

ABEGG-STIFTUNG

Media Release April 2017



SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2017

MATERIAL TRACES CONSERVING AND EXPLORING TEXTILES

30 APRIL – 12 NOVEMBER 2017
OPEN DAILY FROM 2 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.

At this year's special exhibition the Abegg-Stiftung will give visitors an insight into the work of a textile conservator. Taking as an example some recently conserved textiles from Central Asia, all of them over a thousand years old, the exhibition will explain the various tests and hands-on conservation work that are a necessary preliminary to public presentation.

The conservation of textiles has played a major role in the work of the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg ever since it first opened fifty years ago. Because such work is done behind the scenes, visitors to the exhibitions see only the end results of it as a rule. Just how long the journey from “untreated” to “exhibition-ready” textile can be – and the surprises it sometimes turns up – is vividly illustrated in this year's special exhibition. The main focus of the show is on the work entailed in preparing a historical garment, hanging, or pair of shoes for presentation.

WIDE-RANGING TESTS AND ANALYSES

But what does a textile conservator actually do? Does she darn moth holes – or patch them, perhaps? Hardly! The paramount objective is to carefully conserve what has survived and to create conditions conducive to its long-term preservation. Every conservation project begins with a detailed material and technical analysis and with an appraisal of the overall condition of the piece, including damage mapping. Those who have never concerned themselves with historical textiles can scarcely imagine what an astonishingly rich source they are, and what a wealth of information on their manufacture, function, and history a close “reading” of them can supply. It is not uncommon for those who work on them to do pioneering research, if only because no comparable pieces have survived. Very old textiles like the ones shown here are often the only examples to have withstood the test of time. Scientific testing methods, for which the Abegg-Stiftung can draw on the support of external experts from both Switzerland and abroad, supply important pointers. Only once all these analyses and examinations have been performed does the textile conservator try out suitable treatment methods and draw up a conservation concept.

FILMIC INSIGHTS

The exhibition features videos of the showcased textiles undergoing treatment in the conservation studio. Visitors can thus watch a densely embroidered robe being freed from dust and dirt with the aid of a miniscule vacuum cleaner and brush; or they can look on as a nimble-fingered conservator plying a surgical needle and ultra-fine silk thread stitches an original textile onto a support fabric. The films include some impressive before-and-after sequences as well as images of the custom-made stands on which the robes are mounted; they also explain the insights that were obtained while the textiles were being studied and conserved.

TWO GREAT HANGINGS

The principal attraction of the exhibition consists of two large, well-preserved hangings from Central Asia, dated to the 8th–9th century. They are decorated with stags facing each other inside a medallion, which was a widely used pattern type at the time, but here has been enlarged to a monumental scale. The medallions therefore extend over the full width of the cloth, at least 173 cm on one hanging and 157 cm on the other, making this a veritable tour de force of weaving! The picture fields bordering the medallions also contain a number of much smaller, beautifully reproduced animals and plant motifs.

The hangings come from an archaeological context and hence were soiled on arrival. The search for a suitable cleaning method uncovered a hitherto unknown dyeing method: it was of all dyestuffs indigo, which in fact has the capacity to form an extremely stable bond with textile fibres, that had been processed in such a way that the dark blue threads had become fragile and extremely water-sensitive. The only cleaning method that could be considered was therefore micro-suction, which incidentally turned out to be very efficient.

SOPHISTICATED SHOES

Shoes can also fall within the remit of the textile conservator. The exhibition therefore includes four examples made of twined plant fibres and silk, which were probably made in Eastern Central Asia and have been dated to the 5th–6th century. The main focus of attention here was on the manufacturing method. That the flat, finely patterned shoes must have been made by a sophisticated twining technique was clear; what had yet to be ascertained was exactly how this technique worked. Once the textile technologies had been thoroughly investigated, therefore, experimental archaeology was brought to bear and an attempt made to produce a replica shoe using the same twining method. This practical experiment revealed that the shoes must have been made in a single piece. The manufacturing method, in other words, is sophisticated enough to manage entirely without seams, but can still produce the desired shape and pattern in a single operation.

A MYSTERIOUS SPARKLE

The exhibition also features several robes, among them one from China, which at first looks unassuming, but on closer inspection turns out to be quite astonishing, being embroidered all over with scenes on the theme of immortality and the beyond as well as rosettes and animals. And anyone who looks closely will notice something else: tiny, gleaming flecks of light! These are produced by tiny fragments of mica scattered in between two transparent layers of weaving. Magnified footage of the mica-inlaid weave and the embroidery on top of it is presented in one of the films, affording visitors a fascinating glimpse inside a textile that would normally be reserved for the conservator working at the microscope. This is the only textile inlaid with mica known to us to date. At the time it was made in the 5th–6th century, the robe would have sparkled every time the wearer moved. So it seems that even centuries ago, people used clothes to attract attention, to assert their social status, and to make themselves look glamorous.

SUITABLE STORAGE AND PRESENTATION

Essential to the long-term preservation of rare textiles are not only stable climatic conditions and protection from dust and light, but also suitable forms of storage and/or presentation. Thus it is the responsibility of the textile conservator to monitor the ambient conditions in which the textiles are kept and to design and manufacture suitable mounts, stands, and supports. Robes, for example, invariably raise the question of whether they should be mounted on tailor-made stands or would do better if laid out flat. From the conservator's point of view, any stands used must match the shape and cut of the robe exactly, and be fitted

with such precision that the fabric is supported, but never stretched or pulled. Not surprisingly, stand manufacture tends to be quite time-consuming.

THE ABEGG-STIFTUNG'S TEXTILE CONSERVATION STUDIO

The Abegg-Stiftung has been researching and conserving textile treasures since 1967 and enjoys a worldwide reputation as a centre of competence for historical textiles. The museum's exhibitions show not only textiles from its own collection but other applied arts as well. The institute was founded by Werner and Margaret Abegg, a Swiss-American couple who wanted to ensure the proper conservation of their own large collection as well as making a purposeful contribution to the preservation and study of valuable textiles from the past. As experienced collectors, Werner and Margaret Abegg were well aware of the fragility of the fabrics in their possession. Right from the start, therefore, they endowed their foundation with a studio specialized in the conservation of textiles – which at the time was a pioneering achievement in itself. The studio takes care of the Abegg-Stiftung's own holdings as well as conserving objects from other institutions. Important textiles from museums and churches all over the world are therefore entrusted to the Abegg-Stiftung. Among the pieces most recently conserved were an embroidered altarpiece from the Art Institute of Chicago and some valuable reliquary fabrics from the shrine of Saint Godehard in Hildesheim.

Last, but certainly not least, the Abegg-Stiftung has made a name for itself as a training centre for textile conservators. The studio provides six places for students at university level wishing to pursue a career in this field. The future of textile conservation is thus assured.

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