THE CLEVELAND Museum of Art (CMA) opened its doors to the public over a century ago, in 1916. Since then, the museum’s collections have been free of admission and “for the benefit of all the people forever”. Cleveland was at the time one of the nation’s largest and wealthiest cities, with a diverse community including a high percentage of immigrants and industrial workers. The museum’s trustees wanted the institution to be “a live educational force in the community” and were convinced that this goal could only be achieved by collecting “the best objects in all branches of art”.1

However, the CMA’s encyclopedic collection of artworks is not only known for rarity and exquisite quality, but the arts of India, China, Japan and Korea were a main focus of interest from the museum’s inception. In fact, the museum’s first curator, Arthur MacLean, had been trained in
the Oriental Department at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. MacLean's appointment was announced in the Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1914 as follows: "It is hoped that his [MacLean's] enthusiasm and his knowledge of Eastern art will so stimulate interest in the art of the Near and Far East in Cleveland that his whole attention may, before long, be required for the care of a department of Oriental Art in the Museum".2 Today, the Asian collections, especially the Chinese holdings, have works of art in almost all media, with particular strength in Buddhist sculpture, classical Chinese painting, Chinese ceramics and silk textiles. Among these four groups, the CMA's magnificent collection of Chinese silks has received little attention. The museum's overall strength in textiles, however, reflects its founders' endeavour that "Cleveland—with its important clothing and weaving industries—should have the advantage of a splendid collection of textiles [...]".3

Dating from the 8th century to modern times and covering a large geographical area from Central Asia along the trade routes of the Silk Road to the imperial silk weaving centres in south-east China, these textiles are noteworthy for their high quality, pristine condition, and breadth in silk weaving types, manufacturing techniques and ultimate usage. In 1997, the CMA and The Metropolitan Museum of Art jointly organised the splendid exhibition, "When Silk was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles", presenting to the public exemplars from two of the most important Chinese and Central Asian textile collections outside Asia.

This year, the CMA presents a selection of its highlights in a new gallery display, titled "The Splendor of Chinese Textiles: From the Silk Road to the Imperial Court" (February 8th to August 12th, 2018). The earliest dated textile on display is an 8th century coat, presumably made for a young Tibetan prince (1). A major and fairly recent acquisition, much has been written about this spectacular textile, which was acquired together with a pair of trousers. The outer fabric of the coat, a silk samite (welt-faced compound twill) woven in five brilliant colours and featuring paired ducks in pearl roundels, bears all the hallmarks of the precious and highly desired silks from Sogdia (present-day Uzbekistan) or Eastern Iran.4 The coat's inner lining is a twill damask with a floral pattern made in China. The same fabric was used to line the accompanying pants (not on display), suggesting that both garments originally belonged together. A pair of small boots, made of the same outer fabric as the CMA coat, is in the collection of the Hirayama Ikuo Silk Road Museum in Japan and complements the set.5 Given the coat's pristine condition, it is not clear whether the garment was ever worn or whether it served as a diplomatic gift or perhaps as currency. The combination of Sogdian and Chinese silks in one garment is evidence for the vital exchange and cultural interaction amongst the peoples living along the Silk Road, a network of trade routes connecting China with Central Asia and the Middle East. With its provenance from Tibet, it seems probable that the costly garment reflects the immense power of the 8th century Tibetan empire, which then controlled parts of Sichuan, Qinghai and Xizang provinces, including the Gansu corridor. The Tibetan King Khri-Idge-focus-btsan (704–754) had even sought marriage alliances with princesses from both China and the Sogdian city state of Samarkand.6

The constant change of power constellations among the peoples from north and north-west of China throughout the following centuries is reflected in the production and exchange of textiles and motifs from this region. The occupation of Chinese territory by northern invaders from the steppe lands often resulted in the relocation of parts of the native Chinese population. The Khitan, Jurchen and Mongols all forced captive Chinese artisans, including weavers, to move from their homeland and settle in locations or centres with foreign artisan activity.7 In addition to trade, migration and pilgrimage, the relocation of artisans thus fostered the transmission, exchange and the merging of indigenous and foreign motifs and weaving skills.

Also on display at the CMA is a pair of Liao dynasty (907–1125) boots, made of finely woven silk tapestry (kesi), featuring two phoenix in flight chasing a flaming pearl (2).

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2. CMA Bulletin, no. 3, November 1914, Staff Appointments.
3. CMA Bulletin, no. 1, April 1914, p. 2.
Although the bright colours of the fabric have become muted through burial and the gold threads are partly disintegrated, the once lavish use of gold and the Chinese-inspired phoenix motif suggest that the boots were made for a member of the Liao imperial family, most probably a woman. It is worth noting that at the time the Liao boots were produced in Khitan-occupied northern China, foot-binding began to become customary among upper-class women in southern China. The high value the Khitan accorded to boots relates to their mobile, semi-nomadic lifestyle. Moreover, the exchange of leather boots between the Song (960–1279) and Liao emperors is recorded in an 11th century text. Boots made of silk tapestry were models for bronze and silver-gilt boots found in Liao tombs. A pair of silver gilt boots (dated 1018 or earlier) with phoenix motifs and cloud scrolls, closely resembling the CMA textile pair, was excavated from the tomb of Princess Chen and Xiao Shaoju at Qinglongshan town in Naiman Banner. The motif of magnificently long-tailed phoenix with cloud scrolls can also be seen on a large contemporary bronze mirror (3). While the mirror, inscribed by its maker in Jinling (Nanjing), was produced in the south-east, the boots were made in the northern part of China then occupied by the Khitan.

