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A Thousand Words: Narrative Traditions in Asian Textiles, June 27, 2003-October 12, 2003

Storytelling is an art form of long standing in many Asian cultures. Sacred and secular literature abounds in Persia, India, China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia. Narrative traditions spread from one region to another through the movement of peoples in trade, migration, or conquest. Sacred texts, mythological epics, court poetry, and folktales were passed down through generations and and often across political or cultural boundaries. Spoken and written words have also been enhanced by visual imagery. Textiles, a universal medium that is easily transported, have long been a means of preserving and disseminating narrative.

Some of the works of art in this exhibition, drawn from the permanent collections of the Department of Costume and Textiles, depict an entire scene or scenes from a particular tale. Others may call to mind a poem or a chapter of a novel through a single symbol. The images themselves are a vehicle for communication, whether they carry a story for those who cannot read or suggest a wide range of associations to the literate.

Not all of the narratives displayed here have been identified at present. Asian literature is both wide-ranging and complex. Still, it is not always necessary to know the story in order to understand the thoughts and emotions suggested by the image.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Persian
Textile fragment, 1600-1650s
Silk, metallic yarn; compound weave
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.520

Persian poetry and literature abounds with references to the nightingale and the rose. In love poetry it is often used as a metaphor for unrequited love. However, the poet Farid ud-Din Attar (c. 1120-c.1220) wrote an allegorical poem in which a convention of birds gather together to begin a quest for the mystical being the Simurgh—representing the soul's desire for unity with God. Many of the birds try to excuse themselves from the journey. Among the latter are the nightingale, which pleads its love for the rose above all else, and the parrot, whose excuse is that it is imprisoned in a cage because of it's beauty, and seeks only liberty.

Excerpt from *The Nightingale's Excuse (The Conference of the Birds):*

My love is here; the journey you propose

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Cannot beguile me from my life – the rose.
It is for me she flowers; what greater bliss
Could life provide for me - anywhere – than this?

Persian
Textile fragment, 1600s-1700s
Silk; compound weave, embossed
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 13.1516

Thai
Cover, late 1800s-early 1900s
Silk; satin weave, painted
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.208

This scene of life at the Thai court shows a series of dance, musical, and dramatic performances being given before a royal couple in a garden setting. They are not the formal dance-dramas taken from the *Ramakian* (the Thai version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*), which were performed by masked dancers, but may be dances illustrating the secular narratives of court literature or folktales.

The layout of this design suggests that the textile was meant to be used decoratively on a table or some other piece of furniture.

Indian
Rumal (cover), 1800s
Cotton plain weave with silk embroidery
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.359

The great Hindu epics, such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, are long rich tales that are often illustrated in Indian art. The embroidered cover seen here was worked by ladies of the court in the Punjab Hills in the 19th century, and depicts the devotion of the Gopis (milkmaids) to the lord Krishna (with blue skin). It has a dual meaning, symbolizing both romantic love and the spiritual desire to be one with God.

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The love of Krishna and Radha, his favorite gopi, is celebrated in both Sanskrit and Bengali poetry.

Balinese
Hanging, first half 1900s
Cotton; plain weave, painted
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 51.554

Tall trees and a row of triangular motifs divide this story cloth into scenes. The same figures appear in all the scenes, which may be either of Hindu origin or taken from stories and myths indigenous to Bali.

Balinese
Hanging, first half 1900s
Cotton; plain weave, painted
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 51.553

The Indonesian island of Bali has retained its Hindu-influenced religion and culture, although most of Indonesia became Moslem centuries ago. Through dance, drama, puppet theater, and music, the Balinese have interpreted the great Hindu epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Story cloths such as this and the one in the adjacent case were hung either in homes or performance spaces.

In the center of this cloth sits a Hindu deity with two female attendants, surrounded by dozens of other female figures dancing, sitting, or holding offerings. The row of triangular motifs near the top separates another row of female attendants, and may divide the narrative into scenes or chapters.

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Chinese
Hundred Boys at Play Hanging, ca. 1889
Silk satin weave embroidered with silk and wrapped metallic thread
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.456

The One Hundred Boys design embroidered on this hanging is not really a story in itself. Instead, the boys' activities refer—directly or obliquely--to the traditional accomplishments of the Chinese scholar. Together they symbolize the hopes of Chinese parents for their sons: that they would pass the state civil service examinations and secure a post that would enable them to live the life of a gentleman.

This theme was well-known at least as early as the 17th century. It is included in a manual of embroidery designs put together by Shen Linqi (1602-1664), a Chinese scholar and calligrapher.

Chinese
Sleeve bands, 1800s
Silk; satin weave, embroidered
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 34.687

These bands tell the story of Lord Wei – a young man who arranged to meet his sweetheart on the river bank under the Blue Bridge. As he waited, the river flooded, but he remained as the water rose and was drowned. The tale is symbolic of a lover's devotion.

