

Textiles with a Dual Heritage

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Working for a number of years with the Civilizations in Contact Project at Cambridge University, I became fascinated by textiles that are the product of these contacts and which have, if you like, two parents or elements from different parts of the world.



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Fig. 1: Child's cap from Afghanistan, 3rd quarter of the 20th century. Collection and photograph by author.

Fig. 2: Japanese indigo and white cotton ikat, ca. 1930-40. Collection and photograph by author.

Fig. 3: Woman's Ottoman style bolero from Tunis, late 19th century. Gilt spangles and metal thread embroidery on black velvet. The motif of birds - especially peacocks, their flesh was believed to be incorruptible and hence the symbol of immortality - drinking at a fountain, representing the water of life, is common on palaeo-Christian sarcophagi in the area and made its way into folk art and embroidery. Collection and photograph by author.



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Fig. 4: Guatemalan apron bought new in La Antigua ca. 2005. A base of Totoncapán jaspe with machine embroidery and passementerie. The shape is 1950s American, the decoration hybrid, but these aprons had become fashionable and part of local dress, especially for the market women. Collection and photograph by author.

Fig. 5: Rabat marriage curtain ca. 1900. Hand embroidered silk on Indian muslin. Collection and photograph by author.

This could be design, in the case of a very moving child's cap from Afghanistan, embroidered with military helicopters, probably Russian [fig. 1]. Did the boy ask for that pattern? More likely, it was embroidered by a mother hoping to protect her child, as more traditional textiles feature snakes and scorpions. Planes are occasionally found on North African *kelims*, dating from World War II. They are also found on an indigo and white cotton ikat, probably for a *yukata* from 1930s Japan [fig. 2].

Another example, this time stretching across millennia as well as miles, is the motif of two peacocks drinking at a fountain, symbolising the water of life. It was probably borrowed from a Palaeo-Christian sarcophagus, of which there are many in the region, before entering folk iconography in North Africa and the Near East - here on a *bolero* from Tunis [fig. 3].

Again, there is the garment itself. In Guatemala, for example, there is no tradition

of decorative aprons, so common in the Slavic world. The elaborate ones worn today with traditional dress in Guatemala are borrowed from Europe, or perhaps North America. The decoration can be in the local style or, as here, hybrid [fig. 4].

It could also be technique. The standard skirt material for Guatemalan Indian women, particularly from El Quiché, is a kind of ikat known as *jaspe*. The technique seems not to have been in use in Central America before the Conquest, nor does it come from Spain or elsewhere in Europe. It is, however, well known in the Philippines. Many things were brought from there to the Americas by the Spaniards. Could ikat have travelled as well?

Given the enormous trade in textiles at all periods of history, it is not surprising to find all kinds of combinations. To give a one example: a marriage curtain, acquired in Rabat and embroidered in the traditional local manner, but using as its base material Indian white-

on-white embroidered muslin [fig. 5]. A similar example used a *chikankari sari*, probably from Lucknow. As an additional twist, according to one theory, this type of work is thought to have originated in Shiraz, imported into India by the Mughals.

Or, again, a 17th century kimono with panels of Indian chintz, introduced to Japan by the Portuguese and usually too costly to be used for anything but small bags and purses. The Japanese soon learned to imitate these cotton fabrics - *sarasa* - although the designs could never be mistaken for the Indian originals. A comparable example might be the Russian cottons exported in vast quantities to Central Asia and used as linings for robes, furnishings, etc. Eventually, they were produced there, mainly in Uzbekistan, although imports continued, later from farther afield (i.e., Japan and China).

I became especially interested in this question of dual heritage when working on the development and travels of the embroidered silk Chinese shawls, commonly known in English as Canton shawls, because of the region where they were made (now

Guangzhou). They are known in Spanish as *mantones de Manila*, because Manila is where they were trans-shipped. Shawls were a standard item across Europe for centuries, worn for warmth or for decoration, but in the early 19th century Chinese shawls began to appear in great numbers - especially, but not exclusively, in the Hispanic world, where they became an element in the national dress of various regions. In China, however, the square fringed shawl has never been a standard article of clothing, although stoles were worn at an earlier period, as seen in paintings from the Tang dynasty (618-906). The Canton shawl is therefore itself an East-West hybrid.

