

ABEGG-STIFTUNG

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SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2018

A TASTE FOR THE EXOTIC EUROPEAN SILKS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

29 APRIL – 11 NOVEMBER 2018

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



Weird, bold, extravagant – this is how the luxury fashion fabrics of the early eighteenth century appear to us today. The intriguing patterns of these 300-year-old silks reflect a pronounced taste for the exotic. Some of the finest examples of this “crazy” fashion can now be admired in the Abegg-Stiftung’s new exhibition.

Being glamorously fashionable in the eighteenth century entailed first and foremost wearing lavishly patterned silks. While the cuts of both ladies’ gowns and men’s attire scarcely changed throughout the century, new fabric pattern collections came out regularly. Several trends developed, but what all have in common is a preference for strange-looking motifs and extravagant compositions redolent of exotic worlds. Arranged more or less chronologically, the exhibition explores this development and presents a selection of the impressive pattern styles – some of them made up into garments – that were en vogue between 1690 and 1740.

BIZARRE SILKS

The “bizarre silks” are undoubtedly one of the highlights of the show. These fabrics dating from the period 1690 to 1720 count among the most exotic creations that silk weavers ever produced. Their patterns are so fantastical and bizarre that they almost defy description. Geometrical shapes and purely imaginary figures are here combined with plants that no one has ever seen and strange-looking shadows. While the various motifs stand out clearly from each other and from their damask ground, they are not necessarily identifiable; many are no more than vaguely reminiscent of certain objects or creatures. Here, nature was not the model, it seems. Seen with today’s eyes, some objects look almost futuristic. Their bold colours and the use of gold and silver thread make these fabrics even more spectacular. It is hard to believe that ladies and gentlemen of rank wore clothes made of such brightly coloured, wildly patterned fabrics.

This stylistic phase is thought to have been inspired by Asian art forms, even if no exact models for it have been found as yet. Pattern designers simply borrowed whichever motifs took their fancy and adapted them according to their own ideas, almost certainly taking their cues from the design principles of the Far East. These included a preference for asymmetrical compositions with large, dynamic, often diagonally arranged motifs, which the Europeans then combined as desired, even without any logical or narrative thread; hence their exotic or “bizarre” appearance.

“PERSIENNES” OR LACE PATTERN

The next fashion trend to follow the surging exuberance of the bizarre silks lasted from ca. 1720 to 1730 and pointed in the opposite direction, as it were. Now the demand was for intricately structured symmetrical patterns, whose white diapered grounds recall fine lace. Yet the models for these decorative, openwork elements are to be found less in European lace than in oriental styles of ornament. Some of the French design drawings for patterns like these are labelled “persienne”, which is the name used to describe them in historic sources. Not until much later did art historians, in a nod to their appearance, start referring to them as “lace pattern”. Many of the robes and gowns made of such lace-patterned silks were worn at official, ceremonial occasions. That they were also worn in private is evident from the pale blue and white patterned banyan with matching cap on show in the exhibition. This is the kind of outfit a fashion-conscious gentleman might have worn over his knee breeches and chemise in the privacy of his own home. The generous, kimono- or kaftan-like cut had the advantage of being at once comfortable and exotic.

NOT SO NATURAL NATURALISM

The dominant style from the 1730s was Naturalism. This was identifiable by a marked preference for colourful plant motifs rendered with painterly finesse and a mastery of perspective such as had never before been produced on a loom. The consistent fall of light, abundant highlighting and shading, and fine gradations of colour lend these motifs a true-to-life, three-dimensional appearance. Interlocking, variously coloured weft threads were an important design element here since they enabled the kind of minimal variations in colour that might make even a woven motif look painted. Many of the fabric patterns in the naturalistic style likewise have an exotic quality, especially those that feature tropical fruits and plants that were all but unknown in Europe at the time. One of the silks on display in the exhibition shows pineapples and banana flowers, for example. Far more common, however, are plants, flowers and fruits of the pattern designer’s own invention. Their proportions are often perplexing and some of these flamboyantly colourful blooms seem excessively large. Rendered in a style that is at once realistic and dynamic, these curious plants still look “natural” – like specimens from some distant land.

CHINOISERIES

A rather more romantic, almost fairy-tale-like style to feature in the eclectic silk pattern catalogues of the early eighteenth century were chinoiseries. Here, the exotic influences are very clearly in evidence as Chinese porcelain, Far Eastern pagodas, Asiatic-looking figures and ideograms are playfully combined and artfully arranged to produce picturesque scenes and attractive pattern repeats. The aim was not so much to produce naturalistic depictions of Asian plants and animals as to give free rein to European fantasies of life in faraway countries, their inhabitants and their way of life. The results of such flights of fancy are sometimes very odd indeed, as is borne out by a Dutch silk showing Chinese figures sporting Ottoman turbans. Chinoiseries were en vogue from ca. 1720 to 1740.

INSPIRATION FROM AFAR

But how did these fabrics come to be patterned with such extraordinary designs? Where did the textile designers of the age draw inspiration? The general fascination with the wares and works of art from the Near and Far East that had been arriving in Europe ever since overseas trade began in earnest in the seventeenth century was undoubtedly a crucial factor here. The ships of the British and Dutch East India Companies brought back not just tea and spices from their voyages to Asia, but also porcelain, wallpaper, lacquer work and textiles. These must have fired the imaginations of Europe’s pattern designers, much as did the many

illustrated accounts of journeys to faraway places published at around the same time. One famous example of such a travelogue on show in the exhibition is Johan Nieuhof's description of his journey to China with a delegation of the Dutch East India Company, published in 1665. Nieuhof accompanied the expedition and wrote a lavishly illustrated account of both the land and its inhabitants. His illustrations in particular proved to be a rich source of inspiration for those European artists who wanted to surprise their noble clientele with ever new motifs from the big wide world.

But the textiles on show in this exhibition are impressive for reasons that go beyond their fantastical patterns alone. Even just the materials out of which they are made – silk, gold and silver thread – tell us that these were luxury products that very few could afford. Their manufacture, too, was time-consuming and expensive, and the weaving presupposed a very high level of technical accomplishment. To be able to weave fabrics with patterns as wild or intricate as these, the loom first had to be set up or “programmed”. Thus a highly specialised line of business emerged, whose primary purpose was to satisfy the exacting demands of aristocrats and the wealthy bourgeoisie. The textiles on show here thus represent a union of exquisite materials, astonishing creativity and craftsmanship. It is a fascinating combination, and one that for several decades held sway over genteel society's fashion tastes.

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

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Caption:

Silk weaving with red damask ground (Detail)

France or Italy, 1700–1710, Abegg-Stiftung, inv. no. 255