

ABEGG-STIFTUNG

Media Release, April 2019

SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2019

LUXURY ON THE NILE LATE ANTIQUE ATTIRE FROM EGYPT

28 APRIL – 10 NOVEMBER 2019
OPEN DAILY FROM 2 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.



Expensive, extravagant clothes played an important role in society even 1500 years ago in the Egypt of Late Antiquity. Dress could be a visible expression of dignity, rank and aspiration. But how best to do that in an age when men and women, young and old essentially wore the same outfit? The Abegg-Stiftung's new special exhibition sets out to answer this question. In addition to several tunics or fragments of tunics from the period, it also presents numerous small pieces of cloth, which as ornamental appliqués were once sewn onto otherwise unremarkable garments to lend them an individual touch.

The Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg is in possession of a major collection of textiles dating from the third to the ninth century, a selection of which the museum is now displaying in an exhibition about dress. The show turns and hinges on an item of clothing that is still familiar to us today: the tunic. This simple, wide-cut garment with or without sleeves was the most important item of clothing in the whole of the Mediterranean region. It was worn by men and women, adults and children of all social classes whether as everyday wear, ceremonial attire or livery. It derived its desired character not from the cut but rather from the materials of which it was made, the dyes colouring it and the ornaments embellishing it. Costly silk or coarse linen, dyed at great expense or left in its natural colour – these are what determined a tunic's value, as did the number and sophistication of the decorative elements.

TEXTILE TREASURES FROM DESERT SANDS

Today's fast fashion is so short-lived and wears out so quickly that visitors will be amazed that the centuries-old Egyptian textiles on show here have not only survived, but often have retained their radiant colours as well. It is the dry sands of the desert that we have to thank for their preservation. There, raiments made of fragile organic fibres such as wool, silk and linen were protected against moisture and light and so withstood the ravages of time. That so many of them survived also has to do with the burial customs of the period. After the third century, Egypt's dead were no longer embalmed and mummified, but instead were buried in their

clothes. Often they were dressed in several garments, one on top of the other, and it is these items that archaeologists unearthed centuries later.

WOVEN IN ONE PIECE

The centrepieces of the exhibition are two perfectly preserved, exceptionally large woollen garments. One is a bright red tunic decorated with two vertical bands patterned in purple and beige, which instead of being displayed on a mannequin has been spread out flat on the wall, mainly to show how huge it is. Another advantage of mounting it this way is that visitors can see how it was woven in one piece, including the sleeves. The weaving was done cross-wise from sleeve to sleeve, which would have been possible only on a loom of more than two and a half metres wide. The patterned parts, moreover, were woven straight into the cloth. Weaving such an item of clothing would therefore have been quite a feat.

The second tunic might almost be a twin of the first one, except that it is made of a heavy, beige-coloured woollen fabric, which ends in a wide cord at the hem. Woven into this one are purple-coloured decorative bands showing intricate climbing plants, dancing figures and animals. This tunic, too, was woven in one piece; but unlike the other one, it is presented in three dimensions on a T-shaped stand that provides all-round support.

How might it have felt to wear such a wide-cut garment? Surely the sheer quantity of material would have impeded movement – to say nothing of making the wearer resemble a walking tent? An illustration sheds light on this question. Of crucial importance, it seems, were the extremely narrow sleeves. These were so tight-fitting that they stabilized the whole tunic, as well as making the cloth bunch up at the shoulders as if the wearer were also wearing a cloak on top of it. The front and back overlap at the sides. The wide cord at the hem made the tunic stand out at both back and front so that it retained the desired shape and was comfortable to wear even when the wearer was moving.

TIMELESS ELEGANCE

Somewhat less spectacular in size, but equally interesting is a wide, sleeveless tunic dating from the first to third century. Very few garments from this early period have been preserved as well as this one. The tunic is remarkable for its fine, orange-coloured woollen weave and understated block pattern. The purple-coloured ornamental bands woven into it from shoulder to hem make for a decorative contrast. Surprisingly elegant and timeless, the tunic remained open at the sides and was gathered together by a belt worn at waist height. Being amply cut, it gives the impression of having half sleeves down to the elbows. For the exhibition, the tunic has been mounted on a special stand, which besides providing all-round support also reproduces the natural drape of the cloth.

CHARMING ORNAMENTS

While the showcases containing the tunics that have survived more or less intact form the centrepiece of the exhibition, most of the wall space is devoted to the display of smaller items: either tunic fragments or the ornamental appliqués that were once sewn onto them. Here we can admire the vast array of ornaments on offer, which ranged from coloured bands extending from shoulder to hem on both front and back to circular medallions or rectangular patches appliquéd onto the shoulders or at knee height and exquisitely worked borders used to embellish the neckline and sleeve ends. It is worth examining these ornaments more closely. Alongside geometrical patterns and floral motifs, there are several figural scenes, many of which are utterly charming. There are Nereids riding on dolphins, for example, or a fisherman in a loincloth with two fish on his line surrounded by birds, rabbits, fish and snails. Elsewhere there are hunters and beasts of prey, dancers and athletes. Most of these human figures have disproportionately large, expressive faces that would be more than a match for many a modern comic-book character.

SILK AND DYESTUFFS AS LUXURY EXTRAS

Most tunics were made of linen and were decorated with ornaments made of linen and wool. But clothes made entirely of wool seem to have been widespread, too, whereas those made of silk were very much the exception.

The latter counted as the ultimate in resplendence and wealth. They could lend the wearer prestige and exclusivity as could no other attire. The starting material alone – the raw silk – was a luxury commodity of the highest order. Until the sixth century, it had to be imported from India or China. As silk garments were very rare even in Late Antiquity, it is hardly surprising that even fewer of these exquisite items have survived to this day. Visitors to the exhibition will nevertheless be able to admire some unique fragments of tunics made of patterned silk. Especially impressive is a green and beige silk, intricately patterned with rows of medallions formed by interlocking bands. These medallions are occupied by Erotes – boyish incarnations of the ancient god of love, Eros – holding baskets of fruit, rabbits, birds or reed pipes.

Another luxury feature are colours. Textile fibres that were to be coloured had to be dyed using either vegetal dyestuffs like madder and indigo or animals such as lac insects or, for purple, the secretions of the murex sea snail. Extraction was difficult and time-consuming, which made these dyes very expensive; so not everyone could afford a coloured tunic. Most people had to content themselves with cloth made of undyed yarn and to upgrade their tunics with isolated ornaments.

A CHILD'S TUNIC WITH STICK FIGURES

The exhibition closes with a small garment: a child's tunic made of undyed linen decorated with red ornaments. These are patterned with frolicking stick figures reminiscent of children's drawings. Whether these were deliberately chosen for somebody's little son or daughter – who knows?

The tunic belongs to the Museum August Kestner in Hanover and was entrusted to the Abegg-Stiftung for conservation. On show in Riggisberg only for the duration of the summer, it provides another highlight of late antique textile art alongside the treasures of the Abegg-Stiftung itself.

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

Detail of a sleeve ornament; Egypt, 7th–9th century; Abegg-Stiftung, inv. no. 1085.