

The Stuff That Matters

Textiles collected by Seth Siegelau for the Centre for Social Research on Old Textiles

1 March to 6 May 2012

Best known for his role in the emergence of Conceptual Art in the sixties, Seth Siegelau has been collecting textiles and books about textiles for the past thirty years. In 1986 he founded the Center for Social Research on Old Textiles (CSROT), which groups together a library, a bibliographic project and a textile collection.

The 200 or so items on display, including woven and printed textiles, embroideries and costume as well as barkcloth and headdresses are shown next to excerpts from relevant texts and historic books drawn from the CSROT Library. They shed light on their technological, social and political context and stress how Siegelau's bibliographic project underpins the collection of textiles.

Entrance

On display are examples of Siegelau's work as an editor, first in the sixties, when he pioneered the book as the site of art exhibitions, then as publisher and bibliographer of leftist books on communication and culture in the seventies, and finally as the compiler of the *Bibliographica Textilia Historie* in the nineties, the first general bibliography on the history of textiles, which now exists principally online, and can be accessed on the iPad provided.

So as to introduce the exhibition while revealing Siegelau's methodology as a textile collector, a small selection of the notes that he both systematically and conscientiously compiled as soon as an item was acquired are shown.

1 *Forbidden Fabrics and the Church*

'We are all Adam's children, but silk makes the difference'. Thomas Fuller, churchman and historian (1608–1661)

In 1754, two shops selling woven silk were established by Huguenot mercers in what is now the front part of Raven Row. Shortly after, the import of foreign woven silks was restricted and subsequently banned, which allowed a domestic industry to flourish in Spitalfields.

Grievances of the local silk weavers led to the various 'Spitalfields Acts' between 1773 and 1811 that attempted to regulate their wages. The end of this embargo in 1824 brought on the collapse of the Spitalfields silk industry. This gallery displays some of the collection's eighteenth century French and continental silks, the very fabrics that were forbidden for more than sixty years.

'The eighteenth century was the age of silk. It was the fabric and power of class command'. Peter Linebaugh, Marxist historian (2003)

The Church was an important commissioner of silk vestments, as exemplified by the number of ecclesiastical garments in the CSROT collection. Some of the cuttings displayed here were extracted by textile dealers from chasubles, whole examples of which are also exhibited.

2 *Silk, gold and silver textiles and other precious fabrics*

In the early eighties Siegelau began collecting European silks and velvets from Italy where their production flourished during the Renaissance, and France, where they were refined to a high point in the eighteenth century. Spanning a period from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, these fragments, which form a greater part of the collection, reveal the most extravagant qualities of woven silk. They also indicate the ways silk has been collected by dealers taking swatches from existing furniture or clothing.

Selected excerpts translated in English for the first time are included from the only book Siegelau has reprinted in facsimile form from the CSROT Library: *Recherches sur le commerce, la fabrication et l'usage des étoffes de soie, d'or et d'argent et autres tissus précieux en Occident, principalement en France, pendant le Moyen Âge*, one of the very earliest European scholarly works on the history of textiles written by Francisque-Michel in the mid-nineteenth century. A sourcebook, it contains thousands of detailed excerpts and references to the different types of luxury textiles and clothing used by the ruling classes.

3 *Headdresses*

The CSROT collection has more recently diversified into headdresses from Africa, Asia and Oceania. From hats for daily wear to headdresses for ceremonies, they form a distinct area of the collection. In both their fabrication and materials Siegelau considers them as textiles.

4–5 *'Archaeological' Textiles*

The textile fragments on display include fifth-century Coptic, late medieval Asian and Islamic textiles and Pre-Columbian Peruvian textiles. They are shown alongside three editions of Polydore Vergil's *De Inventoribus Rerum* (published in English as *On Discovery*), which is not only the first book to consider textiles as a pivotal aspect in the development of human activity but also the oldest in the CSROT Library (1503).

6b *La Lingère*

Taking its name from the eighteenth century book on display *L'art de la lingère* by François-Alexandre-Pierre de Garsault (*lingère* meaning the linen cupboard and the laundry maid in French), this gallery displays embroidered items for domestic use alongside historic pattern books and addresses its original function as a dressing room.

6 *Master bedroom*

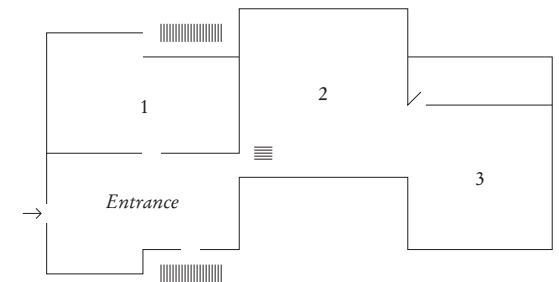
This bedroom was built for Francis Rybot, the Huguenot silk merchant who owned the shop below. Its contents allude to the domestic and decorative functions of fabrics.

7–7b *Barkcloth and other natural fabrics*

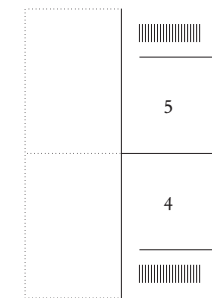
Made from the inner bark of certain kinds of trees, barkcloth has been used for clothing, domestic decoration, exchange and in ceremonies.

The largest textile in the CSROT collection, a tapa panel from Papua New Guinea serves as a backdrop for other Oceanian objects made out of tapa including a mask, sashes and hats.

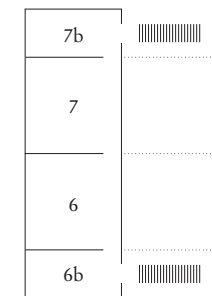
In the adjoining room, numerous examples of small African barkcloth panels cover an entire section of the wall, demonstrating the difference in their production and consumption.



Ground floor



First floor



Second floor

Exhibition curated by Sara Martinetti, Alice Motard and Alex Sainsbury, and designed by 6a architects. Graphic design by John Morgan studio.

Special thanks to Emmy de Groot for her cataloguing and conservation work and to Seth Siegelau for working so tirelessly towards the realisation of this exhibition.