

An Early Indian Silk

Rahul Jain

This textile (Pl. 20.1) belongs to a rare group of Indian drawloomed silks discovered in Tibet. Most of them are woven in the complex fabric structures of samit and lampas and date from the 15th to 17th centuries. As many pre-date the earliest surviving silks of the Mughal period, they are of utmost importance to the study of medieval Indian textile history. Although a number of different iconographic series appear in the group, most of the silks show, to greater or lesser extent, an unmistakable commonality of material, weave, colour and motif. Some were designed and woven specially for export to the great monastic establishments of Tibet, where climatic and cultural conditions were perfect for their preservation. Others were possibly woven for the Deccani and Rajput courts but found their way to Tibet instead. This particular example is the earliest known fragment of an Indian silk in a museum collection in India.

In the medieval period, Tibet's wealthy Buddhist establishments provided an insatiable market for luxury textiles. Walls, ceilings, floors, pillars and lintels in Tibetan monasteries were traditionally draped with woven, embroidered, resist-dyed and appliqued cloths. These were imported from regions as far apart as China and western Europe, and from every region in between, for use as canopies, hangings, curtains, banners, altar covers and *taṅkā* mounts, as well as for garments. In that setting, Indian silks such as these, with their sensational colour and attractive design, would have been among the most desirable, and conveniently available, of all foreign textiles entering Tibet.

The identification of an Assamese Vaiṣṇavite iconography in one series from this group has established that the drawlooms required to weave complicated samite- and lampas-weave fabrics were being used in Assam in the mid-16th century [Crill, 1992, pp. 76-83]. The Assam, north Bengal region had developed what was possibly the earliest mulberry sericulture and silkweaving industry in the Indian subcontinent. It was also a pre-eminent source of lac, the principal dye used in nearly all these silks. From north Bengal, a direct and well-established trade route went up, via Sikkim, to Tibet. It is possible, then, that a



Pl. 20.1: Fragment of woven silk patterned with roundels, 16th century

number of the non-Vaiṣṇavite silks, including this one, were also woven in that region. Questions remain, nonetheless, about this medieval Indian manufacture. Unlike some woven with an identifiable east Indian motif, others such as this one are woven with a pattern that combines multiple design influences but has no precise parallel in India's court or temple art from the period. As all share certain material and design characteristics, it is tempting to argue that they were all woven at the same east Indian drawloom-weaving centre over a period of time, and that their diverse images and styles reflect merely the diversity of the destinations they were intended for. As yet, no clear evidence is available to confirm this. That some came from another centre, in some other region, remains a possibility. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the weaving of complex silks on drawlooms was probably restricted to only a few centres outside east India, but with the exception of Ahmedabad, the capital of the Gujarat sultanate in west India, no other centre has been securely identified. Possibly, Delhi, in north India, and the Daulatabad-Deogiri area in the north Deccan, supported drawloom weaving during this period [Naqvi, 1983, pp. 115-126].

More important than the question of origin is the glimpse these beautiful, but enigmatic, silks provide into India's medieval art. They offer firm proof of the presence of robust provincial traditions of design and pattern-making in the "decorative" arts of the subcontinent. They show, crucially, that motifs and styles in these arts tended to persist over far longer periods of time than those of court painting and architectural decor. In some instances where mural or manuscript paintings have not survived, these medieval textiles offer unique evidence for regional artistic styles and vocabularies from the period.

By the time this textile was woven in north-eastern India, the theme of inhabited roundels had already appeared for a thousand years in patterned silks woven elsewhere in Asia. In this late Indian version, simple feathered roundels depict a classical *gaja-vyāla* combat. The *vyāla* is often depicted in the arts of India as a destroyer of elephants (*gaja*). It may be seen trampling upon an elephant or clenching one in its jaws, in a symbolic victory of a superior force over what is the region's most celebrated icon of power and wealth. In this silk, that combat is compounded by the appearance on the scene of another mythical beast: a winged feline with eight legs. Presumably, this is a *sarabha*, described in the great Hindu epic, the *Mahābhārata*, as an eight-legged "lion killer". Under attack by a *vyāla*, which itself is being attacked by a *sarabha*, the elephant, fully caparisoned for battle, appears strangely motionless. The combat occurs within a relatively large, plain roundel with a feathered rim. Small errors of pattern and weave make the interstitial motifs difficult to decipher. The device may be interpreted as a pearled square enclosing a rectangular, six-petalled floret. Resting on each of the square's four sides is a pistillated, palmette-like form.

The *vyāla* and *sarabha* of this textile have the sinuous bodies and pinched waists

characteristic of the arts of many regions of Sultanate India but persisting right upto the modern period in the arts of eastern India. The static, submissive posture of the elephant is also characteristic of northeast Indian representations in painted manuscripts and stone sculpture. While the *gaja-vyāla* theme, something compounded with a melee of other beasts, appears in the medieval temple art of several regions, the *gaja-vyāla-sarabha* motif is very rare. The proposed period of production for this silk is supported by the appearance of a *vyāla* of nearly identical style and posture in a painted folio of *Devī Māhātmya* manuscript from one of the hill kingdoms of northern India. The folio is dated c. 1552, and the winged feline appears in one of its most potent Hindu incarnations: as a vehicle for the great goddess, Devī [Goswamy and Fischer, 1997, No. 1, p. 22].

The direction of the roundels in this silk is aligned to that the weft so that the pattern appears laid on its side. This scheme would have permitted long lengths of the pattern to be woven and rotated horizontally for use, a plan of weaving which appears frequently in these medieval Indian silks. Their end-uses must have required frieze-like panels with uninterested pattern. These were presumably stitched to other such lengths above and below. Some surviving ensembles show that such silks were edged with wide, separately-woven borders and stitched together into curtains, wall-hangings, and tent panels [Riboud, 1998, Pl. 33, p. 170]. Large, court furnishings of this sort are known to have survived in Tibet and, surprisingly, in the royal textile stores of the Rajput court of Amber (Jaipur). In c. 1597, Raja Man Singh of Amber, who had been sent by the Mughal emperor Akbar (c. 1556-1605) to quell a rebellion in Bengal, married princess Padmeshwari (Kshama Devi), the sister of king Lakshminarayan of neighbouring Koch Bihar. This event might explain how woven silks from remote northeast India entered the Amber (Jaipur) treasury.

Details of Textile

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DESCRIPTION: Fragment of woven silk patterned with roundels enclosing an elephant, a winged feline, and an eight-legged beast in combat.

PROVENANCE: Eastern India, 16th century.

MATERIAL: Silk

MEASUREMENTS: 52.5×26 cms.

TECHNIQUE: Compound, complementary weft-patterned 1S2 twill (samit)

THREADS:

Pattern Control Warps: silk, pink, thin, tight S-twist, paired

Structure Warps: silk, pink, thin, tight S-twist

Warp Order: 1 pair of pattern control warps alternates with 1 structure wrap

Complementary Wefts: silk, twistless, red, dark greenish-blue, yellowish-cream, white

Weft Order: ABC, ABC in 3-colour areas

THREAD COUNTS:

Pattern Control Warps: 32-36 pairs/cm

Structure Warps: 16-18/cm

Complementary Wefts: 31-33/cm

Warp Pattern Step: 1 pair of pattern control warps

Weft Pattern Step: generally 2 sheds of complementary-weft twill

PATTERN:

Straight repeat; approximate height of technical repeat unit: 15-17 cm; approximate width of technical repeat unit: 17 cm.

References

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