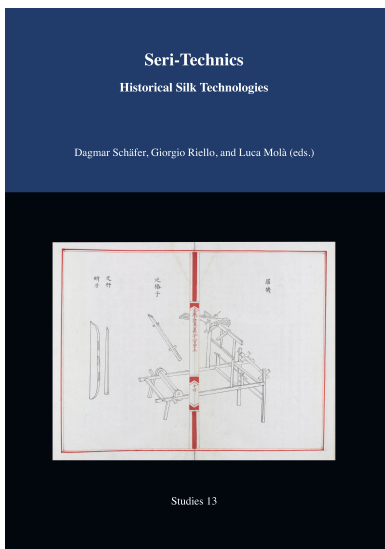


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## Studies 13

*Maria Ludovica Rosati:*

*Panni tartarici: Fortune, Use, and the Cultural Reception of Oriental Silks in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth-century European Mindset*



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## Chapter 6

### ***Panni tartarici: Fortune, Use, and the Cultural Reception of Oriental Silks in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth-century European Mindset***

*Maria Ludovica Rosati*

In recent years, interdisciplinary debate in art and textile history on theories of intercultural and cross-cultural interaction has strived to define the cultural processes that occur when different cultures meet, establish contacts and exchanges in a global historical context. Concepts such as “interaction,” “adoption,” “appropriation,” and “translation” are gradually replacing terms such as “influence” or “loan,” which were typical of earlier literature.<sup>1</sup>

This revision has shifted the focus of investigation from products to cultural dynamics, expressing more clearly the relationship between the parties involved (“interaction”) and the active and creative role of a culture in adopting an external element (“appropriation,” “translation”). Baxandall’s well-known “Excursus Against Influence” (1985) is an early example of these tendencies. According to his work, the use of the word “influence” in the history of art is misleading, because it implies a sort of passivity in the subject who is “influenced” by an external agent and also because it seems to deny the subject his proactive approach in consciously choosing and selecting items to adopt, how something is adopted and, above all, for what purpose.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth considering these kinds of points when studying silk in the pre-modern age, because the history of the textile medium is set in an utterly Euro-Asian dimension. Most artistic, technological, and cultural phenomena connected to luxury textiles have their roots in a wider context than the locality of their manifestation. Innovations, original developments, and creative practices had as a background a widespread geographical and chronological network of exchanges, migrations, and interactions among people, objects, ideas, and solutions. In fact, economic, political, and commercial relations facilitated the long-distance circulation of objects and cultural practices connected to luxury textiles. These practices were similar in the different Euro-Asian civilizations that shared the use of silk in defining their identity and the symbolic meanings attributed to the textile medium (for instance the role of precious fabrics in the construction of the image of power). Precisely the similarity in the way fabrics were used stimulated phenomena of interaction and produced a sort of Euro-Asian continuum, referring to the culture of luxury and the consumption of this particular sort of “portable” sumptuary object.<sup>3</sup> Thus this fluid global context of exchanges represents an ideal background to look into the different processes occurring at times of cultural meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> For a synthesis of the debate on intercultural theory and its applications in pre-modern age studies, see Canepa 2010, with references. For a definition of the single intercultural processes, see Ashley and Plesch 2002; Bacci 2007; Walker 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Baxandall 1985, 58–62.

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of portability, see Hoffmann 2007.

This chapter concentrates on the period between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when silk circulation reached an unprecedented dimension both for the volume of the exchanges and their geographical extension from China to Europe. The different aspects referring to the arrival in the West of a specific typology of Asian textiles, the so-called *panni tartarici* (Tartar cloths), are used as an example to show the possible multilevel nature of processes of interaction and appropriation connected to silk as a luxury item.

### 6.1 The Culture of Silk Luxury in the Mongol Age: *Panni Tartarici*

From the end of the thirteenth to the first half of the fourteenth century many Asian silk textiles arrived in Europe. Although foreign silks had long been familiar to European elites, during this period world political events enabled a more extensive circulation of luxury goods all over Euro-Asia and the opening of new and stronger supply channels to the European markets. The Mongol conquest of a large part of Asia and the subsequent reorganization of that vast empire in satellite and vassal states created the conditions for European traders, primarily Italians, to get to and establish steady business relationships with international trading centers and places in the Middle and Far East where silk and textiles were produced.

