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Abstracts

Manichean Textiles from Northwest China: Costume as Codex

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Rare surviving artifacts of the Manichean religion consisting of thirty-six woolen textiles, are stored in Japan, where they have been for over 500 years. They are preserved in that country thanks to their serving as festival decorations for an annual Shinto-Buddhist procession in Kyoto. They are designed and painted with Manichean motifs described by scholars including Klimkeit, Moriyasu, and Gulácsi. In several examples Tibetan Buddhist, local talismanic icons, and later, Taoist themes, appear and are combined with the original Manichean elements. The major ground is composed of vertical swaths of light and dark segments juxtaposed and seemingly in a state of tension. The textiles are related to a group of twenty-one pile carpets, which share some of the same motifs and are owned by the same neighborhood associations. The textiles and carpets are documented in association records, paintings of the procession, as well as in spectators' reports. Carbon dating of threads from four examples performed at Oxford University is supportive of art historical sources. It is likely that the objects were created by Uighur artisans. Among textile scholars, Uighurs are famed as developers of tapestry weaving, which they are thought to have learned from the Sogdians, considered inventors of the technique. Repeated thin ink lines define forms, a characteristic of Uighur painting. Both tapestries and carpets are woven of the same thick and hairy wool and some imagery on the carpets echoes imagery on the textiles. They were variously intended to serve as monastic robes, temple hangings, and as sitting carpets for High Lamas.

The Uighur Manicheans are said to have disappeared from Northwest China by the thirteenth century, but, in fact, these relics date from the 14th to 17th centuries.