

Seed and Spirit of Modernism:
Volume 2
an exploration through
Abstract Asian Textiles

“Colour is a basic human need.....like fire and water,
a raw material indispensable to life”
Fernand Léger

Seed and Spirit of Modernism: an exploration through Abstract Asian Textiles

Mystical Modernism: the Asian roots

It has always intrigued me that so many of the ancient textiles I have handled over the years have such a modern quality. That the modernists were aware of ancient cultures; through museums, exhibitions and travel, is irrefutable. But that they were aware, through examination and experience, of ancient philosophy has only occurred to me of late through having examined in further depth the Modernist in reference to Asian textiles. It has been a true adventure discovering how much of modernism was hidden by the pragmatists in their desire to have their view dominate the 20th century. It is our intention to give a rationalist's view of avant-garde thinking, and thereby connect the very substantial influence Asian philosophies had on Modernism, while also allowing the mystical to remain mystical.

At the core of Modernist design philosophy in the first decades of 20th century was the Bauhaus. [1] Central to education at the Bauhaus, was Johannes Itten. [2] Itten developed the foundation course and, more importantly, colour theory [3], associating it with emotional energy and introducing the colour star which added more subtleties to the work done by Goethe. [4] Itten is arguably regarded as the greatest teacher of the art of colour in modern times.

Walter Gropius, the director of the Bauhaus, and Itten had two very different views of the direction the Bauhaus should be taking. Itten believed that the individual should be nurtured. He persuaded two other teachers with similar views, Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, to join him at the Bauhaus. Gropius's view involved more commercial interests and mass production. Certainly Itten's charismatic magnetism threatened the influence of Gropius at the school. Itten's mystical quality and his devotion to Zoroastrian philosophy [5] were not exactly what social reformers were looking for. Dramatically Itten resigned his post at the Bauhaus in 1922, leaving Kandinsky and Klee to continue his work on colour.

The artists: Jean Arp, Alexandre Blok, Constantin Brancusi, Theo van Doesburg, Robert Delauney, Arthur Dove, Marcel Duchamp, Marsden Hartly, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Hilma af Klint, Franz Kupka, Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, George Mucho, Georgia O'Keefe, Franz Marc, the writers Boris Pasternak, Katherine Mansfield, T. S. Eliot, Franz Kafka and W.B. Yeats, the musicians Arnold Schoenberg, Aleksander Scriabin and the analytical psychologist Karl Jung, were all acknowledged pioneers of the Modernist movement, and were all also involved in the ideas of Theosophy [6] or Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy. This aspect of their lives seems greatly overlooked by the pragmatic academics who have written art and literary history. In the post war years art history certainly repressed the esoteric aspect of the avant-garde.

Theosophy [6] attains that all religions are attempts by the "Spiritual hierarchy" to help humanity evolve to greater perfection, and that each religion therefore has a portion of the truth.

Both Itten, through his understanding of Zoroastrian philosophy, and the Theosophists, through their investigations into the Vedic, Zoroastrian, Taoist, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, arrived at an understanding concerning the of connectedness of colour and emotional energy. This was the key to abstraction, which began to emerge around 1910, and it was also the key to Theosophy. Both investigated the process of cosmic and human evolution, in order to find the 'essence of things'. Both looked for a universal grammar that could communicate this essence. Both were instinctively drawn into the ancient philosophical and religious controversy concerning the relationship of appearance and reality. And both were essentially anti-intellectual movements: they shared the belief that one could understand emotionally the secrets of creation in a way that transcended scientific observation or sheer logic.

Kandinsky, [7] together with Gabrielle Muntz, travelled to Tunisia to see the whirling dervishes. These mystics could reach a state of trance by praying and spinning round. Thus elevated, they would feel no pain. Kandinsky wanted his art to have the same effect as the whirling dervishes. He believed that people could arrive at their 'superior selves' simply by looking at abstract art. He wanted to lock the viewer into a meditative trance. Through his experience of Synaesthesia, Kandinsky added music to his emotional understanding of colour:

"Colours are the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul the piano with many strings, the artist the hand that plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations of the soul" Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912)

In the same essay Kandinsky himself refers to Theosophy as "*one of the greatest spiritual movements of his time*".

Paul Klee [8] in April 1914, on returning from Tunisia wrote in his diary: *"Colour possesses me, it will always possess me. That is the meaning of this happy hour; colour and I are one. I am a painter."*

Georges Braque wrote *"I want to expose the absolute"*.

Rudolf Steiner, in 1920, contended *"Art is the daughter of the divine"*.

Mondrian had been a member of the Theosophical Society since 1909, after spending a summer in the Dutch village of Domburg, a retreat favoured by avant-garde spiritualists. He explained *"All the time I'm driven to the spiritual,"* and *"through Theosophy I became aware that art could provide a transition to the finer regions, which I will call the spiritual realm"*.

Mondrian - and many other Modernists - believed that art could change the objective conditions of human life. He saw art not as an end but as a means to an end - spiritual clarification. *"What is real is not the external form, but the essence of things,"* wrote Brancusi. *"It is impossible for anyone to express anything essentially real by imitating its exterior surface"*.

Yet another artist, Franz Kupka, studied Greek, German and Oriental philosophy, along with a variety of theosophical texts. The art historian Charlotte Douglas writes that the aesthetics of Malevich and his circle *"resulted from a unified world view that encompassed all dichotomies; for them science and Eastern mystical ideas were seamlessly joined in a conceptual continuum, and knowledge of the world might be obtained by beginning at any point"*.

Tachman, author of *"The Spiritual in Art"* (1986), suggests *"Modernism was nourished by elements from the common pool of mystical ideas"*. He stresses:

"what artists found appealing about the various arcane religious and philosophical systems was their underlying premise that the spiritual world is governed by laws that mirror natural laws and that can be expressed in symbols.The spiritual world, like the natural world, is charged with energy, producing cosmic vibrations and human auras. The spiritual principles that intrigued certain artists included synesthesia, the overlap between the senses by which a painting can simulate music; duality, the idea that the cosmos reflects an underlying principle of yin and yang".

Throughout the 20th century, if Theosophy or Zoroastrianism were mentioned at all in reference to art, it seems to have been dismissed, as with Mondrian, as a youthful folly, when it was, in fact a major influence in his life - and more importantly - his work.

The pragmatists of the 20th century are slowly having to admit to the mystical side of Modernism, but maybe they did break their own golden rule - of being factual and impartial - when, with sleight of hand they forgot to mention the influence of the Asian philosophies and mystics.

It appears that instead of the Modernist taking inspiration from what they might have seen of Ancient cultures, in Museums and Art Galleries, they were in fact tapping into essential energy purported in the Vedic, Zoroastrian, Taoist, Buddhist, Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. The fact that many of the textiles published in this catalogue are much older than modernism, illustrates that the theory of colour was in fact intuitively practised in these Asian cultures.

If we take the art philosopher Clive Bell's definition of Modernism, as *"to find meaning"*, these abstract Asian textiles can in fact be modern too.

Footnotes: note [1] Bauhaus - see page 41. note [2] Itten - see page 41. note [3] Colour theory - see page 42. note [4] Goethe - see page 42. note [5] Zoroastrianism - see page 43. note [6] Theosophy - see page 44. note [7] Kandinsky - see page 41. note [8] Klee - see page 42.

The utility of non-existence

Though thirty spokes may form the wheel,
it is the hole within the hub
which gives the wheel utility.

It is not the clay the potter throws,
which gives the pot its usefulness,
but the space within the shape,
from which the pot is made.

Without a door, the room cannot be
entered,
and without windows it is dark.

Such is the utility of non-existence
A translation from the Tao Te Ching

1.

Katak (devotional shawl)

