



**Cotsen Textile Traces Colloquium**

# **[re]Think Silk**

---

**April 10-11, 2024**

10 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Washington, D.C. (EDT)



THE GEORGE WASHINGTON  
UNIVERSITY MUSEUM  
THE TEXTILE MUSEUM

# Colloquium

[re]Think Silk is an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural examination of silk and sericulture that explores the subject beyond traditional geographic and cultural perspectives. Join established scholars, curators and other specialists as they share their recent research and discoveries on international silk textiles. Panels include "Silk Around the World," which reveals the global range of moths that produce cocoons of silk filament used to make thread. "Silk as an Interface Between Cultures" explores the social and psychological appeal of silk in different regions. Finally, "Silk Innovations" considers contemporary technological and bioengineering efforts to modify silk.

*The [re]Think Silk Colloquium is organized by the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center at The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C. The colloquium is made possible through support from the Rubin-Ladd Foundation and the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection Endowment. We extend special thanks to John E. Vollmer for originating the [re]Think Silk project.*

---

## The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum

Located on GW's campus in downtown D.C., the museum celebrates art, history and world cultures. Public programs and exhibitions are inspired by diverse collections of global textiles and local history. Resources for students and scholars include the peer-reviewed The Textile Museum Journal, the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center and the Albert H. Small Center for National Capital Area Studies.

[www.museum.gwu.edu](http://www.museum.gwu.edu)

---

## Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center

The museum's Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center is dedicated to textile research and houses the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection, which represents a lifetime of collecting by business leader and philanthropist Lloyd Cotsen (1929-2017). One of the world's most significant textile study collections, it comprises nearly 4,000 fragments dating from antiquity to the present, offering insights into human creativity around the world.

[www.museum.gwu.edu/cotsen-textile-traces-study-center](http://www.museum.gwu.edu/cotsen-textile-traces-study-center)

# Day 1

Wednesday, April 10 | 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m. EDT

10:00-11:00

## Welcome Remarks

*John Wetenhall, museum director*

## Introduction

*John E. Vollmer, president, Vollmer Cultural Consultants, Inc.*

## Keynote Lecture: New Directions in Silk Studies

*Dr. Zhao Feng, dean, School of Art and Archaeology, Zhejiang University, and honorary director, National Silk Museum, China*

11:00-12:00

## Panel 1: Silk Around the World

### Wild Silks: West Africa, Southern Africa and Madagascar

*Dr. Richard S. Peigler, professor, University of the Incarnate Word, Texas*

### Wild Silk in India: Connecting to the Land for Sustainable Development

*Karen Selk, textile artist and founder, Treenway Silks, Canada*

### Twist and Turn: Silk and the Problem of Quality in Medieval and Early Modern Italy

*Dr. Giorgio Riello, professor, European University Institute, Italy, and the University of Warwick, United Kingdom*

12:00-12:30

## Panel Discussion and Q&A

*Moderated by Lee Talbot, curator, The Textile Museum Collection*

---

# Day 2

Thursday, April 11 | 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m. EDT

10:00-10:15

## Introduction

### Silk Textiles in the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection

*Karthika Audinet, academic coordinator, Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center*

10:15-11:15

## Panel 1: Silk as an Interface Between Cultures

### Silk in the Cultural Landscape of 16th- to 20th-century Mesoamerica and the Andes

*Dr. Elena Phipps, conservator and curator, Metropolitan Museum of Art (retired) and lecturer, UCLA*

### Tuyuhun Usage of Northern Wei Silk

*Dr. Mariachiara Gasparini, assistant professor, University of Oregon*

## Panel Discussion and Q&A

*Moderated by Dr. Shelley Burian, Lisa and Bernard Selz Curator*

11:15-12:30

## Panel 2: Silk Traits, Technology and Innovation

### Sericulture and Applications in Science, Technology and Art

*Silvia Cappellozza, researcher, Council for Agricultural Research and Agricultural Economy Analysis, Italy*

### Silk in Regenerative Design and Architecture

*Dr. Laia Mogas-Soldevila, DumoLab research director and assistant professor, University of Pennsylvania*

## Discussion and Q&A

*Moderated by Karthika Audinet, academic coordinator, Cotsen Textile Traces Study Center*

---



# Abstracts and Speakers

Wednesday, April 10

## KEYNOTE LECTURE

### New Directions in Silk Studies

*Zhao Feng, dean, School of Art and Archaeology, Zhejiang University, and honorary director, National Silk Museum, China*

Three projects showing new trends in silk research will be discussed: the creation of a digital silk database; international collaborations between museums and institutes; and, importantly, more research focusing on textile cultural exchange, such as *New Study on Silk Taquete and Samite Along the Silk Roads*.



