

THE FINE FABRICS OF PERSIA

BY PHYLLIS ACKERMAN

WHEN self-consciousness reaches the level of self-esteem, in children or in savages, and indeed even before they are specifically aware of pride, they must dress up. Shiny new shoes for the one, daubs of colored mud on naked flesh for the other, and they feel themselves enhanced and exhilarated. But the time comes when these no longer suffice to titillate vanity, and then fine weaving begins, a stage reached by the ancient Orientals long before the dawn of history, so that in the earliest matured civilization that has yet been found, that of Sumer, clothes were already very elaborate. Those ladies in waiting who went so pitifully to their death in attendance on Queen Shubab, put on their most ceremonial costumes for the hoped-for trip to a better world beyond, bright red dresses of fine wool trimmed with blue beads.

Fine feathers were perhaps not sufficient to make fine birds, but fine birds had to have fine feathers, a principle that never lapsed in the East until modern times. Wealth, honor, authority, any special distinction, were signalized in handsome raiment, and especially the king and his court were marked as a class apart by the beauty of their clothes. Usually in the earlier states, including Sumer, important looms were a temple prerogative, but later, as the bonds of theocracy began to relax so that ruler and priest were less closely related, they became rather a service of the court and so they remained, in spite of growing competition from private enterprise, well down into our era. Thus the most prized silks of Byzantium were those from the government gyneccea and legal restrictions not only assured to them the sole right to produce certain types, but also prohibited the wearing of the most sumptuous purple patterns by any but those of the emperor's personal entourage.

For centuries fine clothes depended for their gorgeousness on color and encrusted ornament. Bright, clear, persistent dyes, extracted with cunning and patience from plants, minerals, and occasionally animal bodies, notably the red of cochineal and the violet of various species of *Murex*, were devised one after another and never forgotten by the color-loving East, until the shoddy fa-

cility of western chemistry, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all but obliterated tradition. The brilliance thus won was, also from a very early date, made more dazzling still by the application of beads, like those on the dresses of the court ladies of Ur, of faience or of semi-precious stones, or of plaques or other motives of wrought metal, in the most elegant examples of gold. The jeweler was a subsidiary of the textile art. Later, with developing craftsmanship these plaques or bracteates were filigreed, enameled and jeweled, exquisite and precious things that put to shame their modern descendents, the beaded or spangled evening gowns that reappear, every so often, in the mode.

