

From the Land of the Thunder Dragon
TEXTILE ARTS OF BHUTAN



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Textile Arts of Bhutan

Diana K. Myers and Susan S. Bean, *Editors*

Diana K. Myers

with

Michael Aris

Françoise Pommaret

Susan S. Bean

Serindia Publications, Chicago
Peabody Essex Museum, Salem

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Her Majesty Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, Queen of Bhutan



TASHICHHODZONG

THIMPHU, BHUTAN

HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN

Handlooms play an important role in Bhutanese society. They are a part of our culture and are of great economic significance for many of our people. Recognizing this, the Royal Government of Bhutan has given high priority to the development of this sector with a view to providing gainful employment and enhancing the income of the rural community while preserving an important aspect of Bhutanese culture.

Our handlooms have evolved over the centuries and reflect the country's distinctive identity. Most of the designs and patterns of weaves are unique to the country. Bhutanese weavers have been very innovative in their designs while still maintaining the traditional character of the art. This is reflected in the many textiles that have well-known patterns as well as new designs adopted or created to suit both Bhutanese and international tastes.

Since our country emerged from its self-imposed isolation in 1961, many people have come to appreciate the unique culture and way of life in Bhutan. Our handlooms are an important part of this tradition.

I am happy that the Peabody Essex Museum is organizing an exhibition exclusively on Bhutanese handlooms and other textiles used in Bhutan. This display will be an important exposure of a vital part of our precious cultural heritage to the world at large. It will also be a tribute to our weaving traditions and to the thousands of weavers in our villages and towns who have kept this tradition alive.

This exhibition has been many years in the making. More than a decade ago Miss Jane Phillips and others at the Peabody Essex Museum had the vision to collect Bhutanese textiles with the goal of eventually presenting them to the American public. Both Dr. Susan Bean, Project Director, and Ms. Diana Myers, Guest Curator, have worked with great perseverance and dedication to bring this project to fruition. The exhibition is a result of their vision and untiring efforts to project an important part of the rich cultural heritage of a small but unique Himalayan country.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank those who have supported this venture. Although it is not possible to mention them all by name, I wish to acknowledge their valuable contribution, both financial and material, to make this exhibition possible.

My personal involvement in this project and with the organizers of the exhibition has given me much pleasure and satisfaction. I wish the exhibition all success and hope that it will provide an insight into an important aspect of Bhutan's unique heritage.

Tashi Delek!

Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck
Queen of Bhutan

**THIS BOOK HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH
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The National Endowment for the Humanities

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Mrs. Stephen Phillips

Lisina and Frank Hoch

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Mr. Lawrence Coolidge

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LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Her Majesty Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck

Her Royal Highness Ashi Choeki Wangchuck

Barbara Adams

Avery Brundage Collection, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco

His Excellency Ugyen Tshering and Patrizia Franceschinis

The Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington

Lisina and Frank Hoch

The Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, New Mexico

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The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota

The Monk Body, Tashichö Dzong

The Museum for Textiles, Toronto, Ontario

Diana K. Myers

Mrs. Chhemey Wangmo Norbu

Mrs. Ugen Norzom Namgyel

Mrs. Chöden Namgyal and Mr. Kinley D. Dorji

Jane A. Phillips Collection, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C.

The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England

Mrs. Sonam Wangmo

Stephen and Claire Wilbur

Preface

From the Land of the Thunder Dragon marks a special juncture for the Peabody Essex Museum. The Peabody Essex is at once new and old. Created in 1992 through consolidation of the former Peabody Museum of Salem and the former Essex Institute, the Museum is just two years old, though its roots extend back to 1799. *From the Land of the Thunder Dragon* features extraordinary examples of textile art and conveys their Bhutanese significance in keeping with the Museum's new mission to blend art and culture in innovative ways.

The Peabody Essex is proud to possess the nation's most extensive collection of Bhutanese textile art. This circumstance results from the dedication and generosity of a long-time friend of Museum, Jane Phillips, who began to collect Bhutanese textiles for the Museum more than ten years ago. Fascinated by an art form hardly known in the West, Jane was particularly taken by the intricate delicacy of the woven patterns. Through her astute collecting, this catalog and the exhibition it documents are made possible. As a result of her love for the richness of Bhutanese textiles, a little known art will now be accessible to many.

Creation of the exhibition and catalog required, however, a team of people. Among them were Dr. Susan Bean, Curator of Asian, Oceanic, and African Arts and Cultures; Diana Myers, the foremost authority on Bhutanese textiles outside Bhutan; Dr. Michael Aris of Oxford University, whose publications on Bhutan are standards in the field; and Dr. Françoise Pommaré of the Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique whose research in Bhutan spanned a decade of residence there. Susan Bean has graciously and vigorously coordinated the project while Diana Myers has served as guest curator and principal author of the catalog.

