Review of Woven Luxuries: Indian, Persian, Turkish Velvets from the Indictor Collection

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LUXURIANT AND extravagant are words that come to mind to describe the sheen of brilliantly coloured velvets on display in this small but stellar exhibition at San Francisco’s Asian Art Museum, on view to 1 November. The exhibition presents an exceptional private collection of exquisitely designed velvets woven in lands of the Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman empires during the 15th through 17th centuries.

Robust blossoms, sumptuous vines, and stylized flowers are among the many designs that characterize Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman textiles, including sumptuous velvets with raised pile and metallic threads that shimmer in changing light. Together the products of these three distinct imperial traditions represent a period of fluid cultural exchange when commerce, technology, and diplomacy emerged through the interactions among established imperial domains and new European colonial powers. Commercial interests, trade, and diplomatic gifts ensured the fertilization of imperial sensibilities from the East in palaces and mansions of the West. At the extreme upper end of technological achievements before the industrial age, velvets take the prize for the most elegant and opulent of all textiles, including the use of metal threads.

In a velvet fabric, designs and patterns are carried by the pile, which results from the use of a complex weaving technology drawing upon multiple sets of warp and weft elements, the interaction of which creates a compound weave. The pattern warps are controlled by a pattern harness, which is operated independently from the structural harness that secures the interlacing of warp and weft for the foundation weave. What distinguishes velvet weaving from other compound weaves produced on a drawloom is the presence a mechanism that allows for differential tension of the velvet warps to create the looped pile, which may then be cut. In so-called voided velvet, the velvet warps remain flat and passive, leaving selected areas of the pattern without pile. The gem-like tones of red, blues, and blue-greens give qualities of colour that are affected by the angle of light hitting the surface of the pile, contributing to the subtle and shifting luminosity of gold and silver strips of metal and metallic-wrapped threads.

The complexities of velvet weave structures are explained by the presence of oversize structural models in the galleries, made using ribbons to represent yarns. The two simplest models illustrate the interlacing structure of a satin foundation weave, front and back; two additional models illustrate the supplementary warps of velvet, showing how they interact with the satin foundation to create loops that are cut or remain uncut, and voided areas where the velvet warps remain passive. The play of light on velvet, the differential textures of pile and voided areas, the height of pile, and the presence of supplementary metallic threads all affect our perception of these sumptuous historical materials; in order to demonstrate these variations and to introduce the tactile qualities so often absent in museum installations, there are several samples of contemporary velvet furnishing fabrics, which visitors are encouraged to touch. Produced at the looms of the Imperial workshops, these textiles, including sumptuous velvets woven in lands of the Mughal, Ottoman, and Safavid eras, are adorned with oversize structural models that remain perplexing is the origin of velvet-wearing, what is missing from the exhibition is a single example of the most colourful Safavid production of the 17th century, in which the objects are professionally mounted, reflecting up-to-date standards of textile conservation.

The objects on view, drawn from the New York-based collection of Rina and Norman Indictor, give us a glimpse of this luxury, the art of production, achieved simultaneously in Mughal, Ottoman, and Safavid eras. As expressions of power, wealth, and taste, the consumption of such velvets was restricted to the uppermost classes who could afford such levels of extravagance. A single border fragment from the Indictor collection is a sample of the greatest richness and diversity of this period, with strips of gold and silver threads all woven together to enhance the effects of light. The textile conservation of these pieces would benefit from extensive analysis and further research.


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