

Fig. 6 Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel with Red and Gold Text ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.009. Photo taken by author.

Text in Gold: 惠: Benefit
沾: To receive favours



EMBROIDERY AS ARCHIVE: ANALYZING 1890S CHINESE EMBROIDERY PANELS AS ARCHIVES OF MEMORIES, STORYTELLING AND IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

Embroidery acts as a medium to construct complex archives of narratives and memories, pulling threads of individual identities through the greater fabric of the social, political, economic and cultural environment. This paper analyzes 1890s Chinese embroidery panels from the Cousland family's collection in the Fashion Research Collection at TMU. Using Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim's Checklist for Observation (pp. 216-221) from *The Dress Detective* (2015) as a framework to conduct object-based research, this analysis draws upon the historical background of Chinese art and embroidery in the late Qing dynasty. The purpose of this paper is to understand the role of embroidery as an archive of memories, storytelling and construction and expression of one's identity.

The textile panels selected from the FRC's collection showcase a combination of motifs that include natural imageries, human figures and text, which allude to various symbolisms, techniques, and making practices. The research questions that I aimed to address through this analysis were:

- a) What are the social and political underpinnings of these embroidery panels?
- b) What is the cultural and ideological significance of the motifs, colours and compositions?
- c) What role does the practice of embroidery play in exploration and construction of one's identity by acting as a medium of recording stories and memories?

In this research, I have situated the FRC textile panels within the context of embroidery in the late Qing dynasty under the rule of the Dowager Empress Cixi (1835-1908). Analyzing these textiles through the lens of feminist court art production allows us to envision the role of embroidery beyond the restrictive domestic practices in Imperial China (Peng, "Artful Subversion" 12; Cui 303).

THE LIFE BEHIND THE ARTIFACT

Although it is a difficult task to accurately pinpoint the origin of these textiles, the closest possibility can be assumed by tracing them back to how the donor may have acquired them. Philip Brunelleschi Cousland¹ (12th July, 1861 - 7th July, 1930), the grandfather of the donor Dick Cousland, was born in Pollockshields in Glasgow, Scotland on 12th July, 1861 to James Cousland (1st April, 1832 - 12th June, 1866) and Jessie Knox Anderson (1831 - 1905). He graduated at the age of 21 in 1882 with an MB and a CM and was a member of the Barclay Church (Church of Scotland) and the Medical Missionary Society. In 1883, Phillip went on a mission to a minor fishing village and port on the South China Sea, near the mouth of the Han River, and up the coastline, north of Hong Kong. He worked in the Swatow Hospital for three years before moving up the river to Chao-chow-fu, the capital of the North-eastern part of the province Kwangtung (Guangdong) in 1886 where there were no doctors or hospitals. Initially in Swatow, as a white man he was faced with hostile reception due to the people's apprehension of "foreign devils" but he slowly established himself as a proficient doctor treating up to 100 patients with a range of conditions per day.

Upon his return to Edinburgh in 1892, he promoted and raised money to build a hospital in Chao-chow-fu. He returned to China in the autumn of 1892 via Toronto, Canada, where, as the missionary representative, he attended the Grand Presbyterian Alliance meeting. On his journey to China back from Victoria, British Columbia, he met Miss Susan Harrington from Seattle, Washington, who was going to Singapore onboard the "Empress of India" as a missionary teacher. They were married in Hong Kong on 13th March, 1893 and lived in "Monkey Den" in Chao-chow-fu. Phillip and Susan had three children Kenneth Harrington, born in Swatow, (18th September, 1894), Jessie Elizabeth, born in Chao-chow-fu, (4th February, 1896) and Philip Alexander Clyde, born in Edinburgh (15th October, 1898).

After some initial opposition, "Burns Memorial Hospital" was officially built and opened in March 1896, outside the South Gate of the city, and eventually other buildings were added. In the first year, the hospital treated 10,800 out-patients and 200 in-patients. In April 1903, Susan returned home to Edinburgh with their children and in 1905 Phillip was invalided home as well due to the deterioration of his health. Despite not having fully recovered, he returned to China the following year feeling the need to develop medical textbooks in the Chinese language for teaching students. In 1906, he left Chao-chow-fu for Shanghai where he was engaged in the construction and compilation of a full vocabulary of Chinese medical terminology which came to be a foundation for modern medicine later adopted by the Chinese government. His work and contributions were recognized by the Chinese Government by awarding him the Order of the Golden sheaf, and he was appointed by the Emperor a Member of the Most Eminent Order of the Excellent Crop.