### About Zhao Feng

Zhao Feng is the dean of the School of Art and Archaeology at Zhejiang University, honorary director of the China National Silk Museum, and Ph.D. supervisor at Donghua University and Zhejiang Sci-Tech University. He is also vice president of the China Museum Association, a member of the Executive Board of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and president of the International Association for the Study of Silk Road Textiles (IASSRT). His research focuses on textile archaeology and conservation, museology and the history of silk art on the Silk Roads. He was a fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (1997-98), the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto (1999) and the British Museum in London (2006). He has published more than 100 papers and authored and edited numerous books in Chinese and English, including *A History of Chinese Silk*; *Chinese Silks*; *Textiles From Dunhuang*; *Chinese Silks and the Silk Roads*; *Textiles Along the Silk Roads: Origin, Transmission and Exchange*; and *Chinese Textile Archaeology and Scientific Research*.

## Wild Silks: West Africa, Southern Africa and Madagascar

*Richard S. Peigler, professor, University of the Incarnate Word, Texas*

Three uses of wild silks in the African region have very different historical, ethnographic and economic features. This will be demonstrated through a discussion of “anaphe” silks, Kalahari wild silk and “landibe” silk, with each type of silk being used in a different region for a different purpose.

### About Richard S. Peigler

Richard S. Peigler is a professor of biology at the University of the Incarnate Word, where he has taught since 1998. He graduated from Clemson University and earned a Ph.D. in entomology from Texas A&M University. He worked as a curator of entomology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science for several years in the 1990s. His research is on the systematics and ecology of moths of the worldwide family Saturniidae, with a focus on those in North America and eastern Asia. He has studied wild silks in Japan, India, China, South Africa and Madagascar. He has authored or co-authored books, book chapters and numerous articles on the Saturniidae and wild silks.





## Wild Silk in India: Connecting to the Land for Sustainable Development

*Karen Selk, textile artist and founder, Treenway Silks, Canada*

Wild silk is much more than the miraculous journey of metamorphosis from caterpillar to silken luxury. It is tightly woven to an ancient living culture raising tasar, muga and eri silkworms in the remote forests of central and eastern India. Raising wild silkworms, reeling cocoons, spinning fiber and weaving silk cloth provides sustainable work and a regular income while protecting the environment, lifting the status of women and maintaining a traditional lifestyle. Photos and stories captured from weavers, spinners and silkworm farmers over 30 years of field research will transport you into their homes and villages to witness the love and dedication involved in each part of the process, from soil to cloth.

### About Karen Selk

Silk has provided Karen Selk with a thread that binds together travel, research, writing, artwork, educating and managing a successful business selling silk yarns and fibers for 35 years. She has given hundreds of workshops and presentations on silk and weaving traditions worldwide and has written numerous articles on silk. Her passion for learning about all aspects of silk has led her throughout Asia and the wild silk forests of India for more than 30 years. The culmination of her field research has been published in the book *In Search of Wild Silk: Exploring a Village Industry in the Jungles of India*. Selk lives in the Salish Sea on Salt Spring Island, Canada.



## Twist and Turn: Silk and the Problem of Quality in Medieval and Early Modern Italy

Giorgio Riello, professor, European University Institute, Italy, and the University of Warwick, United Kingdom

Pre-modern European artisans, craftsmen and entrepreneurs considered reeling methods as a major way to improve the quality of finished products, thus avoiding spoiling expensive raw silk through faulty processing. A complex machine to reel and throw (filatoio) or twist (torcitoio) silk solved a major problem: Hand-reeling or twisting with a wheel could not provide a homogeneous torsion due to a lack of coordination between the turns of the spindles and the turns of the reel. Examining Bolognese and later Piedmontese systems of silk throwing and reeling, Dr. Riello discusses the innovative ways that machines and technologies helped boost quality, production and productivity.



