

Journal of the Oriental Rug and Textile Society





ORIENTAL RUG & TEXTILE SOCIETY

ORIENTAL RUG AND TEXTILE SOCIETY of GREAT BRITAIN

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The Oriental Rug and Textile Society of Great Britain was founded in 1977 to encourage interest and enthusiasm in the carpets and textiles of Asia and now of the whole world. We aim to advance understanding of the processes involved in their creation and to promote knowledge of the traditional centres of weaving.

Members receive details of up to eleven events (lectures, visits and trips abroad) each year and three full colour journals.

Annual membership subscriptions: Individual £42 (£30 with journals by email); Student under 25 years Free (journals by email)

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or email: membership.orts@gmail.com

Do join us!

Volume 6 issue 3 Autumn 2023

Contents

Page 3 Society news and forthcoming events.

Page 4 Dimity Spiller and Gavin Strachan: *Rugs and textiles in Polish Museums: Warsaw and Krakow.*

Page 14 Jane Gordon: *Travels in Guatemalan textiles: Ann Hecht's first visit.*

Page 23 Sheelagh Killen Rees: *A Visit to Sant'Antioco in search of silk: the secret of Byssus.*

Page 27 Book review: *Global Ikat: Roots and Routes of a Textile Technique*, edited by Rosemary Crill.

Page 29 Book review: *Byzantine Silk on the Silk Road*, edited by Sarah E. Braddock Clarke and Ryoko Yamanaka Kondo.

*Front cover: Detail of a 19th century hanging from Banja Luka, Bosnia, on display in the National Museum, Krakow.
Photo: Susan Deliss.*

ORTS JOURNAL AUTUMN 2023

In this issue of the journal the focus is mostly on ORTS activities, and in particular the visit to Poland this September. The week was packed with opportunities to see items which many of us have long wanted to see, as well as unexpected treasures discovered in the museums and palaces of Warsaw and Krakow. In their detailed account of the trip, Dimity Spiller and Gavin Strachan share their experiences. Sheelagh Killeen-Rees, too, takes us on a journey—in this case a journey of exploration of sea silk in Sardinia. There are three book reviews, and a taste of Guatemala, whose textiles will be the subject of a lecture next year.

Fiona Kerlogue

ORTS Show and Tell December 13th 2023

We gather from 6pm onward for a seasonal get-together with light refreshments. There will be a short formal AGM commencing at 6.30 with a Show and Tell immediately afterwards.

Do bring items from your textile or rug collection to show the assembled throng in the drawing room at the University Women's Club. Treasures, mysteries, curiosities—all welcome.

Burma to Myanmar exhibition at the British Museum, 8th November



Dr Alexandra Green will be giving an introductory talk for ORTS members at 2pm in the Study Room. Members may wish to book their own tickets for the exhibition for 3pm. Enquiries for the talk to Fiona Kerlogue on editor.orts@gmail.com.

ORTS LECTURE PROGRAMME Winter 2023/4

Wednesday, November 22nd. Stefano Ionescu: 'Tuduc or not Tuduc - that is the question.' Via Zoom. 18.00.

Wednesday, December 13th. AGM and Show and Tell. University Women's Club. 18.00 for 19.00.

Wednesday, December 20th. Peter Lee (Singapore): 'Changing hybrid fashions in C19/20 Singapore.' 18.00. Via Zoom.

Wednesday, 17th January 2024: Avalon Fotheringham (V&A). 'Madras Handkerchiefs.' University Women's Club. 18.00 for 19.00.

Wed 21st February 2024. - Martin Conlan - 'Tribal Wedding Blankets of the Chinese minorities, SW China.' Via Zoom. 18.00.

Please check newsletters and website beforehand in case of adjustments.

Rugs and textiles in Polish Museums: Oriental Rug and Textile Society trip to Poland. 4th to 10th September 2023.

Dimity Spiller and Gavin Strachan

The Oriental Rug and Textile Society trip to Poland took place between 4th and 10th September 2023. The article below is in two parts, each written by a member of the group.

Part One by Dimity Spiller



*Figure 1. Introduction to the Sahakian collection.
Photo: Gavin Strachan.*

of media but it was the carpets which were of prime interest to us. Georg, an Armenian, was born in 1889 in Persia. As well as his rug business he also worked in the Iranian Embassy in Poland, where he met his Polish wife, Teresa, born in 1915. In 1939, with war on the horizon they moved their collection first to Vienna and then to Brussels. Georg died in 1967 leaving Teresa to tend to the collection. She was not just a collector but also a skilled conservator. She died in 2007 having given the collection, over a period of time, to Poland. She was known for her energy, dedication and generosity.

The Sahakian carpets and textiles collection numbers around 650, of which 350 are carpets from the Caucasus. Around 15% are on display but a catalogue of the whole collection is to be published in January 2024. The oldest piece on show is a blue ground Dragon carpet dating from around 1700. This was relatively short at perhaps three yards, though even with an examination of the back we could not see signs of shortening (Figure 2). Apart from an 18th-century Ladik prayer rug all the rest were later 19th century, reflecting a revival of interest in pile carpets at that time. The lack of wear did

The plan for this trip took off over a cup of tea at the V&A shared with Joanna Wasilewska, then the Director of the Asia Pacific Museum in Warsaw. She arranged the Warsaw part of the visit most beautifully, lending her Central Asia curator Karolina Krzywicka to us as escort and guide.

We started with a morning visit to the Sahakian Collection of carpets from the Caucasus, which is housed in the Tin-Roofed Palace, a little eighteenth-century pavilion tucked under the arm of the great Warsaw Royal Castle. We were met by the curator of the collection, Kataryna Polujan, who gave us a comprehensive tour of her display (Figure 1). Georg and Teresa Sahakian were active collectors of art in a range

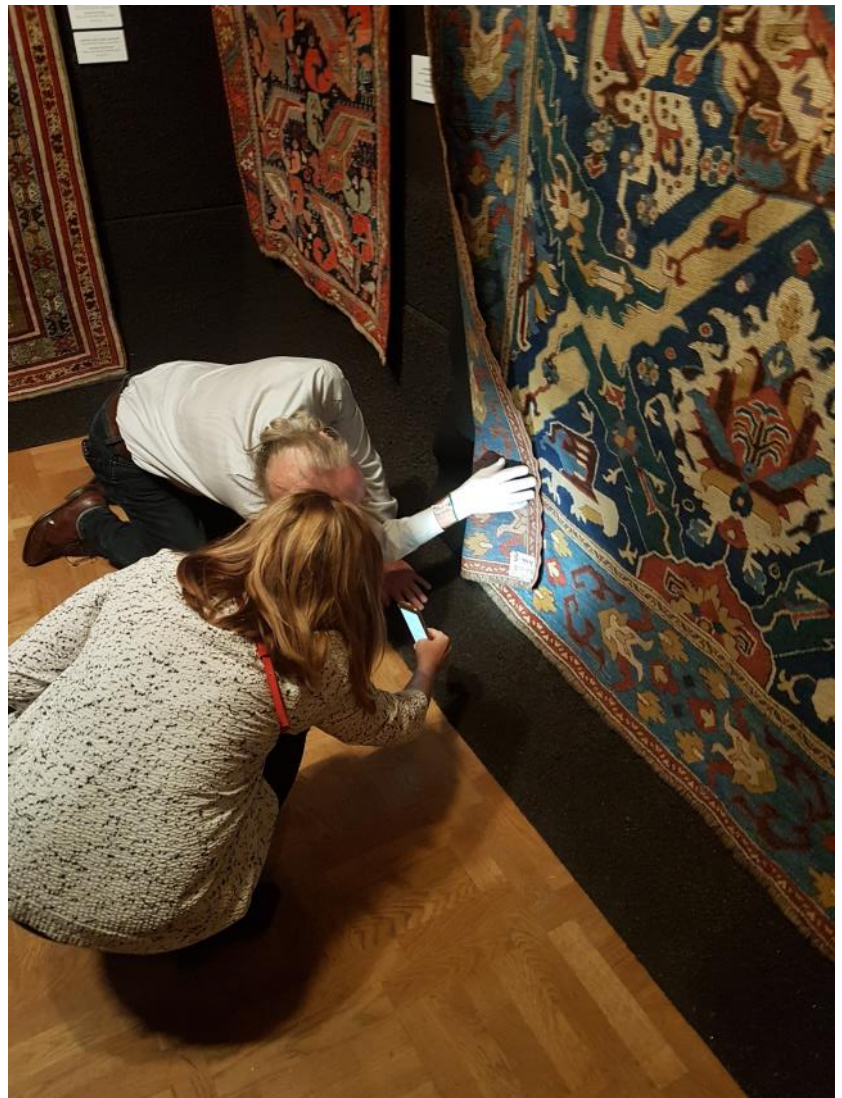


*Figure 2. Examining the Dragon carpet.
Photo: Gavin Strachan.*



Figure 3. One of the regional costumes on display at the Ethnographic Museum, Warsaw. Photo: Susan Deliss.

give a very cheerful aspect to the presentation. To see an as-new Memling carpet was a great pleasure. One Gendje Kazak rug is a reprise of an 18th-century one published in the Hali Orient Stars book. A Kasim Ushak with a wide running dog border was full of motifs which are frequently seen in Polish embroideries. An unusual carpet which gave rise to much discussion was the Karabagh burial rug. In fittingly sombre tones of brown, grey and black it was commissioned by his sons to honour their deceased father, according to the inscription on the bottom. The oddity was that all the motifs faced the other way up.

