



Iridescent Everyday Wear – Indigo, Luster and Pleats

26 April 2012 to 20 January 2013

With the exhibition “Shimmering Everyday Clothes” the Museum der Kulturen turns attention to a singular aspect within the unique clothing tradition of the Miao peoples, presenting select pieces of a textile collection that enjoys worldwide acclaim. The metallicly shimmering skirts worn by Miao women represent artistry in perfection.

The Miao groups number more than nine million people living mainly in the mountainous region of southern China and parts of Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. The Miao fall into roughly a hundred different groups, which use, among other things, clothing styles to mark their identity. Among the Miao, dress simultaneously fulfils clothing, representation, and communication functions. Clothes speak of prosperity, marital status, reputation, ethnic group affiliation, as well as skills in terms of artistry.

Dyed, beaten, pleated

The exhibition “Shimmering Everyday Clothes” focuses on a fascinating aspect of the Miao clothing tradition – the metallicly shimmering, blue pleated skirts – and sheds light on the unique materiality and expressiveness of these handcrafted fabrics. Weaving, dyeing, and pleating are techniques found across the world in rich variety. The show makes reference to this by exemplarily exhibiting three pieces from other cultures. However, owing to their singularity, the pleated skirts of the Miao are unmistakably the celebrated stars of the exhibition. The amazing fabrics feature three special tokens: the midnight-blue, almost black indigo hue, the many pleats that lend the fabric a sculpture-like stiffness, and the metallic sheen. The fabrics are produced by Miao women by hand; the knowledge concerning the many work steps is passed down from one generation to the next.

Artistry in perfection

The skirts impress by their simplicity: they consist of a pleated skirt section and a high wrap-around. The wrap equipped with fixing bands is easy to don and adapts to the silhouette of the woman wearing it. The midnight-blue tone of the fabric is produced by repeated dyeing in indigo. After this the cloth is coated in layers of albumen, plant extracts, and ferrous clay. The metallic sheen is achieved by beating. For this purpose the panel of cloth is laid out on a stone slab and repeatedly pounded with a wooden mallet. Watching the women at work explains the energy and power that impacts on the material. Finally the cloth is folded into pleats with the aid of rice starch, which not only keeps the pleats in place but also lends the fabric its typical stiffness and unusual materiality. Due to the vast number of vertical pleats, a skirt is likely to consist of huge quantities of cloth, which is why seams often measure ten metres and more.

Time for pleating

Shiny materials and surfaces are often associated with special value, which is why representational objects often consist of valuable hard materials such as minerals, stone, metal, or wood, which are difficult to work. The Miao skirts' unusual metallic sheen grants them a semblance of value, while the cloth's texture and copiousness reflect the immense input in terms of material, time, and skill. Passing on this knowledge to the next generation plays an important role in shaping cultural identity.

The exhibition was designed and realized by the guest curator Walter Bruno Brix, who is not only known for his work as an artist but also in his capacity as an art historian and textile specialist. He has a fine sense for objects and spaces, and special locales with their untold stories habitually rouse his artistic interest.