





Gems in Cloth and Stone: Medium, Materiality, and the Late Antique Jeweled Aesthetic

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Abstract | In *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity*, Michael Roberts argues that color, opulence, repetition, and variety epitomized the period's aesthetics, a phenomenon he terms the "jeweled style." Although Roberts did not consider textiles in his analyses, this article argues that fabrics participated in the same trends, perhaps even serving as intermediaries in the transfer of motifs between actual gemstones and architectural decoration. The first part of the article shows how Roberts's definition of the jeweled style fits in larger art historical discussions about late antique aesthetics and visuality. The bulk of the article presents examples of tapestry-woven textiles from the fourth through eighth centuries that depict gems and jewelry in woven form. Many tunics, for example, depict gemstones along their collars; furnishing textiles, too, frequently include representations of gems and jewelry, most notably at the edges of fabrics or as part of woven renderings of architectural structures like columns and arcades.

On the most basic level, these woven gemstones reflect the broad popularity of the jeweled aesthetic among a wide social spectrum and in a variety of contexts, especially in fabric furnishings. More particularly, the popularity of jeweled motifs in textiles points to a sophisticated appreciation for artistic bravura, as weavers pushed against the limits of the textile medium to transform yarns into precious stones. Lastly, the article argues that a focus on textiles with jeweled designs points to the interrelatedness of ornamental motifs in late antique jewelry, textiles, and architectural décor, an observation which in turn highlights compelling aesthetic connections between the adorned human body and the built environment.

With their glittering surfaces and jewel-toned hues, wall mosaics count among the most visually impressive works of the late antique period (fig. 1). During the period of the early Byzantine Empire's greatest geographical expanse around the Mediterranean in the sixth century, mosaics adorned major imperial commissions such as the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, Saint Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula, and the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna. Made of precious stones and glass—sometimes backed with gold leaf—mosaics were valuable not only for their inherent materiality, but also for the exquisite craftsmanship

that went into their design and for the eye-catching effects of their kaleidoscopic color schemes.

The mosaics' spectacular coloration and the frequent depictions of gemstone motifs in their iconographic repertory have left a deep impression on popular and scholarly conceptions of late antique and early Byzantine luxury arts as jewel-like, precious, and fine.¹ Indeed, in *The Jeweled Style: Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity*, Michael Roberts argues that precisely such mosaic-like characteristics of color, opulence, repetition, and visual variety epitomized period literary and artistic tastes, a phenomenon he

Notes

¹ The mosaics in Ravenna, for example, feature in virtually every standard textbook of western art history. See for example Luttkhuizen and Verkerk 2006, figures 4.45 and 4.46. The panel of Justinian and

his retinue is the cover of Köb and Riedel 2005. The sumptuous dress and brilliant jewelry of Justinian and Theodora's court even recently served as inspiration for the Chanel pre-Fall 2011 Collection, *Paris—Byzance*.

See for example Meenal Mistry, "Pre-Fall 2011 Chanel," *Vogue*, December 6, 2010 (<http://www.vogue.com/fashion-shows/pre-fall-2011/chanel>); James Bort, "Paris-Byzance, le défilé des métiers d'art

Chanel," *Le Figaro: Madame*, December 27, 2010 (<http://madame.lefigaro.fr/style/paris-byzance-defile-metiers-dart-chanel-271210-120827>).



FIG. 1
Empress Theodora and
her retinue, 6th century,
wall mosaic, Basilica of
San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy
(artwork in the public
domain; photograph from
wikicommons)

terms the “jeweled style.”² Although Roberts did not include textiles in his analyses, numerous surviving examples of tapestry-woven fabrics from the fourth through eighth centuries depict gems and jewelry, making these objects a productive area for further evaluation of late antique aesthetic trends among a wide social spectrum and in a variety of contexts. More particularly, the popularity of gemstone motifs in textiles points to a sophisticated appreciation for artistic bravura as weavers pushed against the limits of the textile medium to transform yarns into precious stones. Lastly, the interrelatedness of ornamental motifs in late antique jewelry, textiles, and architectural décor highlights compelling aesthetic connections between the adorned human body and the built environment around the late antique eastern Mediterranean.

The Jeweled Style in Textiles

Although concerned primarily with literary theory, Michael Roberts’s 1989 book directly addresses visibility in a chapter titled, “Poetry and the Visual Arts.”³ Drawing from examples like floor mosaics, sculpture, manuscripts, and ivories, Roberts defines late antique jeweled style first in visual terms, emphasizing period

tastes for repetition, contrast, abstraction, brilliance, and fragmentation, all qualities Roberts argues are also found in late antique literature. He contrasts these qualities against the orderliness, precision, and balance of classical art and literature, and in doing so argues for profound transformations in late antique aesthetic tastes.

