
Crossroads of Cloth: Textile Arts and Aesthetics in and beyond the Medieval Islamic World

Aux carrefours des étoffes : les arts et l'esthétique textiles dans le monde islamique médiéval et au-delà

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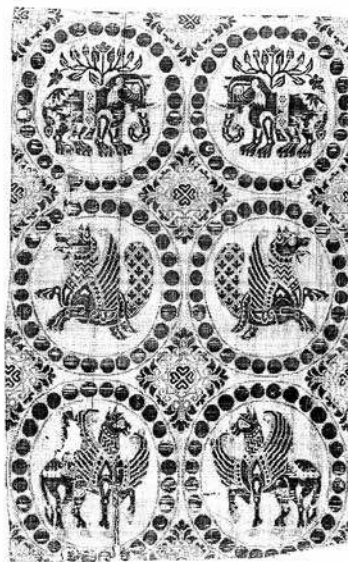
Crossroads of Cloth: Textile Arts and Aesthetics in and beyond the Medieval Islamic World

A piece of woven silk preserved in the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York (fig. 1) shows medallions with pearl borders in which various animals appear. The elephants, winged horses, and composite creatures with dog heads and peacock tails are positioned alternately face-to-face and back-to-back. The fabric is designed to be viewed both from a distance and more closely.

From a distance, the overall structure with its repeating pattern forms a grid in which geometrical roundels oscillate between contact and isolation. They are so close they seem almost to touch both each other and the complicated vegetal patterns in the spaces between, although in fact each roundel remains separate from every other visual element in the textile.

Viewed more closely, the meticulous rendering of the various beasts within the medallions invites the viewer to pay more attention to the details of the design. Each roundel is a space for the artistic representation, subdivision, and ornamentation of a figurative body through complex interactions of stylization and diversity. However, not even the most accurate observation has yet solved the mystery of where this fabric was made. Over more than a century scholars have associated it with a range of geographical origins across the Mediterranean basin, from Muslim Spain to Byzantium and the Middle East.¹

The Cooper-Hewitt weft-faced compound twill silk clearly illustrates the complexities faced by those studying textiles from the medieval Islamic world, as the provenance of an extant fabric is often very hard to determine. Even the question of whether it was in fact manufactured in Islamic territories or rather in Byzantium or other parts of the Christian world often remains unresolved. Furthermore, the Cooper Hewitt silk fragment also raises two other issues that are crucial for many textiles from the medieval period: their trans-temporal and transmedial aspects. While the



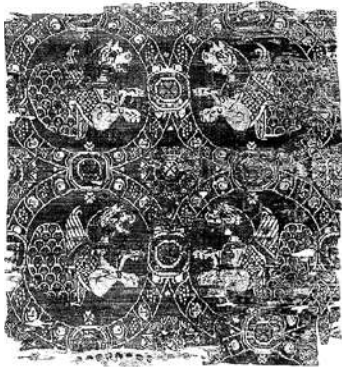
1. Fragment of a silk weaving, compound twill (samite), Spain, Byzantium or the Eastern Mediterranean, 11th – 12th century, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, Gift of John Pierpont Morgan, inv. no. 1902-1-222.

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2. Moulded stucco plate with a *senmurv* in high relief, framed by a pearl roundel, Iran, Čāl Tarkān, 7th or 8th century, London, British Museum, inv. no. 135913.



3. Fragment of a silk weaving, possibly Byzantium, 9th – 10th century, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 761-1893.



fabric itself can be dated to the eleventh or twelfth century, its figurative motifs actually derive from Sasanian models current in third- to sixth-century Iran (OTAVSKY, 1998). The composite creature seen in one of the pearl roundels is commonly identified as a *senmurv*, which has appeared in stone and stucco reliefs of vestments and ornamentation since Sasanian times (KRÖGER, 1982), such as the wall panel from Čāl Tarkān-‘Ešqābād near present-day Tehran (fig. 2). This mythical beast remained a highly popular motif for centuries and was represented in different media and materials. *Senmurvs* were imitated and modified across great distances through portable objects, predominantly textiles (fig. 3), and the Cooper Hewitt silk fragment is one of numerous artifacts which testify to the *longue durée* of ancient Iranian motifs in the medieval Mediterranean world (CANEPA, 2009).

This paper seeks to approach the field of medieval Islamic textiles by focusing on a number of questions raised by the Cooper Hewitt fabric and its design, including the overlaying of geographical spaces and temporalities, academic approaches to these artifacts, and the intersection of various media and materials. Rather than offering an example for technical analyses of medieval fabrics, the aim of this paper is to highlight the crucial and multi-faceted

role of textiles in a medieval Islamic world constantly interacting with other regions, and to contribute to the re-evaluation of the textile medium within the discipline of art history.

Geographies of Cloth

“It is well known that cotton pertains to Khurasan [northeast Iran] and that linen pertains to Egypt” (al-Tha‘ālibī [961-1038 A.D.], quoted from SERJEANT, 1942, p. 65). As this passage from the *Laṭā‘if al-Ma‘ārif* exemplifies, textiles were clearly associated with certain regions through their raw materials. The natural accessibility of fibers and dyes differs from one part of the world to the next and certain locations came to be eponymous with their resources, such as the Iranian desert city of Kerman, so famous for indigo that in the Persian language *rang-e kermānī*, “the color of Kerman”, became a synonym for blue (BALFOUR-PAUL, 1997, p. 23). Moreover, while the material qualities of textiles were frequently determined by their place of manufacture, textile production itself could also have an impact on the environment. From the Bronze Age the landscape in the Eastern Mediterranean was shaped by mounds of discarded murex snail shells, such as those near Phoenician cities in Lebanon and sites in Turkey (REESE, 2010), not least due to the enormous amount of murex needed to dye cloth purple. To color the trim of a single garment required the crushing of 12,000 *Murex brandaris* shells (JACOBY, 2004, p. 210).