European-language sources from this time often called these fabrics *panni tartarici*, a term used today to refer to a type of material (generally, but not only, lampas structures with metallic threads) that was made during the Mongol age in various workshops all over Asia, from the Yuan dynasty China (1279–1644) to Mamluk Egypt (1250–1517). After Anne Wardwell's work on the recognition and classification of still existing artifacts that could correspond to this type, it is now possible to return to the ambit of Tartar silks some of the most precious fabrics kept in Europe, such as Pope Benedict XI's (1240–1304) vestments in the church of San Domenico in Perugia, the funerary clothing of the Italian nobleman Cangrande della Scala (1291–1329) in Verona, and the burial textiles placed inside the tomb of the Spanish kings in Burgos.<sup>4</sup> *Pannus tartaricus* refers consistently to the Mongol (or "Tartar" in medieval Europe renderings) Empire. It is still a suitable term today to describe various Asian products, precisely because the Mongol ambit was the origin of a new and substantial homogeneity in technical and decorative solutions, characterizing the sumptuary textiles of the time.

As well as territorial and political unification, the Mongol domination gave rise to a process of cultural unification in the conquered lands, through the creation and diffusion of a new shared language of luxury, in which precious fabrics played a fundamental role. In the costume of the Mongol dynasties many legacies of their nomadic tradition survived, for instance a large use of textiles not only for clothes but also in buildings and furnishings, and a predilection for transportable luxury goods, especially fabrics and precious metals. In Mongol cultural politics, this type of artifact became a key element in creating a new image of power and legitimizing their rule over the conquered lands: sumptuary fabrics were protagonists at official rites and, at the same time, objects of tribute, real economic resources and instruments to create bonds of loyalty to the khan through institutionalized moments of distribution, managed by the central government itself.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Wardwell 1988; on the diffusion of oriental silks in Europe, see Rosati 2010 with references; von Fircks and Schorta 2016.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Mongol cultural politics and the use of luxury silks, see Allsen 1997.

As they lacked any autochthonous tradition of processing silk, the Mongol sovereigns gradually improved their access to textiles by various means. At first, they depended on looting the recently-conquered Asian towns and on tributes from subject kingdoms. Realizing the potential of Eurasian trade routes, Mongols also encouraged the presence of merchants and foreign goods at their courts. Later they began to move forcibly large numbers of specialized craftsmen, holders of the technological knowledge of the most important Asian textile civilizations, the Islamic and the Chinese. These weavers were relocated in new textile colonies in Mongolia and China, specially created to satisfy court's needs. Here the production was under official state control, according to a centralized management model deriving from Chinese administrative structures or, perhaps, modelled on the Abbasid *tirāz*, known after the conquest of Baghdad (1258); the manufactures were supported by offices founded purely to coordinate different settlements, control production standards, supply raw materials, and collect finished products.<sup>6</sup>

In these ateliers, an original artistic language developed, as the technical and figurative cultures of Chinese, Islamic, and nomadic traditions merged into a new international style, oriented by the Mongol patron. In particular, the Mongolian preference for gold stimulated production of silk textiles with metallic thread. These textiles were of several different technical types, including the “cloth-of-gold” (*nasij* in Persian or *nashishi* in Chinese). European sources transcribed this term variously as *nassic*, *nach*, or *nak* (*nasicci*, *nacchi*, and *nachetti* in Italian).<sup>7</sup>

This new textile language did not only emerge in the Mongol imperial manufactures. In the following decades it spread all over the Euro-Asian continent, from the Yuan territories to the Persian Il-Khanate and Mamluk Egypt.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence that Chinese weavers were moved westward, as there is that Islamic weavers were moved to the East.<sup>9</sup> However the close political and cultural relations between Yuan China and the other khanates, particularly between Khubilai Khan's (1215–94) Yuan Dynasty and Hülegü Khan's (1217–65) Iranian Empire, certainly contributed to the new style's dissemination to the West.

In this second phase, the circulation of precious artifacts and perhaps albums of models seem to have played a fundamental role in the international exchange.<sup>10</sup> Mongol khans dispatched samples of gold cloth to satellite courts to seal their alliances and enhance loyalty. Moreover, the local textile industry imitated the Yuan prototypes, and silk patterns were also included in other artistic media, such as ceramics.<sup>11</sup>

The imitation practices were motivated by the desire of the patron to follow the dictates of the new fashion developed in the Great Khanate, according to a mechanism of emulation and appropriation of the symbols of power. The Mongol textile language became part of the visual culture of their neighbors. Moreover, it was given an active contribution by other artistic civilizations that introduced new elements into the international style and altered for-

<sup>6</sup> See Allsen 1997, 27–45, on ways of supplying luxury textiles and the Mongol manufacturers.