Guangdong, the province where the doctor and his family resided, is one of the four widely recognised embroidery centres in China (Wu and Zhang 304). In 2006, China designated Su embroidery, Xiang embroidery, Guangdong embroidery and Shu embroidery as intangible cultural heritage of China (Zhong and Chudasri 2). Guangdong's natural suitability for growing mulberries and raising silkworms as well as intricate techniques inspired by Western painting led to its national and international recognition (Wu and Zhang 309). This embroidery employs a variety of fibres such as silk, wool, gold thread, peacock feather and horses' tails to decorate costumes and other home decor textiles (Zhong and Chudasri 3). The embroidered textile panels along with a jifu (FRC 2016.01.001) which is a semi-formal robe that was worn for regular court business (Yao 117), were probably acquired as gifts during the Cousland family's stay in China and were then passed down through the family. These were then donated to Toronto Metropolitan University Fashion Research Collection in 2016 by Dick Cousland, the grandson of Phillip Brunelleschi Cousland.

Fig. 1 Red Silk Chinese Banner with Gold Embroidery, ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.003. Photo taken by author



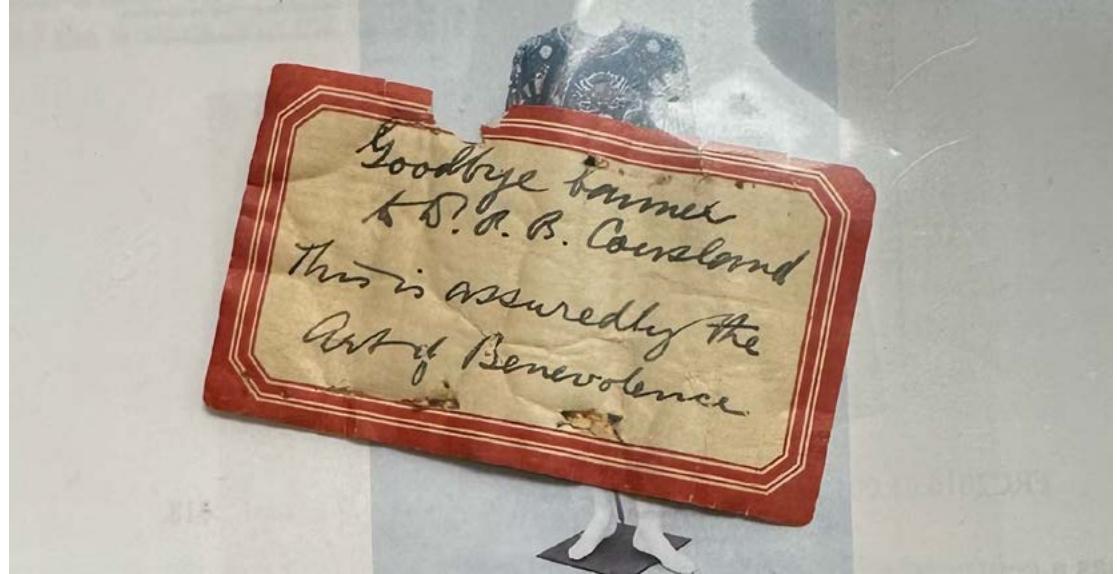
A GIFT OF GRATITUDE

This first textile panel is a red silk banner with gold embroidery in traditional Chinese. It features a band of green ribbon trim and a green silk fringe. It also has a red cotton pole insert at top which forms a backing and implies that it was meant to be hung on a wall or over a doorway. The banner measures 58 inches across and 14.5 inches from top of pole insert to end of fabric. The fringe is 6 3/4 inches and has beaded tops. The text consists of 4 horizontal characters across the banner and 8 vertical characters at either end of the banner. Each of the horizontal characters across the body of the banner have a blue piping around the character that is attached using a couching stitch.

