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The Abduction of Helen: A Western Theme in a Chinese Embroidery of the First Half of the Seventeenth Century

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The upcoming exhibition *The Interwoven Globe: Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500–1800* will open at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in September 2013. Included in the exhibition is a monumental multicultural hanging, the subject of this paper.

The large hanging depicts *The Abduction of Helen* from the story of the Trojan War.¹ The Trojan War, a thoroughly European theme, is among the most important accounts of the Western classical tradition. It inspired large sets of European tapestries as early as 1472,² but the embroidery and painting of this hanging is not European but Chinese. This paper will focus especially on some of the intercultural aspects of the hanging, implicating not only the Chinese and Europeans, especially the Portuguese and the Jesuits, but also, less directly, India and Japan, in this abduction of the theme of the Abduction of Helen from Europe to China.

The hanging is extremely large, about 12 by 16 feet, and it is only one piece of a set. Seven pieces from the set are known, and of that total, three are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum.³ All of them have the same border—including four occurrences of an armorial, one at each corner, a pair of phoenixes at the top, a lion and griffin at the bottom, and a triton and serpent on each side.

The armorial does not coincide in all particulars with any known arms. It might be an erroneous rendering of the arms of the Mascarenhas family of Portugal. The nobleman Francisco Mascarenhas served as Governor of Macao, 1623–1626. But this armorial has too many bars in the shield, and it is not at all certain that a nobleman would have accepted an inaccurate version of his family's arms.⁴

At the top of the border is a pair of confronted phoenixes. Their heads, erect neck feathers, and the simplified and graphic rendition of their breast feathers are typically seen in Chinese arts, but these phoenixes flank a sun—a very European sun with rays and even a face, not part of the Chinese decorative vocabulary. Similar suns, however, are seen in Jesuit works.

¹ The hanging is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 1979.282. As of the TSA deadline, photography for the exhibition catalogue of this extremely large hanging has not yet taken place. I regret that this paper is not illustrated. Please check the Museum website (www.metmuseum.org) for forthcoming images.

² Campbell, Thomas P., *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 19.

³ See Standen, Edith Appleton, *European Post-Medieval Tapestries and Related Hangings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 volumes (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), Volume 2, 796–802. The two others in the Metropolitan Museum's collection are 50.97.2 and 51.152. Of the others, two are in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon; see Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, *Les objets d'art: guide des collections*, (Lyon : Musée des beaux-arts ; Paris : Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993), 76–77. One is at Steinitz, Paris; see Courtin, Nicolas, and David Langeois, *Steinitz* (Paris: Steinitz, 2002), 34–36. One more was sold in Florence in 1934; for further details, see Standen, Edith Appleton, *European Post-Medieval Tapestries and Related Hangings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 volumes (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), Volume 2, 796–797.

⁴ Standen, Edith Appleton, *European Post-Medieval Tapestries and Related Hangings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 volumes (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), Volume 2, 799.

At each side of the border is an oval containing a Triton with a serpent, probably included in the design of the hanging for its European emblematic function. Triton is Neptune's trumpeter, trumpeting the fame of noble men and their illustrious deeds. But European depictions of this emblem differ in many details. Here, for example, Triton has a snake tail, not a fish tail. Further, the Tritons' scales are similar to the feathers of the phoenixes at the top of the border.

The abduction of Helen started a war between Troy and Greece; this version, where Helen is forcibly seized, relies on post-classical sources. The composition features a background and many figures, a visual cacophony of diagonal arms and legs. To give a general orientation, the background shows European buildings with baroque facades on the left and the sea with Chinese-style waves on the right. Helen is at the very center, with her arms outflung. In the foreground on the left side are armored men clashing violently, in front of Helen's husband Menelaus. On the right is the striped boat to which Helen is being carried. The Trojan prince Paris awaits her in the boat.

European prints are suggested as the source for the design, especially Marcantonio Raimondi and his school.⁵ They frequently produced figure-filled compositions, including an *Abduction of Helen* in Vienna, based on Raphael.⁶ The print is not close enough to be called the source, but it does bear some very general similarities to the hanging. It, too, has a background of architecture and the sea, and as in the embroidered hanging, Helen is being taken away against her will to a waiting boat. Many large areas of the hanging and print do not correspond at all, however. For example, the print devotes considerable attention to a bridge that does not figure at all in the hanging, the architecture in a corner of the print's background is classical rather than baroque, and the presence of violent armored men in the hanging is far more extensive than in the print.

The three main characters are Helen in the center, Menelaus on the left, and Paris on the right. Helen is being carried off (literally carried off; her feet are off the ground) by two men, a man in yellow on one side and a man in blue on the other. She is very well dressed in a long garment with horizontal stripes that incorporate a lot of couched gold thread. Most of the gold is lost from the gold thread, which is composed of gilded paper wrapped Z on a red silk core, a typically East Asian thread. Many of the gold threads themselves are lost, revealing the cotton foundation cloth, 2-2 twill using z-spun cotton; the cloth is likely to be from India.

