

## *Expressions of Faith: Religious Textiles in Asia*, October 17, 2003-February 8, 2004

The textile arts have long been used in religious observance throughout the world. Embroidered, woven, painted, and printed fabrics have served and still serve as vestments, decorations, offerings, and devotional or talismanic objects in many faiths. This exhibition from the permanent collection of the Department of Costume and Textiles includes such cloths and clothing from across Asia: Indonesia, Burma, Thailand, China, Japan, and Turkey. Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, Hinduism, and Islam are represented, as well as belief systems rooted in the natural environments of indigenous cultures. Although forms and symbolism differ among the religions represented by these objects, there is also common ground. The visual spectacle of ritual is enhanced for the worshipper through the use of luxurious textiles for vestments and decorative hangings, particularly those made of lustrous silk and metallic threads. Elaborate vestments focus attention on the celebrant, helping to create an aura of power and authority. Also, individuals may make, wear, or use textiles with sacred imagery or religious purpose, thereby proclaiming their beliefs or identities. In many cases, specific colors or patterns are reserved for a particular ritual or season.

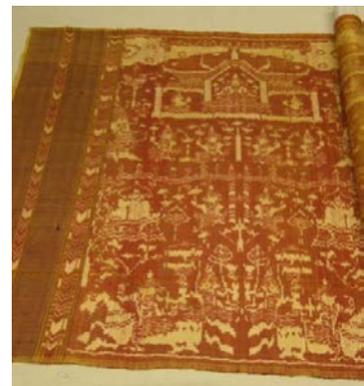
Whether commissioned from a professional workshop or created by an individual for personal reasons, the careful crafting of these textiles speaks to their function as an expression of faith. They are all extraordinary examples of textile art.

### CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Cambodian; Thai; Khmer  
*Pidan* (pictorial hanging), early 1900s  
Silk; twill weave, weft ikat (mat mii)  
Gift of Miss Mary Patterson 53.041

*Pidan* are used as hangings or canopies in Buddhist temples and monasteries. Women, who cannot earn spiritual merit through service as monks, do so by donating a wide variety of textiles, including *pidan*, for use in religious ceremonies. These textiles may be personally woven by the donor or commissioned from a highly skilled weaver.

In this *pidan* the design is divided into two sections – heaven and earth – with the seated Buddha at the top and the king on horseback below. Other images include spirits or priests in the traditional greeting pose, goddesses or temple dancers, the tiered parasol emblematic of the king, and the lit candle that points the way to the Buddha above.



# RISD MUSEUM

Near Eastern; Turkish

*Tomb cover fragment*, 1700s

Silk; compound satin weave

Museum Works of Art Fund 46.504

The repeated texts woven down the length of this panel from a tomb cover are four Islamic statements of faith. One of them is the shahada ("testimony of faith"), considered to be the first pillar of Islam. It may be translated as "There is no god but Allah; Muhammed is the prophet of Allah."

The two decorative scripts used for the texts in this cover have been identified as varieties of thuluth, one of many scripts developed by Islamic artists to give beautiful visual form to the word of God, as revealed to Muhammed and written in the Q'uran (Koran).

Caucasian

*Prayer Rug*, 1900s

Wool; supplementary weft pile, symmetrical knot

Gift of Myron Taplin 84.239.2

In the Islamic religion, a worshipper washes before prayer to achieve symbolic purity, then uses a mat, rug, or cloth to preserve that ritual cleanliness from contact with the ground. These textiles very often incorporate a niche motif in the center of the design. This motif refers to the mihrab, an architectural element in a mosque that orients the faithful correctly for worship; that is, facing toward Mecca, the holy city of Islam. The mihrab is found in woven and printed rugs, mats, and hangings produced throughout the Islamic world.



Burmese; Shan

*Talismanic undergarments (yantra)*, mid 1900s

Silk; plain weave, painted and inked

Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2002.11.7

Over history, the indigenous animist religion of the Shan people of northern Burma has been combined with Buddhism and Hinduism. This suite of undergarments, inscribed by a priestly master with astrological texts and Buddhist and Hindu images related to the wearer's life, was a private and personal talisman meant to keep the

# RISD MUSEUM

wearer from physical and spiritual harm. Finely drawn on silk cloth, it must have belonged to a member of the Shan aristocracy.

Inscribed talismanic shirts survive from the Islamic cultures of 15th- and 16th-century India and Turkey and from the Buddhist, Hindu, and animist cultures of 19th- and 20th-century Thailand and the Philippine Islands.