LEFT & RIGHT Fig. 2 Red Silk Chinese Banner with Gold Embroidery, ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.003. Photo taken by author



Fig. 3 Tag attached to FRC 2016.01.003. Toronto Metropolitan University. Photo taken by author



The banner had small tag attached to it at the time of its donation which read:

"Goodbye banner
[Dr. P.B.] Cousland
This is assuredly the art of Benevolence"

Using Google Translate, I was able to gain further insight into the context of this banner. The text on the far left (vertical) translates² to "A gift from the guardian of Fengxi Village" and the text on the far right (vertical) translates² to "Mr. Cousland, a great master³". These types of banners were commonly used as gifts to congratulate someone on opening a new company, or in this case, a medical clinic.

The embroidered text in the centre has four characters² and praises Dr. Cousland for his skills in treating his patients while also mentioning his loving and caring nature².

符 : Symbol
仁 : Benevolence
乃 : so/therefore/only
堤 : Embankment

POLITICAL SCENARIO IN THE QING DYNASTY (1644-1912)

Phillip first arrived in China in 1883, which would have been during the rule of the Guangxu Emperor (1875-1908) of the late Qing dynasty whose reign was largely dominated by the regent Dowager Empress Cixi (Hummel 732). The Dowager Empress Cixi's regency was an exciting, tumultuous and controversial socio-political phenomenon (Peng, "Artful Subversion" 1; Yuhang and Zandorfer 1). As a low-ranking concubine to the Xianfeng emperor (r. 1851-61), Empress Dowager Cixi Née Yehenala gave birth to the emperor's only son and heir, who became the Tongzhi emperor (r. 1862-74) (Yuhang and Zurdorfer 3). Upon the Xianfeng emperor's unexpected death which made her son the sole successor to the throne, she gained "a sixteen-character honorary title, beginning with *ci* 慈, "mercy," and *xi* 禧, "delight," (Peng, "Staging Sovereignty" 3) which also carried the meaning "Motherly and auspicious" (Yuhang and Zurdorfer 3). At the time of the Tongzhi emperor's death in 1874, Empress Dowager Cixi was already involved in state affairs and political decisions with the late Xiangfeng emperor's principal wife, Empress Dowager Ci'an, acting as co-regent (3). Upon the Tongzhi emperor's death, Cixi nominated her son's cousin as the next ruler of China who ruled as the Guangxu Emperor until 1908 (Hudson 10). Following the Empress Dowager Ci'an's death in 1881, Cixi continued to further consolidate her position of power and authority in the imperial court due to the Guangxu Emperor's young age (Yuhang and Zurdorfer 4) until she nominally stepped down in 1889 after she married the Emperor to her niece. The failure of the Emperor's Wuxu Coup or the Hundred Days Reform in 1898 (Yuhang and Zurdorfer 4; Wang et.al 57) led to the imprisonment of the Emperor and Cixi resumed power until her death on the day following the Emperor's death on November 1908 (Esherik and Wei pp.3-5).

Amongst the Empress Dowager's many radical efforts to subvert and claim authority in the patriarchal imperial realm, was her taking direct control of the imperial court's art production:

"Moreover, Cixi claimed ownership in the same way that Qing emperors did: she commissioned porcelains bearing the names of her palace residences and signed the paintings she herself made as well as those ghost-painted by the court artists. The matriarch even established a weaving workshop in Zhonghai, to the west of the Forbidden City, so that she could conveniently inspect the quality and design of new textiles for her use." (Peng, "Artful Subversion" 12)

The Empress Dowager, who was also an embroiderer herself (Lee 289), extended her interests and patronage to art forms that were beyond those that Chinese women commonly had access to (Peng, "Reconfiguring Patriarchal Space" 192). These included the production of imperial porcelain wares (192), reconstructions of imperial architecture (196), commissioning oil paintings from western artists to improve foreign relations as well as embracing modern western technology of photography (Yao 113). While these efforts allowed Cixi to transgress gendered conventions and boundaries in imperial politics and society (Peng, "Reconfiguring Patriarchal Space" 210), she also revolutionised the agency and visibility of women painters by recruiting them as court painters (217).