Silk complex weave

Ming Chinese made for the Tibetan Market

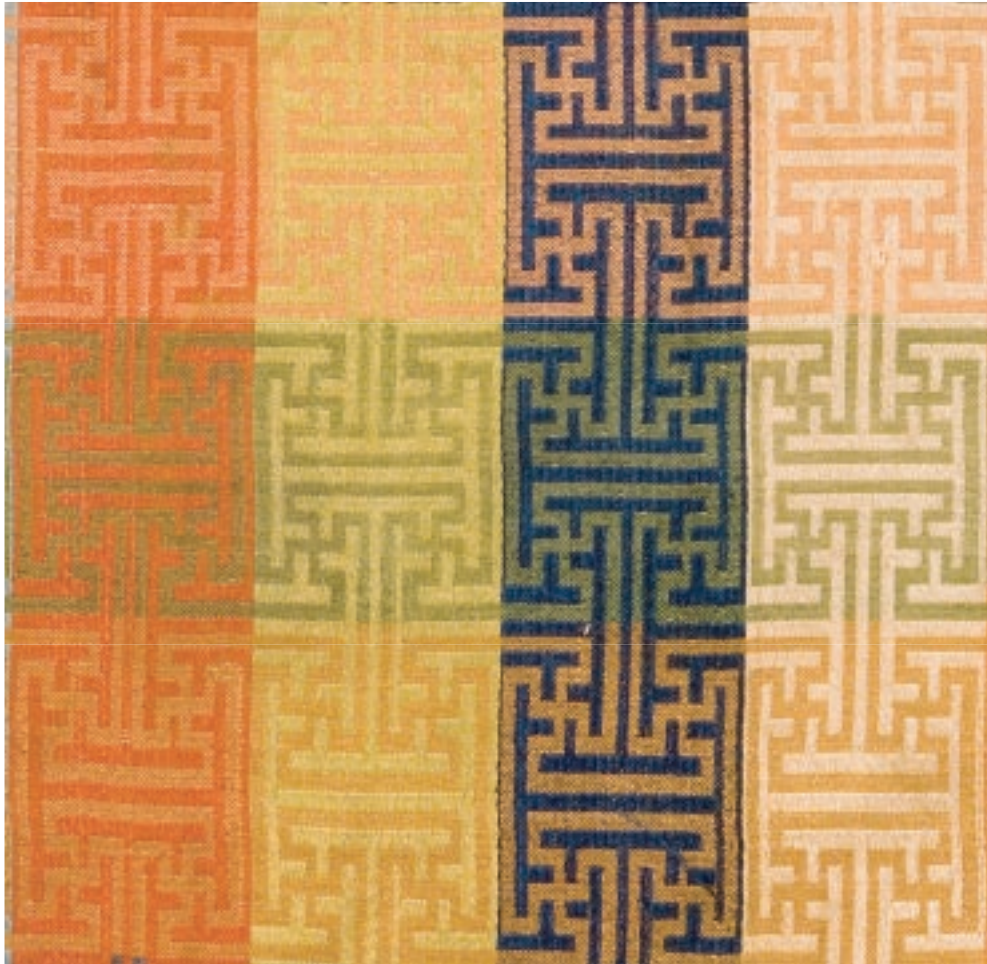
16th Century or Earlier

A gift from a Ming Emperor to an acknowledged Karma pas (spiritual leader)

Measurements: 70 cms x 65 cms - 27.5 inches x 25.5 inches

Design consisting of a continuous clockwise and anti-clockwise swastika pattern. The swastika in China was a Taoist symbol of eternity and divinity; and as the 'wan tzu' (character for ten thousand) it represented the Taoist principle of the 'ten thousand things under heaven'.

Lit: Robert Beer, *Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols*, p344.



detail

The purest and most thoughtful of minds are those who love colour the most.
John Ruskin 1859

2.

Tibetan Buddhist Ritual Patchwork

Composed of 17th and 18th Century silk damasks and brocades.

These patchworks were often found in Buddhist monasteries and were said to represent the absence of the Buddha.

The act of stitching ritual textiles like the copying of Buddhist scriptures was considered a devotional pursuit. (a literal translation of the word "Sutra" is a stitch with intent)

Measurements: 71 cms x 71 cms - 28 inches x 28 inches

Lit: Similar example in *Chinese and Central Asian Textiles*, Selected articles from *Orientalia* 1993-1997, *Designs on Early Chinese textiles* - Regina Krahl, p. 67

Geometric's and Roundabouts, Gary Dickenson, published Linda Wrigglesworth 1997.



“Clouds come floating into my life, no longer to carry rain or usher storm, but to add colour to my sunset sky.” *Rabindranath Tagore*



3.
Imperial yellow Chinese silk damask.
Design incorporating clouds.
Late Ming, early Qing
Measurements: 69 cms x 69 cms - 27 inches x 27 inches



4.

Tibetan Buddhist Ritual Patchwork

Composed of 18th and 19th century silk damasks

These patchworks were often found in Buddhist monasteries and were said to represent the absence of the Buddha. The act of stitching ritual textiles like the copying of Buddhist scriptures was considered a devotional pursuit. (a literal translation of the word "Sutra" is a stitch with intent).

Measurements: 66 cms x 66 cms - 26 inches x 26 inches

Lit: Similar example in *Chinese and Central Asian Textiles*, Selected articles from *Orientalis* 1993-1997, *Designs on Early Chinese textiles* - Regina Krahl, p. 67

Geometrics and Roundabouts, Gary Dickenson, published Linda Wrigglesworth 1997.

"Buddhism correctly understood is a philosophy. Pure Buddhism has no God. The true Buddhist thinks and believes abstract. He needs no other aid."
The Dalai Lama to Peter Hannes Lehmann
Quoted in *The Tiger Rugs of Tibet* (Thames and Hudson, 1988).



5.
Tiger Rug
Tibetan Circa 1880's
Wool pile, Wool warp.
Measurements: 155 cms x 84 cms
Formerly in the Mimi Lipton Collection
and Published in *Tiger Rugs of Tibet* by Mimi Lipton.
Thames and Hudson 1988 pg 79 plate 60
Exhibited at The Haywood Gallery - London 1989.



6.
Orange Lowan (ceremonial cloth)
Hand woven silk, simply embellished
in the tritik process of resist dyeing.
From Palambang, Sumatra
Late 19th Century
Measurements: 198 cms x 81 cms - 76 inches x 32 inches

"These ikats engage ears as well as eyes. Their forms are more 'musical' than most other works of art. Although we respond audibly to, say, Picasso's Guernica (horrific trumpets and drums!), it is harder to tune in the hushed, cerebral melodies of Mondrian's otherwise enervating rectangles; and most pictures by old masters are well suited to the silent galleries where they are usually housed. Looking at ikats summons lutes, cembalums, drums, reed horns and the melodically undulating vocal lines that once surrounded them."

Professor Stuart Cary Welch
Curator Emeritus, Department of Islamic and later Indian Art
Harvard University Art Museums
IKAT silks of Central Asia, The Guido Goldman Collection

7.

Panel

Cotton warp, silk weft, ikat dyed,
lined in indigo chintz

Uzbekistan

Circa 1850

Measurements: 201 cms x 149 cms - 79 inches x 58 inches

Similar piece published in: *IKAT silks of Central Asia*, The Guido Goldman Collection, Kate Fitz Gibbon and Andrew Hale, Lawrence King, 1997 p.74

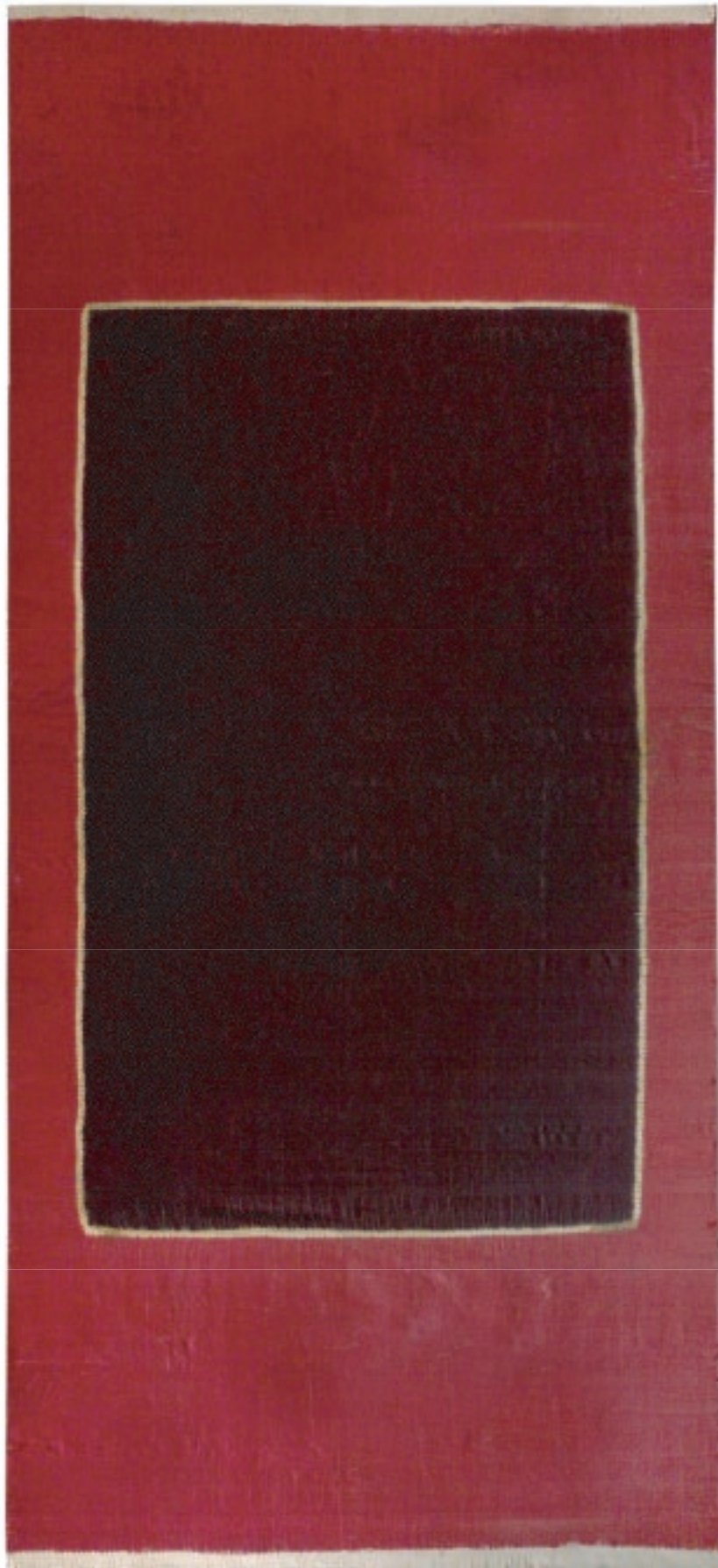
Lit: *The Guido Goldman Collection*

Ikats from Turkestan, Tirov collection exhibited in and published by Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, 2002.