Yet, in spite of the site-specificity of raw materials, they were widely traded over long distances from the earliest times. One reason was the quest for the finest quality, even if rarity and long-distance transportation made it more expensive. Resources from diverse regions were thus frequently compared and used for different purposes. A treatise on the silk craft in Florence, written around 1450, gives an insightful account of the numerous kinds of silk, most of them imported from the Islamic world, and their specific functions

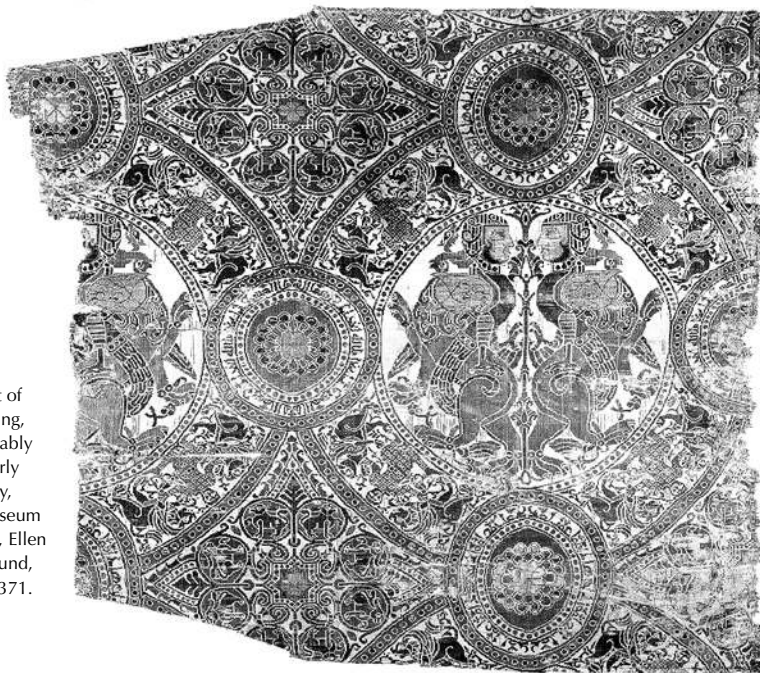
(GARGIOLLI, [1868] 1995). Whereas *seta spagnola* and *ciattica* from the Iberian Peninsula, *seta modigliana* from Romania, and the Persian *stravai* were suitable for making both warp and weft threads, the Persian *leggi*, *leggibenti*, *catangi*, and *talani* were used only for weft threads, *calabrese* specifically for velvet, and *siciliana* for heavy satins (MOLÀ, 2000, p. 56). Records from the Venetian silk industry include *ablaca*, *ardassa* (or *ardassina*), *asbar* (or *rasbar*) from Persia, *castrovana*, *decarà*, *giudaica*, *safetina*, *trapolina* from Palestine and Syria, *andria*, *fior di morea*, *giana*, *rocalica*, *salona*, *vallona* from Greece, Albania, and the Balkans, and *nostrane* (“our”) silk, grown locally on the Terraferma near Venice (MOLÀ, 2000, p. 55).

The wide-ranging provenance of the types of raw silk described in these documents maps the known world through cloth and testifies to a continuous effort to expand the practice of sericulture, which first emerged in China. Silkworm smuggling features widely in legends and adventure stories. Among the most famous, recorded by Procopius of Caesarea and Theophanes of Byzantium, is the account of two monks, said to have brought *bombyx mori* from Asia to the Mediterranean for the Byzantine emperor Justinian by concealing them in bamboo canes (THOMAS, 2012, p. 128f.); for the great economic value of silk fabrics made their production an affair of state. Though further research is needed, scholars agree that as the Arabs expanded the territory under their rule, they also spread the cultivation of mulberry trees and silkworms and the manufacture of silks from the Middle East to other regions (JACOBY, 2004, p. 199). The extension of sericulture from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Iberian Peninsula after 711 is reflected in the account of a thirteenth-century Arab author who refers to the Syrian mulberry tree growing in Al-Andalus (*ibidem*; LOMBARD, 1978, p. 95f.).

Geographical interrelations were not restricted to raw materials, but were also crucial to finished fabrics. When locations gained a reputation for the manufacture of certain types of textiles, the fabrics themselves were often named after their city of origin, such as damask from Damascus or muslin from Mosul. Of Mardīn in southeastern Turkey, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa wrote: “They make stuffs here which take the name of the town” (quoted from SERJEANT, 1972, p. 92). However, the wide circulation and high prestige of textile artifacts frequently led to the production of imitations. In Almería, for example, “800 looms for weaving *tirāzī* garments of silk, and for precious cloaks, and splendid brocade a thousand looms” were installed and the city was celebrated “all over the East and West” for “*siklātūn*, and for Djurdjānī garments, Isfahānī stuffs, ‘Attābī, and marvelous veils, and curtains ornamented with precious stones” (quoted from SERJEANT, 1972, p. 169). The textile types listed in this account, which refer to Djurdjān, Isfahan, and to the ‘Attābī quarter in the city of Baghdad, show that Almería was an active center of production for imitations of renowned Iranian and Iraqi fabrics (JACOBY, 2004, p. 217). ‘Attābī textiles from Baghdad were also imitated in other medieval weaving centers, for instance, in Antioch (MACKIE, 2015, p. 138); and, as the following statement by Ibn Ḥawqal indicates, copies could even surpass the originals in terms of quality: “There is nothing like the ‘Attābī of Isfahan in excellence and luster” (quoted from MACKIE, 2015, p. 107).