EMBROIDERY AS ART AND SYMBOLISM

Each of the embroidered textile panels analyzed in this paper convey personal expressions of gratitude and appreciation through symbolic motifs and the incorporation of text. However, they are also reminiscent of the social, religious and political values that would have been imbued in the embroidery of that time. The role of embroidery in Imperial China ranged from being a medium of personal expression to political tools used to assert power and status (Lee 291). While late Ming dynasty textiles were primarily adorned through the process of weaving, material culture in the Qing dynasty revolved around embroidery (Silberstein 77). Although embroidery did feature on the belts or sleeve bands of garments in the late Ming dynasty, the increased use of embroidery in fashion was brought about with the improved lightness of embroidery threads and an increase in the range of colours that allowed detailed gradation effects that lent a natural painting-like quality to textiles (pp. 81-82). Embroidery developed as a medium through which the techniques and themes of paintings could be emulated (Gao 72). Another important turning point for embroidery during the late Qing dynasty came with the rise of a female embroidery artist Shen Shou (1874-1921) who, with the recognition and patronage of the Empress Dowager, went on to transform embroidery from a medium of emulation into an artform of its own (Lee 290). While the end of the Qing dynasty marked an era of unrestricted development of embroidery as an independent art form where female embroiderers gained recognition it also meant the end of imperial patronage that led to a decline in the intricate qualities of embroidered textiles inspiring new techniques (Zapolska 159).

Amongst the women embroiderers of the Qing dynasty, religious symbolism influenced by Buddhist and Daoist beliefs was a major theme, often incorporating motifs of flowers and birds (Gao 71). In China, flowers were important cultural symbols that were often attached to their own festive and ritual practices (Tay 22). As part of a royal ceremony that celebrated the birthday of flowers which fell on the 12th day of the second month, the Dowager Empress Cixi accompanied by the court ladies, would tie red silk ribbons on the trees and plants (22). The Dowager Empress's affection for flowers was also evident in the seasonal expressions of peonies, lotuses, chrysanthemums and plum blossoms in her extravagant embroidered robes (Lee 289). Amongst the gentry women and courtesans who had restrictive access to art and embroidery and therefore complex relationships with this art form, floral motifs acted as visual signifiers of "purity", "personal integrity", "feminine cultivation and familial status" (Cui 303).



Fig. 4 & 5 Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel with Red and Gold Text ca. 1890s.
Toronto Metropolitan University. FRC 2016.01.009
Photo taken by author. Text in Gold² (Right) 高先生大人雅鑒 : Mr Gao, the great

Object FRC 2016.01.009B features a branch of satin-stitched plum blossoms and butterflies with the Chinese characters for spirit and body painted in gold. The plum blossom which blooms in the late winter to harken the arrival of spring has long been an auspicious sign and a symbol of resilience in the history of Chinese art (Hsü 25). The gendered expression of the plum blossom which was associated with a woman's "transience of beauty and youth" (25) or the "ideal man" (26) became a flexible symbol of longevity in the Qing court under Cixi's rule (Li 38). Additionally when the "yishu mei or 'single tree with plum blossoms,'" motif was featured on a garment it allowed the wearer to embody this symbolism of eternal life (38).

Another important flower in Chinese culture is the peony which continues to be considered the 'King of Flowers' symbolizing "wealth and honor" (Brennan 140). Due to its significant role in the reigns of previous Qing rulers, Cixi claimed the peony as a motif of "visual currency" in both her personal attire as well as her commissioned art, further engendering the symbolism of this flower (142). The lotus, on the other hand, was an influence of Buddhism and its iconography on Chinese textiles which is discussed below in relation to object to FRC 2016.01.005. The lotus had spiritual connotation and was associated with deities, symbolizing "the progression of the soul through the waters of experience until it reaches the Sun of enlightenment" (Zapolska 155)

Fig. 7 Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel with Gold Text ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.009 B. Photo taken by author
Text in gold² : 靈: Spirit
身: Body



Flowers were not the only instances of imbuing elements of nature with auspicious and spiritual meanings. Lingzhi mushrooms which are often portrayed in Chinese art with a cloud shaped top, seen in object FRC 2016.01.009A (bottom right corner), were promoted by Daoists who believed in its medical benefits and spiritual associations with immortality (Yan pp.368-69; Zapolksa 157). Butterflies that we see in FRC 2016.01.009 A and B were often metaphors for love and attraction particularly when depicted with flowers, and Qing dynasty textiles were especially (Ströber 2) famous for portraying themes of love and marriage through combinations of butterflies and peonies (Frisoli et al. 9).