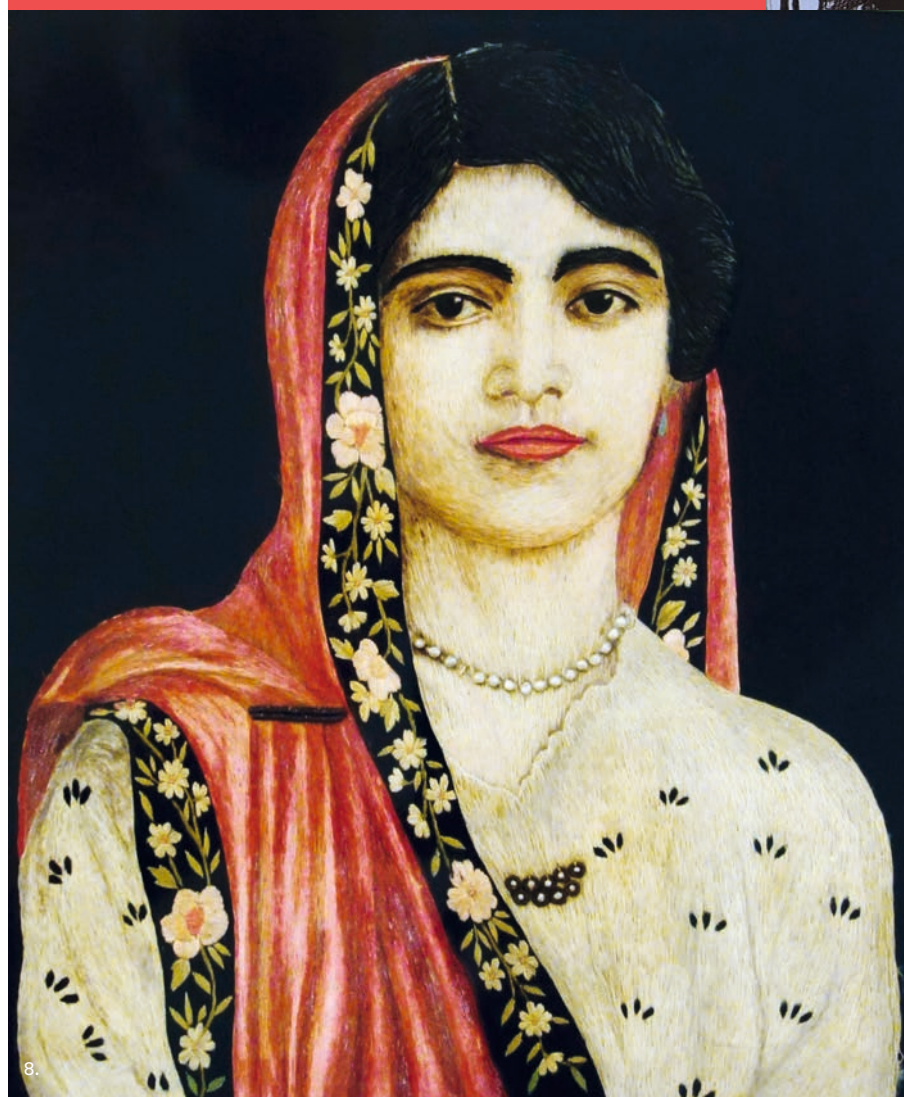
Since part of the appeal of these shawls was their exoticism, although they were commissioned by Western merchants (the Spanish author Perez Galdos has a wonderful and accurate description of the trade in his novel *Fortunata y Jacinta*),¹ the designs were almost always Chinese. Some of the earliest examples, however, have clearly Western motifs, especially a nosegay tied up with a ribbon. This was a very fashionable pattern around 1800, which made its way not only to



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Fig. 6: A shawl from Manila? Early 20th century, hand embroidered silk on silk. The use of European stitches and stylisation suggest it may have been made in The Philippines rather than China. Collection and photo: Caroline Stone.

Fig. 7: Mughal influence? Mid 19th century, hand embroidered silk on silk. This superb quality shawl is one of a very small group in which the flowers are stylized in the Mughal rather than the Chinese manner. Private collection.

Fig. 8: Sari with embroidered ribbon border in a 19th century portrait of a young woman (Parsi?). Private collection, Mumbai.

Fig. 9: Shawl imitating the Manila shawls worn by the Spanish. Tétuan, Morocco, early-mid 20th century. Artificial silk, machine embroidered in the pastel colours favoured by the Ottomans ca. 1900. The flowers are a mixture of Asian and Turkish styles. Collection and photograph by author.

alternative: embroidered ribbons – *kors* – could be added to the sari border and *palu* [fig. 8]. Generally Chinese in style, but sometimes with popular Indian motifs, such as peacocks, they were exported in large quantity and often sold by Chinese pedlars.

There is another twist to the story, however. The Indians, as has frequently been noted, are excellent craftsmen and skilled copyists, so it is not surprising that before long imitations of these ribbons were being produced in India, particularly at Surat. It is actually very hard to tell originals and imitations apart. The way that stitches are worked and the thread is started and finished off varied from country to country. In this way the wrong side of the material can provide a clue as to the origin, even if the right side is a perfect imitation.

