

Asian Textiles and the Grammar of Ornament: Design in the Victorian Age,
November 16, 2007-August 3, 2008

This exhibition mines the Museum's permanent collection of Asian textiles from the perspective of the 19th-century British designer and educator, Owen Jones (1809–74), author of *The Grammar of Ornament* (London: 1856). On view are textiles whose patterns are paired with corresponding plates from his publication. His assessment of decorative "language" was compiled as a pattern book for all of the applied arts from architecture to textiles. His sources are the ornamental traditions from cultures across the globe, including India, Persia, Egypt, and China. Critical to his undertaking was London's Great Exposition of 1851, the setting in which the technology and manufacturing processes of the Industrial Revolution were displayed for all to see. The huge state-of-the-art glass-and-iron Crystal Palace constructed in Hyde Park for the event was the architectural stage upon which nations from around the world—but most importantly, England—displayed their accomplishments. Among the great number of Western visitors to the show, a vast majority were viewing the applied arts of other cultures for the very first time.

The single most powerful influence on the applied arts during the 19th century was the reexamining of design education and practice. Reform therein was motivated by what some saw as the negative side of the Industrial Revolution. In challenge to the popular notion that new, fast, and cheap were the progressive ideals of a modern society, Jones and others started to rethink the effect this was having on design. The reform movement gave birth to the first teaching collection at The South Kensington Museum, London, founded in 1852 and now called The Victoria and Albert Museum. Setting a precedent, on several days of the week the South Kensington Museum offered free admission to the public, including those engaged in industrial trades such as ceramics, metalwork, and textile manufacturing.

Fittingly, Rhode Island School of Design (established 1877) was founded with a similar sentiment, as the original bylaws of the School state: that the "principles of art [be applied] to the requirements of trade and manufacture." Many of the objects on display here are gifts from Miss Lucy Truman Aldrich, one of the Museum's most prolific collectors, who traveled extensively through Asia and for whom this gallery is named. She and other benefactors of RISD, including its founders, have created a lasting testament to the School's original and continuing mission to deliver innovative design education.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Turkish

Fragment of small patterned Holbein carpet, 1500s

Wool; knotted pile, symmetrical knot

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 12.008

This Classical carpet is known as a Holbein-style carpet, referring to the 16th-century German artist Hans Holbein the Younger, who frequently portrayed this type of rug in his paintings. The octagonal interlaced medallions identify the type. In Europe imported carpets from Anatolia were immensely popular, although very costly. The vogue in the West was to drape the carpet over a table or chest, it being far too valuable to walk upon.

Holbein carpets are of a different knotting technique than Persian carpets (see example 2002.33A on display), and the technique of the former lends itself to the geometric interlacing that exemplifies the style.

Mosaics found on walls and pavements in houses at Cairo were the source for this page of patterns from the Grammar of Ornament.

Indian; Parsi? Parsee?

Blouse, 1800s

Silk

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates 13.2311



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Burmese

Woman's court hip wrapper (byant htamein), mid 1900s
Silk, cotton, metallic thread; tapestry weave, plain weave
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2002.11.1

In the original 1856 printing of *The Grammar of Ornament*, Jones classifies the motifs on this plate as "Hindoo." The sources from which Jones quotes – a Burmese glass shrine and standard, and elements from the famous Ajanta caves wall paintings in western India, the latter Buddhist in nature – were exhibited at the Crystal Palace in 1851 and must have impressed him with their coloration as well as patterning.

The Burmese hip wrapper shown here exhibits a sparkling combination of hues, accented by metallic-thread detailing. When compared to the Burmese examples on Jones's plate, it points to an overriding Burmese court aesthetic. The hip wrapper's silk tapestry-weave construction and motifs of waves and clouds is likely derived from those perfected by the neighboring Chinese, an interesting note to the topic of Victorian borrowings.



Persian

Carpet Fragment, 1600s
Wool; knotted cut pile
Gift of John Hegnauer 2002.33A

Under the Safavids, the Persian city of Isfahan, where this carpet was produced, was one of the largest Eastern trade centers. Isfahan was particularly well known for the manufacture of high-quality carpets for both local consumption and European export. Located along the Silk Road at a point where it is crossed by an important north-south trade route, the Persian proverb *Esfahān nesf-e jahān ast* ("Isfahan is half of the world") aptly describes this ancient city in which the riches and citizens of many nations came together. Accordingly, this carpet's imagery reflects Far Eastern traditions, evidenced in the visual device known as cloud bands (see the Chinese coat, acc. no. 35.391, also on display), as well as the classically Persian shown in the finely rendered palmettes, flowers, and scrolling vines.



