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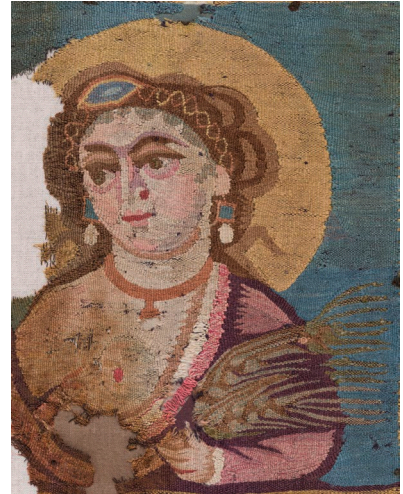
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SPECIAL EXHIBITION 2026

AT HOME IN LATE ANTIQUITY FURNISHING TEXTILES OF THE 4TH–7TH CENTURY

26 APRIL TO 8 NOVEMBER 2026

OPEN DAILY FROM 2 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.



Whereas the outer walls are generally all that survives of the private homes of Late Antiquity, Egypt's dry desert climate has preserved some outstanding examples of the textile furnishings they once contained. The Abegg-Stiftung's new exhibition showcases a representative selection of these textiles dating from the 4th to the 7th century. The wall hangings, blankets, curtains and bolsters give a vivid impression of the domestic culture of the age.

The upper-class homes of Late Antiquity contained astonishingly few items of furniture. Couches for sleeping and dining, some small round tables, a few armchairs and wall cabinets were apparently all that was needed. Made of wood, stone or bronze, to us they look more like pieces for use in the garden. The decor, by contrast, made the rooms look anything but spartan, despite the relative lack of furniture. In addition to the marble inlay, murals and mosaics, it was above all the precious textiles that defined the look of a domestic interior. Large-format wall hangings, diaphanous curtains and soft bolsters covered in patterned woollen fabrics lent living spaces a luxurious atmosphere, making them a suitably grand setting for social functions. And since they featured figural scenes, unlike today's home furnishings, they also provided plenty of material – in the literal sense of the word – for animated conversation.

TALES OF THE OLD GODS

The picture fields of two ornamental strips belonging to the first part of the exhibition are teeming with sea spirits, dancing satyrs and maenads, centaurs and the shepherd god Pan with a kithara player. These tapestries are remains of large wall hangings. Such scenes of mythic figures were widespread on textiles made to adorn domestic interiors. Despite the new themes introduced by Christianity, which in the 4th century rose to become the official religion, the old pagan myths remained as ubiquitous as ever in private life. The famous gods and heroes of Antiquity served as both figures of identification and as paragons whose stories exemplified the good life.

DIONYSOS AND HIS ENTOURAGE

As numerous as the gods were, there was one who was exceptionally popular: Dionysos. As the god of feasting, wine and ecstasy, he and his entourage embodied the desire for a happy and carefree life. Large tapestries depicted scenes of their exuberant merry-making with music and dance. Even if hardly any such wall hangings have been preserved in their entirety, numerous fragments of them have survived, and these prove how popular the theme was in the domestic interiors of that period. One large fragment from a Dionysian pageant shows a female kithara player, dancing in an arched niche. She is one of the maenads belonging to Dionysos' mystical entourage, whose dancing was expressive of ecstatic frenzy.

THE ANNUAL CYCLE

In addition to mythological narratives, there were also depictions of nature. The cycle of the seasons, but also the forces of nature, had considerable influence on everyday life in Late Antiquity. Nature was perceived as more than just the physical environment and was rather associated with symbolic or philosophical concepts. The four elements, the seasons, or the twelve months of the year were generally represented as human figures, as in the Twelve Months Hanging that can be seen in the exhibition. Of the hanging's three registers of standing figures, only the lowest has been preserved. Such personifications expressed the hope of a bountiful harvest and the perennial return of happiness.

OPULENT INTERIORS

The self-promotion and ostentation derived not just from the textiles' visual content, but also from the materials and craftsmanship invested in their manufacture. One such masterpiece is the wall hanging showing the famous pair of hunters, Meleager and Atalante. The tapestry is executed in very fine wool in more than thirty different shades. Even just the dyeing of the yarns was a luxury that very few could afford. The textiles were just as valuable as modern luxury goods are today. They were a visible sign of power and wealth and signalled membership of the elite.

MULTI-FUNCTIONAL FURNISHINGS

The textiles did more than just contribute to the aesthetic impact of an interior; they also played a crucial role in how such an interior was used. The materials and techniques were carefully chosen so as to match to the intended purpose. The large tapestry wall hangings made of linen and wool afforded protection against the cold and insulation against draughts; yet they were also stiff and unyielding. Most bolster coverings were made of woollen fabrics that were at once soft and hard-wearing. Curtains in the homes of Late Antiquity might shield against prying eyes or regulate the incident light and ventilation, though they were also used as partitioning elements. The linen ground of such fabrics was generally decorated with only small motifs in wool. This made them light, pliable and translucent.

BEAUTIFUL ON BOTH SIDES

One speciality of the interior furnishings of Late Antiquity are the resist-dyed fabrics. This special dyeing process is very similar to the related technique of batik. A linen fabric was first painted with a paste made of resin and wax and then dipped into a dyeing vat. The paste prevented the painted areas of fabric from taking up the dye. After drying, the paste was removed to reveal areas that were now lighter than the dyed back-ground. One advantage of this technique is that the motif is visible on both sides. This made such fabrics ideal for hanging freely in space or as a way of partitioning off certain areas.

SOFT AND SUMPTUOUS BEDDING

In Late Antiquity, couches made of wood and stone were used both for sleeping and dining. The necessary comfort was provided by large bolsters. The fabric of choice for their coverings was wool, decorated with small motifs. One such bolster covering can be admired in the exhibition. Its pattern shows lions, tigers and various mythical creatures. Some remains of feathers were found on the back of this fabric. Feathers as a filling material would have made the bolster soft and comfortable; they also signalled the high status of its owner. A short film in the exhibition explains the significance of banquets at which guests would have reclined on such bolsters.

Over and above their practical function, the textiles used in domestic interiors also generated an atmosphere of luxury. They were a vehicle of self-promotion and were at once luxury goods and status symbols. The considerable skill and artistry of their makers is amply attested to by their fine workmanship. Their aggrandizing potential can be felt even 1500 years later. The textiles in the exhibition cannot fail to impress and they also give us an inkling of just how opulent the upper-class homes of Late Antiquity were.

Both press release and photos are available as e-mail attachments.

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Caption:

Personification of summer, wool tapestry, Egypt, 3rd–4th century, Abegg-Stiftung, inv. no. 5346.

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