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## About the Society

The Society for Asian Art is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that was incorporated in 1958 by a group of enlightened citizens dedicated to winning Avery Brundage's magnificent art collection for San Francisco. Since that time, we have been an independent support organization for the Asian Art Museum-Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture.

For more than sixty years, we have offered a wide range of innovative, high-quality educational and cultural programs, along with social (and culinary) events where participants share their knowledge and enthusiasm. SAA's popular Arts of Asia Lecture Series, open to all, is the core of the museum's docent-training curriculum. We sponsor foreign and domestic travel, visits to private art dealers and collections, in-depth study groups, special lectures by leading scholars, literature courses and symposia. Some of our programming supports specific exhibitions.

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# Intertwining History along the Silk Road<sup>1</sup>

by Dr. Mariachiara Gasparini



Figure 1-1: Sleeve made of two warp-faced weavings: a red ground with jade bi and a tree with the “Mother of the West” and Chinese characters, and a *wusijin* (five color compound) with clouds, beasts, and Chinese characters. Han period (206 BCE–220 CE). Courtesy of China National Silk Museum, Hangzhou.

## The Beginnings of the “Silk Road”

When in 1877 Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905), German traveler and geographer, coined the term “Seidenstrasse” (literally “Silk Road”), he probably did not expect to stir evocative and mysterious scenes of deserts and caravans in the collective Western imagery. The network of roads and sea routes that connected China to Europe through Iran was not used only

to trade silk, but uncountable other commodities, and became a location for an exchange of techniques, people, knowledge, and culture that shaped Eurasia over the centuries. The trade for which this network is named had already begun with the interactions between Eurasian nomadic people from the northern steppes and the Chinese, Persian, and Greek civilizations. However, it was at least as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), when the Chinese exchanged



silk with their closest and farthest neighbors that a “proper Silk Road” began.

Along the Silk Road, silk reached Palmyra, in Syria, and then the Mediterranean Basin, and Byzantine coins came back the other way, reaching Chinese tombs as clothing ornaments. The small fragments of silk discovered in the Temple of Baal, bombed by ISIS, demonstrate the importance and reach of silk has a highly refined material that the Chinese have mastered for 8500 years. Two years ago, at a Neolithic tomb site in Jiahu, Henan province, Chinese archaeologists discovered biomolecular evidence of silk fibroin in the soil around the waist of the deceased. This find suggests the possible use of silk as an accessory, perhaps a belt, but also confirms the earlier domestication of the *Bombix Morii* (silk caterpillar). Until that moment, the origin of silk was linked to the two oldest silk fragments previously discovered, one in Yingyang county, Henan Province (3630 BCE) and the other in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province (2750 BCE).<sup>2</sup>

Today, around the Taklamakan desert, Xinjiang Province, examples of clothing and textile items continue to be found along the two roads that are conventionally called the “Northern and Southern Silk Roads.” Many of these textiles are made of silk, cotton, wool, ramie, and hemp, using different techniques and assuming a variety of shapes. Quite a few of the textiles came to China from the West. As an outpost of the Chinese Empire, it is in this region that different ethnic groups, languages, scripts, and religions established a multicultural society

The dry climate of the Taklamakan naturally mummified a group of Caucasian people, who wore clothing of wool fabrics and felt. Most likely, these people moved from Southern Siberia around 2000 BCE, and died while traveling in the desert. Thanks to them and other foreign horse riders, China acquired the use of pants. Two pairs discovered in Yanghai, not far from Turfan, along the Northern Silk Road, and dated to about 3200 years ago, are the oldest yet found in the world. They were made with two separate straight-fitting legs and a wide crotch with reinforcement for riding horses. The yarns were spun from sheep's

wool and woven in twill, kilim and rip techniques, and then shaped into the desired form and size.<sup>3</sup> At the knees the twill is interrupted by a pattern zone in the “taaniko” weaving technique which can be created by twisting the wefts around free-suspended warps without a loom.<sup>4</sup>

With the arrival of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) in the 4th century BCE and the establishment of Greek communities in Bactriana (Central Asia), textiles with Hellenistic motifs began to appear in Central Asia and the western regions of China, as originally created or transformed along the way. A famous fragment with a Greek man and a centaur from the cemetery of Sampul in Xinjiang confirms the early influence of Hellenistic art in China.<sup>5</sup>

Centuries later, during the Eastern Han period (25 – 220 CE), when China began to expand its territories westward while fighting against the Xiongnu from the North, similar weavings spread from Niya and Loulan, along the Southern Silk Road, to Oglakhty, Southern Siberia, and further west to Palmyra. These weavings often depict serpentine clouds, strange zoomorphic figures framed by Chinese characters, lozenges, and disks of jade (*bi*) as motifs. Sometimes these fabrics decorated the “Mother of the West” (e.g., [Figure 1-1](#)); a mythological female figure that became popular in that period, and which was also confounded or combined with an earlier figure of the Buddha in meditation, like the type found on the contemporary bronze “money tree” in the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco (see [Figure 1-2](#)).

During the same period, we find wool fragments in China with Roman-style patterns, generally showing grapevine motifs and cherubs. Among the most famous examples is the double-faced woolen tabby caftan of the Yingpan man (named after the homonymous cemetery where he was discovered) datable to the 3rd or possibly 4th century CE. As a more “recent” mummy, the Yingpan man wears a golden mask (now only a small part of the gold foil is still visible on the forehead) according to the Greek funerary tradition. Despite his uncertain provenance, looking



Figure 1-2: Money tree with “Mother of the West” and the Buddha figure. Bronze with glazed earthenware base. Eastern Han period (25-220 CE). Courtesy of Asian Art Museum, San Francisco.

at the well-preserved red caftan made with a composition of golden yellow, Roman-style cherubs, we might think that he was a person from the Eastern Roman Empire, but a recent analysis has confirmed that the weaving was an eastern production. Most likely, the Yingpan man was a merchant of unknown origin who traded between East and West, or a Central Asian who had adopted Western costume and habits and had purchased his outfit from one of the local Xinjiang workshops that produced fashionable copies of Western weavings and motifs.<sup>6</sup>

## Silk and Buddhism

It was also thanks to Buddhism, however, that many devotional items created with silk and other materials, carrying a combination of patterns and motifs that had been around on other media since the 6th or 5th century BCE, began to circulate and became particularly popular during the Sui-Tang periods (581–618 and 618–907). The aforementioned Hellenized-Roman Central Asian style that spread with the Kushans (30–375 CE) in Central Asia and that had reached China along the branches of the Silk Road around the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, was adopted for early Buddhist art as well, and it is still visible in many of the Buddhist caves today, from Kizil to Dunhuang, and also in later material discovered in the Astana Cemetery, near Turfan. Here, figurines of non-Chinese people completely dressed with real textiles, images of the Tang ladies, and accessories of various types give us an overview of the fashions of the time among different ethnic groups living in the area.

