

# TEXTLES FROM THE ISLAMIC WORLD

Written by Sumru Belger Krody, The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum All photographs courtesy of The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum

Textiles have played many vital roles and carry immense significance across the vast Islamic lands from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. They take myriad of forms, as they span centuries of diverse ethnic backgrounds, across huge swathes of geographic space where the Muslim faith has dominated for over a millennium.

extiles take on countless forms, designs and shapes by the agency of artists and their culture. They reflect the artists' interest in many aspects of the natural world through floral decorations or representations of the fauna—whether rendered in a naturalistic or stylized manner. Additionally, as in other forms of art across cultures and visual vocabulary, abstract creations occupy an important place.

Textiles cast a light on the multifaceted and diverse identities conveying layers of owner history, from gender and ethnicity to spiritual beliefs and political affiliations. In decoding the messages embedded in the fabrics—materials, colors and designs—we can understand the esthetic richness and expressive potential of textile arts while unfolding the fascinating stories of human life and creativity. In many cultures, people differentiate both textually and verbally between one type of textile and another in detail; thus, this extensive, specialized vocabulary some Muslim societies employ to distinguish types, textures and functions of textiles points to their primary importance.

As clothing, textiles fulfill the desire for beautification and

Textiles cast a light on the multifaceted and diverse identities of the Islamic world, conveying layers of owner history, from gender and ethnicity to spiritual beliefs and political affiliations. self-expression, conveying personal and group identity. Variations in weight and fineness of weave distinguish fabrics for daily wear or ceremony in different seasons. For centuries in predominantly Muslim societies, textile possessions indicated the wealth of individuals. Many bridal trousseaux contain textiles of many forms, forming more than half of a bride's wealth and standing equal to cash.

Certainly, the Islamic courts of the medieval and early modern periods contained the largest textile assemblages. The sumptuous regalia of dignitaries in court ceremonies symbolized the superiority of their rulers and the wealth that power could muster. Outside court circles, men and women wore their clothing in layers. They donned similarly tailored garments fitted with draping and accessories that differentiated each gender.

The earliest apparel reflected the three distinct cultural zones where Islam had spread in the early centuries of the religion: loose, untailored garments of Arabs suitable for their desert climate; tunics and wraps worn in Hellenistic cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean; and tailored and fitted-sleeved robes including trousers worn by nomadic horse-riding Turkic-Iranian Central Asians. The types of clothing established in the early Islamic period still predominate in the same regions where the religion is practiced today.

As furnishing, textiles have kept people warm or cool, depending on the climate, as well as afforded privacy and a

feeling of security and belonging while enhancing the esthetics of the home environment. Textiles convert multipurpose rooms according to need. A bedroom transforms to a dining room by stacking mattresses, pillows and quilts on one side and spreading cloths and napkins on the floor.

Textiles have also functioned as domiciles, creating walls, doors and roofs of tents nomadic people have dwelled in for centuries, from Mali to Central Asia. In the medieval and early modern periods, some Muslim rulers and their retinues relied on movable housing beyond the nomadic function of shelter and shade. Tents emblemized royal authority. The wealth of dynasties deployed royal progressions, wars, hunting expeditions and diplomatic receptions in these domiciles. Carpets, cushions and hangings with lavish decorations using expensive material covered every corner of these tents for prestige and reflected the elevated status of the ruler.

Textiles played an active role in diplomatic gift giving practiced among rulers. This required vast textile resources for each court, and their imperial treasuries housed thousands upon thousands of costly fabrics. These included not only the clothing worn by rulers and their retinues, and gifts for foreign

Textiles envelop people and environments in such abundance that they create an esthetic affecting the decorative elements of other media, from architecture to metalwork.

