

THE RECEPTION AND TRANSFORMATION OF MING DYNASTY TEXTILES IN THE TIMURID COURT: EVIDENCE FROM THE ROYAL RECEPTION IN A LANDSCAPE MINIATURE

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Introduction.

During the Yongle period (1403–1424), the Ming dynasty and the Timurid Empire stood at the height of their respective political and cultural development, representing two of the most powerful regimes at opposite ends of Asia. With the continued operation of the Silk Road, diplomatic exchanges between the two states became increasingly frequent. Within this context, the circulation of luxury goods—particularly silk textiles—emerged as a crucial medium of courtly interaction. Such material exchanges not only reflected diplomatic relations but also reveal complex and subtle processes of cultural negotiation.

Main part.

The Timurid miniature *Royal Reception In A Landscape*, now housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art, provides a valuable visual archive for examining these processes. The gold-woven garments, canopies, and decorative motifs depicted in the painting clearly incorporate visual elements derived from Ming dynasty textiles, allowing us to observe the dynamic interaction and integration of textile traditions between the two courts. This essay argues that these elements were not simply copied or passively adopted; rather, they were consciously selected and reorganized within the Timurid court's aesthetic framework and social hierarchy. Through a close visual analysis of *Royal Reception In A Landscape*, this study explores how Ming dynasty textiles were “translated” into the Timurid courtly context and transformed into a visual language endowed with local meaning.

1. Historical and Cultural Exchanges between the Ming Dynasty and the Timurid Empire. In the late fourteenth century, the Ming dynasty and the Timurid Empire rose simultaneously at the eastern and western ends of Asia. Formal contact between the two powers began in 1387, when Timurid envoys were dispatched to the Ming court. Eight years later, the Ming dynasty sent its first diplomatic mission to Samarkand. During this early phase of contact, tensions arose: Timurid forces

detained Ming envoys and prepared for military action. Timur himself died in the winter of 1405 while leading an eastern campaign.

Following a period of intense internal political struggle, Timur's son Shah Rukh emerged as the ruler of the empire and achieved reunification of Timurid territories in 1409. Unlike his father, Shah Rukh pursued policies that emphasized economic and cultural development and favored peaceful foreign relations. During his reign (1409–1447), diplomatic missions were exchanged frequently between the Ming court and the Timurid Empire, leading to a notable intensification of political, economic, and cultural interaction. On the Ming side, the Yongle Emperor Zhu Di actively promoted diplomacy toward Central Asia, and exchanges between the two courts reached an unprecedented level.

Accounts of these exchanges survive in both Chinese and Persian sources. Chinese records include the *Ming Veritable Records* (《Ming Shilu 明实录》) and Chen Cheng's travel report *Record of the Western Regions and Foreign States*. Persian sources include Khwaja Ghiyāth al-Dīn's *Account of Shah Rukh's Embassy to China* and Abd al-Razzaq Samarqandī's *The Rise of the Two Auspicious Stars*. [1. p, 106-108].

A comparative reading of these texts reveals the symbolic importance of diplomatic gifts. For example, *The Rise of the Two Auspicious Stars* records that *in 1417 the Ming emperor dispatched envoys to Herat bearing numerous gifts, including falcons, patterned silks, red damasks, and porcelain vessels*. [2, p.283] Correspondingly, the *Ming Veritable Records* note that *a Ming mission departed Beijing in 1416 and arrived in Herat the following year, presenting Shah Rukh and his sons with bolts of fine silk and gauze*. [3]

In addition to textual sources, several paintings visually document these exchanges, including *Groom Leading a Horse* Figure 1, *White Gyr Falcon* Figure 2 and the *Royal Reception In A Landscape* Figure 3, *Leading a Horse*, painted by a Ming court artist, depicts a white horse presented by Shah Rukh to the Yongle Emperor, while *White Gyr Falcon* represents a falcon sent in return by Zhu Di. *Royal reception in a landscape*, by contrast, directly depicts three Ming envoys within a Timurid courtly setting. Together, these works testify to the peak of diplomatic interaction between the two powers. The historical records suggest that the goods exchanged were not ordinary commercial products but highly symbolic courtly luxuries, with textiles occupying a central position. In this sense, silk functioned as a form of material “lubricant” in early Ming–Timurid diplomacy, providing the historical foundation for the sumptuous garments and decorative elements depicted in ‘*royal reception in a landscape*’.