The circulation of these objects altered weaving techniques, as new ones were acquired, and methods were combined. The warp-faced technique that characterized Chinese weavings since at least the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) completely disappeared around the 8th century (see e.g., [Figure 1-3](#)). It was slowly replaced by the weft-faced techniques that characterize the majority of later Tang (and other Eurasian) textiles discovered to date (see e.g., [Figure 1-4](#)). These techniques were used with both wool and silk, and are often erroneously defined as “brocade,” a translation of the Chinese term *jīn* used especially for the warp-faced weavings, but also for the weft-faced type, and which really refers to patterned textiles generally.<sup>7</sup>

Considered the “Sistine Chapels” of the desert, the Dunhuang Caves include magnificent representations of textiles on walls and ceilings (see [Figure 1-5](#)). Cave 17 (also known as “Library Cave”) stored and hid many silk banners, sutra covers, silk paintings, and other items made of textiles, along with documents in various



Figure 1-3: Warp-faced fragment. Eastern Zhou dynasty, Warring States period (475–221 BCE). Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum, New York.



Figure 1-4: Weft-faced fragment with floral medallion, Tang dynasty (618-907). Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum, New York.

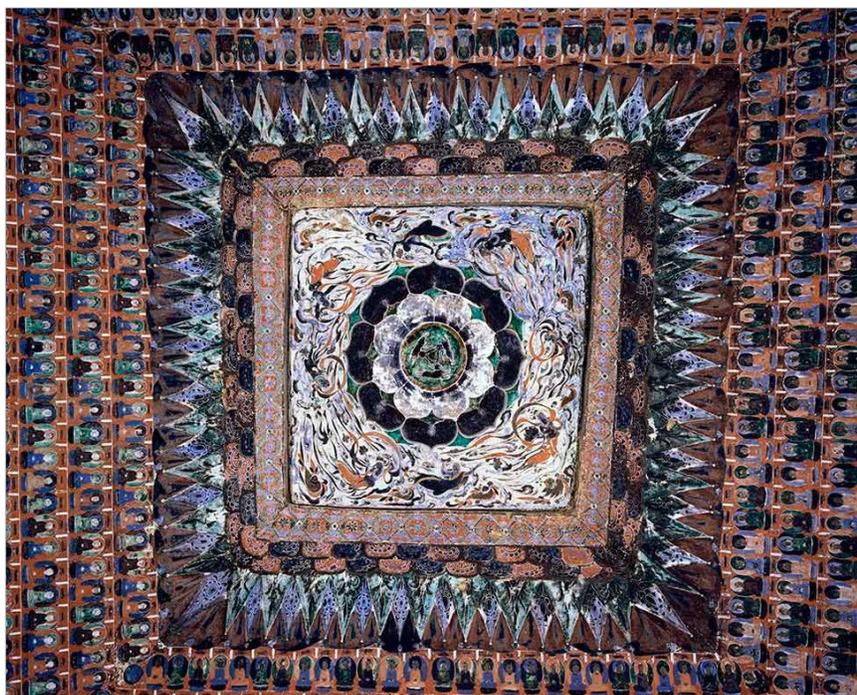


Figure 1-5: Ceiling in the shape of a canopy with a central floral medallion and three interlocked hares. Dunhuang Cave 407, Gansu Province, China. Sui dynasty (581-618). Source: <https://chinesepuzzles.org/three-hares/>

languages, for centuries until they were discovered and brought to Europe by the Hungarian archaeologist Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862–1943) and the French Asianist Paul Pelliot (1878–1945). Particularly intriguing are banners in the shape of a human body, with head, arms and legs (generally made with different textile fragments), found in various sizes, and also depicted on the walls and on other textile items (see e.g., [Figure 1-6](#)). Some of the caves’ ceilings are also painted in the shape of textile canopies showing roundels and lotus flowers like giant mandalas. These images correspond to a few of the fragments discovered *in situ*.

The Dunhuang textile collections (now in London, Paris, and New Delhi) are consistent in their use of fabrics, motifs, and shapes, which presumably reflect those popular in the area. However, those found during the Turfan-Prussian expeditions at the beginning of last century (1902–1914), now part of the Turfan Collection in the Asian Art Museum in Berlin, have different features; only a few seem related to the Dunhuang Tang style. One item in particular is a triangular pennant that we see represented in the Kizil wall paintings and also as a decoration of architectural wooden elements from the caves (see [Figure 1-7](#)). Kizil paintings and textiles show less Chinese influence, and are more Indo-Iranian in style and colors.<sup>8</sup> These devotional items were created with recycled textiles and paper that were originally used to compensate the soldiers sent to the western regions, or to “gift” monks for their prayers and for their services to build and paint the cave-temples of local aristocratic families. Docu-



Figure 1-6: Silk banner from Dunhuang, Gansu Province. 8th–9th cent. Courtesy of British Museum, London.



Figure 1-7: Pennant. 7th – 8th cent. Silk twill and parchment. From Tumshuq, Xinjiang Province, China. Turfan Collection, Berlin © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by M. Gasparini.

Figure 1-8: The “Sasanian Ambassadors” wearing three different robes depicting boars’ heads, ducks and *simurghs*. Afrasiyab (Samarkand), Uzbekistan, 7th cent. Reconstruction by M. Gasparini



ments discovered in Dunhuang, as well as wall paintings confirm the organization of monastic auctions of the belongings of deceased monks; including clothing and accessories accumulated during their life time. The auctions allowed items to continue to circulate, to be recycled for different purposes, and ultimately to inspire some of the decoration of the caves.

The Uighurs adopted and modified these styles between the 9th and 10th centuries. Descended of the Turkic *Tiele* people, the Uighurs reestablished a second Khaganate (Kingdom) in Qocho (ancient Turfan) in 856 that lasted until the end of the 14th century, when they were completely defeated by the Mongols (1206–1368). The Turfan Textile Collection in Berlin includes many textile fragments that, without a doubt, are Uighur, and seem to represent a local adaptation of the earlier and coeval Sogdian-Tang style. Particularly interesting is the use of golden embroidery to create Buddhist and also Manichaean banners and clothing. This embroidery inspired images in the Bezeklik caves featuring large standing Buddhas surrounded by Bodhisattvas, monks and lay people.

## Beaded Roundels and Medallions

One of the most popular patterns of this period, which circulated in the Buddhist caves and across Eurasia, and was later adopted and transformed by the Mongols, is the roundel. First it was beaded, and later it was lobed like a flower. Roundels usually enclosed a single animal or a pair of animals, a floral motif, or more rarely a human figure. This pattern has been generally called the “Sasanian roundel” (referring to the last pre-Islamic Iranian Empire that lasted from 224–651 CE). However, to date no Sasanian textile fragment with a roundel has been found in Iran or in central China (apart from the multiethnic Tang capital Chang’an; modern Xi’an, Shanxi Province). Rather, it is between Sogdiana and the western regions of China that a great number of these textiles have been discovered. The figures on the rock reliefs of Taq-e Bostan, Iran, the ori-

gin of which is still debated, and some Sasanian metalworks and stuccos have roundel textile patterns. These provided the name for these weavings. But, looking at the textiles that appear in the Hall of the Ambassadors in Afrasyab (present Samarkand, Uzbekistan), 7th century (see [Figure 1-8](#)), as well as in the Sogdian ruins of Panjikant (present Tajikistan), 7th–8th century — similar to those depicted in Taq-e Bostan — and considering the textile remains from Xinjiang and Gansu, it seems more likely that weavings with roundels enclosing zoomorphic figures were produced in Central Asia, between China and Iran by people of various origins.

