

Threaded Worlds: Medieval Textiles and Modern Collections



Art History 646, Fall 2023: Wednesdays, 11:35-2:25 in Arts Building West-220
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Seminar Description

Silk was the diplomatic gift par excellence in the medieval Mediterranean. It offered the maximum advantage for long-distance diplomacy: easily transported, lightweight and flexible, silk bore the highest economic value, sometimes equivalent to specie. Its circulation was heavily regulated, with harsh punishments for silk workers who strayed beyond the prescribed confines of guild systems. Beyond economics and diplomacy, silk and other sumptuous textiles fundamentally index the body and its spatial environments as adornment. Silk garments proclaimed status for their wearers, offering a finely calibrated visual coding for court cultures; they also were used to wrap the most sacred bodies in churches, both as funerary dress for entombed bishops and as the lining of reliquaries for the relics of saints. Fabric hangings also offered the possibility of portable monumentality and flexible architecture, serving as adornment for altars or means to divide church space, or as tents for rulers on battlefields or brides in transit to new lands.

Today most museums hold fragments of these threaded worlds, many collected by wealthy industrialists and dealers in the nineteenth century. Because there is little evidence of provenance or origin, many textile collections remain unpublished or poorly documented; and because of their delicate state of preservation, many fragments remain in museum storage, rarely if ever seen by visitors. This seminar will be anchored by the particularly rich collection of textiles in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. This diverse corpus of over 700 fragments from the Late Antique and medieval world offers a singular opportunity for original research. Thus the final research projects will be based on textiles in the museum in an attempt to build provisional histories for these fragments that have been profoundly decontextualized and out of sight.

While a background in medieval art or textiles is not required for the seminar, an openness to original and in-depth research is necessary.

Land Acknowledgment

McGill University is located on land that has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee and Anishinabeg nations. McGill honours, recognizes, and respects these nations as the traditional stewards of these lands and waters.

Course Requirements

I. Participation: 50%

Half of your final grade will be based on your seminar participation, which includes weekly conversations and leading discussion on two occasions throughout the term.

It is imperative that students come to seminar every week prepared to discuss the readings thoughtfully and respectfully. If you have difficulty formulating discussion questions and responses or find speaking out in class challenging for whatever reason, I encourage you to speak to me sooner rather than later so we can work together on effective strategies for participation. Throughout the term you may also be asked to write additional short responses to the course content (likely to be posted to the discussion board on MyCourses), which will factor into your participation grade.

Because the success of the seminar depends on an engaged and lively group dynamic, attendance is mandatory, but I also understand that things come up. ***Please note that if you miss a class for whatever reason—and I do not need an explanation or doctor's note—you are expected to write a response to the readings for the session you missed.*** This response should be 3-5 pages in length (double spaced) and should be emailed to me within one week of the missed session.

In addition to participating in the weekly conversation, students will take turns leading discussion. Discussion leaders will outline the scope of the reading, create a power point presentation of relevant works of art and architecture to structure the discussion, and, most importantly, will bring to seminar a selection of questions to prompt discussion.

Overall, when assigning final participation grades, I ask these questions: Did you contribute a critical point of view, a set of commentaries, and/or an interpretive stance that was of value in our discussions? Did you accept your share of responsibility for the success of this class? Or were you merely an observer of everyone else's endeavors?

II. Research Project: 50%

The culmination of the seminar is a research project on a textile fragment in the MMFA. The project encompasses the following components, details of which will be elaborated separately:

1. An **acquisition-style report** on the particular textile (3-5 page)
2. A 15-minute **presentation** of your research project at the end of the term.
3. A formal **research paper** (15-20 pages) formatted according to the *Chicago Manual of Style* due one week after our last session.

All written work should be submitted as a Word file with standard margins (1") and font (Times New Roman). ***Note that unless an extension is granted in advance, late assignments will be graded down 5% per day.***

Final papers should represent rigorous research and original argumentation. When I assess upper-level seminar papers, I consider the depth of your engagement with the topic more broadly and with the particular object of analysis specifically. I place a high priority on the quality of writing and argumentation as well as an attentiveness to detail and clarity. Please also be especially attentive to my policy on using generative artificial intelligence tools (below).

