

# Finely Felt

Craig Wallen's Gallery 51 in Philadelphia recently showed a rare collection of early Mongolian resist-dyed felts belonging to Sam Coad. Discovered preserved under layers of bedding in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, no more than about three dozen are known worldwide, the oldest of which have been C-14 dated to the mid- to late Ming period.

Sam Coad has made a detailed study of these distinctive red and white resist-dyed felts. The oldest group, thought to date from the 15th-16th century, is made from good quality wool, with the curls of the fleece visible on the felted surface (1). Subjects, in both 'portrait' and 'landscape' formats, tend to be of an auspicious nature, and stylistically the art often resembles that of the Yuan period rather than the Ming.

The second group, probably made in the 17th century, is characterised by the use of a coarse, kempy lowland wool, similar to that found in the Ming Imperial Palace carpets from the Forbidden City in Beijing. The drawing is highly accomplished and examples appear in both portrait and landscape formats, with the latter usually having an additional lower skirt.

Pieces of the third and largest group, probably from the 18th century, are made from a uniform, even, felt. All known examples to date are in landscape format, with a lower panel, and have 'Greek key' borders.

Until the Yuan period, (1260-1341) the Chinese considered the felts and other woollen textiles produced by Mongols and other steppe nomads as the crude production of their barbarian neighbours to the north. The Han Chinese were the masters of silk, the foundation of their wealth, which involved an international trade stretching from the Pacific to the Mediterranean. The nomadic peoples of Inner Asia had traditionally been suppliers only of raw materials such as jade and horses. However,

following the conquest of the Middle Kingdom and the foundation of the Yuan (Mongol) dynasty, even the most refined Chinese art became amenable to influence from the steppes. Though the Yuan rulers were rapidly acculturated by their Chinese subjects, they retained a strong identification with the nomadic world of their ancestors which was transmitted to the courtly arts of the period.

It was during this time that felt carpets developed a status as luxury goods. Yuan sources describe the demand from the imperial court for fine felt textiles. According to one source, the quality of felt carpets became so refined that their artistry was said to have equalled that of the best knotted-pile carpets and at times even surpassed it.

This group of resist-dyed felts fills a void between the archeological material and the present, because felts are usually totally utilitarian, being used and then discarded. But our survivors have a high enough graphic value to have been treasured and preserved within the Tibetan monastic environment. Four examples have been C-14 tested, with three giving dates in the late 15th and 16th centuries, and one, inconclusively, in the late 17th.

The felts have stencil-drawn designs with additional freehand elements which are produced using paste-resists. They are then dyed red, although some show evidence that other colours were also applied (yellow and sometimes blue). There are three different dye



1. Above: Group 1 fragment (detail), showing plum blossom, bamboo and pine, 15th/16th century (?). The elements are drawn in early Ming style.

2. Left: Group 2 felt (detail), Ming period 17th century (?). This felt uses the lowland wool and horizontal format characteristic of group 2



groups. The oldest ones use a beautiful slightly variegated strawberry red madder. Some of the lowland wool felts have a darker, more bluish-red dye, tentatively identified by Nobuko Kajitani as lac. The most recent examples have a very even madder colour.

Typically we find depictions of a wide range of flora and fauna. Deer, with leg articulation and floral dappled patterns like those found on early (6th century) Silk Road textiles, are a particularly favoured motif among the early examples (see HALI 130, p.99).

Most of the known examples were collected in Tibet, however, the exact place of manufacture remains a mystery, although the subject matter is clearly Sino-Mongolian, not Tibetan.

## Ulan - Early Mongolian Felts

Gallery 51 with Sam Coad Rare Textiles  
51 North 2nd Street, Philadelphia  
Pennsylvania  
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