<sup>7</sup> On different types of silks with patterns woven in gold, see Allsen 1997, 2–4; Watt and Wardwell 1997, 127–63; Kuhn 2012, 334–39.

<sup>8</sup> On the diffusion of the Mongol style towards the West, see Allsen 1997, 71–98; Watt 2002.

<sup>9</sup> According to Watt and Wardwell (1997, 130–31), Mongol rulers were supposed to relocate craftsmen from China to Samarkand and the neighbouring areas, while some Far Eastern presences have been found in the Central Asian town of Almaliq.

<sup>10</sup> The problem of the existence of model albums is dealt with by Komaroff 2002.

<sup>11</sup> One example is the ceramic decorations in Takht-i Sulaiman Palace, built during the reign of Abakha Khan (1265–82) south of Tabriz. Komaroff 2002, 175–80.

eign forms to adapt them to their own knowledge. Thanks to the fluidity of the Euro-Asian context in the Mongol age, the so-called second-generation products remained in the channels of circulation the prototypes had come from. The international luxury culture was fed continuously by contributions from different traditions, sharing the same taste and attributing the same values to the textile medium.

## 6.2 The Outcome of the Euro-Asian *Koiné*

The various creative processes at the origin of the language of Tartar cloths reflect the inter-cultural nature of the Mongol empire and its management politics of the large controlled territories. We can consider this style as part of a Euro-Asian *lingua franca* or a common language (*koiné*) in the best sense of the word. The *koiné* includes an added value and an intrinsic creative potential: each tradition offers its wealth of expertise, creating a new pool of knowledge that is available for all members of the inter-cultural group to draw on. Different traditions lived together and were not flattened or homogenized.

In some Mongolian artifacts, technical and figurative motifs from many Asian traditions are mixed and find a new balance, as in a fragment kept in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello in Florence (figure 1). This fabric, from the second half of the thirteenth century, can be attributed to a Yuan-Chinese workshop (possibly a Daidu imperial laboratory) and corresponds to the *nasij* type.<sup>12</sup> Technically, it is a weft-patterned lampas (satin in the ground area) woven with metallic wefts consisting of flat strips of gilded animal substrate. Although made in China, the weave is closer to Islamic products, and this kind of gold thread also appears in other contemporary Central Asian artifacts. Hence, its material structure shows clear evidence of the intermingling of other textile traditions.

The mixture of different repertoires is even more original in the iconography. The general decorative pattern with different sized stripes brings to mind Islamic textiles and the practice of inserting bands with celebratory, well-wishing or generically ornamental inscriptions also derives from this culture. However, the usual Arabic script has here been replaced with *phags-pa*, the new alphabet required by the Mongols to unify the state bureaucracy. Moreover, within the larger band, two fierce panthers are depicted in an aggressive stance, reminiscent of the savage creatures in the metal artifacts of the Steppes. Even the decorative detail on the contorted bodies of the animals seems to refer to the lean, engraved strokes used by nomadic goldsmiths. However, the image's savagery is mitigated by, and imprisoned in, a botanical background of Chinese tradition, being sinuously interwoven with thin wave-like branches, blooming with exquisite lotus buds and delicate little curved leaves.

In other specimens one textile tradition dominates over a few subtly-inserted foreign details. Art historians have repeatedly stressed that mostly "Islamic" or "Chinese" iconographic features do not necessarily reveal the provenance of an artifact. For instance, one Yuan silk in the Musée Guimet in Paris (fourteenth century, traditionally attributed to China or Turkestan, figure 2) depicts medallions inhabited by pairs of symmetrical animals, which is a typical Islamic decorative structure, widely used by weavers east and west of the Eurasian continent.<sup>13</sup> The prototype, known through weft-faced compound and lampas weaves, was translated into a Chinese-style weave, namely a single warp weft-patterned tabby *à liage repris*. The absence of a supplementary binding warp is reminiscent of

<sup>12</sup> Suriano and Carboni 1999, 44–8.

<sup>13</sup> Lefèvre 2004, 70.



