

Asian Textiles: An Introductory Guide for Personal Property Appraisers

by Cynthia Shaver

This article is intended as an introductory guide for personal property appraisers who encounter Asian textiles in their professional work. By Asia, I refer to Korea, China, Japan, India, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia. I write about appraising as a service to the profession and to find new clients, but as a textile appraiser, my primary focus is on the textile rather than the value. To me appraising Asian art, and Asian textiles, is a way of life. In my spare time, I read about art and textiles, go to museums, attend classes, and talk to other art historians. As professional appraisers, we must approach each appraisal with respect and due diligence.

Appraisers must identify and discuss characteristics keyed to the Getty Identification Standard, such as description, origin, size, and material. Along with those criteria, we also judge various quality and value characteristics. The intent in this article is to suggest ways to look at a textile and the specific quality characteristics of Asian textiles with regard to fineness, or degree of excellence: in other words, what to look for. Value characteristics (as opposed to quality characteristics) of Asian textiles can be related to culture and usage, some examples will be given when discussing value characteristics. It is important to remember that a given value represents a certain moment in time in a specific geographical location, for example, December 31, 2011 in San Francisco, California. It is also important to realize that the vast majority of the Asian textiles one will see as a general Asian art appraiser, are of a modest and decorative value only. This article hopes to point out when it is important to ask the help of an expert, where an object may have a far higher value.

In understanding an antique or work of art, as appraisers we must know something about the history of the culture and country of origin. Applying common sense to identifying a textile after a few hours of research, will often answer most questions. That is not suggesting that one can understand the value of textiles as well as one who has handled and

studied thousands of textiles over forty years. Many expert textile appraisers have been in the field for decades. The importance of cloth in the history, legends, and folk stories of Asia should not be underestimated. Textiles signaled power, prestige, and wealth. Bolts of cloth and clothing were carefully depicted in all materials used in art including bronze, porcelain, and paintings.

In preparation for this article, I reviewed my last five years of appraisals of Asian textiles to see what the quality characteristics I cited most often were. Condition was the most important, and the quality of the technique was a close second. The third and fourth key quality characteristics were fineness of thread and color; the fineness of the thread affects the tightness of the weave and color describes the presence of and the density of colors. The final quality characteristics are complexity of design and the age of the textile. All of these quality characteristics work together to give a piece its value.

Condition is the most important quality characteristic. There are enough good Asian textiles available, that if the condition is not very good to excellent, meaning no stains, tears or rips, the value drops significantly. According to a contemporary Chinese writer, there are ten thousand dragon robes stored in the Palace Museum in Beijing. The large number of surviving robes reminds us that these robes were not reserved for the emperor and his immediate family. In this last year alone, I saw over half a dozen dragon robes and a dozen other types of Chinese robe. In the late 1980s, it was popular to import textiles from Japan by the pound. There are thousands of Japanese kimono in this country. Home interior stores have Indonesian ikats on display for the walls or made up into pillows. Textiles from India have been used as curtains and tablecloths since 1970. Now with the internet, the supply has increased, so condition must be the top priority when evaluating an Asian textile. Even with rare textiles, condition is the number one quality characteristic factor. As a dealer of antique Japanese textiles in the 1990s, the author offered two 18th century Japanese silk tsujigahana fragments to a major museum, each with an asking price of over \$50,000. One was older with a more desirable design, color, and technique but in worn condition. The other, although of less quality, was in far better

condition and was purchased right away. The trump card is always condition.

So, how do you judge a textile? First feel the cloth. The tactile sensation of quality cloth can be felt. What makes a quality weave? The number of warps and wefts used per square inch, or the density of the threads, as well as the fineness and quality of the thread used. The production of cloth is only the first stage in making a wearable garment. Often the weaver of the cloth has no idea what the final garment will be. How is the garment constructed from woven cloth? Sometimes we find a bolt of silk made for a Chinese robe, that has not yet been cut or sewn into a robe. Is the cloth cut and tailored like a Western suit or blouse, or is it rectangular and uncut like a toga? Are there darts or tucks? Look at the shape of the arms. Are there any labels on the garment? Since the early 20th century, garments have been made in Japan and China for European and American markets. In India, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia making cloth with western themes for the export market has also continued since the late 19th century. Sometimes one will find a Gumps or Nishimura label sewn into the neck of an Asian garment. This addresses provenance more than value. If the garment was made for export and is in excellent condition, it still has a couture value if, for say, it was created for attending the San Francisco opera in the 1920s. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has three or four robes of Japanese origin, made in the early 1920s for Western consumption.