Fig. 8 Black Cotton Chinese Textile Panel with Gold Thread Embroidery, ca.1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.005. Photo taken by author





LEFT Fig. 9 Woman's Short Informal Robe, fragment, Qing dynasty (1644- 1911), Guangxu period (1875-1908); National Museum in Warsaw; photo by K. Zapolska. BUDDHIST MOTIFS IN CHINESE TEXTILE DECORATIONS at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Accessed 6th December 2024.



RIGHT Fig. 10 Antique Chinese Mandarin rank badge, Qing period 19th century. Silk and Gilt thread. Antiques Atlas.https://www.antiques-atlas.com/antique/chinese_rank_badge_a1173/as035a1173. Accessed 6th December 2024.

Object FRC 2016.01.005 is a black cotton Chinese textile panel with gold thread embroidery measuring 71 inches (end to end) by 14 1/4 inches (top to bottom). The embroidery is composed of couching stitches over gold-wrapped threads. Featuring vases and vessels of various shapes, flowers, feathers and scrolls, there seems to be an auspicious or religious quality of symbolism. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, couching stitches over gold wrapped threads that would be too thick to pierce through the fabric, became a more efficient technique to attain aesthetic quality and helped hide any imperfections that were encountered as a result of the pressure of time and declining patronage (Zapolska 159). During the Qing dynasty, Buddhism played an important and influential role in addition to China's Confucian and Daoist systems of thought (Zapolska 148; Guang 305). For the followers of Buddhism, embroidery provided a way of expressing and conveying complex ideas of faith and devotion to their religion (Zapolska pp.150-151). The integration and influence of Buddhist motifs on Chinese paintings and sculpture since the introduction of Buddhism during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) (Guang 318) also translated into ornamental textile panels for home and court decor (Zapolska 151). Motifs were composed to create metaphorical imagery and conveyed personal political and religious ideologies through storytelling (149). The influence of these complex and diverse ideologies on Chinese textiles can be seen in the official rank badges that were developed during the Emperor Guangxu's Hundred Days' Reform which had combinations of eight Buddhist symbols, eight Taoist and eight "invaluables" (Zapolska 162; Finlay 62).

Fig. 11 & 12 Chinese Embroidery Samples Glued to Paper Backing, ca.1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.011. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.



Object FRC 2016.01.011 features two embroidery samples glued to paper backing. It depicts two human figures, one in front of a pagoda and another kneeling on the banks of a river. Two commonly used Chinese embroidery stitches are visible here: satin stitch and knot stitch. The stain stitch which developed during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) allowed for more detailed and realistic renditions of flora and fauna (Lee 276). The Peking Knot also known as the 'Forbidden Stitch'⁴ was a particularly time-consuming and expensive stitch that required great skill and precision resulting in a beautiful texture (Pospíšilová 89).

Fig. 13 Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel, ca.1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.006. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024



Fig. 14 Old Chinese Silk Embroidery Forbidden Stitch Embroidered Panel Framed-antique, ca.1850-1940. ebay.com. Photograph by dusdde. <https://www.ebay.com/itm/333237900088>. June 18, 2020. Accessed 1st December 2024



Fig. 15 From the left, Jessie, Clyde and Mary and Kenneth Cousland. Harvey Lean sitting. Wedding of Mary and Kenneth, 24th April, 1925. Photograph provided by the donor to the FRC



Object FRC 2016.01.006 is a cream silk textile panel with a vertically composed embroidered imagery of three individuals on boats on a river. The satin stitch embroidery is composed of fine silk threads and the panel is unmounted and the length of silk is much longer than the embroidered section measures 47.5 inches by 7 inches wide. The embroidered section measures about 20.5 inches within that. The narrow textile panel could have been a wall hanging or clothing band. In fig.12, we see a very similar textile panel which shows that this particular imagery of human figures on boats or on the banks of a river surrounded by flora and fauna, with bridges and pagodas in the background is a recurrent one. In a photo of Mary and Kenneth Cousland's wedding, Kenneth's sister Jessie is seen wearing a similar long embroidered scarf that might have been passed down to her by her parents.

