

FEATURED COLLECTION

The Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collections

by Linda McIntosh

THE TILLEKE & GIBBINS Textile Collection began in the late 1980s when Tilleke & Gibbins, the oldest surviving law firm in Bangkok, Thailand, moved into offices behind the American Embassy. David Lyman, present Chairman and Chief Values Officer and avid rug collector, desired a Thai theme for the offices' interior design, and readily agreed to the suggestion to adorn the walls with local hand-woven fabrics. Soon, the firm began acquiring more weavings of the various ethnic groups living in Thailand and neighboring countries. The seeds for starting the Collection were planted in 1987, and as the number of textiles grew, especially with the acquisition of 70 rare Lao fabrics, the Tilleke & Gibbins Textile Collection was officially established under its first full time curator, Karen Bunyaratavej.

The mission of the Textile Collection is not only to decorate Tilleke & Gibbins' offices, but to

preserve Thailand's and other Southeast Asian countries' textile heritage for present and future generations. The Collection is available to the public for research and educational purposes. Interested individuals and groups are welcome to view the textiles on display (they are rotated every 6 months), and also, to visit the Collection's storage and preservation area. The textiles are stored following international museum collection standards, and UV filters are placed on office lights to prevent damage to the displayed fabrics. Each textile is photographed and documented, and the data are stored in a museum collection software program.

Regions Represented

The Collection presently consists of approximately 1,800 textiles. The majority originate from the countries of mainland Southeast Asia: Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Burma or present-day Myanmar, and Vietnam. Insular Southeast Asian textiles, such as those from Malaysia and a few Indonesian islands, are also represented, as are some non-Southeast Asian textiles.

The focus of the collection is on cloth from the various ethnic groups living in Thailand, especially from Tai cultures. Ethnic Thai belong to the Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai ethno-linguistic family. The Lao, the dominant majority of Laos and most populous ethnic group of northeast Thailand, also belong to this branch, which is composed of numerous sub-groups, such as the Tai Phuan, Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, Phuthai, Tai Dam, and Tai Yai or Shan. The Collection has a solid foundation of this diverse material culture of the Tai groups.

Textiles originating from non-Tai groups living in Thailand are also represented. These cultures include the Khmer and related

Coffin Cover or Shroud, Phaa Puu Long, Tai, NE Laos, 1890-1920, Length 350 x Width 96 cm, 1997.2.1.

linguistic groups such as the Kui. The Khmer are the dominant ethnic group of Cambodia. The Kui live in the southern provinces of northeast Thailand that border Cambodia. Khmer and Kui weavers are particularly known for their weft ikat-decorated silks. The Collection holds fabrics from other minority groups, including the Malay, Cham, Hmong, Karen, Akha, and Mien. The ethnic groups comprising Thailand's population also live in neighboring countries, and the textile trail follows these branches into Laos, Vietnam, Burma, Malaysia, and southern China.

The Collection also houses textiles originating from ethnic groups not represented within Thailand's borders. The civilizations forming Thailand over the centuries interacted with their neighbors. Weavings of neighboring Southeast Asian groups and distant cultures of India and China found their way into Thailand. Burmese, Intha, Naga, Kachin, and Chin textiles from Burma, or Myanmar, are well represented. There are also some examples from minority peoples living in southern Laos and the central highlands of Vietnam. These geographically isolated cultures are the Jarai, Rhade, Katu, Ta-oi, and other groups.

Household Textiles and Clothing

The textiles range from high-status court textiles to household items, with the philosophy that all types of textiles are an art form. Utilitarian items such as blankets, curtains, and mattress covers, are often elaborately decorated with intricate designs. Many of these domestic accessories comprise a bride's trousseau. Other types of textiles include clothing for everyday use and special occasions. Court textiles are often made of costly, imported materials, such as gold- and silver-wrapped thread. The Collection has a firm foundation in diverse types of clothing from the ethnic

Skirt, Sin Khuang, Tai, NW Vietnam, 1890-1920, Length 86 x Width 65 cm, 1991.6.43.

groups living in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Religious Textiles

Handwoven or hand-adorned cloth maintains a prominent role in the religions of Southeast Asian cultures. Textiles function as religious offerings, tools to demarcate sacred space, and as conduits between the natural and supernatural. There are many examples of weavings associated with shamanic rituals and Buddhist ceremonies. It is vital these textiles are preserved, since their production has declined, or even ceased. Since funeral banners, both shamanic and Buddhist, are rare religious textiles, the Collection houses different examples to preserve them for present and future generations' appreciation and learning.

Exhibition and Access

The Collection regularly loans textiles to local, regional, and international exhibitions in fulfilling its mission to preserve textiles as art and as an educational tool. In Bangkok, Tilleke & Gibbins' textiles have been exhibited at the Jim Thompson Centre for Textiles and the Arts, Jim Thompson House Museum, Bangkok. When this Foundation hosted its 1999 International Symposium on Southeast Asian Textiles, a special display of the

firm's textiles accompanied the event at the Shangri-La Hotel. Other exhibits have included: "Power Dressing" (2003); "Tied Together" (2004); "Status, Myth, and the Supernatural" (2005), and "Weaving Paradise" (2007).