Support for *From the Land of the Thunder Dragon* has come from many sources. Jane Phillips and her mother, Mrs. Stephen Phillips, have been most beneficent in helping make the project possible. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided essential funding to plan and carry out the project. Lisina Hoch gave wise counsel to this endeavor and, together with Frank Hoch, provided crucial early support.

Finally, it is extremely gratifying to recognize the tremendous support given by the Bhutanese. Her Majesty Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, Queen of Bhutan, has been a most active patron for the exhibition since its inception. Her Majesty's Foreword to this catalog articulately conveys her deep esteem for Bhutan's textile arts and her appreciation for this endeavor. Their Excellencies Lyönpo Om Pradhan, Minister for Trade and Industry, Lyönpo Dawa Tsering, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Ambassador Ugyen Tshering, Bhutan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, have provided critical and invaluable support. Beyond these official ties to Bhutan, many families have lent precious heirlooms to this exhibition and shared their knowledge with us.

We are deeply indebted to these individuals and to the many members of the Museum's staff who have made the catalog and exhibition a reality. Above all, we are proud to help make the remarkable art and culture of Bhutan accessible to a wider world.

Dan L. Monroe
Executive Director

Acknowledgments

The support, energy, and assistance of many people have helped bring about the exhibition *From the Land of the Thunder Dragon* and this publication. Foremost among them is Jane A. Phillips who built the Phillips Collection at the Peabody Essex Museum, establishing a firm foundation for the exhibition.

Our deep appreciation goes to Her Majesty Queen Ashi Sangay Choden Wangchuck, who first encouraged Diana Myers in the idea of a textile exhibition in 1986, and later agreed to serve as formal adviser to *From the Land of the Thunder Dragon*. The guidance of His Excellency Lyönpo Om Pradhan, Minister for Trade and Industry, His Excellency Lyönpo Dawa Tsering, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and His Excellency Ugyen Tshering, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, fostered a genuine collaboration between the museum and the Royal Government of Bhutan.

The contributions to this volume by Dr. Michael Aris and Dr. Françoise Pommaret represent only a part of their role in the project. Their enthusiasm for an exhibition on Bhutanese textile arts was instrumental from the outset, and they generously shared their knowledge of Bhutan. Lisina Hoch, with her long ties to Bhutan and its friends in the United States, and Dr. Bruce Bunting of the World Wildlife Fund also gave their liberal support.

Diana Myers acknowledges her special gratitude to the late Lam Nado and to Dasho Shingkar Lam, who, through hours of reminiscence and conversation, introduced her to the historical and cultural importance of textiles in Bhutan and guided her work. Over many years, the Venerable Mynak Tulku Rimpoche and Am Chime Wongmo were of continuing assistance at the National Museum in Paro and in Thimphu. The generosity and friendship of Yeshe Phuntsok and his wife, Diki, who introduced Diana Myers to Bhutanese weavers in Kathmandu in 1978, were invaluable. Rajni Chavda's encouragement greatly furthered her fieldwork. Rinji Om provided a home in Thimphu and participated in excursions to remote corners of the country. Throughout Bhutan, many other people provided welcome hospitality, conversation, and stories. The lenders to the exhibition are thanked particularly. The exhibition and this book are immeasurably richer for these Bhutanese contributions.

The glossary was compiled with important assistance from Bhutanese scholars, chiefly the late Lam Nado, historian and Dzongkha Education Adviser in the Department of Education; Dasho Shingkar Lam, Secretary to the third king and former Speaker of the National Assembly; the Venerable Mynak Tulku Rimpoche, Director of the National Museum; Lopön Pemala, former Director of the National Library; Sangay Wangchuk, Undersecretary in the Council for Ecclesiastic Affairs and Acting Director of the National Library; and Dasho Sangye Dorje, Director of the Dzongkha Development Commission. Choeki Ongmo and Dorje Gyetshen confirmed loom and weaving terminology in their native Tshangla, and José Toscano verified terms against the draft Dzongkha-English Dictionary being compiled by the Dzongkha Development Commission.

Other Bhutanese were extremely helpful during the evolution of the exhibition and this publication, including Dasho Jigme Thinley, Dasho Sonam Tobgye, Cham Lopön Sigay, Am

Tshering Dem, Am Ugen Doma, Am Ugen Norzom, Ugyen Wangdi, Am Sonam Wangmo, Am Karma, and Dasho Karma Galey and his daughter Chhodön in Bhutan, and Thinley Dorji and Tashi Dorji in New York. Special thanks are due to Kunzang Norbu for his efficient services as liaison officer at the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

In the United States, Lotus Stack of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Mattiebelle Gittinger of the Textile Museum in Washington, D.C., were steady supporters of a Bhutan exhibition, and of Diana Myers's research, over the past decade. They shared their technical expertise on looms and weaving and, along with Dale Gluckman of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, made available their considerable experience in developing exhibitions. Dr. Barry Bishop at the National Geographic Society helped locate and obtain archival photographs. Thanks also go to Mary Ballard, Camie Campbell, Dan Edwards, Judy Gianareles, Michal Keeley, Lobsang Lhalungpa, Julia Swetsoff, and all those who permitted their Bhutanese textiles to be studied and photographed.

