



# Weaving Splendor

TREASURES OF **Asian Textiles**

from The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

October 7–December 31, 2022

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# Tennessee State Standards

## Fine Arts Standards

By analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating artworks, students fulfill the Respond domain of the Fine Arts Standards. Synthesizing information and contextualizing the works applies to the Connect domain. The Create domain includes the generation, conceptualizing, development, and refinement of artistic work.

## Social Studies Standards

### Grades 6–8

6.38: Describe how the desire for Chinese goods influenced the creation of the Silk Road and initiated cultural diffusion throughout Eurasia, including the introduction of Buddhism into ancient China.

7.06: Summarize the effects of the Mongolian empires on the Silk Roads, including the importance of Marco Polo’s travels on the spread of Chinese technology and Eurasian trade.

7.11: Analyze the development of trade routes through Asia, Africa, and Europe and the expanding role of merchants.

### Grades 9–12

E.45: Explain the benefits of trade among individuals, regions, and countries.

S.10: Compare and contrast various cultures of the world.

S.12: Analyze how culture influences individuals (e.g., ethnocentrism, cultural relativity, culture shock, American values).

S.13: Describe how the social structure of a culture affects social interaction.

WG.26: Locate, describe, and compare major cultural characteristics in the regions of East, South, and Southeast Asia.

## Introduction

Look at the image on the right. What would you call the pattern? Paisley, perhaps? Though paisley takes inspiration from this motif, this pattern is called *boteh*, which means “flower or cluster of leaves” in Persian. This style of ornamentation originated in ancient Iran and by the eighteenth century had exploded in popularity in textiles, finding its way to the United Kingdom. Mass production of shawls decorated with this teardrop-shaped motif began and most notably flourished in the Scottish town of Paisley, giving *boteh* the name by which it is known in the West.

Asian textiles are all around us, and this specific shawl illustrates one of the patterns explored in *Weaving Splendor: Treasures of Asian Textiles from The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*. The beauty of Asian textiles led to their proliferation across the globe. These textiles shaped the cultural connections that followed as they were themselves shaped by them. *Weaving Splendor* spotlights luxury textiles, their historical impacts and uses, and the material cultures to which they belong.

Like the shawl pictured here, this Educator Guide takes us on a journey of over five thousand miles and five hundred years. Together, we’ll explore our own *material cultures*—the textiles we use to clothe ourselves and our homes as defined by tradition and society—and through that exploration gain a deeper understanding of the world that came before us and still surrounds us.

This Educator Guide is organized around the five themes of our exhibition:

1. Court: Professional Presentation
2. Theater Costumes: Creating Characters Onstage
3. Furnishings: Transforming Interiors
4. International Exchange: Asian Textiles, Diplomacy, and the Rise of Global Markets
5. Enduring Traditions: Modern and Contemporary Asian Textiles



Man's white-ground long shawl (detail), ca. 1830. Kashmir, India. Pashmina wool twill and tapestry twill with silk and wool embroidery Lent by Mr. W. L. Comstock, 82-1934

## Court: Professional Presentation

When we look at a piece of clothing, we can often identify what materials were used to make it and see the story it tells about the wearer. People dress differently depending on when and where they live and their individual tastes. Take, for instance, the kimono pictured. It was constructed in Japan by three different artists—a dyer, embroiderer, and painter—each a highly trained artisan. The designs not only tell us who made the garment, but for whom it was made.

From the luxury construction of this garment, we can tell its wearer must have been a person of high status, as it was expensive to produce. Skilled artisans covered this garment with symbols, such as oranges made with saffron dye and vivid red chrysanthemums. Each of these auspicious markings are wishes for health and longevity for the wearer and blessings for those looking at the kimono. This garment was made for a winter ceremony and, as such, is composed of silk, a *self-regulating fiber*. This means that it retains warmth in cooler months and remains cool in the warmer ones. The gold embroidery and meticulous motifs woven throughout this kimono are time-intensive crafts. Each character and symbol reveal a bit about the wearer and lets us know that this particular piece of clothing was reserved for a woman in the court of the shogun, most likely associated with the samurai class.



*Uchikake*, late 18th–early 19th centuries. Japan. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Dan Casement, 44-30/15. Photo: Gabe Hopkins

## Techniques and Materials

### Silk

*Weaving Splendor* presents many types of fabrics, one of the most prominent of which is *silk*—a natural fiber produced by a host of different insect species for their nests and cocoons. These insects include beetles, bumblebees, and weaver ants. The textiles on view in the exhibition use silk from the oldest known and most traditional source: silkworms.