## The Hijri Calendar

In 638 CE, six years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Islam's second caliph, 'Umar, recognized the necessity of a calendar to govern the affairs of Muslims. The Qur'an, in Chapter 10, Verse 5, states that time should be reckoned by the Moon. Existing calendars of the era were identified with other religions and cultures. He therefore decided to create a calendar specifically for the Muslim community. It would be lunar, and it would have 12 months, each with 29 or 30 days. This gives the lunar year 354 days, 11 days fewer than the solar year. 'Umar chose as the epoch for the new Muslim calendar the Hijra, the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad and 70 Muslims from Makkah to Madinah, where Muslims first attained religious and political autonomy. The Hijra thus occurred on 1 Muharram of the year 1 according to the Islamic calendar. This date corresponds to July 16, 622 CE, on the Gregorian calendar. Today in the West, it is customary, when writing hijri dates, to use the abbreviation AH, which stands for the Latin anno hegirae, "year of the Hijra." Because the Islamic lunar calendar is 11 days shorter than the solar, it is therefore not synchronized to the seasons. Its festivals, which fall on the same days of the same lunar months each year, make the round of the seasons every 33 solar years. This 11-day difference between the lunar and the solar year accounts for the need to convert dates from one system to the other. -PAUL LUNDE

#### CONVERTING Years and Dates

The following equations convert roughly from Gregorian to hijri and vice versa. However, the results can be slightly misleading: They tell you only the year in which the year of the other calendar begins. For example, 2025 Gregorian begins in Rajab, the seventh month of hijri 1446, and ends in the month of Rabi` II 1447.

**Gregorian year =** [(32 x hijri year) ÷ 33] + 622

#### Hijri year = [(Gregorian year - 622) x 33] ÷ 32

Online calculators can be found by searching "Gregorian-hijri calendar calculator" or similar terms.

#### Fabrics created for use in Islamic religious contexts often represent the technical and esthetic apex of the textile arts at the time of their creation.

dignitaries but also furnishing fabrics and tents for receptions.

Throughout the Islamic world, textiles have also featured prominently in religious observances. Prayer rugs render everyday spaces appropriate for communion with Allah, while those such as the white plain cloth *ihram* worn by men during Hajj imbue wearers with spiritual and sacred legitimacy. Symbolic or narrative patterns, and even verbal inscriptions, express spiritual beliefs in tangible form while heightening the sensory experience of worship or ritual. Although the patterns in the textiles were most often secular, some textiles included Arabic script and verses from the holy Qur'an.

*Tiraz* is a term referring to the inscribed medieval Islamic textiles bestowed upon worthy individuals by caliphs and rulers. *Tiraz* inscriptions contain blessings, and many include the contemporaneous caliph's name and his honorifics. Fabrics created for use in Islamic religious contexts often represent the technical and esthetic apex of the textile arts at the time of their creation. While costly materials and superior artistry embody the devotion and respect of believers, they also strongly proclaim the prestige of the owner, institution or patron. The best example of this type of textile is the *kiswah*, the fabric highlighting Qur'anic verses covering the Ka'ba, the holiest site in Islam.

Textiles envelop people and environments in such abundance that they create an esthetic affecting the decorative elements of other media, from architecture to metalwork. Furthermore, they affect ideas and communication by providing a standard to judge tangible and intangible objects. Because of their fragility, many such textiles have failed to survive to this day compared to how many once were produced. Nevertheless, a considerable number now stand preserved in museums and continue to display the grandeur and power of Islamic textile manufacture in the medieval and early modern periods. They are exhibited, published and available for studies. These historical textiles have inspired many contemporary artists and craftspeople, such as fashion designers, working across various media, enriching contemporary and future textiles.

For more information about The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, and its programs and exhibitions, visit museum.gwu.edu.

**Sumru Belger Krody** joined The Textile Museum in 1994 and was appointed senior curator in 2011. She is also editor in chief of *The Textile Museum Journal* and teaches courses at GWU on textile arts. Born in Izmir, Türkiye, Krody specializes in textiles from the late antique era and from the Islamic world. She has curated or cocurated numerous exhibitions and written numerous books and articles on textile arts.

**On the cover:** Saddle cover, detail, Uzbekistan, late 19th century. Wool and silk. The Textile Museum Collection 2021.17.45, Brick Freedman Collection. Equestrian textiles started with the nomadic need to protect the horse and its rider: to absorb the horse's sweat and provide both stability to the rider and protection for the horse's barrel. Over the centuries, these textiles evolved to have decorative and spiritual meaning alongside the rising importance of the horse as a very valuable asset.

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#### GRANADA/SPAIN

Fragment from a curtain, detail, Nasrid dynasty (1232 CE–1492), Granada, Spain, late 14th century CE-early 15th century CE. Silk. The Textile Museum Collection 84.11, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1931. The mid- to late 14th century CE witnessed the dynasty's cultural peak, when the architectural detail (stucco and cut tile) in Alhambra aligned with luxury silk textiles such as this one that hung in relationship to them.

