

Brücke exhibitions and catalogues of 2005. It would certainly be instructive to learn more about how the heirs of Expressionism and Dada relate to their proverbial forefathers. However, it can be argued that it would be difficult to draw a line; particularly in the case of Dada, as this would involve making curatorial connections with new realism, neo-Dada, pop-art, happenings, mail-art, fluxus, conceptual art, BritArt, and so on. What this diversity suggests, is that Dada far more than Surrealism (or Cubism for that matter) has had the most enduring impact of all avant-garde manifestations.

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Notes

- 1 It would have been interesting to learn in greater detail from the chief curators Laurent Le Bon, Leah Dickerman, and Anne Umland how the current Dada exhibition differs in its conception from the important Arts Council Hayward Gallery show, organised by Dawn Ades and her team in 1978.
- 2 Brady Roberts, *Constructing New Berlin*, London, 2006, 12.
- 3 This cacophony also brought to mind the merging bands of sound created by Bruce Nauman's *Raw Materials* (2004), the Turbine Hall installation work at Tate Modern. In general, Nauman's work reveals him to be one of Dada's chief inheritors.
- 4 Stephen C. Foster is professor emeritus of art history at the University of Iowa and former director of the Fine Arts Dada Archive and Research Center located there since 1979. The International Dada Archive is available online at www.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/index.html. It is one of the most important resources for scholars of Dada.
- 5 See T.J. Demos, 'Zurich Dada' in Leah Dickerman and Matthew S. Witkovsky, eds, *The Dada Seminars*, Washington, 2005, 14.

ON THE SILK ROAD

Chinese Silk: A Cultural History by Shelagh Vainker, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004, 224 pp., 137 illus., \$39.95

Chinese Silk: A Cultural History by Shelagh Vainker is a thoughtful, well-written survey on the culture, history, and evolution of Chinese silk throughout its long history. Written for both the specialist and non-specialist alike, the book traces Chinese silk through Chinese mythology, archaeology, history, literature, religion, and trade. Vainker takes the reader from the neolithic to post-revolutionary China to discuss how silk has permeated agriculture, commerce, clothing and even currency. Chinese silk in its many forms: bolts and rolls, cloth, textiles, decorative pieces, manuscripts, mediums of artistic expression, and art pieces are examined. While *Chinese Silk: A Cultural History* was written to accompany an exhibition of Chinese silk products at the Ashmolean Museum, it should not be viewed as an exhibition catalogue. It is a comprehensive, detailed book that makes a wonderful addition to Chinese and sericulture (the raising of silkworms to produce raw silk) scholarship.

The book begins with an introduction on the myths and rituals associated with silk and the various female members of royalty and goddesses associated with the history of silk. Vainker weaves throughout the book the fact that women have played

an important role in sericulture not only in its origins and mythos, but in its actual production. Women have long been the key producers in silk manufacture, from taking care of silk worms to weaving and textile production. The ancient Chinese phrase *nan geng nu zhi* literally means 'men plough, women weave' (9). The introduction also discusses how silk is produced and its important role in literature. In Chinese literature, one finds silk mentioned in numerous places, from books written as early as 1090 to poems lamenting the fatigue of workers. Vainker writes that what distinguishes silk from the other cultural achievements like porcelain and lacquer 'is its pervasion of rural, urban, religious, imperial, artistic and economic life over three millennia' (19). This is an important idea to remember in understanding the place silk has held in Chinese society and culture. Silk is not only an artistic expression, but is part of the cultural makeup. It has lasted, as Vainker shows, through high and low points in Chinese culture, from warring states to cultural revolutions. With each cultural upheaval, the new generation made silk designs in their own style.

Chapter one finds Vainker tracing the earliest evidence of silk in the neolithic era, Shang dynasty and Zhou dynasty. Because of their fragile nature, entire pieces of silk textiles have not been found and so researchers have relied upon traces and impressions found on pieces of bronze and jade knives and axes which were wrapped and placed in burials as a form of grave goods. Other early evidence is found on oracle bones where ideograms for silk are carved. Beautifully carved jade silkworms also reveal the importance that silk must have had to these early dynasties. Silk was so valuable during the Western Zhou dynasty that it was used as currency for buying horses. The trade exchange with peoples from the northwest and the Western Zhou is important, for it not only reveals that silk was viewed as something very exotic and special, it also indicates that it was probably one of the earliest wares traded on the Silk Road. During these early dynasties, the status of silk rose so high that it began to be used as a support for writing and painting.

