the compounds, but also the styles that can be attributed to various historical periods and to different cultures cohabiting in the same area. This process of identification would not have been possible without the comparison with the well-known pieces discovered in the cave of Mogao in Dunhuang, Gansu Province, or other fragments now held in public and private international collections. Except for a tiny fragment of wool, the materials represented in the collection include mainly silk, cotton, ramie or hemp, leather, bamboo, and paper (also gilded). The structures, are of many types, all microscopically analyzed: tabby, twill – often embroidered in various stitches or clamp-resist dyed, warp-faced and weft-faced compounds, “Chinese damask” (self-patterned tabby or twill, known as *qi* or *ling* in Chinese sources), gauze, lampas, *kesi* tapestry (Fig. 3; 4), and a structure made of bamboo and silk in a technique called *zhicheng* (woven into shape), used mainly for the creation of sutra wrappers (Fig. 5; 6). All of these weavings, which were often recycled, were employed to make religious items or items for daily use.



Figure 3. Silk kesi tapestry with gilded paper threads. 11th-12th century. 34 x 11 cm. From Kotscho *α*.



Figures 4 a; b. Microscopic image of the compound. Images by author. Turfan Collection (III535), Berlin. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Museum für Asiatisch Kunst.

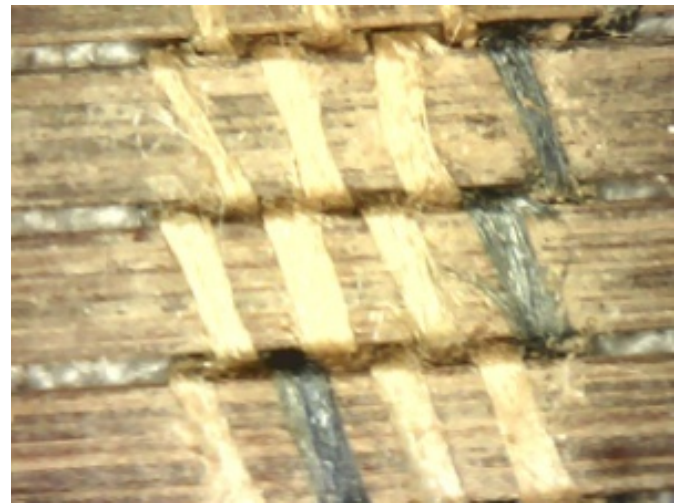


Figure 5 (left) Sutra wrapper in bamboo decorated in silk with the zhicheng technique, and the head cover in embroidered silk weft-faced twill. 10th-11th century. 33 x 28 cm. From Kurutka (Turfan foothill, under cave of the Arath 84). Figure 6 (right). Microscopic image of the zhicheng technique. Images by author. Turfan Collection (III7452A), Berlin. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Museum für Asiatisch Kunst.

Although at first glance the collection might be classified as Chinese, it betrays a strong Sino-Iranian and Turkic matrix rooted in archaic forms and images that had circulated in China, Central Asian, and Mongolia on various media for many centuries, and were eventually re-contextualized in specific areas with indigenous features.¹ An important category that explains this phenomenon is that including banners and canopies (which are the majority) made with recycled compounds, often embroidered. Patterns and motifs, however, can usually be seen as ornaments on sculptures and architectural structures, or depicted on walls (from the caves). There are two important cases/examples:

- An earlier patchwork banner discovered in Kotscho Library K, datable to the Tang period (618-907) and made with small pieces of “Chinese damask,” used for the central body; a piece of weft-faced compound for the top head; and, a tie-dyed yellowish tabby for the leg (Fig. 7). The small, stylized diamond-shaped squares that compose the lateral structure of the body are rare on textile but common in painting and architecture (Fig. 8). To date, it can be compared only to a pillow cover from Dunhuang with similar (but more complex) work, exhibited in 2014 in the China National Silk Museum in Hangzhou (Fig. 9). The diamond shape on textile was created according to the typical Central Asian diamond cassion ceilings or the diamond-opening roofs like in the Baltit Fort in Hunza Valley, Pakistan. Indeed, many of the caves in Dunhuang have the ceiling painted in the same diamond shapes, often enclosing textiles motifs.



Figure 7 (left) Banner in “Chinese damask”, tie-dyed tabby, and weft-faced twill. 7th-10th century. 43 x 17 cm. From Kotscho Library K. Figure 8 (right). Detail of stylized diamond-shaped squares on the lateral sides. Images by author. Turfan Collection (III6220), Berlin. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Museum für Asiatisch Kunst.

¹ I have discussed this matter in details in a previous article “A Mathematic Expression of Art: Sino-Iranian and Uighur Textile Interactions and the Turfan Textile Collection in Berlin,” in *Transcultural Studies Journal*, no. 1 (2014): 134-163. <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/transcultural/article/view/12313> The Turfan textile collection is also one of the main cases study included in my PhD dissertation with the title *De-coding Central Asian Textile Imagery. From the Tarim to the Mediterranean Basin* submitted to the University of Heidelberg, Germany.



Figure 9 Smaller reproduction (made in 2014) of a pillow cover with diamond-shaped work from Dunhuang, dated to between the 7th and the 10th centuries, by the China National Silk Museum. Images by author. © China National Silk Museum, Hanzhou.