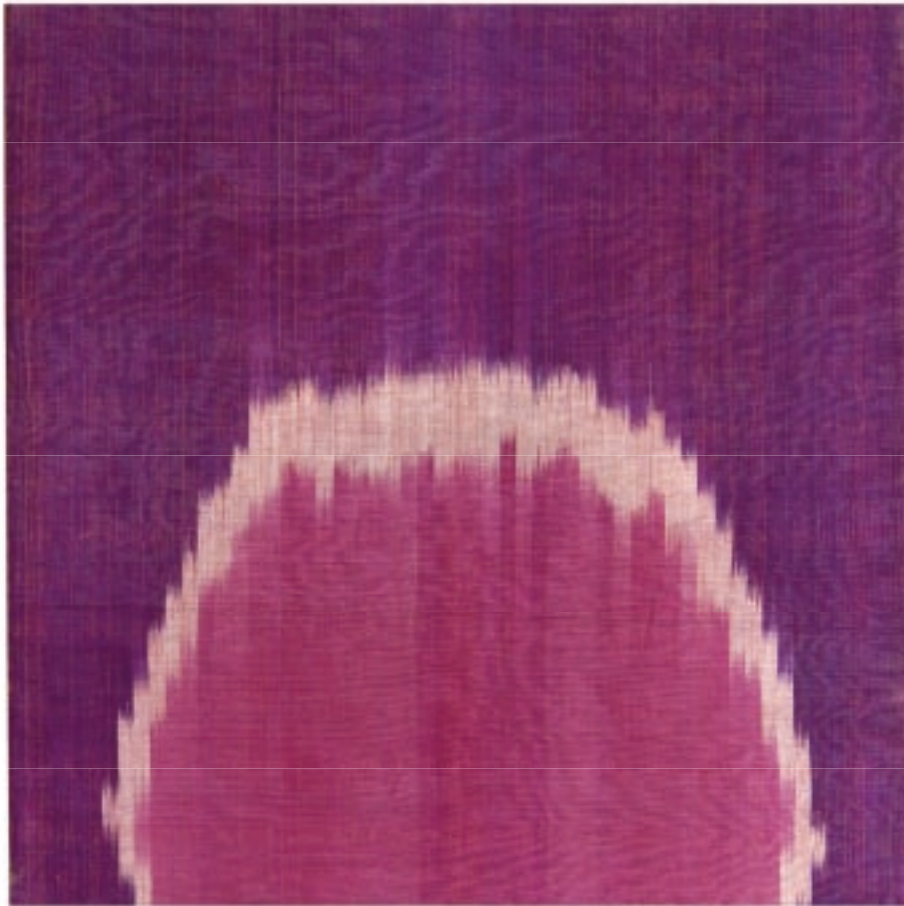


"I am not interested in colour or form or any thing else. I am interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy ecstasy, doom and so on."
Mark Rothko 1957.

8.
Lowan
Ceremonial cloth
Aubergine
Handwoven silk, embellished using tritik process of resist dying
Palambang, Sumatra, Indonesia
Late 19th Century
Measurements: 198 cms x 81 cms - 76 inches x 32 inches



The Ikat of Central Asia are some of the most modern looking textiles of all the abstract textiles from Asia. Central Asia has been the source of more Sufi schools than the rest of the Islamic world combined. (Sufi's represent the mystical more spiritual side of Islam) Colour and music are in much evidence in society in Central Asia. Colour and music are two phenomena that we experience emotionally without engaging our intellect - in many ways mystical experiences! It is therefore not too illogical to imagine that mystic Sufis and colourful abstract ikat designs are in some way connected.



9.
Ikat fragment "Cave"
Cotton warp dyed, silk weft, Silk ikat
Uzbekistan Circa 1910
Measurement: 51 cm x 45 cm
20 inches x 18 inches

10.
Ikat Fragment
Cotton warp dyed, silk weft,
Late 19th Century, Early 20th Century
Uzbekistan
Measurements: 25.5 cm x 81.5 cm
10 inches x 32 inches

"The soul becomes dyed with the colour of its thoughts."
Marcus Aurelius



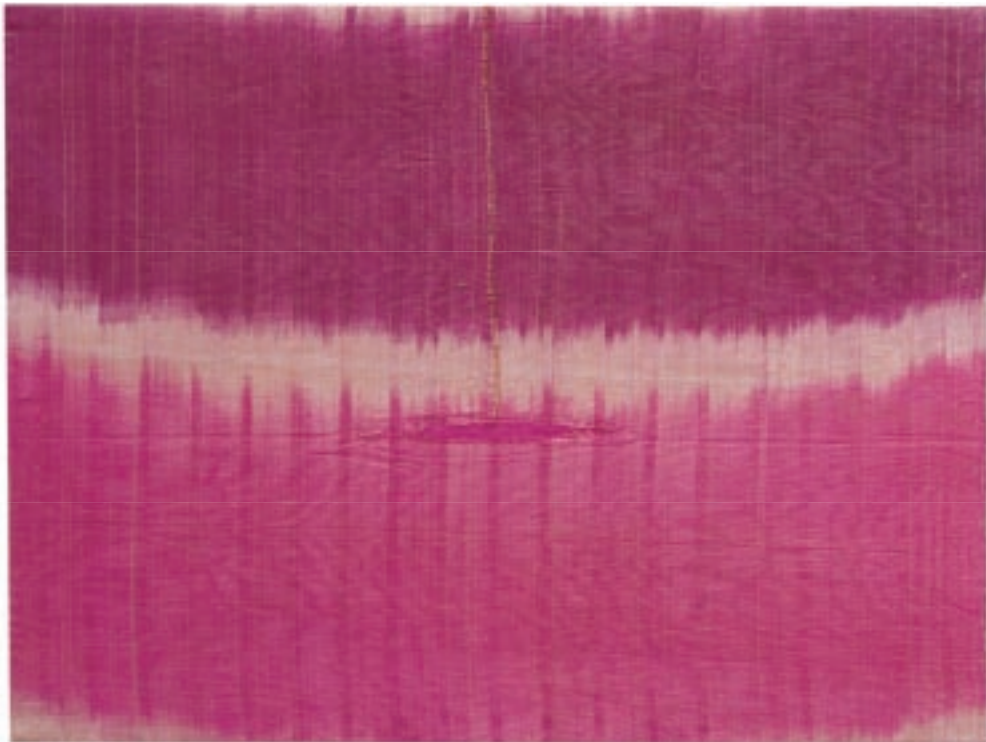


Depiction from
'Thought Forms' by Annie Besant 1901
plate 10 - Definite Affection

11.
Ikat fragment,
Pink and White circle
Silk and cotton warp
Uzbekistan, mid 19th century

12.
Ikat fragment
Pink and Purple
Silk and cotton warp
Uzbekistan, late 19th century

"When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy."
Jelaluddin Rumi



“Colour is the essence of painting, which the subject always killed”
Kazimir Malevich



13.
Ikat fragment
Square in squares: Pink, yellow, purple
Silk and Cotton warp
Uzbekistan, early 20th century



14.
Ikat fragment
Rectangles and Stripes: Pink, Purple, yellow
Silk and cotton warp
Uzbekistan, early 20th century
Measurements: 130 cms x 74 cms - 51 inches x 29 inches

“Whatever takes form is false.
Only the formless endures.”
Ashtavakra Gita 1: 18-20



15.
Green hand-woven silk Lowan
Palambang, Sumatra, Indonesia.
Ceremonial Cloth
Tritik process of resist
Late 19th Century
Measurements: 86 cms x 185 cms - 34 inches x 74 inches



16. Ikat fragment, Cotton warp, silk weft
Uzbekistan, early 20th century
Measurements: 64 cms x 76 cms - 25 inches x 30 inches



17. Ikat fragment, Cotton warp, silk weft
Uzbekistan circa 1890
Measurements: 71 cms x 26 cms - 16 inches x 10 inches

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our explorations
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”
T. S. Eliot