Roberts’s work has enjoyed significant popularity since its publication, particularly in literary scholarship.⁴ His positive view of late antique culture echoes in scholarship on the period’s aesthetics, which has largely focused on questions of visual culture. Jaś Elsner has suggested that visual variety reflected the late antique viewers’ taste for unusual combinations of media and striking visual effects.⁵ More recently, Elizabeth Bolman has built on Roberts’s theory of the jeweled style in her studies of the sixth-century wall paintings of the Red Monastery in Sohag, Egypt, where colorful walls covered with clashing patterns indeed exemplify his stylistic criteria (fig. 2).⁶ Bolman has proposed that “manifestations [of the jeweled style]...express delight in the variety and contrast of colors, patterns, materials, qualities of light, and architectural spaces.” Bolman has further argued

² Roberts 1989.

³ Roberts 1989, pp. 66–121.

⁴ A search on Google Scholar on July 11, 2017, for example,

revealed 251 works listed

as citing Roberts’s book.

Most of the works concern late antique literature, with

surprisingly few art historians engaging with his findings.

⁵ This argument is developed in Elsner 2006, pp. 271–309.

⁶ These ideas appear in Bolman 2016; Bolman 2006, pp. 1–24.



FIG. 2

Apse detail, 6th century, Red Monastery, Sohag, Egypt. Reproduced by permission of the American Research Center in Egypt. This project was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

that the paintings' artists sought to "destabilize wall surfaces... unsettling the viewers' expectations."⁷ Elsner's and Bolman's scholarship has rightfully drawn attention to late antique preferences for visual variation, and their work reflects Roberts's importance in art historical scholarship on late antique aesthetics and visual culture.

With their bright colors, varied motifs, and repeated patterns and frequent depictions of gemstones, late antique furnishings and dress typify the visual qualities of the late antique jeweled style. Designated as "Coptic" textiles in scholarly literature, these fabrics date from approximately the fourth through twelfth century and were preserved in Egypt's dry sands before entering museum collections in the late nineteenth to twentieth centuries. Tapestry and plain weave were by far the most common techniques practiced in Egypt in the late antique period, and comprise the bulk of surviving examples in museum collections today. Tapestry weave is in fact ideal for portraying gemstone motifs, because the hand-intensive quality of the weaving process itself means that weavers can easily add variety, asymmetry, and figuration to their work. Perhaps because of this flexibility, gemstones in many colors, sizes, styles, and types feature in these fabrics in figural scenes and ornamental patterns alike. This stands in contrast to silk weaving, where prearranged threads on a drawloom result in fixed and mirrored arrangements of motifs with little room for deviation from a single, repeating design unit. In silks, gemstones are thus generally relegated to framing elements, as in the pearly medallions common on many late antique silks, particularly those coming from Central Asia.⁸ For this reason, this article focuses on tapestry-woven examples, which reflect a wide range of gemstone motifs in late antique textile design.

Textiles with jeweled motifs have received only scant attention in scholarship, and from an iconographic perspective primarily. Jutta-Annette Bruhn's



1993 catalogue, *Coins and Costume in Late Antiquity*, includes a photograph of an exceptionally finely woven sixth-century tapestry-woven fragment of a head and duck set within a gem-studded frame, now at Dumbarton Oaks (BZ.1946.16), in a short section dedicated to jewelry sewn to textiles (fig 3).⁹ More recently, gemstones in dress textiles have been described in a brief study by Căcilia Fluck which focused on the collections of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin.¹⁰

Differences in the sizes and quality of dress textiles with gemstone designs points to widespread taste for the iconography among wearers of varying ages and social status. A rather simple sixth-century tunic from the Brooklyn Museum (38.753), for

FIG. 3
Fragment of a furnishing textile, c. 6th century, tapestry weave in polychrome wool, 33 × 22 cm, Byzantine Collection, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1946.16 (artwork in the public domain; © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection)

⁷ Bolman 2012, pp. 75–6.

⁸ See Mackie 2015, pp. 38–41, for a discussion of differences in drawloom technology. Fig. 1.23b depicts

a schematic representation of a fixed, vertical point repeat on an 8th century silk.

⁹ Fragment with wreathed head and duck in jeweled

trellis, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1946.16. Bruhn 1993, pp. 33–5.

¹⁰ Fluck 2013, pp. 11–23.