Course Materials and Policies

Communication

My office hours are scheduled for immediately after seminar (Wednesdays, until about 3.30). During this time, you may stop by office (Arts W-240)—no appointment necessary. You may also email me to schedule an appointment at another time by zoom, phone or in-person.

Resources

MyCourses serves as “home base” for the seminar, where you will find announcements, readings, research guides, and other resources. Please be sure to check regularly for announcements and updates. Please also feel free to use the MyCourses discussion board feature for sharing information and resources (sharing ILL books, etc...): the “Seminar Administration” thread is available to everyone enrolled in the seminar. Unless otherwise noted in the syllabus, the readings will be posted as PDFs on MyCourses under “course documents.”

While seminar-specific resources will be posted on MyCourses, note the following McGill resources as well: the dedicated writing center for graduate students, [called Graphos](#), McGill’s [Teaching and Learning Services](#), and the subject guide to [Art History](#) on the library website.

Language of Submission

In accord with McGill University’s [Charter of Student Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives. (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009).

Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#). (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See McGill’s [guide to academic honesty](#) for more information.)

Generative Artificial Intelligence

AI for general research: If you choose to use generative AI of any sort for gathering information related to the course material, always check the main sources of the information. Make sure they are trustworthy, verifiable, and academically authoritative. If the sources are not traceable or unclear, do not use/accept the information.

For course writing: Use of generative AI is not permitted for *writing*. If you do find sources through Generative AI, you must locate and consult the original source in its entirety (academic articles or books) for your writing. Be aware that stitching together fragmented information/sentences/phrases via generative AI tends to yield an incoherent paper with poor quality in terms of both content and writing itself. To write a productive, organic, and solid research paper, try to cultivate and maintain the traditional research methods: check the original sources and cite them properly. Any negligence of proper citations will likely result in plagiarism. Moreover, representing ideas or expressions of ideas that were AI-generated as your own will be considered an academic offence in this course.

Mobile Phone Policy

Mobile phones are strictly prohibited during class time and should be silenced and stored where they cannot be seen or heard.

Mental Health

Many students may face mental health challenges that can impact not only their academic success but also their ability to thrive in our campus community. Please reach out for support when you need it; many resources are available through the [Student Wellness Hub](#).

Extraordinary Circumstances

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Copyright

© Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of [copyright](#) can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

SEMINAR SCHEDULE: WEEKLY TOPICS, READINGS, AND DUE DATES

August 30. Office hours in lieu of a formal group session. Please read the syllabus and familiarize yourselves with the relevant websites and resources and prepare for our first meeting.

Part I: Orientations: Materiality and Historiography

September 6. **Orientations**

- Patricia Blessing, Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, and Eiren L. Shea, *Medieval Textiles Across Eurasia, c. 300-1400* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
 - Written collaboratively by art historians of medieval Islam, Byzantium, and China, this book offers an up-to date overview of textiles, incorporating specialist research and recent archeological finds. It will be a valuable resource throughout the term, especially for its bibliography. For our first session, I ask you to read the book in its entirety, but note that it is slim volume with merely 80 pages of text with images on nearly every page. It is available as an e-book via the McGill library catalogue or you can purchase a hard copy from your preferred online vendor if you are suffering from screen fatigue.