Some of the animals in roundels may be related to the Iranian sphere, such as the boar, which is sometimes associated with the Iranian god of victory, Verethragna (and might appear in such form) (see [Figure 1-9](#)), or a variation of the so-called *simurgh*, which since the beginning of the Islamic period began to appear as a combined-element zoomorphic figure representing the “Divine Glory.” Other animals such as the pheasant, the duck with a ribbon in its beak, or the winged horse are the most popular and widespread in Central Asian-Chinese territories (and also found also on Coptic and Byzantine textiles, and manuscripts). Despite the number of textiles of this type discovered in western China, not many have been found in the eastern regions. Also, looking at Chinese paintings or other depictions, it seems like that Chinese women appreciated such patterned, polychromatic weavings; men preferred monochromatic types. It was not unusual for Chinese women to be sent as brides to the western regions and to adopt local costumes. In documents from Dunhuang, in fact, these weavings are generally cataloged or mentioned as “foreigner” or “Central Asian,” and differ from the “Han-Chinese” types.<sup>9</sup>

Possibly inspired by Iranian and Byzantine coins that circulated in Central Asian-Chinese areas, the beaded roundel first appears in China on tiles from the Yungang caves, Shanxi Province, around the 5th century CE. Framing a rosette instead of a zoomorphic figure, this specific motif, which is already found during the



Figure 1-9 and Cover: Textile with Boar's Head Roundels. Silk split-stich embroidery on plain-weave silk. Iran, Afghanistan or China, 7th cent. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum, New York.

Achaemenid period (c. 550–330 BCE) in Iranian art, was transferred onto textile during the Tang period. The *hongjin* was in fact a popular type of red weaving featuring a grid enclosing small rosettes framed by beaded roundels. It is found along the two branches of the Silk Road around the Taklamakan in a few variations (see e.g., [Figure 1-10](#)).

One motif that seems to have been particularly popular was a beaded roundel framing a pair of facing stags. This was most likely related to peoples from the steppe. Textiles with this motif reached European cathedrals. An early example is the textile discovered in the Cathedral of Huy in Belgium and recently dated to the 9th century. The circular forms that appear in the body of the stag, however, can be traced back to the 5th century BCE Pazyryk carpet from the Altai Mountains, possibly an Achaemenid gift for the local Turkic people, which shows a very similar stag depicted with such forms as representations of internal organs. During the medieval period, as Turko-Mongol nomads moved across Chinese and Iranian lands, similar circular forms appeared in the bodies of many animals, and these animals were often enclosed in a beaded roundel on silk textiles. Sometimes, rosettes and flowers were adopted as variations of the organs and are found on both Central Asian and Byzantine textiles.<sup>10</sup>

## Byzantine Types and External Acquisitions

In the 6th century, at the time of the development and diffusion of the beaded roundel, Byzantium officially began the production of silk. A contemporary votive tablet discovered in Dandan-Oiliq, near Khotan, shows how a Chinese princess who was sent as a bride to a local king, smuggled a silk cocoon in her crown, forever breaking the secret of silk that China had kept hidden from the West for centuries.<sup>11</sup> Although the story of the smuggling princess is a legend that can be dated to centuries earlier, the alliance between the Central Asian first Turkic Kaghanate and the Byzantines signed in 568 against the Sasanians,

who had the monopoly of silk, historically marks the beginning of silk production in the West. The establishment of the late Roman State Silk Workshop however, did not break the Chinese trade; rather it disrupted the Sasanian monopoly, and both Chinese-Central Asian and Byzantine silk textiles began to circulate and to be traded along Silk Road to avoid the common Iranian enemy. These textiles influenced the development of early Islamic and Tibetan art.

Two places outside the main Silk Road yielded well-preserved textiles with roundels datable to between the 8th and 9th centuries, showing that this artistic heritage lasted longer: Moschevaya Balkha in North Caucasus, and Dulan, Qinghai Province, China. These are represented by a green caftan with *simurghs* and other robes and fragments with small beaded roundels enclosing double-axe motifs from the Caucasus, and large textile panels with roundels of different sizes enclosing a great variety of animals woven in a distinctive purple red color from the southwestern region of China. These suggest later local adaptations of earlier Central Asian textile designs.

While many of the textiles from Moschevaya Balkha are Byzantine (except for those with double-axe motifs that seem to be a local adaptation of two facing boar's heads), those from Dulan, suggest a completely new production source, possibly in Iranian-Central Asian communities in Gansu, Xinjiang, or Sichuan. The makers may have been the Tubo (Tibetan) people who had moved to the area in the 6th century or earlier and with whom the Dulan tombs are associated. These latest textiles are particularly important because they represent a very early form of Tibetan art. Among the many fragments discovered, is the first example found of golden weaving carrying a Pahlavi inscription referring to the Iranian title "King of Kings," made in the same *à retour* (point repeat) weaving technique used for the *sudarium* of Saint Victor in the Cathedral of Sens, France, (which shows the Sumerian king Gilgamesh strangling two lions), which is dated to 769. The *retour* technique used for both the Pahlavi inscription from Dulan and the *sudarium*



Figure 1-10: *Honjin* canopy. Tang Dynasty (618-907). Silk warp-faced tabby. From Toyok, Xinjiang Province, China. Turfan Collection, Berlin © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by M. Gasparini.



Figure 1-11: *Tiraz* fragment. Silk warp and cotton weft; plain weave, embroidered. Ca. 892–902 Eastern Iran or Khurasan. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum, New York.



Figure 1-12: Libation scene. 10th -13th cent. Wall painting. Alchi complex, Ladakh, India. Photo by author.

in Sens creates a sequence of colors in an alternate and reverse repeat (1-2 / 2-1 for the first, and 1-2-3-4 / 4-3-2-1 for the latter) that clearly seems to circulate in Eurasia at the time, and confirms the transfer of weaving techniques and styles.<sup>12</sup>

### Islam and the Mongol Heritage

Two events marked the decline of the Tang dynasty, considered the golden age of China: the Battle of Talas in 751 on the Talas River (modern Kyrgyzstan), where the Tang were defeated by a Tibetan-Turkic-Arab army, and the An Lushan Rebellion led by general An Lushan (of Sogdian or Turkic origins) against the Tang, between 755 and 763. The Battle of Talas also marked the beginning of the Islamization of Central Asia, from which followed the “Islamization” of old

textile workshops according to new religious fashion norms.

