

THE EMPIRE **STRIKES** BACK

NUNZIO CRISA

'Intrecci Cinesi', currently at the Moshe Tabibnia Gallery in Milan is a major exhibition with an associated research programme, publication and lecture series on the subject of classical period Chinese carpets and textiles.



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CHINA AND CHINESENESS are back in vogue. However, while in centuries past this was mostly to do with Western fascination for everything 'Oriental' – a process related to Age of Enlightenment, not to forget colonialism – the current situation is driven by economics only, and the cash flow has been reversed.

There should be little doubt indeed that the Land of the Dragon is now the key global player, both economically and politically, and this might last for a while. As a consequence, in recent years events aimed at enhancing China's global image have flourished, such as the Beijing Olympics or the Shanghai World Expo. Even Hollywood has been put at work to help legitimise this new look, and the 'Kung-fu Panda' cartoon movies have rapidly and deservedly become a roaring success.

All this, however, also has positive collateral effects for those interested in art. Various governments, in their eager search for celebrations of 'bilateral friendship', are more than happy to provide visibility, if not direct support, to events somehow linked to Chinese culture. Such is the case in Italy, where 2011 has been designated the 'Year of Chinese Culture in Italy'. This allowed Moshe Tabibnia to win official patronage for his most recent project, 'Intrecci Cinesi', a close examination of textile art through the study and display and of some important examples of period Chinese carpets and textiles.

This is the Milan gallery's third major project since 'Trame Rivelate' in 2008 (HALI 157, pp.128-131) and 'Crivelli e Brera' at Milan's Pinacoteca di Brera in 2009-2010 (HALI 163, pp.98-99). The event runs from 12 October to 10 December 2011 and consists of multiple, interrelated parts: the exhibition with some fifty works, including carpets, textiles and tapestries; the presentation of a recent study of period Chinese textiles – a programme of four subject talks by scholars and academics; and a fully illustrated catalogue with photographs and information on fifteen additional works that are not on show.

The works displayed span the 15th to the early 19th centuries, including nine woven artefacts from the Ming era. Visitors will have the chance to see some of the most important early Chinese weavings in private hands, some recognisable from international auctions or the pages of notable publications in decades past. Not only carpets are on display, but also a dozen Chinese textiles (including four *kesi*), a couple of 18th century French tapestries, and a rather interesting 16th century Italian velvet showing the influence Chinese culture had on Western society when Europe was swept up by the fashion for *Chinoiserie*.

China's principal gateway to the West was the Tarim Basin and its Silk Road oases, so it makes sense to include some carpets from what the native Uighurs call East Turkestan and the Chinese label Xinjiang (New Frontier) in the Milan show. Some twenty pieces from the area should provide sufficient insight to these fascinating carpets, with their received influences from and to both West and the East,

1 Ming scrolling leaf stem carpet fragment, China, 15th or 16th century. 1.12 x 1.30m (2'10" x 4'3"). Gallery Moshe Tabibnia, Milan, Italy

2 Ming floral carpet fragment, China, second half 16th century, 1.80 x 2.80m (5'11" x 9'2"). Gallery Moshe Tabibnia, Milan, Italy



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in particular their links to Chinese weavings.

The planned lecture programme is also of considerable interest, especially a discussion of the results from a scientific study of red and yellow dyes used in antique Chinese carpets. As readers surely know, the ton-sur-ton shades of various yellows, oranges and apricots often seen in period Ningxia carpets are mostly the result of the use of a fugitive red dye. This is because, unlike dyers from the Tarim Basin or the Gansu area who used madder (*Rubia tinctorum*, *Rubia cordifolia*) to obtain red, those from Ningxia used Sappan wood (*Caesalpinia sappan*), a soluble reddish dyestuff obtained from the red heartwood of a tree native to tropical Asia, that was not fast and faded quite rapidly. Whether Chinese dyers were aware of the fugitive nature of their red dyes and the resulting yellow shades were an intentional and desired outcome, may perhaps be answered here.

Although only indirectly related to this event, there is another point calling for clarifi-

cation. Moshe Tabibnia was the main protagonist of plans for the establishment of a Museum of Antique Textile Art in Milan (MATAM), that was scheduled to open some time in 2011 (HALI 163, p.98). What happened to it? Official news is MATAM still is a strong, lively and ongoing project, and indeed lent several carpets to 'Intrecci Cinesi'. Moreover, a good number of carpets from the MATAM collections are on loan to the Cini Foundation in Venice, where they will form the bulk of the holdings of the newly formed 'Museo del Tappeto', currently under rapid development on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, facing St Mark's Square and just a short gondola ride from Harry's Bar – Orson Welles, Truman Capote and Ernest Hemingway would have appreciated it, as we do.

INTRECCI CINESI

Moshe Tabibnia Gallery,
Via Brera 32, Milan, Italy

12 October – 10 December 2011
www.moshetabibnia.com