Figure 1 Groom Leading a Horse

Collected by Topkapı Palace Museum



Figure 2 White Gyrfalcon

Collected by Topkapı Palace Museum



Figure 3 Royal Reception in a Landscape,

the double frontispiece of a Shahnama (Book of Kings) of Firdausi

Collected by Cleveland Museum of Art

1. *Visual Structure and Courtly Hierarchy in the 'royal reception in a landscape' Miniature.* Royal reception in a landscape now in the collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, is a Timurid miniature composed of two independent album leaves of equal size, each measuring 32.7 by 22 centimeters. The painting depicts a court banquet set within a lush garden landscape, where flowers are in full bloom and green grass stretches across the foreground. A princely couple sits beneath a canopy, while guests and attendants, dressed in elaborate garments, are arranged around them. Musicians perform, servants present food, and the overall atmosphere conveys ceremonial splendor.

According to the museum's documentation, the two leaves originally served as illustrations for a copy of the Persian epic *Shahnameh*, completed in 1444 in Shiraz, the capital of the Fars province under Timurid rule. Prince Iskandar Sultan was the most important patron of the Shiraz miniature tradition, and during his rule the local school reached its artistic peak. *Royal* [4, p.17-23] *reception in a landscape* was thus likely produced in Shiraz and depicts a grand reception hosted by the Timurid ruler for envoys from various regions.

At the center of the composition on the right stands a canopy adorned with richly patterned textiles featuring dragon motifs. Beneath it, golden brocade cushions are placed atop a carpet, upon which the prince and his consort are seated. To the left and in front of the canopy, five groups of guests are arranged: three central groups sit on rectangular carpets decorated with geometric patterns, while one group directly in front and the three Ming envoys at the far left kneel directly on the grass. At the far-left edge of the image, six attendants manage horses, cheetahs, and falcons, underscoring the court's wealth and power. In the foreground, servants dressed in gold-woven robes move among the guests, carrying lacquered tables laden with food, playing harps, or holding blue-and-white porcelain vessels filled with wine and delicacies. The most visually striking feature of the painting is the abundance of gold-woven garments worn by figures across all levels of the court.

Notably, the spatial distribution of figures—across carpets, grass, and the elevated canopy—constructs a clear hierarchical order centered on the prince. The material quality and decorative patterns of garments function as crucial visual markers within this hierarchy, reinforcing distinctions of rank and status.

2. *The Transformation of Ming Textile Elements in the Royal reception in a landscape*. Rather than simply reproducing the appearance of foreign textiles, *Royal reception in a landscape* demonstrates how Ming textile elements were incorporated into the Timurid court's own visual system through selective modification of motifs, garment structures, and usage contexts. Through close examination of the painting's details, it becomes possible to observe how Ming textiles were localized and reinterpreted.

The prince's attire provides a particularly revealing example. He wears a gold-woven robe, yet around the neckline appear three large decorative panels composed of vegetal motifs. This feature derives from the Chinese Yun Jian (cloud collar), [5] a garment accessory that in the Timurid context was typically positioned around the collar, extending over the shoulders both front and back. Such collars could be sewn onto outer garments as detachable ornaments or embroidered directly onto the

fabric. In contrast to the more elaborate and complex cloud-collar designs that developed during the Ming dynasty Figure 4—such as those incorporating persimmon-stem motifs—the collar worn by the prince retains a relatively simple structural form while integrating vegetal patterns characteristic of Islamic art. [6]



**Figure 4 Gold-Decorated Dragon Satin Robe with Cloud-Collar, Coiling Dragons
on Sleeves, Knee Patches, and Braided Fastenings (妆金云肩盘龙纹通袖膝襴龙
缎辮线袍) ,1368**

Collected by **Shandong Museum**

A second example can be found in the canopy beneath which the prince and his consort sit. The canopy textile features gold brocade decorated with dragon motifs. Ceremonial court banquets held great significance in the Timurid court, and textiles used for such canopies were typically made of velvet, silk, or brocade—materials whose high cost rendered them potent symbols of power and status. [7] In contexts involving royal tents or the reception of foreign envoys, the use of such luxurious fabrics became a visual convention. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the selection of a dragon-patterned canopy during the reception of Ming envoys was a deliberate gesture of diplomatic goodwill. Yet while the dragon motif evokes Chinese imperial imagery, the canopy's overall decorative scheme emphasizes blue-and-gold coloration and Islamic floral designs, with winding vegetal scrolls surrounding the dragons. In this way, the foreign motif is visually subordinated to a local aesthetic framework.

CONCLUSION

Royal reception in a landscape incorporates numerous elements that testify to cultural exchange and integration between the Ming dynasty and the Timurid Empire, including Chinese-style cloud motifs along the borders of the composition and the blue-and-white porcelain vessels held by attendants. From the gold-woven garments worn by figures at all levels of the court to the richly decorated canopy,

the painting vividly demonstrates how the Timurid court selectively absorbed diverse cultural elements and reconfigured them within its own textile traditions. *Royal reception in a landscape* thus functions not merely as a depiction of a court banquet, but as a visual text of cross-cultural material exchange, revealing how the Timurid court translated foreign textiles into instruments for constructing and reinforcing its own aesthetics of power.

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