



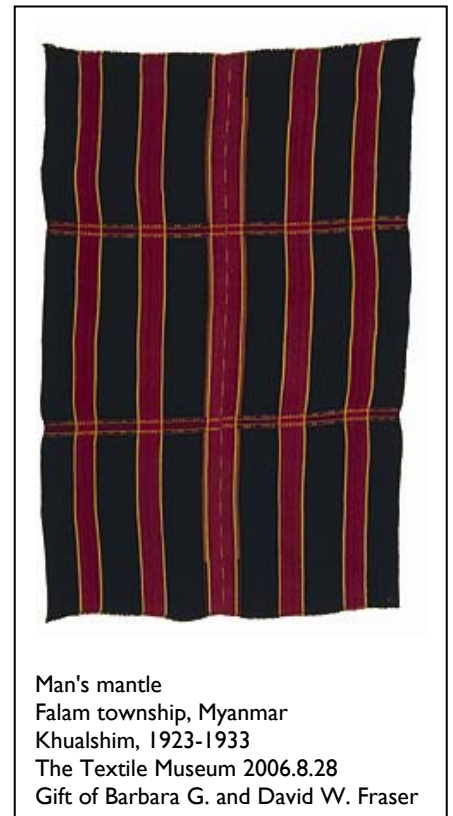
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Landmark Exhibition of Asian Textiles at The Textile Museum
Mantles of Merit: Chin Textiles from Mandalay to Chittagong
October 13, 2006 – February 25, 2007

September 14, 2006, Washington, DC — A landmark exhibition of textiles of the Chin peoples of western Myanmar (Burma), northeastern India and eastern Bangladesh will be on view at The Textile Museum from October 13, 2006 – February 25, 2007. Mantles of Merit: Chin Textiles from Mandalay to Chittagong includes nearly 80 ceremonial mantles, tunics and other garments, along with contemporary and historic photographs as well as jewelry and accessories worn with the textiles. It is the first major exhibition devoted to the textiles of the Chin, an ethnic group comprised of some two million people speaking 44 languages. Textiles play a central role in Chin social life, illustrating an individual's success in achieving merit in this life and the next through worldly activities such as hosting feasts and bagging big game.

The majority of the textiles on view are from The Textile Museum's collections, which was formed in large part by a donation to the Museum by the exhibition's curators, Dr. David W. Fraser and Barbara G. Fraser. Their rigorous scholarship on Chin textiles resulted in a definitive volume on the subject, *Mantles of Merit: Chin Textiles from Myanmar, India and Bangladesh*, which received the 2006 Millia Davenport Publication Award from the Costume Society of America, as well as the 2005 Ancient and Modern Prize from *Hali*, *Cornucopia* and *Oriental Art*.



Man's mantle
Falam township, Myanmar
Khualshim, 1923-1933
The Textile Museum 2006.8.28
Gift of Barbara G. and David W. Fraser

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Exhibition Themes

Despite commonalities of language and culture, the various Chin groups are broadly dispersed over adjacent hills of three countries, speak languages many of which are mutually unintelligible, and have textile traditions that vary widely. Mantles of Merit: Chin Textiles from Mandalay to Chittagong introduces visitors to the important ceremonial textiles of the four major divisions of Chin: Northern; Southern; Ashö; and Khumi, Khami and Mro. As generalizations, the Northern Chin are distinguished by their fine blankets and hierarchical social structure; the Southern Chin by the simplicity of their textiles and their egalitarian social structure; the Khumi, Khami and Mro by their narrow textiles with elaborate selvedge decoration; and the Ashö by their fine tunics and their residence in low-lying and coastal areas as well as the hills.

The exhibition is organized around three themes: how textiles imply status within Chin culture, the migration of Chin weavers and the resulting effects on their textiles, and how, over time, the designs of Chin textiles have grown increasingly complex while the techniques for creating them have been simplified.

How Chin Textiles Imply Status

For the Chin, textiles signal the status of the wearer in several ways, playing their most dramatic role in the core Chin effort to achieve merit in this life and the next. Chin peoples have traditionally strived to distinguish themselves from their peers through accomplishments in hunting, war, wealth accumulation and feast giving. The textiles made and worn by the Chin announce those accomplishments through specific patterns reserved for the meritorious.

Many Chin textiles also denote local subgroups and serve as emblems of community membership. Most are sex-specific and some are appropriate only for people of a certain age, marital status, high-status clan or religious function.

Migration and Chin Textiles

The migration of the Chin did not stop when they arrived from the Tibetan plateau 1,000 or more years ago. Chin oral history records waves of subsequent migration, many of them out of the northern Chin Hills, with migrating groups pressuring earlier migrants to move once more. As groups moved, they took weaving styles with them or acquired new styles from their new neighbors. One can trace some of these migrations by comparing textiles from the departure point and destination. Such comparison can also reveal the effect of imported materials, particularly silk, from non-Chin, lowland cultures.

