

ABEGG-STIFTUNG

Press Release, April 2015

SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2015

TRIUMPH OF ORNAMENT FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN SILK-WEAVING

26 APRIL – 8 NOVEMBER 2015

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

In the age of the Renaissance, at a time when painters were striving for greater naturalism and depth, silk-weaving ventured down a completely different path. It celebrated ornament in stylized, two-dimensional forms and invented monumental patterns of unparalleled splendour and elegance. To this day, these fabrics count among the supreme achievements of the European art of ornament.

The silks on show in the special exhibition at the Abegg-Stiftung are remarkable for the costly materials, technical mastery and artistic inventiveness invested in their creation. Velvets take pride of place here. These sumptuous fabrics with their magnificent patterns provide persuasive testimony to the innovative potential of Italy's silk-weavers and textile designers of the fifteenth century. Woven in silk and gold thread, these are luxury fabrics par excellence. That they feature in so many portraits of the period, whether of princes, bishops or members of wealthy mercantile families, is thus not surprising. Such finery, reproduced in lavish detail and with painstaking accuracy, was a very visible badge of high social status. The radiant colours and sheer opulence of the array of fabrics on show at the Abegg-Stiftung cannot fail to delight. The exhibition is thus a feast for the eyes in which intense reds, luminous greens and royal blues, to say nothing of gleaming gold, fascinating patterns, intricate details and highlights, silky soft pile and special effects in metallic thread compete for our attention.

THE THIRD DIMENSION

Velvets differ from other silks on account of their pile. This is what gives them their soft, fine, fur-like feel and makes them change colour depending on the incident light. And this is what lends their patterns the third dimension of depth. Pile, however, calls for a highly sophisticated weaving technique. Velvets derive their pattern not from the weft but from the additional warp threads that produce the hallmark pile on top of the ground fabric. The rise of this innovative weaving technique also inspired an artistic new departure. The orientation of the ornaments changed from breadthwise to lengthwise so that, following the direction of the warp, they gained in height while the forms became longer and more monumental.

MAGNIFICENT PATTERNS

The patterns of the fabrics exhibited here are exceptionally dynamic and expressive. Especially impressive are the examples with vigorously climbing vines that meander up the cloth in sweeping, elegant curves. These vines are in turn adorned with large floral motifs, and have spindly, serpentine offshoots with stylized fruits and leaves branching off them. The patterns can be as large as two metres high, so that only then is the pattern repeated. Others, meanwhile, feature densely packed rows of large, fantastical flowers. It is a bizarre-looking world that is created here – a world that contrasts sharply with what was happening in the other arts at the same time. Models from Classical Antiquity, light and shade, depth and perspective have scarcely any role to play in silk-weaving. Here, fantasy and sophisticated stylizing hold sway.

MADE IN ITALY

Italian silk-weaving of the fifteenth century was the non plus ultra of textile manufacture. Thanks to its velvets, Italy rose to become a leading centre of silk-weaving, exceeding even Persia and China in its technical and artistic inventiveness. This was the golden age of European velvet weaving. Italian velvets were exported all over the known world. Their pre-eminence is also evident in the impact they had on Ottoman silk-weaving, in those days still in its infancy. The borrowings from Italian models included not just the basic form of the vertical climbing vine but also specific details such as the characteristic palmettes with flowers and fruits and the tendril-like shoots branching off on either side.

EXTRAORDINARY LUXURY

The manufacture of velvets was both time-consuming and expensive. Because of the pile, around six times as much silk was needed for a velvet as for a smooth silk. Even the plainest velvets therefore surpass almost all other fabrics in terms of material value. And an exceptionally complex pattern, the use of several colours, special effects and gold thread make them costlier still. Velvets with gold brocading thus rank among the greatest luxury goods of the fifteenth century. The more gold they contain, the more precious they are. Velvet “cloth of gold” is velvet in which not just parts of the pattern but even the background is woven in gold thread. Only the highest-ranking dignitaries, from emperors and popes to princes, bishops and wealthy mercantile families could afford such fabrics, which were at once status symbol, luxury commodity and insignia. They could be made up into ceremonial robes both sacred and secular or be used to adorn thrones and altars.

All the works exhibited belong to the Abegg-Stiftung, which holds one of the world’s most important collections of fifteenth-century velvets.

This media release is also available as an e-mail attachment.