What is the method of closure? Button holes were not present on Asian textiles. China used closures with a cloth loop and metal togs; Indonesia used various size lengths and widths of textile wrapped around the waist. Belts were not used. Japanese had long obi waistbands of different widths (depending on age and style) that wrapped around the waist. It defined the waist rather than being used to hold anything from falling down from the waist. India had a fitted top with attention given to long amounts of flowing cloth around the torso, whether it be fitted or not.

It is important to note what technique was used to decorate the cloth. Some textiles were made with a combination of techniques, which was common throughout Asia and can add to the value. Is the decoration on the surface or is it in the weave? Use a magnifier to see if dye is on the surface

or whether the individual threads were dyed. If the dye is on the surface, the design will carry over the individual threads. Were the threads dyed before weaving the cloth, as in ikat? This can produce a slight blurry effect in the woven cloth although in some styles of ikat, the threads are in razor sharp alignment with no fuzziness or blur.

What makes a quality tapestry weave as seen on some important Chinese dragon robes? This technique is called kesi in China and tsutzure in Japan. Although it is a technique used in China and less frequently in Japan, it is not seen in other areas of Asia except in flat weave rugs.

What makes a quality batik? The numbers of colors used, the complexity of the design, and little or no bleeding of dye through the wax resist. Resist dyeing, with wax or a paste resist, was a technique used throughout Asia, not only for batik but for stencil dyeing as well. Many of the blue and white cotton garments of Chinese ethnic minorities were decorated using this technique. By contrast, the blue and white cotton garments of the Japanese were generally made by the ikat technique.

What is seen as a high quality embroidery? It is important to realize the difference between a satin stitch (long loose threads) and a knot stitch, sometimes referred to as “forbidden stitch,” a circular knot of thread on the surface of the cloth. This use of several different embroidery styles on one garment took more time and skill and has a higher value today.

How does one judge sashiko (straight line stitching from Japan)? By the evenness of stitch intervals, the length of the stitch, and the quality of thread used are the criteria, rather like sewing a good hem where one wants the stitches to be evenly spaced and of the same length. Again, start with the quality of the thread. One of the few Korean textiles that one sees on the market are bojagi, patchwork cloths, a square made up of many smaller squares of cloth sewn together, used for covering a special gift or offering.

Look at a seam. How many layers of cloth are joined together? Is the seam wrapped with thread or sewn down on the sides? Some seams were folded under and then sewn down. It is worth noting the amount of work and care given to the seam. A quality woven textile shows signs of quality and care everywhere, even in the seams.

Can you see the individual threads? If so are they thin or thick? Do they appear uneven in thickness? Might the thread be hand-spun? Thread is usually made of several strands twisted or plied together. Are there silver or gold threads on the cloth? Gold and silver thread was used throughout Asia. Gold or silver leaf is laid flat on paper, glued, and then cut. This filament is twisted around silk thread or placed flat in the weave and used as decorative thread to form or enhance patterns. Japanese priest robes from the 1800s, imported into this country and draped over grand pianos, often have this method of decoration. Unfortunately, the threads are often broken or frayed, ruined by years of sun exposure, and the condition is not good. Remember that condition is the most important quality characteristic. There are long padded Japanese wedding kimono, heavily embroidered with gold thread, that were made in Tokyo as bridal gown rentals during the 1970s and 1980s. A corner store in Tokyo that was several stories tall displayed heavily embroidered kimono in all of its windows, advertising Wedding Apparel For Rent. When made, these kimono were expensive, each costing thousands of dollars. Once used enough to show even the smallest signs of wear, their value became nominal, in the low hundreds of dollars. A used 1970s wedding kimono, even in excellent condition, has little value beyond its value as a decorative object.

Color: is the color even across the whole cloth or garment, or are areas bleached by exposure to light? Have the threads been thoroughly saturated with the dye? Is there dye variation among the threads? These qualities are typical of various vegetable blue and red dyes used throughout Asia. Do the dyes seem vegetable or chemical? Bright pinks and purples are most likely modern chemical dyes. Cotton is difficult to dye, so achieving a depth or intensity of color requires far more labor. Japanese cotton futon covers with a deep even indigo background cloth command prices of \$500 and above. In Japan, the intensity of indigo blue dye on cotton textiles, can add value. Remember that quality must be seen throughout the entire cloth or garment. If the design execution or the dyeing of the design is inferior, no matter how intense the indigo color, the value is limited. As a dealer of Japanese textiles, the author had a beautiful deep blue futon cover decorated with a phoenix pattern. The problem was that the phoenix

looked somewhat like a chicken. The indigo blue background was beautiful, the quality of the dyeing was not questioned, but it didn't sell because of what was seen as a defective design. A highly desirable red color seen in certain Indonesian cotton textiles requires several steps and is rarely seen. The presence of that one quality characteristic can be worth thousands of dollars. Silk is easy to dye, so a variety of colors and shades were readily achieved and are expected.