Chinese
Woman's informal coat, 1800s
Silk, metallic yarn; satin damask, embroidered
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.406

Ching dynasty informal dress, which was not for court wear, was generally ornamented with motifs and scenes of personal importance, rather than those of the hierarchical nature of court garments.

This jacket contains a variety of small vignettes, possibly illustrating Chinese folktales and legends relating to good fortune and filial piety.

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Japanese
Kimono, early 1900s
Silk; compound weave, yuzen-dyeing, embroidery
Gift of Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf 37.045

The front, back, sleeves, and interior of this kimono are decorated with images of different shrines and temples. However, the scene that concerns us is on the lower right front panel. Here, in front of a spreading pine tree, lie a rake and a broom, taken together, symbols of eternal love from the Legend of Takasago.

Jo and Uba were a devoted married couple whose spirits were said to inhabit two pine trees, hundreds of miles apart at the shrines of Takasago and Sumiyoshi. On moonlit nights they came together to sweep up the pine needles (a symbol of longevity) on Takasago Beach with rake and broom. The legend inspired the No play Takasago, and is referenced in poetry and other literature.

Poem by Fujiwara no Okikaze (late 9th-early 10th century)

Who is left now of my friends
From the old days?
The Takasago pines live on.
But they don't know me.

Japanese
Textile length, first half 1900s
Silk; compound weave
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop W. Aldrich 58.184.5

This textile length depicts rows of No theatre masks and other objects associated with the stories of No drama. For example, the cart and pine branch are props from the play *Matsukaze (Wind in the Pines)*, and one of the masks is of the type (*wakaonna*) worn by the actor playing one of the young women in the play. The bands of text in between the bands of motifs appear to be from a No song book; the small dashes next to the characters are song notation.

Excerpts from *Matsukaze*:

Priest: I am a priest and I travel through the provinces. Here on the beach I see a solitary pine tree with a wooden tablet fixed to it,

and a poem slip hanging from the tablet. Is there a story connected with the tree? Please tell me what you know.

Villager: The pine is linked with the memory of two fisher girls, Matsukaze and Murasame. Please say a prayer for them as you pass.

Matsukaze and Murasame:

A brine cart wheeled along the beach
Provides a meager livelihood:
The sad world rolls
Life by quickly and in misery!

Japanese
Obi, late 1800s
Silk, metallic yarn; compound weave
Gift of Mrs. James N. Byers III 1988.041

Japan's Heian period imperial court life, with its distinctive flowing clothing and hairstyles, also provides the setting for the scene depicted in this obi: three women engaged in some domestic task – perhaps writing a poem - behind a screen, as a man enters the room to speak to a fourth woman, and a stag watches the scene from outside a window. This design may be a scene from one of the well-known Heian literary masterpieces such as *The Tale of Genji* or *The Tales of Ise*.

In early Japanese court life poetry was a serious form of communication in which everyone participated, whether by entering competitions or simply exchanging poems with lovers and friends.

Poem by Prince Otsu (663-687) to Lady Ishikawa

In the dew dripping
On the broad-flanked hill,
Waiting for you
I stood dampened
By the dew on the hill.

Return Poem by Lady Ishikawa (late 7th-early 8th century) to Prince Otsu

Waiting for me
You were dampened,
O that I could

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Be the dew dripping
On that broad flanked hill

Japanese
Furoshiki (wrapping cloth), 1900-1950s
Silk; plain weave, yuzen-dyeing
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.452

The figure clothed in chrysanthemums in the center of this furoshiki is Ono No Komachi, one of the 36 Immortals of Japanese Poetry. She lived in the 9th century, during the Heian period in Japan (794 to 1185), which produced some of the world's greatest works of literature, much of it written by women prominent in court circles. In the 14th and 15th centuries a series of five No dramas were written about Ono No Komachi, crystallizing her reputation as a figure of literary legend.

The surrounding male figures are five more of the Immortals of Poetry.

Two Poems by Ono No Komachi

Cheery blossoms pale after long rain
Beauty useless;
I live in a world drained of color
Without you

Imperceptible
It withers in the world
The flower-like human heart

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Japanese
Kesa (Buddhist priest's robe), late 1700s- early 1800s
Silk, gilt paper; gauze weave, yuzen-dyed, embroidered
Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.064

Buddhist *kesa* are often made of sumptuous fabrics bearing little or no religious symbolism. The design elements seen here may refer to a chapter of perhaps the first great novel in world literature: *The Tale of Genji*, written about the year 1000 by Lady Murasaki Shikibu, a courtier of Heian-era (794 to 1185) Japan. Genji is a prince of the Japanese court, and the novel tells of his life and loves, and those of his friends and family.

The Tale of Genji is so well known in Japan that a few motifs – such as the cart and the gate - might call to mind a specific scene or an entire chapter from the book.