September 13. **Materiality and Historiography**

- Tristan Weddigen, "Materiality," *The Art Bulletin* 95, no. 1 (2013): 34-37.
- Jennifer L. Ball, "Textiles: The Emergence of a Christian Identity in Cloth," in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, ed. Robin Margaret Jensen (New York: Routledge, 2018), 221-39.
- Mary Margaret Fulgham "Under Wraps: Byzantine Textiles as Major and Minor Art," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 9, no. 1 (2001-2002), 13-33.
- Thelma K. Thomas, "The Medium Matters: Reading the Remains of a Late Antique Textile," in *Reading Medieval Images: The Art Historian and the Object*, ed. Elizabeth Sears and Thelma K. Thomas (2002), 38-49

September 20. **The Body Clothed, Charmed, and Jeweled**

- Henry Maguire, "Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990): 215-224.
- Jennifer L. Ball, "Charms: Protective and Auspicious Motifs," in *Designing Identities: Gender and Power in Late Antique Textiles*, ed. Thelma K. Thomas (New York: Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, 2016), 55-64.
- Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, "Gems in Cloth and Stone: Medium, Materiality, and the Late Antique Jeweled Aesthetic," *The Textile Museum Journal* 45 (2018): 23-39.
 - Also take a look at the clip on [Conserving an Egyptian Tunic](#) from the Victoria and Albert Museum

Note that Lindsay Corbett will join the last half hour of our seminar to discuss the textiles in the MMFA.
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September 27. **Robes of Honour: Texts on Textiles**

- Stewart Gordon, “A World of Investiture,” in *Robes and Honor: The Medieval World of Investiture*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 1-19.
- Rebecca Sauer, “The Textile Performance of the Written Word: Islamic Robes of Honour (*khila`*),” in *Communication and Materiality Written and Unwritten Communication in Pre-Modern Societies*, ed. Susanne Enderwitz and Rebecca Sauer (De Gruyter 2015), 113-126.
- Jacques van der Vliet, “‘In a robe of gold’: Status, magic and politics on inscribed Christian textiles from Egypt,” in *Textile Messages: Inscribed Fabrics from Roman to Abbasid Egypt*, ed. Cäcilia Fluck and Gisela Helmecke (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), 23-49.
 - Also take a look at the following, which includes visual material: Maryam Ekhtiar and Julia Cohen, “Tiraz: Inscribed Textiles from the Early Islamic Period,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–): http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tira/hd_tira.htm (July 2015).

In addition to our regular seminar meeting this week we will arrange individual meetings to discuss object assignments for the final research project.

October 4. **From Tomb to Vitrine: Corpora and Disciplinary Foundations**

This week’s readings include discussion of the modern collection of ancient textiles, which often entailed the desecration of human remains. Please feel free to speak to me in advance if you have concerns about this difficult content.

- Jochen A. Sokoly, “Between Life and Death: The Funerary Context of Tiraz Textiles,” in *Islamische Textilkunst des Mittelalters: Aktuelle Probleme* (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 1997), 71-78.
- Thelma K. Thomas, “Coptic and Byzantine Textiles found in Egypt: Corpora, Collections, and Scholarly Perspectives,” in *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300-700*, ed. Roger S. Bagnall (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 137-77.
- Thelma K. Thomas, “From Curiosities to Objects of Art: Modern Reception of Late Antique Textiles as Reflected in Dikran Kelekian’s Textile Album of ca. 1910,” in *Αναθήματα έορτικά: Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Mathews*, ed. Joseph D. Alchermes with Helen C. Evans and Thelma K. Thomas (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2009), 300-312.
 - Also take a look at the following, which includes visual material: Jennifer L. Ball, “Died in the Wool, Buried in the Linen: Textiles from the Graves of Late Antique Egypt,” in *From the Desert to the City: The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles. Selections from the Rose Choron textile collection with related objects*, ed. Warren Woodfin (New York: Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, CUNY, 2018), 6-13.