Fig. 1: Fragment of silk with panthers. Weft-patterned lampas, silk, and gold threads. Chinese manufactures, Yuan, second half of 13th century. Courtesy of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, nn. 573-574 F.

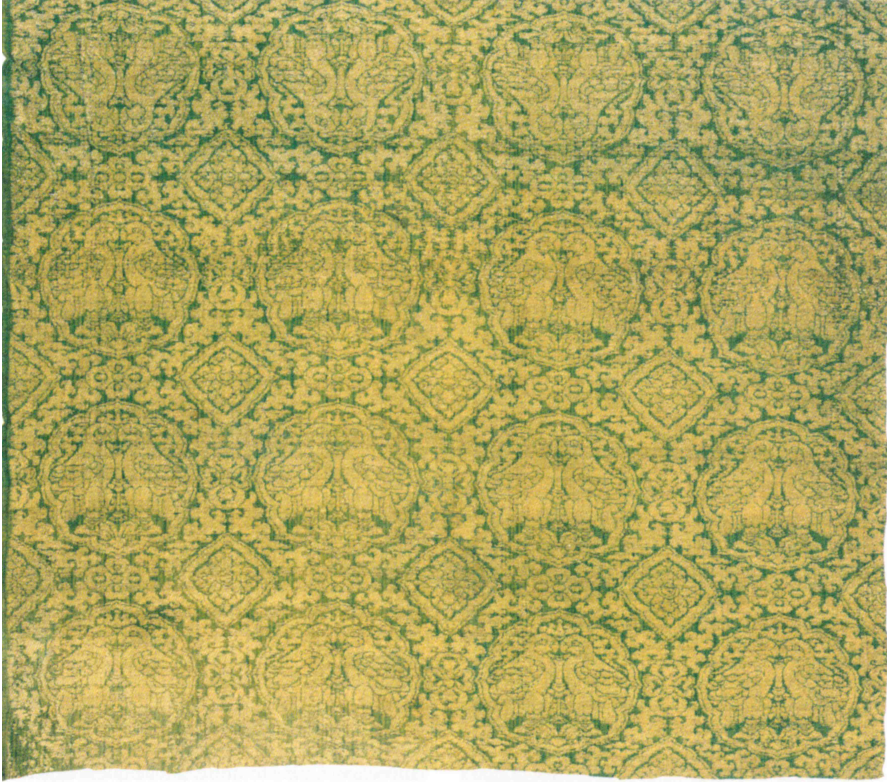


Fig. 2: Fragment of silk with medallions inhabited by parrots. Weft-patterned tabby, silk and gold threads. Chinese manufactures, Yuan, 14th century. With kind permission from the Musée Guimet, Paris, n. MA 11122. bpk / RMN – Grand Palais / Thierry Ollivier.

tabby and twill with a supplementary brocading gold weft (*jinduanzi* silks 金緞), that were already being produced during the Liao (907–1125) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties. Yet, the continuous gold pattern weft (flat strips of gilded paper) covering the whole surface of the cloth generates an effect similar to that of the *nasij* (technically lampas weave), so this specimen shows how, in the context of the *koiné*, technology interacted with the prevalent tastes, adjusting creatively to meet patrons' demands.

From an iconographic point of view, the process of appropriation is analogous, because the geometrical pattern of wheel converses with the lively Chinese sense of nature, maintaining the regular scansion of the composition but introducing some dynamic elements, such as the medallions' lobed outline and the tiny shoots of the inter-spaces. Finally, as for the animal motif, the pairs of symmetrical parrots might have entered the Yuan weavers' repertoire in different ways. This Middle Eastern subject had been used in gold-works and textiles since the Tang (618–907) dynasty. The retrieval of a heraldic pair of birds also suggests a renewed comparison with Islamic textiles from the thirteenth century.



Fig. 3: Dalmatic of Benedict XI, with kind permission from the Church of San Domenico, Perugia.

