

WORLD TEXTILES

A CONCISE HISTORY

Mary Schoeser



Thames & Hudson **world of art**

Mary Schoeser

World Textiles

A Concise History

210 illustrations, 106 in colour



Thames & Hudson world of art

To Terry, who forgives my round-the-clock writing

1. (previous page) 18th-century embroidered velvet Koran folder

Any copy of this book issued by the publisher as a paperback is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including these words being imposed on a subsequent purchaser.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2003 by
Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX
www.thamesandhudson.com

© 2003 Thames & Hudson Ltd, London

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-500-20369-5

Printed and bound in Singapore by C. S. Graphics

Contents

7	Introduction
10	Chapter 1 Prehistoric Materials and Techniques
28	Chapter 2 The Dye and Loom Age <i>c.</i> 3000–400 BC
50	Chapter 3 Trade and Trends 750 BC to AD 600
74	Chapter 4 Church and State AD 600–1500
90	Chapter 5 Western Ideas and Styles Dispersed 1300–1900
112	Chapter 6 Oriental Influences 1450–1900
134	Chapter 7 Surface Patterning from Indigo to Ikat 600–1900
156	Chapter 8 The Importance of Cotton and Linen 1500–1950
176	Chapter 9 New Technology 1600–2000
194	Chapter 10 The Art of Textiles 1850–Today
214	Glossary
	Bibliography
	Acknowledgments for Illustrations
	Geographical Index
	Subject Index
	Acknowledgments

Mary Schoeser is a recognized authority on the history of textiles. She has advised organizations such as English Heritage, the National Trust, Liberty of London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and is currently a research fellow at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, London. Her publications cover the full range of textile history, from the textile entries in *Materials and Techniques in the Decorative Arts: An Illustrated Dictionary* (2002) to a survey of contemporary work in *International Textile Design* (1995).

Thames & Hudson world of art

This famous series provides the widest available range of illustrated books on art in all its aspects.

If you would like to receive a complete list of titles in print please write to:

THAMES & HUDSON
181A High Holborn
London WC1V 7QX

In the United States please write to:

THAMES & HUDSON INC.
500 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10110

Printed in Singapore



Mary Schoeser

World Textiles

A Concise History

210 illustrations, 106 in colour



Thames & Hudson world of art

To Terry, who forgives my round-the-clock writing

1. (previous page) 18th-century embroidered velvet Koran folder

Any copy of this book issued by the publisher as a paperback is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including these words being imposed on a subsequent purchaser.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2003 by
Thames & Hudson Ltd, 181A High Holborn, London WC1V 7QX
www.thamesandhudson.com

© 2003 Thames & Hudson Ltd, London

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-500-20369-5

Printed and bound in Singapore by C. S. Graphics

Contents

7	Introduction
10	Chapter 1 Prehistoric Materials and Techniques
28	Chapter 2 The Dye and Loom Age <i>c.</i> 3000–400 BC
50	Chapter 3 Trade and Trends 750 BC to AD 600
74	Chapter 4 Church and State AD 600–1500
90	Chapter 5 Western Ideas and Styles Dispersed 1300–1900
112	Chapter 6 Oriental Influences 1450–1900
134	Chapter 7 Surface Patterning from Indigo to Ikat 600–1900
156	Chapter 8 The Importance of Cotton and Linen 1500–1950
176	Chapter 9 New Technology 1600–2000
194	Chapter 10 The Art of Textiles 1850–Today
214	Glossary Bibliography Acknowledgments for Illustrations Geographical Index Subject Index Acknowledgments



Introduction

A comparison between prehistoric and present-day textiles demonstrates the lack of logic in a linear history, which takes us from simple to complex, or from plain to patterned. Many of the materials, techniques and forms used in ancient times remain in use today, both as essential aspects of production in many regions of the world and as ingredients in textile arts. Such continuity makes textiles unique among all artifacts. The fact that their making often involves the creation of the 'ingredients' – unlike working with wood or stone – makes them extremely complex and particularly revealing of human ingenuity. It can be argued that as indicators of cultural mechanisms, textiles offer insights into the greatest range of developments, embracing not only technology, agriculture and trade, but also ritual, tribute, language, art and personal identity.

