Woven silk

Place of origin: Iran (probably, designed and made)

Date: 14th century (designed and made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Woven with silk and gold thread (gold wound round linen core)

Museum number: 769-1894

Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10a, The Françoise and Georges Selz Gallery, case WS []

Public access description

This silk is one of the most expensive luxury textiles of the 14th century and might have been used for secular or ecclesiastical dress or furnishings.

The exotic birds and vine leaves in its composition represent designs that were new at the beginning of the 14th century. Birds and plants flow freely across the textiles, the former depicted in active poses, often ranged in pairs facing each other. Vine leaves also feature prominently.

The main Italian centres of silk weaving by the early 14th century were Lucca and Venice. They distributed silk textiles from the East as well as building up their own silk manufacturing. They exported some of their silks to northern Europe. Although this silk was probably woven in Italy, the exoticism of the birds suggests that its makers were familiar with goods imported from the East.

Descriptive line

Turquoise blue silk woven with gold pattern of eagles and vine leaves; probably Iranian; 14th century.

Physical description

Woven silk (lamps) with deep turquoise blue satin ground and pattern formed by a gilt brocading weft. The pattern consists of pairs of birds, resembling eagles or Chinese mythical fong-hoang; the birds face each other across a pattern of scrolling stems, tendrils and vine leaves. The pattern is a point repeat (i.e. symmetrical about a vertical axis), and this piece shows the equivalent of two full repeats down the length and just over one repeat across the width. One side of the textile has been cut, while the other retains its selvedge which has been folded in to the reverse of the textile. At some point the top of the textile has been folded back, thus causing cracking in the top inch or so of the piece. There is also a little damage on the left hand cut edge towards the bottom.

Dimensions

Length: 70.5 cm maximum, Width: 27 cm, Width: 27.9 cm with selvage, Width: 27.5 cm with selvage turned in, Length: 10.5 cm repeat, Width: 8.25 cm repeat

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Object history note

Bought from M. Duseigneur, 7 rue de l'Abbaye, Paris in November 1894 as one of four pieces of 'ancient stuff' for 900 francs (£31 14s 5d) among an assortment of other objects from bronze bowl to carved wooden doors. Two of the other pieces (now 770.1894 and 771.1894 had money added to them for restoration). (Nominal file G. & Raoul Duseigneur, MA/1/D1997/1). Raoul Duseigneur left a bequest to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 1918.

Historical significance: This is a fine example of a costly silk which combined two expensive raw materials, real gold and silk. Relatively few silks from this period survive, some having been destroyed to salvage the gold thread for its monetary value.

Historical context note

This is one of the costliest silks woven in this period because of the gold thread within it.

Pattern

The exotic birds and vine leaves in this composition belonged to a form of design that emerged at the beginning of the fourteenth century: in it birds and animals that had previously been trapped in roundels were liberated, being allowed to mix freely with other elements of the composition. They were depicted in active poses - rampant, flying, clawing, and clinging on to prey. Often they were ranged in pairs facing each other. Vine leaves also feature prominently among the plant motifs of the same period. Although the pattern repeat is regular, the flow of the design disguises this technical limitation. Donald King posits that the source of the new style may have come from the East and that some of the flora and fauna show a strong Chinese influence. Brigitte Klesse has identified many variations on this theme in Italian painting of the second half of the fourteenth century.

These birds and plants may or may not have been used for their symbolic value, vine leaves representing fruits (grapes) which contributed to
the pleasures of dining but also have a symbolic value within Christianity. The exoticism of the birds may suggest the impact on European silk production of motifs from goods imported from the East. The Italian city states sat at the centre of trade routes to northern Europe, to the remnants of the Byzantine empire and the Mongol Empire which stretched from China across central Asia to Ilkhamid Persia. They distributed silk textiles from the East as well as building up their own silk manufacturing. The main Italian centres by the early fourteenth century were Lucca and Venice, and they exported some of their silks to northern Europe.

Technique
King notes that a change in weaving technique occurred at the beginning of the fourteenth century, with the lampas weave taking over from weft-faced compound weaves. While weft-faced compound weaves are smooth on the surface, lampas weaves have two or more textures. Additional colours of silk, or gold and silver thread, were often added as brocading (supplementary) wefts. In this example, the gold birds and leaves created through brocading stand proud of the turquoise ground.

Select bibliography
Brigitte Klesse, Seidenstoffe in der italienischen Malerei des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts, Schriften der Abegg-Stiftung Bern, 1967. Note in particular, cat. nos. 247 and 282. She shows no examples of the combination of this type of bird and vine leaves.
Donald King and Monique King, European Textiles in the Keir Collection, 4000BC to 1800AD, Chapter 3, especially, pp. 43-5.)

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O129376/woven-silk-unknown/