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Wrapped in Beauty

The Koelz Collection of Kashmiri Shawls

Grace Beardsley
in collaboration with Carla M. Sinopoli

Ann Arbor, Michigan
2005

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Preface

Study of the Walter N. Koelz Collection in the Asian Division of the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology (UMMA) has benefited from the efforts of two talented scholars over recent years. The work of the first, Carolyn Copeland, resulted in an exhibit and catalogue of the Koelz Tibetan and Ladakhi Buddhist monastic thangka paintings (Copeland 1980). Research by Grace Beardsley on the textiles in the collection has yielded the present publication. As the current curator of the Koelz collection, I can only express my profound gratitude and admiration for the efforts of these two dedicated volunteers in studying and sharing their knowledge concerning Walter Koelz and his remarkable collection of South and Central Asian artifacts.

The present volume has a long history. In Chapter 2, we summarize the life and collections of Walter Koelz and review how the collection's extraordinary objects made the journey from Asia to Ann Arbor, Michigan. Chapters 3-6 focus on the artifacts themselves, specifically on the twill tapestry wool shawls produced over several hundred years and spanning a remarkable period in Indian and world history. These chapters comprise only a portion of Beardsley's study of the Koelz textiles; the remainder of her efforts must await future publication.

Sadly, Grace Beardsley passed away before she could see the efforts of her decade-plus work on the Koelz textiles come to publication. Her work on the textiles began in the early 1980s when Karl Hutterer was curator of the Museum's Asian Collections. A self-taught textile scholar, Grace closely examined each of the 100-plus textiles in the Koelz collection, recording detailed information on construction, thread counts, color, and design. She also conducted extensive background research on the objects, and sought to understand them in their broader cultural and historical framework. Thus, her approach to the textiles was that of both a textile specialist and an anthropologist, not surprising given her prior education in decorative arts (University of Chicago) and anthropology (as a student of Alfred J. Kroeber at the University of California, Berkeley).

Grace's route to our museum was circuitous. While at Berkeley, she met and married Richard Beardsley, a cultural anthropologist specializing in Japan, and they moved to Ann Arbor in 1948 when Richard took up a position in the University of Michigan, Department of Anthropology. The Beardsleys raised two daughters in Ann Arbor, making frequent trips to Japan. It was not until after Richard Beardsley's death in 1978 that Grace began her study of textiles (at age 65!) researching hand-woven belts of Tarahumara native communities in northern Mexico and as well as the Koelz textiles.

When I arrived as curator of the Museum of Anthropology in 1993, Grace had nearly completed her study of the textiles and had prepared a lengthy manuscript on the Kashmiri and Persian shawls, west Indian phulkari embroideries, Uzbeki embroidered household textiles (suzanis), fitted garments, and miscellaneous other textiles (saris, horse caparisons, rugs, etc.) in the Koelz Collection. A perfectionist, Grace was not

satisfied with her ambitious and wide-ranging study, and when she left Ann Arbor in 1998 to live near her daughters in Oregon, decided to recast the volume into two separate books. As curator of the collection I was eager to see her work published, but neither Grace nor I made significant progress in meeting this goal for several years. We renewed contact in spring 2003, when I contacted Grace about the volume and requested her approval to extract the portion of her manuscript dealing with the Kashmiri and Persian shawls for a publication that could appear in concert with a planned exhibit of the shawls at the University's Museum of Art. Then ninety years old, Grace responded enthusiastically to this suggestion and began to work through the volume, writing detailed editorial suggestions and revisions in the margins, which she mailed to me in sections. As noted, Grace passed away before this volume could be completed, and it has fallen to me to complete the final editing and reorganization of the work. While I have necessarily reorganized the work somewhat, I have tried to be as true as possible to her intent and have maintained her graceful prose. An avocational weaver myself and a scholar of South Asian craft production, it has been a pleasure to see this volume through to completion, and to learn from Grace about the wonder of these beautiful textiles. I hope that the readers of this volume will share her love and enthusiasm for the objects described, and I am confident that they, like me, will learn a great deal from her dedicated and impressive scholarship.