In contrast, the textiles of Benedict XI's cloak and dalmatic could be attributed to a workshop in Central Asia at the end of the thirteenth century, although both items show the decorative characteristics which are typical of the East Asian repertoire (figures 3–4).<sup>14</sup> The cloak silk (weft-patterned lampas), the main cloth (weft-patterned tabby) and some of a small insert of the dalmatic (weft-patterned lampas) present three variations of a small vegetable decoration, called “tiny patterns” (*de opere minuto*) in Latin sources.<sup>15</sup> Small golden leaves and inflorescences cover the surface in diagonal lines that produce a dynamic, sparkling effect and hide the modular nature of the composition. Single motifs clearly suggest a Chinese origin: peonies, round buds, small comma-shaped leaves and clover with curved tips renew the traditional vegetable repertoire of Islamic textiles. Moreover, the miniature decoration creates a lively sense of movement which is alien to the abstractly fixed and symmetrical styles of earlier Middle Eastern patterns.

<sup>14</sup> On the problem of attributing Benedict's textiles, see Rosati 2016, 173–5.

<sup>15</sup> That is, “una planeta de panno tartarico albo deaurato de opere curioso minuto per totum” in the Vatican inventory. Münz and Frothingham 1883, 36.





Fig. 4: Detail of the main cloth of Benedict's dalmatic. Weft-patterned tabby, silk and gold threads. Ilkhanid or central Asian manufacture, end of 13th century. With kind permission from the Church of San Domenico, Perugia.

### 6.3 Uses and Fortune of Panni Tartarici in Europe

Benedict XI's vestments exemplify the positive reception of Asian designs in Europe in the late Middle Ages. The different fabrics of the robes were probably from the Vatican treasure, where, according to the inventories written between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, more than a hundred *panni tartarici* were kept. Financially valuable and artistically well-executed, these Tartar cloths were treasured and associated with one of the most important authorities of the time, becoming privileged instruments of the representation of power. Through their material splendor, the objects demonstrated the superior condition of their owners, according to a practice of using silk typical of the whole Euro-Asian continent and shared also by the Christian West since the early Middle Ages.

In Europe, foreign fabrics were considered one of the greatest expressions of luxury and their very rarity nourished the desire. The Carolingian (seventh to ninth century) and Ottonian (951–1024) Empires had used silk as part of their imperial ceremonies, imitating traditions of the Byzantine Empire (330–1543). Following the same model, the Papacy introduced the use of precious fabrics into the Roman Church after the eighth century, both for liturgy and to display its spiritual and temporal authority. Moreover, silk was connected with the worship of relics, bringing the luxury textiles' semantic contents from the range of sacral royalty into the realm of sanctity.<sup>16</sup>

The practice of using silk during the Middle Ages shows a dialectical balance between perception of the cultural otherness of the objects' provenance and the process of adapting the meaning carried by the foreign textile into a new context of reception. It was recognized that the silk objects were made in "other" realities, as is confirmed by classifying fabrics according to their real or presumed geographical origin: "coming from the Byzantine Empire" (*panni de Romania*), Baghdadi silks (*panni de Bagadello*), or Levantine clothes (*de Outremer*). However, through a process of appropriation the same objects were used to embody and express the highest values of the emergent European identity. Sometimes the foreign silks were accepted and appreciated because of the taste for precious materials symbolizing excellence, a cosmopolitan taste shared with other civilizations. In other cases, the process of adoption might involve a complete subversion of the object's original meaning. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the use of oriental fabrics within the liturgy of the Roman Church. Islamic silks with inscriptions praising Allah were used for Catholic ecclesiastical clothes, or even in the Virgin's cloak, without any apparent contradiction. This was possible because, on the one hand, the Arabic characters were supposed to be already in use in the Holy Land at the time of the biblical histories. On the other hand, the pagan appearance of the inscriptions strengthened the idea of ecumenism and the superiority of the evangelical message that foretold its ultimate triumph, incorporating the expressions of other cultures.

Therefore, it is not surprising to find the same socio-cultural uses for the *panni tartarici* at the end of the Middle Ages. In fact, it is evidence of the very high esteem that these objects were held in. They were probably considered the most precious textiles of the time. Rather there was a wider diffusion of Asian fabrics than in the past. Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, all the European courts displayed silk artifacts at their most important events, from weddings to funeral and coronation ceremonies, such as the clothes of Rudolph of Bohemia (r. 1298–1307) in Prague, which were probably used for his wedding (1281); or the royal shrouds of Burgos mentioned above, and the dalmatic of Ludwig the Bavarian (1282–1347), part of his coronation's robes.<sup>17</sup>

Indirect evidence further confirms an increase in the importance of Mongol cloths in the late Middle Ages. The Great Wardrobe, the English book of court expenses, includes many receipts for Tartar cloths (*nak*) and textiles from the Armenian city of Tarsus (*panni de Tars*) which were bought from Genoese and Florentine merchants for the coronation ceremony of Edward III (1312–77) in Westminster Abbey on 1 February 1327.<sup>18</sup> A substantial familiarity with Asian textiles is also evident in the bookkeeping of other ruling European families. A

<sup>16</sup> See Muthesius 1995 on the role of silk in the early Middle Ages.

