

Fig. 1: Christening gown made in the Netherlands in 1944 from allied parachute silk for a child born on 6 June, D-Day. Courtesy Textile Research Centre, Leiden (TRC 2010.0070a).



Textiles on the move, through time and space

Willem Vogelsang

In October 2020, IAS in Leiden organised a week-long online conference about textile and dress traditions that develop through time and space, and thereby often change their role and meaning. The conference was organised with the assistance of Sandra Sardjono of the Tracing Patterns Foundation in Los Angeles, Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood of the Textile Research Centre (TRC) in Leiden, and Chris Buckley, Oxford. It replaced a 'real' conference that was planned to take place in Leiden, but which had to be postponed because of the corona pandemic.

The present Focus section of The Newsletter contains ten papers. Some were discussed during the conference, others were written afterwards. They all reflect upon the changing roles of textiles in society. Textiles and dress have a significance that transcends their practical function, namely to provide warmth and protection. They also play a central role in social, economic, and spiritual interactions. Textiles and clothing

speak volumes about the hierarchy of power relations amongst their users, including power that defines stratifications of class, wealth, and gender. In most cases, these tangible and intangible values of textiles are culture-specific, and their unspoken functions are fully understood within a particular tradition. Textiles are also repositories of techniques, for spinning, weaving, dyeing, printing, and embroidering, and these techniques travel

over time and space from one group of people to another. The history of textiles also reflects the history of animal husbandry and the growing of plants, in order to produce the fibres needed for the textiles. All these techniques travelled from one group to another, and in the process they changed and adopted new features and meanings.

Textiles moved easily from one area to another because of their portability. Their

measurable value (in the raw material, knowledge, and the time and effort of labour put into them) makes textiles a perfect medium for commercial exchange and as items of tribute. The Silk Route between East and West from the Roman period onwards is a good example. At the same time, their intangible cultural value (as a medium to

Continued overleaf



Fig. 2 (left): Traditional Moroccan woman's kaftan made from Japanese material intended for a kimono sash (second half 20th century). Courtesy Textile Research Centre, Leiden (TRC 2001.0074).

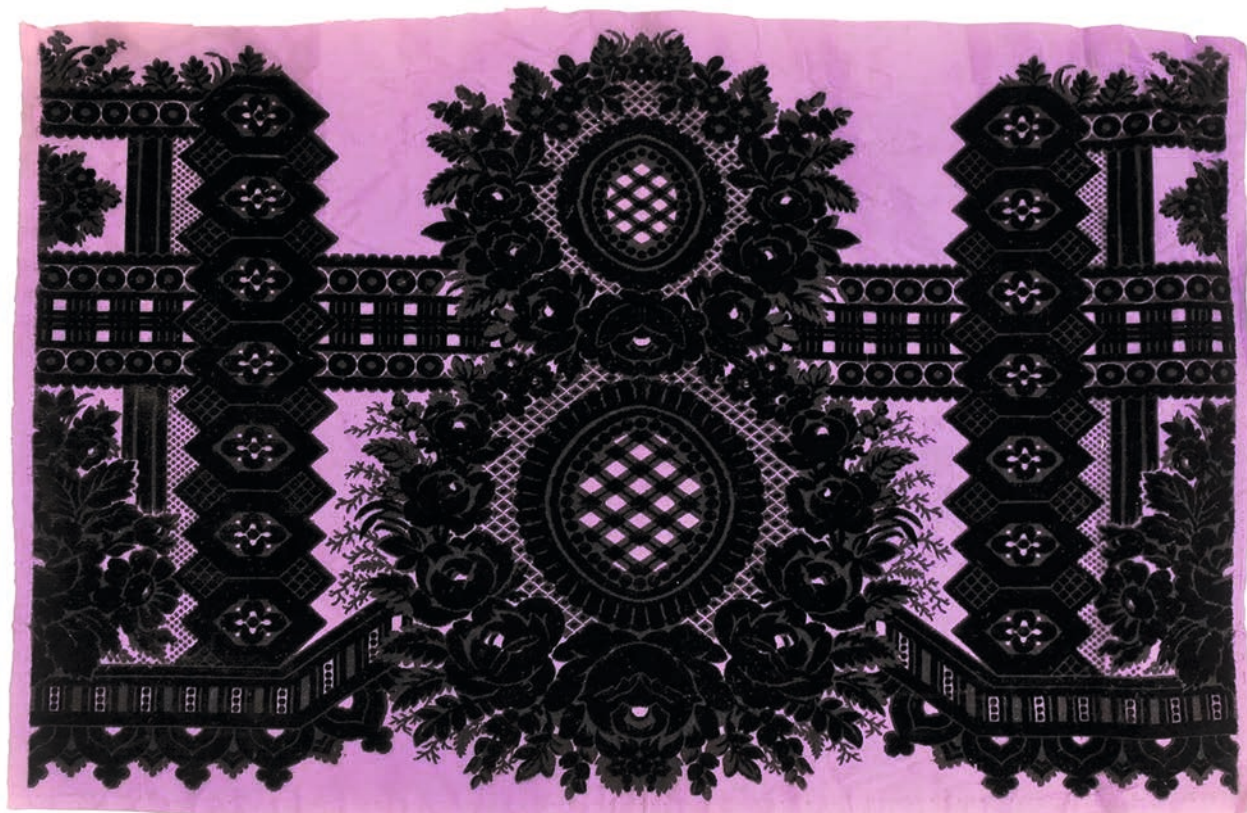


Fig. 3 (right): Velvet panel produced in China in the mid-19th century for the European market, particularly used for the borders of ladies' crinoline dresses. Courtesy Textile Research Centre, Leiden (TRC 2018.2401).