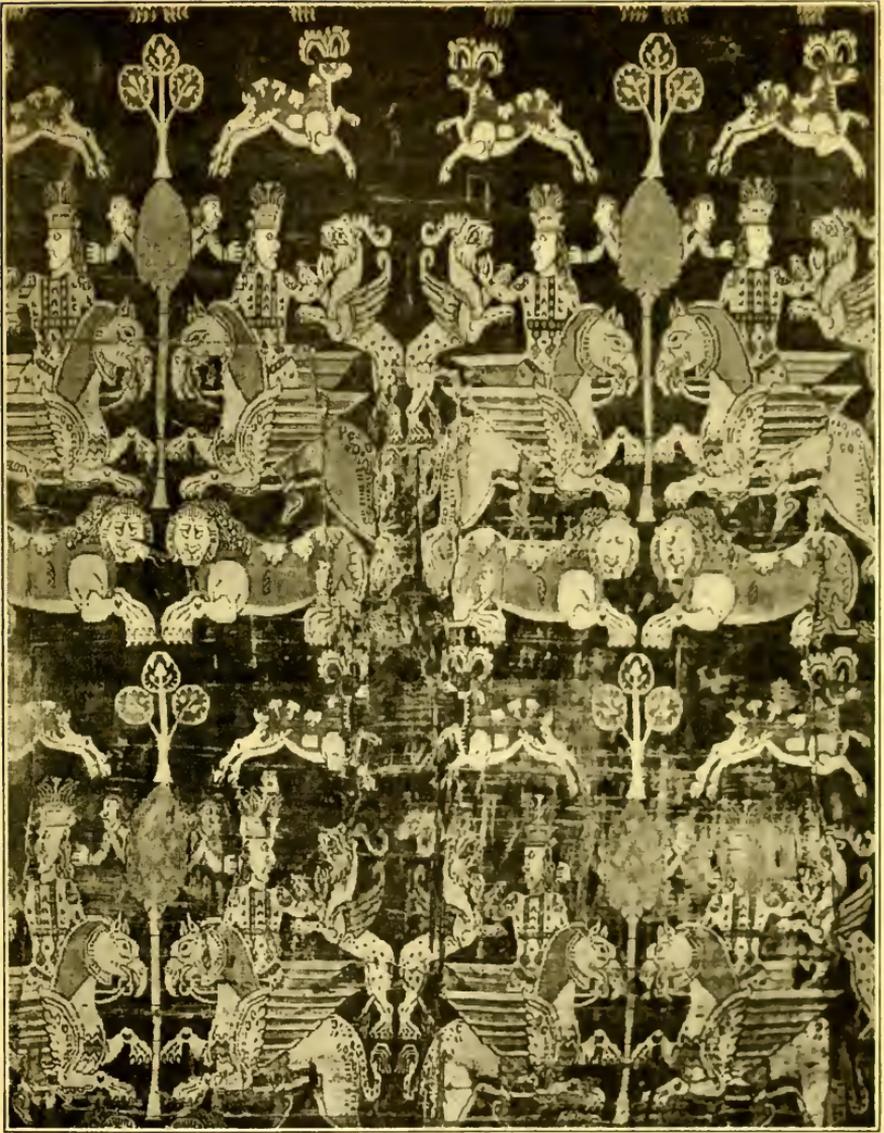
From applying patterns in beads and bits of colored stone, to applying them only with colored thread, which is embroidery, is but a short logical step, but when and how it happened is lost in pre-history. Nor are we better informed on the next logical advance after that, the rendering of the designs directly into the stuff itself while it was still in process on the loom. The fashionable ladies of Crete of the second millenium in some of the Minoan frescoes uncovered by Sir Arthur Evans had handsome patterns on their gowns, birds, griffons, and other elaborate motives, but whether they were embroidered or actually woven, or if so, how, we cannot even surmise. Homer's Helen, however, was already weaving illustrative designs in two colors in a "double web," and another type of pattern weaving, tapestry, appears at about the same time in costume fabrics from Egyptian graves.

Just what Persia was doing in textiles through these remote ages we do not know, though perhaps we still shall, for expeditions now working there to fill the great gap in our archaeological knowledge of Iran, notably that at Damghan, are making such numerous and varied discoveries that we may yet have clues to the early textile art. Traces of fabrics at Susa have been only plain cloth and from these to Achaemenian times there is a total blank. Nor indeed do we come to much more satisfactory evidence even at this period, for we have only a few representations of patterned costumes, the most important, the white robes of the guard at Susa as rendered in enameled bricks, with two colored rosettes or square jewel motives in even rows that suggest, but by no means prove, a woven rendition.

But when fine weaving does definitely emerge in Persia, it is

marked with great prestige. The Sasanian textiles in both silk and wool were prized by their contemporaries and their fame endured, to be revived with enthusiasm and the tribute of high prices in our own day; and this, in spite of the fact that it is difficult almost to the point of impossibility to prove that any existing silk is actually Sasanian and not a foreign or subsequent adaptation of the much imitated style. At the best there are but a scant dozen examples for which the claim can be reasonably well supported, but these and representatives of other, related designs in other media in the contemporary Persian arts, especially in the rock reliefs of Taq-i-Bustan show an impressive style of really imperial authority in which dignity takes precedence over grace, but decorative richness is achieved by the embellishment in abstract form of the details. It is a style directly derivative from the Achaemenian tradition, repeating, with a perfect command of technique though in a very limited color range, the very forms even to details that the Achaemenians also had worn on their costumes, but rendered then by the jeweler's art, for the typical Sasanian patterns, most often rondels enclosing rosettes, or more characteristically an animal in hieratic pose, are but the earlier bracteates embedded now in the weave.