<sup>17</sup> For a survey of the surviving evidence of Tartar cloths in the European courts, see Jacoby 2004, Monnas 2004, Bravermanová 2004, all of which are in Marini, Napione, and Varanini 2004, 141–53; 123–39; 235–46. See also the essays in von Fircks and Schorta 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Monnas 2001.

*tartaire* appears in the list of purchases made on behalf of the Count of Flanders by the chaplain Guillaume between the end of 1276 and June 1277; in 1299 some *dras tartarins* were bought for the lords of Hainaut while, three years later, a *tartare d'outramer vermel* was acquired for the House of Artois to cover a parade saddle. We know that master Giovanni of Florence bought two *panni tartarici* on 1 October 1323 in Paris for the Count of Hainaut's daughter.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the number of *naques* and *tartaires* in the French sovereigns' wardrobes increased to the extent that they were provided with their own section, devoted to gold and silk fabrics, in 1317 and again in 1342.<sup>20</sup>

The literature provides further evidence of the diffusion of Tartar cloths by mentioning the new Asian types. Since the twelfth-century, a typical topos in European courtly romances had the protagonists clothed with sumptuous garments, silk and precious foreign textiles, consistent with their moral and blood dignity. Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Mongol productions appeared on the literary stage too. In Jacquemart Giélée's (c. 1288) poem "*Renart le Nouvel*," written in Lille, France, one of the ladies was described as wearing a "gold cloak" (*un mantel d'un drap de Tarse d'or blendè*).<sup>21</sup> In Nicole de Margival's late thirteenth-century French poem "*Dit de la Panthère*," the main character inferred people's rank by noting whether they wore Tartar cloths (*bien avisai qu'il estoient de grant affaire, car de samit ou de tartaire ou de drap d'or de gran value avoit chascuns robe vestue*).<sup>22</sup> The Umbrian poet Nerio Moscoli (active in the first half of the fourteenth century) metaphorically described Love as a textile so precious that it "exceeded even the splendor of the Mongol silks" (*niun tartaresco paregiar lo poria*).<sup>23</sup> In Geoffrey Chaucer's (1343–1400) *The Knight's Tale*, Emetreus, King of India, carried a coat of arms made with "cloth of Tars, couched with perles" and his battle steed was fitted into "cloth of gold."<sup>24</sup>

If Chaucer's work proves the existence of a lively link between the Tartar textiles and the exotic worlds where those objects came from, the poet Nerio Moscoli shows how those artifacts had, by then, become part of European elite customs. Perhaps echoing the verses of Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) (*Inferno*, XVII, 14–18), where the monster Gerione's variety of colors exceeds that of a Tartar cloth, the poet uses textiles as a measure for comparison with no need to specify their nature, presumably well-known by his contemporary readers. In both cases, we can see the development of two clichés (silk as exotic clothing and pre-eminent luxury goods), which were connected to the diffusion of Tartar textiles in Europe and which illustrate the foreign objects' reception into the cultural horizon of the time.

#### 6.4 Market Expansion and New Values Attributed to the Textile Medium

The effects of the wider diffusion of Asian silks can also be seen in the amplification of meanings given to luxury textiles, which, in its turn, is connected to the new conditions of the European market developing in the same decades.<sup>25</sup> New wealth gave the urban and merchant classes easier access to luxury markets, where a great deal of Asian sumptuary goods appeared at this time. The urban classes displayed their success by appropriating

<sup>19</sup> Dehaisnes 1886, i, 70–1, 106, 123, 254.

<sup>20</sup> D'Arcq 1874, 1–36.

<sup>21</sup> Giélée 1961, 254, verses 6242–6244.

<sup>22</sup> de Margival 2000, 50–1, verses 208–13.

<sup>23</sup> Mancini 1997, 97, sonnet 78, verses 5–8.

<sup>24</sup> Chaucer 2008, 54, verses 2156–61.

