

FABRICS AND FASHIONS—FROM 2000 B.C. TO A.D. 1952

IN THE ANIMAL WORLD the finery goes to the males, but women have turned the tables on men almost all over the world. Now the standard fabrics—silk, wool, and cotton—are gradually giving way to modern synthetic products, our Bulletin reporter finds. But if all should vanish, there would still be preserved examples of the finest weaves of all ages and all lands in the Museum's "library" of textiles. Further, the designs of these old materials would continue to serve as inspiration to the artists working in the new media as they do today to those of the present textile industries.

By CHRISTINE TARDY

THE TIME is fast approaching when the methods of synthetic cloth-making devised by science will be available to everybody all over the world, with the result that the time-honored use of animal and vegetable fibers, with all the intricate weaving techniques, may become lost skills. Our century is beginning to see miles of synthetic fabrics rolling out of the mills, and nylon is replacing silk. Ingredients such as coal, air, water, and petroleum are being used to make cloth instead of the more costly wool and cotton. Aside from cost considerations, the synthetic chemical fibers and fabrics often excel the animal and vegetable fibers—in being insect-resistant and practically wear-proof, they defy the age-old complaints.

Our descendants may one day be amused at all the trouble their ancestors had to go to for a new coat, dress, or suit. Compared to whipping up a batch of synthetic fibers in an industrial laboratory, the old methods of shearing sheep and carding wool or raising cotton and running it through the gin will seem like cumbersome efforts. Even now sheets of cloth are coming off mill rollers like sheets of paper towels, so that weaving too is eliminated. It is likely, though, that the methods of weaving we inherited from people of centuries ago will continue to be used for pattern effects, although a machine now does the weaving instead of the hands.

Partly against a future when our animal-vegetable fabric materials and techniques have become obsolete and forgotten, but of equal ethnic and artistic value now, is a recently established "library" at Chicago Natural History Museum. This unusual library has no books in it at all. It is a library of fabrics—shelves full of cloth from all over the world, ranging from very ancient

times to the present. Huge custom-made steel cabinets, especially designed for storing fabrics are arranged row on row. The trays within the cabinets can be taken out to study the cloth. Grandma's mothballs have been replaced with the latest development in anti-insect preservatives, and the cases are dust-proof to ward off rapid deterioration of the fabrics from the city's dust.

The 10,000 pieces of cloth in the fabric library are filed *not* according to the Dewey Decimal System, but according to the area from which they come and the people who made and used the materials. One section is filled with prehistoric pieces of cloth and another section is devoted to ethnological pieces from more recent cultures. The largest groups of fabrics are from the indigenous cultures of both the North and South American continents, the Far East, Oceania, Africa, and ancient Egypt. Of the contemporary cultures, the best and most extensive collections are of fabrics from the American Indians of the Northwest Coast and the American Southwest, Mexico, and the highlands of South America. Of materials both ancient and contemporary, Indonesia, China, and India occupy the most shelves. The very old fabrics are mainly from Egypt and Peru. In the ancient Egyptian section of the "library" are to be found linen strips used to wrap mummies 4,000 years ago, while Peru contributes some of the finest fabrics found anywhere, dating from 200 B.C. on. Everything in the "library" was brought back by Museum expeditions, and contributions from other sources are not encouraged because there is no difficulty in obtaining pieces. The problem is to make the most effective use of what the collection already contains.

"The way the textile library is set up, it can be made available for research only," says Dr. Alexander Spoehr, Curator of

Oceanic Ethnology, who is in charge of the "library." "Since the fabrics are not displayed as they would be in an exhibit, they are primarily of interest to textile specialists and designers."

The collection is by no means composed simply of scraps of cloth. There are Indian saris of the finest silk, delicately bordered with colorful embroidery. Filed away are entire costumes, such as gold-threaded harem outfits of filmy, transparent silks and heavy dragon-brocaded Chinese wedding gowns. Most of the fabrics are, in fact, pieces of clothing, but there is an almost equal abundance of containers—everything from medicine men's bags to pieces for holding the baby to his mother's back. The remainder is mainly blankets and bed clothing, tapestries, rugs, and ornamental material.

Browsing through this fabric library is almost like a trip in a time-machine, and there's no doubt about its being a travesty on space. You can see where a lot of our present habits of dress come from, and it's



VARIATION ON A THEME

Heavy silk robes, vividly embroidered, as worn by the aristocracy of China (standing, left), Japan (right), and Korea (kneeling).