Turkish

*Dalmatic*, 1550-1600

Silk; compound weave

Museum Appropriation Fund 28.008

This extraordinary example of Ottoman Turkish weaving makes up a vestment used in the Eastern Orthodox church. The dalmatic features the figure of Christ Pantocrator (Christ the Redeemer), surrounded by symbols of the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and a cross with an abbreviated inscription meaning "Jesus Christ the Victor." It is one of several surviving examples of Christian imagery woven in Turkey specifically for use by the Orthodox church, the religion of the Byzantine Empire, which was governed for centuries from Constantinople (modern Istanbul). When Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, its new Muslim rulers allowed the practice of the Orthodox religion to continue, and the Patriarch of the church in Istanbul was re-established.



Japanese

*Altar cloth (uchishiki)*, 1800s

Silk; tapestry weave

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.367

The cloth called the uchishiki ornaments Buddhist household altars as well as the altar tables of temples. It represents the straw or cloth mat that the Buddha sat upon while teaching. The beautiful fabric used for the face of an uchishiki is often backed with a coarse white cloth. The white side is displayed during the period of mourning following the death of a family member. Many Japanese practice Buddhism, which came to Japan in the 6th century, in addition to the more ancient indigenous Shinto religion. Homes often contain both a Shinto shrine and a Buddhist altar.



# RISD MUSEUM

Japanese

*Altar cloth (uchishiki)*, 1800s

Silk, metallic yarn; embroidery

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.366

The cloth called the uchishiki ornaments Buddhist household altars as well as the altar tables of temples. It represents the straw or cloth mat that the Buddha sat upon while teaching. The beautiful fabric used for the face of an uchishiki is often backed with a coarse white cloth. The white side is displayed during the period of mourning following the death of a family member. Many Japanese practice Buddhism, which came to Japan in the 6th century, in addition to the more ancient indigenous Shinto religion. Homes often contain both a Shinto shrine and a Buddhist altar.

Japanese

*Buddhist priest's robe (kesa)*, 1800s

Silk, gilt paper; compound weave

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.103

Buddhism and its tradition of vestments originated in India and eventually reached Japan through Central Asia, China, and Korea. The main vestment, called kesa in Japanese, is usually a rectangular patchwork made of many pieces sewn together in a columnar configuration, symbolic of a monk's poverty. The patchwork format eventually came to use luxury textiles, which a donor may have given to a monastery to acquire spiritual merit or to commemorate a loved one.

Chinese

*Buddhist priest's robe (kesa)*, 1700s

Silk; tapestry weave

Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.273

This Buddhist priest's robe is of the same layout as the Japanese example on view (acc. no. 46.103) and stems from the same tradition; however, the Chinese versions often have triangular sections added, which make the cloth drape more gracefully over the monk's arm. Here, these sections have been removed, as indicated by the seam and break in the border pattern on the right side.



# RISD MUSEUM

The use of lanterns in some of the squares may indicate that this robe was used in the annual Lantern Festival, held on the fifteenth day of the first month of the lunar calendar.

Chinese

*Daoist priest's robe, 1800s*

Silk, metallic yarn, tapestry weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.242

Of the several kinds of Daoist priest's vestments, this poncho-style robe is considered the most formal. It is worn by the highest-ranking priest during one particular category of ritual, those of "going out." Only in these observances is the priest seen by the public, and this voluminous robe conceals secret ritual movements while simultaneously revealing the priest's power and status. The complex iconography includes the Daoist cosmos within and around the large medallion on the upper back, and additional motifs and figures related to Buddhist and Confucian beliefs.



Chinese

*Altar frontal, 1800s*

Silk; tapestry weave, painted details

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.226

In imperial China, household altars often reflected a combination of religious beliefs, such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. This decorative hanging for the front of an altar table depicts a white elephant – an important figure in the story of the birth of the Buddha – with traditional Chinese symbols for good fortune, such as the two bats, one carrying a ruyi sceptre, the other a rhinoceros horn. In addition, the fabric used to bind the edges of the hanging shows objects that are traditionally the attributes of the Eight Immortals of Daoism.



# RISD MUSEUM

Indonesian; Balinese  
*Shoulder cloth (slendang)*, 1800s  
Cotton; double ikat (geringsing)  
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.469

This shoulder cloth is patterned by tie-dyeing both the warp (vertical) and weft (horizontal) yarns before weaving the cloth; a technique known as double ikat. In Indonesia, double-ikat cloth (geringsing), is made only in the village of Tenganan Pageringsingan on the island of Bali. It is used, however, throughout Bali, particularly in the life-cycle rituals and ceremonies that characterize the combination of Hindu and indigenous animist religious beliefs of the Balinese. Lengths of fabric are worn by participants in rituals or draped in temples or around the bride and groom at weddings, but even fragments of the cloth have a place in many rituals.