Carpets were an important element in the Polish world. In the later 19th century there were regular exhibitions, with private owners encouraged to lend their treasures. The display is carefully classified by region and type. Several pieces belonging to the Sahakians were published by Ulrich Schurmann in his magisterial book on Caucasian Rugs. Is it perhaps possible that the carefully named carpets of this collection have filtered down into the general classification? Katarzyna was kind enough to give us catalogues of two areas of the collection. We will have to wait until next year to acquire the complete version.

However, ORTS visits are not just about textiles - convivial meals are also important. In the Old Market Square we had lunch featuring the old Polish standards of beer and *pierogi* dumplings. Well-fortified, we went on to an afternoon visit at the Ethnographic Museum. Here we were met by Justyna Otwinowska, the Chief Curator, and a bevy of other curators. We started with the display of

Polish costumes, which in its slightly old-fashioned layout, classified region by region, is currently being redesigned by specialist curator Patryk Pawlaczyk, who introduced us to this section (Figure 3). However, what there is to see is a riot of colour, embroidery and ingenuity. Pull-out drawers full of objects add to the diversity of display (Figure 4). Momentarily distracted, it was a while before I realised what I thought to be a table decoration was actually a wedding headdress, to be balanced for two days on top of the bride's braids and most uncomfortably secured only by her own hair. Objects like this were worn into the 1950s, while the 'paisley' shawls on display were a regular part of an outfit until the 1970s. Up till then it was also standard for lowland households to grow and weave their own linen, while highland communities produced woollen clothing. There has been a revival of the vibrant embroidered felted trousers; it is now fashionable to wear these at weddings and other festive occasions. The embroidery is mainly done by men. The next gallery was the Asian area, here arranged by topic and shown to us by Katarzyna Flis. We saw some Hmong caps donated by ORTS member Maria Wronska Friend. A beautiful, delicately embroidered burka caught my eye. The



Figure 4. Embroidered felt slippers from Poland. Ethnographic Museum, Warsaw. Photo: Susan Deliss.



Figure 5. Chief curator Justyna Otwinowska explaining the costumes from Mordovia, Ethnographic Museum, Warsaw. Photo: Gavin Strachan.

following day I learnt that they were not always the symbol of oppression as we now see them but were the dress of noble ladies. The section on The Way combined the idea of a journey being both physical and spiritual. The physical aspect included a good, intact sumac Shahsavan bag. At this point some of us went to the batik area, while others enjoyed the musical instruments gallery, using the headphone to tune into the various sounds. This multimedia presentation was very good.

The third area we saw was in the basement, inhabited by two cats, Ethno and Graphik. We went into a storeroom as there was not enough space in the conservation studio to see various garments adding up to four costumes, for which the technology of the materials were under investigation by Krystyna Tomasik, the conservation expert (Figure 5). The costumes came from the Republic of Mordovia, a tiny enclave in Russia on the Volga, 600km SE of Moscow. This area was settled by Huns from Mongolia centuries ago and remains distinctive. This museum is the only one to have such items and all seem to have some details with shamanistic or magical powers, such as the coin-laden back apron, worn to protect women during menses. Subjects such as provenance, what went with what and dye substances stimulated absorbing discussions which could have gone on much longer but for the naphthalene smell .

An outdoor performance of traditional Polish songs from the Kurpie region in the square outside the museum rounded off the day. The lack of regular electricity until quite recently in some remote parts of the Kurpie region, meant that performances of such songs was still a strong memory. These were mostly unaccompanied love songs in a style unfamiliar to us. The audience frequently joined the solo baritone in the chorus. The quiet addition of a hurdy gurdy, an instrument that originated in medieval Poland, added to the atmosphere.

On Wednesday we visited the Asia/Pacific Museum, which was set up in 1973 by diplomat Andrzej Wawrzyniak as the Nusantara Archipelago Museum, to house his collection of Indonesian art. As the breadth of the collection increased so the name changed to the present one in 1976. The gallery is still in



Figure 6. Batiks from storage on display for our private visit. Asia-Pacific Museum, Warsaw. Photo: Sheelagh Killeen Rees.

an Indonesian meal in the Old Town completed our time in Warsaw.

Thursday saw us on an early train to Krakow, where we were met by our own Clive Rogers and his friend Joanna Skoczynska, who swept us off for lunch in a delightful café, where we sampled local hop-flavoured cider.

The afternoon's visit was to the Princes Czartoryski Collection, home of Leonardo da Vinci's *Lady with the Ermine*. The ground floor has the decorative arts and the paintings are on the floor above. On the ground floor, laid out by region, one is soon in the 'Victory of Vienna (1683) Room' with a re-creation of a Turkish tent, lined with hangings of the Banja Luka type. On the floor is an appliqué carpet. On the wall opposite is a 'Polonaise' carpet, a pale threadbare ghost of its original self, appropriated during World War II and only returned in 1997. The various sets of horse trappings, including a fine 17th century Turkish saddle and shabrack, once owned by Mikolaj Hieronim (1645-1683), give a good idea of how gorgeous the parades must have been (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Turkish saddle and shabrack. 17th century. Princes Czartoryski Collection. Photo: Gavin Strachan.

creation; next year there will be a lead through the Buddhist countries into India and Tibet. At present there is a rather abrupt change from Mongolia, with a stunning Ger interior, straight into Indonesia. The multimedia points, in both Polish and English, are excellent. The museum has frequent events to include the various minorities that live in Warsaw. We had a thorough tour of the Asian galleries, where there were many beautiful and interesting objects but we had no time to dwell as we were expected in the education room where a wonderful collection of Indonesian textiles was laid out for our inspection (Figure 6). Now it was Fiona's turn to lead a detailed discussion of what we were seeing. We were accompanied by curator Maria Szymansya-Ilnata, conservator Ewa Soszko, collections manager Marta Bienas as well as our own dear Karolina Krzywicka, who most generously, on top of all her care of us, gave us each a catalogue of the Museum and one of her own on the susani collection.

We really are most grateful to everyone who helped with our marvellous time in Warsaw. Above all we are deeply grateful to Joanna Wasilewska for arranging everything so beautifully. An afternoon at leisure followed by



Figure 8. Carpet from Tulczyn, Ukraine. 18th century. Czartoryski Collection, Krakow. Photo: Gavin Strachan.



Figure 9. Fabric fragment, 16th or 17th century Iran. Czartoryski Collection, Krakow. Photo: Susan Deliss.

Beyond this room were further delights, including a carpet from Potocki, made in Tulczyn in present-day Ukraine in the fourth quarter of the 18th century (Figure 8), several *kontusz* sashes, and a fragment of a Persian fabric dating from the 16th or 17th centuries with scenes of flower watering (Figure 9).

Part 2 by Gavin Strachan

The centre of Krakow is relatively small and those who chose to do so could walk from one venue to another. While Dimity was on her way back to London, the remainder of us, on the recommendation of Joanna Skoczynska, dined well, if relatively expensively, at the Pod Baranem Restauracja. While still accessible, the restaurant is located well away from the usual tourist area and served us some typical good Polish dishes such as sour rye soup (*żurek*) and venison.

Thursday morning saw us at the enormous Wawel Castle where we met Dr Magdalena Ozga, the co-curator of one the several permanent exhibitions *Art of the Orient: Ottoman Turkish Tents*. The castle was awash

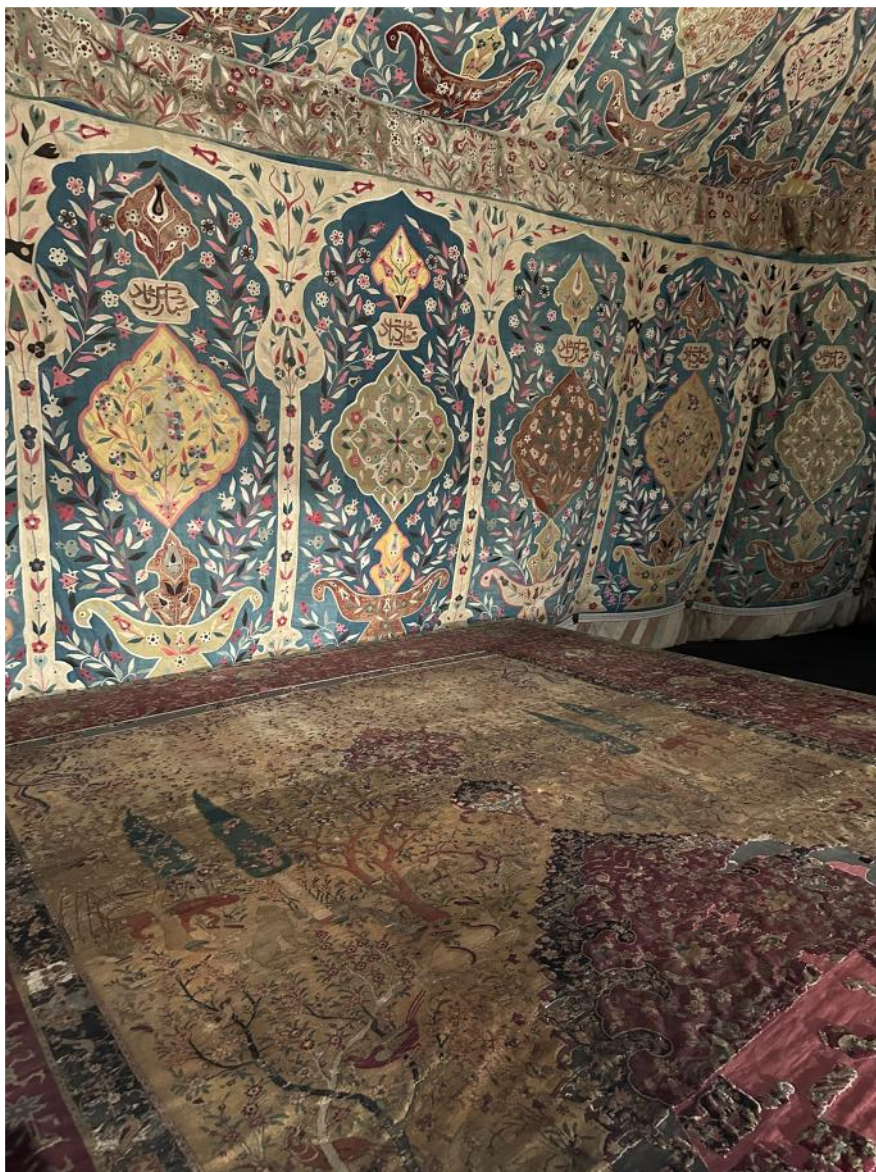


Figure 10. Ottoman tent 896/1.3 captured at the Battle of Vienna on display at Wawel Castle. Photo: Susan Deliss.