<sup>25</sup> On the situation of the luxury market in the late Middle Ages, see Stuard 2006.

elite products, both as originals—as Tartar cloth from Asia—and in their local variations, often stimulated by the strong European demand for foreign textiles. Silk was no longer the privilege of the traditional ruling classes but, through a process of emulation, became an everyday component in the life of whoever was rich enough to own those precious objects. An unparalleled arrival of silk textiles on the market, due to the growth in both local industry and international trade, brought luxury to the houses of private citizens and their clothes. On the urban streets in the Middle Ages, the concept of fashion began to catch on for the first time.<sup>26</sup>

As clothes were becoming an instrument of self-definition and distinction according to age, sex, and rank, it is significant to find a *pourpoint* made of Tartar cloth among the oldest surviving specimens of secular fourteenth-century costume. This item, today in Lyon Musée des Tissus, belonged to Charles de Blois (1319–64), would-be Duke of Brittany dead on the battlefield of Auray in 1364 (figures 5–6).<sup>27</sup> Its tailoring, which emphasizes the male upper body through padding, a tight waist cut, and countless rows of buttons, was common in this era among upper classes. The foreign silk was a further and recognizable sign of social distinction, being a material at the top of the contemporary luxury hierarchy. The increased use and wide diffusion of silk did not lead to a devaluation of those materials. On the contrary, the consciousness that silk was a symbol of excellence was amplified: gaining access to luxury meant taking possession of those tangible manifestations of power that were once peculiar to sovereigns by divine investiture. It meant acquiring an instrument of social ennobling to approach the elite and demonstrate one's own high standing through visible appearance, as the luxury goods, worn and flaunted, became a true status symbol.

When the merchant class had amassed enormous riches, and reached the top of political life of their towns, they began to think of themselves as princes, assuming a proper lifestyle to legitimize the new structure of power by the same symbolic display that for centuries had belonged to the royal and ecclesiastical hierarchies. This practice of ennobling and self-legitimation by the silk medium is found in the Italian Trecento cities, as in the case of the funeral equipment of the Verona captain Cangrande della Scala (1291–1329).<sup>28</sup> The sumptuous display of Tartar cloths wrapping his remains shows not only a huge wealth, but was also part of his family's political program of building a ritual tradition to legitimize their power over Verona. Using the same symbols as those of the European sovereigns, they asserted their intention of turning a municipal office into a permanent authority over the city, and the successors of Cangrande proceeded to do exactly that.<sup>29</sup>

In the fourteenth century, Asian silks continue to embody values of excellence, but, as a consequence of the new social order, their message concerns both an already acquired status of royalty, power, or dignity, and the very aspiration to this condition. Those who could not afford an entire silk outfit, trimmed their clothes with silken sleeves, belts, and accessories, to approximate the lavish costumes of the upper classes. This was possible because of an unprecedented diversification of the luxury market, in which extremely expensive objects and more affordable accessories arrived from Asia. Silk bags, scarves, and ribbons are listed in the cargo of a Syrian merchant who arrived at Porto Ercole in 1338 and, according to the

<sup>26</sup> On fashion and the hierarchy of appearances, see Muzzarelli 1996; Blanc 1997.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Monnas has attributed the fabric as being manufactured in the Middle East in the middle of the 14th century. Monnas 1992.

<sup>28</sup> On Cangrande's textiles, see Magagnato 1983; Marini, Napione, and Varanini 2004.

<sup>29</sup> Napione 2004.



Fig. 5: Pourpoint of Charles de Blois, with kind permission from the Musée des Tissus, Lyon, n. 30307, 924 XVI.2. © Lyon, musées des Tissus et des Arts décoratifs – Pierre Verrier.

chronicle of Agnolo di Tura del Grasso (active in the fourteenth century), the entire cargo was sold successfully in Siena.<sup>30</sup> So a desire to rise in society was met by the new products that helped to realize this ambition, even if only partially: everybody could buy the symbolic-goods in the city markets, legitimately, and in accordance with their own resources, while in the shops the craftsmen were able to make cheap versions of the more valuable artifacts simulating precious materials by tricks of their trade.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> di Tura del Grasso 1931, 521.

<sup>31</sup> For examples of cheap imitations, like gilding to imitate precious metals, see Stuard 2006, 53.