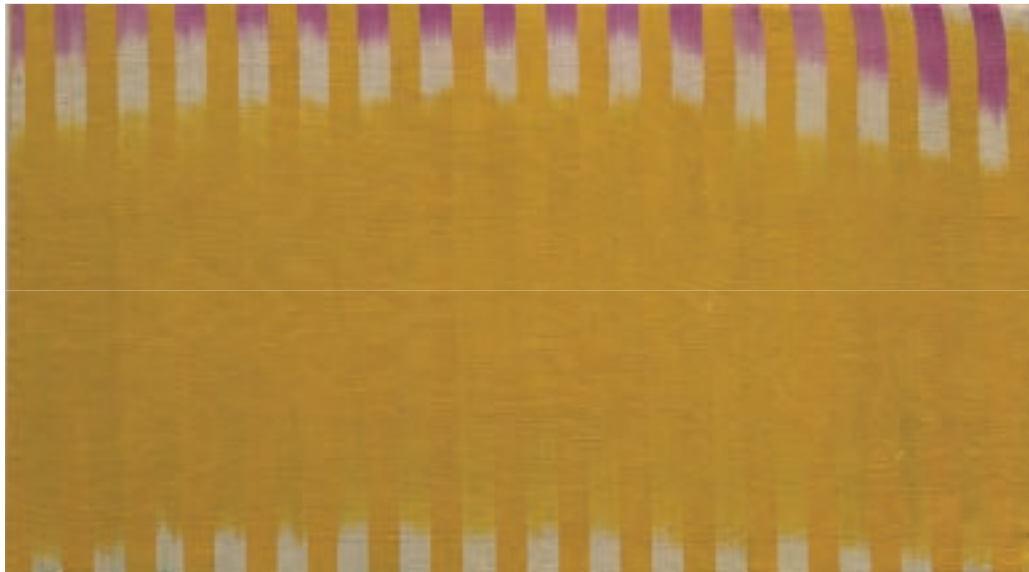
18.
Tashkent Embroidered Suzani
Silk on Cotton
Late 19th Century
Measurements: 120 cms x 230cms - 47 inches x 90 inches.

Similar examples in Vok Collection, '*Suzani: A textile from central Asia*', written by Ignazio Vok and Philip Taube, Published by Edition Vok (Munich, 1994). Catalogue no 1 & 2.

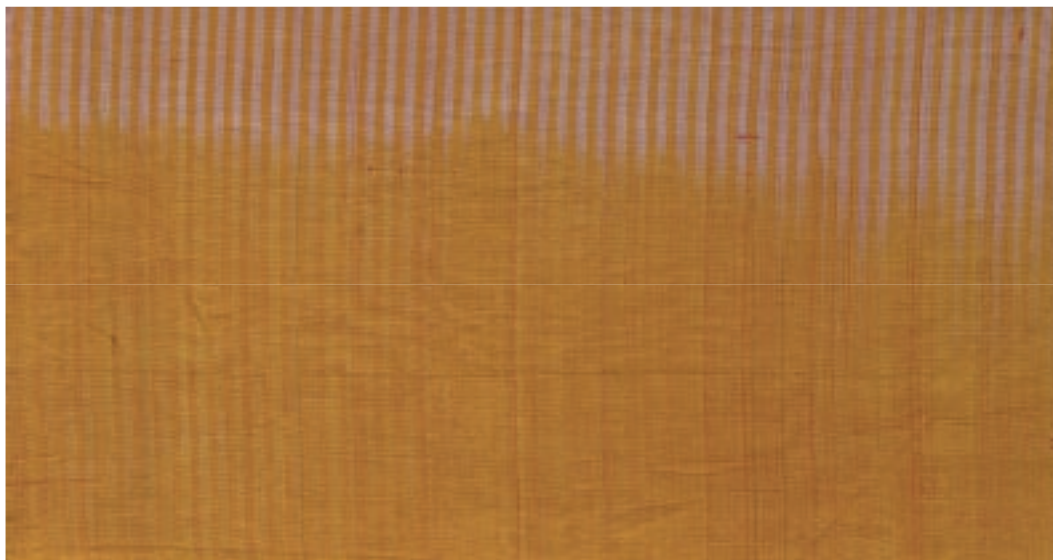


19.
Ikat panel, a silk and cotton ikat
Uzbekistan, circa 1870
Recently lined and conserved on linen
Measurements 188 cms x 132 cms - 74 inches x 52 inches.

An almost identical piece recently exhibited at V&A Museum and published in *Central Asian Ikats* by Ruby Clark 2007 (V&A publications) 56-57.

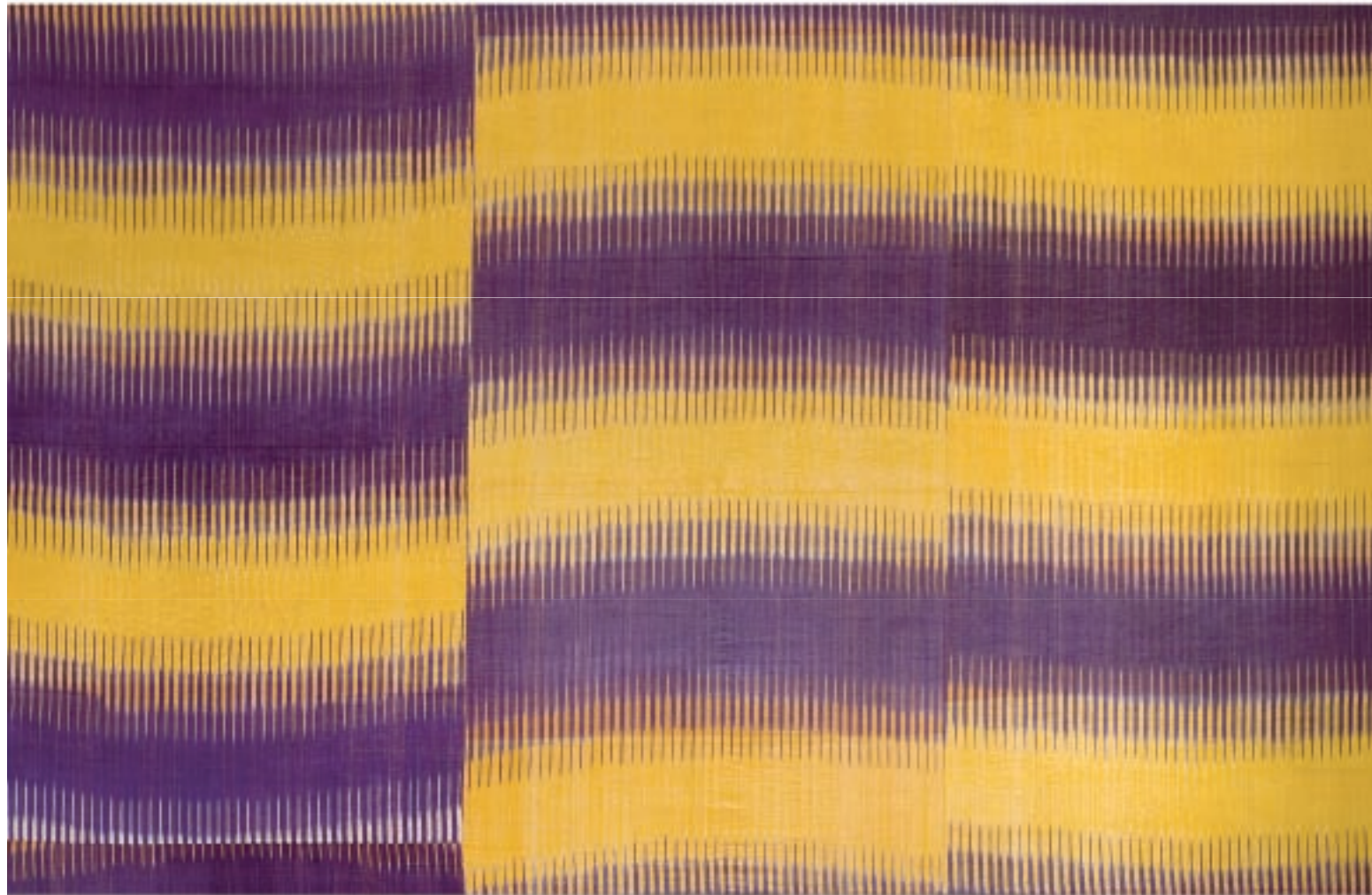


20.
Yellow with pink ikat fragment
Cotton warp, silk weft
Uzbekistan, late 19th century
Measurements: 29.5 cms x 41 cms - 12 inches x 20 inches



21.
Ikat fragment (yellow comb)
Cotton warp, silk weft
Uzbekistan, early 20th century
Measurements: 23 cms x 42 cms - 16.5 inches x 9 inches

