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Razzle-Dazzle: The Language of Ornament in Asian Costume and Textiles,
June 16, 2006-October 15, 2006

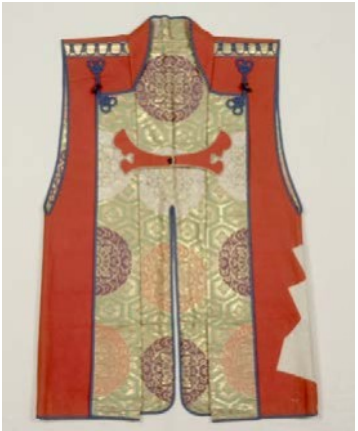
Shells, mirrors, beads, seeds, metal disks, coins, sequins, feathers; these are only some of the items that have been used to make clothing and textiles jingle, sparkle, and jiggle. Throughout time, all over the world, in every society, humans have embellished their clothing in ways that signal status and religion or serve as talismanic, flirtatious, or protective charms. These days, many Westerners have lost touch with the symbolic power of ornament applied to apparel, dismissing such adornment as superficial, artificial, and even disingenuous. The group of objects in this exhibition spanning the Asian world reminds viewers of the pleasure and meaning that such materials may convey.

The English word "ornament" derives from the Latin ornare, meaning "to equip, get ready, or fit out." Some have pushed this definition one step further, suggesting that the term also expresses completion. Although not a structural necessity, ornament makes an object whole. How differently might we look upon certain articles in this gallery if they did not include gold for its inherent wealth and homage to hierarchy, purity, and indestructibility; silver, metal, and sequins for their associations with prosperity and protection; mirrors for their power to ward off malevolence; beads and seeds for their correlations with fortune, resiliency, and fertility; and feathers for their regal connotations?

Lacking such accoutrements, these textiles would take on another function, causing the wearer to behave in another fashion and the beholders to interpret the behavior in other ways. The thread of meaning would dissolve. From a kingfisher-feather-covered Chinese woman's wedding headdress to an Ottoman textile encrusted with sequins and gold thread, this group of costumes and textiles creates an aura of razzle-dazzle that confuses the spirits, intoxicates the beholder, and empowers the possessor.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Japanese
Man's campaign coat (jimbaori), 1800s
Wool, silk, metallic-wrapped yarn; compound weave, plain weave with appliqué
Gift of Mrs. John R. Bartlett 07.204



The *jimbaori* coat, based on a European prototype, originated in the 16th century as a garment to be worn by samurai over their armor. By the 19th century, when peacetime led to a more administrative role for samurai, the jimbaori developed into a symbol of status and power, as well as a statement of personal aesthetics and beliefs.

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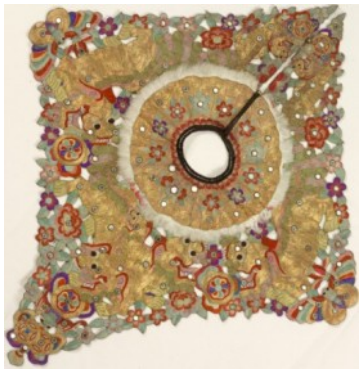
The red wool in this coat and also the gold-wrapped yarn have strong connotations of vigor and luxury. This fabric, called *rasha*, was imported from Europe and was especially prized for the cochineal-dyed red color, which was impossible to obtain from Japanese dyestuffs. The design on the back of the coat showing a paper streamer (*gohei*) and a length of rope (*shimenawa*)—both important aspects of Shinto religion rituals—proclaims the owner's spiritual and political values.

Attributed to; Mandaya; Philippine
Woman's jacket, 1800s
Abaca fiber, bast fiber, mother-of-pearl disk, metal sequin; plain weave with embroidery and appliqué
Gift of Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf 15.235

Symbolic of the power of lightning (*kilat*), the mother-of-pearl disks (*kalati*) prominent on this jacket form a defensive shield of sparkling light. The strength of this shell, which can endure grinding, polishing, and drilling, raises it to a level of honor in a region that has used shells as items of decoration and monetary value since Neolithic times.

The abaca-fiber textile studded with shells, disks, and metal sequins also pays tribute to community balance. Women weave the soft material, while men forge the disks. These jackets thus represent the integration of male and female roles and harmony in the world.