with visitors, many of whom were Polish, but once inside the exhibition space we enjoyed Dr Ozga's scholarly commentary and tour. Throughout its history, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth had contact with Islamic countries through trade as well as military conflicts, and pieces from Turkey, the Caucasus, and Iran came into the country. Wawel Castle holds one of the largest collections of Ottoman tents in Europe, and three of these (as well as a small, choice tent wall inv. 2542 dated to 1713-1714) were displayed in the exhibition.

The largest tent on show, inv. 896/1,3, a splendid edifice supported by two poles, towered above us. It was captured at the Battle of Vienna in 1683 (Figure 10). The tent's interior walls have a decoration of floral motifs and medallions with Arabic inscriptions bestowing blessings of happiness and prosperity. It was purchased from the Wettin collection by antique dealer Szymon Szware, and donated to the Castle in 1933, as was the 'rectangular tent', inv. 2537/1-3, also thought to be late 17th century. Somewhat smaller, it was probably used by mid-ranking

officers of the Ottoman army. The final tent on display, the 'oval tent', Inv 7985, previously thought to have come from the Battle of Chocim (1673) or the Battle of Vienna, ten years later, is now dated to 1695 by the discovery of a Turkish quality stamp, applied by the dye controller to the cotton on one of the walls.

Not all the tents in the collection were taken in war. Ottoman tents were used by Polish aristocratic families not only for military campaigns but also when travelling within the country for purposes such as attending sessions of the itinerant *sejm* (parliament). They were purchased, ordered from cities in the Ottoman Empire, and some were even made in Lwów, modern-day Lviv, now in Ukraine but previously in Poland, by Armenians who modelled them on the Turkish ones. The primary material employed was cotton, used for both the inner and outer layers, and the interior walls are decorated with appliqué of cotton, silk and often gilded leather.

Under the large tent was displayed the Polish section of the large 'Cracow-Paris' carpet, which according to tradition was seized at the Battle of Vienna in 1683 and came to Wawel Cathedral (deposit 89) (See Figure 10 above). It has had a rugged life. In the 19th century it was cut in half. One half ended up on display in Paris. The remaining part stayed in Poland but was taken by the Nazis to Germany in 1940 and retrieved in 1946. It may have been made in Tabriz in the second quarter of the 16th century and depicts in its golden ground a garden filled with springs, trees, birds, and animals including *qilin* (the auspicious Chinese unicorn).

Rugs and textiles in Polish museums

On the floor below, five large banners displaying the *Dhu'l faqar*, the sword of Imam Ali, the son-in-law of Muhammad, are displayed behind glass and timber cases suspended from the ceiling. It was unfortunately not easy to see them - what little lighting there is reflects from the glass. Fortunately, however, the accompanying exhibition publication, *Treasures of the Orient*, 2020, available in both Polish and English, has pictures of the banners so it is possible to get a good idea of what they look like. We were told that a redisplay of the banners is planned, and it was at this point that we learned that with such a large collection the castle has a textile conservation team of 11 people.

The banners on display all dated from the 17th century and were probably made in Istanbul or Baghdad and used in battle. One, Inv 145, was captured in 1683 at Párkány on the Danube, now in modern-day Slovakia, and was sent to Loreto in Italy as a votive offering by King John III Sobieski. In 1798, Polish troops fighting for Napoleon arrived in Loreto and it was handed over to their commander at a ceremony in Rome and in due course came to Warsaw. However, in about 1831, Tsarist Russians removed it to St Petersburg. It was eventually returned to Poland as part of the restitution following the 1921 Treaty of Riga. In 1939, like other Wawel treasures, it was evacuated to Canada, returning in 1948. Not surprisingly it is in poor condition and is in line for complex conservation work.

Some of the party then lunched at La Campana, an al fresco Italian restaurant off a side street in the old part of town fairly close to the castle. The entire party returned there that evening for supper, where the accompanying jazz duet brought in many younger couples.

On the Saturday morning, Dr Beata Biedrońska-Słota, the long-time head of the Textiles Department at the National Museum in Krakow, now retired but still active, took us on fascinating tour of part of the permanent exhibition at the main National Museum. Amongst the furniture and other artefacts there were some high-quality textiles and carpets.

In Poland carpets were woven in-house for aristocratic families' own use. The museum had several such examples which had been woven within what is now modern-day Poland, but as the country was once much larger there were also items from what is now Ukraine (and Lithuania). One carpet, dating to the third quarter of the 18th century and bearing the arms of the Leszczyc family, was woven with symmetrical knots, as is usual in Poland, in either Tulczyn, now in Ukraine, or Niemirów, within modern-day Poland but close to the Belarus border. Another, also woven in either Tulczyn or Niemirów, was more precisely dated to circa 1774 as it bore the combined arms of the Potocki and Mniszech families and is thought to celebrate a wedding which took place that year. The museum also had on display four stylish Polish-woven kilims which were used as wall hangings. The earliest in the museum was woven in the 19th century, another in 1915, and one, which in terms of design was linked to the art deco period, was from the 1930s.

A very fine Bosnian Banja Luka wall hanging was also much admired and resulted in some interesting debate. Unfortunately previously misattributed by the museum to Turkey, Dr Słota also identified it as being from Banja Luka; as a result she suggested that the previously-understood date for the interior walls of the tent we saw in the Princes Czartoryski collection was almost certainly incorrect. Her analysis can be found in a volume published by the Polish Institute of World Art Studies in 2017.

We also had a close look, in a rather constricted space, at the main part of a garden carpet dating to about 1700 which was clearly Safavid (Figure 11). After the trip I contacted an ORTS member with an interest in garden carpets, who thought that the medallion had unusual borders indicating it might have been conceived as a pond, separate from the adjacent water channels, and while he did not have a totally comprehensive view of the literature on classic *chahar bagh* carpets, he was pretty sure the National Museum example is not mentioned in any sources in English.

Wide silk sashes were an essential part of noble Polish dress in the 17th to 19th centuries (Figure 12). The sashes were used to wrap around a robe-like garment called a *kontusz*. Like much Polish national dress, the *kontusz* sash is of eastern origin. They are usually about 10 feet long and 40 cm wide and come in a variety of designs. Depending on the width, they might be folded a number of ways so as to reveal various designs for particular occasions. We saw three such sashes in the museum. Those on display happen to have been woven in Lyon in the second half of the 18th century, but initially the sashes were



Figure 11. Garden carpet from Isfahan on display at the National Museum, Krakow. Late 17th to early 18th century.
Photo: Susan Deliss.



Figure 12. Kontusz sash. National Museum, Krakow. Photo: Susan Deliss.

imported from Persia and Turkey, and some were made locally. The museum had on display half of a sash woven in Kashan at the end of the 17th century.

An unusually striking display in the Gallery of Decorative Arts is of material relating to Poland's Jewish community, including a wide range of beautiful objects dating from the 17th century onwards. The collection began to be formed in 1887, when a silver spice container was donated by Leonard Lepszy, but it continued to grow right through until 1939, testimony to the strong culture of Ashkenazi Jews in Central-Eastern Europe. For ORTS members, there were some stunning embroidered caps in the display.

After the session at the National Museum, some of the party re-visited Wawel Castle to look at the tapestries and Polish carpets which are on permanent display at the State Rooms. Following a catastrophic fire in 1595, the east and north wings of the Renaissance were rebuilt in Baroque style for King Sigismund III. However, tapestries of astonishing quality, and many of a great size, commissioned by Sigismund II Augustus (1520 – 1572) and woven in Brussels in the workshops of Willem and Jan de Kempeneer, Jan

van Tieghem and Nicolas Leyniers between 1550-1565 were not consumed by the fire and are considered among the jewels in the Wawel crown (Figure 12).

This is the largest collection of tapestries ever commissioned by one ruler. They comprise a series of tall, narrow tapestries depicting pastoral scenes displayed in the Senators' Hall between the windows, and much larger biblical ones which are exhibited in rotation. One seen during our visit was from a series on Noah and the flood, and there are also some which bear the coats of arms of Poland and Lithuania. The tapestries have had a chequered life over the years and some are still in Russia, where they are on display in different museums without specifying their origin, but many were saved for the Polish nation as they were amongst the artefacts taken to Canada during the second world war.

Among the carpets on display in the state rooms, there are three Polish examples (Inventory numbers 982, 1296, and 1726), all dating from the first half of the 18th century, which are attributed to the estate workshop of the important Potocki family, one of whose carpets we had seen in the National Museum.

