



# The Language of Dress

Textile Research Centre, Leiden

Top left: A ceremonial bicorne hat worn by Dutch member of Parliament, Laurens de Groot, in the early 1920's.  
Top right: Woman's kaftan from Fez, Morocco, made out of a Japanese obi (1950's).  
Below left: An ikat from Sumba, Indonesia, brought back to the Netherlands by a Dutch official in the 1920's.  
Below right: Pair of bridal lotus shoes, late 19th century, China.

All photos Courtesy Textile Research Centre, Leiden.



**D**ress is a silent language, full of meaning and nuances that come in all shapes and sizes, colours and textures. It is a language with many variant forms, different vocabularies and sometimes complicated grammatical rules, which are all, as with every language, constantly changing. Dress is a language that we all speak, but communicating with dress is not always straightforward and may lead to misunderstandings. We do not all speak the same dialect!

And dress is not limited to garments. It also includes hairstyle, body modifications, footwear, jewellery, make-up and so much more. Dress is a highly diverse field of study that helps to explain how we communicate, not with words, but with our appearance. What does it mean when a man wears a suit and a necktie, or when a woman covers her face with a veil? Why has there been a recent surge in tattoos? And how do people react when they see a man with a set of nose-rings? Why do some people prefer to wear cotton garments, linen, or even hemp? And why do some of us don hideous jumpers at Christmas? Dress is also a resource for historical and archaeological observations. Which dress language did people speak hundreds, or even thousands of years ago? Why was the Egyptian pharaoh, Tutankhamun, entombed together with some two hundred garments, including over a hundred loin cloths? Why are some Chinese men and women starting to wear typically Han-style garments – is it simply to say that they are Chinese and want nothing to do with Western style clothing? There are more questions than answers!

## The Textile Research Centre

The Textile Research Centre (TRC) was established in 1993 with the express aim of studying and teaching on the subject of textiles and dress and presenting the subject to a wider audience. For many years it was housed at the National Museum of Ethnology, until in 2008 it moved to its own premises, along the Hogewoerd in the centre of the old textile town of Leiden. Since then it has grown rapidly, with twice-yearly exhibitions at its own gallery, an ever expanding library, a still growing number of lectures, workshops, and courses, with visitors every day from all over the world, and supported by a steady stream of interns

and volunteers, many of whom are attached to Leiden University. But apart from its in-house expertise, its main asset certainly is its collection of garments and textiles from all over the world, and from all ages.

In 1997 the TRC started with a small collection of textiles and garments as a teaching tool while working with students from Leiden University. Since then the collection has grown to nearly 25,000 items, but its function as a teaching and handling collection has remained the same. In order for the collection to reach as wide an audience as possible, the TRC is constantly adding more information and photographs to its database, which is accessible online (<https://trc-leiden.nl/collection>).

As part of its collaboration with the London based publishing house of Bloomsbury, the TRC is expanding its collection of hand and machine embroidery, which forms the basis of a special TRC project, namely the *Encyclopedia of Embroidery series*. The first volume was *The Encyclopedia of Embroidery from the Arab World* (published in 2016 and the recipient of various awards). The second volume, *The Encyclopedia of Embroidery from Central Asia, the Iranian Plateau and the Indian subcontinent* will be published in late 2019, followed by other volumes on European, sub-Saharan African, American and East and Southeast Asian embroidery.

## The TRC Collection

The TRC Collection is one of the few public collections that looks at the whole world of textiles and dress, rather than, for example, focussing on (Western) high fashion items, art historical aspects, or the 'ethnic' garments from one particular part of the world. Instead it takes a more holistic approach. It looks at textiles and dress from a wide range of angles inherent to the objects themselves, within the framework of the basic question as to why people use or wear the garments that they wear. In other words, the collection focusses on the basic elements of the 'language of dress': the fibres and dyes used, the production methods, the cut and shape of the garments, their decoration, the producers and the wearers, and how these items link in with each other and with different groups around the globe.

The TRC has been actively engaged in collecting and studying and presenting a wide range of textiles and garments from Asia. Some

sub-collections stand out. The TRC houses a wide and very diverse collection of items from Afghanistan; a large part of the collection was assembled during various fieldtrips in the country between 1978 and 2011. Most of these items date to the latter half of the 20th century and represent the main groups living in the country, including Baluch, Hazara, Nuristani, Pashtun, Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek groups. Many of the TRC's Afghan items were on display in a TRC exhibition entitled *Well-Dressed Afghanistan*, which was held at the TRC in 2010/2011. The same display is also one of a series of TRC online exhibitions.

Another Asian/Middle Eastern sub-collection is that of *badla*. This name refers to the use of a narrow, flat metal thread (plate, lamella) to create various knotted effects. It can be found, with different names, in India, southern Iran and Egypt. The Indian pieces in the TRC collection include items made for the home market (notably saris) and for export, such as a *badla* overdress for an Omani Bedouin woman. In the TRC *badla* collection there is also a special item, namely a 1920s European flapper dress made from two Egyptian shawls decorated in the *badla* manner.

A third sub-collection that should be mentioned is that of Chinese lotus shoes. Since 2007 the TRC has been building up an assemblage of these minute shoes worn by mainly Han Chinese women up to the early 20th century. The collection not only includes a range of shoes from different parts of the country, but they also represent different occasions, such as weddings, funerals, burials, and so forth. In addition, items relating to the production of lotus shoes, including a range of tools, are included in the collection. Many of these shoes were on display in a TRC exhibition (2012/2013) about decorative and protective footwear, and are also included in yet another TRC online exhibition.

## TRC exhibitions

Apart from expanding its range of online exhibitions, the TRC also organises two to three temporary and actual exhibitions per year, and for the organisation of many of these the assistance is given by interns and students from a range of educational institutions, who in this way acquire practical experience in handling textiles and setting up displays.

Exhibitions in the TRC Gallery have ranged from African *kanga* (2009), decorative footwear, including the Chinese lotus shoes (2010), Afghan dress (2010), through Chinese *cheongsam* (2011), African dress (2014), and garments from Yemen (2015), to more technical exhibitions, about the history of embroidery, about weaving and about textile printing.

In addition, exhibitions from outside are set up at the TRC to encourage textile crafts in general. These exhibitions covered the subjects of lace (2014) and that of weaving with 16-shaft (also 2014), and also displays and workshops set up together with Taiwanese indigo dyers and weavers (2016), with Indonesian weavers (2017), with Taiwanese basketry weavers (2018) and with the UNESCO indigo printer, Georg Stark (2018). The craftspeople are encouraged to sell items at the TRC during the exhibitions in order to support and publicise their work.

This year the TRC set up an exhibition about 500 years of velvet production and velvet clothing, and is based on the TRC's extensive collection of fifteenth century (and later) velvets and velvet garments. In the summer of 2019 the TRC is organising the *Out of Asia: 2000 Years of Textiles* exhibition, to coincide with the 11th International Convention of Asia Scholars. There is, in sum, plenty to talk about, with the silent language of dress.

Dr Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood  
director Textile Research Centre  
[info@trc-leiden.nl](mailto:info@trc-leiden.nl);  
<https://www.trc-leiden.nl>