- A later small brown tabby fragment with small chain-stitch embroidery of flames, dots, and flowers, discovered in Tschiggan Kōl and datable to the end of the Tang period, possibly during the Uighur and Tibetan presence in the area. The embroidered flame as it appears on the fragment recalls the *mudra* (ritual hand gesture) of the *cundī dhāraṇī* (a Buddhist sutra translated during the Tang by the Indian Trepitaka Divākara – 613-688 – that introduces the *dhāraṇī* spell, and explains the way it should be recited in front of a Buddha), as well as the *ūrṇā* (divine mark) on the forehead of a Buddha sculpture, gathered during the expeditions, now on display in the Berlin museum (Fig. 10; 11; 12).² The dots, which were already embroidered in the same way during the Warring States period (471-221 BCE), and the umbrella-like flowers, however, appear in many caves in Bezeklik, north of Turfan, that are datable to between the ninth and eleventh centuries.

² The *Sūtra of the Buddha's Enunciation of the Great Cundī Dhāraṇī* has been fully studied and translated by Robert Gimello, Professor of Theology and of East Asian Languages and Cultures and World Religions and World Church at the University of Notre Dame, Chicago, IL. It was presented as a case study at the Synological Summer School *Tang Dynasty and the World outside China* at the Department of Chinese Studies, ELTE University, in Budapest, Hungary, from July 1-7, 2013, which I attended. During his lectures, Prof. Gimello showed images of the related *mudra*.



Figure 10 (left) Details of the embroidered mudra on the silk fragmented tabby. 9th-10th century. 15 x 15 cm. From Tschiggan Köl (III 6190). Figure 11 (center). Buddha sculpture from Shorchuq. 7th-9th century. Figure 12 (right) Detail of the ūrṇā (divine mark) on the forehead of the Buddha sculpture. Images of the textile by author, images of the sculpture by the Museum of Asian Art in Berlin. Turfan Collection Berlin. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Museum für Asiatisch Kunst.

These are just two of the many cases in the Turfan collection that express multicultural, multi-technical, and multi-media interactions along the branches of the so-called Silk Road that gathered an heterogeneous variety of materials. Due the recurrent damage to the structures and the embroideries, and the lack of a radio-carbon analysis that would confirm the dating, the collection as a whole has been neglected for many years; nonetheless, now, it has been finally considered for the new Central Asian Art Gallery in the future Humboldt Forum to open in Berlin in 2019.

At a cost of 590 million euros, the Humboldt Forum (designed by the Italian architect Franco Stella) is one of the biggest European construction projects and is one of the many on-going reconstructions in Berlin; the museum complex will feature the reconstructed façade of the old Berliner Prussian Palace, destroyed by the Soviets in the '50s, and will include the Ethnological Museum, the Museum of Asian Art, The Humboldt University Lab, and the Central and Regional Library. It is being built on Museum Island (the Unesco World Heritage Site since 1999), in the center of Berlin, once the site of the Palace, in front of the Old National Gallery and the Berlin Cathedral. The current Humboldt Box, a geometric blue building situated near the future museum, uses historical materials to introduce the idea behind the Humboldt Forum, and presents the art collections that will be soon exhibited in the Forum (Fig.13).³

Despite the on-going controversy about the façade of the building – a tribute to the greatness of the former Prussian Empire, which will also include the emblem of the Emperor Frederick The Great (1712-1786) on the windows – the Forum will gather all the collections under the same roof, in a site full of art in order *to be “in touch with as much of the world as possible.”*⁴ In this regard, according to *the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation*, the non-European collections of art need to return to the center of Berlin to facilitate a better understanding of the world and *to lend a new appeal to the unified Berlin, with a possible “exotic” touch.*⁵ The Turfan collections

³ For updated images about the construction of the Humboldt Forum see the official website <http://www.sbs-humboldtforum.de/en/Home/>

⁴ Hermann Parzinger, *The Humboldt Forum; The Goal and Significance of Germany's Most Important Cultural Project at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Berlin: Stiftung Berliner Schloss-Humboldtforum, 2011), head cover.

⁵ Ibid., 22-25.

will be thus exhibited in a big hall that, unlike the current Museum in Dalhem, will also include items now stored in the basement like the textile fragments.



Figure 13 The Humboldt Box (on the left) and the Humboldt Forum (under construction), and reproduction of the original sculptures along the bridge that links Unter den Linden (boulevard to the Brandenburg Gate) to the Museum Island Image by author.

Although this could be a great opportunity for the textile collection, which has never been displayed until now, the concept of the display has not yet been clarified and the fragments run the risk of being stored in a common chest of drawers in the new gallery. In this way, as often occurs in many museums housing textile collections, the fragments will not be contextualized with other media and will probably leave the visitor with the idea that they are “just fragments.” If this fragmented treasure is ultimately to be visible to the public, it will be necessary to have it shown in a digital three-dimensional reconstruction, with related color palettes, and diagrams of the composition as a whole and of each singular pattern, in order to guide the visitor through the creation of specific graphic elements that will also be visible in the other media on display. Processes of artistic adaptation and rejection are visible on many different surfaces, from wooden beams to wall paintings and textiles. The art of weaving often renews and transforms ancient models, or uses images and religious or social symbols without necessary transfer their original meaning. For this reason, in order to avoid a static and classic way of displaying art that would already be trapped in the façade of a “glorious past,” the new Central Asian Art Gallery at the Humboldt Forum should employ modern digital tools (with related information) to display the Turfan textile collection, order to make it accessible to viewers, and to re-define what Central Asian art is, and what role it played in the transcultural and trans-media interactions between East and West.