The inscription on a piece of silk fabric preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston epitomizes such transregional dynamics and geographical intersections. The fragment of the shroud of San Pedro de Osma is decorated with a repeating pattern of harpies and lions inside medallions decorated with human figures and framed by griffins. Woven into the smaller circles linking these roundels is an Arabic phrase meaning, “This was made in Baghdad, may God watch over it” (fig. 4). Based on this epigraphic evidence, scholars believed the fragment had been made in the Middle East; however, Florence E. Day’s detailed analysis of the inscription, which comprises a number of orthographic peculiarities, revealed that this textile claiming to be a “Baghdad silk” must actually have been woven in Al-Andalus (DAY, 1954; PARTEARROYO, 1992, p. 106).

4. Fragment of a silk weaving, Spain, probably Almería, early 12th century, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Ellen Page Hall Fund, inv. no. 33.371.



Textile, Image, Text

The issues raised above indicate both the perspective and challenges inherent in the study of medieval Islamic textiles. While one of the core interests of the field of art history in recent years has been the bridging of its sub-disciplines, such as Byzantine, Islamic, Asian, African, Latin American, and Western art history, when it comes to textiles, transcultural dynamics and connectivities have always been taken into account (FALKE, 1913, I, preface). As unbreakable, easily portable, lightweight items of high value, textiles were a privileged domain for the elab-

oration of cross-cultural artistic languages. However, analyses of textiles from the medieval Islamic world remain fragmented between different disciplines, since textile scholarship of the pre-modern period is predominantly characterized by compartmentalization into (economic, cultural, social) history, analytical textile studies, and art history, and still highly marginalized within the latter field.

Textiles were already a prominent feature of the trans-Mediterranean world outlined by Shelomo D. Goitein in his analysis of the documents from the Cairo Geniza (GOITEIN, 1967-1988). The discovery of more than 300,000 manuscripts in the storeroom of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo provided a vivid picture of Jewish communities and their commercial networks from the Mediterranean to Yemen, Central Asia, and India, particularly between the tenth and the thirteenth century, and also shed light on the importance and numerous roles of textiles as household and commercial items (STILLMAN, 1996). Comprehensive studies of textiles in written sources from the Islamic world were undertaken by Robert B. Serjeant, who published numerous in-depth articles in the journal *Ars Islamica*, later reprinted in a single volume entitled *Material for a History of Islamic Textiles up to the Mongol Conquest* in Beirut in 1972. Further material was presented by Thomas Allsen for textiles of the Mongol period and by David Jacoby (ALLSEN, 1997; JACOBY, 2004).

Serjeant's work, still the key reference for medieval Islamic textiles, was published without illustrations, as were other major contributions to the history of medieval textiles. The work of Goitein, Serjeant, Jacoby, Allsen and other historians on textiles is primarily text-based, drawing on inventories, marriage contracts, dowry agreements, wills, personal correspondence, diplomatic exchanges, business letters and agreements, chronicles, travel accounts, clothing laws, and other documents. Their research is predominantly focused on aspects of manufacturing, dissemination, labor, supply and demand, consumption, distribution and trade in relation to cloth (JACOBY, 2004, p. 198). Theirs is thus largely a realm of language, and the textile-based connections they analyze are not least a matter of contact

linguistics, given that the migration of raw materials and finished fabrics frequently resulted in the migration, adaptation, translation and re-interpretation of the related vocabulary, from Baghdad to Al-Andalus and from Persia to Italy.

Though Reinhart Dozy's *Dictionnaire détaillé des noms des vêtements chez les Arabes* already sought to shed light on the great variety of textile vocabulary in the medieval Islamic world (DOZY, 1845), many issues remain unresolved, particularly when attempting to match a term to a preserved textile. This is true, for instance, for the so-called *būqalamūn* or *abu qalamūn* fabrics, whose characteristics have been a matter for heated debate among scholars. In spite of several descriptions of this type of fabric in medieval sources as one which "they say [...] changes its color with the ascendant of the day and the glare of the sun" (quoted from PELLAT, 1954, p. 158), there is no clear consensus on its design. While Jacoby thought it was striped (JACOBY, 2004, p. 221), other scholars argued that it was shot silk, in other words woven with warp threads of one color and weft threads of another (BIERMAN, 1997, p. 110). Meanwhile Patricia Baker believed she had identified a *būqalamūn* fabric in a polychrome patterned silk fragment from Egypt in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (BAKER, 1991), but was eventually contradicted by Jacoby (JACOBY, 2004, p. 221). The etymology of the term *būqalamūn* is also questionable and gave rise to further discussions about the appearance of the fabric. While Dozy suggested that *būqalamūn* or *abu qalamūn* derived from the Greek word ὑποκάλαμον describing "striped" cloth (DOZY, 1927, I, p. 9), others such as Sabra linked it to the Persian language and the meaning "chameleon" (Abdelhamid I. Sabra in IBN AL HAYTHAM, ed. 1989, I, p. 101).

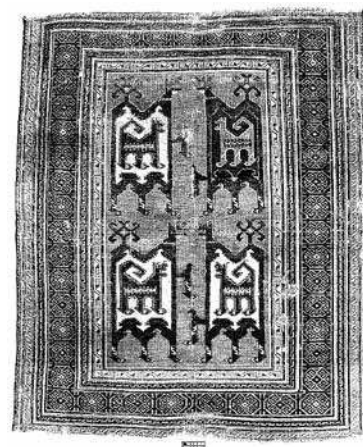
The case of *būqalamūn* reveals the difficulties of dealing with textual documents in relation to extant fabrics. Textile studies tend to focus on an examination of the weaving structure and technical analyses in order to determine the place and date of production and the classification of a given fabric. This has led to the development of a specific vocabulary to describe the technical and visual features of the fabrics studied. Textile terms from historical sources and contemporary technical textile terminology may at times overlap or be related, but they more often diverge.

