

Silk and culture

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*Culture
Dawn*

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usage of silk.

Silk as a costly cloth has a long and rich past in various cultures in the East as well as in the West, serving various purposes

THINGS of daily use play an important role in influencing and changing the habits and behaviour of people. Those who are rich and resourceful, use luxury things to distinguish themselves from the commoners. Such things become symbols of their high status and social class. To make these inaccessible to the commoners different methods are adopted by the elite classes: either to make these things so expensive that the ordinary people cannot afford them or to make their use unlawful for the lower classes.

In these times, such a law would be termed a violation of human rights, therefore other methods are used. One such is to manufacture them in less quantity and sell them at high cost so that only the wealthy are able to buy them. This trend is evident in the changing fashions of dress, ornaments, jewellery, furniture, and architecture. These luxuries are linked to sophistication and refinement. Only the super rich can afford their possession.

"It is said that some officials and commoners do not follow the rules (of clothing) in public, but wear tight jackets of crimson, purple, black, and green under their robes. They even dare to show these clothes when they are in lanes or in the country. This kind of behaviour blurs the distinction between the nobles and masses, and erodes moral standards. From now on, everyone should wear clothes according to his own status. Those holding a high rank may wear clothes designated for the lower ones, but those of lower rank are not allowed to wear the clothes of those above their status. The official in charge should enforce this rule and never allow such aggressions to occur."

Silk as a costly cloth was gradually used in different religion to preserve holy relics. First, the Buddhist kept the relic of the Buddha wrapped in silk and used silken banners on their monasteries. Later, in the Christian churches the use of silk became widespread. The dress of their religious officials became silken, and silken curtains were hung on the walls of churches to beautify them. The figure of Christ and of saints were at times embroidered on them. The holy relics were also preserved in silken folders. The graves of saints were also covered by beautiful silken cloth.

In Islamic societies on the other hand, there was no such prohibition on the use of silk for commoners as it was in China and in the Roman world. However, there are Traditions of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in which the wearing of silken clothes for men is prohibited. As a wealthy class emerged in the Muslim world, it started to wear silken clothes to distinguish itself. These were used as status symbols. Muslim rulers established factories for the preparation of silken

when possessed. The study of an objects' history reveals its role and impact on the social, cultural, and religious life of a society. Xinru Liu, a Chinese professor of history, wrote an interesting book on 'Silk and religion' surveying historically the use of silk and its impact on Asian and western societies from 600 A.D. to 1200 A.D.

He rejected the myth that China was the first country to produce silk and that it kept its preparation secret till some Nestorian priest smuggled silk worms and introduced the manufacturing of silk to other countries. He argued that silk was prepared in China, India, Byzantinian and the Roman world simultaneously.

However, the quality of Chinese silk was superior to others. As it was very expensive, only the aristocracy used it. Besides dresses, silk was also used for other purposes such as a currency. Artisans, who prepared it, paid duties to the government in the form of silk. It was also used as a shroud at a noble's death.

In 7th century China, there were rules and regulations for the use of silk. In 681, the king Kao-tsung issued an edict revealing how the nobility and ruler were particular about the

for the preparation of silken dresses.

The Abbasid Caliphs, to compete with the Byzantinian emperors, used silk as a means to show off their wealth and grandeur. It is said that the Abbasid caliph Muqdadirbillah (908-932) had 28 thousand silk curtains at his court which were hung at festivals and other occasions of celebration to create awe among onlookers.

Other Muslim rulers also established royal factories for the preparation of silken robes of honour for gifts to nobles and for the dresses of the royal family, following the tradition. The Fatimids of Egypt possessed rich silk curtains for the adornment of their palaces. Later on it became popular practice to give robes of honour to notables and nobles on different occasions in appreciation of their services to the empire.

History shows that in the medieval times, the use of silk was not only for religious purposes but silk dresses were a symbol of a high class. When devotees came from China to India they brought with them silk that was offered to Buddhist shrines and monasteries as gifts and in case of need was as currency to meet their expenses.