Chinese
Child's ceremonial collar, late 1800s - early 1900s
Silk, cotton, metallic-wrapped yarn, mirror, brass, fur; plain weave with embroidery and mirror work, damask weave
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 17.510



Based upon the shape of early Central Asian garments, detachable collars such as this one have enjoyed great popularity in China since the mid-17th century. As ornament for women's ensembles, they add a layer lavish whimsy with their intricate, cut-out patterns and elaborate embroidery. In this child-sized example, mirrors augment the celebratory and auspicious imagery of tigers, wish-granting fairy bats, and butterflies. As children were deemed more susceptible to harmful supernatural phenomena, it is likely that the mirrors fulfill a protective role.

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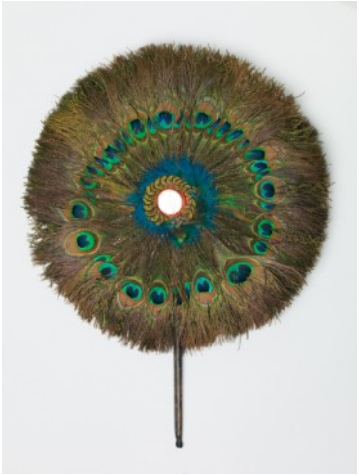
Indian
Fan, 1800s
Wood, peacock feather, mirror
Museum Collection 1989.044.8



Indigenous to Southeast Asia, peafowl have long been regarded as symbols of good fortune and spiritual purity. In addition to their regal beauty, their mystique derives in part from the legend that they can swallow poison without being hurt and thus can eradicate evil. Further, animal materials that retain their brilliant color after death are considered to possess extraordinary life force that brings luck and eminence to the possessor.

Peacock-feather fans with mirror centers often appear in Buddhist art as an attribute of the deities who attend the Buddha. They are also used ritually to cool statues of deities during the sweltering Indian summer days.

Indian; Naga
Man's shawl, 1800s
Cotton, cowrie shell; plain weave with supplementary weft patterning and appliqué
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 1990.010

Similar to the Philippine jacket in this gallery, the shawl shows the communal value of combined male/female efforts in ceremonial garment production. The woman weaves the fabric, and the man, who will wear the shawl that honors his martial accomplishments, attaches the cowrie shells to the finished textile. These shells, arranged in circles that symbolize the moon, embody the fertility and prosperity that the owner wishes to bring to his community. He is allowed to add more shells, in the shape of circles or a human figure, once he has participated successfully in a headhunting raid or when he has hosted a feast of merit, providing food for the entire village.

Nuristani; Kohistani; Pakistani; Afghan
Dress (jumlo), mid 1900s
Cotton, silk, glass bead, metal, coin, mother of pearl, plastic; plain weave with embroidery, beadwork, and appliqué
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 1993.040

The plethora of baubles, embroidery, and swinging skirt gores on this distinctive dress, (*jumlo*) from Afghanistan or Pakistan makes it a

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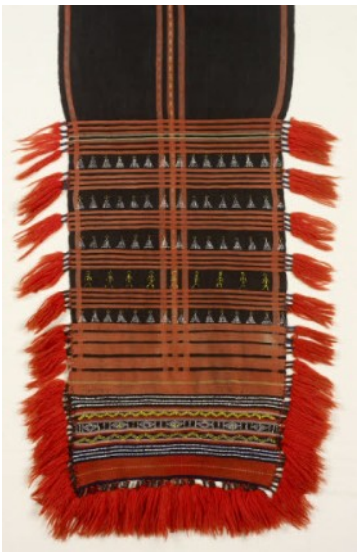
feast for the eyes and ears. The tinkling sound made by the dangling coins was meant to scare evil spirits away; the other shiny elements, together with the intricacy of the embroidery around the neck and sleeves, would act as further security for the wearer. Although these garments are no longer made, some later examples also include bottle tops, ring pulls from soda cans, and bits of zippers, all valued for the flashing light they reflected that would avert the evil eye.

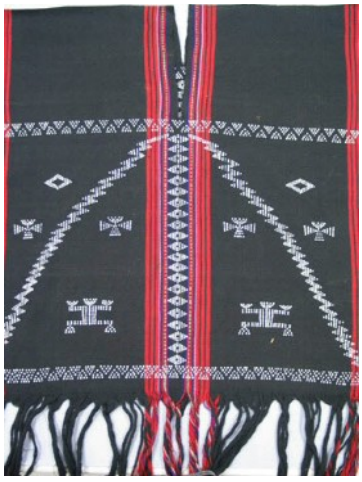
Vietnamese; Co-Tu
Man's loincloth, ca. 1960
Cotton, acrylic, glass beads; plain weave with supplementary weft patterning and beadwork
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2001.3.13



Throughout Southeast Asia beads appear on garments and textiles as symbols of wealth and ritual. Before the importation of the glass variety seen here, beads were made from indigenous materials of clay, shell, stone, and seed and were traded for their monetary value and their associations with the supernatural world.