The *khil'a* (an honorific garment) and the *tiraz* (a term that derives from Persian meaning “embroidery”) were two of the main garments that began to be produced. *Tiraz* specifically referred to a plain compound with a printed, woven, or embroidered inscription –possibly the most popular “Islamic weaving” across Eurasia — and to the workshops that produced it. The earliest types that survive today can only be dated back to the 9th century. As Central Asia was far from the central Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, the Central Asian *tiraz* workshops continued to weave older styles of textiles as well, and slowly began to include Arabic inscriptions (see e.g., [Figure 1-11](#)). The emerging style became especially evident during the Mongol period when “Sasanian” animals, Arabic inscriptions, and Chinese characters were all some-

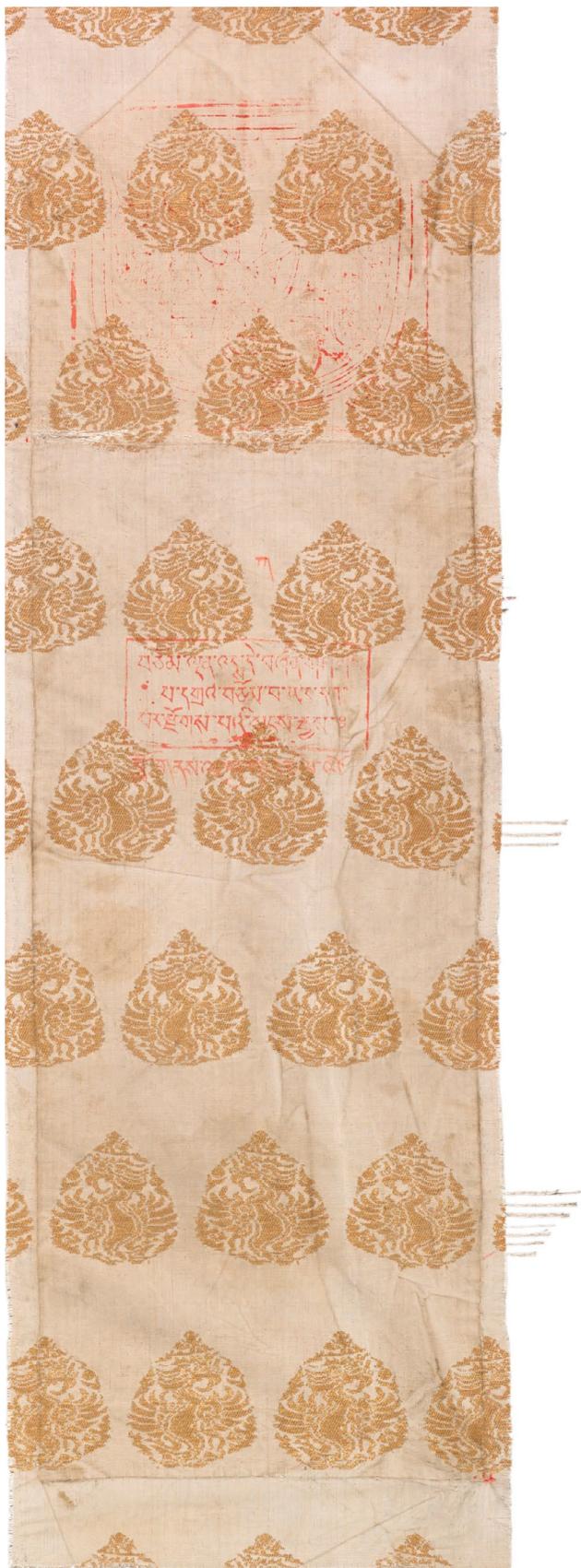


Figure 1-13: Golden brocaded silk tabby with phoenixes. Jin dynasty (1115-1234). Central Asia. Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art.

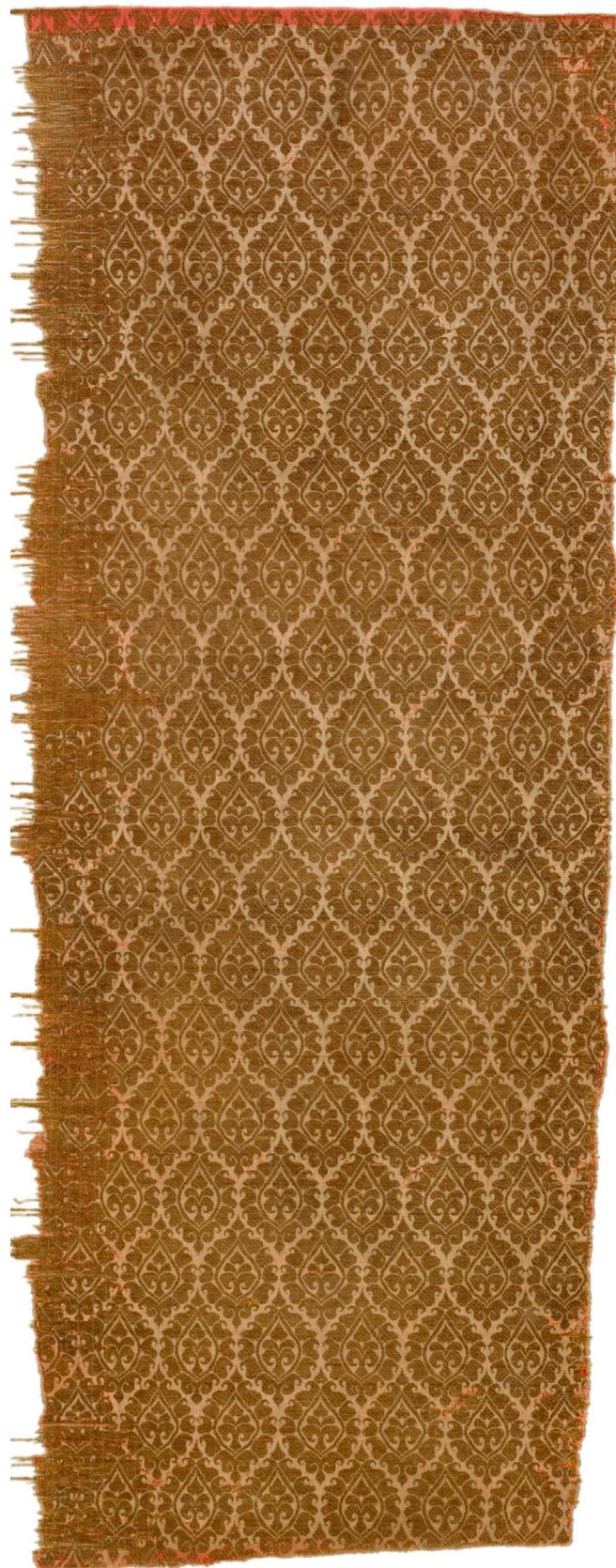


Figure 1-14: *Nasij*. Tabby with supplementary weft, golden and silver threads. 13th -14th cent. Central Asia. Courtesy of Cleveland Museum of Art.



times combined in golden weaving called *nasij* (or *nashishi* in Chinese) found across Asia and Europe. A remarkable example of *khil'a* with *tiraz* armbands is visible in the libation scene in Alchi, Ladakh region, India, dated to the 13th century. The scene depicts a ruler, possibly of Turkic origin, wearing a robe with lions, next to an indigenous woman holding a cup. See [Figure 1-12.13](#)

Except for the Song dynasty (960–1279), especially known for the so-called “literati” period, from the second half of the 10th century to the second half of the 13th century, Turko-Mongol peoples ruled over the “Middle Kingdom” and the rest of Eurasia, preparing the ground for the rise of the Mongols. Both the Kithans and the Jurchen people from Northeast, who established the Liao (907–1125) and the Jin (1115–1234) dynasties respectively, as well as the Uighurs in the western regions, used their own costumes as well as Chinese official garments.