In chapter two, the author discusses how silk became a valuable commodity not only in China, but also in distant lands. It was during the Han dynasty that trade on the Silk Road began. Silk was one of the main commodities on the Silk Road, travelling to such distant places as Rome, Africa, the Middle East, and India. Archaeological sites up and down the Silk Road, including Niya, Dunhuang and Lop Nor, have revealed beautiful examples of silk in plain weave tabby, twills, gauzes, and brocades, in a wide variety of colours and motifs. During this time the Han dynasty used Daoist teachings to create designs of clouds, flames and hills with pattern stamp moulds on silk, bronze and many other items. Dynasties immediately following the Han saw the beginning of the practice of using silk to pay household taxes, the use of silk to quote prices for wood, rice and other commodities, and the buying of official positions with silk. It is in this chapter that the reader begins to understand the complex nature of silk and its industry. No longer could silk be seen purely in artistic terms; rather, it should be viewed as a source of economic power.

The third chapter describes the great quantity of silk, different weaves, colours and patterns that have been preserved from the Sui and Tang dynasties. In this chapter, Vainker does a superb job of explaining the details of court, official, and commissioned household workshops. Women from all walks of life, from the royal court and palace, to slaves, criminals and women who had lost their status, were also major producers of silk. Besides the new Tang innovations in silk satin and tapestry

weave, single colour gauzes, crepes, lenos, damask, twill and multicolour brocades, and pile cloths were all popular. Some of the best preserved Tang silks and other works of art were found in Cave 17 at the Silk Road site of Dunhuang and from the excavation at Astana in Turfan.

The Song dynasty discussed in chapter four is often seen as a 'period of great cultural achievement in China's history' and is known for its 'development by scholars of poetry, calligraphy and painting, and for the establishment of a restraint in aesthetics and a regard for historical objects' (110). Other dynasties such as the Liao and the Xi Xia are described, but it is really the Song that takes the forefront in this chapter. Silk production seemed to explode with the growth of local industries. Silk was produced in almost all of China and trade grew at this time with the beginnings of sea trade and travel for exporting merchandise. Lastly in this chapter Vainker discusses the Yuan dynasty, the Mongol rulers of China. Here she describes how silk slightly declined because of the Mongol reorganisation of Chinese government. Like many items throughout history it is important to see that silk went through phases of popularity.

Chapter five describes the Ming dynasty revitalisation of the silk industry and new technological advances in the creation of glossy satins. The silk industry was also revitalised with the return of Han clothing styles based on the Tang and Song dynasties and regulation of court dress by the Emperor. Restrictions on clothing were manifested through the types of silk and colour based on class or status. Furnishings during the Ming were also highly valued. Unique to the Ming dynasty was the gentlemanly scholar, who had the habit of collecting works of art, antiques, and embroidered tapestry, giving old silks a new lease of life.

Finally, in the sixth chapter Vainker explores the Qing dynasty and the republics that came after this last Chinese dynasty. Qing emperors used silk fabrics, clothing and furnishings as a way to legitimise their right to rule and their imperial identity. The Qing emperors, like their Ming predecessors, also tried to regulate silk fabrics and colours. Exportation of silk products to Europe and the Americas was a huge success in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there was a decline because of the creation of synthetic fibres, coupled with internal and external conflicts and changes in fashion. Later, when one might expect a total decline in silk and its production under the People's Republic, Vainker shows that silk was one of the few luxury items that was preserved because of the huge manufacturing industry and level of employment linked to its production and because of the sense of cultural pride that existed around it. Under the People's Republic, new embroidered tapestry designs were taken from previous Chinese dynasties and reworked to explore new Communist ideas of the Chinese workers.

The most enjoyable part of many books can be found in the images rather than the text. Visual images are a significant component that go hand-in-hand with the written scholarship. Vainker has used breathtaking examples of numerous types of silk items ranging from clothing, silk screens, banners, book coverings, chair coverings to revolutionary art. Maps, a key component when discussing archaeological sites, prominent cities, and the Silk Road, are well drawn throughout the text. Helpfully, at the end of the book, Vainker gives the reader a chronology of Chinese dynasties, a glossary of Chinese textile terms, numerous notes, a bibliography, sources of illustrations and a thorough index.

The book achieves its aims clearly, informatively and interestingly. The regional distinctions of Chinese silks are made apparent and silk itself is revealed as a largely luxury item that had a role in art, religion, and the economy. In treating silk in this way, Vainker enables the reader to understand better the social uses of goods in Chinese history.

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