Examples from the Collection have also been part of regional exhibitions such as "Invisible Hands," held at the National Museum of Laos-Luang Prabang in 2005. International loans include "Weaving Tradition: Carol Cassidy and Woven Silks of Laos," held at several locations in the US, including the Museum of Craft and Folk Art in San Francisco, CA.

To accommodate its growth needs, in the Fall of 2008 Tilleke & Gibbins relocated to the Supalai Grand Tower in the Southeast corner of Bangkok. The Collection's storage facilities have been enlarged to accommodate additional shelving and a larger workspace to care for an expanded collection. More textiles will be on display throughout the offices. The present curator, Wipawee Tiyawes, is busily arranging the Collection in its new home. As the Collection's consultant, Linda McIntosh is writing a book highlighting some remarkable examples of the firm's heritage textiles, which will be published in 2009.

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*Artists' Tapestries from
Australia: 1976-2005*

Sue Walker

The Beagle Press, Sydney, 2008
284 pp. color and B/W images
ISBN 978-0-947349-50-9, \$60

SUE WALKER, FOUNDING Director of the Victoria Tapestry Workshop, has written a fascinating and detailed history of the organization's first 30 years. The large volume is beautifully designed and lavishly illustrated with superb color photos. Images include views of the workshop itself, steps in the design preparation, color selection, sampling, weaving preparation and execution, works in progress, and most of the 350 tapestries produced as of 2005. The VTW specializes in collaborations with contemporary artists to produce tapestries for public buildings and private collections throughout the world. Its Exhibition Collection loans tapestries to exhibitions in Australia and internationally.

From the first, the VTW has specialized in creative interpretations of artists' paintings, working in close collaboration with the artists. In addition to tapestry design and production, the VTW is also a highly regarded teaching and training center for weavers and designers. Walker traces the workshop's fascinating history from its inception in the 1970s through its rise to international importance and its 21st-century challenges. After a major 1970 exhibition of 17th-18th century French tapestries was mounted in Melbourne, a group of interested individuals researched the possibilities for launching an

Australian tapestry center using locally-produced wools and featuring works by Australian artists. As a result, the Victoria Tapestry workshop was established in 1975 with Walker at its helm.

To achieve a uniquely Australian identity apart from traditional European tapestry workshops and styles, and following the advice of consultants such as Archie Brennan, the VTW focused on exploring the tapestry medium to the fullest, and in reinventing traditional forms from an Australian viewpoint. To date, the VTW has collaborated with over 300 leading contemporary artists from Australia and around the world. In addition to interpreting contemporary art works, the workshop has executed heraldic-style tapestries, historical and narrative tapestries, and woven interpretations of complex symbolic paintings by Aboriginal artists. Lively stories of the conception and production of some of the VTW's major works impart a sense of the challenges faced and conquered during their planning, weaving, and ultimate unveiling. These tales, seamlessly interwoven with the progressive history of the Workshop, provide a glimpse into the gargantuan labors involved in producing large-scale tapestries.

An epilogue outlines the financial support system of the Workshop. A timeline, a complete catalog of tapestries woven at the VTW from 1976-2005, a list of artists and designers, and a list of weavers complete the volume. *Artists' Tapestries* is an invaluable reference for anyone interested in tapestry or in design.

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—Karen Searle
College of St. Catherine

*The Clothing of the
Renaissance World, Europe •
Asia • Africa • The Americas:
Cesare Vecellio's Habiti Antichi
et Moderni*

Margaret F. Rosenthal and Ann
Rosalind Jones

Thames and Hudson, 2008
23.0 x 27.2 cm, hardback, 600 pp
540 illustrations, 77 in color, \$125
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TWO HISTORIANS OF ITALIAN language, literature, women's studies and dress have spent years at work on the translation and annotation of Cesare Vecellio's standard work on dress, *Degli abiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo*, his 1590 and 1598 printed compendia, originally in three volumes, on mostly secular male and female clothing in the known world, especially in Venice. We think we know this work well from the requisite inclusion of selected Vecellio plates in reference works on fashion and clothing, but the rich context provided through an introductory essay by Margaret F. Rosenthal, University of Southern CA, and Ann Rosalind Jones, Smith College, plus an excellent index and an illustrated glossary gives their fresh translation of Vecellio's commentary a new immediacy and social grounding. One may learn, for instance, a great deal about upper-class Venetian women's hair ornaments (Vecellio also published a book on jewels), but only in descriptions of prostitutes does one read about their manner of underwear.

Printed books on dress and the exotic appearance of 'others' were published in Venice and elsewhere during the second half of the 16th century, and prior to that in manuscripts. But, Vecellio's sheer numbers of examples, his acute powers of observation, historical vignettes, and attention to detail gave his volumes gold standard status, and they were reprinted with regularity over the next four centuries.

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