Technique and Structure in Chin Textiles

Chin weavers use a simple backstrap loom in which the warp is circular and continuous. They used homegrown cotton, “flax” or hemp, often dyed with indigo or other locally produced natural dyes. The Chin repertoire of weaving structures is broad and varies by division. Some of the more important

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structures employed by the Chin are warp-faced plain weave, weft-faced plain weave, twill, 1-faced supplementary weft patterning, 2-faced supplementary weft patterning, false embroidery and weft twining – an ancient textile structure that predates the use of heddles (the sets of parallel cords that compose the harness to guide warp threads in a loom).

The earliest descriptions of Chin textiles date from 1800, whereas the oldest known Chin textiles were acquired in 1855. Since then, many changes have occurred in material and design. Two broad trends can be discerned. Over time, the structure of Chin textiles has become simplified, apparently as weavers chose easier ways to achieve the intended result. Simultaneously, the decoration of Chin textiles has tended to become more elaborate, covering a greater portion of the surface area and employing novel yarns and colors.

Exhibition Curators

David W. Fraser, MD, is a Research Associate at The Textile Museum and in the Asian Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. He authored [A Guide to Weft Twining and Related Structures with Interacting Wefts](#), the standard work on what may be the oldest textile structure, and co-authored with Peter Collingwood an article in *The Textile Museum Journal* on the bags of itinerant Jain merchants in western Rajasthan. He is also an independent consultant with particular interest in epidemiology, international health and education and material culture. He was President of Swarthmore College from 1982-91 and headed health, education and housing activities in South Asia and East Africa for the Aga Khan's Secretariat from 1991-1995, before serving as Executive Director of the International Clinical Epidemiology Network (INCLEN) from 1996-2000.

Barbara G. Fraser, JD, is a financial services attorney with a particular interest in the international aspects of this practice. She is currently working at OppenheimerFunds, Inc. as the senior attorney primarily responsible for their investment advisory products for non-US persons and institutions. Her interests in textiles date to childhood when they were focused on various forms of needlework. In the past 20 years, they have expanded to become more international and to include weaving. Her greatest interest in textiles is their role in the culture of the maker.

Together Barbara and David Fraser have been studying the textiles of Myanmar and Northeast India for the past several years. Their article, "The Textiles of the Northern Chin," appeared in vol. 33, No. 4 of *Arts of Asia*. They curated an exhibition [Textiles from the Burma Hills](#) that had venues at the University of Pennsylvania and Denison University in 2005, and published their major work, *Mantles of Merit: Chin Textiles from Myanmar, India and Bangladesh*, the same year.

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Related Educational Programming

GALLERY TALK & TOUR

Saturday, October 14 • 11:00 am

Join Guest Curators Barbara G. and David W. Fraser for a tour of the new exhibition. FREE; no reservations required. Limited to 35 participants.

LUNCHTIME TEXTILE TALKS

Take a break and visit The Textile Museum for a series of lunchtime talks in the galleries. See the exhibition *Mantles of Merit: Chin Textiles from Mandalay to Chittagong* in a new light by hearing viewpoints from various curators, scholars and Chin community members. Bring a brown bag lunch and, weather permitting, eat in the gardens. FREE; no reservations required. Space is limited.

Techniques of Chin Textiles

Thursday, November 2 • 12:00 pm

Led by David W. Fraser, Guest Curator and Textile Museum Research Associate

Chin Textiles as Burmese Art

Thursday, December 7 • 12:00 pm

Led by Sylvia Lu, Independent Researcher and Author

FAMILY FIRST SATURDAYS

Achievement Clothing

Saturday, November 4 • 2 – 4 pm

Learn more about the beautiful and culturally significant clothing made by the Chin, a group of two million people who live in the remote hills of Myanmar, Bangladesh and India. Discover how these traditional textiles play a central role in the Chin practice of achieving merit. Create your own achievement clothing and have your photograph taken while wearing it. FREE; no reservations required.

SPECIAL EXHIBITION TOURS

Sundays, October 14, November 19, December 10, January 21 & February 25 • 1:30 pm

Take a docent-led tour of the exhibition. FREE; no reservations required. Limited to 35 participants.

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Founded in 1925 by George Hewitt Myers, The Textile Museum is an international center for the exhibition, study, collection and preservation of the textile arts. The Museum explores the role that textiles play in the daily and ceremonial life of individuals the world over. Special attention is given to textiles of the Near East, Asia, Africa and the indigenous cultures of the Americas. The Museum also presents exhibitions of historical and contemporary quilts, and fiber art. With a collection of more than 17,000 textiles and rugs and an unparalleled library, The Textile Museum is a unique and valuable resource for people locally, nationally and internationally.

The Textile Museum is located at 2320 'S' Street, NW in Washington, DC. The Museum is open Monday - Saturday 10:00 am to 5:00 pm and Sunday 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm. Admission is free; suggested donation is \$5.00. For further information, call 202-667-0441.

For more information or images, please contact Molly McMullen at (202) 496-5074 or by e-mail at mmcmullen@textilemuseum.org or visit www.textilemuseum.org/about/pressroom.htm