Jin golden brocades (*Jinduanzi*) with a roundel or a drop-shape pattern made of a single animal surrounded by leaves, were particularly appreciated by the Mongols who adopted them for their own clothing, and later transferred the patterns into their *nasij* weavings (see e.g., [Figures 1-13](#) and [1-14](#)). Sources say that the Uighurs produced these golden weavings, and that they were presented to Genghis Khan (1162-1227), in 1209.<sup>14</sup> Not by coincidence, two shoes made of *nasij*, possibly dating to the 10th or 11th century, were discovered by Stein outside the city of Qocho.<sup>15</sup>

The golden weavings of the Mongols became a popular and accepted visual form of communication across their vast Eurasian empire. From the 14th century the *nasij* weavings appear in Italian documents as *panno tartarici* or also *tartareschi*, *tartarini*, *tarsici*, or more specifically as *nachoni*, *nacchi*, *nachetti* or *nasicci*. These terms all referred to weavings from the East, and differed from *panni saracini* or *saracinati* that were produced only in the Islamic Mediterranean. Not only were these weavings copied in Italy, but with their arrival, new pictorial movements began using golden thread. Just as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in Central Asian caves had been



Figure 1-15: *Madonna (wearing a “Tartar” mantle) and Child Enthroned*. Paolo Veneziano, ca.1350. Tempera on wood. Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum, New York.

depicted centuries earlier, the Madonna, saints, and angels were shown wearing Asian textiles. Giotto di Bondone, Simone Martini, Lippo Memmi, Bernardo Daddi, and Palo Veneziano are just a few of those Italian painters who contextualize “Tartar” textiles in Christian art and religious space (see e.g., [Figure 1-15](#)). Textile remains in church treasuries and museum collections exemplify some of the textiles depicted by artists.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

The textiles that crossed the Silk Road over the centuries had an enduring impact on Eur-



asian social and cultural life. The Tarim and the Mediterranean Basins each worked to receive and absorb artistic ideas and to adapt them into their own markets. At the core of the Silk Road, Central Asia was home to the encounters of ethnic and cultural groups that recycled materials, styles, technologies, and religions. There is a continuity of images that were initially adopted by Eurasian nomads and semi-nomads who interacted with sedentary people along north-south routes, then transferred by Sogdian and Turkic merchants who spread and adapted cultural ideas along east-west routes, and eventually by the Mongols who created a universal form of art and civilization. In the late Middle Ages, the tension between European Christians and Middle Eastern Muslims, and the bubonic plague of 1346, closed the terrestrial Silk Road and catalyzed the use of new sea routes that were navigated in the following centuries, brought the discovery of the Americas, and led to the development of global trade in textiles. In the Americas textiles from Asia and Europe were finished in Mexico and Peru, or copied and combined with indigenous elements, established a new “global” trend and, a style that it is still today visible in the liturgical vestments held in some of the California Missions, and which will be discussed in an upcoming article.

**Dr. Mariachiara Gasparini** is an Adjunct Lecturer at San Jose State University. She earned her PhD. From Ruprecht-Karls-Universität in Heidelberg. She is a specialist in ancient textiles, and has written extensively on textiles along the Silk Road. Dr. Gasparini is the author of the forthcoming book, *Transcending Patterns: Silk Road Cultural and Artistic Interactions through Central Asian Textile Images*, to be published in November 2019 by the University of Hawaii Press.

## Notes

1. Information in this article is selected from the book *Transcending Patterns: Silk Road Cultural and Artistic Interactions through Central Textile Images* by M. Gasparini (University of Hawaii Press, November 2019).
2. Yuxuan Gong, Li Li, Decai Gong, Hao Yin, Juzhong Zhang. “Biomolecular Evidence of Silk from 8,500 Years Ago.” *PLoS ONE* 11(12) (2016): 1–9. Feng Zhao. *Treasure in Silk* (Hangzhou: ISAT Costume Squad Ltd., 1999), 21.

3. Tabby, twill, and satin are the three basic binding systems from which all the other weaving structures developed. Kilim is a very tight type of tapestry, and rip (or ripstop) is a reinforced weaving technique that involved the use of reinforced thread during the weaving process at regular intervals.
4. Ulrike Beck, Mayke Wagner, Xiao Li, Desmind Durkin-Meisterernst, Oave E. Tarasov. “The Invention of Trousers and its Likely Affiliation with Horseback Riding and Mobility: A Case Study of Late 2nd Millennium BC Finds from Turfan in Eastern Central Asia.” *Quaternary International*, vol. 348, (2014); 224–235. [http://www.spranglady.com/uploads/7/7/0/8/77084287/17\\_2014\\_beck\\_et\\_al\\_qi\\_348\\_224-235.pdf](http://www.spranglady.com/uploads/7/7/0/8/77084287/17_2014_beck_et_al_qi_348_224-235.pdf)
5. Fragment published in Sheng, Angela. “Textiles from the Silk Road: Intercultural Exchanges among Nomads, Traders, and Agriculturalists.” *Expedition*. Vol. 3, Issue 2, (2010). <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/textiles-from-the-silk-road/>
6. Marta Źuchowska “Grape Picking” Silk from Palmyra: a Han Dynasty Chinese Textile with a Hellenistic Decoration Motif.” *Swiatowit* 12 (53)/A, (2014): 143–162.
7. The warp-faced compound is a ground with complementary warps in series and one weft only. The weft-faced compound instead is created with complementary wefts in series (a main warp, a binding warp, and a weft composed of two or more series of threads). During the Tang period it appeared in tabby and in twill. The word “brocade” refers to any weaving that employs an extra weft to create a pattern, without touching the selvages.
8. Mariachiara Gasparini. “A Mathematic Expression of Art: Sino-Iranian and Uighur Textile Interaction and the Turfan Textile Collection in Berlin.” *Transcultural Studies Journal*, no. 1, (2014): 134–163.
9. Zhao Feng and Le Wang, “Glossary Textile Terminology (Based on the Documents from Dunhuang and Turfan),” *Journal of the Royal Asian Society* 23, issue 02 (2013): 369–373.
10. Mariachiara Gasparini. “Sino-Iranian Textiles in Trans-Himalayan Areas.” *Silk Road Journal*, vol. 14, (2016): 84–96.
11. [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=30488001&objectid=6516](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=30488001&objectid=6516)
12. Idem.
13. Finbarr B. Flood, “A Turk in the Dunkhang? Comparative Perspectives on Elite Dress in Medieval Ladakh and the Caucasus,” in Allinger, Grenet and Jahoda, *Interaction in the Himalayas and Central Asia: Process of Transfer, Translation and Transformation in Art, Archaeology, Religion and Polity* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2017), 229–231.
14. Watt, James CY “Introduction,” in James CY, Watt and Anne Wardell, *The World of Khubilai Khan: Chinese Art in the Yuan Dynasty* (New York, New Haven, and London: Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2010), 8.
15. Stein, Marc Aurel. *Innermost Asia: Detailed Report of Explorations in Central Asia, Kan-su and Eastern Iran* (London: Oxford University press, 1928), vol. 2, 594. In her *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War and Faith*. (London: The British Library, 2004), 243, Susan Whitfield dates the shoes to the first Uighur period before the Chinese conquered the city in 608. However, looking at the patterns on the shoes and the type of the embroidery, they seem more likely datable to the second Uighur period, between the tenth and eleventh centuries.
16. Maria Ludovica Rosati. “Migrazioni tecnologiche e interazioni culturali. La diffusione dei tessuti orientali nell’Europa del XIII e del XIV secolo.” *OADI*, n. 1, (2010): 58–88.