FIG. 4 (left)
Tunic front with marine motifs, 6th century, tapestry weave in polychrome wool, 33 × 113 cm, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 38.753 (artwork in the public domain; photograph, The Brooklyn Museum)



FIG. 5 (center)
Necklace and pendant cross, 6th–7th centuries, rock crystal and silver, (a) necklace, 66 × 1.1 cm, (b) cross with silver mount, 8.6 × 4.1 × 1.3 cm, (b) rock crystal cross only, 7.3 × 4.1 × 1.3 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1908, 08.202.27a & b (artwork in the public domain; photograph all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



FIG. 6 (right)
Fragment of a tunic, c. 6th century, tapestry weave in polychrome wool, 19.3 × 12 cm, Byzantine Collection, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1974.9 (artwork in the public domain; © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection)

example, preserves a section of its reinforced neckline. Measuring only 113 cm in length from its neckline to lower fringe, the tunic was made for a relatively small person (fig. 4).¹¹ A pendant of a winged figure and a gem-studded gold cross pendant on a chain composed of multicolored beads are woven just beneath the neckline. The woven depiction of this adornment indeed recalls beaded necklaces with pendants, such as a sixth- or seventh-century rock-crystal and silver pendant and chain from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (08.202.27a & b), said to be from Medinet Habu in Egypt (fig. 5).¹² Other examples of woven necklaces set beneath the necklines of tunics suggest this was a fairly common motif; one example at Dumbarton Oaks (BZ.1974.9) features a

similar effect of layering, with a cross pendant set above a colorful chain ending in a round pendant (fig. 6).¹³ Though not as complete as the Brooklyn Museum piece, the scale of the fragment—measuring 12 × 19.3 cm—is similarly small. The diminutive sizes of these tunics may suggest that woven pendants functioned as protective amulets on children's garments.¹⁴

Perhaps the most stunning examples of imitative jewelry on dress textiles appear on two fourth-century fragments once forming necklines, now at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (46.401 and 46.402; figs. 7 and 8).¹⁵ The fineness of the weaving, the use of purple dye, and the inclusion of threads of actual gold all point to these pieces' originally spectacular appearances. They undoubtedly once

¹¹ Tunic front with Marine Motifs, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, 38.753, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/48927>. Thompson 1971, cat. no. 36.

¹² Necklace and pendant cross, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 08.202.27a & b, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/473068> and

<http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/473069>.

¹³ Tunic front, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1974.9. Thompson ms., no. 125. Thompson dates the piece to the ninth–tenth century; this stands in contrast to the dating of the tunic front in the Brooklyn Museum, which she dates earlier.

¹⁴ Ball 2016, pp. 54–64.

Intriguingly, an otherwise coarse and careworn infant's tunic, also at Dumbarton Oaks, features a carefully embroidered cross at precisely the same location as the two tunics discussed here, just beneath the neckline, above the heart. "Infant's Tunic," Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1970.46 is documented

in Thompson ms., no. 156.

Thompson dates the piece to the "eighth to ninth century?" but does not provide substantial comparanda.

¹⁵ Neck ornaments, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 46.401 and 46.402. <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/neck-ornament-48771> and <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/neck-ornament-48788>. Weitzmann 1979,



belonged to elite wearers, since ancient texts reveal that such clothes were the prerogative of only the uppermost levels of society, in large part because of the inherent material value of the gold thread and purple dye.¹⁶ The front and back necklines of one fragment (46.401; fig. 7) feature brooch-like rectangles interspersed with human heads wearing wreaths and Phrygian caps. Delicate gold threads woven into lacy, vine-like forms evoke deeply-set goldwire settings, while depictions of pearls, amethysts, and emeralds appear as if strung along thin gold wires in a gold setting. The weavers expertly emulated the iridescence of jewels by delicately layering various shades of green threads. Indeed, the three-dimensional effects of the wirework, pearls, and cabochons find their visual parallels in the aesthetics of a pair of bracelets at the Metropolitan Museum (17.190.1670 and .1671), and suggest that the weavers drew inspiration from actual pieces of contemporary jewelry when conceptualizing their designs (fig. 9).¹⁷

Another fragment (46.402, fig. 8) is even more explicit in its efforts at mimicry. The neckline depicts two necklaces of differing styles: one features large blue and green gemstones set in alternating square and round gold settings connected by loops; the other includes more simply set and smaller gems of varying hues, each attached by a chain and featuring tear-drop shaped pendant gemstones set in gold. The settings and clasps at the end of the woven necklaces indeed evoke the features of real pieces of jewelry, such the links and clasps of a seventh-century gold and glass paste necklace and pendant now



FIG. 7 (top)
Neck ornament from a tunic, c. 4th century, tapestry weave in wool, linen, and gold-wrapped silk, 56.9 × 15.8 cm, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Charles Potter Kling Fund, 46.401 (artwork in the public domain; Photograph © 2018 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

FIG. 8 (bottom)
Neck ornament from a tunic, c. 4th century, tapestry weave in wool, linen, and gold-wrapped silk, 51.3 × 12 cm, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Charles Potter Kling Fund, 46.402 (artwork in the public domain; Photograph © 2018 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

FIG. 9 (left)
Jeweled bracelets, 6th century, gold, silver, pearls, amethyst, sapphire, glass, quartz, 3.7 × 8.2 cm and 3.8 × 8.2 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917, 17.190.1670-1 (artwork in the public domain; photograph all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

cat. no. 125.