> JANUARY Rajab - Sha`ban

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#### MOROCCO

Cape (hendira), detail, North Africa, Morocco, Middle Atlas Mountains, c. 1970. Wool and cotton. The Textile Museum Collection 2016.8.1, gift of Lin Lougheed. Hendira is worn draped over a woman's shoulders and fastened over the chest with a clasp or braided wool ties. The shag side is worn inward in cold or wet weather for insulation and outward at other times. The finest capes require up to two years of work.

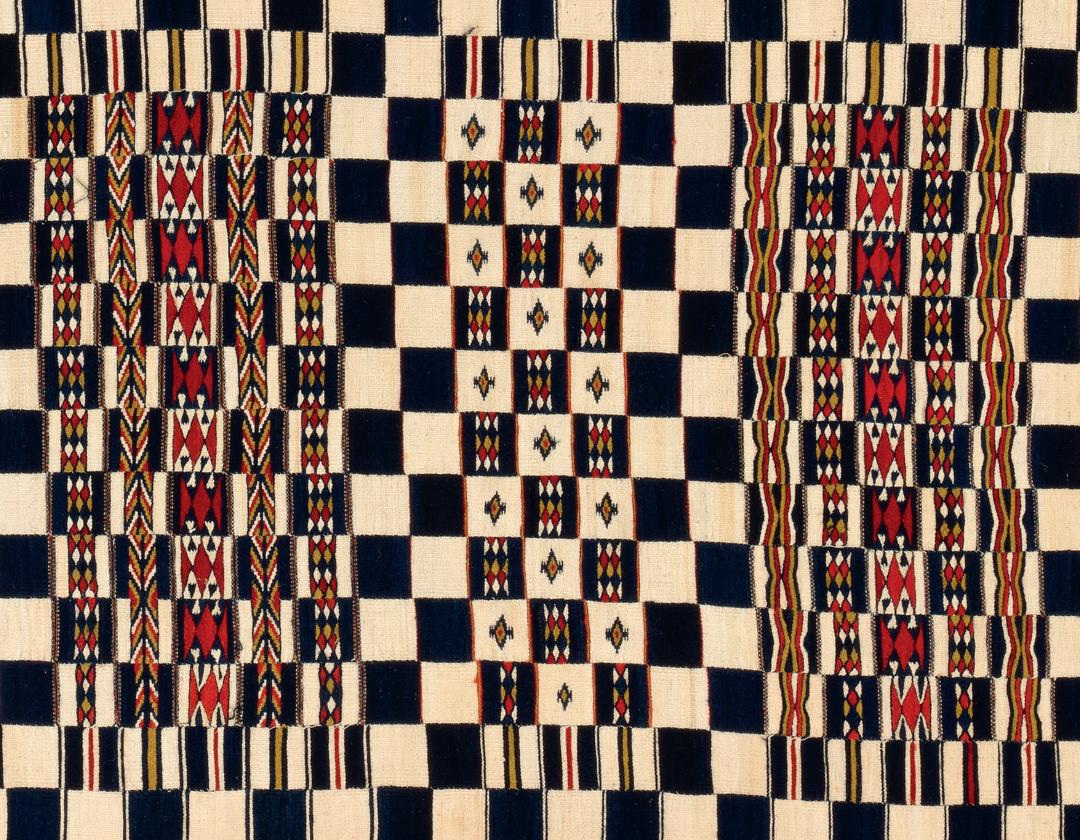
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#### MALI

Tent panel (arkilla jenngo), detail, Mali, Timbuktu, 1940–1949. Cotton and wool. The Textile Museum Collection 1977.23.2, gift of Phyllis C. Kane. Fulani weavers in West Africa created large tent panels or blankets like this example for sale to Tuareg nomads. This panel is constructed from 14 individual, narrow textile strips, sewn together at their selvedges. The triangles, chevrons, and lozenges arranged throughout the cover were created using tapestry weave, a very time-consuming textile-making technique.

> MARCH Ramadan – Shawwal

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#### TUNISIA

Headcover (tarf er-ras), detail, North Africa, Tunisia, Kerkenna, first half of 20th century. Wool and cotton. The Textile Museum Collection 2003.26.2, The Irmtraud H. Reswick Collection. For festive occasions, women on the Islands of Kerkennah, located off Eastern Tunisia, wear this headcover with *tarf el-ktef*, a type of garment worn in a regional style that distinguishes these women from those on the mainland.