Whereas the matching of preserved textiles with historical terms has thus frequently proven to be problematic, scholars commonly seek to match extant artifacts with their representations in other media, often in order to further investigate the specific functions and dissemination of the depicted items. A miniature from the Great Shahnama, for instance, in which a rug underneath the throne constitutes the "forbidden territory" reserved for the ruler and a few privileged individuals (SHALEM, 1998), gained a prominent position within the field of Islamic art history because it is the only known representation of a so-called animal rug from the fourteenth century in the Islamic world (fig. 5) (ETTINGHAUSEN, 1959).

Extant fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century carpets with animal designs are commonly attributed to Anatolia (fig. 6). The Shahnama miniature, which was produced in Iran in the 1330s or 1340s, showing Zahak



5. Zahak consults the physicians at court, from a *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) by Firdawsi, detached manuscript folio, Iran, Tabriz, c. 1330-1340, Washington D. C., Freer Gallery of Art, purchase – Charles Lang Freer endowment, inv. no. F1923.5.



6. Confronted animal rug, Turkey, 14th century, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, Louis V. Bell Fund and Fletcher, Pfeiffer and Rogers Funds, 1990, inv. no. 1990.61.

7. Monochrome
luster bowl,
Iraq, late 9th or
10th century,
Copenhagen,
The David
Collection,
inv. no. 26/1962.



consulting his court physicians, while a rug with an octagonal design featuring quadrupeds with one raised leg covers the ground, has been regarded as important evidence of the presence of such artifacts in a courtly setting. Yet, in scholarship, as well as “documenting” the use of textiles and carpets, images were also understood to “document” the existence of the objects themselves. In many cases, this has led to a cross-cultural approach, particularly where carpets are concerned. Apart from the Great Shahnama miniature, representations of fourteenth-century animal carpets are exclusively known in non-Islamic regions, predominantly the Apennine Peninsula, where large numbers of pile

carpets arrived as items of trade (SPALLANZANI, 2007). Numerous fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Italian paintings featuring animal carpets are known and were taken as *ersatz* for rugs which are no longer extant. As very few fourteenth-century animal carpets have been preserved, carpet historians have sought to reconstruct the history of Oriental carpets based on their representations in fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Italian painting (ERDMANN, 1929; MILLS, 1978 AND 2001).

Transmedial and Transmaterial Dynamics

Images can provide valuable insights for scholars interested in material culture and for those who are *à la recherche des tapis perdus*. Identifying a textile or a carpet in a painting can yield very important information both about a particular type of artifact and about the cross-cultural circulation of objects and motifs. However, from an art historical perspective, we must first note the difference between a material object and the (artistic) representation of an object in another medium, and secondly, consider the images in themselves. In the case of Italian paintings, for instance, the latter approach involves studying the ways in which painters explored the boundaries of perspective, color, and the representation of different materials when depicting Anatolian carpets in their works, and the way in which they combined different levels of figurative imagery, sometimes rendering animals featured in carpets and fabrics alongside their living counterparts in the same painting.

Experts in Islamic art have proposed thought-provoking methodological approaches to transmedial and transmaterial dynamics that go beyond simple documentation. Regarding interrelations between textiles and other media, Oleg Grabar notably drew on a statement by the eleventh-century Persian poet and philosopher Nasir-i Khusraw in observing that much of the pre-modern world “acquired its aesthetic judgment through textiles” (GRABAR, 1976, p. 45).

In the *Safarnāma* (*Book of Travels*), Khusraw praised the pottery pieces sold in Old Cairo, saying they were “so fine and translucent that you can see your hand behind them when held up to the light” (KHUSRAW, 2001, p. 70). To describe these objects in more detail, he compared them to textiles: “From this they make cups, bowls, plates and the like, and they color them so that their color resembles *būqalamūn* and different colors appear at every angle you hold them” (translation SABA, 2012, p. 192f.). The design characteristics of the *būqalamūn* or *abu qalamūn*, mentioned above, remain unclear; however, it seems that in the eleventh century they were sufficiently well known for Khusraw to use them as a benchmark for specific color effects.

Būqalamūn fabrics figure prominently in various contexts in relation to other artifacts, media, and materials in the medieval Islamic world. They were compared to luster ceramics (fig. 7) (SABA, 2012), to jewels, and even to the plumage of birds. Whereas Jabir ibn Hayyan

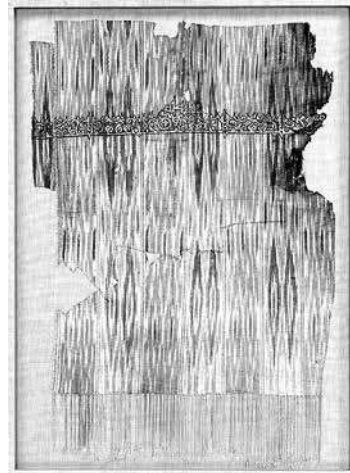
and Mas'udi compared *būqalamūn* fabrics to jaspers and opals shot through with different colors, medieval authors also suggested that their shimmering tones resembled the iridescent feathers of peacocks or the Sultana bird (*porphyrio porphyrio*) that lived on the banks of the Nile (BAKER, 1991).

Much attention has also been paid to the visual effects of Yemeni *ikats* (fig. 8). To create these textiles, the warp threads were resist-dyed with the pattern before the cloth was woven. Bundles of yarns were first bound together and dyed, then opened, re-bound and dyed again to produce the desired pattern (hence the historical Arabic term *ʿaṣb* meaning “bound (thread)” for *ikat*). The blurred borders of the ornamental motifs appear almost transitional, as though the process of taking up the dyes and forming the pattern were not yet complete.