### About Giorgio Riello

Giorgio Riello is professor of early modern history at European University Institute (EUI), Florence, Italy, and professor of global history and culture at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom. Before moving to the EUI, he was director of Warwick in Venice (2018-19), director of the Warwick Institute of Advanced Study (2014-17) and director and chair of the Pasold Research Fund (2010-19). Dr. Riello has published extensively on the history of material culture, trade and consumption in early modern Asia and Europe, and has authored and co-edited numerous books, including *Back In Fashion: Western Fashion Since the Middle Ages* (Yale University Press, 2020); *Luxury: A Rich History* (Oxford University Press, 2016, co-authored with P. McNeil); and *Cotton: The Fabric That Made the Modern World* (Cambridge University Press, 2013, winner of the 2014 World History Association Bentley Prize). Dr. Riello is currently directing a large-scale, ERC-funded research project entitled "CAPASIA: The Asian Origins of Global Capitalism, 1500-1800," which considers the system of trade in the Indian Ocean. A book on silk in pre-modern Eurasia in collaboration with Dagmar Schaefer, Max Planck Institute, Berlin, is forthcoming.



Thursday, April 11

## Silk in the Cultural Landscape of 16th- to 20th-century Mesoamerica and the Andes

Elena Phipps, conservator and curator, Metropolitan Museum of Art (retired), and lecturer, UCLA

Since the 16th century, silk has permeated the cultures of the Americas in many forms. Arriving by ship to Acapulco and Lima from Asia, via the Manila Galleons, or brought by the Spanish flotas from Europe, it came as raw materials, threads and woven cloth. Silk was also introduced as “seed” to be raised in a number of attempts — some more successful than others — to establish the art of sericulture in the Americas. This presentation looks at selected examples of the raising, making and using of silk in the region, from the 16th century to the present day, focusing on the Indigenous communities who produced and used it.

### About Elena Phipps

Elena Phipps received a Ph.D. in pre-Columbian art history and archaeology from Columbia University in 1989. She worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art for 34 years as a textile conservator and was co-curator for two major textile exhibitions: *The Colonial Andes: Tapestries and Silverwork 1430-1830*, in 2004 (whose catalog was awarded the CAA Alfred Barr Jr. Award and the Mitchell Prize) and *The Interwoven Globe: Worldwide Textile Trade* (2013). She has published widely, including *Cochineal Red: The Art History of a Color* (MMA, 2010); *Looking at Textiles: A Technical Terminology* (Getty Publications, 2013); and “Silk, Cotton, Wild Banana and Piña: Luxury Cloth and Their Materials Connecting Worlds” in *Transpacific Engagements: Exchange, Translation and Visual Culture of Entangled Empires (1565–1898)* (Ayala Foundation and Getty, 2021). From 2011-14, Dr. Phipps served as president of the Textile Society of America. Since 2011, she has taught textile history, techniques and cultures in the Department of World Arts and Culture/Dance, University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA).





## Tuyuhun Usage of Northern Wei Silk

Mariachiara Gasparini, assistant professor, University of Oregon

This presentation analyzes the use and trade of Northern Wei textiles across the border of China and Central Asia between the 5th and 6th centuries. A group of robes, hats, boots, saddles, quivers and other textile items possibly belonging to the Tuyuhun (like those worn by horsemen portrayed on Tuyuhun coffins from Qinghai Province, China) has disclosed the cultural and artistic entanglement with the Hephthalites and Tocharians across the Qaidan Basin and the Trans Himalayas. Although the origin of these people is still debated among scholars, the common use of Chinese silk, which was often traded in exchange for horses, camels, yaks and Persian mares, suggests similar artistic tastes and traditions, as visible from identical patterns and motifs.



### About Mariachiara Gasparini

Mariachiara Gasparini is an assistant professor of Chinese art and architectural history at the University of Oregon. She received a Ph.D. in transcultural studies and global art history from Ruprecht Karl University in Heidelberg, Germany. Her research focuses on Chinese and Central Asian textiles, material culture, wall painting, artists' praxis and Sino-Iranian and Turko-Mongol interactions. She is the author of *Transcending Patterns: Silk Road Cultural and Artistic Interactions Through Central Asian Textiles* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2019) and has contributed a chapter in *Persian Cultures of Power and the Entanglement of the Afro-Eurasian World* (Getty Research Institute Publications, 2024). She is currently co-editing *Volume 6: Trade and Industry: Global Circulation of Local Manufacture and the Migration and Consumption of Textile Products, Both Historically and Contemporaneously* of *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of World Textiles*. Dr. Gasparini is a recipient of the Henry Luce Foundation China Studies Early Career Fellowship 2021-22. Her new research project focuses on Tuyuhun and early Tibetan material culture across Qinghai and Sichuan Provinces, and the trans-Himalayas.