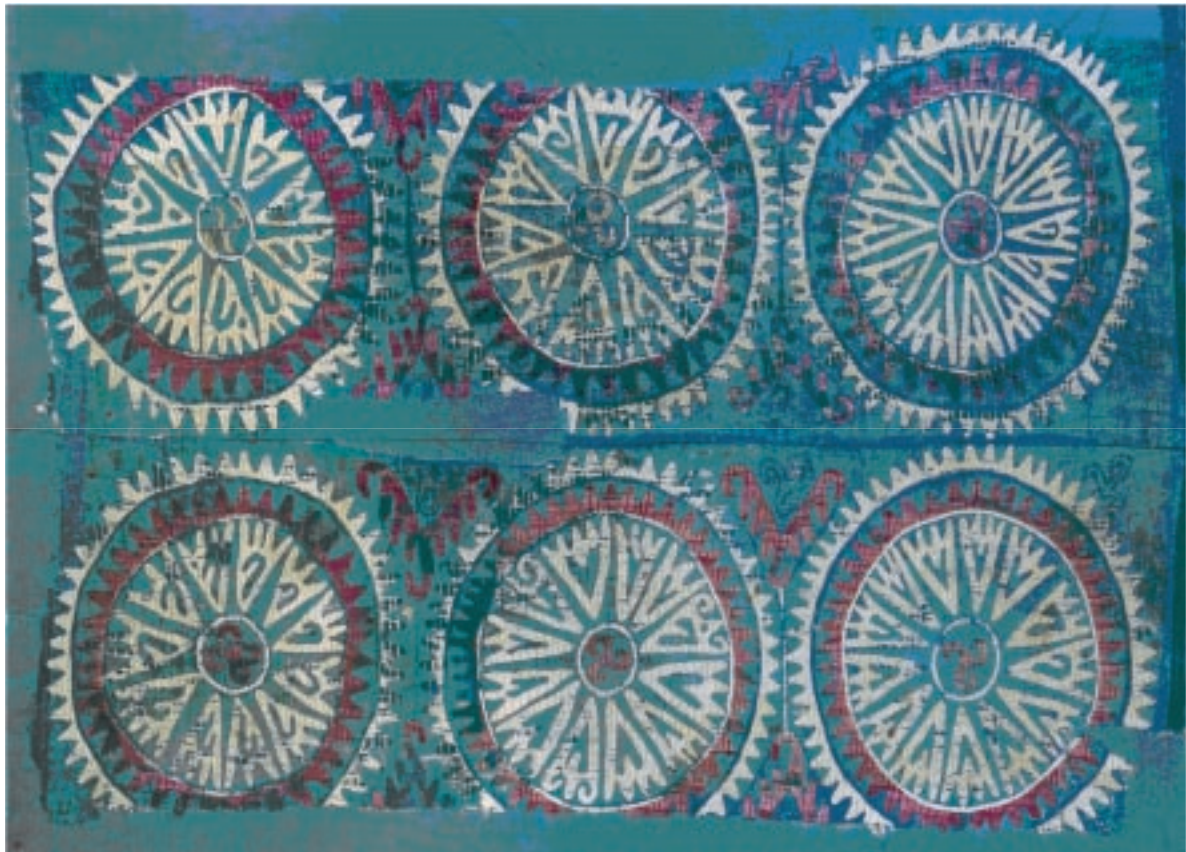
“Light, that first phenomenon of the world, reveals to us the spirit and the living soul of the world through colours.” *Johannes Itten*



22.
Ikat panel (purple and saffron) Cotton warp silk weft, lined in Russian chintz
Uzbekistan, circa 1900. Measurements: 116 cms x 175 cms - 45 inches x 69 inches

Kaitag

The mountainous region of Kaitag, after which its inhabitants are named, lies near the Black Sea. Kaitag embroideries, according to the research of Robert Chenciner, were associated with birth, marriage and death. For infants they were laid across the head end of the cot, the embroidery face down, to ward off evil spirits and protect the child; when a bride married, she would carry all her belongings wrapped in one of the embroideries made for her to her husband's family home; on death one would be laid directly across the face of the dead, embroidery face down, because the living were not supposed to look on the faces of the dead. The Kaitag were historically a country of several nationalities, including: Hunnic, Turkic, Persian, Semitic and Ibero-Caucasian peoples; they also practiced at some point Islam, Christianity and Judaism. All these diverse components led to a rich visual, colourful and iconographic practice displayed in their embroidery in abstract form, giving them a modernist intensity.



23.

Ritual cover; Kaitag region, Daghestan, Silk Embroidery on cotton

Second half 19th Century. Measurements: 58 cms x 91.5 cms - 23 inches x 36 inches

Seen in: *Kaitag Textile Art From Daghestan*, Robert Chenciner, Textile Art Publications 1993;

Catalogue No. 95 p. 177



24.

Ritual cover

Kaitag region, Daghestan

Early 19th Century

Silk embroidery on Silk

Measurements: 117 cms x 58 cms - 46 inches x 23 inches

Similar to the Microcosmic map textiles discussed in *Kaitag, Textile Art From Daghestan*,

Robert Chenciner.



25.
Ritual cover
Kaitag region, Daghestan, 18th century or earlier
Silk embroidery on Silk
Measurements: 104 cms x 63.5 cms - 41 inches x 25 inches
Similar examples in: *Kaitag, Textile Art From Daghestan*, Robert Chenciner,
Textile Art Publications 1993, Catalogue Nos 17, 19, 20 pp 151-152.



26.
Ritual cover, Kaitag region, Daghestan
Early 19th Century, Silk embroidery on Silk
Measurements: 117 cms x 58 cms - 46 inches x 23 inches
Similar to the Microscopic map textiles discussed in *Kaitag, Textile Art from Daghestan*,
by Robert Chenciner

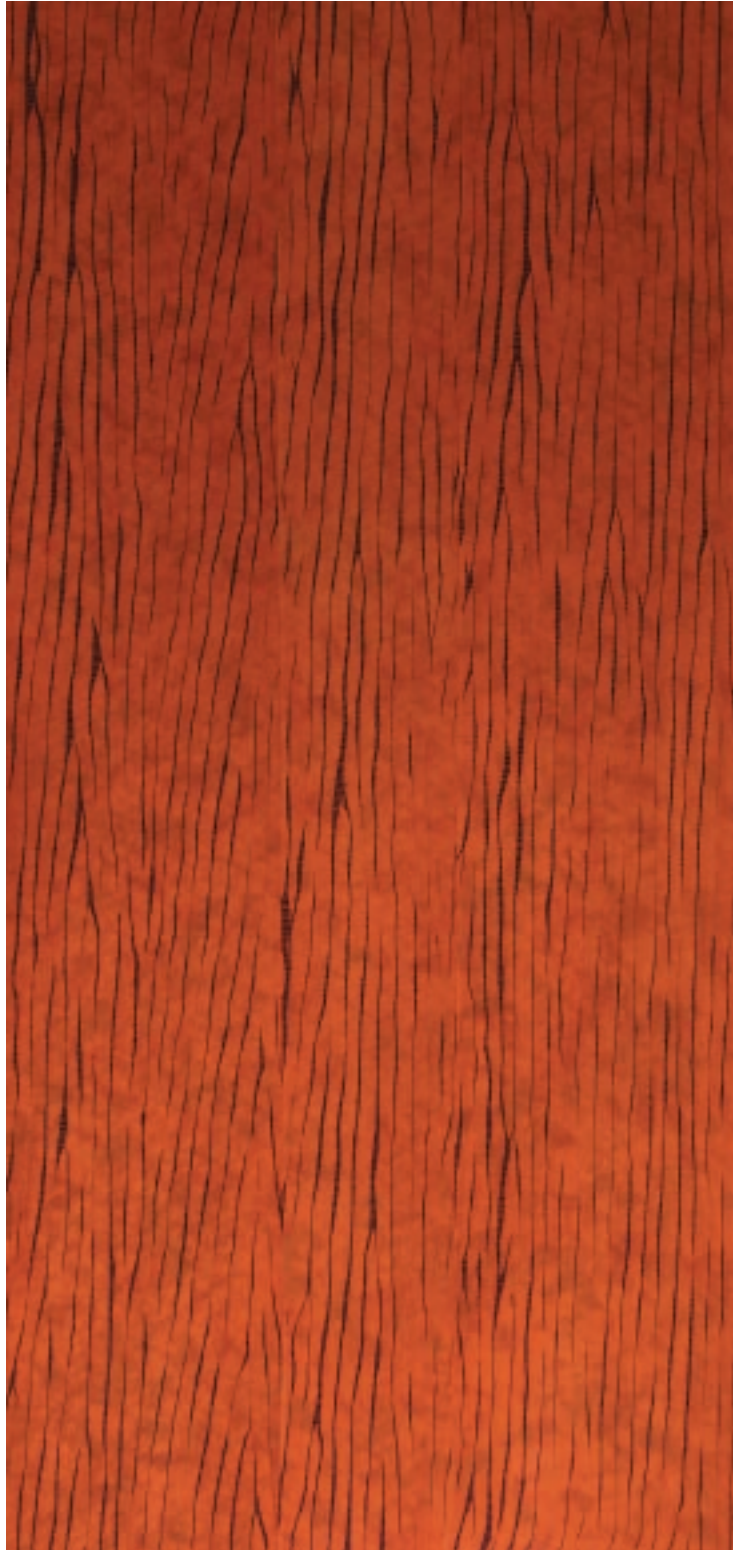
"As to what I have done as a poet... I take no pride in it... but that in my century I am the only person who knows the truth in the difficult science of colours – of that, I say, I am not a little proud, and here I have a consciousness of a superiority to many."
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

27.
Wall-hanging Uzbekistan, Cotton warp, silk weft, ikat-dyed,
Uzbekistan, circa 1880's
Measurements: 178 cms x 82 cms - 62 inches x 44 inches





28.
Phulkari, Floss stitch on cotton, depicting abstract Mother Goddesses
Punjab, Northern India, circa 1880's
Measurements: 274 cms x 122 cms - 108 inches x 48 inches



29.

