THE WORLD OF SILK

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It is, of course, a commonplace that the intrinsic value of the material of a work of art is of no importance; a charcoal scribble by Michelangelo outweighs any possible concoction of pearls and diamonds. But there are certain substances which, from their natural beauty, their rarity, or their cost, have always been looked upon as especially appropriate raw materials for that expenditure of thought, time, and skill which, in a good period and in good hands, results in a work of art. Gold, for instance, can be made into useful dinner plates, but these, at least in times when men are sure they can truly ornament whatever they touch, are likely to be elaborated into masterpieces of the goldsmith's art. In the same way, among textiles, silk has always been a stuff from which works of art were woven; a silken cloth is not, of course, necessarily more beautiful than one of linsey-woolly, and in fact two of the textiles which are most definitely on the right side of the uncertain line that divides the fine from the decorative arts, Persian rugs and medieval tapestries, are mostly made of wool, but the chances of attaining artistic worth have usually been good for a silk fabric. Silk has always been dear-bought and, frequently, far-fetched; it shines as no other natural fiber does and takes color easily and well. Expensive, exotic, and beautiful, it was naturally entrusted to the artist for fabrication; some designs, even, exist by painters such as Pisanello and Jacopo Bellini. If, therefore, we wish to see the art of the world in a sequence of textiles, we will find it sumptuously spread out before us in silks.

Such a selection is now on display at the Metropolitan Museum in the exhibition The World of Silk. Here the great silk-making centers are represented by some of their finest productions: China, the originator of the craft, never surpassed; Japan, India, Persia, and Turkey; Europe, especially Italy and France. Innumerable opportunities are here given for making comparisons, tracing developments, and finding common denominators. The notes that follow are concerned only with the European examples, but certainly as much can be written of the Eastern ones. All alike show one of the most interesting characteristics of any type of art, the adaptation of a given style to an intractable medium. For a loom, even today, and far more so in its early

Fragment of a twill weave with a fantastic company of stags, swans, and a hound, typical of xiv century Italy. Fletcher Fund, 1946
forms, is an exacting master; no other medium, perhaps, places such rigid restrictions upon the man who would use it as a tool in making a work of art. Besides the two-dimensional character of a piece of cloth and the narrow width of the loom, the artist must reckon with the almost insuperable technical need for symmetry, either exact or mirror image, and for the repetition of the design. But “nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room,” the sonnet-writer works within his fourteen lines, and the textile designer and maker has demonstrated triumphantly through the ages that any style, even if primarily architectural or sculptural, can be expressed in the interlacings of warp and weft. Sometimes the technical limitations are accepted as the basis of a textile style, as in the double-headed eagles of twelfth-century Byzantium; sometimes they are wrestled with, and almost overcome, as in the artfully careless sprays and garlands of eighteenth-century French brocades; sometimes the height of craftsmanship is used to produce in silk what is being done contemporaneously in paint—with results that are disastrous in the nineteenth century but perfection in sixteenth-century Persian velvets. To look at this group of silks keeping at the back of one’s mind the technical problems involved, as well as the memory of what was being done at the same time in stone and pigment, wood and silver, is to gain a new insight into the meaning of style.

But weavers, their craft so hard to learn and their skill so highly regarded, have at times asserted their independence and either clung to a convention outmodeled in the other arts or accepted a new influence which failed to make headway in other fields. The most striking instance of the latter occurrence took place in Italy soon after the year 1300. The reign of Kublai Khan (1216-1294) and his dynasty was a period of easy intercourse between East and West; Marco Polo was only the most articulate of many travelers and traders. One result was the importation of much Chinese silk into Europe and a revolution in Italian textile design. A style appeared which, with its bizarre combination of Gothic and Chinese fantasy, is one of the liveliest and strangest idioms ever found in
any decorative art. Throughout the fourteenth century dogs in battlemented castles, deer with flaming manes, elephants with peacock feathers streaming from their nostrils, swans thrusting their heads through wind-blown sails, eagles steering gondolas, and hounds with crowns encircling their haunches pour from the looms of Lucca and Venice; not even the margins of the richest illuminated manuscripts can show such grotesqueries.