The white-bearded man on the left side of the hanging is probably Helen's husband Menelaus, who is wearing armor with animal heads at the shoulders. Many of the other armored figures in this hanging also have animal heads at their shoulders. It's often difficult to sort motifs into strictly Chinese or strictly European categories, and armor is a case in point. During the period, both Chinese and European armor featured animal heads at the shoulders, as seen in a famous fifteenth-century Chinese painting of a general⁷ and a sixteenth-century sculpture of Philip II of Spain⁸, as well as in numerous other examples.

The background behind Menelaus on the left side of the hanging is filled with naively rendered European-style buildings, baroque facades with multiple domes and windows. In the hanging, the windows formerly had couched gold metallic thread in their "panes," probably to simulate the glint of glass. The architecture is generally comparable to that of the Church of St. Charles Borromeo, a baroque-style church in Antwerp (built 1615 to 1623) that is based on the Jesuit church Il Gesu in Rome. (The Jesuits, of course, were active in China in the late sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth century.) Above the European-style rooftops, the clouds in the

⁵ Standen, Edith Appleton, *European Post-Medieval Tapestries and Related Hangings in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2 volumes (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), Volume 2, 799.

⁶ Strauss, Walter L., gen. ed. *The Illustrated Bartsch* (New York: Abaris Books, 1978-), Volume 26, page 208, no. 209.

⁷ Shang Xi, ca. 1430. "Guan Yu Captures General Pang De," Palace Museum, Beijing.

⁸ Pompeo Leoni (ca. 1533-1608). Philip II of Spain, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

sky are very Chinese in form, similar to a standard rendition of clouds in Chinese woven textiles of the late Ming period, such as an example in the Metropolitan Museum's collection that was used as a sutra cover.⁹

The right side of the hanging is devoted to the sea and the ship. The waves in the background are Chinese in style; however, the sails of the ship, which appear to be made of white cloth, are fully flexible and therefore unlike the more rigid sails of Chinese ships of the time. In the boat awaiting Helen, at his ease under a canopy, is a third major player in the story: Paris, the Trojan prince, crowned with a wreath. On the shore in front of the boat are various gold vessels, probably for wine, and also plates laden with fruit. The fruit in the foreground appears to be quinces, known and eaten in both Europe and China. However, another kind of fruit puts in an appearance outlined against the striped side of the boat. It's a cluster of lychees, a kind of fruit eaten in China but not in Europe at the time. The presence of lychees here suggests once again that the embroiderers were given fairly free rein as long as the general outlines of the composition were maintained.

The major players Menelaus, Helen, and Paris—and all the other figures in this densely populated composition—have painted faces, arms, and legs. The paint was applied to the cotton foundation cloth. Evidence presented here for the first time suggests that the application of paint was probably done in China by Chinese artists who had been trained by Jesuits, possibly at a painting academy in Japan.

Painting in the European style had reached East Asia with Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth century.¹⁰ In 1583 the Italian Jesuit Giovanni Niccolo established an academy of painting in Japan to train local artists to produce religious art. When the missionaries' relations with Japanese authorities deteriorated, Niccolo fled Japan, returning to Macao in 1614 after about thirty years of teaching Western-style painting in Japan. Some of his students became active in China, and it seemed possible that such students were responsible for the painting of this hanging.

The Department of Scientific Research at the Metropolitan Museum of Art analyzed pigments of the hanging,¹¹ taken from one of the Tritons in the border, and various results support this multicultural scenario. One of the pigments, a blue-green, was used in Europe but not Asia, and another, a white, was used in Asia but not Europe. In addition, the white pigment occurs more frequently in Japanese than in Chinese contexts. Speculatively, the students could have received the blue-green pigment from European sources and learned the use of the white pigment from Japanese sources.

Two of Niccolo's students in Japan who became active in China were Ni Yicheng, of Japanese and Chinese parentage, and Yu Wenhui, a young Chinese from Macao. The highly regarded Ni Yicheng had studied at Niccolo's academy in Japan, and once in China he "was in constant demand to paint works ... both for the Jesuit mission in China and for their church in Macao."¹² However, so far no works firmly attributed to him survive. Yu Wenhui produced the only surviving painted portrait of the Jesuit leader Matteo Ricci,¹³ which exhibits a rather naïve treatment of shading, somewhat comparable to the strategy used to depict the shading in the face of Paris in the hanging. Perhaps the two students mentioned here or some of their less well-documented colleagues were responsible for the painting of the figures in this hanging.

⁹ The Ming-dynasty sutra cover is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession number 2011.221.32

¹⁰ See Michael Sullivan, "Some Possible Sources of European Influence on late Ming and Early Ch'ing Painting," *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Chinese Painting* (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 1970), pages 595-596. See also Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day* (New York: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1973), pages 15-16, 48, 57.

¹¹ Report from Department of Scientific Research, MMA, Marco Leona, August 23, 2012.

¹² Bailey, Gavin Alexander, *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542-1773* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 96.

¹³ The painting is preserved in the Casa Professa, adjacent to the Church of the Gesu, Rome.