



# Weaving Splendor

TREASURES OF Asian Textiles

from The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art



Ingram Gallery  
October 7–December 31, 2022

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, is renowned for the breadth and depth of its collection of Asian art, and this exhibition presents many of its most extraordinary textiles. Because they are fragile and light sensitive, these works of art are rarely displayed. Dating from the fifteenth to the twenty-first centuries, they give insight into Asia's diverse and enduring traditions, showing how Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Persian, and Turkish artists have combined innovative and meticulous techniques with precious materials to create luxurious textiles. *Weaving*—interlacing warp and weft threads, often using a loom—is an ancient method of creating fabric that reaches astonishing heights in Asia. Each textile on view, whether woven from cotton, bast fiber, silk, or wool, tells a complex and fascinating story.

Divided into five sections, this exhibition explores the artistry of Asian textiles and the many different purposes for which they were created, including for use as garments, furnishings, gifts, and trade goods. The first section spotlights formal court robes made in imperial China and Japan, where emperors and other members of the ruling class used exquisite clothing to signify rank and status within the governmental hierarchies. The second section focuses on theater costumes—captivating garments that transform actors into characters onstage and transport audiences to a different place and time. As exemplified by a deep green Japanese robe (cover) composed of a light silk gauze—a material chosen for its ability to drape the body and amplify the fluid movements of a dancer—these costumes are custom made for specific types of performances. The third section features textiles intended to bring beauty, comfort, meaning, and warmth to homes and temples. They include an altar cloth, carpets, and chair covers. In some instances, textiles themselves created an interior as a tent or canopy. The exhibition includes a recreation of a sixteenth-century Persian tent that helps us imagine how it felt to be enveloped by magnificent silk velvet ornamented with flowers and scenes of a royal hunt. The fourth section examines the major role Asian textiles played in diplomatic exchange and global trade. Magnificent examples, such as a Persian medallion carpet (fig. 1) given by a *shah* (an Iranian ruler) to a pope around 1600, were commissioned as gifts. For centuries all sorts of fabrics traveled along the Silk Road—a network of routes that spanned from China to the Mediterranean. After the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama (ca. 1460–1524) charted a sea route to India around Africa's Cape of Good Hope in 1498, direct trade between Europe

and South Asia greatly increased. More goods were able to move on ships rather than over long land routes. Merchants even used Asian textiles, including pashmina shawls and *chintz* (a multicolored printed or painted cotton fabric), as currency. The Industrial Revolution, however, brought about dramatic changes in both production and global trade. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, weaving became more mechanized in Europe and North America and flourished in factories there, causing the number of looms operating in Asian cities such as Bursa, Isfahan, and Masulipatnam (now Machilipatnam) to decline. The exhibition concludes with modern and contemporary Asian textiles. Examples from China, Japan, India, Pakistan, and Turkey illustrate weaving practices from the late nineteenth century to today. In some areas traditions have been revived by nongovernmental agencies and dedicated patrons and artists, while art forms such as carpet weaving have continued in other regions without interruption. In the twenty-first century Asia has regained its position as both a leading textile producer and a place where local traditions of domestic and luxury textile making continue to thrive.



Figure 1

In addition to experiential learning activities in the Martin ArtQuest® Gallery, *Weaving Splendor* is complemented by an education gallery in the exhibition with reference books, a place to reflect and respond, and an area where contemporary fiber artists talk about and show their processes (for the demonstration schedule, consult the touch screen in the gallery or [FristArtMuseum.org/WeavingSplendor](http://FristArtMuseum.org/WeavingSplendor)). Visit these spaces to gain a deeper understanding of the historical objects on view and learn how Asian weaving traditions are being practiced and kept alive today, including by individuals in our own community.

Cover: *Bugaku* costume (*hō*-type). Japan, Edo period (1615–1868), first half of the 19th century. Silk gauze embroidered with silk thread. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 31-142/4. Fig. 1: Tapestry-woven medallion carpet. Kashan, Iran, Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), ca. 1600. Silk and silver metallic wrapped thread. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 32-70

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