CONCLUSION

It is interesting to see these textile panels take on new meanings by being passed down from one person to the other. The story of what may have first been acquired by Phillip Cousland and his family during their life in Chao-chow-fu as gifts of gratitude or as artifacts of their own interest in textiles, has transformed and eluded itself with the passing of time. In its new context as objects of research, the symbolism of motifs no longer convey a personal message to the viewer nor speak to a particular person's wealth or status. Instead they act as complex archives of narrative equations that we as researchers attempt to infer and assign values to. Connecting object-based analyses to contextual frameworks of the history of the donor of the objects as well as the socio-political scenario of China in the late Qing dynasty and its history of embroidered visual culture has allowed me to access these textile archives. While this paper introduces one perspective of viewing the textiles through the historical context of certain geographical, imperial, religious and cultural influences, the scope for understanding and analyzing them remains limitless.

NOTES

1. All data relating to the donor's ancestry including Phillip Brunelleschi Cousland's life in China has been sourced from the records of the Fashion Research Collection at Toronto Metropolitan University.
2. Translations of the text from the embroidered textile panels have been sourced using Google translate and discussions with Professor Osmud Rahman (Graduate Program Director, MA Fashion, Toronto Metropolitan University).
3. 高似蘭 Gao Silan was translated from Cousland. 先生 means Mr. 大國手 means a master or someone specialized in a particular skill, often used to describe expertise in the medical field.
4. The term "Forbidden Stitch" refers to a looped or knotted stitch that is believed to be so fine and difficult to embroider that it would often lead to blindness. However, another narrative defines this stitch as being forbidden by a Chinese Emperor because of its association with imperial textiles and the Forbidden City, the Emperor's home (Lim, Shirley, et al. 11)

FIGURES

Fig.1 Red Silk Chinese Banner with Gold Embroidery, ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.003. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.2 Red Silk Chinese Banner with Gold Embroidery, ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC2016.01.003. Embroidered text-left and right. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.3 Tag attached to FRC 2016.01.003. Toronto Metropolitan University. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.4 Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel with Red and Gold Text ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University. FRC 2016.01.009 A. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.5 Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel with Red and Gold Text ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.009 B. Text in Gold2 (Right) 高先生大人雅鑒 : Mr Gao, the great. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.6 Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel with Red and Gold Text ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.009 A. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.7 Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel with Gold Text ca. 1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.009 B. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.8 Black Cotton Chinese Textile Panel with Gold Thread Embroidery, ca.1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.005. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.9 (Left) Woman's Short Informal Robe, fragment, Qing dynasty (1644- 1911), Guangxu period (1875-1908); National Museum in Warsaw; photo by K. Zapolska. BUDDHIST MOTIFS IN CHINESE TEXTILE DECORATIONS at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Accessed 6th December 2024.

Fig.10 (Right) Antique Chinese Mandarin rank badge, Qing period 19th century. Silk and Gilt thread. [AntiquesAtlas](https://www.antiques-atlas.com/antique/chinese_rank_badge_a117/as035a1173). Accessed 6th December 2024.

Fig.11 Chinese Embroidery Samples Glued to Paper Backing , ca.1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.011. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

FIGURES

Fig.12 Chinese Embroidery Samples Glued to Paper Backing , ca.1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.011. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.13 (Left) Cream Silk Embroidered Chinese Textile Panel, ca.1890s. Toronto Metropolitan University FRC 2016.01.006. Photograph by Kanishka Kumar, 2024.

Fig.14 (Right) Old Chinese Silk Embroidery Forbidden Stitch Embroidered Panel Framed-antique, ca.1850-1940. ebay.com. Photograph by dusdde. <https://www.ebay.com/itm/333237900088>. June 18, 2020. Accessed 1st December 2024.

Fig.15 (Right) From the left, Jessie, Clyde and Mary and Kenneth Cousland. Harvey Lean sitting. Wedding of Mary and Kenneth, 24th April, 1925. Photograph provided by the donor to the FRC.

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