This wealth of creatures only disappears when the High Gothic has found its characteristic textile pattern, the so-called pomegranate design. Even this most persistent of all textile motifs is thought to trace its descent from the Chinese version of the lotus. But though the pomegranate becomes the basis for almost every fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century pattern, there is no monotonous repetition of other men's designs or slackening of invention; the great stalk swings from side to side of the two-foot-wide panel of undetermined length that is the weaver's canvas, bearing at rhythmic intervals its heavy fruit and enlivened at every turn with a variety of tendrils, flowerets, scales, and leaves that have all the profusion and vitality of natural objects while never imitating them. This is the backdrop to the Virgin that is even more familiar to us in the paintings of Van Eyck and his contemporaries than in the velvets themselves—one basic formula treated in a thousand ways. One thinks not only of the Tour de Beurre throwing its thousand crockets and pinnacles against the sky but of the solemn movement of the great cloaks that shroud the figures of Claus Sluter. Velvet, the most difficult of stuffs, has become the predominant silk weave and illustrates all the tricks of the trade, voided and polychrome patterns, brocading in metal thread, and the luscious "pile on pile," that is, with part of the pattern raised, not merely above the flat ground, but above a lower velvet pile.

The coming of the Renaissance stops the movement of this design without changing its basic lines; the pomegranates align themselves, the pattern quiets down. We have moved from the Ca' d'Oro to the Pazzi chapel. So successful is this style, achieved in Italy about the year 1500, so perfectly suited to the capabilities of the loom, that velvets and damasks made in it still appear as backgrounds in the paintings of Van Dyck. Typical renaissance motifs, such as the vase of flowers, are also much used and are handled with the same sureness, poised in a perfect equilibrium but never lifeless.

With the end of the High Renaissance textile design undergoes, though at a somewhat later date, the reaction against its classical stability and clarity that sways the pictorial and plastic arts. For the first time, also, small all-over patterns intended for dress goods become really frequent. In earlier times it is seldom possible to say that a given silk was meant

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*Velvet with cloth-of-silver ground and a strong symmetrical design in red pile typical of the High Renaissance in XVI century Italy. Bequest of Theodore M. Davis, 1915*
Baroque velvet, called "Jardinière" because of its many-colored flowers.
Genoese, xvii century. The Michael Friedsam Collection, 1931
for dress or drapery. In a fifteenth-century painting, the Virgin will be enthroned with a velvet of one great pomegranate pattern hung behind her, a kneeling king will have robes made of another, his page, perhaps, of a third. Small, scattered motifs are certainly not unknown in the fifteenth century, but they become immensely more common after 1550, when costumes in portraits show them frequently and continue to do so for a hundred years. At the same time silks intended for upholstery begin to display bold designs which soon broaden to the whole width of the loom and eventually even have no repeats in the length of the stuff. “The utmost possible enlargement of the unit of design,” Roger Fry’s definition of the baroque, is well exemplified by these grandiloquent wall coverings. The mannerist style, which preceded the baroque in other fields but continued to exist alongside it in textiles, is perhaps best seen in the dress goods, especially the ciselé velvets (with cut and uncut pile in the same fabric). In hundreds and hundreds of these patterns the crisp little velvet twigs, leaves, flowers, and even birds and animals lie across a ground, often glittering with gold, in rows which are horizontal, diagonal, or vertical as the beholder happens to see them, changing like trick perspective drawings used in a psychology course. Nor are the deceptively simple motifs static in themselves; a tendril gives a little twist, the triangular cut at the end of a broken branch is off center, a diagonal bar is half bent into an S curve. The result is a shimmer of activity over the whole design, never sweeping nor giving a sense of directional movement but enlivening every grouping. It is movement in a restricted space, checked at every turn, thrown back upon itself constantly, but giving vitality and spirit to the fabric as a whole.