Carla M. Sinopoli
December, 2004

Acknowledgments

In a project taking more than 20 years from inception to completion, many debts have been accumulated. I am certain that if Grace were here, she would first and foremost acknowledge the support of her daughters Margaret and Kelcey. In the Museum of Anthropology, we thank Karl Hutterer, who as Curator of the Asian Division first encouraged this project. We also thank the then and now Museum Director, Dick Ford, for his support at the beginning and end of these efforts. Collection managers David Kennedy and Karen O'Brien provided invaluable help in making the shawls accessible for study and photography. Thanks to Karen O'Brien also for word-processing Grace Beardsley's original 400-plus page manuscript and Walter Koelz's manuscript which is included on the CD. The University of Michigan Center for South Asian Studies provided financial support for this work. Kay Clahassey drafted and redrafted all of the illustrations in this volume and has been with the project since its inception; her dedication, patience, and good humor are appreciated as much as her extraordinary artistic skills. Thanks also to Sally Mitani and Jill Rheinheimer who edited, designed, and nurtured this manuscript and rode herd on me to see it to completion. The University of Michigan Office of the Vice President for Research and College of Literature, Sciences, and the Arts provided funds for the photographic documentation of the collection. The photographs were taken by Dwight Cendrowski (Dwight Cendrowski Photographers LLC) in the hallway of the School of Architecture and Design; we thank Sherri Smith for her assistance in this effort. The publication of this manuscript coincides with an exhibit of the Koelz textiles at the University of Michigan Museum of Art. We thank exhibit curator Maribeth Graybill, and the museum's exhibit staff for providing such a wonderful showcase for the collection. Finally, we must acknowledge Walter Koelz who acquired this extraordinary collection in the first place; we dedicate this work to his memory.

Carla M. Sinopoli
June, 2005

PART I
Kashmir Shawls in Context

Introduction

About the Koelz Collection

The Koelz Collection of Asian textiles, Asian Division of the University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, derives from Walter W. Koelz's travels in Southern and Central Asia in the early 1900s. The collection was made in what was then northwestern India, although the textiles themselves derive from a much larger area including Iran, Afghanistan, Turkistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, Kashmir, India, and Xijang (Tibet). These areas are Central Asian, not only geographically but even more so historically: they are central to the Asian continent in having served for millennia as crossroads for trade, conquest, and cultural exchange.

The Koelz Collection includes flat and fitted garments as well as a variety of textile household furnishings suitable for nomads, villagers, and urban dwellers. The textiles include wool pile weaving produced by nomads inhabiting areas just east of the Caspian Sea; silk brocades and embroidered cottons of the Middle East; fine woolen shawls from Kashmir in the foothills of the Karakoram Range; Tibetan horse caparisons; and even a tribal sash from the Assam Hills of eastern India. Particular strengths of the collection are the tapestry-woven wool shawls of Kashmir, cotton shawls embroidered in the phulkari technique from India and Pakistan, and embroidered household pieces from Uzbekistan. Their creators likely included both household artisans who produced for family consumption and full-time specialists producing for international markets.¹

Koelz's discernment and respect for high-quality textile skills is impressive. Collecting these textiles was no easy task. In a letter written from Karachi in 1934, commenting on a shipment of items to the University of Michigan, Koelz observed: "the acquisition of good textiles is a slow process, more laborious even than the body-exhausting trek in the mountains after Tibetan paintings."²

This study of the Koelz textiles explores their origins and their uses as well as the objectives of their collector. The textiles also tell us about the societies that produced these

goods and the period in which they were produced. Many of the pieces reflect the collision between traditional handwork and the industrialization of the nineteenth century.

The Koelz Collection also casts light on changing textile technologies and the impact of changing expressions of taste. This study also touches on the search for suitable fibers and dyes, the development of ingenious devices for weaving and coded instructions for illiterate weavers, the patterned distribution of labor, and evidence of trade. Aspects of these are embodied, bit and fragment, in the cloth of former days.