Textiles played an important role in Chinese diplomacy with foreign states and at court. Bolts of silk served as diplomatic gifts to pacify border populations and to maintain balanced power constellations. During the Song dynasty, the Chinese court agreed to pay annual tribute to the Liao-Khitan in the form of thousands of silver taels and bolts of silk. The treaty was followed by comparable arrangements with the Xixia and Jin peoples. Over centuries the Chinese court endeavoured, with varying degrees of success, to keep a stable relationship with powerful Tibetan Buddhists. During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), in particular under the Yongle emperor (reigned 1402–1424) who was a devout Buddhist, vast quantities of gifts of all kinds were sent to Tibetan monasteries or were received by political dignitaries. Later, the Shunzhi emperor (reigned 1644–1661) invited the Fifth Dalai Lama to Beijing in 1652, and in 1779, the Sixth Panchen Lama visited China at the request of the Qianlong emperor (reigned 1736–1795). Qianlong recognised the supremacy of the religious authority of the Dalai Lama, and in turn the Tibetans acknowledged the Qing emperor as an incarnation of Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. A striking painting that depicts Qianlong as Mañjuśrī in the Palace Museum, Beijing, documents this acknowledgment. During the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the Chinese court began to send gifts of court garments and furnishings to Tibet where they were altered to Tibetan-style narrow sleeve robes with close fitted neck and a distinctive overlap in the front, called chuba. A magnificent 17th century robe in the CMA collection, made of Chinese silk satin for a Tibetan lama or an aristocrat, prominently documents the complex relationship maintained between powerful Tibetan Buddhists and the Chinese court (4). The CMA chuba has been fashioned from a sumptuous imperial satin wall hanging. John Vollmer, who studied the piece, concluded that Tibetan tailors cut it into sixty separate units, reassembling the fabric to a completely new, dramatic and bold design. The wearer of such a garment must have impressed bystanders by his striking appearance.

In addition to foreign dignitaries, court officials benefited from imperial gifts made of Chinese silk. A poem by Wen Zhengming (1470–1559), in running script style calligraphy in a hanging scroll format in the CMA, expresses Wen’s gratitude to the Jiaging emperor (reigned 1521–1566) for a gift of an embroidered silk given to him in appreciation of his meritorious service (5). The poem reads:

As I expressed my gratitude to His Majesty by the Goldwater Bridge.
This heavenly silk is embroidered with five colours.
Resplendent it is, draping over my arm with designs of twin dragons.
Having received such a gift, I [bowed] in shame over my lack of achievements.
Humbly I returned to my rank to observe the grand ceremony.
I wish His Majesty shall live on for myriad years,
And the sun will always shine upon His trailing robe.

Since the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) the production of silk for imperial use increasingly concentrated in the Jiangnan region, the Lower Yangzi (Yangtse) Delta. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the main official imperial workshops were situated in Hangzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing and Beijing. Tax payments, largely in the form of rice and bolts of silk, were submitted and shipped from the Jiangnan region to the capital (6).

Due to the warm and humid climate in China’s southeast, local silk workshops specialised and excelled in the making of airy, semi-transparent gauze garments that became fashionable among women and men. A recently acquired painting in the CMA collection shows a woman in such a dress of semi-transparent red gauze (7). The painting relates to the legendary love story between Tang dynasty (618–906) Emperor Xuanzong and his consort, the beautiful Yang Guifei. Set in a contemporary 18th century
southern interior, Yang's nude body can be seen through
the red robe as she leaves the bath.86

Raising silkworms, weaving and embroidering silk were
primarily the domains of women. Some excelled in this
pursuit to a degree that they gained the recognition of
the emperor. As a result, their woven tapestries or silk embroi-
deries were mounted in album, handscroll or hanging scroll
format, like calligraphies and paintings, and entered the
imperial collection as works of art. Zhu Kerou, active
during the reign of Emperor Gaozong (1127–1162), and
Han Ximeng, active circa 1630s–1640s, both challenged
the genre of calligraphy and painting by producing fine
tapestries and embroideries that closely imitate these picto-
rial arts. Both women were respectively active in the tradi-
tional weaving centre of Songjiang, near Shanghai. Han
Ximeng's husband, the official Gu Shouqian, mentions
how Dong Qichang, the great official and calligrapher, ad-
mirèd her album of embroideries, imitating Song and Yuan
paintings:

The Chief Minister of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices [Dong
Qichang] saw and deeply appreciated it, and asked me how her
skill reached this point. I [...] respectfully replied: "[...] Often
when the sky is clear, the sun unclouded, the birds happy and
the flowers fragrant, she absorbs the vitality of life before her eyes
and stitches [it] into fine silk from Suzhou."