The cross-cultural use of ornament is further illustrated in plate XXXIV from the *Grammar of Ornament*. Regarding this plate, Owen Jones wrote: "The exquisite ornaments on Plate XXXIV... will give a perfect idea of the Arabian decorative art. Where it not for the introduction of flowers, which rather destroy the unity of the style, and which

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betray a Persian influence, it would be impossible to find a better specimen of Arabian ornament. As it is, however, it is a very perfect lesson both in form and colour."

Comparing the plate to the Isfahan carpet, notice the carpet's scrolling vines that echo the interlacing, as well as the similar floral motifs on both.

Chinese; Qing

Woman's imperial Manchu coat (Ch'i-Fu), ca. 1873

Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn; gauze weave, embroidered
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.391

Jones references textile motifs in this plate, in particular the patterns numbered 7, 8, and 11, which may each be seen as direct translations of the elements in the imperial court robe on view. The motifs representing the universal ocean (8) and earth (11), isolated on the plate, work together in the coat to underscore the place of the wearer, in this case an empress, at the axis of the world. The nine dragons and the color yellow also distinguish the coat as being made for a member of the imperial Manchu family.

Note the shared use of cloud motifs in the Burmese hip wrapper on view in this gallery and in this coat, here identifiable as blue forms symbolizing the heavens. Centuries before Jones's interest in Asian design elements, the cloud motif traveled westward along the Silk Road, as seen in the rug fragments also exhibited in this gallery. The Silk Road was a land trade route 5000 miles long that connected Near Eastern ports accessible to the Western powers with eastern China, passing through Central Asia.

Chinese

Woman's informal coat, 1800s

Silk, metallic yarn; satin damask, embroidered
Gift of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 35.406



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Persian

Woman's jacket, 1800s

Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn, cotton; continuous supplementary weft patterning, printed lining

Museum Appropriation Fund 37.390

Although Jones indicates that many of the patterns on the two plates exhibited here were originally intended for wall and tile decoration, the jackets show that allover (diaper) patterns framing small floral elements is common in Persian design. The cotton linings, however, owe some credit to Indian patterning and printing techniques. The jacket's form may also be seen as representing a crossroads of influence: the sleeves that narrow to a point derive from coats worn by horsemen on the Asian steppes, while the flanged hips show the influence of the expanded skirts of 17th- and 18th-century European women's dress.



Near Eastern; Turkish

Tomb cover fragment, 1700s

Silk; compound satin weave

Museum Works of Art Fund 46.504

Chinese

Blouse (choli), late 1800s

Silk; satin weave, embroidered

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.278

The motifs of birds and the deep red coloring of this blouse mimic designs of plate L of the Indian Ornament section in the *Grammar of Ornament*. For these plates Jones observed textiles and embroideries presented in the Indian displays of the 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition in London. This blouse, in comparison to the other piece in this case, expresses a more pronounced Indian aesthetic catering specifically to the Parsi market.

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Indian; Gujarati
Woman's skirt, 1800s
Silk; satin weave, embroidered
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.341

Jones likely spent considerable time at the India exhibit in Crystal Palace, as he notes that the ornament from the plate shown here were taken directly from Indian metalwork. He also copied patterns and colors from the embroidered and woven fabrics and vase painting that comprised the Indian collection. Those objects that were on view were placed in the South Kensington Museum promptly following the end of the Great Exhibition.



Persian; Indian; Mughal?
Sash (patka), first half 1700s
Silk and gold-wrapped thread compound weave; continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft patterning
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.529

The visual relationship is readily apparent between the floral sprays gracing this Mughal sash and those depicted on Jones's plate, taken from a Persian manufacturer's pattern book at the South Kensington Museum, London. Having spent time in Persia's courts, the first Muslim conquerors brought with them to India a preference for what Jones describes as the "great simplicity and ingenuity displayed in the conventional rendering of natural flowers" in Persian art. At the hands of India's master weavers and designers, the floral spray developed over the course of the 19th century into a larger flowering plant motif called a buta (note the Indian skirt on view here); and then, responding to the European market, into the well-known paisley motif, seen as a teardrop-shaped mass of swirling vegetation in the large shawl in this gallery.