At the Peabody Essex Museum, Christina Behrmann, Assistant Curator, and Michelle Tolini, Departmental Assistant in the Department of Asian, Oceanic, and African Arts and Cultures, organized the exhibits and the photography, managed the budget, and helped the project proceed smoothly. They were assisted by several volunteers and interns, including Dale Mudge, Brad Epley, and Laura Sonjara, who dedicated many hours to preparing the textiles for exhibition. Others who contributed to the project include Registrar Lucy Butler; Janet Halpin in the Development Department; Dorothy Chen-Courtin, Patti Marxsen, and Connie Wood in Public Relations; the staff of the Education Department; and the exhibition team, including Fredrick McDougall Johnson, Director of Design, and William L. Phippen, Director of Conservation and Collections Management. Our warmest thanks go to Markham Sexton for his crisp and innovative photography.

We also express our gratitude to the National Endowment for the Humanities for providing levels of planning and implementation grant support without which this project could not have achieved its full potential. Anthony Aris and Patrick Booz of Serindia Publications contributed not only their expertise as publishers, but also their considerable knowledge of the eastern Himalayas and Bhutan.

Finally, we thank our families: John and Edie Rhoads, who were always encouraging and forgiving of Susan Bean's absences from home; and Barry Sidman, who made Diana Myers's dedication of time and energy to her heart's work possible.

Diana K. Myers
Susan S. Bean

Note on Foreign Words

Bhutanese and other non-English terms are represented in simplified phonetic forms. They are all italicized on first use, where their meaning is explained; terms related to textiles are italicized throughout. On the initial use of some important terms in Dzongkha, the national language of Bhutan, and Tibetan, orthography is shown in Roman type. For pronunciations and more information, see the Glossary.



Introduction

Bhutan, Its Textiles, and the World

Textiles are a rich and complex art form deeply embedded in the culture and history of Bhutan. Weavers, always women, are esteemed as artists for their highly skilled and visually stunning mastery of color, pattern, and composition. Weavers are also creators of wealth; textiles are valuable commodities. Men, usually monks, embroider and appliqué religious images and shrine furnishings with consummate skill, remaining true to sacred prototypes and achieving sanctified magnificence. Wild silk, cotton, nettle, wool, and yak hair are the fibers basic to the region, but domesticated silk, metallic yarns, and machine-spun mercerized cotton from India and China have been available for many decades. More recently, rayon, acrylic, polyester, and wool from as far away as Hong Kong and Australia have become ubiquitous. Fine imported fabrics, especially woolen broadcloths and Chinese silks, have long been preferred for appliqués and embroideries. Textile arts in Bhutan are centuries old, vibrant, ongoing, and ever changing.

Bhutan's textiles, especially the intricate brocades and complex warp-striped patterns, are unmatched anywhere else in the world. These products of diverse regional and ethnic specializations, taken together, constitute one of the world's great textile traditions. No wonder, then, that this art, which was virtually unknown outside of the region until two decades ago, has been gathering a steadily growing, devoted following in the West and in Japan. Textiles have become Bhutan's most powerful emblem abroad.

Bhutan in the World

Bhutan has held a special place in the Western imagination as a Shangri-la, high in the Himalayas, far from the dirt and noise of modern life, surviving from a simpler time, steeped in Eastern mysteries. As the twenty-first century approaches and this image becomes ever more disconnected from actual circumstances, there are new visions emanating from Bhutan: a nation providing for the long-term protection of its environment by restricting erosion-causing activities like lumbering and setting aside extensive tracts of conservation land; a government fostering gradualism and appropriateness in social and economic change by limiting tourism and carefully managing the extent of industrial development and foreign involvement; a monarchy nurturing representational institutions through the National Assembly inaugurated in 1958 and the District Development Committees established during the reign of the present king; and a contemporary society with an artistic heritage that continues to be both relevant and evolving. But these visions are all precarious because Bhutan, like so many countries around the world, is struggling to balance the need for national unity against the realities of ethnic and linguistic diversity, and the desire for national integrity and sovereignty against the pressures of immigration, tourism, economic development, and foreign investment. For Bhutan's textile heritage, the challenges lie particularly in the cheap, easy-care, factory-made imported cloth that now competes with

FIG. 1.1

In Bhutan, a woman's principal garment, the kira, is a large rectangle of cloth, about 1.5 by 2.8 m, that is wrapped over a blouse, pinned at the shoulders, and fastened tightly at the waist. This particular woman's dress exemplifies a classic type known as kushüthara, that has striped edges, multiple rows of patterns creating deep end borders, and a white field into which many intricate motifs are woven. This kushüthara was given to its present owners by the late king and Queen (Mother) Ashi Kesang in 1955. (see Catalog)