> APRIL Shawwal – Dhu-al-Qa`dah

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OTTOMAN/TÜRKIYE

Section of an embroidered cover, detail, Ottoman Empire (1299 CE-1922), Türkiye, Istanbul, 16th–17th century. Linen and silk. The Textile Museum Collection 1.22, acquired by George Hewitt Myers prior to 1940. The fine ground fabric, the precisely done double running stitch creating a reversible embroidery, and the masterly rendition of quintessential Ottoman motifs such as tulips, carnations, and crescents in a playful and flowing composition most likely destined for Ottoman court use indicate a professional hand.

Dhu-al-Qa`dah – Dhu-al-Hijjah

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**SYRIA** 

Woman's robe, detail, Syria, Damascus or Aleppo, late 19th century. Silk and metallic-wrapped thread. The Textile Museum Collection 2024.5.7, Marita and David Paly. Entari or üçetek was a long graceful trailing robe worn over the undershirt and baggy pants in many parts of the Ottoman Empire, including Syria. Various fabrics were used to construct these robes, including Syrian striped ikat fabrics that were referred to as *alaja* as in this example.

Dhu-al-Hijjah – Muharram 1447

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IRAQ

Tiraz fragment, detail, Abbasid, Iraq, 938 CE. Cotton and silk. The Textile Museum Collection 73.671, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1951. The central Kufic script reads, "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise to God, Lord of the Worlds, and lasting (?) peace and blessing from God and glory to the caliph Abu 'l-'Abbas Ahmad, the Imam ar-Radi billah, Commander of the Faithful, may God prolong his existence. Has been ordered in the year 326 H."

Muharram – Safar

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#### TURKMENISTAN

Yomut horse cover, detail, Turkmenistan, second half 19th century. Wool. The Textile Museum Collection 2021.17.87, Brick Freedman Collection. A thick horse cover like this example from Turkmenistan protected the horse from injury to its barrel, which could be caused by the wooden saddle and rider on it. Its thick embroidered felt provided the additional benefit of keeping the horse warm during the very cold and windy winters on the steppe of Central Asia.

> AUGUST Safar - Rabi' I

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#### KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakh man's coat, detail, Uzbekistan, second half of the 19th century. Doeskin and silk. The Textile Museum Collection 2002.5.1., gift of Caroline McCoy-Jones. Central Asians have developed specific garments to suit the region's harsh climate and their nomadic lifestyle on the move from one pasture to another. This winter coat, a sign of wealth and quite rare, possibly made by a very skilled Uzbek tailor and embroiderer for a Kazakh man of status, exemplifies this idea.

> SEPTEMBER Rabi' I - Rabi' II

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#### PAKISTAN

Carpet, detail, Hindustan (1526-1857), Pakistan, Lahore, early 18th century. Pashmina and silk. The Textile Museum Collection R63.00.21, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1945. Spread before or beneath the ruler or religious leader, court carpets like this served to designate the privileged space around the most highly esteemed individual and to present him regally to his audience. As a special object, it helped to maintain the dignity and authority of the ruler enthroned upon it.

# OCTOBEF Rabi`II – Jumada I

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#### INDIA

Textile fragment, detail, India, 17th century. Silk. The Textile Museum Collection 6.133, acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1947. The floral pattern against the metallic ground of this velvet displays the naturalistic and spacious drawing characteristic of the Hindustani court style. Specific shades of color—green, crimson and tan—distinguish their silks and carpets. The elegance of form, precise composition, and exquisite choice of color typify all the sumptuous arts produced for the imperial court of Hindustan.

NOVEMBER Jumada I – Jumada II

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#### INDONESIA

Man's head wrapper (Iket kepala), detail, Indonesia, Java, c. 1900. Cotton. The Textile Museum Collection 1987.26.1, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Wallace E. Holbrook. Made on the North Coast of Java, textiles like this were popular as head or shoulder cloths among men in Sumatra. With the dhu'l figar (Sword of Ali) motif in the four corners, this headcloth features a central medallion with Arabic script surrounded by four calligraphic patterns inspired by a *tughra*, the monogram of Ottoman sultans.

> DECEMBER Jumada II - Rajab

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Front cover

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