express identity) was carried along with them, together with the movement of people. On these journeys textiles would lose their old values, acquire new significance, or communicate messages that may be changed or distorted in their new environments.

The papers below look at specific materials, techniques, uses, and decorations that were used and developed for textiles in one particular region and which then moved, either physically or in the minds of artists and

craftsmen and women, to other parts of the world, thereby changing the meaning of these textiles, their function, and their importance in society [figs. 1, 2 and 3]. The papers not only emphasise the adaptability of textiles to other cultures, over space and time, but they also reflect upon the ever-present process of adoption and adaptation of 'foreign' elements into a local cultural context. These include Indian chintz motifs on 'traditional' regional costume from the island of Marken

in the Netherlands, American jackets being worn by Japanese *yakuza* men, or Chinese decorative designs being incorporated into Latin American 'national' costume.

The conference and some of the papers below were facilitated by the availability of large collections of textiles, namely the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection in Washington, with some 4,000 textiles from all places and all periods of time (see the papers below by Marie-Eve Celio and Lee Talbot), and in particular the

world-wide collection of the Textile Research Centre in Leiden (35,000 objects; see the papers by Gillian Vogelsang and Francesco Montuori). These collections emphasise the importance of large, open-access, broad-based collections for the study of textile and dress history, especially when focusing on the development and global spread of textile techniques and decorative elements.

In the first paper, Marie-Eve Celio-Scheurer writes about 'Japonisme' in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century, and some of the products of the so-called *Wiener Werkstätte*. She refers to influences going both ways, by Japanese products and artists influencing European textiles and other objects, and by European artists affecting the artistic production of Japanese craftsmen.

The second paper, by Lee Talbot from Washington, takes us to the ancient Silk Route between China and the West, which not only transported silk, but also textiles from East to West and vice versa. This movement introduced new motifs, materials, and techniques in the West, but also in the East.

Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood, Director of the Textile Research Centre (TRC) in Leiden, elaborates on the global popularity of an originally Iranian motif, the *buteh*, which in the early 19th century was copied in the Scottish town of Paisley and hence became known world-wide as the paisley motif. It can now be found all over the world, on stylish gowns and on punk T-shirts, on men's underwear and on Tanzanian kangas.

Anna Jackson, from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, writes about two remarkable 18th-century garments. One of them was made in Japan from a silk fabric originally produced in France; the other was made in Europe from a material produced in Japan. Contacts between Europe and Japan are also discussed by Ariane Fennetaux from Paris. On the basis of a garment now in the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, she stresses the likelihood that India played an important role in the manufacture of 'Japanese' garments for the European market.

Dale Gluckman from Los Angeles writes about an Indonesian batik collection now in Bangkok, which was collected during three trips made by the Thai king Rama V to the former Dutch East Indies. He made a collection that is marked by its diversity and the information that was added to each piece. Niaz Zaman from Bangladesh and the Canadian filmmaker Cathy Stevulak report on the development of a typical textile product from Bangladesh and neighbouring West Bengal in India. This is the *kantha*, which has in recent years been given a new lease of life and is now used not only for the traditional quilts, but also for large wall hangings.

A paper by Nuning Y Damayanti Adisasmito from Bandung deals with the *Batik Kompeni*, a form of batik that developed in the 19th century from closer contacts between (mainly) Dutch entrepreneurs and local Indonesian craftsmen and women. These batiks include representations of Little Red Riding Hood, and storks standing in the middle of water plants.

Francesco Montuori from Italy, an intern at the TRC in Leiden, writes about a 'typical' Japanese garment from the post-war period, namely the *sukajan*, which is a garment that originates from the bomber jackets worn by American airmen stationed in Japan, and indirectly from the so-called letterman jackets that were worn since the mid-19th century by students at American universities. The *sukajan* became the characteristic garment of Japanese 'bad boys' in the 1950s and 1960s, and has since become a popular garment in Japan, which is often produced in China.

The final paper is by Caroline Stone from Cambridge, who presents a number of examples of decorative motifs sometimes very unexpectedly finding their way to other countries and continents. Compare in this context the traditional Moroccan woman's kaftan made from Japanese material originally produced for an *obi*, or kimono sash [fig. 2]. The examples show how concepts of 'static local tradition' and 'authenticity' are often hard to substantiate.

Willem Vogelsang served as Deputy Director of the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden from 2011-2020. willemvogelsang@gmail.com