

ABEGG-STIFTUNG

Press Release, April 2014

SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2014

VEIL AND ADORNMENT MIEVEAL TEXTILES AND THE CULT OF RELICS

27 APRIL – 9 NOVEMBER 2014

OPEN DAILY FROM 2 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.

What role do textiles play in the cult of relics? The mortal remains of saints were a church's most treasured possession in the Middle Ages – and often still are in Catholic areas. For centuries, relics have been painstakingly preserved, wrapped in the most exquisite materials available. Textiles protect and adorn. And in the course of time, they sometimes became relics in their own right by virtue of having touched venerated objects or having been worn by a saint. Thus many medieval textiles owe their preservation exclusively to the cult of relics.

The new special exhibition at the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg presents a rich array of textiles used in the cult of relics. The highlights of the show are the medieval fabrics from the reliquary shrine of Saint Godehard, the Bishop of Hildesheim who died in 1038. When he was canonised in 1131, nearly a century after his death, his tomb in Hildesheim Cathedral was opened and the contents transferred to a gilded, gem-studded shrine.

MAGNIFICENT ACCOUTREMENTS

The shrine was opened for conservation purposes in 2009, bringing to light several bundles containing remains taken from the tomb of the saint: bones, fragments of vestments, dust, grit and earth – all carefully packaged inside textile wrappings. In the years following, the medieval textiles were carefully conserved in the Abegg-Stiftung's textile conservation studio and are now being presented to the public for the first time. Among them is an especially magnificent silk, whose large pattern shows a double-headed, amply plumed peacock with an impressive wheel on a dark-blue ground. Of the second wrapping with a coloured pattern one whole length has survived. Measuring 250 × 125 cm, it was sewn by skilful hands into a box shape, presumably to serve as a lining for the shrine of Saint Godehard. The pattern is made up of a red ground and dark-green pairs of birds with outlining and details in yellow. Rather less attractive in terms of colour, albeit of equal historical interest, are two large white linen cloths. Both are altar cloths that were probably used in Hildesheim Cathedral before being converted into relic wrappings.

A VESTMENT RELIC

The so-called Bernward Chasuble also comes from Hildesheim. Made of gorgeous Byzantine silk, it is one of the finest 11th-century garments to have survived. The plain but patterned yellow silk features large medallions containing pairs of birds. Bishop Bernward of Hildesheim, who died in 1022, gave the vestment to the Benedictine Abbey of Saint Michael that he himself founded. After his canonisation in 1193, the chasuble became not just a memento but a relic, which led to pieces being cut out of it. The conspicuously rectangular gaps left in an otherwise intact garment furnish conclusive proof of the practice of dividing relics.

SILKS FROM THE SAINT CANDIDUS HEAD RELIQUARY

Alongside the magnificent textiles from Hildesheim, the Abegg-Stiftung is also presenting a no less interesting find complex from the Abbey of Saint-Maurice in the Valais, namely the textiles retrieved from the Saint Candidus head reliquary. According to the legend, this early Christian martyr was executed near Saint-Maurice as a member of the Theban Legion around the year AD 302. The costly head-shaped reliquary for his skull was made in the 12th century. During restoration work in 1961, the reliquary was found to contain not only parts of the skull of Saint Candidus, but also a blue silk cap and dozens of tied-up textile packages with little parchment notes containing information about the tiny relics wrapped up inside them. It seems that relics of other saints and keepsakes from famous holy sites were also preserved inside the Saint Candidus head reliquary. The oldest textiles date from the early 6th century, the period in which the Abbey of Saint-Maurice was founded.

TEXTILES FROM THE GUELPH TREASURE

In 2005, the Abegg-Stiftung purchased at auction a heavy oak casket resembling a treasure chest. The elaborate carving on the lid names its precious contents: "Fragments of cloth from the treasury of relics of the House of Braunschweig-Lüneburg." Inside the casket was a pile of cardboard folders and paper wrappings, which in turn contained fragments of cloth and little relic bags originating from the former treasury of the Collegiate Church of Saint Blaise in Braunschweig. Since this treasury was made over to the donor's family – the Guelphs – in 1671, it is now known as the "Guelph Treasure." The oak chest and cardboard folders, on the other hand, date from the late 19th century, when the Viennese priest and medieval scholar Wilhelm Anton Neumann was commissioned by the owners to study and appraise the Guelph Treasure. Neumann had the finest materials sewn into cardboard folders, which he proceeded to label and preserve in a custom-made wooden chest. His encyclopaedic scholarly account of the Guelph Treasure was published in 1891. The textiles, until 2005 believed lost, are now being exhibited for the first time. Of special interest are not just the fragments of medieval textiles and the relic bags themselves, but also their historical montage. The intact ensemble of casket, cardboard folders, paper wrappings and labels is a truly exceptional example of how objects of cult became objects of research.

TEXTILE RELICS FOR PRIVATE DEVOTIONS

Complementing the exhibition are two relic arrangements from the Benedictine Abbey of Mariastein in Canton Solothurn. The pieces of cloth displayed here are fragments of famous textile relics such as the chasuble of Saint Fridolin of Säkingen and the bridal gown of Saint Elizabeth of Thuringia. Around 1900, the fragments were painstakingly assembled on two cardboard panels, one for female and one for male saints, and then labelled with great care. Originally framed, the textile relics may have been used for private devotions.

The textiles from Hildesheim, Saint-Maurice and Mariastein were entrusted to the Abegg-Stiftung for conservation and analysis. They will be returned to their owners once the special exhibition in Riggisberg is over.

Press release and photos are available as e-mail attachments.