In Vietnam the quantity of beads adorning a garment is a clear marker of the wearer's personal wealth, both material and spiritual. The durable, hard-wearing characteristics of the beads are believed to reinforce the strength of the wearer, protecting him/her against unseen danger. Here, the fringe on both garments, but especially on the loincloth, also flirtatiously calls attention to the man's body.

Ta Oi; Vietnamese
Woman's tunic, ca. 1960
Cotton, glass beads; plain weave with bead work
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2001.3.14



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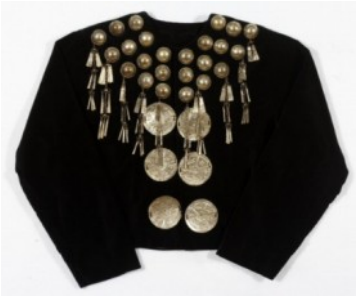
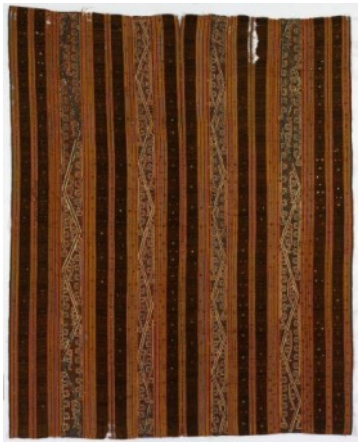


Burmese; Jinghpaw
Woman's jacket (soi shakap na palawng chang), 1950-ca. 1995
Cotton, silver disks and tassels; velvet with appliqué
Edgar J. Lownes Fund 2004.53.3

Although these dramatic silver disks (*soi*) are now considered an identifying feature in the dress of all Kachin men and women, originally they were made by Shan blacksmiths and worn by women in only one particular area of the Kachin state. The gleaming, jingling disks and pendants today serve as a point of regional pride and as an illustration of personal wealth. An expression of generic Kachin traditional dress, the jacket today would be worn with a tall hat, a wrapped skirt (often red), and lacquered cane hoops around the waist. The woman is not the only one to enjoy the privilege of donning soi. As a man's accessory, the bag, too, uses meaningful ornament to beautify, as well as to call for regional cohesion and political power.



Indonesian; Kaur
Woman's hip wrapper (tapis), 1800s
Cotton, silk, mica; plain weave, ikat with embroidery and mirrorwork
Edgar J. Lownes Fund 2004.53.6

An unmarried Kaur woman would have made a hip wrapper such as this one to wear as festival dress with a jacket similarly ornamented with mirrors, embroidery, and cowrie shells. Because a young woman might spend a long while working on these garments, a suitor's enquiries into her eligibility often would take the form of asking if she had yet finished her tapis. Once completed, the garments signaled her readiness for marriage.

It is believed that the use of mirrors in Indonesia came through trade with India. Kaur tapis stand out for their incorporation of golden-colored mirrors (*cermuk*), which were often purchased with monies obtained from the pepper trade. In many Southeast Asian cultures the donning of foreign, and therefore precious, material imbues the wearer with magical qualities.

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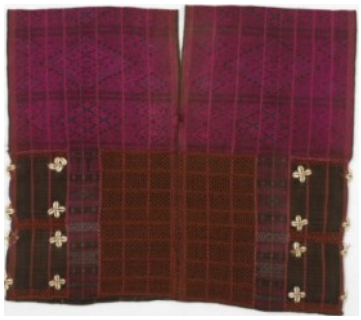
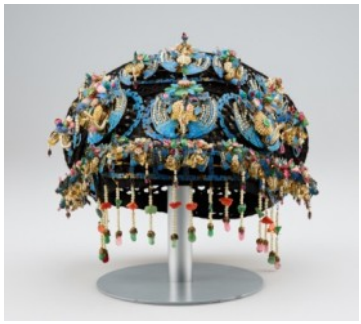


Burmese; Laytu
Woman's tunic (khran in), 1950-ca. 1995
Cotton, silk, glass beads, cowrie shell; plain weave with supplementry weft patterning, beadwork, and appliqué
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2005.4.9

Because of their strong associations with fertility and power, cowrie shells appear on textiles made in areas as far from the ocean as Tibet. Native to the waters around the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, these shells have been traded and used as currency throughout Asia and into West Africa, carried across the Red Sea by Arab merchants.