The relationship of textiles to writing is especially significant, not only for the cuneiform-like qualities of many patterns, but also for the parallels between ink on papyrus and pigment on bark cloth. There is, in fact, little difference between the two. Such connections are implied in many textile terms. For example, the Indian full-colour painted and printed 'kalamkari' are so named from the Persian for pen, *kalam*; the wax for Indonesian batiks is delivered by a copper-bowled *tulis*, also meaning pen. The European term for hand-colouring of details on cloth is 'pencilling'. And the Islamic term *tiraz*, originally denoting embroideries, came to encompass all textiles within this culture that carried inscriptions. With or without inscriptions, textiles convey all kinds of 'texts': allegiances are expressed, promises are made (as in today's bank notes, whose value is purely conceptual), memories are preserved, new ideas are proposed. Many anthropological

2. Being both functional and decorative, textiles can be read in many ways. This wallpocket of 1710–30 displays figures representing Faith, Hope and Charity, and the Four Cardinal Virtues as identified by Plato. It has significance for studies of classicism, Christianity, Western concepts of women, and the role of needlework in a young woman's education. Made of plain silk taffeta, silk floss, silver and gilt thread and gold lace and braid, it also documents the fine materials then available in Engadine (Grisons canton, Switzerland), as well as the skills and taste of its maker.

and ethnographical studies of textiles aim at teaching us how to read these cloth languages anew. The 'plot' is provided by the socially meaningful elements; the 'syntax' is the construction, often only revealed by the application of archaeological and conservation analyses. Equally, the most creative textiles of today exploit a vocabulary of fibres, dyes and techniques. Textiles can be prose or poetry, instructive or the most demanding of texts. The ways in which they are used – and reused – add more layers of meaning, all significant indicators of sensitivities that can be traced back at least ten thousand years.

Taking a lead from textiles also engenders a more balanced understanding of the indigenous cultures that never developed the use of bronze and iron (as in Australia), developed iron use alone and comparatively late (as in Africa in about 800 BC), or developed the use of copper followed rapidly by iron (as in the Americas in about AD 100). That said, there *is* a relationship between metallurgical skills and textile-making. As the climate warmed at the end of the last Ice Age (*c.* 7000 BC), the loss of abundant vegetation in certain areas forced communities to redirect observational and manipulatory skills in order to settle and to control and preserve food supplies. These skills were already highly developed through centuries of experience with textile materials and techniques, and their contribution to agriculture and animal husbandry can be readily deduced, not merely in the use of cordage and bands for ploughs and reins, but, more significantly, in the way such concepts were expressed: 'haft', for example, means not only 'to bind' and 'handle', but also to habituate animals to a new pasture. In light of all this, could not the same skills have contributed to the development of metallurgy? Certainly metallurgy and textile techniques later become closely related through their joint applications in machine-building and as a result of the lead taken in organic chemistry by first dye, and then fibre, sciences.

The aim of this book is not to give a country-by-country account of textiles (although a guide to geographical and cultural groupings can be found in the Geographical Index), but to sketch in the themes discussed above to explore the worldwide connections and influences that have made textiles global commodities for centuries. This focus means that the important and generally interconnected topics of materials, methods, trade, technology and social structures are not constantly cross-referred. Instead, each of these subjects is

twice highlighted in the following ten chapters to suggest their continued pertinence. In building a doorway to this subject, I make no apologies for this personal choice – based both on what I know and on what I know to be less thoroughly charted – and for making only passing reference to what will be readily accessible to readers elsewhere. Thus, fashion and other means of consumption of textiles, gender issues, aesthetic characteristics and individuals do not figure prominently here. In addition, since academic and popular publications on this subject were until recently dominated by European and North American publishers, source material must be understood to be Western in bias, even when the topic is non-Western. Finally, in a survey such as this the repetitive citation of exceptions to the rule was felt to be unwieldy, and it is easier to note at the outset that the statements that follow almost always have a caveat or two. This reflects the richness and diversity of textiles, a subject so vast that there remain numerous avenues to be explored, some of which are suggested in the following pages.