Fig. 6: Detail of the cloth of Charles de Blois's pourpoint. Weft-patterned lampas, silk and gold threads. Ilkhanid manufacture, 14th century. © Lyon, musées des Tissus et des Arts décoratifs – Pierre Verrier.

### 6.5 Forms of Cultural Appropriation

The various uses of Tartar cloths in Europe substantiate different aspects of cultural appropriation: some practices were common all over the Euro-Asian continent, while others seem peculiar to the European context. When items that were originally destined for Asian courts turned into a cultural component of European luxury, the silk's medium's meaning of excellence took on also new forms of social practices. These sometimes corresponded to the uses already common in Asia and sometimes reflected the expectations of western society in the fourteenth century.

For instance, the visual manifestation of royalty through the silk medium crossed the entire Euro-Asian continent to reach Europe in the end. Understanding the communicative power of precious textiles on the subject civilizations, the Mongols created their own language of silk, to express their authority. In the satellite courts the meaning of these objects was so clear that adopting them implied taking a more or less legitimate part of the same power. When Tartar cloths reached Europe, they were adopted as a royal attribute because of the medieval taste for precious materials and the already mature predilection for silk. In this case, there wasn't a clear will to emulate the Mongol sovereigns and the adoption went through further processes (appropriation instead of emulation). In the end the results were equivalent because they were based on the same premises, that is, silk meant as a symbol

of excellence. The textile medium, therefore, proves itself a typical “cultural migrant” of the pre-modern age, able to cross spaces and civilizations thanks to continuous semantic adaptations, disseminating in different realities a shared technical and figurative repertory and a similar attitude to silken luxury and its social uses.

The role played by Tartar cloths in the nascent European fashion demonstrates how foreign goods can be given absolutely new values when they became part of the cultural phenomena that were originating from the evolution of western social structure in the late Middle Ages. It wasn't the arrival of Asian textiles that caused the birth of fashion, but these objects were chosen by the receiving culture as a proper instrument to create forms of distinction in clothes, according to a need that was already evident at the time through other expressive means, not directly related to the international market of silk.<sup>32</sup>

The same process of appropriation can be seen in the Italian manufacturers. Italian weavers actively developed a Euro-Asian *koiné* by imitating Asian fabrics and styles. Yet, at the same time, these artifacts also represent a typical Gothic art, in line with fourteenth-century studies on the effects of light and color, and the renewed interest in the natural world. Hence, Tartar style silks were a possible, but not unequivocal, solution for an existing demand from European society.<sup>33</sup>

The modes of appropriation can be read as continuous processes of adaption and a creative re-elaboration of foreign elements within new cultural products, peculiar to the receiving context. The very name, *pannus tartaricus*, was the result of a process of appropriation, rooted in the perceptive and cognitive horizon of the European late Middle Ages. Actually, the name “Tartar cloth” was an invention, a sort of hypernym comprising several different Asian products, a descriptive category used to bring exotic objects into the scope of the known, the familiar and the identifiable. In the European sources the single textile types are sometimes called by their technical-commercial names (which often comprise the source language term translated into Latin or vernacular languages: e.g. *nasiccium* and *nassic* or *nasij*), or can be described with a generic term, later specifying their technical and decorative characteristics: “cloth-of-gold” (*pannus tartaricus ad aurum*), “velvet” (*pilosum*) or “plain silk” (*de attabi*).<sup>34</sup> Obviously, the word “Tartar” contains a certain amount of ambiguity due to its historical genesis—on the one hand it evokes China and *Cathai* and, on the other hand, it comprises all of Asia. Moreover, it is very unlikely that societies in the West were fully conscious of the cultural processes behind the new international style. However, the word was strongly evocative for contemporary people. Specific, well-defined characteristics were associated with Tartar textiles to the point that, over the decades, any object corresponding to those parameters could be called *tartaryn* or *tartarino* in Italian, *nach* and *camoca*, whether the artifact had been made overseas or been woven in laboratories in Lucca or Venice. Therefore, the perception of what was truly Tartar gradually became disengaged from the actual provenance of an artifact, opening the way for future invention of the “exotic,” which was typical of Modern Europe.

<sup>32</sup> For similar discussions about the relationship between oriental textiles and fashion in the Crusade period, see Snyder 2002.

<sup>33</sup> On the developments of Italian manufactures, see Rosati 2010 with references.

<sup>34</sup> These examples are from the 1295 inventory of Bonifacius VIII. Molinier 1885, 43–44.

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