# The C. Laan Chun Library

**Its history and collections at the Asian Art Museum**

by John Stucky



The reading room of the C. Laan Chun Library from the central hallway of the 4th floor of the Asian Art Museum.

## **The Library and Its Collections**

The history of the C. Laan Chun Library is almost as long as that of the Asian Art Museum itself. The library initially opened in the fall of 1967 with a core collection of a few thousand titles. Since then, the collection has grown to nearly 44,000 titles or about 45,000 actual volumes, and almost 230 active periodical subscriptions housed in two stack areas, on the 4th floor and in the basement of the museum. In addition to the active subscriptions there are partial hold-

ings of many periodicals, including specific issues relevant to the museum's research needs.

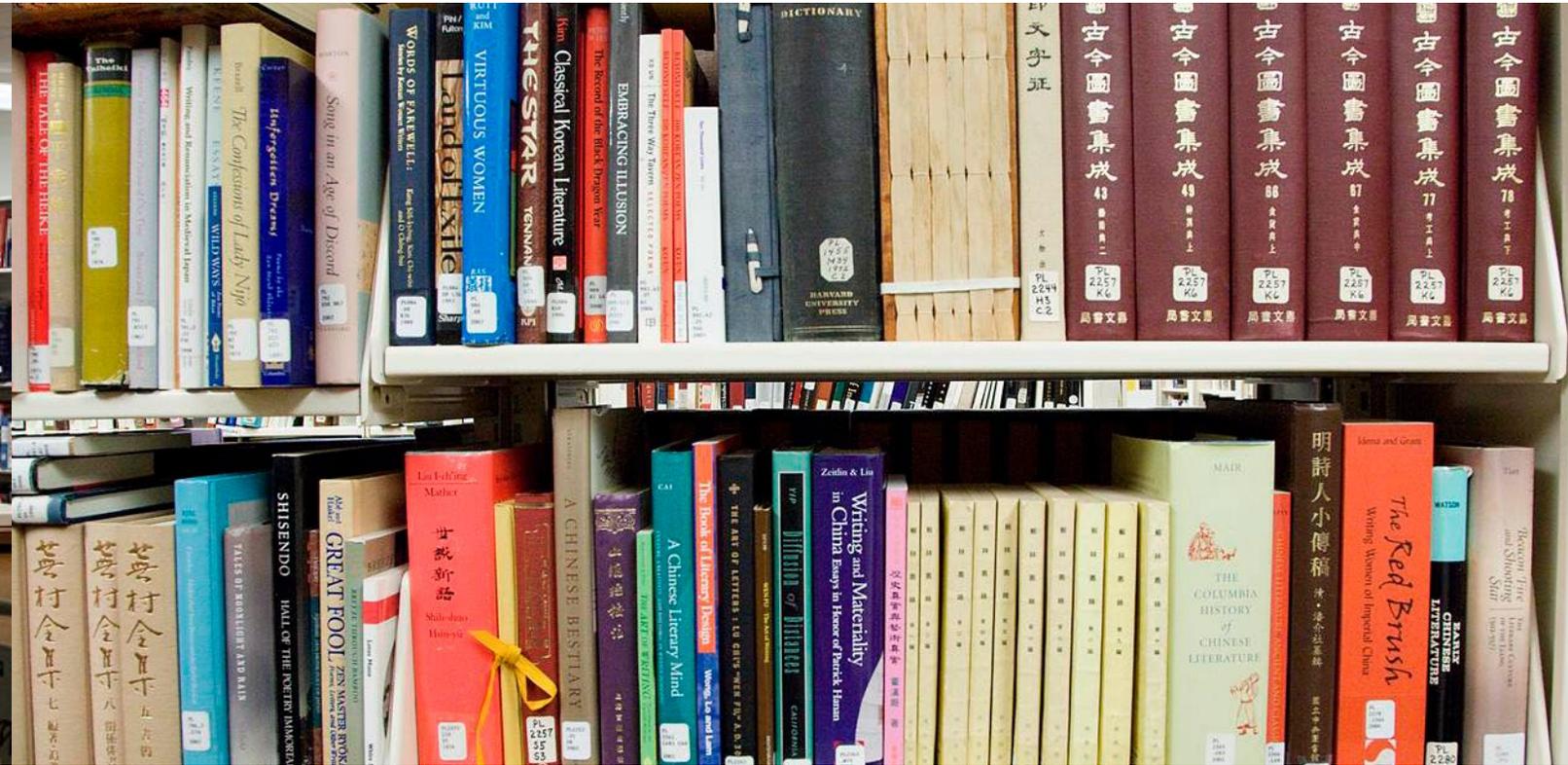
The library owes its existence, largely, to the Society for Asian Art. It was started to meet the expectations of Avery Brundage expressed in his agreements with the City of San Francisco, and in recognition of the research needs of the museum staff and docents. Yet, it was the Society that took on much of the responsibility to financially support the library through a fundraising campaign.<sup>1</sup>



The C. Laan Chun Library is named for Clara Laan Chun. Laan Chun was both a member of the Society and a member of the first docent class and remained a committed member of the Asian Art Museum community for over 35 years. Laan was a frequent user of the library, always deeply researching material and preparing for her well-informed gallery tours. Also, she was a frequent

complete set of the important Japanese art journal *Kokka* dating from the 1880s to the present, as well as extensive donations of books from the libraries of members of the Society for Asian Art.