## Sericulture and Applications in Science, Technology and Art

*Silvia Cappelozza, researcher, Council for Agricultural Research and Agricultural Economy Analysis, Italy*

Countries with a tradition of producing silk keep silkworms in specialized genetic banks. Recently, there has been a series of non-textile applications that require greater traceability and the use of silk proteins in their native form (silk shell). For this reason, the offshoring model of silk production, which has significant issues, needs to be reconsidered. Technological applications involve both silk proteins and the chrysalis. Applications also involve using the insect as a bioreactor, namely as a producer of materials useful for humans, and as a model for studying pharmacologically active substances, nanoparticles and various chemicals. Silkworms have also been employed in the bio-construction of artistic artifacts, using rearing techniques that induce the insect, for example, to spin flat, thereby replacing the formation of cocoons.

### About Silvia Cappelozza

Silvia Cappelozza is the research manager responsible for the Sericulture Laboratory at the Council for Agricultural Research and Economics, Agriculture and Environment Research Centre, Padua. She has 30 years of experience in silkworm rearing and breeding, and is a qualified teacher of entomology and pathology. Cappelozza conducted the scientific coordination for the five-year Rural Development Plan project (2017-2023) for the establishment of the first operational group on sericulture in Italy, "Serinnovation" (Veneto Region). She is the lead partner of the Horizon project "ARACNE," which began in 2023. Cappelozza is responsible for her institution and for the production of silkworm eggs for Italian silk producers. She also collaborates with organizations for the training of aspiring silk farmers. She has published over 50 articles in Scopus-indexed journals, serves on the editorial board of three international journals, has obtained a few industrial patents, and has consulted for the FAO and several private companies for the development of sericulture projects abroad.





## Silk in Regenerative Design and Architecture

*Laia Mogas-Soldevila, DumoLab research director and assistant professor, University of Pennsylvania*

Bridging materials science, biomedical engineering and arts and crafts, Dr. Mogas-Soldevila discusses her past work on digital biomaterials manufacturing and silk protein-enabled distributed sensing at MIT MediaLab and Tufts University, as well as current silk-based, large-scale material systems developed at University of Pennsylvania within DumoLab Research. Exploring materials as new design companions, the lab develops architectures that nurture both the human body and planet Earth with research areas including ambient-conditions manufacturing, augmentation of hyper-local material systems, environmentally interactive bio-composites and inclusive material-driven education. Examples include bio-resin blends from chitosan, sodium alginate and silk fibroin used to stiffen soft-knit structures, and biomaterials that are strong, soft, pliable, durable and biodegradable, such as leather from reformulated silk protein.

### About Laia Mogas-Soldevila

Laia Mogas-Soldevila is an assistant professor of graduate architecture and director of DumoLab Research at the Stuart Weitzman School of Design, University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Mogas-Soldevila's research focuses on new sustainable material practices bridging science, engineering and the arts. Over the past 10 years, she has partnered with scientists to redesign materials. Her pedagogy supports novel theory and applied methods understanding biomaterials and bio-based fabrication in product design and architecture. She holds an interdisciplinary doctorate from Tufts University School of Engineering and two master's degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and is a licensed architect with a minor in fine arts by the Polytechnic University of Catalonia School of Architecture in Barcelona and the École Nationale Supérieure de Beaux-Arts in Paris.

---

### Image Credits

**Cover:** Textile fragment (detail), China, Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-1633.\*

**p4:** Bow cover, China, 678-893. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T2735b.\*

**p5:** Textile fragment, North Africa, early 19th century. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-0601.\*

**p6:** Textile fragment; India, Assam; 1670-1700. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-0335.\*

**p7:** Sacred textile, Italy, mid-16th century. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-0425.\*

**p8:** Fragment of a hanging, Peru, 1650-1700. The Textile Museum Collection 91.405a. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1941.

**p9:** Textile fragment; Uzbekistan, Bukhara; Tang dynasty (618-907), 635-785. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-2540.\*

**p10:** Textile fragment; Italy, Venice; c. 1500. Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection T-2876a, b.\*

\* Photos by Bruce M. White Photography.