A farewell supper was held at a rooftop restaurant overlooking Wawel Castle before the group dispersed on Sunday, although one intrepid traveller made her way to Zakopane by bus before leaving the following day. It had been less than a week, but packed with new things to see and learn. Travelling with like-minded companions make such experiences a real pleasure.

Dimity Spiller and Gavin Strachan



Figure 13. Detail of tapestry depicting *Hercules Fighting Cacus* from the series *The Labours of Hercules*, Brussels, first half of the 17th century. Wawel Castle. Photo: Susan Deliss.

Travels in Guatemalan textiles: Ann Hecht's first visit

Jane Gordon

In memory of Ann Hecht 1929-2021



Figure 1. Woman's huipil from Colotenango. Horniman Museum 2008.562.

In 2008 the Horniman Museum acquired a collection of 25 Guatemalan textiles from Ann Hecht, perhaps best known for her authoritative study of weaving practices *The Art of the Loom: Weaving Spinning and Dyeing Across the World*. The book, which was published by the British Museum in 1989, included a chapter on the brocaded textiles of Guatemala, based on Ann's thorough research in museum collections, extensive reading and deep practical understanding of the processes involved. The chapter was chiefly illustrated by examples from the collection of Krystyna Deuss, who founded the Guatemalan Maya Centre in Wandsworth in London in 1990.

Ann wrote that she first became interested in weaving in her thirties when she found a loom in the attic of a house she and her husband moved into in Kenley, Surrey. This sparked an interest which lasted the rest of her life, first through formal study, then through giving lectures, running workshops and writing, and later by travelling to those countries whose textiles fascinated her most. Although she was by profession a talented graphic designer, her passion in life was weaving. In 1989, when *The Art of the Loom* was published, Ann had not yet visited Guatemala. Her extensive investigations into the subject, however, meant that she knew exactly where she needed to go and what she wanted to do there. It was the textiles of the Maya Indians in the south-west highlands which were the focus of her attention, where, as she wrote in 2001, 'the women weave and wear their own costume' and 'each town and village has its own style.' She had earlier urged caution in the latter case, though: 'exceptions can be pointed to, and generalisations are dangerous' (1989, 163).

In 1992 Ann had bought a woman's upper body garment made in Colotenango in the mountainous west of Guatemala, a *huipil*, from the Guatemalan Indian Centre in London (Figure 1). It consists of three narrow red and white striped panels sewn together, with a square neckline cut out of the central panel. The edges of the neckline are buttonholed in yellow and green. The *huipil* has large areas of red single-faced brocading over the chest and back, almost completely obscuring the striped material on which it is worked, and small square motifs in various weft-wrapping techniques superimposed over the red brocading and dotted around the lower parts. The weft-wrapping technique is technically similar to *soumak* and can be found in Colotenango and the surrounding villages. It may have been that a visit to the Centre had inspired her interest, or that she was exploring textiles in their collections in preparation for her trip. Whichever was the case, the following year she was on her way to Guatemala.



Figure 2. Morning market, Antigua, Guatemala. Photo: Ann Hecht.

In July 1993 Ann set off with a group of adventurers led by a travel company based in Oxford called Travel Alternative, specialising in tours where the group had the chance to make things. Her diary and photograph albums provide fascinating insights into her approach and although the entries are sometimes brief and rarely delve into details of her thinking, the materials together give a valuable picture of Guatemalan practices at the time. In 2001 *Textiles from Guatemala* was published, a smaller book which Ann wrote based on textiles in the British Museum collections, containing further insights gained from her travels in the country.

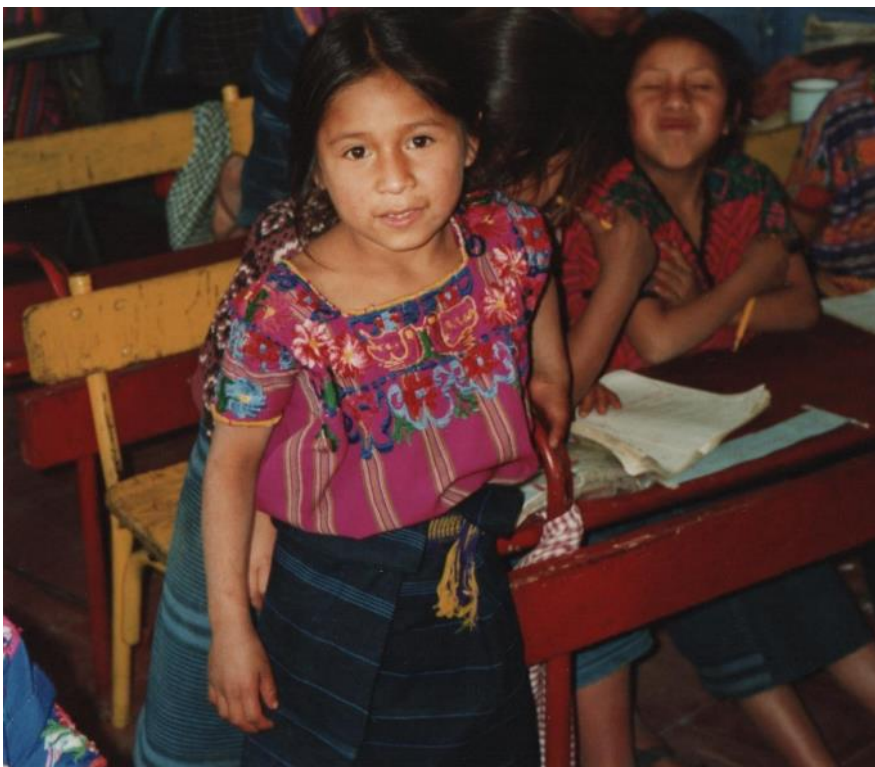


Figure 3. Schoolgirl in Santa Maria de Jesus. Photo: Ann Hecht.

The group arrived in the town of Antigua, the capital of Chimaltenango, one of the 22 departments into which Guatemala is divided. Ann clearly appreciated the hotel, with its courtyards, flowering bushes, and parrots. The town itself she described as quiet, with beautiful churches and ruins. The next day the group walked through the morning market (Figure 2) to the bus station where they joined the minibus which was to take them up to the 'typical Guatemalan village' of Santa Maria de Jesus, under the slopes of Volcán de Agua, an extinct volcano some 10km away. Here the party visited a school, where Ann noted that the children were taught to embroider by hand (Figure 3).

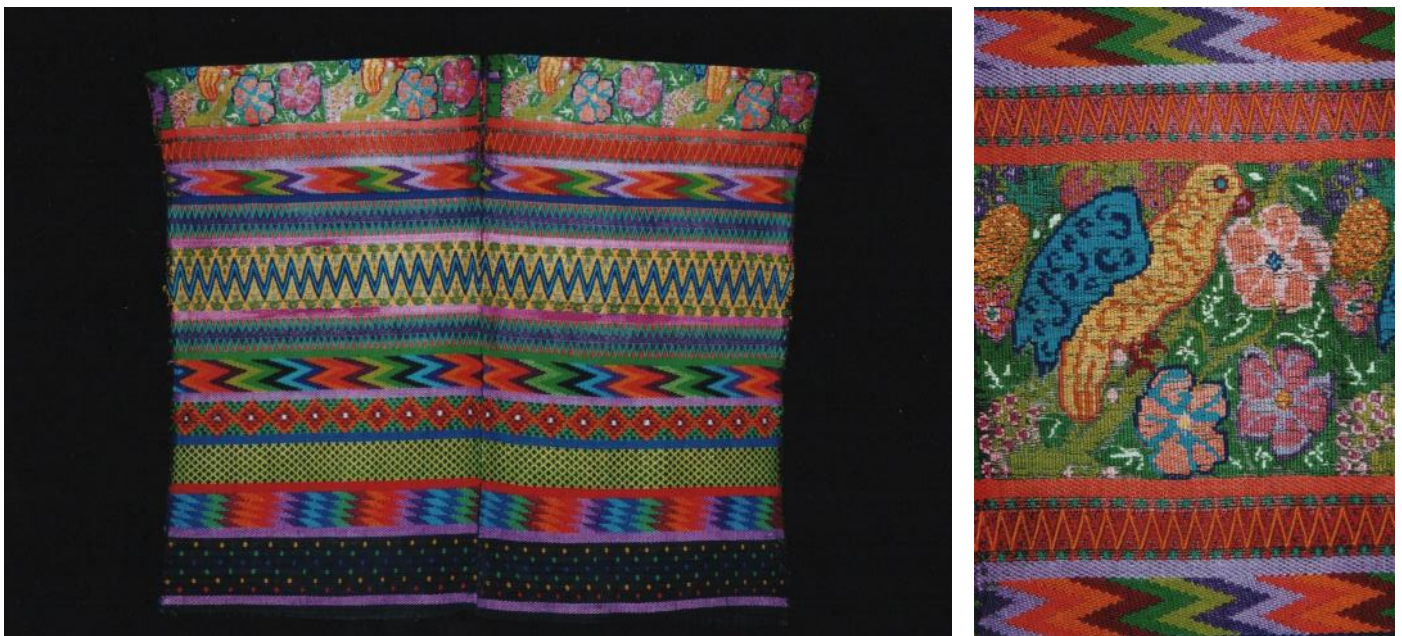


Figure 4. Woman's upper garment, huipil, from San Antonio Aguas Calientes, and detail. Horniman Museum 2008.563.