¹⁶ For a list of excavated and museum-held purple-dyed textiles with gold threads see

Gleba 2008, pp. 61–77.

¹⁷ Jeweled bracelet, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 17.190.1670, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/464077>; Jeweled bracelet, The Metropolitan

Museum of Art, New York, 17.190.1671, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464078>.

Museum of Art, New York, 17.190.1671, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/464078>.

FIG. 10 (top left)
Necklace and chain, 7th century, gold, pearls, glass paste, 61.5 cm, Byzantine Collection, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, Washington, DC, BZ.1938.69.1 and .2 (artwork in the public domain; © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection)

FIG. 11 (bottom right)
Detail, figure 8.



at Dumbarton Oaks (BZ.1938.69; fig. 10).¹⁸ Even more astonishingly, many of the woven gemstones in this fragment are represented with a single gold thread running through their centers (fig. 11). This carefully observed detail faithfully portrays the appearance of semi-translucent gemstones threaded with gold wire, a feature typical of late antique jewelry work as seen in the amethyst pendants of a pair of seventh-century earrings at the Walters Art Museum (57.560 and 57.561) (figs. 12 and 13).¹⁹

The superbly crafted necklines from Boston are rare survivals and must serve as mere stand-ins for what were likely the most luxurious garments of late antiquity: textiles with real jewelry and gemstones sewn directly to clothing, known today only in visual and textual representations. In a study of late antique legal sources, Javier Arce has argued that such gem-studded clothes were regulated to imperial wear, as one sees in visual depictions of late antique and early Byzantine emperors and empresses like in the mosaics at Ravenna (fig. 1).²⁰ Along these lines, Aimilia Yeroulanou has proposed that a group of jewelry usually called “necklaces” or “diadems” may have in fact been stitched on to clothes.²¹ A fourth- or fifth-century artifact at the Walters Art Museum (57.549) is one such object that may have been sewn to a garment: it has no obvious latches or hooks, making it likely instead that it was once stitched to a supporting fabric (fig. 14).²² Another artifact—recognizable as a collar composed of gemstone-studded plaques now in Berlin (Antikensammlung, 30219, 505)—features Greek letters on its reverse, a detail which Barbara Niemeyer has suggested dictated the placement of the plaques beneath the neckline of a garment (figs. 15 and 16).²³

The appearance of jewelry on dress textiles might therefore reflect class distinctions and hierarchies. Among imperial elite, we might expect garments with actual gemstones stitched on to them as suggested in textual sources, visual representations, and



¹⁸ Necklace, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library & Collection, Washington DC, BZ.1938.69. Ross 1965, no. 13.

¹⁹ Pair of earrings, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 57.560-561, <http://art.thewalters.org/detail/77410/pair-of-earrings-2/>. Weitzmann 1979,

cat. no. 289.

²⁰ Arce 2005, pp. 33–44, esp. p. 42–3.

²¹ Yeroulanou's argument is based on pieces' unfinished backs and wire frames that create depth. See Yeroulanou 1999, pp. 40–4. Similar issues are debated in Metzger 1986, pp. 1–5.

For the phenomenon in the Islamic world, see Mackie 2002, pp. 92–100.

²² Diadem, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 57.549, <http://art.thewalters.org/detail/3439/diadem/>. Other examples are held at the Louvre (BJ 2269 and 2268). See Yeroulanou 1999, P. 40. A similar set of openwork

plaques, called a necklace, is held at Dumbarton Oaks (BZ.1975.7a–c), see Ross 2005, cat. no. 182A–C.

²³ Niemeyer 1997, pp. 191–206. Discussion of this argument in Yeroulanou 1999, p. 44.

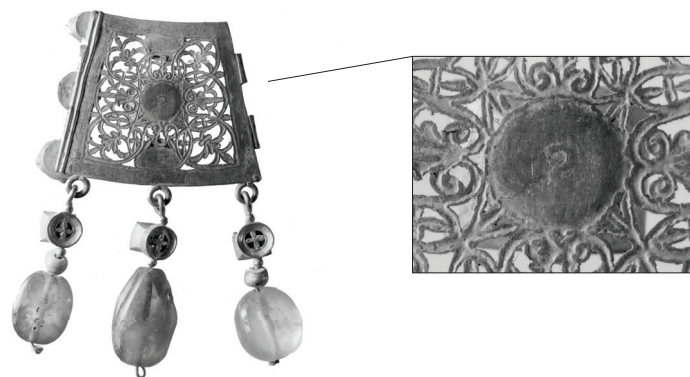


FIG. 12 (top left)
Pair of Earrings, 7th century, gold, pearls, and semiprecious stones, 11.2 × 4.4 × 2.5 cm, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 57.560-561 (artwork in the public domain; photograph, the Walters Art Museum)

FIG. 13 (top right)
Detail, figure 12.