Ikats from Yemen were widely exported, and they were also copied, notably in the city of Rayy near present-day Tehran in Iran (SERJEANT, 1948, p. 77) and in Fatimid Egypt, where they were reproduced in linen instead of cotton (reflecting the importance of this raw material in local textile production) (GOLOMBEK, GERVERS-MORNÁR, 1977, p. 83f.; CONTADINI, 1998, p. 61f.). Patterson Ševčenko's recent finding of a Yemeni *ikat* garment depicted on a twelfth-century templon at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai sheds further light on the dissemination of this kind of cloth through networks across the Red Sea (PATTERSON ŠEVČENKO, 2012). The scenes of the posthumous miracles of St. Eustratios include one that represents a female figure dressed in a white tunic with arrow-like streaks of pink and blue (fig. 9). The blurred nature of the tunic's design is a typical feature of fabrics manufactured using the *ikat* technique, indicating that the artist intended to create a recognizable image of the fabric, which also posed a particular challenge to the painter's palette.

The blurred edges of the ornamental forms create an effect of fluidity, leading to comparisons between Yemeni *ikats* and veined marble (MILWRIGHT, 2007), itself compared both to water and to (watered) silk (BARRY, 2007). Following Grabar's notion of transmedial and transmaterial “textile aesthetics”, Lisa Golombek drew attention to the fact that the design of *ikats* was sometimes evoked in architectural decoration. Two columns in the Great Mosque of Yazd in Iran are clad in mosaic faience with a chevron pattern in the brown, blue, and cream-white color range typical of Yemeni *ikats*, as if “vested” in cloth (fig. 10) (GOLOMBEK, [1988] 2007, p. 109).

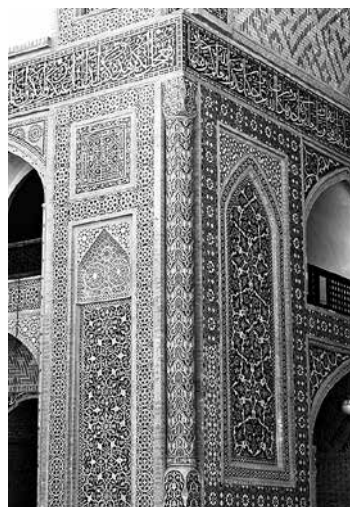
The evocation of a textile in another medium and/or material was predominantly achieved through the transfer of ornamentation. Roundel patterns, for instance, were



8. *Tīrāz* textile fragment, cotton, ink and gold, resist-dyed (*ikat*), Yemen, late 9th – early 10th century, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of George D. Pratt, 1929, inv. no. 29.179.9.



9. Detail of the St. Eustratios templon beam, 12th century, Sinai, Monastery of St. Catherine.

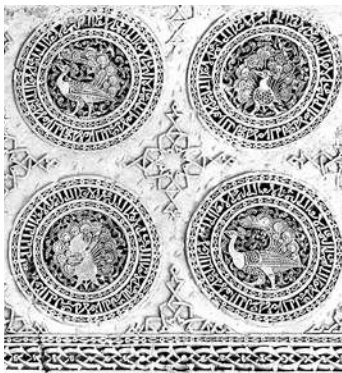


10. Detail view of the façade to the left of the southern iwan of the Great Mosque of Yazd.

11. Fragmentary casket, wood, covered with paper and painted, iron fittings, Afghanistan, 11th – 12th century, Copenhagen, The David Collection, inv. no. 31/1997 and 51/2001.



12. Cloister ceiling decorated with silk roundel patterns showing peacocks and Arabic inscriptions, c. 1187, Burgos, Santa Maria la Real de Huelgas.



13. Fragment of a silk weaving, weft-faced compound twill, probably Almería, Spain, 1100–1150, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. no. 828–1894.



widespread on medieval silk fabrics, so that the six-sided wooden casket from Ghaznavid Afghanistan, decorated with painted medallions showing pairs of birds back-to-back and framed by pseudo-Arabic inscriptions in yellow, red, olive green with an outline in black, looks almost as though it has been wrapped in a precious silk (fig. 11) (FOLSACH, 2003). This visual effect was further enhanced by the common practice of lining or covering boxes and other artifacts with cloth. Similarly the stucco circles with peacocks and Arabic inscriptions, which appear on the ceiling of the cloister of Santa Maria la Real de Huelgas in Burgos (fig. 12), recall a canopy and reflect the popularity of medallions and peacocks in textile designs (fig. 13) and the crucial role of textiles in furnishing (MACKIE, 2015, p. 169f.).

These examples illustrate the broad spectrum of transmedial and transmaterial dynamics linked to textile arts, including practices of imitation, evocation, modification, and transformation, as well as their intersections, digressions, and superimpositions. However, the full diversity, versatility, and range of these phenomena in the pre-modern period can only be assessed by means of case studies and so remain ill-defined. Transfer processes are also apparent in the Cooper Hewitt silk and the relief from Čāl Tarḵān, described at the start of the present essay (fig. 1). Silks featuring pearl roundels themselves make reference to other materials and media; they have been linked to seals (BIVAR, 2006) through their motifs that seem “imprinted” on the cloth; furthermore, the medallions are framed by evocations of pearls, as though set with jewelry. When they are represented in stone, these two-dimensional fabrics evoking gems and pearls again become “sculptural” with pearl roundels rendered in three dimensions (fig. 2). During transfer processes of this kind artists frequently experimented with visual effects inherent to certain media and materials. In the relief from Čāl Tarḵān, for instance, the *senmurv* appears tightly fitted into the roundel, its great tail pressed against the pearl border. Meanwhile its front legs and snout stick out beyond the ornamental frame, so that the mythical beast seems to be reaching out into space, ready to leap free of its circular prison.