Currently, the depth of the collections in the library match, and in some areas, surpass those of local university libraries. Specifically, the library's collec-



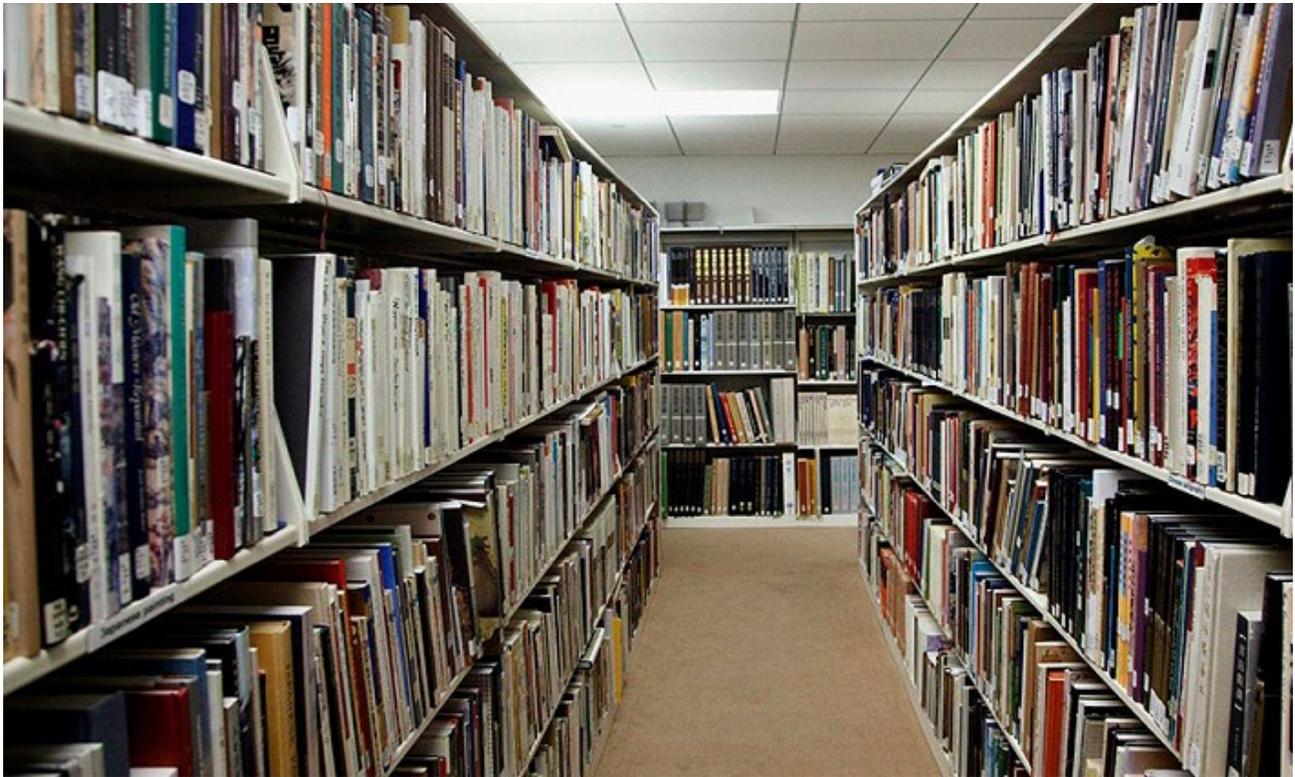
A few of the overcrowded shelves in the literature section. Note the range in formats.

donor to the library and left a significant portion of her estate to help with the library's relocation in the Civic Center site. The library in its new location was established in her name and memory and remains her enduring legacy.

The original material that made up the library when it first opened consisted of the collection that had been built by Society founding member Bea Haberle, a former curator and librarian at the deYoung Museum. Added to that were many items from Mr. Brundage's own library, including a

tions on Chinese and Japanese ceramics, ancient Chinese bronzes, south Asian sculpture, and Buddhist studies, are at least comparable to those of the libraries of the Asian Art Museum, Berkeley and Stanford University, and include materials that these two libraries do not have. In some instances, the Asian's library is one of only a few of the libraries in the United States, or the world, that holds a particular rare and important work.

In addition to books and periodicals, the library has a collection of microforms (fiche and film) of



A view of the stacks, looking toward folios shelved along the far wall.



Another view of ranges in the main stacks on the 4th floor.



A sample volume of the Shinbi Taikan, a thorough catalog of privately held treasures of Japanese art published between 1899-1908 and housed in two small chests (ko-dansu) with a separate volume on each shelf.



older journals and documents. It also houses the archives of Avery Brundage and the museum, the archives of the Society for Asian Art, along with a full set of the Society's *Newsletter* and *Lotus Leaves* dating back to the early 1960s.

The library's special collections include drawings, paintings, and calligraphy in many formats including handscrolls and albums as well as posters, postcards, several photograph collections, South and Southeast Asian palm leaf Buddhist manuscripts, Japanese and Chinese woodblock prints, Chinese and Japanese woodblock illustrated books dating from the late 16th to the early 20th centuries, and maps from the 16th to the early 20th centuries. There are also coins, stamps, and various ephemera such as a polo style T-shirt made for the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the accession to the throne of Thailand's King Rama IX (King Bhumibol) in June of 2006.

## The Librarians

**T**he founding librarian was Fred Cline. Mr. Cline graduated from UC Berkeley with a major in East Asian studies. After graduation he worked for a few years in the banking business, largely in Malaysia, where he developed a friendship with the pioneering western scholar of East Asian art, Robert van Gulik.

After a few years in Asia, Mr. Cline returned to Berkeley to study at the library school there. Upon graduating he took a position as a reference librarian at the State Library in Sacramento for five years before coming to the Brundage collection library, as this library was known at that time. Shortly after opening the library in the museum Mr. Cline wrote that the it was "designed to serve the staff of the Museum, visiting scholars and interested persons from here and abroad."<sup>2</sup> This has remained its mission.

Fred Cline was librarian from 1967 until the end of 1993, a tenure of over 26 years. During that time,

he added 20500 more titles to the library's core collection. Mr. Cline set the benchmark for high quality by building a collection of remarkable works that represented superior scholarship and depth.<sup>3</sup>

When I began at the Asian, the library had been without a librarian for more than three and a half months. There were mountains of books all over the reading room. My first task was to reshelve them all and in doing so, get to know the collection more thoroughly and learn the library's strengths and weaknesses. Even though I had known Fred Cline for a few years, I gained a profound respect for the breadth of his knowledge and scholarship and his incredible custodial abilities. Though the C. Laan Chun Library has changed since Fred Cline retired, the core spirit and quality of the collection still reflects his immense and lasting influence.