SOME PEOPLE LIKE WOOL . . .

A Guatemalan lady spends a good deal of time over her embroidery.

fun to see some of the customs that our society never adopted or has long since rejected. The bridal gown idea is one of the oldest, and remote cultures go right along with Western civilization in the custom of going to considerable trouble for one lovely gown that is worn once and then put away, perhaps never to be worn again.

One of the apparent and easy concepts to trace in clothing customs is that which is found in nearly every modern and ancient culture throughout the world, with very few exceptions. That is the custom of using dress to indicate social status and occupation. It is still possible to pigeon-hole yourself, or to cause others to pigeon-hole you, according to the way you are dressed. A man in overalls is a farmer. Someone in blue jeans is either a student or a factory worker. There are women who can tell at a glance how much another woman paid for her dress and where she bought it. If you can afford it, you can dress yourself to fit the part of almost any role, whether countess or sea-captain.

But it is the fact that certain manners of dress are associated with certain ranks or positions in society that can be traced as a very old and widespread idea. Until the attempts at abolishing India's caste system were instituted, there was never the slightest question about who belonged to which caste, for it was immediately apparent from the manner of dress, the drape of the sari, and the set of the turban—effectively enforced by social pressure.

Going through the "library" at random, you can't help being struck with the ingenious variety of materials called upon to produce fibers for fabrics, as well as the

vast number of techniques for turning the fibers into cloth. Every known way of weaving is represented in the collection. According to Dr. Hugh C. Cutler, Curator of Economic Botany, fibers are obtained from the bark of trees, from grasses and leaves, from plants like cotton and flax, from the hair of sheep, llamas, and buffalos, and from silkworms. The peoples of China and India obtained fiber from a shrub that was made into a cloth called *ramie*. It had a gummy quality to it, but it served them until the cotton gin made cotton cloth abundant. Hemp provided the fiber for most of our early ancestors' clothing, while linen, cotton, and wool were sufficiently



. . . WHILE OTHERS LIKE SILK . . .

A silk sari for the aristocratic Hindustani, woven with gold.

costly to be saved for Sunday best. In general, people have utilized the fiber materials that were handiest to them. The South Sea islanders, for instance, made all of their clothing from grasses, bark, and leaves until trade routes made other materials available and missionaries' ideas on morality foisted clothing conceived in temperate zones onto the backs of peoples in tropical areas.

The "library" is a storehouse of ideas for textile designers, for the proud inspirations of centuries of craftsmen and artists are preserved there. Some of the "newest" contemporary abstract and geometrical patterns seen on store counters today have their strikingly similar counterparts in the patterns found on very old or remote pieces from Africa, the American Indian, and Southeast Asia. Curiously enough, the weaving abilities of some New World peoples were equal to if not superior to anything found in Old World cultures. The ancient Peruvian Indians in particular

developed one of the highest degrees of textile skill found anywhere. Unbelievably fine knitting and mesh work, exquisite tapestries, and a remarkable variety of techniques for making designs in cloth were created by these people. Some fine examples of these can be seen in James Nelson and Anna Louise Raymond Hall (Hall 4—Indians Before Columbus). However, people throughout the world found all of the ways to impress designs into fabrics, sooner or later, whether by weaving in different colors of fibers, painting, brocading, embroidering, or dyeing in various ways. The human love of decoration is responsible for all this endeavor that has gone into adorning the garments we must cover ourselves with if we are to stay warm and keep out of jail.

Nature frequently makes her male creatures resplendent with color and beautiful decoration. The male peacock so outshines the drab female that the unknowing suspect the two to be of different species. This beauty makes the male an attractive object of love-interest for the female, while her muddier color scheme helps to protect her from hazards by blending her in with the environment.



. . . AND SOME PREFER COTTON

The latest thing in Florida wear, if you're a Seminole Indian: colored strips on white cotton.

Things have been reversed almost everywhere, however, by modern mankind. In our society, the modern female is the one bedecked with colorful plumage, while the drab male limits himself to an almost concealed burst of brilliance in his necktie. There are, though, a few places in the world where it is the man who decks himself out with riotous displays of ornament, while the lowly female sticks to not-so-noticeable décor.



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