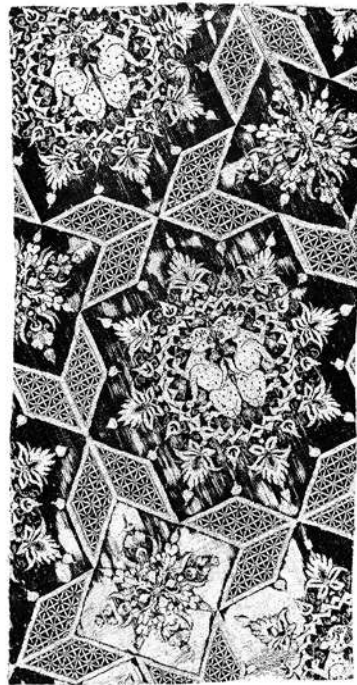
The relationship between textiles, architecture and architectural decoration was particularly extensive and varied. Artistic practices such as the use of motifs known from Indian printed, resist-dyed cotton textiles in a late twelfth-century screen at the Qutb Mosque in Delhi (FLOOD, 2009, p. 235) raise the question of how far these patterns were associated with textiles and how far textiles, as highly portable artifacts, simply functioned as transmitters of patterns and ornamentation from one medium to another (for recent studies on issues of ornament, see NECIPOĞLU, PAYNE, 2016). These dynamics become even more complex if we consider that architectural decorations were also transferred to textiles, as in the case of silk fabrics with star tile patterns (fig. 14) known from walls

“dressed” with actual tiles (fig. 15). These relationships went beyond specific patterns. The star and cross tiles now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are probably from Takht-i Sulaiman in Iran, where overglaze painted fritware of this kind was produced. The technique, called *lajvardina*, takes its name from the Persian word *lajvard*, or lapis lazuli, for its deep shade of blue (KOMAROFF, 2002, p. 176). The comparison of these tiles and others with a turquoise glaze to textiles featuring tile patterns, woven in blue-dyed silk, reveals a multitude of mediations and intersections between various materials and their visual effects: lapis lazuli, turquoise, ceramic glaze and indigo, their cross-references, similarities, differences, allusions, evocations, and – given the presence of textiles in buildings – juxtapositions.

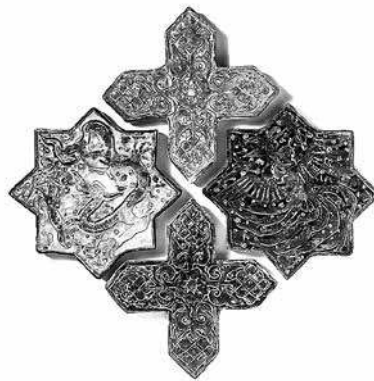
What makes Khusraw’s statement so fruitful for studies of medieval Islamic textiles is that he does not reduce textile aesthetics to migrations and transfers of patterns between media and materials. When comparing luster ceramics with *būqalamūn* textiles, he focuses more generally on the similarities between their surface effects (SABA, 2012). While the comparability of different media and materials and chains of association from one to the other can indeed be triggered or enhanced by the recurrence of patterns, the comparability of visual effects can also go beyond specific ornamentation. The relationship between architecture and artifacts of various materials and their capacity to complement and compete with each other is conveyed in the following lines by Ibn Zamrak on the Hall of Two Sisters in the Alhambra (cited in MACKIE, 2015, p. 194), a building complex much studied for its intersection of textiles, architecture, and poetry (BUSH, 2006). The paragraph reflects the interrelations of media and materials, geographical connections and geopoetics of cloth – where the Arab and Iberian Peninsulas coincide and earth meets heaven: “In [the Hall of Two Sisters] the portico has exceeded [the utmost limits] of beauty, while thanks / to it the palace has come to compete in beauty with the vault of heaven. / With how many a decoration have you clothed it in order to embellish it, one consisting of / multicolored figured work which causes the brocades of Yemen to be forgotten!”

Spinning Threads for Research

There are numerous ways to approach medieval Islamic textiles in a short article. One would be to focus on specific textile functions typical of the Islamic world: the *Kiswah* or textile covering of the Kaaba in Mecca; the *khilat* or practice of giving gifts of textiles and the bestowal of robes of honor by Islamic rulers (GORDON, 2001); certain kinds of garments such as the *khirqā* or Sufi cloak (ELIAS, 2001); the multiple meanings of *tirāz*, which derives from the Persian word for embroidery and could signify the workshops in which luxury

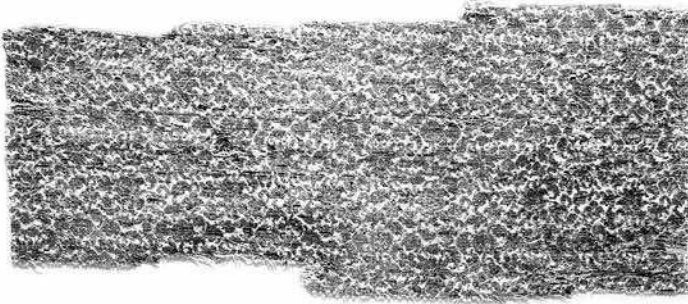


14. Fragment of a silk weaving, Iran, 14th century, New York, Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, gift of John Pierpoint Morgan, inv. no. 1902-1-251.



15. Star and cross tiles, fritware, overglaze painted (*lajvardina*), Iran (probably Takht-i Sulaiman), 1270s, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Shinji Shumeikai Acquisition Fund, inv. no. AC1996.115.1-4.

