Fragments - The Stein Collection

Object: Fragments

Place of origin: Astana (excavated)

Date: 200-800 (made)

Artist/Maker: Unknown

Materials and Techniques: Plain woven silk and embroidery

Credit Line: Stein Textile Loan Collection. On loan from the Government of India and the Archaeological Survey of India. Copyright: Government of India

Museum number: LOAN:STEIN.515

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

Four fragments of monochrome plain woven silk, of which two are blue and one buff coloured. The fourth and largest fragment is dark red embroidered with floral design in pale blue, blue, green, cream and brown. It is unclear what these textiles would have been used for, although they are likely to have been part of a burial shroud. They were recovered from the site of Astana, an ancient burial ground where the tombs date from the 3rd to the 8th century AD.

The sites are part of an area of Central Asia we now call the Silk Road, a series of overland trade routes that crossed Asia, from China to Europe. The most notable item traded was silk. Camels and horses were used as pack animals and merchants passed the goods from oasis to oasis. The Silk Road was also important for the exchange of ideas. Whilst silk textiles travelled west from China, Buddhism entered China from India in this way.

This textile was brought back from Central Asia by the explorer and archaeologist Sir Marc Aurel Stein (1862-1943). The V&A has around 650 ancient and medieval textiles recovered by Stein at the beginning of the 20th century. Some are silk while others are made from the wool of a variety of different animals.

Descriptive line

Four fragments of plain woven blue and yellow silk, and embroidered red silk, found in Astana, 200-800

Physical description

Four fragments of monochrome plain woven silk, of which two are blue and one buff coloured. The fourth and largest fragment is dark red embroidered with a floral design in pale blue, blue, green, cream and brown. Originally the embroidered red fabric was lined with a paler red silk, and there are fragments of this remaining.

Dimensions

Length: 11.8 cm largest fragment, Width: 7.8 cm largest fragment

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Historical context note

Astana lies south of Turfan on the northern Silk Road. It once served as a burial site for Kharakhoja, an important trade centre during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). Here Stein unearthed a stunning array of burial objects, including: clay figurines, textiles, gold and silver coins, and thousand-year-old mortuary cakes, preserved in the dry heat of the desert. Ancient contracts for labour, land and grain purchases excavated at Astana and Kharakhoja show that carpets, rolls of silk, cotton and linen were often used as money. The V&A holds several silk fragments, dating from the third to the sixth century. These include plain and pattern-woven pieces, some of which have been resist-dyed, painted and embroidered. These figured silks incorporate decorative themes from Central Asia, Persia and China; reflecting the rich mingling of cultures which occurred along the Silk Road.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O93582/the-stein-collection-fragments-unknown/