Nor should the aesthetic dimensions of the collection be overlooked. Many ethnic cloths are of great beauty and are today recognized as such, rather than being regarded as mere “native” crafts, relegated to exhibition among ostrich eggs and other curiosities. We must also realize that in centuries past, a far greater value was placed on textiles. Cloth once ranked with gold, gems, weaponry, magnificent palaces, and large retinues as evidence of wealth and power. Cloth was, in fact, a mainstay in making palaces and retainers resplendent. The possession and distribution of luxury items, including fine cloths, was both widely recognized and pervasively employed as evidence of power. A leader might distribute wealth to reward and control underlings or might present handsome and costly gifts to rivals in elaborate “Robes of Honor” ceremonies (Gordon 2001). Both gestures could strengthen and elevate the leader’s position with his subordinates. Similarly, rulers and courts made opulent displays of wealth derived from plunder, tribute, local manufacture by court-maintained artisans, or gift exchange with other rulers or elites.

Nor were handsome fabrics displayed only on special occasions. Taking an example from an earlier Central and Southwest Asian world to which some of the Koelz textiles are distantly related, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Safavid rulers of Persia used a dazzling array of fabrics in their daily domestic activities. Rulers, courtiers, and servants were clothed in silk, often gold- and silver-enriched. Their horses were caparisoned in equally handsome materials. Likewise, rich fabrics with woven or embroidered designs were used to fashion garden pavilions and gorgeous tents. These embroidered canopies were carried onto the hunting field to offer shelter for rest or regalement. On the field of battle, the contest in display was often almost as important as the contest at arms, and larger and even more elaborate textile constructions were erected. Within the Safavid palaces, floors, divans, and cushions were covered with rich weavings. Walls were sometimes entirely draped with hangings, and doorways were hung with curtains (Ackerman in Pope and Ackerman 1965:5:2069).

One wonders how all this textile wealth in support of power was produced for courts and how it was stockpiled. In the great Islamic courts of Persia, India, and Central Asia, the tremendous volume of sumptuous textiles required for courtly activities gave rise to the institution of palace factories known as *tiraz* (or *karkhanas* in the Mughal context). Some idea of the magnitude of manufacturers in such courts may be gained from a description of the fourteenth-century court of the Delhi Sultanate cited by Serjeant (1972:122). In addition to the armor makers, jewelers, embroiderers and other master craftsmen, the state factories of Sultan Mohammad ibn Tughlak of Delhi (r. 1325-1351) employed four thousand weavers of silk. The *tiraz* storerooms also contained vast quantities of imported cloth from China, Iraq, and Alexandria.

In the seventeenth-century Persian Safavid court, the need for splendid textiles was met by tribute as well as by the workers in the court’s *tiraz*. Artisans were drawn from many lands,

for skilled artisans were themselves valued assets. Among the manufactured products of the period, textiles became perhaps the most important. In 1667, Isfahahn had some thirty-two weaving workshops attached to the court, each employing some 150 skilled weavers—a total of 4,800 laborers working solely for the court (Lubell 1976:2:120).

The use of fine textiles was of course not solely the realm of emperors. Textiles were also highly valued in the more modest households of local kings, elites, merchants, and others with the means to acquire them. The Maharajah Sawai Man Singh II Museum in Jaipur (Singh 1979: ix-xi) houses an outstanding family collection of fabrics and costumes that is remarkable in revealing a dynastic family's long history of collecting cloth pieces and clothing; this is a rare well-documented and well-maintained textile treasure that has been conserved despite India's humid climate. Some of the earliest dated textiles preserved in India come from this collection, which includes fitted costumes for men, women, and children; shawls, *odhanis* (veils), and other draped wear; unused fabrics and furnishing materials, quilts, curtains, upholstery, carpets, and floor spreads; and palanquin covers and horse caparisons. The rajah's court workshops, karkhanas, which produced the textiles, were organized on the Mughal pattern: spinning, dyeing, weaving, carpet-making, printing, embroidery, stitching, and jewelry-making figure among the thirty-six workshops.

