Threads of Asia: a Guide to Historical Asian Textiles in the U.S.

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I. Purpose

A. Intent of the guide

The purpose of this guide is to intertwine culture and art. It is made for Asian American designers in particular but can be used by anyone with an interest in Asian and Asian American art and textiles. Another purpose of this guide is to aid designers in utilizing history and culture in their work through the Library of Congress’s textile collections. This guide will cover fabrics of East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, and how many of these textiles made their way over to the United States. Additionally, it will cover how designers should use these traditional fabrics as a form of appreciation, not appropriation. By utilizing this guide as a starting point, designers and artists can explore more personal histories and cultural fabrics available in the Library’s collections.

B. What is Asian American?

While this guide covers many regions of Asia, it is not wholly comprehensive of the diverse areas in Asia—such as Central Asia, Northeast Asia, and Western Asia. The regions covered—East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia—are covered because of the high levels of immigration to the United States, establishing the idea of “Asian
American.” While being Asian American has historically referred to East Asians, the term formally applies to any American of Asian descent. This, of course, is a definition that simplifies the political and social implications of being Asian in North America. The idea that there are “Threads of Asia” in the United States is where this guide stems from. Through centuries of immigration and trade, Asia has interwoven itself into the complex blanket of the U.S. As society changes and evolves, art can always take root and inspiration in those threads.

II. East Asia

A. Silk

Silk was originally created in China in the fourth millennium, BCE, made from spun silkworm fibers (History of, n.d.). These techniques largely spread across Asia, but remained centralized in China.

![Chinese Farmers Creating Silk Fabrics. Photo by the Keystone View Company, ca. 1906.](https://www.loc.gov/item/2006677897/)

With the creation of the Silk Road in the 2nd century BCE, China opened to the West for the trade of not only goods but techniques and ideas as well. The Silk Road was a large reason many traditionally Asian-produced fabrics were introduced to the West, including hemp, velvet and brocade. All of these materials appear in Americans’ closets today.

In particular, France became a large contributor to the silk industry, supplying much of Europe. English royalty took a particular affinity to this new material. In the early 1600s, when colonies were beginning to be established in Virginia in the U.S., King James I
ordered materials for silk to be sent and cultivated in the U.S., to compete with the growing silk industry in France (Silk production, n.d.). Thus, silk began to evolve, forming new variations from moths and creating artificial substitutes.

B. **Hmong clothing**

The Library contains a variety of traditional Hmong story cloths. These fabrics are intricately woven, hand-stitched fabrics that depict a variety of folk tales and narratives.


Joshua Kueh, a Southeast Asia Reference Librarian at the Library, looked at these textiles in relation to the history and context in which they were created. Women created these narratives, which Kueh explains in depth in his article, under conditions of dislocation at refugee camps. They convey experiences of wartime, histories and
political context (Kueh 2020). Embroidery has always been used as a form of storytelling, and this is one example that the Library has a collection for.

C. Hanbok

Hanbok, which directly translates to “Korean clothes,” has been around for over 2,000 years, and styles have evolved over the various eras and rulers of Korea. The clothes worn by royalty and nobility in the Joseon dynasty from 1392 to 1897 are most commonly recognizable today. Hanbok was typically made from silk, and various patterns, colors, and materials codified social and political status.

Korean Man Dressed in Hanbok. Ca. 1890.
https://www.loc.gov/resource/ds.14899/

While still worn today for special occasions such as weddings or family gatherings, Hanbok’s enduring journey to the present has not been simple. Japan’s annexation of Korea in the early 1900s led to a certain stigma against defining Korean clothing (Iyenaga 1912). Furthermore, with the influx of Western trade in the late 19th century, hanbok became largely dominated by Western clothing. Nevertheless, it continues to thrive even in the West today, with hanbok shops becoming staple institutions in Korean-American dense cities such as Los Angeles and New York.
III. Southeast Asia

A. Woven clothing

Influenced by China and regions of South Asia, traditional textiles of Southeast Asia include woven shawls, blankets and tube skirts. These materials are embroidered, decorated with appliques, or dyed. Production of these textiles, made by using a loom, is a female-dominated field and industry, with the implication of a weaver being able to change threads into a new substance representing the growth from girl to woman (Southeast Asia 2023). The growth of trade in the late 1900s shifted some focus away from traditional weaving in the global context, but home-based textile production continues to thrive today in countries such as Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia. The types of woven fabrics that these countries produce vary, and include cultural fabrics such as ikat, a type of woven yarn fabric with dyed fabrics, and songket, a woven fabric with threads of gold and silver inserted (Wilson 2022). Colors and styles of the clothing made from these fabrics can indicate status, wealth, age, and gender, and can be worn at traditional ceremonies.