Returning to Antigua, Ann made the first of her many purchases, a *huipil*, which had been made in the village of San Antonio Aguas Calientes in the department of Sacatepequez (Figure 4). She photographed a woman from there in the market in Antigua, clearly attracted by her *huipil* (Figure 5). Ann commented on how intrusive photography can be: her photographs often show people from behind, testament to her sensitivity in this kind of situation, which she often experienced. She later noted that San Antonio Aguas Calientes was said to be where the best weavers in the Highlands of Guatemala lived. In 1989 she had written of the technique characteristic of the place: 'double-face brocading weaves over and under groups of warp ends in the web, appearing on the face and reverse of the cloth. In some cases, as in the floral band on the huipils from San Antonio Aguas Calientes, both faces of the fabric are identical because the coloured wefts are worked in and out over groups of four ends, rather as in tapestry' (1989,177). It is not surprising that she would want to obtain an example, which she did even before she was able to visit the village.

The next day the party flew to Tikal National Park, in the middle of the jungle and housing ancient Mayan ruins spread over a very wide area. Ann noted:

'We saw butterflies and monkeys, parrots, wild turkeys, and the tree from which latex is drained that is an essential ingredient of chewing gum. It is an important export to Japan and the USA. A gum used in incense was from the same tree.'

The following day was spent in San Benito, a settlement on the shore of Lake Petén Itzá, and the surrounding area. They flew back to Antigua that evening.

On 20th July Ann arrived with the group in San

Figure 5. Market day in Antigua. Photo: Ann Hecht.





Figure 6. Ann weaving in San Antonio Aguas Calientes. Unknown photographer.

Antonio Aguas Calientes. Her photographs suggest that members of the party spent time at the house of a woman called Maria Elena, where they were shown how to weave on a backstrap loom (Figure 6). Ann later wrote that the loom without any work on it is nothing more than a ‘bundle of sticks....which are all you will find on a stall selling looms in the market’. These body-tensioned looms were the type used by women, who made items of clothing for the family. At Maria Elena’s house, looms had been prepared for them, and three generations of the family helped, making them feel very welcome. She learnt to weave a brocaded lozenge shape. By the end of the day she was tired and aching from the unusual sitting position, needed to keep the warp taut or relax it by adjusting the movement of her body to create the shed through which the shuttle carrying the weft is passed. But at the same time she recorded how satisfying she had found the experience – ‘a great day’. The next day was spent with the same family. This time Ann tried for herself the double-sided brocade technique, finding it very difficult. She acquired a loom, perhaps the one she was weaving on, and this is in the

collection at the Horniman Museum.

On 22nd July most of the day was spent driving to Chichicastenango, with stops at Patzun and Iximché, where there were ‘Mayan ruins in a beautiful setting’. The next day in the crowded market Ann bought a carrying cloth, *tzute*, (Figure 7) made of a striped, warp-faced panel, cut in half and sewn together across the seams with a black *randa*, or joining strip banded with reds, orange, green and blue. The *tzute* was covered with 2-faced brocading of animal and bird motifs worked in stranded cotton. In Chichicastenango she also bought a woman’s head-piece from Aguacatán.

Figure 7. Women’s carrying cloth, *tzute*, with double-faced brocading. Chichicastenango. Horniman Museum 2008.571.





Figure 8. Selling woollen blankets in the market in Sololá.

There had been reports that a group of Belgian tourists had earlier been held up by bandits and robbed of all their jewellery and money, so on 24th July the drive to their next stop on the shores of Lake Atitlán was under police escort. They visited two villages on the eastern shore: San Antonio Palopó and Santa Catarina Palopó. In San Antonio Palopó the men and boys were wearing traditional dress. This consisted of red and white striped shirts and black and white checked woollen *rodilleras* (a woollen cloth wrapped around the waist and kept in place with a sash) (Figure 8). In contrast, in Santa Catarina Palopó rather than the traditional costume the women and children were wearing huipils of blue, turquoise, and emerald, and blue or lurex headdresses. There was a fiesta going on with children darting around in animal costumes.

The next day's outing was to the market in Sololá, 'definitely a local affair, there were only a sprinkling of tourists.' Ann bought the *huipil* typical of the town made from two warp-faced lengths of the distinctive striped cloth of Sololá (alternating plain red and spotted *jaspe* or ikat yarns) (Figure 9) and an old-style carrying cloth using locally grown naturally brown cotton. That afternoon the group returned to San Antonio Palopó, where Ann learnt the local way to make a warp, set up a loom, weave on a ribbon loom, and embroider a *randa* (the special coloured strips used to join seams together). The loom was probably the type of ribbon loom which Ann wrote about later as 'perhaps unique to Guatemala', combining the body-tensioning principles of the back-strap loom with the heddle-lifting mechanism of the treadle loom.

Figure 9. Woman's upper garment, huipil, from Sololá, with blue ikat between red stripes. Horniman Museum 2008.560.



On 26th July the group crossed the lake to Santiago Atitlán, once the capital of the Tz'utujil people, where the majority of the population are ethnic Mayan (Figure 10). Here the traditional costume of the men included distinctive striped embroidered trousers, and Ann bought a good example (Figure 11). They came across 'an excellent weaver of belts' – such belts were also part of the men's local costume, but this weaver was making them for export. Ann noted their very subtle colours and olive-green background.

The next day's programme was dominated by a visit to Salcajá, the town that specialises in *jaspe*, pronounced 'haspa'. The fabric produced was used especially for skirts, which by this time were rarely woven at home in the villages, the market-bought cloth being produced in towns. *Jaspe* is the technique, widely known elsewhere by the Indonesian word *ikat*, in which the threads for the warp and/or the weft have parts of the threads tied tightly in patterns to resist the dye before they are used in the weaving process. Ann described seeing various processes: warps stretched out in the streets with, the aligning of the design, the making of warps on huge warping mills and the

Figure 10. Spinning cotton in Santiago Atitlán.
Photo: Ann Hecht.



dyeing of black, 'with members of the dyer's family, even quite small children, diligently binding those areas of the design that are to remain white after the dyeing process.' She 'had a go' on a big four-shaft treadle loom, which had been introduced by the Spaniards. These were worked by men and could hold very long warps. Ann noticed that weavers there did not use a raddle in preparing the warp for the loom - instead they rolled the warp onto the back roller



Figure 11. The distinctive striped and embroidered men's trousers of Santiago Atitlán. Horniman Museum 2008.567.



Figure 12. Length of woven jaspe fabric from the town of Salcajá. Horniman Museum 2008.578.

in finger-sized sections. In Salcajá there were specialist shops selling weaving equipment and yarn as well as *jaspe* fabric. Ann bought a length of dark blue *jaspe* (Figure 12) and a boat shuttle.

From Salcajá they moved to Zunil village, where Ann commented on the long shawls worn across the front of the body with the ends thrown over each shoulder hanging down behind, and the long tapestry-woven ribbons with pompoms on the ends worn in the hair. She bought a few items at the co-operative, including a child's *huipil* and three long, narrow, weft-faced hair ribbons of a type woven and worn in

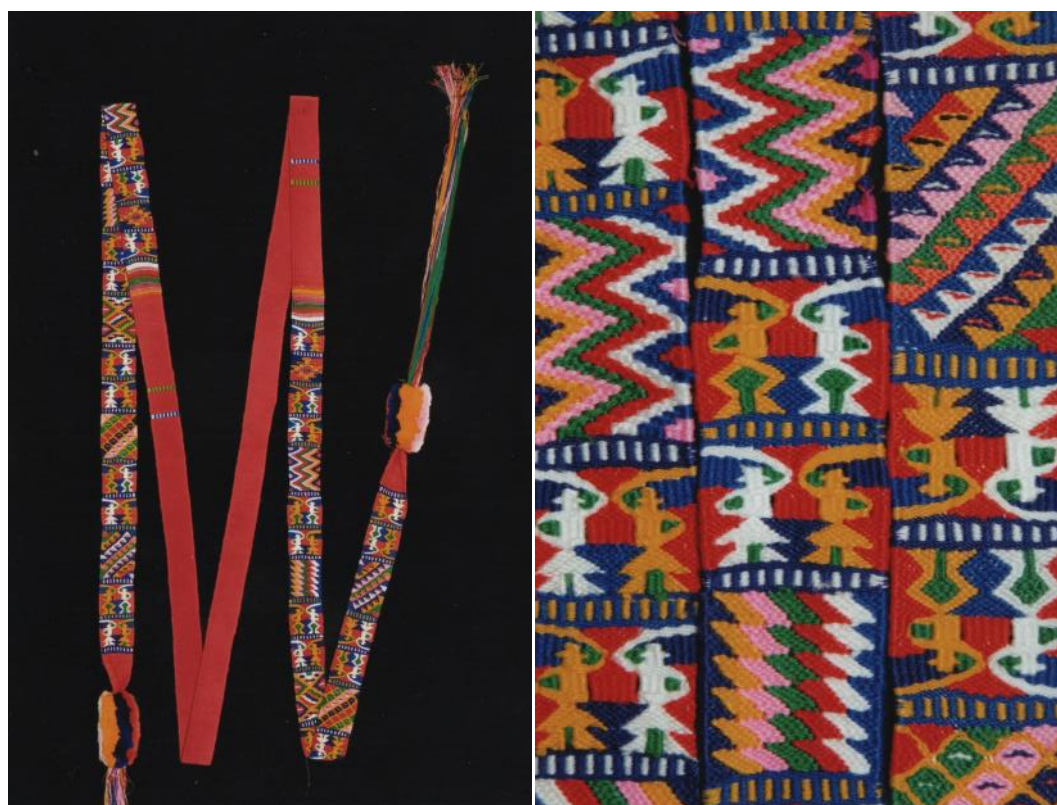


Figure 13. One of three hair ribbons Ann bought in Zunil village. Horniman Museum 2008.576.2.

many Guatemalan villages (Figure 13). The styles are the same: the central field is plain, weft-faced red, but for a considerable length at each end are little designs of human, animal, and bird forms woven in tapestry technique. They ended the day checking in to a hotel in Quetzaltenango, the city which acts as a centre for trade between the coast and the highlands and a processing centre with textile factories.



