

## Graduate Theological Union

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From the Selected Works of Carol Bier

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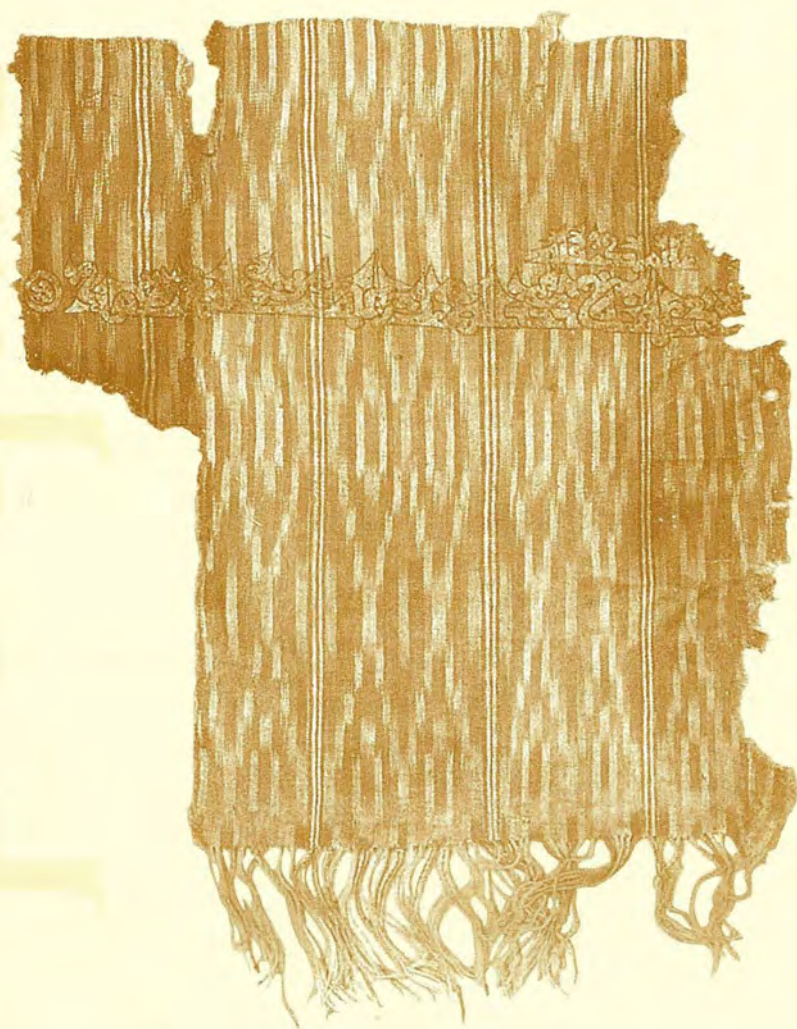
2001

# A Calligrapher's Art: Inscribed Cotton Ikat from Yemen

Carol Bier, *The Textile Museum*

# A Calligrapher's Art:

Inscribed Cotton Ikat from Yemen



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**Yemen** at the advent of Islam and in the ensuing centuries is a little known entity in our contemporary world. A thousand years ago when Baghdad was capital of the Islamic empire under the Abbasid caliphs, Yemen was a flourishing center of agriculture and trade. By camel caravan north to central Islamic lands and in maritime trade with India to the east and Africa across the straits, Yemen's ports of call along the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden were emporia for textiles, dyestuffs, and incense.

While today Yemen predominantly imports textiles from abroad, in the early centuries after the Islamic conquests Yemeni striped textiles were sought far and wide. As the Abbasid caliphate declined and multiple claims to power gained hold in the provinces, regional artistic styles emerged. The rulers of Yemen adopted one of the prerogatives of the Abbasid caliph, bestowing honor by rewarding subjects with elaborately inscribed textiles called *tiraz*.

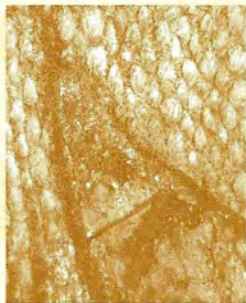
Woven in plain weave—the simplest interlacing of warp and weft—the Yemeni textiles' striped patterns are effected by a resist process, known as *ikat*, in which sections of the warp yarns are selectively dyed before weaving. The inscriptions are applied in gold leaf outlined in black ink, or embroidered using white cotton thread. The dating and attribution is based upon inscribed historical data and calligraphic styles, which find parallels in contemporary coinage.

The Textile Museum's collection of 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century Yemeni *tiraz* is one of the most important in the world. George Hewitt Myers, founder of the Museum, acquired these textiles between 1928 and 1952. They bespeak of a cloth that was imbued with great significance as a vehicle for communicating pious benedictions, and which represents the collaboration of calligraphers, dyers, weavers, and embroiderers.



Cover: Scarf end  
The Textile Museum 73.59  
Acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1931.

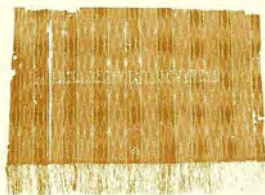




73.59 Arabic lettering in gold leaf on resin,  
outlined in black (microphotograph)



73.59 Arabic lettering, detail of gold  
leaf on resin (microphotograph)



Textile fragment  
The Textile Museum 73.213  
Acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1935.