16. Fragment of a silk weaving and metallic thread lampas, Central Asia, late 13th – mid-14th century, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1919, inv. no. 19.191.3.



textiles were produced in the medieval Islamic world, the bands with inscriptions that adorned them or the fabrics themselves (BLAIR, 1997; FLUCK, HELMECKE, 2006)). Another approach might seek to establish a “canon” of medieval Islamic textiles by listing some of the best known

textile artifacts, such as the mantle of Roger II (DOLEZALEK, 2012), the so-called veil of St. Anne (MACKIE, 2015, p. 113-116), the chasuble linked to Thomas Becket in the Cathedral of Fermo (SHALEM, 2013 and 2016), the paraments dedicated to San Valero in the Cathedral of Lerida (MACKIE, 2015, p. 185f.), the banner of Las Navas de Tolosa (MACKIE, 2015, fig. 5.12), the funerary attire of Rudolph IV of Habsburg (RITTER, 2010), or the mantle of Mamluk silk, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art (MACKIE, 2015, fig. 7.31). All these artifacts reflect the transcultural “biographies” of many textiles from the medieval Islamic world, having been, respectively, produced specifically for a Christian ruler, made in Egypt for a Fatimid sultan and interpreted as relics from the Holy Land, turned into ecclesiastical vestments, seized as booty, used in Christian funerary contexts, and thought to have been used to clothe a statue of the Virgin (see references above).

An emphasis on transmedial and transmaterial dynamics carries certain risks. The interrelations between textiles and other media and materials played a crucial role in Gottfried Semper’s *Der Stil*. However, Semper’s *Stoffwechsel* theory supposed a teleological trajectory from fabric to wood to stone architecture (SEMPER, [1860] 2008), reinforced with regard to the Islamic world in the nineteenth and twentieth century, when there was a tendency to retrace all Islamic architecture to “the tent” (see NECİPOĞLU, 1995, p. 63 for a discussion of different authors following this line of argument). Rather than studying intriguing cases of contemporaneity between tents and architectural constructions (O’KANE, 1993), these theories claimed a universality of the textile medium in the Islamic world, an approach which is heavily biased not least because it fosters stereotypes of a culture characterized by the *hijāb*, the veiling of women, the turban, and (traces of) nomadism.

Instead of pursuing the concept of a generic “textile mentality” which Lisa Golombek coined for the Islamic world drawing on Grabar’s interpretation of the passage from Khusraw, it seems more productive to consider the transmedial and transmaterial case studies she presented (GOLOMBEK, [1988] 2007) and to unpack what they have to tell us about media, materials, communities and geographic regions.

There are two reasons for this. Firstly, interrelations between different media and materials were a common feature of the pre-modern period, when metalworkers took inspiration from ceramics and porcelain, glassblowers from inlaid metalwork and lusterware, and potters from glass (and vice versa); the separate categorization of different media (not to mention hierarchical distinctions between “high” and “minor” or “applied arts” in Western art history) is an art historical construction. Instead of focusing solely on textiles, it would thus be much more fruitful to explore them in relation to other, transmedial and transmaterial phenomena, and to investigate the specifics of the arts of the loom, which, through the production of different items, including those for the wrapping and dressing of artifacts and human bodies and the articulation of spaces, involved particular interactions with various media and materials. Secondly, rather than focusing narrowly on textiles of “the Islamic world”, it is important to recognize

cross-cultural dynamics and the relations between different geographical regions and their contexts. The problematic nature of the term “Islamic art”, with its emphasis on religion, has often been highlighted, and objects such as the Cooper Hewitt silk fragment, variously ascribed to regions from the Iberian Peninsula (itself highly multi-religious and cross-cultural) to Byzantium, reveal the difficulty of determining what is meant by “Islamic art” or “medieval Islamic textiles”.

Furthermore, numerous regions were in close diplomatic and mercantile contact with the Islamic world. These interactions, the great quantity of traded textiles, local sericulture, and wool and silk manufacture in places such as Tuscany, pose the question of whether notions such as Grabar’s and Golombek’s “textile aesthetics” could be applied to non-Islamic territories as well. Cathleen Hoeniger has convincingly shown how the fourteenth-century Italian painter Simone Martini changed his painting method in order to depict *nasīj* (*nachetti* or *nasicci* in Italian), a type of cloth put into world-wide circulation by the Mongols, used, among other things, for the paraments of Pope Benedict XI preserved in Perugia, and copied by local silk weavers in Tuscany in the early fourteenth century (HOENIGER, 1991; ROSATI, 2012). The provenance of the imported fabrics remains unclear; they may have originated in Central Asia or Iran, but showed *chinoiserie* designs and motifs (KLESSE, 1967; see also KADOL, 2009). They were luxury items, woven in white silk and gold thread and decorated with a small, dense pattern of foliage and flowers, which seemed to shimmer (fig. 16), and it was this visual effect that Simone tried to achieve in works such as the *Annunciation* for Siena Cathedral. He used the technique of *sgraffito*, which involves an initial application of gold, overlaid with paint, which is then scraped off to create the required design. Granulation is then used on the gold areas. It was through this layering of gold and paint that Simone sought to render the effect of woven cloth in the medium of painting (fig. 17).

Recent discussions of transcultural and global *art histories* have adopted and reassessed Aby Warburg’s concept of “image vehicles” (*Bilderfahrzeuge*). Through this concept, Warburg sought to understand the migration of images, focusing on their translation from one medium to another, the high mobility of certain media and the dissemination of images and motifs across wide geographical distances and potentially across the globe. However, although Warburg developed this model in relation to a textile medium, his *Bilderfahrzeuge* are tapestries transporting figurative imagery from Northern Europe to Southern Europe (WARBURG, 1907), they are not “vehicles” driving along the “silk road” (*Seidenstraße*), a term coined by Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen (1833-1905).