FIG. 14 (center)
Diadem, 4th-5th century, gold, amethyst, emeralds, 31.1 × 2.86 × 0.9 cm, The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 57.549 (artwork in the public domain; photograph, the Walters Art Museum)

FIG. 15 (bottom left)
Reverse of collar, 6th century, gold, pearls, amethyst, glass paste, Antikensammlung, Berlin, 30219, 505 (artwork in the public domain, bpk Bildagentur Staatliche Museen Berlin, Art Resource, New York).

FIG. 16 (bottom right)
Detail, figure 15.

FIG. 17 (above left)
Curtain, 5th–6th century,
tapestry weave in wool and
linen, 138.43 × 69.85 cm, The
Minneapolis Museum of Art,
Minneapolis, The Centennial
Fund: Aimee Mott Butler
Charitable Trust, Mr. and Mrs.
John F. Donovan, Estate of
Margaret B. Hawks, Eleanor
Weld, 83.126 (artwork in the
public domain; photograph,
The Minneapolis Museum
of Art)



FIG. 18
Fragments of a Hanging: St.
Theodore and Inscription,
6th–7th century, tapes-
try weave in wool and
linen, 37 × 48 cm and 32
cm × 44 cm, Harvard Art
Museums/Arthur M. Sackler
Museum, Gift of Mrs. John D.
Rockefeller, 1939, 1939.112.1
and .2 (artwork in the public
domain; photograph, The
Harvard Art Museums)

FIG. 19
Fragment of a calendar
hanging, 6th century, tapestry
weave in wool and linen,
84 × 178 cm, Abegg-Stiftung,
Riggisberg, Inv. Nr. 1638
(artwork in the public domain;
© Abegg-Stiftung,
CH-3132 Riggisberg, 2003,
Photography: Christoph
von Virag)



surviving examples of jewelry. Clothes with emulated gemstones, like the fragments in Boston, may have served as a visual workaround for non-imperial, elite wearers eager to follow such styles without breaking sumptuary regulations. Coarsely woven tunics with representations of necklaces and cross pendants may have held particularly amuletic functions associated with the cross motif among a broader swath of society, perhaps associated with children's wear.

Gemstones also appear depicted on late antique furnishing textiles, which can be distinguished from garments thanks to their generally larger size and the scale of their motifs. Jeweled motifs on large-scale hangings above all demonstrate weavers' special interest in replicating the visual effects of light passing through stone. A fragment of a fifth-century liturgical hanging at the Minneapolis Museum of Art (83.126) depicts a large cross, or "crux gemmata," at its center (fig. 17).²⁴ The cross consists of rows of pearls and gemstones, set against a naturalistic wreath of leaves and fruits. The weavers evoke the jewels' three-dimensional surfaces by setting pairs of two-toned, triangular shapes next to one another, arguably an effort to capture the effects of light on a polished, semi-translucent gemstone.

Jeweled motifs appear frequently in the framing elements of furnishing textiles. For example, fragments of a sixth-century hanging, now at the Harvard Art Museums (1939.112.1 and .2), depict a standing figure labeled "Saint Theodore" holding a jeweled cross and set within a pearl- and gem-studded frame (fig. 18).²⁵ Jeweled motifs also appear around the frame of a fourth- to sixth-century hanging in Riggisberg (83.126), possibly depicting allegories of the seasons (fig. 19).²⁶ A fragment of an early Islamic era tapestry fragment, now at the Museum



of Fine Arts, Montreal (1953.Dt.5), features an eagle in its central field, while a colorful border includes an abstracted gemstone motif.²⁷ Such bejeweled frames seem to have been preferred to heighten the contrast between the frame and the central, often figural, scene.

Lastly, gem-encrusted architectural structures appear often in large-format furnishing textiles. The upper part of a fifth-century hanging at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (90.5.905) depicts dark-hued riders, horses, and animals beneath a colorful pearl- and gemstone-covered arcade (fig. 20).²⁸ Surviving tabs at the top of this textile point to its original use as a hanging in an architectural setting. Another example, a fragmentary hanging now at The Textile Museum, depicts a gemstone-studded pediment which in turn frames a naturalistic garden scene with fruits and birds (fig. 21).²⁹ With their fanciful designs, these examples certainly would have injected visual interest to the spaces where they were hung.

