ABEGG-STIFTUNG

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Special Exhibition 2020

Arab Weavers – Christian Kings
Medieval Textiles from Spain

26 April – 8 November 2020
Open daily from 2 p.m. to 5.30 p.m.

Open from 11 May 2020

The Abegg-Stiftung's new exhibition sheds light on the eventful history of medieval Spain by presenting costly textiles from that period. Most of the exhibits are silks dating from the 12th to 15th century that were made by Muslim weavers but preserved in a Christian context. Over and above their value to art history, therefore, these objects are also important as contemporary sources for the changing balance of power between Christian and Muslim rulers. At the same time, they attest to the fruitful exchange that took place between religions and cultures.

From the 8th century until 1492, large parts of Spain were ruled by Muslim dynasties. Silk-weaving also arrived on the Iberian Peninsula with Arab and Moorish culture. The Muslim weavers were consummate masters of their trade who produced the most magnificent fabrics. Their silks were much-coveted luxury products that attracted attention far beyond national boundaries. Whether as war booty, diplomatic gifts or expensive merchandise, they passed into the hands of the Christian kings and church dignitaries of northern Spain. That many of these fabrics have survived to this day is thanks above all to their use by the church – whether as wrappings for relics, as liturgical vestments or to decorate the altar. These textiles from al-Andalus, as Muslim-ruled southern Spain was called, were a defining element of the culture of representation in both Muslim and Christian Spain until well into the Late Middle Ages. The artistic centres of the north, by contrast, including cities such as Burgos and Barcelona, were known primarily for their exquisite embroideries with Christian motifs. Not until the 15th century did weavers in Spain produce silks whose style and motifs were no longer, or only faintly, reminiscent of Arab culture.

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Arab Fabrics for Christian Saints

The oldest textiles in the exhibition date from the 12th century. They were woven by Muslim weavers under the Almoravid Dynasty. Adorning the fabrics are majestic eagles, lions and mythical creatures in medallions with lavishly ornamented frames. No one in the Christian part of Spain was in a position to produce such magnificent silks with patterns as intricate as this. That these textiles were traded, gifted or looted across borders and between religions is thus not surprising. Christian dignitaries had the fabrics made up into liturgical vestments or used them as wrappings for the church's most important treasures: the relics of saints. Their desire for splendid furnishings did not even stop at pieces with clearly legible Arabic inscriptions such as *baraka* (blessing). The exhibition features four examples of this kind: two large pieces of silk that served as wrappings for the relics of Saint Librada, an Early Christian martyr, and two fragments of the vestments of canonized clerics.

In the Service of Christian Kings

A second section of the exhibition presents 13th-century fabrics that can be linked to Spanish nobles, whose coats of arms they bear, among them that of the Kingdom of Castile-León. Especially impressive here is a small fragment from the mantle of King Ferdinand III (1199–1252). This is an extremely fine silk tapestry showing a red lion on a white ground (León) and a golden castle with three towers on a red ground (Castile). Although the fabric shows the coat of arms of a Christian kingdom, it was woven by Muslim weavers. They lived in those parts of the Iberian Peninsula that formerly were Moorish, but in the course of time were conquered by the Christian kings. The craftsmen belonged to the class of Mudéjares, a name derived from the Arabic word *mudaǧǧan*, meaning “made serviceable”. They adapted to their new rulers and to the wishes of their Christian patrons with heraldically correct woven decorations.
The Moorish style was not rejected, however, as is evident from a fragment of the burial garment of the Infante Don Felipe (1231–1274), son of King Ferdinand III. This fabric is patterned with fields formed by diamond lattices, stars and rosettes. These are interspersed with broad horizontal bands containing the Arabic word *al-yumn*, meaning “happiness”. The silk was probably woven in Málaga in what was then al-Andalus and presumably came into the Infante’s possession as a gift, although it might also have been war booty or a luxury import. Don Felipe’s piece of clothing, incidentally, was an *aljuba,* a shirt-like garment of Arab origin, which was fashionable among Spanish noblemen in the 13th century. Such examples show just how popular textiles woven by Muslim weavers still were among the upper echelons of Christian Spain.

Alhambra Silks

The exhibition leads from the vestments of Christian kings and clerics to the silk hangings that once adorned the interiors inhabited by Muslim elites. The patterns of these home furnishings resemble that on the garment of Don Felipe: sophisticated geometric patterns alternate with fields containing Arabic inscriptions. Although only fragments of these hangings have been preserved, the examples exhibited enable us to imagine the vast array of colours, ornaments and inscriptions they must have displayed. Woven into the fabric are the Arabic words for "happiness and prosperity" or simply "bliss". The geometric patterns on these hangings are among the most complex of them all. Their interlacing lines give rise to polygonal or circular shapes that can be extended ad libitum so as to form highly complex star, rosette and lattice motifs. Such patterns, together with calligraphic inscriptions, are characteristic of Islamic art. They are to be found in all artistic disciplines and especially in the stucco work, ceramic tiles and wood carvings with which interiors were embellished. With refernce to the most famous and most impressive monument to Moorish architecture in Europe, these textiles are also known as “Alhambra silks”. Producing such patterns on a loom was nevertheless significantly more difficult and more time-consuming than in materials such as stucco, ceramic or wood.
In addition to the silks with geometric patterns and Arabic inscriptions – the classical Islamic ornaments, in other words – the exhibition also features fabrics that combine floral motifs with coats of arms. These brightly coloured silks, many of them with a red ground, are adorned with stylized carnations or coiling lotus tendrils

along with little birds or lions. The bends on the coats of arms recall the arms of the Nasrids, the Muslim-Moorish dynasty that ruled the Emirate of Granada from 1238 to 1492. The bends themselves have Arabic inscriptions such as “Honour for our ruler, the Sultan” or, more simply, *baraka* (blessing) woven into them. One of these fabrics has survived in the form of a liturgical vestment.

Ecclesiastical Pomp

The enthusiasm of Christian dignitaries for the textiles woven by Muslim weavers began to wane only when the first Italian silks started to arrive in Spain, but at the latest in 1492, when the military defeats suffered by the last Emir of Granada, Muhammad XII, forced him to vacate the Alhambra. The Christian monarchs, Ferdinand II of Aragón and Isabel I of Castile, entered the city amid great pomp just a short time later. They celebrated their conquest by lavishing extravagant gifts on the church. These included precious textiles, which in this way came into the possession of cathedrals, convents and parish churches all over Spain. The last section of the exhibition is therefore dedicated to textiles made specially for churches. Among these are several colourful and very well preserved liturgical vestments which show no sign at all of the influence of Arab culture. These objects thus stand for the end of a long period of cultural cross-pollination between two religions, which although not conflict-free, was certainly very fruitful.

Both press release and photo are available as e-mail attachments.
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Caption
Silk weaving decorated with stripes and an Arabic inscription; Granada, 14th century; Abegg-Stiftung, inv. no. 5838.