Tatsumaki arashi shibori, Japan, 2nd quarter of 20th Century

Lit: *Shibori: The Inventive Art of Japanese Shaped Resist Dyeing* by Wada, Kellog Rice and Barton, published Kondansha International Ltd, 1999, page 183

Measurements: 108 cms x 86 cms - 74 inches x 34 inches

"Art is a step from what is obvious and well known towards what is arcane and concealed"
Kahil Gibran

30.

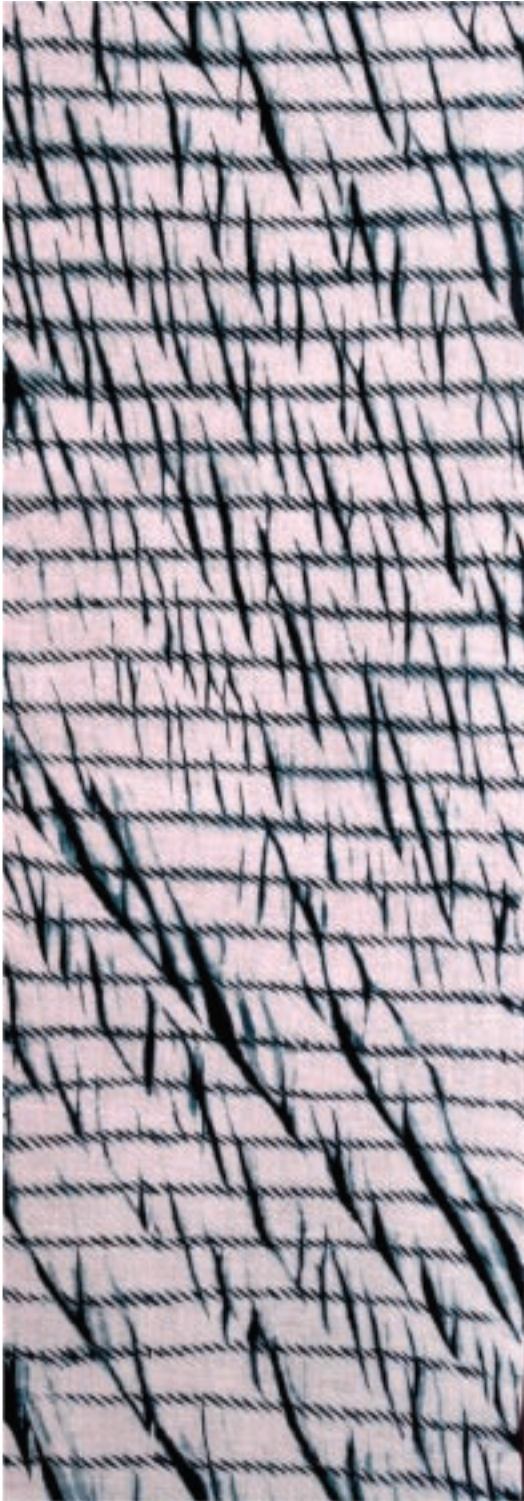
Calligraphic Kalamcari (block printed and painted) on cotton
Persian 1880

The calligraphy is a poem with refrain on the life against tyranny and injustice,
of the martyr Imran Husayn ibn Ali (628Ad-680Ad)

who was killed at the battle of Karbala. October 10th 680Ad

Measurements: 89cms x 168cms - 35 inches x 65 inches



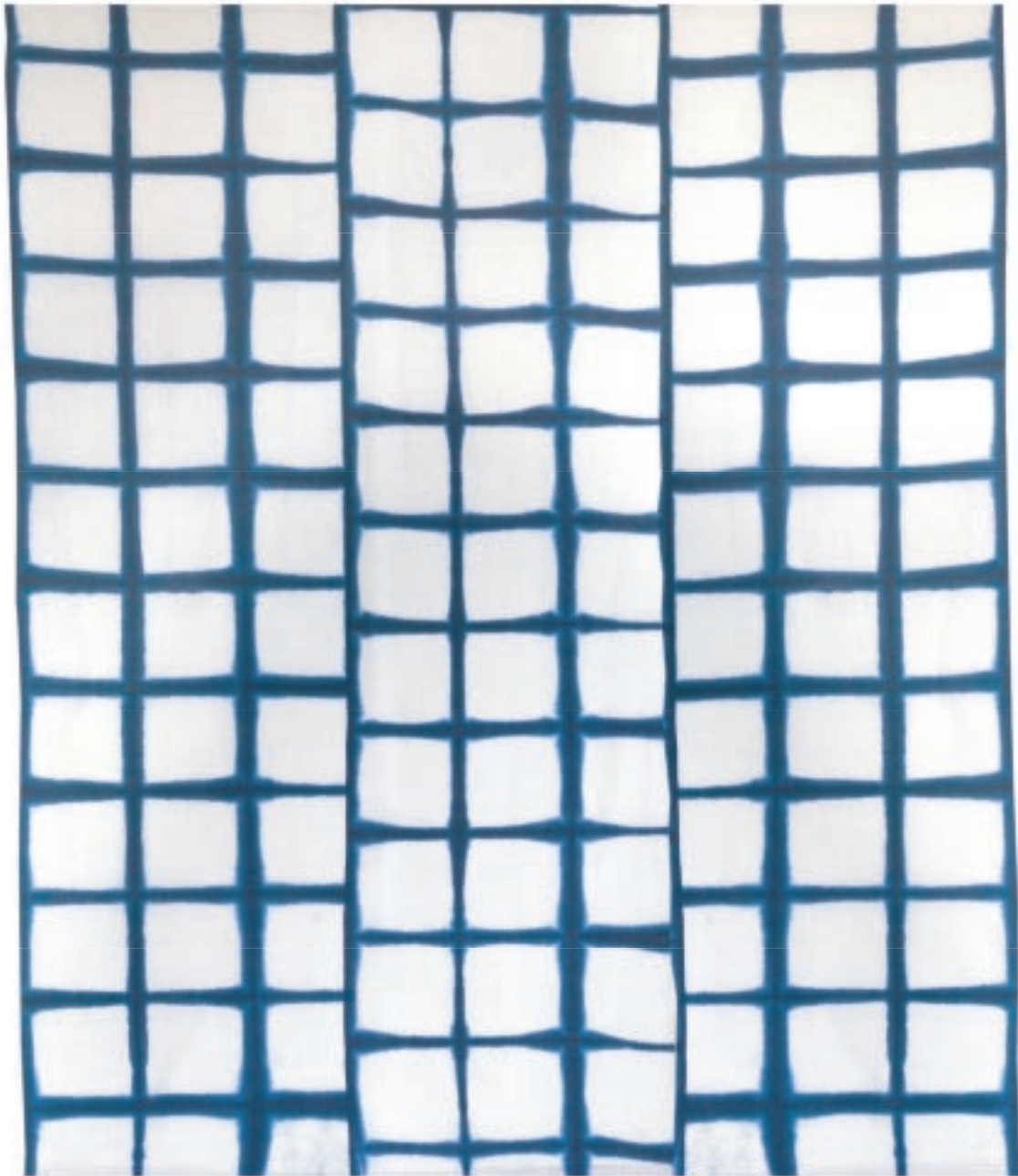


31. Arishi Shibori (vertical lines)
33 cms x 125 cms - 13 inches x 49 inches



32. Ori-nui Shibori (meandering stream)
66 cms x 102 cms - 26 inches x 40 inches

Both textiles from Japan. Indigo on cotton. Tashio period. 1912-1926. Lit: *Shibori, the inventive Art of Japanese Shaped Resist Dying* by Wado, Kellog-Rice and Barton. Published by Kondansha International Ltd.



33.

Clamp resist sekka Shibori

Japan, 2nd quarter of the 20th Century

Lit: *Shibori: The Inventive Art of Japanese Shaped resist Dyeing* by Wada, Kellog Rice and Barton

Published Kondansha International Ltd, 1999, page 119

Measurements: 91 cms x 91 cms - 36 inches square



34.

Tibetan Panel

Wool appliqué on wool

The two symbols depicted in this panel are the 'wheel of joy and pleasure' (in Tibetan: Gankyil) and the eight petal lotus flower. The 'wheel of joy' is an important central symbol for the Dzogchen meditation practice in Buddhism; it is a symbol of primordial energy. The lotus flower has great significance in Tibetan Buddhism and having eight petals; it is representative of the theme of renewal.

Robert Beer: *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs* (Serindia Publications, London)

Measurements: 28 cms x 114 cms - 11 inches x 45 inches



35.

Painter's Smock

Fine linen embellished with cotton embroidery, depicting the yin/yang symbol of balance and harmony. This smock is a rare find and an indication of Asian philosophical links that existed with European artists. English, circa 1920.