FIG. 20
Fragments of a hanging, 5th century, tapestry weave and plain weave in wool and linen, 104 × 63 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of George F. Baker, 1890, 90.5.905 (artwork in the public domain; photograph all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

FIG. 21
Curtain or hanging, c. 4th century, 213.4 × 117 cm, The Textile Museum, Washington, DC, 71.18, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1925 (artwork in the public domain; photo courtesy The Textile Museum)

²⁴ Curtain, The Minneapolis Museum of Art, 83.126, <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/3149/curtain-coptic>.
²⁵ Fragments of a hanging: St. Theodore and Inscription, Harvard Art Museums, 1939.112.1 and .2. <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/213118> and <http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/>

[collections/object/214817](https://collections.artsmia.org/art/3149/curtain-coptic).

²⁶ Fragment eines 'Monatsbehanges, Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, Inv. Nr. 1638. Schrenk 2004, cat. no. 16.

²⁷ I thank the archivists at the Image Collections and Fieldwork Archives at Dumbarton Oaks for allowing me to study the records of the Census of Byzantine

Textiles in North America, where I found this image in the file for "Montreal, Museum of Fine Arts." A published photo of this textile appears in Williams n.d.

²⁸ Fragment from a Coptic hanging, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 90.5.905, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/

[search/444378](https://collections.artsmia.org/art/3149/curtain-coptic).

²⁹ Curtain or hanging with an architectural frame, The Textile Museum, 71.18. Trilling 1982, cat. no. 2, color plate 2.

FIG. 22
Detail of BZ.1946.13, fig. 3.

The Materiality of Textiles

With their visual effects of contrast, variety, brilliance, color, and superficiality, dress and furnishing textiles alike embody the characteristics of the late antique jeweled style, even more so in that they play up the depictions of jewels and gemstones as part of their iconographic repertory. But while Roberts's definitions of the jeweled style address purely visual concerns, the popularity of gem motifs across media raises significant questions about underlying appreciation for materiality in late antique aesthetics enlarges and complicates our understanding of the parameters of the jeweled style itself. Such a focus also pushes against scholarship which addresses textiles strictly in terms of their visual qualities. Indeed, Tristan Weddigen has recently argued that much work on textiles tends to "reduce textiles to material neuters and flattened carriers of information," since interpretations present objects as mere bearers of imagery rather than as objects intended to be understood in spatial and material terms.³⁰ In situating textiles as flat, inert surfaces functioning as two-dimensional planes intended only to bear imagery and color, scholarship has long avoided the material realities of cloth. Weddigen argues instead for a new approach to thinking about textiles, where the three-dimensional qualities of the cloth itself, as well as its spatial context on the body or in architecture, are crucial for holistic interpretation. Imagining the textiles in their original three-dimensional operations requires thinking past their static appearance today in museum displays or conservation labs.

Materiality has received increased attention in current art historical discourse, with discussions about making, medium, and spatiality of particular interest.³¹ This line of inquiry departs from scholarship focused on visuality and iconography, the predominating discourse in medieval art history in the 1980s when Roberts developed his concept of the jeweled style.³² In contrast, James Elkins has



urged academic art historians to consider material from the perspective of artistic process, arguing for the limited usefulness of analogies focused strictly on visual experience.³³ Particularly inspirational in this line of thinking is work by anthropologist Tim Ingold, who exhorts us to think not only about visual or design parallels—or what he calls the hylomorphic model—but also about the demands of the materials themselves, the process of making, and the role or rationale of the maker—what he describes as the "textility of making."³⁴

Foregrounding materiality opens up new ways of thinking about late antique textiles, making it clear that they were prized as material objects as much as visual ones, appreciated for their artistic mimicry and transformative subversion of medium. Tapestry weave, for example, was arguably the best for emulating gemstones in cloth; weavers working in this technique were able to modulate the surface of the cloth and introduce texture, making it particularly effective in translating gemstones and jewelry into cloth form. Weavers could also pack threads of many different hues to manipulate the density of the cloth,

³⁰ Weddigen 2013, p. 34.

³¹ A general overview of concerns in the field, see Miller 2011, pp. 232–48.

³² See, for example, the

centrality of visuality in two "state of the field" essays from the time: Hamburger 1993, pp. 383–400 and Kessler 1988, pp. 166–87.

³³ Elkins 2008, pp. 25–30.

³⁴ Ingold 2010, pp. 91–102. I thank Gudrun Bühl for passing this reference on to me.

introduce gaps between color fields in the form of slits, and blend threads together. These techniques and materials all served to introduce distinctive shapes and subtle shading into the weave structure (fig. 22). Indeed, the creation of small, carefully controlled color fields of many hues could in fact even be seen as weavers' effort at mimicking jewelers' process of shaping gems and setting them in place. That tapestry-woven fabrics were created from materials like linen and wool makes the depiction of precious gemstones in this format all the more compelling example of mimicry.