Using silkworm silk to create textiles is a demanding process. Though each cocoon is made of about one mile of silk filament, it takes forty-eight silk filaments to make just one thread of silk, and it takes more than two thousand silkworms to make one pound of raw silk. Though labor-intensive to make, this ancient fiber—first created in fourth-millennium BCE China—has long been lauded as a luxury fabric and in high demand. This is because:

- Silk reflects light well and materials made from it have a lustrous quality.
- While the silk appears delicate, it is also one of the strongest natural fibers. Silk garments are resilient and keep their shape for a long time.
- Silk has a high *tensile strength*, meaning it's flexible. This makes it ideal for use in creating a range of textiles for clothing or homes.

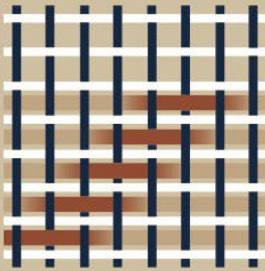
### Weaving and Brocade

*Weaving* is the act of interlacing of threads. This is usually done on a *loom*—a device that holds the threads of the garment in place while a material is being created. Threads laced lengthwise by the loom are called the *warp*, while the threads laced widthwise that fill in the spaces between warp threads are called the *weft*.

*Brocade* is a specialized type of weaving pattern. Designs are woven into the fabric using an extra weft, which allows the design to be seen on both sides of the garment. This contrasts with embroidery, where patterns are sewn on top of another fabric to embellish it.

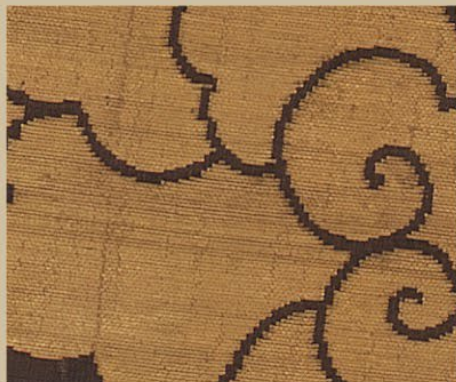
# TECHNIQUES

## Brocade



*Brocade* is a weaving technique that uses supplementary ornamental threads in the horizontal weave to create patterns on fabric.

When the purple fabric for these trousers was on a loom, the weaver inserted individual gold-paper threads. To make gold leaf durable enough for weaving, ultrathin gold foil was pasted onto paper with lacquer, then sliced into thin threads. The weaver would have carefully calculated where the gold-paper thread should appear on the surface to create the golden floral pattern.



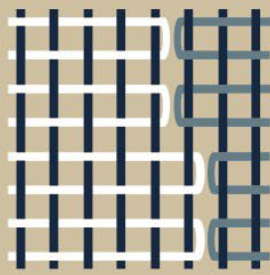
Details from *Nô* costume  
(*hangire*-type trousers)

**Kesi**

*Kesi* means “cut silk” and refers to the illusion this style of weaving produces. It utilizes a method that creates distinct, unblended areas of silk: the wefts are shortened and tucked into the weave, creating color zones with crisp edges. This illusion makes it appear as though the color zones are separate pieces threaded together rather than made on the same loom.

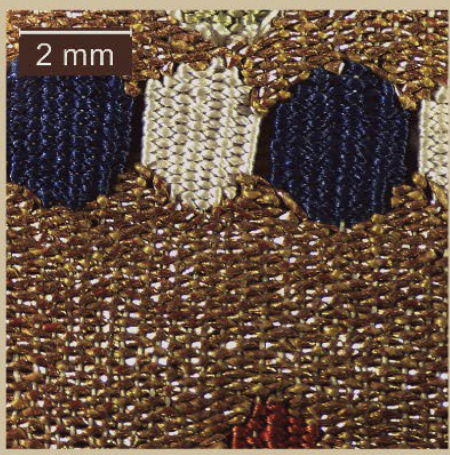
*Kesi* originated in China, and it is thought that this method was first intended to translate paintings into tapestries. Eventually, the style began to be used for ornate, high-quality clothing.





Kesi was invented about one thousand years ago and is still practiced today. Weavers use distinct *wefts* (horizontal threads) to achieve clear images and complex pictorial effects.

Different-colored threads turn away from each other, creating crisp edges between shapes.



TOP AND BOTTOM RIGHT: Details from chair cover with crane design  
BOTTOM LEFT: Detail from lady's coat

## Theater: Creating Characters Onstage

In the previous section, we considered how clothing can denote the wearer's identity. Here, we will discuss how clothing is used to obscure or take on a new identity, as with costumes like this lady's coat. Though it could have been made for a wealthy woman, the way it's constructed suggests that it was used as a theater costume for a woman's role in a Qing dynasty opera.

