

ABEGG-STIFTUNG

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SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2025

FLOURISHING INDIA – TEXTILES FROM THE MUGHAL EMPIRE

27 APRIL TO 9 NOVEMBER 2025

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

Who is not familiar with the Taj Mahal, the world-famous mausoleum in the Indian city of Agra? A mighty edifice, it is also a powerful demonstration of the Mughal rulers' cultural refinement and sense of elegance and splendour. Much less well known are the textiles from that era. A new exhibition at the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg sheds light on the fabrics created during the reign of the Mughal Dynasty (1526–1858) and the uses to which they were put.

At the height of its power in the late seventeenth century, the empire founded by the Muslim Mughal Dynasty comprised almost the entire Indian Subcontinent as well as parts of what are now Pakistan and Afghanistan. To the Europeans, it was a realm of fairy tales, a land of unimaginable riches in which trade flourished and the arts and sciences were actively promoted.

Whereas buildings made of stone typically endure for centuries, textiles tend to have a much shorter lifespan. Made of organic fibres such as silk, cotton, linen or wool, they are highly sensitive to both light and fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Mughal silks are especially rare. One reason for this is India's tropical monsoon climate; another is the fact that patterned silks, unlike cotton fabrics, were generally not traded internationally. Far from being export wares, these works are examples of Indian court art, produced in courtly workshops to serve a princely clientele. Those that did travel to other parts of the world did so as gifts to foreign rulers. Not until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were these exquisite textiles sold on the art market and there acquired by collectors and museums. This makes the Abegg-Stiftung's small but very fine collection of such textiles all the more impressive. These colourful fabrics patterned with figural and floral designs are exhibited here for the first time.

TEXTILE ART FOR THE COURT

One good example of the sumptuousness of Mughal textiles is a multi-coloured velvet patterned with a figural scene. Its symmetrical composition shows a lady standing next to a cypress tree, framed by blossoming branches. Finely dressed, she is savouring the scent of a flower and has elegantly turned her head to one side so that her face appears in profile. The young cheetah at her feet is leaping up to her. It is not just the scene itself but also the materials and techniques that tell of the courtly context of this work and mark it out as a luxury fabric

par excellence. The ground is covered in gold threads, and viewers who look carefully will see that the lady's jewellery is formed by loops of brocaded silver threads. No fewer than eight different colours are to be found in the velvet pile. Magnificent velvets such as this were woven under the influence of Iranian weavers. When they migrated to India, they brought with them both Persian stylistic elements and technical innovations such as the art of exchanging pile warp threads during the weaving process. This enabled them to produce a pile with a much greater variety of colours than could be obtained by conventional velvet weaving. This technique was unknown in Europe, and exactly how the Iranian and Indian weavers accomplished it remains a mystery even today. A short video on this subject explains how the viewer can tell that some pile warp threads have been exchanged.

TEXTILE FURNISHINGS

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COLOURFUL AND DETAILED MINIATURE PAINTINGS

A miniature painted on paper shows how a palace interior would have looked. There, seated on a floral carpet with a chevron border is Krishna and his companion. They are reclining on bolsters, some of which have decorative covers. Suspended over the doorway in the background is a rolled-up curtain made of a patterned fabric, while draped over the balustrade is a red velvet with a green border and silver fringe. Textiles were also important outdoors, where they served to distinguish the ruler, as is illustrated by another very fine miniature dating from around 1600. This painting shows Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) on a hunting expedition. He is enthroned beneath a canopy whose inside is lined with a patterned fabric, while unfurled at his feet is an exquisite carpet.

Most brightly coloured and meticulously detailed miniature paintings come from albums, where they illustrated texts recounting historical events from the lives of the Mughal emperors, works of literature or Indian mythology.

METRE-LONG SASHES AND SHAWLS

Indian attire of the Mughal period typically included accessories such as sashes and shawls made of lavishly patterned silk fabrics. The exhibition features two examples of these dating from the eighteenth century. Both are so long that they have to be presented partially rolled up. They are remarkable for their side-borders and decorative end panels. They count among the most complex drawloom weavings in that they were woven in one piece with different pattern programmes for the central field, side-borders and decorative end panels. Another magnificent textile with a golden central field and decorative end panels was perhaps a short sash originally. This, too, was woven in one piece. Its decorative end panels with their colourful peacocks and parakeets amidst swirling vines are especially charming, while the fringed border on all four sides is a later addition. Such exquisite sashes and shawls were worn primarily by princes and high-ranking civil servants. They were wound round the waist several times, the patterned end panels draped down decoratively in front of the body.

EXTRAVAGANTLY DYED COTTON FABRICS

India has a long tradition of manufacturing resist-dyed cotton fabrics. It was exporting extravagantly dyed fabrics to Egypt, Africa and Southeast Asia long before the painted and printed fabrics known as “indiennes” became fashionable in Europe. The highlight of this section of the exhibition is a fragment of a hanging that dates from the fourteenth or fifteenth century, so before the Mughal period. Its fascinating pattern in various shades of red is so intricate that it is at first sight difficult to grasp. Only when we look longer do the motifs snap into focus: an elephant with two riders, several figures wearing sashes and bearing arms, a rearing horse under a tree, an ornament etc. A video is provided to explain the sophisticated dyeing technique that was applied here. Indian dyers were indeed specialists. Their products were remarkable for their high quality and the lightfastness of their colours and were coveted all over the world. They were an important economic factor, too, and brought the Mughal Empire prosperity.

LUXURIOUSLY PACKAGED COURTLY CORRESPONDENCE

The last display case in the exhibition also contains something to marvel at. Displayed there are two elongated silk pouches made of red silk fabrics with gold brocading. Each is tied with a braid bearing a seal. These pretty pouches were used to convey letters. One of them was even preserved with its original contents. This letter, penned in Persian, is also exhibited along with its original paper envelope. A short video presenting the two letter pouches explains the inscriptions on the seals and so gives viewers a glimpse of the culture of courtly correspondence once practised in India. The relationship between the sender and the addressee is reflected both by the letter itself and by the choice of fabric for the pouch.

The exhibition is an opportunity to discover Indian textiles from several centuries, to delight in their colourful patterns and to admire the technical mastery with which they were manufactured. The multi-coloured velvets and artfully patterned silk and cotton fabrics give us an inkling of the important role played by textiles, whether in the courtly culture of Mughal India or as export wares. They attest to the extraordinary variety and sophistication of the textile art that developed under the Mughals.

Both press release and photos are available as e-mail attachments.

Please contact Ms. Catherine Depierraz: +41 (0)31 808 12 07, depierraz@abegg-stiftung.ch

Caption:

Velvet with a lady in a garden (detail), silk and metal threads, Western India (Gujarat), early 17th century, Abegg-Stiftung, inv. no. 437.