Even among non-elites, smaller textile troves and more modest wardrobes were accumulated and passed on between the generations. The use of socially appropriate textiles placed the owner or wearer more securely in her or his social network. For example, the phulkari embroidered shawls in the Koelz Collection were prepared well in advance by women in villages of the Punjab for their daughters' marriages and distribution to wedding guests. Afterward, the shawls were carefully laid away to be worn at other festive events. In the same way, the Koelz *suzanis* from Uzbekistan, embroidered for home furnishings, were worked by family women in anticipation of marriage and the establishment of new households.

While the textiles described above were made by women for members of their extended households, the Kashmiri and Persian wool shawls in the Koelz collection are the work of male professionals. Worn primarily by upper-class men, they were significant status symbols. The Koelz silk brocades are also the work of professional weavers, and were tailored to produce handsome clothing expressive of high social position.

The Koelz textiles are claimants to no great age. The oldest fabric piece in the Koelz collection is probably the early seventeenth-century Shah Abbas silk fragment. Most of the shawls were purchased in antique shops of northwestern India in the early 1930s, and date to the nineteenth century. It is only for the wool shawls that a closer dating has been attempted, facilitated by the numbers of more specifically dated published shawls. Even so, the suggested dates for the Koelz shawls are approximate at best.

The Organization of This Work

The work is divided into two main sections. Part I consists of six chapters, providing the context for understanding the Koelz textiles. Chapter 2 presents a brief overview of the

history of the collection, and of Walter Koelz, who procured it. Chapters 3 through 6 turn to the textiles themselves. Although there are only two turbans in the collection (and even these are arguably not turbans), these relatively early and finely woven textiles contain many of the elements important to understanding the more numerous shawls in the collection. These “turbans” are discussed in Chapter 3. The bulk of this study, however, is devoted to the shawls. Chapter 4 provides historical context for the shawls by considering their material constituents, technology of production, and the social contexts in which the shawls were produced and consumed from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Chapter 5 examines the shawls in even more detail, considering an important technological innovation of the nineteenth century—the development of elaborate pieced shawls. Chapter 6 turns to a discussion of major motifs important in pieced and fully woven shawls, and the impact of the European Jacquard loom on shawl design.

Part II of this volume is a detailed descriptive catalogue of a portion of the Koelz textile collection: the elaborate shawls and “turbans” woven in Kashmir or Persia. Information on other textiles in the collection—saris, phulkari embroideries, fitted garments and household textiles (suzanis, rugs, book covers, and other pieces)—will be published separately in the future. Here, we focus on one important weaving tradition that emerged out of the Islamic courts of Central and South Asia, and whose products came to be coveted and widely worn by European women throughout the nineteenth century. The transition from production for courtly elites to that of a broad international consumer base dramatically impacted both the forms and ornamentation of the textiles and their technology of production.

For the most part, this monograph describes the collection in terms easily accessible to the general reader, keeping formal textile terminology to a minimum. But textile analysis is often technical enough to defy simple explanation and repetitively detailed enough to tire. Where feasible and expedient, data are condensed into tables and graphs. Nonetheless, certain sections of this work are replete with detailed descriptions of aspects of technology that have in the past been unfortunately overlooked or, perhaps, tactfully avoided. For the textile scholar, these details are essential. For the general reader, the pages are easily turned.

Terms not usually found in standard collegiate dictionaries or that are used in a specialized way are defined in the text, and they have also been summarized in a glossary at the end of the book. English usage is employed for most terms, except where there is no ready equivalent. Where possible, the social background in which the fabrics were used is discussed. However, this is uneven and for some textiles in the Koelz collection, little information is available.

Notes

1. The Koelz collection of the UMMA also includes an outstanding assemblage of well-documented thangka paintings (Copeland 1980).
2. Letter to Professor Winter, 13 January 1934, copy on file, UMMA Asian Archaeology Division, University of Michigan.