Figure 14. Woman's upper garment, huipil, from Todos Santos. Horniman Museum 2008.555.

The next day the group visited four places: Almolonga, to look at the wholesale vegetable market serving the whole country; Zunil, to collect the items Ann had bought the previous day; San Francisco el Alto; and Zaculeu, the magnificent site of important archaeological ruins. San Francisco el Alto had 'a rather amazing church' where they could go up on the roof and clamber all over the three rounded domes, a big dome one end, and two smaller domes for the bells the other end. There were good views from the top of the mixed market below. The churches were used all the time, Ann noted. 'There is a constant coming and going, with private supplicants at the altar up front, or at the various statues up each side, with many candles at all stages of burning.' This church was the first she had noticed with fresco decoration. She described it as 'rather delicate in red and blue under the big dome'. It was 'wonderful weather, sunny, windy, and cloudy'.

On 29th July they set off from their hotel in Huehuetenango for Todos Santos, a long journey across the 3500m Cuchumatanes mountain pass to a high plain. They stayed in Todos Santos ('All Saints') for three and a half hours. This visit, Ann found, was a unique experience. The whole town; men, women and children, were all wearing traditional clothes. The men wore a white shirt with red stripes, inlay-woven collars and a strip of contrasting stripes down the middle of the back, together with red trousers with white stripes. Some of the men were wearing a piece of black woollen material over the trousers. They also wore straw hats: the older ones a flat pork pie, and the rest a cowboy/Mexican type.

Women and children wore *huipil* made from three panels; striped material on each side and supplementary woven patterns in the centre. The predominant colours were purple and red. The skirt, held in position by a red sash, was dark blue (indigo) with pairs of narrow stripes at four-inch intervals. Ann bought a trouser leg, as these were for sale separately, and all three pieces of the woman's costume (Figure 14).

The last stopping place, before heading back to Guatemala City and the flight to Houston and then home, was Nahualá. Ann noted in her diary that she had bought several items of the distinctive weaving from the area but gave no further details. The items in the Horniman collections are a man's sash (Figure 15) and shawl (Figure 16) and a panel from a carrying cloth (Figure 17). The sash is described as a *cofradía* sash, that is, of the type worn by members of *cofradías*, religious brotherhoods attached to the church. 'People visiting the Sunday market in Chichicastenango are sure to catch a glimpse of the unusual trousers and jacket worn by members of the *cofradía* for processions and local customs connected with the Church of Santo Tomás', she wrote later.

Travels in Guatemalan textiles

In 1998 Ann returned to Guatemala to visit some of the centres of weaving which she had not been able to see on her first visit, this time accompanied by her daughter, Ruth. Her travels took her further afield to unravel further questions. But that's another story.

Jane Gordon

Items from Nahualá: Figure 15 (left) Man's sash (Horniman Museum 2008.568); Figure 16 (right) Tzutze panel (Horniman Museum 2008.570); Figure 17 (below) Man's tzutze (detail) (Horniman Museum 2008.569).



A Visit to Sant' Antioco in search of silk: the secret of Byssus.

Sheelagh Killeen Rees

Having always been interested in shells and their stories, and in 'silk' from wherever it is sourced, whether from lotus or orchid stalks, or even spider silk, my appetite was whetted when I heard and read about sea silk and the last woman known who dived for it. I decided to make a journey to the small island off the west coast of Sardinia, called Sant' Antioco, to visit this very interesting and special woman. She is Signora Chiara Vigo, known for her free-diving work with the large bivalve clam mussel, the fan or pen shell (*Pinna nobilis*, L.). Signora Vigo is the self-styled protectress of this inhabitant of the sea-grass meadows which surround the Sardinian coastline, as well as other southern Italian shores such as those around Taranto in Puglia and in Sicily. She is also a maestro in the art of sea silk weaving and embroidery, a dying art which has attracted the attention of researchers from far afield. I emailed Chiara Vigo one evening in March 2023, and received an answer the following day, in which she welcomed my coming visit.



Figure 1. Chiara Vigo embroidering with sea silk.
Photo: SKR.

pattern with her nails (Figure 1). An impressive woman, she motioned me to sit down opposite her on the right of the small room, where she sat at her workstation. I had her to myself for two hours or more, so I was able to ask some questions in my halting Italian, which I had been teaching myself.

Signora Vigo was immediately into her passion, proudly showing me a fine example of a *Pinna nobilis* shell, over two feet long, with its nacreous interior, often used for decorative mother-of-pearl inlay work (Figure 2). These clams also produce tiny, discoloured pearls, not very much valued. I

Two months later I arrived in Cagliari, where a hotel taxi met me. We drove across the ancient causeway linking the isthmus to the island of Sant' Antioco and its eponymous little town. After a rest and some lunch, I walked up the hill from my hotel Del Corso, and found the yellow ochre-painted house, with a wood and glass door, the entrance to her modest Museo and studio, where she works every day. The walls are covered in photographs, cuttings of news interviews and examples of her work. On the left side as you enter there is a low floor loom strung with a plain linen warp and weft, where Signora Vigo sometimes finger-weaves the old gold threads of the sea silk into an embroidered symbolic



Figure 2. Signora Vigo holding a *Pinna nobilis* shell, the 'beard' of which is the source of sea silk fibres. Photo: SKR.



Figure 3. Signora Vigo at work at her worktable. Photo: SKR.

found myself sitting on one of the many small chairs set all around the room where she demonstrates her ancient art to the local children and the many visitors who find their way to this self-styled maestro's small but fascinating Museo. On her worktable Signora Vigo had some examples of raw sea silk, in a tangle of tiny shells, seaweed and other passing detritus that the clam picks up, when it is standing erect in the

sea (Figure 3). It is anchored of course by the many filaments which emanate from the side of the clam, with sticky pads which cling to the seabed. These filaments come from a gland inside the mussel's meat, as big as a beef-steak—once known a poor mans' food, which secretes a syrup-like stream. This hardens when it exits the shell and hits the cold sea water, turning into the protein substance keratin, reminiscent of human hair. In a clump it much resembles an Elizabethan 'merkin' or wig.

La Signora asked me to close my eyes and extend my hand. I felt nothing, though she had put some sea silk into my palm, miraculously completely weightless. It is, as she has said, impalpable. I opened my eyes and there was the tangled golden gleaming example of 'Byssus', as it came to be called. This is one of the magical tricks with which she surprises people when they visit. She then took up some tweezers to extract the shells from some old sea silk, and then used a square wooden carding brush with many tiny wires protruding to remove the tiny bits of seaweed and broken shell from another tangled mess of sea silk lying in a basket. Its colour at this point was a bronzy brown. She had some old caches of sea silk that were quite dirty, but she assured me that after soaking it in the juices of her secret recipe the colour would turn to gold. In times gone by, bovine or mare's urine was used to soften and desalinate the fibres. Next she took some sea silk in her hand, and with her juniper wood spindle, approximately 10 inches long, she started to spin the



Figure 4. Spinning the fibres with a juniper spindle. Photo: SKR.

threads together (Figure 4). Often they are not more than 2-4 inches long, though they can reach 8 inches. She sang as she spun, explaining that this so-called 'short spinning' was her own creation. The threads were spun with an S-twist for embroidery and a Z-twist for weaving. Then she immersed the thread in lemon juice, some alcohol, pomegranate juice and many different kinds of seaweed, all in a medium-sized chemist's glass jar. She lifted the jar opening to her mouth & breathed on the two-inch deep liquid, while she incanted a kind of low dirge. It seemed an extraordinarily ancient sound that she made, amplified in the vessel, all part of her sacred and alchemical way of blinding the yarn, and spinning her own yarn, her story going back to ancient times.

Of course, these processes normally take many days and indeed moons before the blinding of the fibres makes them shine like gold in the light. Signora Vigo showed me one small weaving which shone brightly when lit (Figure 5). Hanging in her studio was a tie which she said had taken 7 years to make. It was for her future husband—she said he never left once she gave it to him. It took a long time to harvest enough sea silk to make such an item. It could never be a commercial enterprise. As Byssus is now protected, with the threat of a prison sentence for anyone who disturbs or attempts to move a *Pinna nobilis* clam from the seabed, Chiara had used material from her stashes of sea silk from her grandmother's time. She may also have some clams in a nursery of her own planting which she can harvest. She revitalised the old Byssus fibre and knitted the tie on two needles. It is one and a half metres long (Figure 6).

Around the walls of her studio are many references which attest to her past work. The subjects of her embroideries are often religious, depicting, for example, the Virgin Mary spinning as the Angel Gabriel announces that she will conceive. The representation of Mary spinning is based on an apocryphal story, in which she was among the virgins asked to spin thread for a curtain for the Temple. Chiara Vigo herself has a strong belief in the Carthaginian goddess Tanit, who figures in Vigo's embroidery as a symbol of fertility and motherhood - themes close to her heart. She is known for embroidering christening gowns with Byssus for the local babies.



