

Textiles from Burma

Edited by Elizabeth Dell & Sandra Dudley

Sumptuous textiles have been produced and worn in great variety by the different peoples living in Burma. Through the centuries these have inspired the recordings of artists and writers, from votive temple murals, to the documents of awed visitors. Travellers have brought vivid examples of these textiles back to museums and collections around the world. In Burma today (and for its dispersed communities) woven textiles continue to play an important role in defining personal and group identity.

Textiles from Burma introduces the richness of these textile traditions, lavishly illustrated with examples from the James Henry Green collection at Brighton Museum, and from other collections around the world.

The volume introduces themes relating to the history, production, meaning, collection and continuing impact of textiles from Burma. It explores these themes in social, cultural and wider contexts. It investigates aspects of collecting and documentation in colonial and modern times, examining the histories and identities that are made and re-made as textiles are collected and written about.

The authors' investigations range from the sumptuary laws of the last Burmese court of the 1880s, to the dress and identity of people in exile on Burma's borders today. They explore extinct weaving processes, such as the textile texts that once wrapped sacred manuscripts; they discuss the processes of re-invention which give traditional costumes value in a changing modern world. Each thematic case study is underpinned by an introduction to the weaving traditions of its particular region. Technical details are explained in a glossary of technical terms, and an appendix provides an annotated list of key textile collections from Burma.

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Foreword

Formed whilst working as a recruiting and intelligence officer in Burma during the 1920s and 1930s, James Henry Green's collection offers a vivid glimpse into a particular place and time. His exceptional collection of photographs shows a wide range of landscapes and people: colonial officers, strangers, friends and family. His collection of books, articles, diaries and fieldnotes offers a context in which to frame these individuals and the beautiful textiles, which frequently reveal the signs of wear, convey an impression of human contact. These sources together give us a compelling sense of life in Burma in the early part of the twentieth century.

Brighton Museum and Art Gallery is extremely fortunate to be the caretaker of Green's collection and the recipient of financial support from the James Green Charitable Trust. The generosity of the Trust has enabled the Museum to use Green's collections as the starting point for building new links between Burma and Britain, Green's time and our own. These links have sparked exciting exchanges between museum professionals, researchers, students and individuals both here and in Burma.

We hope this book will reflect some of the many dialogues that have informed the development of the Green textile collection and will open the platform for many more. There are a number of people to whom I would like to extend thanks, not least to those individuals in Burma who have contributed their expertise, experience and enthusiasm.

I would also like to thank the following people: Oonagh Connolly, Susan Conway, Caroline Cook, Sadan Ja Ngai, Patricia Herbert, Lisa Maddigan, Penny Marlow, Rebecca Quinton, Hkanhpa Tu Sadan, Mandy Sadan, Catherine Speight and Louise Tythacott, for their work on Green's textile collection; contributors, John Barker, Elizabeth Dell, Sandra Dudley, Frances Franklin, Sylvia Fraser-Lu, Ralph Isaacs, Vibha Joshi, Lisa Maddigan, Mandy Sadan and Mika Toyota for their professionalism and zeal and, especially, Sandra Dudley for her assiduous editorial work; also, Nigel Cunningham for design and John Williams for photography.

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Lastly I would like to thank Elizabeth Dell, Keeper of World Art and Anthropology and Head of the Green Centre, and Helen Mears, Curator of World Art, for overseeing this publication and to the Trustees of the James Henry Green Charitable Trust for their continuing enthusiasm and support for the Green Centre's work.

Jessica Rutherford
Head of Libraries and Museums and Director of the Royal Pavilion

Preface

When James Green arrived in Burma in 1918 he found himself in one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse countries in the whole of Southeast Asia with over 240 languages and dialects spoken and more than 120 distinct groups of people. Green was dazzled by the cultural diversity he saw around him and, like others working at the far reaches of the British Empire, he eagerly turned to the new science of anthropology to provide him with an 'objective' means of recording his new environment.

Green quickly realised that textiles could signify ethnic difference and he wrote detailed notes on the dress and physical appearance of the people he encountered in his recruitment and intelligence work. His notes focus largely on how textiles reflected group identity and sadly, there are few records in his archive that tell us how, where, when and from whom the textile pieces were collected. It is likely that this information would have revealed stories of the personal friendships and relationships that Green formed with the people he met.

In recent work being undertaken on behalf of the James Green Centre for World Art these stories are being retraced by revisiting areas where Green worked. Through initiatives such as the Kachin textile project, which involved commissioning 17 'traditional' wedding outfits in Kachin state, thorough documentation ensures that light is thrown not only on the design, making and significance of the new textiles but also on their historic counterparts. This process also enables the Museum to explore how the traditions of dress recorded by Green in the 1920s are interpreted today and, by commissioning and collecting new textiles in Burma, to support the continuity of contemporary weavers' creativity, skills and traditions.

As the Green collection has grown the wonder of the stylistic range, technical talent, and sheer beauty of Burma's textiles never diminishes. The variation that so struck Green continues to amaze. This book is both an introduction to the production of textiles in Burma and a celebration of the diversity they represent.

John Govett
Chairman, James Henry Green Charitable Trust