IV. South Asia

A. Cotton

India, alongside China, has dominated the cotton industry for a while, as in the 18th century, India had a 25% share of the global textile trade. Demand for cotton continued to grow, as it was a cheaper alternative to other materials such as silk. Easy to sew, dye and manipulate, cotton fabrics slowly rose to the top as one of the most popular fabric types. Under British rule in India from 1858 to 1947, Britain heavily invested in labor technologies and manufacturing technologies to further increase cotton production. During this colonization period, Britain was able to heavily profit off India, as well as force imports and investments of British goods and industries (Malihan, n.d.). Raw cotton from India was often transported to Britain to be made into cotton fabrics, which Britain was able to sell to the rest of the world. Fabrics and textiles—beyond cotton, India is a large producer of silk, yarn and jute—have grown to be such a large part of India that in 1985, the Ministry of Textiles was created.
Trademark for British Indian Cotton Mills. Ca. 1885.
https://www.loc.gov/item/2022674768/

V. Appropriation vs appreciation

In Western fashion, the line between appropriating culture and appreciating it is extremely thin. Are these terms even mutually exclusive at all? In the context of decades of migration and immigration between the U.S. and Asia, what does this even mean? With interest in Asian culture in the U.S. coming in waves, it is easy to write off putting on another country’s traditional garment as “simply appreciating it.” However, appreciation does not just come by saying the term. “While clothing is universal, some pieces can carry specific meaning and should be researched and treated as such,” luxury fashion specialist Jodie Chan said in an email to the New York Times. “If you want to wear a kimono/yukata or robe piece suggestive of a kimono, for example, it is very important to consider how you wear it — always the left side over the right side, as the other way is for the deceased in Japanese culture” (Friedman 2023). In other words, respect and intent matter.

Many of these traditional garments and fabrics, especially those that were embroidered to tell a story, were born out of times of grief. For example, the Hmong story cloths were created in refugee camps filled by those who fled Laos under strict communist rule, and
represent stories of their–mostly female–former lives in Laos. Because these textiles were created in times of turmoil and displacement, it is crucial to be aware of these histories so they can be used in an appropriate manner.

Finally, one must consider who is benefitting from the garment made with these traditional fabrics or patterns. Is there any benefit going to the original culture or country? Appropriation in fashion has been a controversy for decades, ranging from Sikh turbans worn at the 2018 Gucci show to white models donning dreadlocks on the runway. It is always crucial to consider, is the point of your usage of the cultural textile to appreciate and pay homage to the culture and context in which it is used, or because the fabric looked “cool” and the pattern fits into the style you were envisioning? When creating designs from traditional Asian fabrics and patterns, consult a professional on the textile you are using, such as someone that may create those textiles or a librarian at the Library of Congress to learn about the history of that material.

VI. Modern-day uses

Meshing and combining several different fabrics and textile patterns together to create a new pattern is a way to pay homage to several cultures you may be a part of. Modernizing traditional garments typically reserved for special occasions has risen in popularity. A prominent example of this is the modern hanbok which keeps the traditional elements of hanbok, such as the fabric and unique crisscross patterns, but sleeves are less dramatized and lengths are made shorter. This fusion presents itself as less full skirts, more fitted sleeves, and simpler patterns and colors. Celebrities such as Blackpink have popularized these garments, and many are starting to adapt them into their everyday wardrobe. Korean Americans have worn hanbok for generations to get in touch with their Korean culture, and these modern versions are a way to continue traditions into the present day. In the process of modernizing a traditional garment, one is able to study the traditional garment in-depth and transform it into something still recognizable, but more wearable, for those looking to further explore their culture.

Another common modern-day could potentially be using these traditional textiles in common pieces of clothing, such as making a jacket or pants out of the fabric. Because textiles like these may be difficult to come by in the U.S., designers can reference the textiles in the Library’s collection to get a better sense of them and potentially create their own. This deep involvement in the process, from fabric to finish, gives deeper meaning to a common garment pattern.
VII. Concluding words

This guide is to inform on the history of Asian textiles, inspire artists, and encourage artists to use the Library’s textile collections when creating their own work. In utilizing this guide, the reader may find inspiration in the textiles mentioned and create ways to incorporate their own work thoughtfully and with a full understanding of the textile’s history and context.

Thank you to Adam Silvia, Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, Elli Kim, Joshua Kueh, Charlotte Giles, Ryan Wolfson-Ford, and Jeffrey Yoo Warren for their interviews. Thank you to my project mentor Olivia Dorsey and the rest of the CCDI community for their support.
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