Just as it would be fruitful to broaden the approach of Grabar and Golombek to include non-Islamic regions, it would make sense to discuss Warburg’s model, its validity, productivity and limitations in the wider context of cross-cultural interactions, notably between



17. Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi, detail of the *Annunciation*, 1333, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

18. Dalmatic from Gdansk, St. Mary's Church, lampas silk, Central Asia or Iran, 14th century, Lübeck, Sankt Marien, inv. no. M 111.



the textile arts and other media, and to reexamine his emphasis on networks, infrastructure, and mobility, in the light of both the work of his contemporaries and newer approaches. The concept of “the silk road” has been criticized and extended to refer to a range of silk roads, including maritime routes, and other transported materials such as glass, notably recognizing that none of these were one way streets – we know of woolen fabrics from Florence that were exported as far as Shahr-e Sabz and Samarkand, and Anne Wardwell has argued that a silk fabric featuring wine leaves and lion

masks, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, is a fourteenth-century Central Asian copy of an Italian design preserved in a silk fragment in the Museum of Applied Arts in Berlin (WARDWELL, 1987, p. 16f.; HANSEN, 2012).

Imagery – notably flowers, animals and mythical creatures such as the *senmurv*, *fenghuang* and *qilin* – was widely disseminated through these networks. It has been noted that Warburg was less interested in issues of materiality (WOLF, 2015, p. 295); yet it was precisely these material aspects that shaped the visual culture at the points of arrival. Woven silk fabrics from Iran and Central Asia, known as *panni tartarici* and used, among other things, for the funerary attire of Rudolph IV and the paraments of Pope Benedict XI, circulated as far as the North Sea, where they were tailored into ecclesiastical vestments of the kind known from Regensburg and St. Mary's Church, Gdansk (BORKOPP-RESTLE, 2012; FIRCKS, SCHORTA, 2016) (fig. 18). The motifs of these silks – sometimes figurative, sometimes epigraphic in the form of long Arabic inscriptions – had an impact on local art production, and so did their materiality. For example, as Laura Hodges has shown, the extensive presence of gold threads in these imported fabrics led to the revaluation of luxury textiles in general: in fourteenth-century England “cloth of gold” replaced “purple” as the denotation for the most precious fabrics (HODGES, 2014, p. 20).

The study of textiles requires interdisciplinary collaboration with historians, textile experts, specialists in linguistics and contact linguistics, comparative literature specialists and art historians. Meanwhile key issues of materiality and textile production processes, often involving other media, call for input from anthropologists (INGOLD, 2010). It is also vital to take a long-term view of historiography, and to recognize the strong and continuing influence of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which affects the discourses and even the “material” we work with. Textile collections in museums reflect collecting practices of the past and tend to focus on luxury fabrics and textiles with sophisticated decorations, while plain cloth and fabrics with simpler patterns have been widely neglected. There are issues of fragmentation and conservation: the so-called veil of St. Anne is spectacular not least because it is a length of fabric and even includes

the selvages, whereas most extant *tirāz* were cut to pieces at a time when in most cases only the inscribed and decorated parts of the textiles were preserved. We must also recognize the problem of frauds and forgeries and their impact on scholarship, as exemplified in the Buyid silk controversy (MACKIE, 2015, p. 154f.). Just as focusing on a number of “master pieces” is problematic when considering finished fabrics and a broader approach that covers a variety of different artifacts, also from less well-known museum collections and church treasuries is necessary, when it comes to raw materials, the field is still dominated by studies on silk, cotton, linen and wool. Dyes and mordants have recently gained more attention, with results that are already greatly enriching the field and will continue to do so. However, it would also be productive to investigate lesser known materials such as *byssus* or “sea wool” (*ṣūf al-baḥr*) made from the filaments of pen shells, and asbestos, the so-called “salamander cloth” that does not burn when thrown into the fire, along with their associated narratives, mythical origins and legends, as well as imaginary fabrics and those supposedly made by celestial beings and fairies (KINOSHITA, 2004).

Now that the field of art history has opened up to adopt a global perspective, it is time to dedicate more attention to textiles and their transmedial, transmaterial and geographical interrelations, as vectors of connectivity, transfer, and cross-cultural exchange. While avoiding an exclusive focus on textile media, it is nonetheless necessary to consider their enormous significance for the pre-modern period, and to rethink established art historical hierarchies. In his commentary on a passage of Dante’s *Commedia* – in italics below – Giovanni Boccaccio praised the quality and beauty of colorful and ornamental fabrics from the Islamic world, too artfully woven to be represented in painting. According to Boccaccio, no painter was able to render a silk weaving with his brush as it was woven by “Turkish” and “Tartar” weavers on a loom: “*Never with more colours, underneath or set on top, in order to vary the decoration, was cloth ever made by Tartars or Turks, who are the best masters of the craft, as we may quite clearly see in Tartar cloth, which truly is so magnificently woven that there is no painter who could use a brush to make anything similar, not to mention more beautiful.*”² (BOCCACCIO, [1373-1374] 1967, p. 590).

Notes

1. For attributions of this fabric to Byzantium (by Luigi Serra, Adèle Coulin Weibel, and Heinrich Jakob Schmidt) and to Spain (by Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, Krishna Riboud, Marco Bussagli, Loretta Dolcini, Rosa M. Martin I Ros, and Anna Contadini), see the catalogue entry in *La seta...*, 1994, p. 168. An Eastern Mediterranean provenance was proposed in *The Meeting of Two Worlds...*, 1981, cat. no. 2, in *The Glory of Byzantium...*, 1997, p. 271; and by Stefano Carboni, Carlo Maria Suriano, in *La seta islamica...*, 1999, cat. no. 17.

2. “*Con più color sommesse e soprapposte, a variazione dell’ornamento, Non fer mai drappi Tartari nè Turchi, i quali di ciò sono ottimi maestri, siccome noi possiamo manifestamente vedere ne’ drappi tartareschi, i quali veramente sono sì articiosamente tessuti, che non è alcun dipintore che col pennello gli sapesse fare simiglianti, non che più belli*”, BOCCACCIO, (1373-1374) 1918, III, p. 232.

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