Almost half a millenium lapses again before there is further actual evidence of Persia's textile skill, though in the interval many travelers bear witness to the reputation of various cities for different fabrics whose character we cannot even guess. But the next silks that we have fully support in their elegance of design and finesse of technique the most laudatory accounts. Thus in the Textile Museum of the District of Columbia, which has by far the largest and most important group of these silks, there is a complete tomb cover in lavender and white, with a composition of lozenges framed by bands of running animals and enclosing in alternate horizontal stripes floriated scrolls that resolve into four trefoils, and finer floriated scrolls against which are displayed confronted ibex bearing honoric inscriptions. An interesting, all-white piece in the collection of Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss has an illustration of the ancient Eastern myth of Ectana who, anticipating aviation, attempted to reach the Heavens borne by an eagle. The eagle, heraldically displayed, enfolds a prince who is protected by a guardian griffon set on either wing and below lions rampant, while underneath



SILK TISSUE

Sixth-Seventh Century

In each design, two kings are represented riding winged griffins,
between them a sacred tree.

(Schlossmuseum, Berlin)

runs a line of stately Kufic. This intricate repeat is rendered in a weave, a double cloth in two qualities of texture, which while technically quite unlike damask, achieves essentially the same aesthetic effect. Again, in the collection of Mrs. William H. Moore there is a lead-blue satin with double-headed eagles against scrolling vines, drawn with an austerity which is yet tempered with grace, which makes the double-headed eagle textiles of Byzantium seem clumsy and obvious. All these silks are probably of the eleventh century.

One tapestry also has survived from this time, a striking and handsome presentation in red and yellow on a blue-green ground of the ancient Eastern theme of struggle between the forces of good, a human-headed lion, crowned, and evil, in the vivid personification of a hissing, flaming, horned snake.

Again there follows another persistent vacuum with only tantalizing references in the geographical and travel literature to the richness and productivity of Persian looms, until in the sixteenth century examples again begin to appear, forming from now on a continuous series, increasing in quantity and variety until in the eighteenth century economic and political decadence entail the industry's ruin. The supreme products of the sixteenth century are velvets and one tapestry. The velvets, almost incredible miracles of digital skill, which is quite matched by the vigorous but finished draftsmanship of the design, show either conventional floral motives or, in the still more complex patterns, of which the finest example is in the Boston Museum of Art, illustrative scenes, in this case active episodes of the hunt. The tapestry, which is in the collection of Mrs. William H. Moore (Page 48), likewise is dedicated to the hunt, a splendid miniature translated into silk, creating the ideal tapestry design, a broad mosaic of expressive silhouettes in well-adjusted contrasts of fresh and beautiful tones, whereby the maximum decorative effect is achieved without sacrifice of verisimilitude.

It is in this century too that the one great name associated with Persian textile art appears, that of Ghyath, whose contemporary fame is attested in a document discovered by Sir Denison Ross, and who has left his signature on several existing examples, including a velvet in the Kelekian Collection, a satin illustrating the popular story of Laila, pieces of which are in a number of museums, and, technically the outstanding piece, a compartment design also in the

collection of Mrs. William H. Moore, in rose, white, and green, with every possible permutation in the weave, and a beautifully drawn design of figures and animals.

With the succession of the great Shah Abbas, the textile art reached its peak of magnificence and such an enormous scale of productivity that many examples are left to us. Of these, the handsomest are the gold and silver ground fabrics, a solid surface of metal in which are embedded patterns of flowering bushes flanked by graceful deer and brilliant birds. But there are less ostentatious accomplishments of subtler merits; a dark blue, soft taffeta, for example, in the Textile Museum of the District of Columbia, with a group of running deer in white and yellow worked in long floats in a flossy silk, bound in varied patterns, with much of the quality of embroidery. Indeed, the repertory is endless, in technique, in designs, and above all, in color which ranges from vivid lacquer red, through every value of the spectrum tones, to almost impalpable variations of elusive neutrals, compounds of violet, gray, and beige.

Within the last few years the present Shah, Riza Pahlevi, with the praiseworthy intent of complementing his great administrative accomplishments with a contribution to Persia's long history in the arts, has attempted to revive the ancient practice of supporting court looms. To this end, and also to further more general aspects of the textile industry, a search was made, first for dyers versed in the old art, and second for weavers. A patient search, especially among remoter groups, has yielded the recipes for many dyes, but still some of the fine tones, notably some of the turquoise and cerulean, that are especially beautiful in the Moore tapestry, are unobtainable. The canvas for weavers was even less successful. The ablest that could be found falls far short of even the simpler accomplishments of his predecessors, and the splendid personage designs are quite beyond the possibility of reproduction. The ingenuity of engineers in this as in so many things has given us quantity and cheap production. But the final price is high, the destruction of an art.