Chapter 1: Prehistoric Materials and Techniques

The first needles are associated with the European Gravettian culture (26,000–20,000 BC) and its roughly contemporary counterpart, the Eastern Gravettian, which includes all mammoth-hunting peoples of eastern Europe and Russia. Needles allowed the joining of skins, and are one of the tools that distinguish the Gravettian from its preceding culture, the Aurignacian (the first Upper Paleolithic culture, which is known to have made pins from polished bone or antler). Together with Gravettian awls and punches, needles – some with relatively fine eyes – also made possible the joining together of numerous found objects such as pierced pebbles, shells, seeds and teeth. Many of these would have been strung on strands as jewellers do today. Others, as in the Grotte des Enfants cave burials in southern France, were placed with such precision across the skull that they must have been fixed to a supporting structure, whether a headband, cap or hairnet. This chapter explores how such supports might have been constructed by considering the basic necessity – thread or cordage – and the range of manipulative techniques common to all cultures. These techniques were known long before pottery and in many cultures continued into modern times as the principal means of creating useful, decorative and symbolic objects.

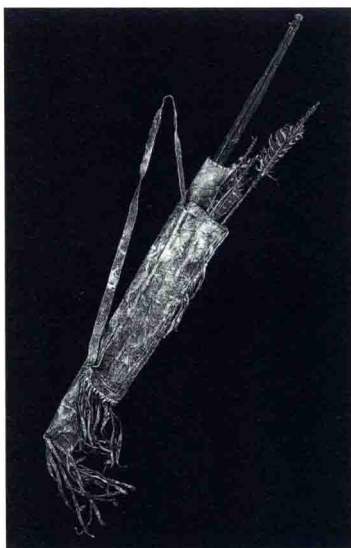
Undoubtedly the first textile art was the creation of threads, yarns and cords, distinguished from one another by their diameters, from fine to thick. Beads made of stone and teeth have been found in La Quina, France, dating to the dawn of the Upper Palaeolithic period (about 38,000 BC), and vines, gut or sinew were probably used in their stringing. Stone implements (from which the combined Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic periods derive the general name ‘the Stone Age’) could also be lashed and bound to wooden shafts with the same materials, although scholars continue to debate the date at which this first occurred. Indeed, the dates of Stone Age objects are continually being reassessed in the light of new finds, more systematic archaeological practices and more precise radiocarbon dating. That said, it is known that Stone Age toolmakers grasped the significance of twisting, which increases strength by diverting part of any tensile load into lateral pressure. Twisted strands wrapped around the held portion of a tool resulted in a better grip, and this feature is maintained in many implements today. Here we meet again

3. Pom-pom and tassel ties, first used thousands of years ago, remain important elements of human and animal tribal trappings; these braided woollen examples, worn by women of Rajasthan (in India) in their hair or at their waists, incorporate valued objects such as cowrie shells and iridescent beetle thoraxes.



4. The importance of twisted cord for tool-making is epitomized by this Plains Indian painted and fringed hide bowcase. Twisted hide binds (or 'hafts') the stone arrow points to wooden shafts (also called 'hafts') and wraps the gripped centre area of the bow.

5. Of all garment types, skirts, loincloths and aprons composed of twisted weft extensions or added-on twisted strands have the longest history. Such a skirt is illustrated on this French Paleolithic 'Venus' figure of about 20,000 bc; actual examples have been found in sites ranging from Denmark (c. 1200 bc) to northern Arizona (AD 1000–1400) and a related form survives in the Polynesian grass skirt.