Considering the materiality of textiles also makes it possible to posit that late antique owners and wearers appreciated textiles' capacity to highlight—and perhaps undermine—the relationship between surface and underlying form. The deep appreciation for surface is central in *Sensuous Surfaces*, Jonathan Hay's evaluation of Ming and Qing dynasty decorative arts, where he argues for the primacy of surface in the development of period aesthetics and forms.³⁵ A similar engagement with surface and underlying structure is indeed implied in the examples of textiles and architecture discussed in this article. In dress fabrics, for example, weavers placed faux woven jewelry in the places where one would expect real jewelry to feature on a human body, namely at the opening edge of a sleeve or along a neckline, as in the pieces from Boston where woven necklaces were made along the tunic's neck. When actual pieces of precious jewelry were worn over such tunics, the cumulative visual effect would have been one of amplification by stacking real and emulated gemstones. Precisely this aesthetic of layering appears in mummy portraits of well-heeled women from late Roman Egypt, who are frequently portrayed wearing multiple necklaces at once (fig. 23).³⁶ Such stacking of jewels seems to have been associated with social class, as a way of displaying one's wealth conspicuously on the surface of the body.



In the built environment, the interplay of surface and structure is evident in furnishing textiles that blur the lines between ephemeral cloth installations and permanent architectural settings. Textiles portraying jeweled architectural features, for example, may have been meant to evoke idealized jeweled structures while also injecting effects of glimmer and brilliance into the surroundings. We should envision such textiles placed (perhaps only temporarily) within permanent architectural settings which themselves in turn may have been decorated with jewel-like motifs. For example, Brigitte Pitarakis has argued that stonecarvers sought to emulate the effects of goldsmithing in

FIG. 23
Attributed to the Isidora Master, *Mummy Portrait of a Woman*, 100 CE, encaustic on linden wood, gilt, linen, 48 × 36 × 12.8 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles 81. AP.42 (artwork in the public domain; photograph, The J. Paul Getty Museum)

³⁵ Hay 2010, see especially, "The Object Thinks With Us," and "Surface, Affect,

Metaphor," pp. 61–105.

³⁶ Doxiadis 1995; Geoffroy-Schneiter 1998.



FIG. 24 (top left)
Capital from Hagios
Polyuktos, Constantinople,
6th century, marble (art-
work in the public domain;
photograph provided by the
Slide Library, Institute of Fine
Arts, New York University,
courtesy of the Institute
of Archaeology, University
of Oxford)

FIG. 25 (bottom left)
Bracelets, c. 400 CE, gold,
6.8 × 5.9 × 4.6 cm and
7 × 5.9 × 4.8 cm, The
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York, Gift of J. Pierpont
Morgan, 1917, 17.190.1668-
1669 (artwork in the public
domain; photograph all rights
reserved, The Metropolitan
Museum of Art)

FIG. 26 (center)
Column from Hagios
Polyuktos, Constantinople,
6th century, marble, glass,
Arkeoloji Müzeleri, Istanbul
(artwork in the public
domain; photograph courtesy
Patricia Blessing)

FIG. 27 (right)
Detail, column from Hagios
Polyuktos, Constantinople,
6th century, marble, glass,
Arkeoloji Müzeleri, Istanbul
(artwork in the public
domain; photograph courtesy
Patricia Blessing)

stone form, noting that architectural features at Hagios Polyuktos include capitals whose forms recall pearl-studded goldstrapping and openwork familiar from period jewelry (figs. 24 and 25).³⁷ A column at that same church was even embedded with colorful glass resembling gemstones, further amplifying the effect (figs. 26 and 27). Such a connection between textiles and architecture is particularly compelling in large hangings that depict jewel-studded frames, such as the one hanging now in Riggisberg, which notably mimic and emulate the framing elements known from wall mosaics (figs. 1 and 19).