Figure 5 (left). Light shining through a fragment of woven sea silk. Figure 6 (right). The tie woven by Signora Vigo for her husband. Photos: SKR.

A Visit to Sant' Antioco

After a while three Italian women arrived, together with one German lady with whom I could converse, and who translated some things for me. Chiara then showed us her work on the loom. Afterwards she attached a long silver thread to the side of her low loom & proceeded to finger-weave a protective silver thread necklace for me, with a scarab which she fashioned at its end. Whilst doing this she sang an old Sardinian weavers' song, which all the Italian ladies knew, and they joined in heartily. Although I couldn't join in, this was very enjoyable. She fastened the necklet on me, I thanked her and bid her farewell, promising that I would come again in a day or two, after visiting the three local museums in the area. Next day, I saw the bones of Sant' Antioco in their sarcophagus on the altar in the Church of his name, also the catacombs deep below. Then I visited the Archaeological Museum, a fine new building overlooking the sea, which contained many excellent displays including some weaving equipment. Next I went to the Ethnographic Museum with all the agricultural tools of this rural community, as well as some boards with Byssus weaving articles, and a picture of a weaving made for *Il Duce*. Later I walked by the sea to the Museo del Mare, the Museum of the Sea, and saw their magnificent displays of *Pinna nobilis* shells and fishing apparatus, as well as hooks and chains used in the past for getting the clam shells from their bed. All of this added to my interest in the Sardinian story & the fan shell *Pinna nobilis*.

Two days later I visited Chiara again, and she showed me swatches of sea silk which she had dyed using crushed shells of murex (*Hexaplex trunculus*) in purple & red colours. She uses only natural dyes, and copper salts instead of alum for fixing the colour. I asked her, over a graciously provided coffee, whether one of her two daughters was going to follow in her footsteps and weave Byssus. She was non-committal with her answer, except to say that she had given the younger one lessons but was unsure that she would continue. Given that harvesting Byssus is strictly forbidden now by law, it seems unlikely that this old and gradually dying cultural practice can ever be revived properly.

Before I left, Chiara gave me a piece of her precious *Bisso* as she calls it, drew me a picture of a 'peace bird', signed it, folded it up and pressed it into my hand. As I left I saw the donation box, and left a good sum with her. Lastly, we had our photo taken together (Figure 7), in the doorway of her Museo del Bisso. This time she had changed from her workaday grey tracksuit to a lovely bronze & turquoise batik caftan. We said our thankyou's and goodbyes and I waved her farewell as I went down the Via Reina Margherita.

It must add that in addition to my visit to Signora Vigo, I visited the Pes sisters, Giuseppina & Assuntina. They too embroider with sea silk, using a 100-year-old cache from their grandmother. They do not dive as Chiara Vigo has done. They are involved in Basel University's Sea Silk project, initiated by Dr. Felicitas Maeder. They too were taught by Signora Vigo's grandmother, Maria Maddalena Mereu. They do not speak with Signora Vigo and are clearly in competition with her. She says she is impervious to them. They do not aspire to the same Sacred Principles as she does; she has a special respect for the sea, sea silk & for the *Pinna nobilis* giant clam that produces the fabled Golden Byssus.

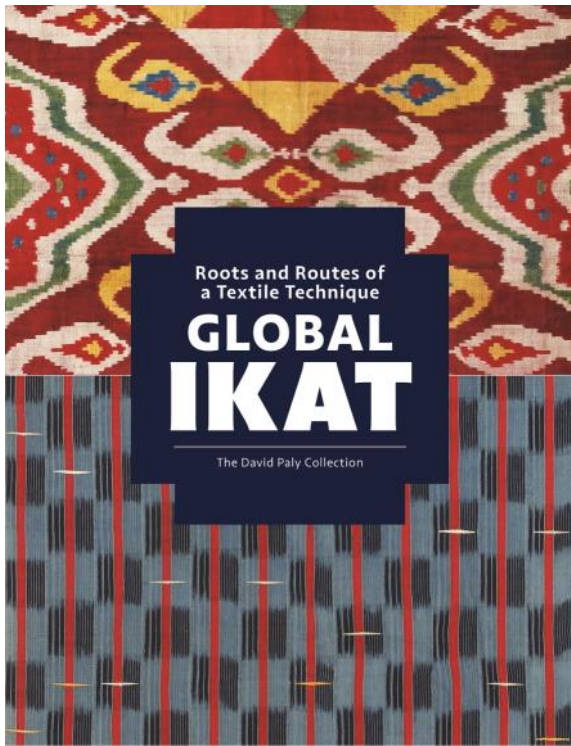
Sheelagh Killeen Rees

Figure 7. The author with Signora Vigo.



Further reading

Those wishing to know more may like to read about marine biologist Helen Scales' research on the production and processing of sea silk in Sant'Antioco. Her findings were published in the chapter *Spinning Shell Stories* in her book *Spirals in Time: The Secret Life and Curious Afterlife of Seashells* (Bloomsbury 2015, 145-171). A chapter in Edward Posnett's book *Harvest – The Hidden Histories of Seven Natural Objects* explores the conflicting narratives about the sea silk in Sant'Antioco (The Bodley Head, London 2019, 123-170).



**Global Ikat: Roots and Routes of a Textile Technique.
The David Paly collection.**

Edited by Rosemary Crill, with contributions from Polly Barton, Sumru Belger Krody, Shelley Burian, Duncan Clarke, Rosemary Crill, Martina D'Amato, Linda S. McIntosh and Lee Talbot.

Hali Publications, 2023

Hardback, 240 Pages

300 colour, 20 b&w illustrations

ISBN 9781898113904

Textiles patterned by the technique of ikat – selectively binding and dyeing threads prior to weaving, creating characteristic blurred designs and strongly contrasting colours – is a perennial favourite of scholars, collectors and the general public alike. This collection of essays on the David Paly collection by leading scholars has much to offer both the newcomer and those who have long admired the cloth.

The book showcases the lifetime collection of American David Paly. In his preface, Paly modestly explains his collection and collecting vision, driven by a fascination for both ikat's 'fantastic difficulty' and its 'exquisite beauty'. There follows a broad introductory overview by Rosemary Crill, then seven chapters divided by geography, written by leading international textile authorities. Each is illustrated with maps, and a selection of illustrations – full page, quarter page, half-page with extended captions and many thumbnails. The volume ends with a sort of postscript by American contemporary fibre artist Polly Barton.

David Paly bravely chose to illustrate in the volume his entire collection, 'less-loved children included'. Paly collected to be geographically inclusive, in his own words sometimes sacrificing 'artistic quality, condition, age and rarity.' Some benefits from this approach include revealing the vision of a single collector, and showcasing a range of qualities – a perhaps more realistic view of what was being made at the time – as well as possibilities to range beyond a strict 'canon'. This reviewer applauds his inclusion of both 'proto ikat' – ikat dyeing on unwoven warps – and 'zone-dyed' textiles – typically using the ikat technique to create contrasting border colours.

Crill's introductory essay brilliantly distills the vast literature on ikat textiles to describe in very clear and accessible language the process, terminologies, and general pathways for the art's transmission over millennia. She identifies three probable historic independent 'roots' or 'inventions' of ikat : in South China, India and Peru. She then maps out major 'routes' – three broad zones of likely shared influences: Eastern, Central and Western. Two pages of illustrations beautifully and graphically convey the sometimes -complex techniques of binding and successive dye baths.

In the seven essays that follow, senior textile historians – experts in their given geographic areas– provide an overview of current knowledge on possible original roots and earliest routes of design and technique influence, before turning to defining the characteristics of individual traditions. In style, the essays range from highly readable accounts engaging for newcomers (e.g. Lee Talbot on Japan) to those that privilege detailed taxonomies of maker-communities and technical descriptions that will be appreciated by experts (e.g. Linda MacIntosh on Monsoon Asia). The most valuable in this reviewer's view further trace out historic change over time *within* given traditions or areas, to emphasize that ikat makers continually innovated and that circulation patterns and influences changed with time.

Book review

A world map helps readers to instantly place historic traditions. However, the title notwithstanding, the book is less about interconnected global pathways à la *Interwoven Globe* – which could easily have bogged down the book in scholarly debates – and more about regional traditions. As Krody writes, tackling ‘its extensive history is impossible within the confines of a few pages or even a book.’ Authors wisely err on the side of caution in examining both ‘roots’ and ‘routes’, and are content to admit that origins of ikat, in Syria and Mexico for instance, remain a mystery.

‘Global’ in a book title can sometimes mean ‘everywhere but Europe’. Paly, however, fortunately included Europe in his collecting strategies. The chapter by Martina D’Amato on European ikat traditions clearly lays out the major producing areas and timelines, as well as the various Asian traditions that brought the ikat technique to Western Europe and Russia in early modern times. Unlike most of the other geographic areas, this section dates to 17th-19th centuries. D’Amato credits the Paly collection itself for helping to advance knowledge.

Of course limitations are imposed by the collection itself, and by some editorial choices. While geographically quite inclusive, the vast majority of the collection dates to the 19th and 20th centuries, and the book thus primarily speaks to ikat-making in this period. Some types – such as the Balinese geringsing – will be very familiar to connoisseurs. The temporality is widened by including images of older objects from public collections such as the Met and V&A. In order to illustrate every piece in the Paly collection, most pieces appear only as small thumbnails, thereby often obscuring the subtle and intricate ikat details in which we revel. It is hoped that digital images of the collection will become available soon. Extended captions often repeat text from the essay, rather than using precious space to introduce new ideas.