I started working at the Asian Art Museum in March of 1994. During this time, I have added more than 21,000 titles. Shortly after settling in at the museum, I also made efforts to make more people aware of the library and to make it more available to the general public. Of course, due to its size and staffing, the library is still only accessible to outside users by appointment.

I came to the Asian Art Museum from Stanford University's Library system where, most recently, I had served as head of Interlibrary Lending while also working at the general reference desk and providing bibliographic instruction to new graduate students. Before that I did graduate work with Michael Sullivan focusing on Chinese calligraphy and painting. While a graduate student, in addition to serving as a teaching assistant, I also worked in the Stanford Museum (now The Cantor Center) creating and updating records for their Asian collections and translating inscriptions on Chinese paintings.

Stanford Libraries had a scholarship program for support staff interested in attending library school. Through this program I attended the School of Library and Information Science at San Jose State. About a year after completing my library science



degree I was informed by a friend, then working at the Asian Art Museum, that Fred Cline was retiring. I leapt at the chance to work at the Asian and have been here since.

## Mileposts To The Present Library

The design of the present library was a challenge. Initially, the architect who worked on the library had designed insufficient space for library users. I negotiated a larger reading room by persuasion in several meetings and gifts of a few large bags of plain chocolate M & M's (a favorite of the architect I worked with).

The next challenge was moving the library to the present building. This involved much planning involving the measurement and layout of the library stacks, in addition to finding a reliable mover. This project was complicated by the cut of funding for shelving. Here again, the Society for Asian Art and the museum's then CFO/COO found funding. At the same time we learned that the ceiling was to be a lower height than we had planned for. This, in combination with the City of San Francisco's requirement for wider aisles in the stack areas, meant the loss of 1000 linear feet of planned shelving space in the main stacks on the 4th floor. This discovery required several re-measurements of the library's collections to re-configure placement of the books. Some re-measurements continued even after the actual move had begun.

Another unexpected problem was that the plumbing covering the ceiling of the library's basement stacks leaked. This was discovered only after the books had been moved into the area. Fortunately, the present engineering staff resolved the problem entirely, and there has been no damage to any of the books or special collections materials shelved in the basement, but it remained a constant concern for a few years.

The most recent accomplishment for the library is the one that has taken the longest: the con-

version of the original card catalog to an online catalog.

Planning the development of an online catalog began in 1998, well before the move to the present museum building. That was when the museum began to seek funding for an online catalog. At that same time, the card catalog was closed, meaning that the library stopped adding new card records, and began cataloging new materials only in an in-house database that could easily be converted to a library database system. This temporary database was moved onto library database software in 2003, but the older records (pre-September 1998) were still only in card form.

It was not until late 2012 that we received significant funding toward the conversion project from Ina Tateuchi of the Tateuchi Foundation. Mrs. Tateuchi is a retired librarian herself, and already a generous donor to the Asian Art Museum. Soon after, we received generous gifts from The Japan Foundation, the Society for Asian Art, and a few individuals which helped us realize full funding for this project. After finding the best company to perform the conversion, and developing a contract and work schedule with their representatives, the work began in early 2014.

After all the older card records and the original online catalog database were converted and meshed into what was to become the present online catalog, the next step was to do a complete inventory and barcode each title and volume in the collection. This inventory identified the titles that had slipped through the conversion so that when the catalog went online we could add all these orphaned titles. The new catalog went online and was mounted into the museum's website in mid-September 2015. Today anyone, anywhere — literally anywhere — can search our catalog. This has been the realization of a dream.

Most recently we have been doing a new inventory of the stacks on the 4th floor and have been selecting titles to be transferred to our storage stacks. This large project will open up desperately



needed growth space on the 4th floor. At the same time, we are creating records in the museum's art database for non-book items in the library's special collections. These projects have required us to add a very skilled and much needed one-year term staff member to the library.

## Significant Gifts To The Library

The life blood of an institution like the C. Laan Chun Library is the continuing generosity of others. One form is funding, such as the gifts from Ina Tateuchi and the Tateuchi Foundation, and the Japan Foundation as mentioned above; but most significantly and consistently, over 50 years, the generosity of the Society for Asian Art.

Also vital to the library are the gifts of publications and other library materials, such as journals, membership magazines and rare materials. Many of these have been acquired through publication exchange with other institutions. Over the years the library has developed friendly relationships with several museums in Europe, Asia and the U.S. that allow us to trade wonderful publications, including institutional journals, exhibition catalogs, and monographs on collections in exchange for our own publications.

Just as important are the gifts from private individuals and families' personal libraries. During the 25 years that I have been at the Asian there have been many impressive gifts of rare and older materials, but there are certain donations that were particularly significant.

One of the largest single donations was the gift of nearly 300 titles from the library of William Ehrenfeld, M.D. in 2005. These books consisted almost entirely of materials on Indian painting and art created during the British Raj. Some books in this collection are well over 125 years old, and several are quite rare.

Another significant gift was that of the private

library, largely on Korean culture and art, of Mrs. Kay Black. This gift was nearly the same size as that of Dr. Ehrenfeld's and included many documents in manuscript form by important scholar associates of Mrs. Black. This gift significantly enriched our collection of material on Korea.

One recent gift is several large folios illustrating a variety of historical kimono from the collection of the Nomura family, direct descendants of Nomura Shojiro, a well-known merchant, connoisseur and collector of textiles and kimono in Kyoto. These very rare folios offer an in-depth and invaluable view of the wide variety of kimono designs made during the 19th and early 20th centuries, and complement screens featuring kimono that the Nomura family has already given the museum.

Finally, I have to mention the wonderful books, papers and other items that came to us through the Yeh family. Originally, these books and papers were the property of Kung-ch'ao (George) Yeh. The Yeh family's collection of Chinese calligraphy and paintings was an extremely significant addition to the museum's art collection and was featured in a special exhibition at the Asian Art Museum in 2006. The donated books that had belonged to Kung-ch'ao Yeh are largely rubbings and reproductions of famous examples of Chinese calligraphy in folio, book, album and handscroll format. All are very special additions to the library's broad collection.

The C. Laan Chun Library is a great hidden treasure in its own right. As the current librarian, I am very proud of the depth, breadth, and especially, the quality of the library's collection. It is filled with wonders.

## Notes:

1. *The Society for Asian Art Newsletter*. Vol. 6:1 (May 1966), page 1.
2. *The Society for Asian Art Newsletter*. Vol. 8:1 (May 1968), page 10.
3. Much of this information has been confirmed through an email exchange with Fred Cline between September 9 – 10, 2019.



# Society for Asian Art

The Society for Asian Art was founded in 1958 to encourage the study and appreciation of the arts of Asia. Its first objective was to help in the acquisition of The Avery Brundage Collection for the City and County of San Francisco.

For more about the Society for Asian Art, its mission, its board of directors and advisors, please visit

[www.societyforasianart.org/about-us](http://www.societyforasianart.org/about-us)

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# Lotus Leaves

Lotus Leaves is a scholarly publication focusing on issues judged to be of particular interest to Society for Asian Art members.

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