October 11. Fall Break

October 18. **Threaded Abundance in Domestic Interiors**

- Henry Maguire, “The Good Life,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* ed. G. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 238-257.
- Jennifer L. Ball, “Rich Interiors: The Remnant of a Hanging from Late Antique Egypt in the Collection of Dumbarton Oaks,” in *Catalogue of the Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, ed. Gudrun Bühl and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams (Washington, DC, 2019), <https://www.doaks.org/resources/textiles/essays/ball>.
- Eunice Dauterman Maguire, “Curtains at the Threshold: How They Hung and How They Performed,” in *Catalogue of the Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, ed. Gudrun Bühl and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams (Washington DC, 2019), <https://www.doaks.org/resources/textiles/essays/maguire>.
 - Please also read the introduction and essay by Williams in the following and spend time with the images throughout: Gudrun Bühl, Sumru Belger Krody, and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, *Woven Interiors: Furnishing Early Medieval Egypt* (Washington DC: The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, 2019), <https://museum.gwu.edu/woven-interiors-furnishing-early-medieval-egypt>

October 25. **Sacred Veiling, Draping, and Wrapping**

- Sean V. Leatherbury, “Textiles as ‘Gifts to God’ in Late Antiquity: Christian altar cloths as Cultic Objects,” in *Textiles and Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Cecilie Brøns and Marie-Louise Nosch (Oxford: Oxbow, 2017), 243-57.
- Martina Bagnoli, “Dressing the Relics: Some Thoughts on the Custom of Relic Wrapping in Medieval Christianity,” in *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period*, ed. James Robinson and Anna Harnden Lloyd De Beer (London: British Museum, 2014), 100-109.
- Avinoam Shalem, “The Body of Architecture: The Early History of the Clothing of the Sacred House of the Ka‘ba in Mecca,” in *Clothing the Sacred: Medieval Textiles as Fabric, Form, and Metaphor (Textile Studies 8)*, ed. Mateusz Kapustka and Warren T. Woodfin (2015), 7-11.

November 1. Study session at the MMFA with Laura Vigo and Lindsay Corbett

“Acquisition reports” are due by noon on Friday, 3 November.
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November 8. **The Textile Aesthetic**

- Lisa Golombek, “The Draped Universe of Islam,” in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in Islam*, ed. Priscilla Soucek (University Park, PA: College Art Association of America and Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 25-49.
- Elizabeth Dospěl Williams, “A Taste for Textiles: Designing Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd Interiors,” in *Catalogue of the Textiles in the Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Collection*, ed. Gudrun Bühl and Elizabeth Dospěl Williams (Washington DC, 2019), <https://www.doaks.org/resources/textiles/essays/williams>.
- Juan de Lara, “‘Set the Gaze on Fire’: Gold-Cloth Furnishing and Sacred Propaganda in the Courts of Early Mediaeval Islam,” *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World* 3 (2022): 205-234.

On Friday, November 10 at noon, Henry Maguire will present a virtual talk on “‘Fiery Light’ of Majesty: Glass Mosaic and the Aesthetic of Silk in Byzantium,” with a response by Gudrun Buehl (former Dumbarton Oaks curator), as part of Yale’s Late Antique and Byzantine Art and Architecture lecture series. Registration is required: <https://ism.yale.edu/event/fiery-light-majesty-glass-mosaic-and-aesthetic-silk-byzantium>

November 15. **Shrouds of Portability in Cross-Cultural Contexts**

- Eva Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century,” *Art History* 24, no. 1 (2001): 17-50.
- Avinoam Shalem, “Architecture for the Body: Some Reflections on the Mobility of Textiles and the Fate of the So-Called Chasuble of Saint Thomas Becket in the Cathedral of Fermo in Italy,” in *Dalmatia and the Mediterranean: Portable Archaeology and the Poetics of Influence*, ed. Alina Payne (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 246–267.
- One of the following essays by Feliciano {to be determined later in the term}: Maria J. Feliciano, “Muslim Shrouds for Christian Kings? A Reassessment of Andalusī Textiles in Thirteenth-Century Castilian Life and Ritual,” in *Under the Influence: Questioning the Comparative in Medieval Castile*, ed. Cynthia Robinson and Leyla Rouhi (2005), 101-131; Luly J. Feliciano, “Medieval Textiles in Iberia: Studies for a New Approach,” *Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Honor of Renata Holod*, ed. David J. Roxburgh (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 46-65.

November 22. Presentations

November 29. Presentations

December 6. Final research papers due at noon.