Additional Information

The Bauhaus

The Bauhaus school (established in 1919) was one of the most influential forces in Modernist Design. The Staatliches Bauhaus was an art school designed to revolutionise art education: the main principle was to combine fine art and good craftsmanship. They published an idealistic manifesto and employed a mixture of fine artists and craftsmen to teach. The first director was Walter Gropius, who among his first staff included Johannes Itten, Lyonel Feininger and Gerhard Marcks as 'Masters of Form' - later joined by Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. Gropius believed that artists should undergo a rigorous training as craftsmen to allow them to become great artists, so he created an arduous workshop based curriculum. The school moved in its 14 years of life from Weimar to Dessau to Berlin and with each move underwent many philosophical evolutions and had two other directors, Hannes Meyer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. During the first few years of the school's existence, the Bauhaus students were mostly influenced by German Expressionism and Itten's teachings (which included his spiritual ideas, his introduction first year course syllabus and his colour theory); Itten was then replaced by László Moholy-Nagy and the Bauhaus changed direction, starting to emphasize function and mass production. The Bauhaus was closed by the Nazis in 1933.

Johannes Itten

Johannes Itten (1888 -1967) joined the Bauhaus in October 1919 teaching the preliminary course. His focus lay on the study of objects and materials, analysis of Old Masters and life drawing. He was aware of the newly established educational reform theory and was familiar with the artists of the avant-garde. In more practical terms this meant that he wanted his students to find their inner being and develop a well-tuned personality. He started his class with breathing exercises and gymnastics and let his students decide whose work was the best. Nonetheless he was quite rightly described as the backbone of the Bauhaus. His 'Vorkurs', the preliminary course, was continued in a very similar style even after he left the institution. It is said that it was his passion for the development of the individual, which eventually led to a fall out with Walter Gropius, the director of the Bauhaus. Gropius was of the opinion that commercial work was essential to keep the school alive and Itten couldn't see this going hand in hand with individualism. Itten eventually founded his own school in Berlin in 1925.

Wassily Kandinsky

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was born in Moscow into a mercantile family. In his youth he was obsessed with Russian and German fairy tales. He studied Law and Economics at Moscow University but left academia and Russia, in 1896, to pursue art in Munich. He studied under Franz von Stuck, at that time considered the best draughtsman in Germany and came into contact with avant-garde European artists. His style began in an impressionist manner and became more abstract over the years, especially with the foundation of "Der Blaue Reiter" group in 1911. During this abstract period Kandinsky discovered Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, Gestalt theory and Theosophy (Besant and Leadbeater's work entitled *Thought-forms*). *Thought-forms* described emanations of light auras and it was at this point that Kandinsky started to paint the spiritual and elemental, becoming focused on colour and form. His personal experience with Synaesthesia (seeing colour linked to music and speech [9]) added a musical element to his development. Kandinsky joined the Bauhaus at Itten's request in 1922, and stayed until 1933, teaching colour and form in 'Free Painting classes'. His work 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' delves into the emotional natures of colour. He also wrote another important pamphlet called 'Point and line to plane' discussing objects interacting in space. After the Bauhaus closed in 1933 Kandinsky moved to Paris and his style morphed into "biomorphic abstraction" (linking geometric forms with nature).

Footnote [9] see inside cover

Paul Klee

Paul Klee (1879-1940) was born into a family of musicians in Switzerland. He seriously considered becoming a musician and always associated music with art. He married musician Lily Stumpf in 1906 and moved to Munich, where he had studied. Klee had his first one-man show in 1910 and then came into contact with "Der Blaue Reiter" group, composed of artists Alfred Kubin, August Macke and Wassily Kandinsky. In 1914 Klee made a life-changing trip to Tunisia and upon his return he claimed to finally understand and 'be at one with colour'. Klee was invited to join the Bauhaus in Weimar in 1920. He initially worked as Master of Form in bookbinding, later he became co-head of the Stained glass and mural painting workshop and finally became head of the Textile department. He taught the free painting class and started an important series of lectures on 'Visual Form' in 1921. He left the Bauhaus in 1930 and moved to teach at the Düsseldorf Academy after which he and his wife returned to Berne.

PIONEERS IN LIGHT AND COLOUR THEORY

Hindu and Buddhist Colour Theory

Indian art, had from its beginnings, been concerned with the emotive powers of colour. The philosophy of Tantra was first mentioned in 600CE and later emerged in both Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. According to scholar Philip Rawson, colours became symbolic and traditional in painting because "*Though colours were used primarily for their conventional symbolic convenience, in practice they also have powerful emotive effects ... their particular colour inflections evoked the required emotive responses*"; Rawson argues that Tantra aesthetics informed Indian visual aesthetics in all other philosophies due to the Tantrik focus on intense expression, both visual and physical. These emotive responses are known as Rasas -the word translates from Sanskrit as "taste, flavour, sap or juice". In Sanskrit literature an essential element of a work of art can only be suggested, not described, the pure essence is a kind of meditation state where the emotion takes over the body and mind. There are nine main rasas, called the 'navarasas' and these have associated colours and expressions, which create the 'flavours' or emotions.

Western Developments

Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1726; Scientist and Alchemist) demystified the rainbow and identified the source of colour in the early eighteenth century. His work *Opticks: or a treaty of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflexions and Colours of Light* (1704) identified that white light refracted through a prism resolved into all the colours of the rainbow. Newton subsequently developed the idea of the colour wheel (or circle), which showed the seven colours (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) in the order made by the prism. In 1708 Claude Boutet used his wheel to create a painter's colour wheel.

Thomas Young (1773-1829; physicist) and **Augustin Jean Fresnel** (1788-1827; physicist) then connected Newton's particle theory with **Christian Huygens** (1629-1695; physicist and mathematician) wave theory to show that colour is the visible manifestation of light's different wavelengths. The visible spectrum of light is between 700 and 400 nanometres (measured in a vacuum). The colour Red has the longest wavelength and shortest appears to be Violet. The colours in order are Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue and Violet.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832; poet, playwright, novelist and philosopher) developed colour theory in a new direction with his *Theory on colour* (1810). His text did not propound a theory but illustrated experiments he had conducted. Although these later proved to be scientifically inaccurate he discovered a great deal about colour perception. Importantly he divided the colour wheel into two halves: the plus side, from red through orange to yellow, and the minus side, which took the eye from green through violet to blue. He discovered that the plus colours would make a subject cheerful and happy and the minus side uncertain and give a feeling of weakness.

Goethe was revered and studied by artists and intellectuals, including Adolf Hölzel (1853-1934; painter). Hölzel, though starting out as an impressionist in style, through his painterly investigations developed non-representative colour spirals investigating the effect of colour; he also produced one of the first abstract works, called 'Composition in Red' in 1905. He founded an art academy in Stuttgart and had an inner circle of students who followed him, including Oskar Schlemmer, Willi Bauermeister and most importantly for colour theory, Johannes Itten.

Johannes Itten's (1888-1967; painter, teacher) colour theory was drawn from many sources, his research becoming integral to the work of many within the Bauhaus school and beyond. It built upon the earlier colour wheel of Adolf Hölzel but also drew on the work of Leonardo da Vinci and Isaac Newton. Itten's theory progressed from the simple twelve-hue colour wheel that had been used before and introduced the colour star. This star was a much more complex way of viewing colour and allowed him to study the shades from every angle, including philosophic, religious, psychic, psychological and physical. He suggested that colour was so connected to emotion that certain combinations could dramatically affect one's mood. He also argued that each individual would experience 'harmony' between colours differently and so he encouraged his Bauhaus students to develop their own individual colour palettes.

Wassily Kandinsky and **Paul Klee**, fellow teachers at the Bauhaus, continued to teach using Itten's colour theory - adding elements of their own personal directions but basing everything on his fundamentals. Itten had also used Gestalt theory, developed in the early twentieth century by Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler: its focus, as a psychological theory, is on perceiving an object within its environment and taking that area as an entity, rather than looking at the object as something separate. It discusses the idea that the human mind forms relationships between everything.

PHILOSOPHY, RELIGION AND THOUGHT

Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism is considered to be one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions. It follows the tenets set down by the prophet Zoroaster, who lived in Persia (ancient Iran) between the 15th and 12th centuries BCE. It was the official religion of Iran from 600 BCE to 650 CE. Zoroastrians follow one god Ahura Mazda (meaning the supreme wisdom). A fundamental tenet of the religion is 'active participation' in life and the need for 'good thoughts, good words and good deeds'. These actions will keep chaos (the opposite of the creation of Ahura Mazda) at a distance. Chaos (*druj*) is considered the 'destructive principle' while the creation (*asha*) is the benevolent principle and it is a balancing act to keep the positive stronger. Zoroastrians believe that the symbol of fire represents the light of creation, therefore they worship in fire temples and fire or light is used as a focal point for prayer. The body of sacred texts of the religion is called 'the Avesta', which contains: The Yasna (including the Gathas said to have been composed by Zoroaster himself), The Visparad (supplements to the Yasna), The Yashts (hymns in honour of the divinities), The Vendidad (describing various forms of evil and ways to confound them) and other shorter text and prayer collections.