The red beads on this jacket accentuate further the cowries' reference to fecundity. In many cultures red is the color of life. This hue in a bead, itself a hard substance that expresses energy and vitality, imbues the wearer with good luck and a rich life.



Chinese; Manchu
Wedding Headdress (dianzi), mid-to late 1800s
Silk, wire, kingfisher feathers, pearls, gems; interwoven satin-covered wire with appliqué
Gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. 37.125A

Thoughts of happiness and prosperity ring out at the sight of this headdress covered with quivering pearls, gems, and bright-blue kingfisher feathers. Until the early 20th century, these feathers were reserved for court use in China—for hair ornaments, headdresses, and, most extravagantly, the tapestries and bedspreads of a royal bedchamber. Sadly, overuse of such precious material led to the extinction of the Eurasian kingfisher in China by the 1930s.

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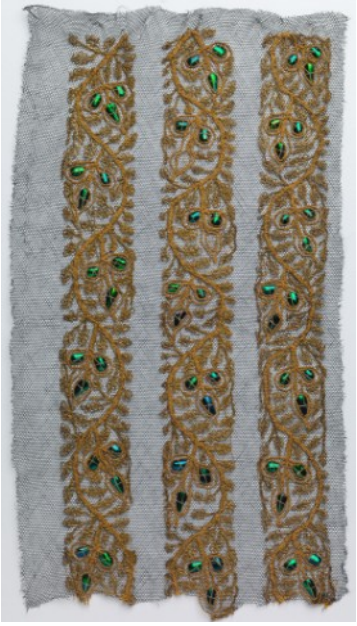
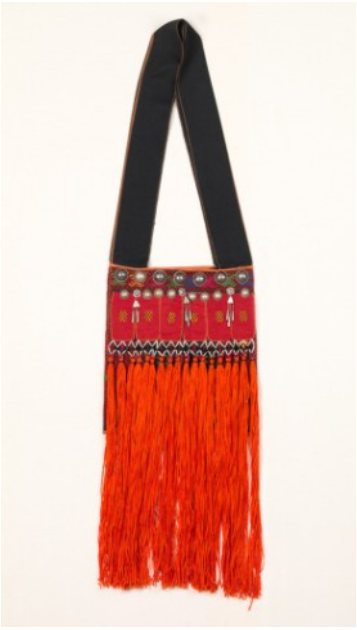
Indian
Fabric trim, 1800s
Cotton, metallic-wrapped yarn, beetle wing; machine net with embroidery and appliqué
Gift of Mrs. Albert H. Miller 41.016



Iridescent, shimmering beetle wings have been used throughout the world to adorn textiles and clothing. One of the oldest instances is found in a Japanese Buddhist shrine dating to 650 AD. In 19th-century India and Burma, as much as 25,000 pounds of these wings per season were harvested for export to faraway places, including England and France, where a ballgown festooned with beetle wings, butterflies, and mother-of-pearl would have created quite a sensation. Compared to such an example, the trim here would have been part of a more modest display that nonetheless retains hints of otherworldly beauty and majesty.

Burmese; Kachin; Shan
Man's bag (n'hpye), late 1800s - early 1900s
Cotton, wool, seed, silver disks, tassels; plain weave with supplementary weft patterning and appliqué
Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.227



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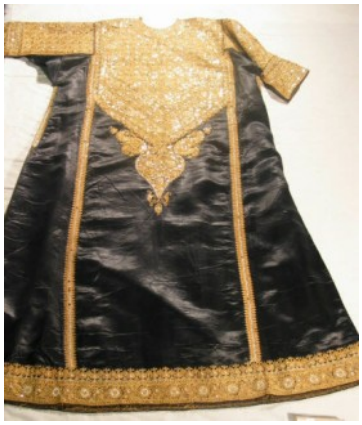
Chinese
Woman's overcoat, 1800s
Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn, brass stud; compound weave, velvet with appliqué
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.215

This coat, designed to be worn over a woman's court robes, poses a bit of a puzzle, primarily because of its applied ornament: the brass

studs garnishing the edges and the fringe at the hem. The tasseled trim is not seen in images of woman during this era, but still might have served to lengthen the coat as well as to add a hint of flirtation in its sway. Brass studs such as these appear on suits of ceremonial armor worn by high-ranking individuals in the imperial circle, but do not normally adorn women's attire. Perhaps a martial reference was intended to honor the role of this court lady's husband. Only two other coats similar to this one are known, both located in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Indian
Woman's tunic, mid 1800s
Silk, sequin, metallic-wrapped yarn; satin weave with embroidery and appliqué
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.367

In India this type of work with gold-wrapped yarn and gold sequins is called zardozi, from the Persian word for gold (*zar*). Such delicate yet eye-catching work was brought to new heights in the 17th century by Mughal (Muslim) emperors who used to great political and social advantage the belief that gold channeled divine energy via its constantly active surfaces. By pondering the gold's precious luminosity, onlookers were able to come closer to an image of yearned-for paradise.