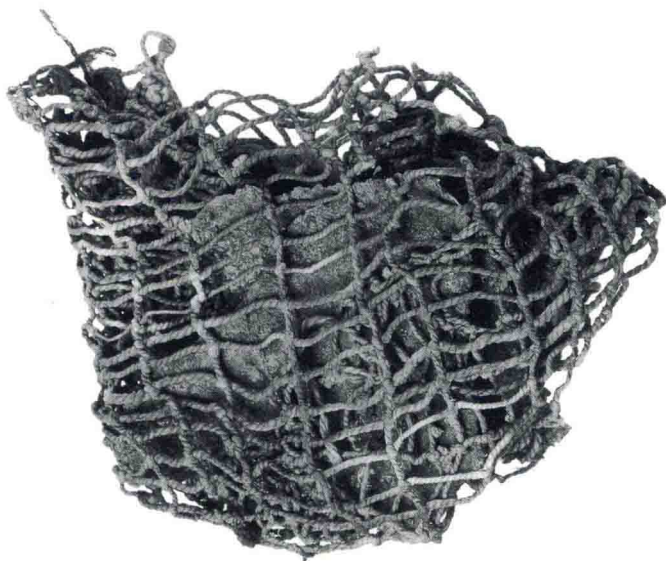
one of many words demonstrating the close relationship between textile techniques and the general development of tools: 'haft', meaning to fasten or attach, as well as meaning the handle itself.

Sinew and gut are often discounted as true fibres, but two types of evidence suggest that these were long ago subjected to the thread-making process of twisting. The first is their documented use by tribal and semi-nomadic peoples around the world; today's Samis (Laplanders) still make fine threads from twisted strands of reindeer sinew. The second is by association with the traditional treatment, especially of gut, for other uses ranging from violin and tennis racket strings to surgical sutures. Until the advent of synthetic fibres in the mid-20th century, the manufacture of catgut – usually the dried and twisted intestines of sheep, but occasionally also of horse and ass – was a thriving industry. Catgut formed the bands in lathes as well as clocks and other precision instruments, a further reminder of the importance of cordage to a broad range of human endeavour.

The earliest known cordage dates from 18,000–15,000 BC. Found in the Lascaux caves in southern France, this three-ply cord is thought to be of some type of bast fibre. Two-ply willow bast nets dated to the late 8th millennium BC have been found in Finland, and nets of linden bast from the North European Mesolithic period (c. 6000–4000 BC) have been unearthed in Lithuania and Estonia. But the fibres that became widespread

are plant basts: flax and hemp (from which linen is made), and various nettles (including ramie, a native of the Far East). Varieties of one or all of these are known worldwide and examples of the first two have survived from Stone Age Europe, central Asia and Peru, although there is no substantial evidence of their use anywhere until 6000–4000 BC. These fibres are all treated in approximately the same way. The plant is dried or heated, retted (broken down by moisture, whether dew, rain or river water) and dried again. The residue of the stem-rind is then removed through breaking, flailing and finally combing the inner fibres. Tree bark fibres were obtained in a similar, but more drawn-out, manner (after retting generally being boiled with wood-ash, or lye), as were esparto fibres obtained from a leafy rush native to Spain and northern Africa (although salt water rather than fresh water is used in their retting).

Numerous plants are more obviously and immediately useful, and basket-makers around the world still manipulate these in ways especially revealing of prehistoric processes, since the craft has never been mechanized. For example, many varieties of palm tree grow in tropical and subtropical regions around the globe, and entire fronds from these, with long ribs splaying from a central spine, are today still interlaced into hats, mats, walling and bags in the Pacific and Caribbean Islands and elsewhere. Ribs (or leaflets) stripped from their spine are also worked, or, like many other appropriate materials (including bamboo, the vine-like



6. Knotted netting produces a robust, flexible structure suitable for many functions. Here knotted two-ply flax cords, radiocarbon dated to 390–350 BC, form a carrier for a cast metal vessel from the Tarim Basin (in modern-day Chinese Turkestan). At the earliest known New World urban centre, Caral in Peru (c. 2600 BC), large, similarly knotted reed bags filled with stones were used to form the inner walls of buildings.