## A Calligrapher's Art

Elaborate calligraphic styles distinguish this group of early Islamic textiles. One style shows elegant inscriptions executed in gold leaf with black outlines. The letters are squat with concave triangular features; some letters are extended horizontally and interlaced. Richly embellished with numerous flourishes, the ornate letters form words set together without spaces. Reading the inscriptions is particularly difficult.

The gold leaf was applied in a manner similar to that used by calligraphers. A resin was laid onto the face of the fabric in the form of the letters to serve as an adhesive. Then the gold leaf was quickly and carefully set. Finally, black outlines were drawn, defining each letter. Neither the resin nor the black outlines show evidence of absorption, suggesting that the fabric may have been heavily starched. In some of the textiles, the fibers have been flattened; the combination of starching and pressing would have served well to prepare the textiles to receive inscriptions, much like the preparation of parchment or vellum familiar to calligraphers.

## An Embroiderer's Art

A creative repertory of short running stitches was used to embroider both small-scale geometric patterns and long Arabic inscriptions, which are read from right to left. The space-filling patterns find parallels in Yemeni architecture and the decorative arts. The embroidered inscriptions convey pious benedictions, quoting the Qur'an, which is holy to Muslims.

The range of stitches yields an apparent simplicity that achieves both clarity and embellishment. The Arabic words exhibit exuberance in the treatment of individual letters with numerous flourishes. The ascenders of vertical letters extend to different heights. Their triangular finials lend a rhythmic pattern to the lines of inscription. Whereas the gilded inscriptions



Stitch diagrams:  
Embroidering a triangular finial

show dramatically extended letters that stretch the length of individual words, the embroidered texts are often compressed.



Textile fragment,  
embroidered in Arabic, detail  
The Textile Museum 73.675  
Acquired by George Hewitt Myers, 1951.

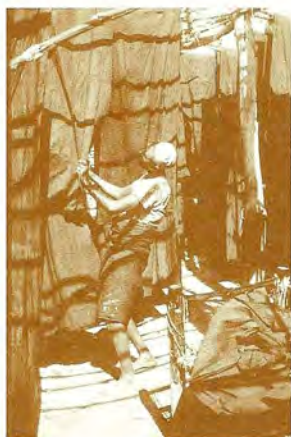
### A Spinner's Art/A Weaver's Art

Plain weave is among the simplest of weaving technologies, requiring an alternate shed — the opening created by lifting or lowering adjacent warps for the passing of the weft. The quality of these early *ikat* textiles attests to the mastery of spinners, dyers, weavers, and calligraphers working together.

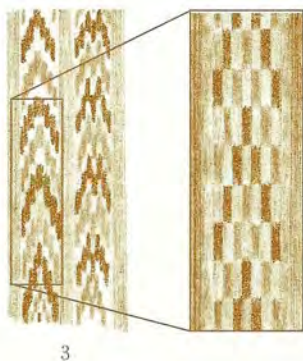
As in India, the cotton yarns are spun in a Z-direction, unusual in the Near East and counter to the natural inclination of linen. Among the inscribed textiles, the warps predominate, giving special presence to the resist-dyed patterns of chevrons and lozenges.

Other woven cotton textiles, with exceptionally finely spun warps and wefts, bear witness to the expressiveness of woven repeat patterns. The repeated designs on the front show supplementary-weft patterning; the patterning yarns progress forwards and backwards as well as upwards, suggesting the use of bobbins.





Indigo-dyeing in Zabid,  
Yemen, 1983



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Diagrams of resist-dye method

## A Dyer's Art

Rhythmic patterns of stripes characterize Yemeni ikat textiles, the play of color achieved by dyeing the warp yarns selectively prior to weaving. Sections of yarn were tied and bound before being dyed; bound areas resisted the dye.

One method required binding a standardized length (see diagram); warps would then have been positioned at different heights when dressed on the loom. Repeating the process of binding and dyeing would result in the observed color sequences of blues, yellow, and brown. White areas would have remained bound, thereby resisting all colors of dye.

From medieval Islamic sources, we read of madder (Arabic, *fuwwa* [Rubia tinctorum]), indigo (Arabic, *nila* [Indigofer sp.]), and a yellow dyestuff (Arabic, *wars* [Memecylon tinctorum]), exported from Aden and Yemen. Since these sources of color were readily available locally, it is likely they were used for these textiles. Indigo dyeing is still practiced in Yemen today.

These textiles represent early examples of the technique today called ikat, a Malay word generally attributed to its use in Indonesia. But *'aqada* is an Arab Semitic root for the verb, "to tie" or "to bind." It is possible that Arab traders introduced ikat-dyeing techniques to Southeast Asia as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Carol Bier

Curator, Eastern Hemisphere Collections

## Consultants

Mohamed Zakariya,  
Calligrapher  
William A. Lewin, Conservator,  
Gilt Decorative Arts & Furniture

## Credits

Microphotography by Carol  
Bier and Claudia Brittenham

Diagrams of embroidery  
stitches by Sumru Belger  
Krody

Diagrams of resist-dyeing  
methods by Erin Roberts

Photo by Jenny Balfour-Paul

## Suggested Readings

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THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

2320 S Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20008-4088  
202-667-0441  
[www.textilemuseum.org](http://www.textilemuseum.org)

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