Ribbons have always been popular merchandise, and Chinese pedlars roamed far afield: the Caribbean, the High Desert in Oregon, and the Guatemalan highlands. In the last, they are found around the necks of the heavy woven blouses – *huipiles* – that form part of traditional dress. Because the original ribbons were expensive or hard to obtain, they were copied, even though weaving rather than embroidery was the local speciality. In Comalapa or San Antonio Aguas Calientes, for example, they are sometimes found on the necks of *huipiles* woven with patterns that derive from the elaborate Italian and Spanish brocades exported to the New World and used for church vestments. Some of these silks, in turn, were influenced by imports from Persia long before, once again adding another layer to the story.

The Canton shawl, which began as a luxury accessory, became part of the Hispanic version of the national dress in Central and South America, where visitors were often amazed at the purchasing power of working-class and even rural women. In Mexico, the embroideries influenced the spectacular *China poblana* costume, while in Guatemala, brightly coloured flowers, particularly popular in *Chichicastenango* weavings, undoubtedly owe something to the shawls.

Following the shawls to a different area of the world: in the European tradition they were worn around the shoulders or over the head, often for warmth, or sometimes decoratively around the waist. However, when Canton shawls reached Palestine, brought back as gifts for the women of the family – usually darker colours and without figures – they were draped as part of the headdress, essentially as a veil.

In coastal Morocco, where Spanish presence was much in evidence, numerous imitations were made. Here we have a new mixture, this time with Ottoman aesthetics, shown both by the tulip design and the pastel “sugar almond” colours. A good example is a 1920s shawl from Tétuan, which was to be worn again as a *hijab* [fig. 9].

These are just a few of the innumerable examples of cultural contact demonstrated by textiles that have two sources of origin or, if you prefer, two ‘parents’ of different nationalities.

A word of warning about designs on the move. While many were transmitted in the ways we have described, companies producing embroidery thread, such as DMC in France, complicated the situation from the early 20th century onwards by giving away patterns or books of patterns to their clients. This resulted in the same designs appearing on cushions in England, the ritual towels known as *rushniki* in Russia and the Ukraine, Palestinian dresses, and woven *huipil* in Guatemala. The patterns of transmission had permanently changed. Later in the century, the picture was further complicated by well-meaning NGOs encouraging embroiderers to abandon their traditional patterns and colour schemes in order to produce items felt to be more saleable.

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Notes

- 1 Galdós, Benito Pérez, *Fortunata y Jacinta*. Madrid, La Guindalera, 1887.

China, but also to the Ottoman Empire, where it begins to appear in domestic embroideries, probably copied from imported French silks.

The vast majority of the motifs, however, were the kind the embroideresses would have been used to working on their own clothes, or pieces they were commissioned to make for local use. Each element would have had a meaning, usually prophylactic or wishing ‘good luck’ – as is the case with almost all traditional weaving and embroidery. Outside China, the symbolism was, of course, not recognised or was reinterpreted: the peony became a rose; trails of wisteria were read as grapes and were especially popular in the sherry producing area of Jerez.

As has already been mentioned, these Canton shawls were known as *mantones de Manila* in Spanish, but there are a few very rare shawls that may in fact have been produced in the Philippines [Fig. 6]. They are worked in a range of stitches more commonly found in items (e.g., tablecloths, blouses, etc.) made for export in the 20th century. Such stitches included drawn thread, cutwork, etc. – not part of the classic Chinese repertoire. This style

of embroidery, with its distinctively European stitches, is said to have been introduced into the Philippines by European nuns in the 17th century, who then taught them to the girls in their care. Interestingly, there are considerable similarities to the embroidery style of Madeira – it was introduced from the mainland about the same date, quite possibly by the same Orders of nuns – where today it is still very much a living craft.

Leaving aside the shawls for one moment, it is worth mentioning that much earlier examples of hybridising reached the West as well as can be seen in the silks produced in Lucca between c. 1200-1450. Church vestments and adornments commissioned by the missionary orders in the East, especially the Jesuits, have been preserved in a number of sacristies. A spectacular example is the vast hanging (9.78 x 5.76 m) completely worked with a design of birds and flowers, displayed at certain times of the year in the Cathedral of Seville. This panel arrived from the Philippines and dates to the late 17th century, but is almost certainly of Chinese workmanship. Whether it was commissioned for the Cathedral,

or whether it was simply acquired as a luxury object to be offered to the Church is unclear, but unlike certain vestments which have a mixture of Chinese and Christian motifs – or one in Oxford made from a dragon robe, but with Christian additions – this hanging has no obvious Christian iconography.

It was not only Europe that was charmed by Chinese embroideries. The Parsi community of the West Coast of India, especially in Mumbai, were important traders with wide ranging contacts and they commissioned embroidered saris – *gara* – from China. These were rare luxury items and very few have survived, but it is possible that this contact also influenced the shawls. There are a small number of very high-quality pieces embroidered with flowers, which are clearly copied from Mughal designs with a stylization that is definitely not Chinese [Fig. 7]. Were these from workshops that produced *gara*? Or were they copied from the Indian chintzes that were popular in Macao and even found their way to Japan? We do not know.

Saris embroidered in China were out of most people’s price range, but there was an