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For Immediate Use

Material Choices: Bast and Leaf Fiber Textiles Opens Aug. 26 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA

In a world awash in a global trade of industrially produced cottons and synthetic fabrics, it is easy to forget that all of the cloth needed in any community once had to be woven by hand and that much of it was made from bast or leaf fibers. Today even the word bast, which refers to a layer of fibers found in the stems of plants, is unfamiliar to many people. ‘Material Choices: Bast and Leaf Fiber Textiles’—on display at the Fowler Museum from Aug. 26–Dec. 30, 2007— features a selection of bast and leaf fiber fabrics used around the world and shows how weavers have overcome the notorious challenges of processing and dyeing these materials to create textiles of subtle, natural beauty and sophisticated design.

‘Material Choices’ opens with an introduction to bast and leaf fibers via an unusual array of objects: elegant coats from Japan made of hemp, wisteria and elm fiber; voluminous and beautifully dyed raffia skirts made by the Kuba peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and intricately patterned ceremonial cloths made in the Philippines from abaca, a fiber processed from banana plants. Textiles from these areas, as well as from Indonesia, New Zealand, Korea and Taiwan, provide a look at the vast range of objects made from bast and leaf fibers, while two complete looms demonstrate the ingenious ways in which these fibers have been worked.

Fiber Use in the Pacific

The exhibition next focuses on the Pacific region and considers the relationships between cloth produced on looms and items made with various other techniques including plaiting, twining, and looping. Scholars have long recognized the crucial roles that loom-woven cloth plays in ceremony and society, especially in Southeast Asia, as markers of wealth, heritage, and position. As Austronesian peoples settled the Pacific from Southeast Asia, they carried these ideas with them. Wherever looms are found in the Pacific, they are closely related to Southeast Asian body-tension looms, and they are used exclusively for bast and leaf fibers (primarily hibiscus and banana).

The loom, however, never spread far into the Pacific, and in many parts of Oceania bast or leaf fiber clothing had to be made without this useful piece of equipment. Some striking examples on display include a cloak and skirt twined by hand by Maori women from fibers of the New Zealand flax plant and a hand-plaited pandanus leaf mat from Samoa, so delicate that it can be worn as a garment. Two so-called “grass” skirts, one from the Trobriand Islands and another from Tuvalu, actually prove to be complex assemblages involving diverse plant materials, but no grass! A complete suit of armor made of coconut fiber from Kiribati and a life-sized crocodile figure constructed entirely of looped bast fiber

from the Sepik River in New Guinea demonstrate the impressive sculptural possibilities of these non-loom technologies.

Revival on the Brink of Extinction

Over the course of the twentieth century, hand weaving ceased to be an economically significant activity in most parts of the world due primarily to the industrialization of textile production, the invention of man-made fibers, and the advent of global cloth trade on a massive scale. Even where handlooms continued to operate, weavers typically abandoned bast and leaf fibers produced from local fields and forests in favor of industrially produced cotton or synthetic yarns. By the 1970s, it seemed that the last remaining traditions of bast or leaf fiber hand weaving would be doomed to history.

It is rather remarkable, then, that the first decade of the twenty-first century has found hand-weaving of bast and leaf fibers not only surviving in some communities, but in some cases even thriving under newly globalized conditions. The last section of 'Material Choices' examines the current state of traditions in Japan's famed "snow country" and the Ryukyu Islands, the Philippines, Vietnam, Borneo, and Micronesia that nearly became extinct in the mid-20th century but have now undergone a revival.

The exhibition is punctuated by a selection of rare botanical prints and books on loan from UCLA's Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library and UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, which provide visitors with a look at the source of these fibers through beautiful drawings of hemp, banana, flax, pandanus, pineapple, paper mulberry, and lemba. Field photographs of weavers, and of their products in use, offer more context for understanding bast and leaf fiber uses.

Additional Information

'Material Choices' is curated by Roy Hamilton, curator of Asian and Pacific Collections, the Fowler Museum at UCLA. The accompanying book, co-edited by Hamilton and B. Lynne Milgram, is being published by the Fowler Museum, *Material Choices: Refashioning Bast and Leaf Fibers in Asia and the Pacific* (ISBN: 978-09748729-8-8 soft cover). This exhibition is made possible through the support of the Getty Foundation, R. L. Shep Endowment Fund, UC Pacific Rim Research Program, Asian Cultural Council, Fowler Museum Textile Council, and Manus, the support group of the Fowler Museum.

The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA's School of the Arts and Architecture, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$8 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call (310) 825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Related Programs

Opening Day, Sun., Aug. 26, 2007

Galleries open 12–5 pm

1–4 pm Kids in the Courtyard: Raffia, Ribbons, and Rainbows

Weave yourself a rainbow at this drop-in workshop for families. Over/under, up/down, create a multicolored mat or tapestry using simple techniques.

1 pm and 3 pm Exhibition Tours

Explore 'Material Choices' with curator Roy Hamilton and B. Lynne Milgram, co-editor of the exhibition's accompanying publication.

4 pm Summer Sunset Concert: Lion of Panjshir

Close out your summer with a show of psychedelic folk rock, influenced by traditional Afghan music.

6 pm Members' Reception with Lion of Panjshir at the W Los Angeles-Westwood

Fowler members are invited to the W Los Angeles-Westwood for a poolside reception featuring cocktails and light appetizers. Space limited; reservations required. RSVP by August 17: 310/206-0306 or fowlermembership@arts.ucla.edu

Sun., Sept. 16, 2007 2 pm

Lecture: A Weaver's Perspective: An Insider's Look at Japanese Bast Fiber Textiles

Melissa M. Rinne, assistant curator of Japanese Art at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, examines the tradition of bast fiber textiles in Japan as well as present-day efforts to sustain the craft in contemporary times.

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