

Diana K. Myers and Susan S. Bean, Editors, *From the Land of the Thunder Dragon : Textile Arts of Bhutan*, London, Serindia Publications, Salem, Peabody Essex Museum, 1994, 248 p., 130 colour plates, 20 b&w photos.

Review by Ann Hecht

In recent years there has been a proliferation of books on textiles, especially on India and the far east, and the subjects have become familiar with a surfeit of pictures but not necessarily scholarly texts to accompany them.

It is all the more exciting therefore to find this excellent book on the textiles of Bhutan, a less well known country, written by four experts. The book was published to coincide with a special exhibition 'From the Land of the Thunder Dragon' based on the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum, augmented with further examples from public and private collections. The text is written and edited by Diana K. Myers and Susan S. Bean with contributions from Michael Aris and Françoise Pommaret. As one would expect from such a scholarly volume there are notes, a glossary, a catalogue of the exhibition objects, references, and a detailed index.

It is only in roundabout ways that Bhutan textiles have come into museum collections. The first such were acquired by museums in Britain, brought back by British diplomats, the only western power at the time to have relations with Bhutan. Jane A. Phillips, a patron of the Peabody Essex Museum, was captivated by the exquisite and intricate patterns of the Bhutanese costumes in a collection of textiles from Kathmandu brought into the museum by a dealer in the early 1980s. From that first sighting she began to build the collection on which this catalogue is based.

Textiles in Bhutan are integrated into all aspects of life. They represent prestige, wealth, and forms of payment, in addition to their use in Buddhist ritual. Items of clothing and gifts of cloth mark important social occasions, both small and large, private and

diplomatic. No transaction is complete without the accompanying gift of textiles carefully chosen to accord with the standing of the recipient.

Three areas of Bhutan (following north-south corridors) have distinctive weaving traditions, eastern, north central, and central Bhutan. Eastern Bhutan is renowned for plainweave fabrics, supplementary-weft-patterned fabrics, and supplementary-warp-patterned fabrics such as the popular *aikapur* made in the northern region of eastern Bhutan. It was also a centre for dyeing, especially the warm eastern valleys which were noted for lac production and the production of indigo from a local broadleaved shrub *Strobilanthes flaccidifolius*. Nowadays, synthetic dyes are much in use, though not exclusively; sometimes the natural ingredients include a measure of powdered dye in the bath or, stranger still, yarns dyed with chemicals are later dipped into a natural dye bath !

North central Bhutan, in the Lhunsi district, was the home of the traditional woman's tunic (no longer worn), woven with distinctive techniques of supplementary-weft-patterning, on a warp-faced cotton ground, in wild silk, wool, and bast fibres. This tunic style, the patterning of which is perhaps the most intriguing of all to be found in Bhutan, was later abandoned for the new style of wrapped dress (*kira*) worn now throughout the country by royal command.

The predominant fibre in use in central Bhutan is wool, woven on the horizontal frame loom introduced from Tibet. It is used for blankets and rain coats in the heavier weights, or sold by the yard in the lighter weights for making up into women's dresses and men's robes.

The weaving of western Bhutan does not compare with the sophisticated practices elsewhere, but Thimphu, the capital and the seat of the royal family, has seen many weavers move west following their employers in government service. The Queen of Bhutan takes a personal interest in promoting the traditions of weaving and the Khaling National Handloom Development Project in Thimphu is one of several royal government initiatives to stimulate weaving.

From the Land of the Thunder Dragon is beautifully illustrated throughout with lengthy and helpful captions: indeed, one could learn much about Bhutan and its textiles by simply studying the pictures and reading all the captions. The text of the book, however, lacks structure and gives the appearance of a collection of articles, some of which cover the same ground. Given that more than one person had a hand in the writing of the book, and that the subject was specifically textiles, it might have been helpful if an expert on weaving, spinning, and dyeing had been asked to join them to elucidate in words and with diagrams some of the more specialised techniques.