Although these examples show the strong conceptual associations and visual rapport between jeweled wall hangings and architectural features, it is nearly impossible to tell which medium preceded the other. In reality the transfer of ornamental motifs

was likely multidirectional and non-linear as design elements moved freely among jewelry, architectural decoration, and textiles.³⁸ Textiles, though, certainly served as intermediaries in the diffusion of designs and patterns through various media. In this sense, textiles participated in broader late antique aesthetic preferences for trompe-l'oeil effects, mimicry, and artificiality.³⁹ For example, Elizabeth Bolman has suggested that the colorful wall paintings of the apse at the Red Monastery emulate textile designs.⁴⁰ Matthew Canepa has also argued for a textile aesthetic in the carved decoration at the sixth-century Hagios Polyuktos in Constantinople, which he specifically argues draws from the ornamental repertory of Sasanian silks,⁴¹ and Marcus Milwright has connected early Islamic marble architectural decoration and the wavy designs of ikat fabrics, which he argues were understood to portray the visual effects of water.⁴²

³⁷ Pitarakis 2007, pp. 63–74. The other churches include St. John in the Hebdomon and St. Euphemia. Black and white photos of these churches' columns are available at "The Byzantine Churches of Istanbul," Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, <https://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/html/Byzantine/>

[index.htm?https&&www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/html/Byzantine/31.htm](https://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/html/Byzantine/index.htm?https&&www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/fineart/html/Byzantine/31.htm).

³⁸ The movement of motifs from one medium to another of course falls squarely in the domain of ornament studies. See for example Trilling 2003, especially "How Ornament Works" and "How Ornament Evolves;" Grabar 1992, pp.

8–46, 155–94. For a recent critique of ornament studies writ large, see Necipoğlu and Payne 2016, pp. 1–6. The essays in the book explore the historiography of ornament in many different art historical subfields.

³⁹ Fabio Barry, for example, has evaluated late antique marble revetments to argue

that they were esteemed as the translation of water into stone. Barry 2007, pp. 627–56.

⁴⁰ Bolman 2016; Bolman 2012, p. 76.

⁴¹ Canepa 2010, pp. 188–223.

⁴² Milwright 2005, pp. 211–21. This phenomenon was already at play in the late antique world. See Barry 2007, pp. 627–56.

Lastly, in considering the connections between these varied media through the lens of the late antique jeweled aesthetic, we open up new terrain for thinking about the relationship of the human body to the built environment. Such an approach demands a holistic view on categories of objects traditionally studied in isolation with little consideration of the meaningful interrelatedness of their aesthetic qualities or ornamental motifs. Rather than thinking about these works in art historical terms as discrete artifacts distinguished by medium or technique, we should instead imagine how these elements worked together, as we picture a jewelry-clad human form within a gemmed architectural frame sheltering in turn a jewel-toned furnishing textile. Such an imaginative exercise evokes in vibrant terms late antique preferences for colorful effects and playful clashes of materials.

Conclusion: Modern Mimicry

Deep appreciation for artistic mastery, mimicry of medium, and surface effect help explain the popularity of gemstone motifs in late antique textiles. Such interest in the material aspects of textiles arguably resonates with trends in contemporary fashion, with fascinating parallels to be found in the 2016 exhibition *Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.⁴³ The exhibition argued that the traditional boundaries between hand-intensive couture and mass-produced ready-to-wear have increasingly blurred over the course of the past century, as couture has come to incorporate machine-made details, and ready-to-wear takes on qualities of work made by hand. A couture wedding gown designed for Chanel by Karl Lagerfeld in 2014 was given pride of place at the opening section of the exhibition as the embodiment of these trends. One would expect such a gown to have been entirely

made by hand, and yet it was in fact an amalgam: Lagerfeld drew a unit of the pattern of the 20-foot train by hand, but the overall design was generated by a computer; crystals were attached to the train by machine, and the embroidery was done by hand.⁴⁴ The gown, in other words, disrupted viewers' expectations of medium and process, making it difficult to tell what was done by people, and what had been done by machines.⁴⁵

The wedding gown demonstrates Lagerfeld's engagement with the limitations and possibilities of his materials and his clear pleasure in emulation, mimicry, and even trickery of medium. With its intelligent engagement with materiality, then, Lagerfeld's wedding gown presents a modern attitude that is in fact deeply resonant with the material aesthetics of late antique textiles discussed in this article. Indeed, by re-casting the jeweled style in terms of materiality and artistic process, a more nuanced interpretation of late antique aesthetics emerges, where awareness of artistic process and appreciation of the tricks of medium were just as important as the resulting visual effects. In the end, we might view the predominance of jewels across media as a reflection of the period's admiration for artistic bravura, as artists pushed against the limits of their materials and superceded them, making stone architecture appear as if jewelry, and transforming gemstones into cloth.

⁴³ Bolton 2016.

⁴⁴ "It's a wedding dress for the twenty-first century. The dress is made from a neoprene-like fabric that is totally synthetic, and the embroidery is based on a

baroque pattern that is totally pixelated, like a computer-generated image. Abstract baroque. Very chic, no?" Karl Lagerfeld in an interview with Andrew Bolton, published in *Manus X Machina*, Interviews

supplement, XXV.

⁴⁵ See *Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology*, gallery views, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPWpgnkLhmA&feature=youtu.be>

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