Mazdaznan

The Mazdaznan movement focuses on the 'good creator' Mazda, from the Zoroastrian religion. However it also includes elements of Hinduism and Christianity in its doctrines. For example the divinity is expressed in a trinity as the Holy Family of Father (male creative principle) and Mother (procreative female principle) and Child (destiny/salvation). The aim of the movement is for man to make earth into a suitable place for God to live. Followers believe that the way to a perfect world is through the power of breath and therefore the discipline teaches breathing techniques, rhythmic praying and chanting. It also recommends a vegetarian diet. The Mazdaznan movement was founded in the United States of America, in the late 19th century by

Ottoman Zar-Adhushth Hanish (born Otto Hanish), who claimed he had received visionary enlightenment and was considered a prophet by his disciples. Though it started in America the movement spread through Europe in the first decade of the twentieth century, the main centre being in Liebnitz, Switzerland. It became so popular in Germany that the Nazis banned it in 1935.

Theosophy

The Universalist religion Theosophy, literally translating as “god-wisdom”, started in the late 19th century; with the foundation of The Theosophical Society in 1875 by Russian born travelling intellectual Helena Blavatsky and American Buddhist lawyer and writer Henry Steel Olcott. Although the word theosophy itself being: - the study of the history of philosophy - had been used by Plato in the 3rd Century and engendered debate since that time. This new Society’s philosophy encompassed all religions, believing that each one had “a portion of the truth”. The three main objects established by Blavatsky, William Quan Judge and Olcott were:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.
2. To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science.
3. To investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.

According to Theosophy, nature does not operate by chance. Every event, past or present, happens because of laws, which are part of a universal paradigm. Theosophists hold that everything, living or not, is put together from basic building blocks evolving towards consciousness. “*A Theosophist is one who gives you a theory of God or the works of God, which has not revelation, but an inspiration of his own for its basis*”. [Blavatsky quoting Vaughn]

As a metaphysical and philosophical doctrine Theosophy became popular in the inter war years, as the world began to search for meaning, tolerance and direction. Followers included many artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee [both teachers at the Bauhaus], Delaunay, Mondrian as well as writers such as T. S. Eliot and Franz Kafka. Many of the intellectuals of the early 20th certainly studied and commented on Theosophy.

Annie Besant

Annie Besant (1847-1933) writer, orator, socialist, co-freemason, women’s rights activist and theosophist, did everything from campaigning for the Irish home rule to advocating contraception and was a major force in the Home Rule Movement in India. She met Charles Leadbeater, a leader of the Theosophy Society in 1894, she also became a clairvoyant in 1895. She was made president of the society in 1907 after the death of the first president Henry Steel Olcott. Her book *Thought-Forms*, co-authored with Leadbeater in 1901, focuses on clairvoyance, describing the visible auras of individuals and ideas and also identifies specific emotional qualities to different colours. There is also a chapter on painting music visually, and examples of works that depict this visual music notation. (illustrations on inside cover) Up until Besant’s presidency, the society had focused on Theravada Buddhism, however under Besant’s leadership the focus shifted to “The Aryavarta” - her term for central India. She translated the Bhagavad Gita, one of the oldest Hindu texts, in 1905. The name Bhagavad Gita translates literally as the ‘Song of God’ and is considered a succinct microcosm of all different strains of Hindu thought, including Vedic, Yogic, Vedantic, and Tantric philosophies. The Gita importantly outlines the three ways of the soul to liberation from the body. These were the way of action, the way of knowledge and the way of devotion.

Hinduism

Hinduism is considered the “oldest religious tradition”. It originated in the Indian subcontinent and has links to the historical Vedic religion of the Iron Age. Hinduism is a diverse system of thought, which has many scriptures discussing philosophy, nature, and divinity. The oldest sacred texts are the four Vedas (books of knowledge): the Rig Veda (a veda of hymns); the Sama Veda (‘veda of Melodies’); the Yajur Veda (‘veda of sacrifice’), and the Atharva Veda (focused on daily life). Other key works include the Upanishads, a collection of texts forming the base of the Vedanta philosophy. Upanishad translates as “Come sit by me” and the texts are a discussion on the nature of reality and the soul, using an active Socratic methodology to understand the world.

Theravada Buddhism

Theravada is the oldest surviving Buddhist school. Henry Steel Olcott, the first President of The Theosophical Society, focused much of the direction of activity towards Theravada Buddhism and Ceylon, (modern day Sri Lanka) an area where Theravada was the dominant strain of Buddhism. The discipline comes from the Vibhajjavada (literally translated as ‘doctrine of analysis’) group, which formed around the third century BCE at the time of the Third Buddhist Council. The aim of the doctrine is to promote analysis. That knowledge must come from investigating the scriptures, listening to wise men and meditation. The meditation is known as Vipassana and its aim is to achieve insight into the ‘true nature of things’. The principle aim of Theravada is self liberation through one’s own individual efforts.

Taoism

Taoism is a philosophy said to be over 5000 years old and based on the literature of the Tao Te Ching. This text is attributed to ‘Lao Tzu’ (roughly translating as ‘old sage’), The character ‘Tao’ translates as ‘the way’ or ‘path’. One element of the Taoist philosophy is an idea of balance and duality: the ‘yin’ and the ‘yang’, male and female, light and dark. A visual translation of Taoist philosophy is found in the tradition of ‘feng shui’ (wind and water) which involves using the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) to balance the positive energy (qi) in any environment. Both Feng Shui and the practice of Taoist alchemy (preserving the qi in one’s body to obtain immortality of the soul) link the elements to directions, colours and objects, to identify how things should exist in relationship to one another in order to maintain the balance.

Anthroposophy

Anthroposophy, literally translating as ‘man wisdom’, was the doctrine of The Anthroposophy Society started in 1912 by Rudolf Steiner, in Dornach, Switzerland. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was formerly the leader of the German Theosophical Society (1902-1911) but broke away to form his own society that focused more on a Christian tradition, while keeping many of the Asian philosophies incorporated by Theosophy, such as karma. He believed that ancient mystics had paved the way for the coming of Christ. Anthroposophy was a “spiritual science” designed to enable man to rise above the material world, as it had done thousands of years previously. Steiner in practice focused heavily on the arts (music, fine art, drama etc) as the means of journeying to the spiritual plane; going on to develop educational practices and schools all around the world, which taught using his spiritual methodology.

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Afterword

It seemed perfectly reasonable that to understand colour, one should look at light. So I was very excited both by the fact that Itten followed the Philosophy of Zarathustra and that the name Zarathustra meant Star - Zarathustra's mission being to contemplate the living sun. - Had the Zoroastrians discovered a connection between colour and emotion thousands of years ago? The fact that Itten had developed a twelve pointed star, which enabled him to see colour in all its subtleties and associating them with emotion, seemed a very satisfying concept. I felt sure that the secret of the connectedness of colour and emotion would be found in Zoroastrian texts - but, in the time we worked on this project, nothing became obvious.

Nevertheless the understanding that Rasa (essence) was present in early Vedic texts did make up for it. However the complexes of Rasa theory is a subject for the aestheticians and not the remit of this project. What did become apparent through this project was the profound influence the East had on Western Modernist thought.

Other influences not already mentioned were; -

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941-Bengali poet and polymath) whose close friendship with William Rothenstein (1872-1945-painter and principle of the Royal College of Art) led to Tagore dedicating his Nobel prize winning poetry collection 'Gitanjali' to him. Tagore also formed strong links with Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats and T.S. Elliot. Rothenstein established The Indian Society in London in 1910.

Ananda Coomaraswamy 1877-1947 – (metaphysician and authority on Indian Art) was married to Ethel Mariet (1872-1952-author and hand weaving revivalist) Coomaraswamy had an innate sense of aesthetics and his opinion was valued in all areas of art on both sides of the Atlantic. He was the first Keeper of Indian art at The Museum of Fine Art in Boston.

Hilla Rebay (1890-1967) curator of The Solomon Guggenheim Collection was partially dismissed from her role after Solomon Guggenheim's death for holding views that were not popular with his less mystical successors. She wrote in 1937 that the works she championed "*elevate into the cosmic beyond where there is no meaning, no intellect, no explanation, but something infinitely greater - the wealth of spiritual intelligence and beauty.*"

Theosophy certainly attracted the creative thinkers of the day. Although Madame Blavatsky did make wrong assumptions and is regarded as a charlatan in some circles, she also opened up avenues of thought since developed by others who have applied them to gain greater understanding of the unity of all philosophies. Annie Besant's contribution to modern life in the East and West was immense. Johannes Itten was a man well ahead of his time, and for being such was almost airbrushed from Bauhaus history. I hope that in trying to explain rather than dismiss Theosophy and Zoroastrianism, that we have added to our understanding of the aspirations of some very significant modernists.

In the twenty first century where it is common to study and appreciate cultural diversity, to practise yoga or to have acupuncture, we are far more open to the aspirations of both Modernist and Theosophist. So maybe it is time for the art historians of the twentieth and twenty first century to accept that, 'The Modernist' dared to explore areas which the art historians feared to comment on, and in their failing to do so, they must take some responsibility for disconnecting us from modernism's mystical roots, much influenced as they are by Asian philosophy. Hopefully we also hereby explain a little why abstract Asian textiles have relevance to the modernist.

This project was a real adventure of discovery but it by no means covers all examples of abstract Asian textiles or is it suggesting that Asian culture is strong in abstraction. Anybody who has any knowledge of the visual diversity of that continent would consider this madness. However, hidden beneath the surface and bound to philosophy, abstraction has existed there for thousands of years.