Design Complexity: are there simple straight lines, or angles or curves? Is the pattern dense or sparse, sophisticated, or naive? Would you say the cloth shows inspirational artistry and creativity? This characteristic is the most difficult to subjectively quantify. The more you see, the more you can judge. Visualize vertical lines, then multiply the lines, and then add horizontal lines achieving a plaid, a more complex design. Now think about achieving the exact desired color density. Does it seem easy or surprisingly complicated?

Asian weaving communities used pattern and sample books as guides. Simple Chinese robes, with minimal embroidered sleeve bands or ribbons outlining the hem, can cost \$1,000. With quality, and variety of added embellishments to the robe, for example fur lining, robes can be valued in the high thousands, with the rarest examples being hundreds of thousands of dollars currently.

Material: most vintage Asian textiles seen today are silk or cotton. Occasionally the fiber will be grass or tree bast fiber or a combination of cotton and bast fiber. In Okinawa and the Philippines, banana and orchid fiber were used. In northern Japan, hemp, ramie, and wisteria were used. The Ainu robes of northern Japan are made from elm bark fiber. If you suspect a textile has value, and is rough to the touch, look under a magnifier at the threads. If the textile has very even synthetic thread, the value is probably decorative. Otherwise it may be time to communicate with an expert.

Some themes are more popular, and often more valuable—for example rabbits are popular in Japanese art, dragons in China, lions in Southeast Asia, and birds and snakes in Indonesia. But the patterns are a value characteristic rather than addressing the overall quality of the object. This

point is only important on an already valuable textile. A value characteristic on a textile such as theme is less important than the quality characteristic tests; condition, quality of technique, fineness of thread, color, complexity of the design and age. If the object fails those tests, it has little or no bearing on the market value.

Another aspect to consider is who wore the cloth. Was it imperial, worn by the ruling class, or was it made for wear by a common working man or a farmer? The choice of material and color will probably reveal who wore the cloth; either a person of wealth and power, or someone relatively common and ordinary. A theatre costume? Again, the material and choice of color and embellishment will suggest use in a theatre. The graphic appeal of theatre robes can add value. Woman or man? The choice of material, shape of the garment, and its color will probably reveal who wore the cloth.

In your appraisal, describe the history of the textile as you know it or as told to you by the owner if that story appears credible. If there is a concern, explain why you think it may have a high value. A written description of the textile should be drafted listing its condition, material, technique, construction, design, provenance, and then an expert should be consulted.

Ideally textiles should be stored flat rather than on hangers, and if folded, tissue or a cotton sheet should be placed in the folds to prevent the fibers from breaking. When taking photographs, make sure the camera lens is parallel to the textile. If not mounted or framed, spread a clean white cotton sheet for both the background color and a dust protector. Take photos of the front and back and the fabric edges or from selvage to selvage (woven edge to woven edge) if it is a panel of cloth rather than a garment.

The market among Asian textiles is mixed, with Japanese textiles trending lower on value now. Chinese imperial robes on the other hand command the highest values. The majority of batiks, ikats, and other Asian weavings fall in the mid to high hundreds. At the same time, know there are several Indonesian ikat textiles in the Yale University Art Museum with values over \$35,000. And of course there are the two separate sales of silk velvet Persian fragments in April of 2010 at Sotheby's Arts of the Islamic World in London for over a million dollars each. Those textiles were rare, old, of exceptional quality and in very fine condition. There are always

exceptions and it is important to know when to ask an expert. As an appraiser who is assisting a client to sell their collection, if you are talking about a textile, go to an expert.

To sharpen your visual senses, visit the Asian textile collections of museums like the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City or the Asian Art Museum and DeYoung Museum in San Francisco. As appraisers, the more art we see and the more we understand, the better we can help our clients.

About the Author

Cynthia Shaver, a senior appraiser of Asian Art with the American Society of Appraisers, has more than 30 years of experience in the Asian art and antique business in the San Francisco bay area. Ms. Shaver has given lectures for museums and educational institutions since 1977. She has contributed to books and magazines and been featured in newspaper articles. Ms. Shaver served on the Board of Directors for the Society for Asian Art at the San Francisco Asian Art Museum and as a Board member of the Textile Arts Council for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Her contact information is www.cynthiashaver.com.