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Persian

Tomb cover, early 1700s

Silk; plain weave, supplemental wefts, triple inner warps
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.536

In his book, Owen Jones credits Plate XXXVII to “a portion of the decoration of the tomb of Soliman I [Suleiman the Magnificent] at Constantinople; it is the most perfect specimen of Turkish ornament with which we are acquainted, and nearly approaches the Arabian [aesthetic].” Here, the plate is displayed with a Persian Safavid tomb cover. The green, black, and red bands of inscriptions woven into the textile make reference to Shi'a Islam, the religious sect dominant during the reign of the Safavid dynasty. Originally a Turkish Sufi order – Sufi is a mystical branch of Sunni Islam – the Safavids had changed their Sunni affiliation for Shi'ism around 1399.

The three lines of text translate to: “O Remembrance of the Lion of Repeated Attack! O Husayn!; O God! O Muhammad! O Ali!; Lo! We have thee a signal victory” (trans. by Scott Redford, Sackler Museum, Harvard University). This may imply that the cloth was used for the burial of a man of high status who had been killed in battle.



William E. Orme, English

The Crystal Palace (commemorative textile length), ca. 1851

Cotton; plain weave, roller printed, glazed
Gift of Mrs. Constance Wharton Smith 58.165.44

The design is based on the frontispiece of John Tallis's three-volume work on the Crystal Palace (published 1852), which housed London's Great Exhibition of 1851, the first of the 19th century's huge international expositions. This commemorative textile length extols Britain's dominance in its depiction of the spectacular iron-and-glass building by Joseph Paxton being visited by people from far and wide. The Industrial Revolution had begun in England during the 18th century, and the 19th century saw unprecedented growth in technology and science, affecting every level of society. England's raw cotton was imported from its colony of India, then spun, woven, and printed in Manchester, England, from which it was sent to market via the new transportation modes of the railway and steamship.



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Chinese

Blouse (choli), 1800s

Silk; satin weave, embroidered

Gift of the Estate of William E. Brigham 63.011.138

The satin-ground fabric and the embroidery are Chinese in origin, although it was produced for the Parsi market in western India. As illustrated in the example from the Grammar of Ornament plate, the colors and botanicals are similar to conventional renderings of Chinese flowers.



Indian

Shawl, 1835-1840

Goat fleece; double-interlocked twill tapestry weave with embroidery

Gift of Mrs. E. M. Smith and Mrs. Peter McBean 78.192.2

This shawl was the inspiration behind the current installation. India's reputation for producing textiles of the finest quality, from printed cottons to twill tapestry woolen shawls from Kashmir, created a demand for luxury fabrics made for export to Europe, Japan, America, Persia, and China. Design for export catered to the taste of a given market. This shawl illustrates the Indian mastery of layered pattern derived from many cultures that appealed directly to Victorian concepts of design. Owen Jones offered the highest praise to the artisans of India, citing their work as an example of "so much unity of design, so much skill and judgment in the application, with so much of elegance and refinement in the execution."



In addition to the quintessentially Indian *buta* (paisley) motif, the vegetation found along the Nile – the lotus, papyrus, palm branches – and even Nile boats inspired many of the unusual and colorful elements of this shawl's design. Egyptian motifs comprise a large percentage of *The Grammar of Ornament*. Additionally, Jones found elements of architecture such as cornices and curvilinear patterns from ceilings of tombs to add to his source book for design.

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Chinese; Qing

Imperial Manchu coat, 1800s

Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn; satin weave, embroidered

Gift of Mrs. Barbara Deering Danielson 82.308.16

In Buddhist culture, the swastika, a term derived from Sanskrit denoting good luck, is considered an auspicious charm for the wearer. The symbol's prominent place on this robe indicates that the coat would have been worn on a happy occasion.



Persian

Woman's jacket, 1800s

Silk, metallic-wrapped yarn, cotton; continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft patterning, printed lining

Museum Collection S85.048

Although Jones indicates that many of the patterns on the two plates exhibited here were originally intended for wall and tile decoration, the jackets show that all-over (diaper) patterns framing small floral elements is common in Persian design. The cotton linings, however, owe some credit to Indian patterning and printing techniques. The jacket's form may also be seen as representing a crossroads of influence: the sleeves that narrow to a point derive from coats worn by horsemen on the Asian steppes, while the flanged hips show the influence of the expanded skirts of 17th- and 18th-century European women's dress.