In a play, costumes help create a time and place for audience members to experience—this is especially true of Chinese theater in the eighteenth century. Stages were austere, with little decoration, immersing audiences in plays' dialogue and encouraging them to imagine the world of the characters. The stage was not meant to imitate reality, but to create an environment of make-believe that engaged the audience and spotlighted the dialogue and music of the production, as well as the skill of the actors. In this context, it's easy to envision that this finely constructed coat would serve as wearable art, acting as an indicator both of setting and of the character's identity.



Lady's coat, early 18th century. China. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 37-25 A, B

## Furnishings: Transforming Interiors



Velvet fragment of hunting scene, ca. 1540–70. Designed by a court painter, possibly Siyavush Beg Gurji. Probably Tabriz, Iran. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-80/3

While clothing can tell us about individuals, so can the textiles used to create the places people call home. This is exemplified by the tapestry fragment pictured here, which depicts a hunting party. Hunting was an important activity for Persian royalty and was often represented in royal Persian art. This motif is used repeatedly across many different types of media, such as ceramics and manuscript paintings. The hunting party scene illustrates what was important from the perspective of a shah in Safavid Persia.

Through the hunt, rulers were able to practice the battle skills needed in war, travel and survey their lands to assess and subdue threats, and create allies. Hunts were not only about capturing game but also were places for princes and kings to refine the skills they'd need to gain and maintain power in their kingdoms. Because of this, the hunt was an important activity for rulers to engage in to influence desirable behavior. The shape of this textile gives a clue as to what it was a part of—a tent. These tents often housed rulers on their military campaigns, serving as mobile palaces. The scene depicted on the tent and the message this scene communicates would have traveled with the ruler wherever he went.

As royal tents were a type of palace, luxury materials were used to surround those who used them in comfort. This fragment employs velvet. Velvet is a high-quality material traditionally made through a process of spinning silk and cutting the fiber along its warp to create a plush pile. In this example, gaps called voids were intentionally left in the velvet and then filled in with brocade.

## International Exchange: Asian Textiles, Diplomacy, and the Rise of Global Markets

The textiles in this exhibition are highly esteemed, not only in the cultures they came from but internationally as well. This idea is exemplified by the influence of and explosion in demand for Indian pashminas in Europe in the nineteenth century.

A *pashmina* (named after the Persian word for wool, *pashm*) is a type of shawl made from the undercoat of the Himalayan goat, which, when spun, produces an incredibly soft and warm yarn known as *cashmere*. This fine material can then be woven into garments.

Most notably worn by men of the sixteenth-century Mughal court in India, pashminas were used as sashes, shawls, and turbans. They were often undecorated or decorated very moderately with small floral designs at the ends. The shawl pictured here, however, tells a particular tale of shifting tastes as times changed and pashminas traveled.

The designs of this shawl rose to prominence in the nineteenth century. As Kashmir, the region in India where these shawls were produced, transitioned from the Mughal period to Sikh rule, tastes changed. Shawls grew in size and their ornamentation became more complex. The modest flowers that once graced them were elongated into intricate teardrop forms with the flourishes and swirls that became known in the West as *paisley*.

Pashminas became all the rage among aristocratic circles in Europe and started to be mass produced. They became a marker of wealth and culture and a standard item of women's fashion. Owning a valuable pashmina could help elevate a woman's status, as it showed them to be cultured and on trend.



*Rumal*, ca. 1870. Kashmir, India. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Gift of Ms. Nellie D. Lee, 55-56. Photo: Gabe Hopkins

## Enduring Traditions: Modern and Contemporary Asian Textiles



*Cicim* brocaded rug, 20th century. Anatolia, Turkey. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Gift of Ralph T. Coe, F73-39. Photo: Gabe Hopkins

Though the majority of this exhibition focuses on textile traditions spanning centuries, incredibly beautiful, vibrant Asian textiles are all around us today. From the contemporary era, we have examples such as this Anatolian *cicim* rug made in the twentieth century by Kurdish women living in Turkey. *Cicim* rugs are created using an additional weft thread in the loom, with the front of the rug facing away from the weaver, who creates intricate designs by passing the thread through the loom and gathering the ends to the back. Woven in a flat, rectilinear pattern, this particular *cicim* is composed of three flat-woven strips of textile affixed together. While this construction is in line with traditional Turkish *cicim* rugs, the rich color pattern points to the Kurdish artistry of this rug. To be sure, Kurdish weavers aren't the only textile artisans to employ bright colors in their work, but bold geometric designs using varied and impactful colors like these are present in virtually all Kurdish textiles. In this example, look for the chicken feathers woven into the design! Thanks to Kurdish artisans, this unique textile tradition endures today.