Turkish
Altar cloth, 1800s
Wool, silk, metallic-wrapped yarn, metal sequin, cotton; twill weave with embroidery and appliqué, pieced
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.555

Used as adornment for solar deities in the ancient Persian Gulf, gold embellishment was also adopted in early history for personal use by royalty and their attendants across the Mediterranean world. A sign of the divine and the regal, as well as an indication of wealth and prosperity, this light-reflecting and glowing material has proved a commanding tool of authority in both religious and secular contexts.

In the jacket here, the gold yarn on a velvet ground is fashionable, but also thoughtfully placed as a protective device at all openings, where the wearer is most vulnerable. The allover decoration of the adjacent altar cloth fixes the onlooker's thoughts on the idea of brilliant splendor radiating from on high.

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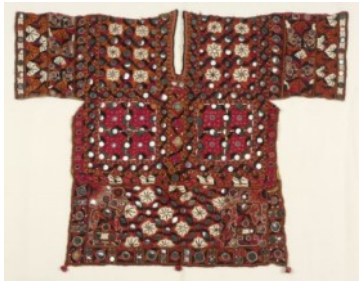
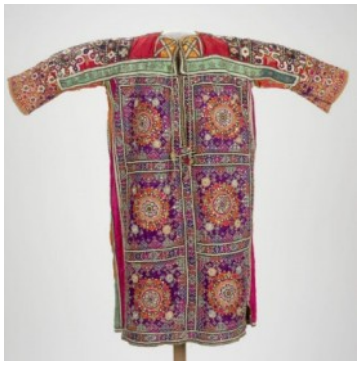
Tibetan
Banner or temple hanging, 1800s
Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn, mirror, metal; satin weave with embroidery and appliqué
Gift of the Lisle Estate 67.472B

The lively imagery of this banner designed to hang in a temple is suitably framed by brass-encased mirrors. Likely meant to reflect the light from softly glowing candles, the dancing mirrors would have accentuated the movement of the central scene, making the iconography more potent and the atmosphere richer.



Gujarati; Sindhi people
Woman's blouse front (kanjari or choli), 1800s
Silk, mirror; plain weave with embroidery and mirror work
Gift of Mrs. James Fowle 68.116.2

The glass mirror work (*shisha*) so thickly scattered across this blouse front has its origins in the use as ornament of mica bits found in the Sindh Desert. Together with the dense pakka embroidery of flowers, peacocks, and singing and dancing figures, the glistening mirrors beckon good fortune, fertility, and the benefits of invigorating light and water. Like the Pakistani tunic left, this piece also includes mirrors to repel the dangerous glance of the evil eye. Because the first look was presumed to be the most harmful, any material that could catch the initial gaze would prevent the wearer from receiving the majority of negative energy.



Pakistani; Lohana
Woman's tunic (guj or chola), late 1800s - early 1900s
Cotton, silk, metallic-wrapped yarn, mirror, plastic and metal sequin, bead; plain weave with embroidery, mirror work, appliqué
Gift of Mrs. Lorraine Howes 78.148

Stiff and heavily encrusted with colorful embroidery, mirrors, and sequins, this tunic was first worn as a wedding garment and was thereafter donned to indicate the wearer's married status. It is easy to see how the pattern and various flashing trims serve to attract positive attention in their festive, ebullient display. At the same time, they deflect negative spells by providing no point of rest for the evil eye. The padded areas on either side of the neckline originally contained aromatics and also functioned as protective devices.

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Turkish
Woman's jacket, ca. 1910
Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn; velvet with embroidery
Gift of F. F. Olney 85.072A

Used as adornment for solar deities in the ancient Persian Gulf, gold embellishment was also adopted in early history for personal use by royalty and their attendants across the Mediterranean world. A sign of the divine and the regal, as well as an indication of wealth and prosperity, this light-reflecting and glowing material has proved a commanding tool of authority in both religious and secular contexts.

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