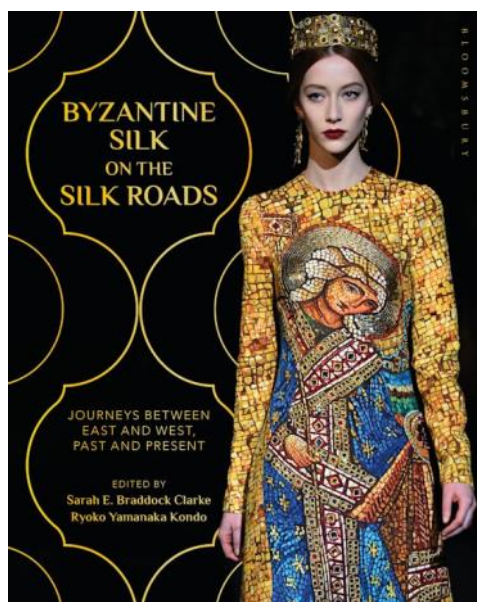
A few final quibbles. For this reader, the section devoted to Africa – a continent – felt inordinately short; the traditions of intriguing Congo and Moroccan pieces were not explained. In the final, ‘Ikat Today’ section, it is arguably a propos to include more examples of contemporary ikat fibre arts or fashions from artists based in Africa or Asia, given that the volume mainly covers these regions.

But these are minor. Altogether, the volume will be a first-stop resource for many, providing state-of-knowledge overviews for the general reader, student and seasoned scholar alike, with up-to-date bibliographies for those seeking deeper reading in a given area. For some a meal, for others a many-spiced hors d’oeuvre whetting the appetite for more. This ‘small document’ – as Paly calls it -- will undoubtedly inspire further research as he intended.

Sarah Fee



Left: Woman's robe, munisak, Bukhara, Uzbekistan, 4th quarter of 19th century, silk velvet warp ikat, cotton weft. 50 x 54 in.
Right: Telial rumal with airplane and clock design, Chirala, Andhra Pradesh, India, ca.1930-40. David Paly collection, IN01.



Byzantine Silk on the Silk Roads

Edited by Sarah E. Braddock Clarke and Ryoko Yamanaka Kondo.

London: Bloomsbury, 2023.

Paperback, 400 pages.

ISBN 978-1350-0-9932-6

A sumptuous and affordable catalogue of mainly medieval Byzantine silks from across Eurasia held in collections worldwide, this volume is severely compromised by much of the supporting material. This is partly a result of the commendable wish to place Byzantine silks in a broader context but also a result of a lack of editing and inclusion of inaccurate material.

The ‘Silk Roads’ and ‘East-West’ binary are used to provide this broader historical and geographical framework and the volume is a collaboration between two academics from, as they note, the island extremities of the ‘Silk Roads’: Japan and Britain. The ‘Silk Roads’ is a convenient label, but it is unfortunate that the editors felt the need to expand on this in the opening essay rather than simply providing a brief definition of what the term implied for this volume: the movement and interchange of materials, technologies, designs, fashions and peoples across this region. The result, as is also the case with the historical summaries found at the start of several other chapters, is in many places a series of clichés and inaccuracies. The use of ‘East-West’ is also distorting: like many binaries it simplifies what is a complex and changing continuum.

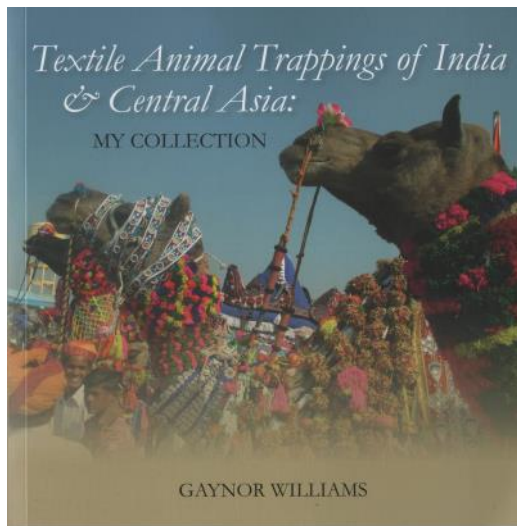
Some of the inaccuracies extend into the history of silk and the spread of loom technology and weaves. Textile terminology is a minefield but, given the authors’ expertise and the inclusion of a glossary, it might be expected that this book would avoid them. Disappointingly, this is not the case. Most notably—and this book is certainly no exception in this—there is no consistent use of a term for the warp-faced compound tabby weave common to early China. It is noted as early as p.23 but the Chinese term, *jin*, is translated as ‘brocade’. The author of this essay then explains that ‘brocade’ can be weft or warp-faced, but the term appears in the glossary and is used in other essays solely as a weft-faced compound weave. This is a well-known issue and many books use the term *jin* to avoid confusion: as does the author of the essay beginning on p.69. But neither brocade nor *jin* appear in the index and there is no consistency in their usage across the volume, including in the captions. So, in the chapter concentrating on *jin*, many captions use ‘warp-faced silk’ rather than ‘warp-faced compound tabby’ (eg. Fig 2.6). In other places, the weave is not identified at all (Figs 6.4, 6.5, 6.6 etc). This might be expected in a non-specialist book but not here.

Once the authors move to their specific areas of expertise: especially design and fashion, then there are more useful insights. But the strength of the book lies in the catalogue of silks from collections worldwide. Most are published elsewhere but it is useful to have them in one place.

The reader should ignore the maps, timeline and index. Curiously, despite one of the editors and several authors being Japanese, the timeline is very Eurocentric, replete with details about events in the Mediterranean whereas little on the corresponding period in central and east Asia (and where is Korea in this?). The glossary is more useful but has glaring omissions, as mentioned above.

In short, a curate’s egg of a book, full of some wonderful images and information, but riddled with historical clichés and inaccuracies.

Susan Whitfield



Textile Animal Trappings of India & Central Asia: My Collection

By Gaynor Williams

Published by Gaynor Williams and printed by Short Run Press Ltd., Exeter

ISBN 978-1-3999-5866-0

This is a vast and complicated subject and Gaynor Williams sensibly limited her exhibition and accompanying book to Central Asia and India, where many different materials, styles and techniques are used in the making of these trappings/decorations and where some of the finest examples are produced.

These encompass headdresses, neck pieces, chest bands, harnessing, saddle cloths, covers, cruppers and other surprising decorations, such as knee bands to cover the unsightly kneecaps of camels, and horses! They are hard to display and photograph due to their awkward shapes but the author has deftly given a good idea as to the quality and diversity of the pieces.

Her book gives a brief and informal impression of her subject and is accompanied by a good selection of photographs of many fine pieces, though a bit more identification of them would have been helpful to the untrained eye. She points out in her introduction that it can be difficult to be sure as to where some of the pieces actually come from due to the nomadic nature of some of the people and/or those who live in isolated communities. Occasionally, not even the dealers know!

Chapter 1 presents an intriguing camel headdress, in a broken state, with four mirrors atop on each side. She meticulously describes the complex nature of the different materials used in its construction in order to achieve the attractive whole. I commend her for drawing attention to this example of nomadic craftsmanship since most books on the subject give priority to pieces such as horse covers, saddle cloths and bags which are often turned into glamorous wall hangings and cushions. She also draws attention to the high quality of the work of these objects, made by the poorest of people living mostly in very harsh environments. It is extraordinary to see the effort that has gone into the highly decorative 'clothing' of their animals, and other more practical pieces for camels, horses and donkeys such as gorbands and girth bands, also braided in complex and decorative patterns.

For less heavy duty animals and for celebratory occasions she shows jewel-like, beautifully embroidered head decorations, from Sindh and the Gujarat area, adorned with shisha and beads, and from Afghanistan and Uzbekistan some very splendid camel covers for weddings.

The description of the Pushkar Camel Fair in Rajasthan was a riot. One can just imagine the heat, dust and general good-humoured mayhem of such an occasion, in effect an atmospheric and colourful chaos, and one in which it would no doubt be a joy to participate.

Gaynor Williams certainly has an outstanding collection and her book, though short, is a contribution to the further understanding and appreciation of this highly decorative form of art and the quality of the production of a myriad of beautiful and (sometimes) strange pieces.

As pointed out in the last ORTS newsletter, the exhibition was a selling one and consequently fans and collectors were able to quench their thirst by acquiring some fascinating objects.

Margaret Broadbent

TALKS

Live talks are held at the University Women's Club, 2 Audley Square, London W1K 1DB, which is a two-minute walk from the Dorchester Hotel in Mayfair.

Numerous buses stop near the Dorchester Hotel, including Buses 13, 16, and 36, which go from Victoria Station to Park Lane and Bus 38, which goes to Piccadilly and stops at the Hard Rock Café bus stop. The nearest tube stations are Green Park and Hyde Park Corner.

Doors open at 6 pm. Please sign your names at reception, and go upstairs to the elegant first floor drawing room, where there will be a pay bar.

Non-members are welcome to attend lectures for £7 a single lecture, students £5.

Lectures are free for members.

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With thanks to Pia Rainey for managing the monthly newsletters

The ORTS journal is published three times a year. Contributions are welcomed from members and non-members. Please send ideas for articles and proposals for book or exhibition reviews to Dr Fiona Kerlogue on editor.orts@gmail.com

The deadline for content for the next issue is September 1st 2023.

Back cover: Hanging, pardeh, Sharisabz, Uzbekistan, second half 19th century. Seattle Art Museum, 2022.38.4. See review of Global Ikat: Roots and Routes of a Textile Tradition, on pages 27-28.