One Hundred Birds, in the collection of the CMA and possibly
executed by a woman, demonstrates the continuing
tradition of making embroidered pictures in imitation of

9See Shen Hsieh-man, Gilded Splendor: Treasures of China's Liao Empire,
10For a reproduction, see Shen Hsieh-man, Gilded Splendor, 2006, p. 104.
12Vollmer, in John Vollmer and Jacqueline Simcox, Emblems of Empire:
Selections from the Mactaggart Art Collection, Edmonton: The University of
13For an image of the Qianlong emperor as Mahjushí, see The Three
Emperors: 1662–1795, edited by Evelyn Rawski and Jessica Rawson,
London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2005, cat. 47.
14See Footnote 12.
15John Vollmer, Silk for Thrones and Altars, Chinese Costumes and Textiles,
16In the painting, a servant offers Consort Yang a bowl of soup; the
servant's earrings suggest that Yang's attendant is, in fact, a girl who
cross-dressed as a male scholar.
17Marsha Weidner, Views from the Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists
Silk Panel with Dragon and Cloud Motifs, circa 1700s–1800s. China, Jiangnan Imperial Factory, Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Silk and metal thread: Jacquard weave. 373.3 x 71.1 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of C.L. Burton, 1976.1087

Yang Guifei Leaving the Bath, 1700s. China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Hanging scroll, ink, colour and gold on silk. Painting 95 x 43 cm, overall 122 x 59.4 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of The MCH Foundation, 2017.65

While, as previously mentioned, the pacification of the Chinese borderlands and maintaining peaceful relationships with one’s neighbours was an important task for Chinese rulers, the management and control of the empire’s vast network of waterways, dams and irrigation systems was another. Throughout history, the Yellow River carried so much silt that it was constantly filling up the riverbed
8  **One Hundred Birds**, 1700s–1800s. China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Embroidery, silk and gold thread. 118.7 x 76.2 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mr and Mrs Severance A. Millikin, 1960.276

9  **Hundred Birds and the Three Friends**, first quarter of the 15th century. BIAN WENJIN (about 1354–1428). Hanging scroll, ink and colour on silk. 152.1 x 95.3 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund, 1980.12

10  **Map, Mingling of Clear and Muddy Water at the Junction of the Jing and Wei Rivers**, 1736–before 1790, detail, handscroll. China, Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong reign (1736–1795). Silk: tapestry weave; embroidery; ink and colours. 34.5 x 273 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust, 1915.618
and, in many instances, caused the overflow of its boundaries. Flood prevention was essential, for when the Yellow River or its tributaries overflowed, it caused disastrous deluges and destroyed arable land and settlements. This is the context in which the centrepiece of the gallery display in the CMA needs to be understood: The handscroll Minling of Clear and Muddy Water at the Junction of the Jing and Wei Rivers (Jing qing Wei zhuo tu) features a map (10) and a report by the statesman Dong Gao (1740–1818), preceded by an imperial commentary. Here the Qianlong emperor had requested an on-site investigation of the Jing and Wei rivers in order to rectify historic written sources that confused these rivers. The entire handscroll is woven in silk; while the calligraphy section on the right side is woven into the tapestry fabric, all Chinese characters on the map (10) are in fact embroidered. The map shows the clear (blue) river Jing in the north joining the muddy (yellow) river Wei in the west and flowing into the large Yellow River in the north-east. The roofs of houses and sections of the city wall in the lower part of the map indicate the city of Xi’an, a former imperial capital in Shaanxi province. In addition to the Cleveland tapestry scroll, an identical silk tapestry version is preserved in the Palace Museum in Taipei and a rubbing version on paper is preserved in the National Library in Beijing. The CMA tapestry scroll is kept in its original carved zitan hardwood box, and is preserved together with its imperial silk cloth wrapper featuring a central dragon motif on yellow ground (11). Dong Gao was a son of the court artist and official, Dong Bangda (1699–1769). The emperor’s relationship with this trusted official is documented in another work of art in the CMA: Wang Mian’s (1287–1359) magnificent large painting on silk, Prunus in Moonlight, bears several imperial seals, one of which reads “ci hao” (bestowed painting). It is impressed above a seal by Dong Gao, reading “chen Gao gong chang” (Your servant Gao respectfully [received this into his] collection) (12).

In conclusion, China has been producing silk for over 4000 years. Desired and exported worldwide long before the manufacture of Chinese porcelain, the value of silk was often equal to gold. The new gallery display presents a selection of highlights of the museum’s Chinese textile collection and explores the manifold ways in which the use of silk enriched, embellished and shaped Chinese arts and culture.

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10 Seals on the map are partly embroidered. A comprehensive study of the CMA tapestry scroll is in preparation.
19 The museum acquired the scroll through John Ferguson in 1914.