

ONLINE TALK: SILK

Event description

The world of fashion would not be what it is today without silk. The Romans immediately fell in love with silks allure - silks from China where, for nearly 3,000 years, silk was China's best-kept secret. Silk can be produced from a range of insect larvae but became most widely produced from silkworms, the *Bombyx mandarina*, and its domesticated descendant, *Bombyx mori*. China developed production techniques that gave it the monopoly on production, transporting its silk to the rest of the world via the ancient silk trading routes. It was not only garments that were made using silk but paper, fishing lines, bowstrings and canvases for painting. Although the finest silks could now be argued to be produced in Italy, China's influence in the history of silk is untenable.

Silk's ability to absorb colour when dyed, its lightness and effervescent glow mean it is often considered one of, or the finest of fabrics. It continues to catch attention in a room when worn and adorn the finer aspects of our homes and accessories. Its enduring qualities are imbued with wealth, glamour and status. From silk weaving mills in the UK, research into silk trading along the silk road and the history of silk's significance across the world, our Silk event will bring together a range of voices in the silk industry that will traverse time, continents, and expertise.

List of speakers

Angela Sheng

Angela Sheng began working on the Asian textile collection at the Royal Ontario Museum in 1985. In 1996 she embarked on researching the "Silk Road" silks as a participant of Reuniting Turfan's Scattered Treasures project (jointly organized by Yale and Peking University). She then expanded her research to include indigenous clothing of southwest China, culminating in *Writing With Threads*, both a traveling exhibition and a catalogue in 2008-09. Having received a five-year Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 2017, she has since been focusing on the little-known contribution of nomadic peoples to knowledge transmission via textiles, while teaching art history at the School of Arts, McMaster University in Canada.

Description of talk:

How Compound Weaves travelled along the "Silk Road"

Using more than one set of warp and weft each, early weavers had innovated loom set-ups to mechanically repeat patterns in textiles. Some favoured showing patterns in the warp face, as revealed by

some ancient Chinese jin-silk finds dated to ca. 500 BCE. Others preferred featuring patterns in the weft face, as attested by a few wool fragments (taqueté) from Roman-occupied sites on the eastern and Egyptian Mediterranean coast, dated to the first century. By the fifth century, however, weft-faced compound silks had shown up in eastern Central Asia and north-western China. There, new kinds of compound weaves in silk emerged in the subsequent centuries, especially the samitum. By the tenth century, an even more complex double weft-faced compound satin was woven in silk for the Khitan elite who ruled northern China from 907 to 1125. But then it disappeared. How did the technologies of compound weaves evolve and why? What weaves resulted in China and west of China? This talk seeks to answer these questions.

Mary Schoeser

Mary Schoeser is a leading authority in the field of textiles and is Honorary President of the UK Textile Society. As an adviser on historic textiles and wallpaper, she has worked with organisations such as English Heritage, the National Trust, Liberty in London, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Mary has organised many textile exhibitions, including a collaboration with the Design Museum at the University of California, Davis, to highlight elements of their collection researched in connection with Textiles: The Art of Mankind. Her previous publications include *International Textiles and World Textiles*.

Description of talk:

In it together: the creation of England's silk industry

Most people interested in textiles - and especially in silks - have heard of the refugee Huguenots and their impact, especially associated with Spitalfields. But there is much more to the emergence of the English silk industry. In this talk, Mary Schoeser outlines the range of contributors and illustrates their inventiveness as they strive to survive in the face of changing fashions from c.1600 to c.1825.

Neil Thomas of Gainsborough (www.gainsborough.co.uk)

Neil Thomas has over 30 years' experience in the Jacquard woven textiles industry all spent at Gainsborough. Having worked in all departments from manufacturing to design and sales, Neil has an unparalleled knowledge of the weaving industry and how to translate clients' ideas into reality. He has been involved in some of the most prestigious projects at stately homes, museum, galleries, film productions and landmark hotels worldwide. His fascination with historical reproductions is only matched by his interest in creating and using cutting edge design and innovative yarns. Neil has held the Royal warrant on behalf of Gainsborough since 2004 and has overseen many projects for Royal residences in the UK and overseas.

Description of talk:

Gainsborough

Established in 1903 in Sudbury, Suffolk, Gainsborough is amongst Britain's last remaining silk weaving houses and the only one still dyeing its own yarns, a crucial element of the traditional process.

Having worked at Gainsborough for over 30 years, Neil Thomas has an unrivalled knowledge of the silk weaving industry. His talk will look at the fascinating history of how and why Suffolk became the home of silk weaving in the UK. He will take you through the manufacturing process of silk weaving, from the dyeing of the yarn, through the design process, weaving on historic looms, to the applications of the final luxurious fabric.

Gainsborough holds one of the UK's leading textile archives and Neil will give an insight into just some of the exciting projects that Gainsborough have been involved in, both past and present, as well as looking at what the future holds for the artisanal craft of silk weaving.

Rezia Wahid MBE

Rezia Wahid is an artist-weaver, who specialises in hand weaving with fine yarns, mainly silk. Rezia was appointed an MBE for her weaving and contributions to Arts in 2005. Rezia researches fine natural yarns and natural dyes from different parts of the world, the natural therapeutic properties of weaving and how it benefits, tells stories and connects. Rezia produces signature works of gossamer-light woven cloths that seek to evoke 'air', 'peace' and 'tranquillity'. Her workshops and performances are tailored to engage a wide range of audiences and designed to be environmentally friendly as well as seeking to build bridges to connect and impact. Her work has been described by Denis May "like an anthology of poetry..."

Rezia's 3rd solo show 'dancing in the womb' will be exhibited at Whitchurch silk Mill from 16th July till 4th September 2022.

Description of talk:

Rezia Wahid will talk about her experiences as a weaver who has been weaving with natural silk yarns for more than two decades.

Rezia will share her reasons for choosing to use spun silk as a warp yarn and silk organzine as her weft yarn which she found after investigating and experimenting with natural yarns. She will explain why her artistic explorations and inspirations are transferred into silk: how silk interprets those feelings as a tactile form and the visual aesthetics.

Sue Tapliss of Whitchurch Silk Mill (www.whitchurchsilkmill.org.uk)

Sue Tapliss is a museum curator, Director of Whitchurch Silk Mill, the oldest working silk mill in the UK,

and an advocate for museums and heritage and the difference they can make to people's lives and communities. Sue was formerly Curator at the Will Museum and Sainsbury Gallery, leading the project to create the Sainsbury Gallery, bringing world-class culture to Hampshire.

Description of talk:

Whitchurch Silk Mill is a Grade 2* listed Regency watermill on the banks of the River Test. This historic silk mill is an important industrial landmark that celebrates and reflects the rich history of weaving.

Whitchurch Silk Mill is now a working museum, the country's oldest operational silk mill and a gem of industrial heritage on the River Test in rural Hampshire. With hands-on weaving displays and a programme of events and activities the mill provides a great family day out. It also has a special exhibition space which hosts a changing programme of displays celebrating textiles, arts, and crafts.

At the heart of the mill, weavers preserve living weaving heritage dating back nearly 200 years. The mill has woven silk for renowned clothing companies such as Turnbull & Asser, Burberry, Ede & Ravenscroft, as well as for television and screen and members of the British Royal Family. By preserving the art of silk weaving at the Mill, this working museum delights visitors and makes its way to a sustainable future.