In the eighteenth century the place of velvet is taken by brocaded pileless weaves. The brocading shuttle is almost as free an instrument as the embroidery needle, and the changes of this century, apart from the variations caused by alterations of artistic style in general, arise largely from the increasing realization of the power of this tool to imitate nature. Realistic flowers had appeared in embroidery, especially in English work, long before. The Jardin des Plantes in Paris had been founded early in the seventeenth century by a botanist and an embroiderer, and many books of engravings of flowers, drawn from nature, appeared during the century and were used by needlewomen. But it was some time before this naturalism affected woven designs; when it did, the effect is startling. The vague vegetation of the reign of Louis XIV, the stiff, heavy leaves and fruit of no known species, begin to move and sway, to grow lighter and airier in the succeeding Regency and early years of the young king, in accordance with the changing taste of the period, but about 1750 it is suddenly replaced by genuine roses, carnations, tulips, and lilac blossoms, all adapting themselves with extraordinary success to the conflicting demands of a
craft which calls for symmetry and an age which abhorred it. The textile designer, by now a specialist, was frequently apprenticed, for part of his training, to a flower-painter, and his skill and the brocader’s combined to produce bouquets as fresh as if the dew were still on them.

This realism persists into the reign of Louis XVI, with its marked reaction in favor of symmetry; textiles show the change as clearly as furniture. Vertical stripes line up the brocaded motifs, which often become small, even minute, and are quietly arranged in rows. The designs are sometimes spiced with playful touches. The shepherdess’s hat and crook or Cupid’s bow and arrow appear among the flowers, and the Chinoiseries, which occur throughout the century in one style after another, turn up once again, more amusing and cunning than ever. The height of realism was attained toward the
close of the century by the designer Philippe de la Salle (1723-1803), who has been called a “painter of the loom” and who produced his splendid birds and garlands, strongly modeled and brilliantly colored, for the walls of palaces from Versailles to St. Petersburg.

Both the prettiness and the grandeur of the ancien régime disappear after 1790. The silks of the Directory and Empire are intense, even violent, in color, rigidly symmetrical, and crammed with classical allusions. The invention of the power loom, first patented in 1785 in England, and the Jacquard machinery, about 1805, together with the abolition of the guilds, with their strict rules governing training of apprentices and quality of workmanship, helped the growth of the industry but damaged the craft. In 1819 there were twenty thousand looms in Lyons, in 1870 there were a hundred and twenty thousand. Silk was cheaper and in becoming common became commonplace. The enormous expansion of the industry, the break with tradition caused by the Revolution, the rise of the middle class, all combined to make nineteenth-century silks, after the Napoleonic period, uncertain in quality and heterogeneous in design. The restored French kings tried to recapture the world of their youth, the romantic revival encouraged imitations of yet earlier periods, the Exposition of 1878 introduced the contemporary fabrics of Japan. The results were frequently sumptuous, often very decorative, occasionally extremely painful, but seldom indeed do they arouse in the spectator that intense awareness of a specific aesthetic communication which it is the function of a work of art to produce.

The twentieth century, which has achieved a style of its own in architecture, has continued to flounder from period to period, country to country in its search for beauty in the decorative arts. We are too close to these objects to be able to guess whether, five hundred years from now, the label caption “first half of the xx century” will indicate an immediately recognizable style, still more whether that style will be held to be a great one. But, silk remains one of the most beautiful of raw materials, an eternal challenge to the artist to do his best work. The great modern silk manufacturers show us that the challenge is being, and always will be, accepted enthusiastically.

Chair back and seat in crimson satin with a neo-classic design in white and gray. Made at Lyons, probably by Grand Frères, 1795-1799. Rogers Fund, 1928