## Activity 1: *Shibori*

In this activity, students will engage in indigo resist dyeing—a technique used in some of the textiles in *Weaving Splendor*—in an accessible way through *shibori*. A traditional Japanese artistic expression, there are six main types of *shibori*: *arashi*, *itajime*, *kanoko*, *kumo*, *mirua*, and *nui*. This activity will focus on *itajime*, a shape-resist technique that can produce geometric shapes such as triangles and squares.

### Materials:

- Cotton fabric
- Two square blocks of wood
- Rubber bands or clamps
- A tub container or bucket for the dye bath
- Long rubber gloves
- Indigo dye bath

### Steps:

1. Spread the fabric across a flat surface.
2. Fold the fabric lengthwise, accordion-style. This should form a rectangle.
3. Again, folding accordion style, form a square with the fabric.
4. Place the folded fabric between two square pieces of wood and tie it together with rubber bands or clamps. Both the wood and the rubber bands will prevent the dye from saturating the fabric they cover. These areas will resist the dyeing process and create unique designs with the negative space they create.
5. Submerge the fabric in the dye bath. Note that the submersion time will affect how much dye is absorbed. The longer the submersion time, the more vividly the indigo will dye the fabric.



Images from [MarthaStewart.com](http://MarthaStewart.com)

## Activity 2: Weaving Paper

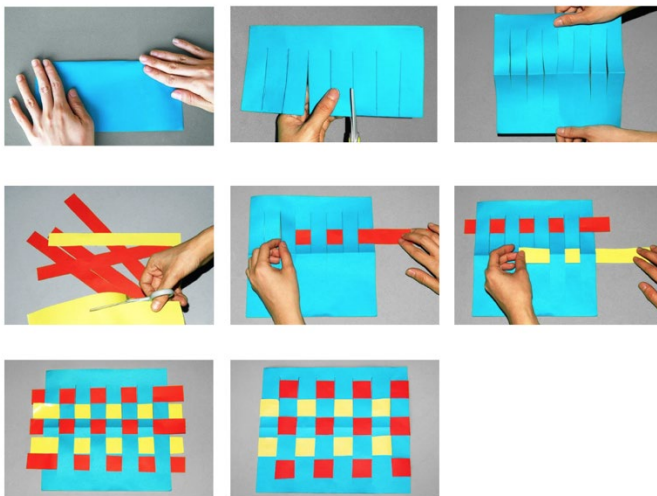
Throughout *Weaving Splendor*, several different loom-centered weaving styles are spotlighted. This activity is designed to be a scaled-down introduction to weaving with readily accessible materials for students of all dexterity levels.

### Materials:

- 2 sheets of 8.5 x 11 in. construction paper in contrasting colors
- Ruler
- Pencil
- Scissors
- Tape or glue

### Steps:

1. Fold one piece of construction paper in half, bringing the two short edges together. This will serve as the background.
2. With the fold at the bottom, place the ruler about an inch from the top of the paper and draw a line widthwise across the sheet.
3. Keeping the paper in the same position, draw lines from top to bottom across the sheet, one inch apart.
4. Using the scissors, cut from the fold upward along each of the lines until you get to the horizontal line. Then, unfold the paper.
5. Fold the second piece of paper in the same way as the background piece, then draw lines one inch apart from the top to the bottom of the sheet. Since you'll be cutting through the second sheet paper, you won't need a horizontal line at the top.
6. Cut along the lines to create long strips.
7. Now, starting at the bottom of the background page, weave the paper strip over and under through the base paper.
8. Weave the next strip of paper in the opposite direction, first under, then over.
9. Continue alternating the weave direction of each paper strip until you reach the top of the page.
10. Excess paper can be taped to the back of the base page or cut, depending on preference.



Images from [FirstPalette.com](http://FirstPalette.com)

### Activity 3: Weaving Poetry

“The Sari” (<https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poem/sari/>) by Moniza Alvi, a Pakistani-British writer and poet, invites us to consider what clothing and family mean in our lives.

In this poem:

1. How are people showing up? Do we notice anything about age, class, gender, and nationality?
2. What does the sari symbolize, culturally and personally for the narrator?
3. How does clothing connect people in this poem?

Have your students write a one-line poem using this prompt:

What does clothing mean for you in your own life? Think about your family, your self-expression, and culture.

Deliberate with the class and combine their sentences to create a poem woven together of all their perspectives.



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