MARY KAHLENBERG

A Mughal Personage Velvet[1]

MUCH of the splendour of the Mughal court was achieved through the abundant use of rich fabrics lavishly displayed from floor to ceiling, and from head to toe. Many Oriental velvets have been attributed to Persia because the Persian tradition in this area is wider known and Persian velvets have been better preserved. There are indications that some of these pieces were actually produced in India for the Mughal court. Obviously, such pieces carry on the grand Persian velvet weaving tradition of the Safavid period in both technique and design.

Of all fabrics, velvet is the one most synonymous with luxury. Woven with a pile, velvet is a three-dimensional fabric. The Mughals made particular use of this quality by designing velvets in which the motifs were woven in pile, and the background was of flat gold or gilt. Further dimensional effect was achieved by the fact that the pile being woven in one direction would catch the flat light, whereas the gold ground would pick up any shimmering light. Together, it was the perfect combination. Subtleties were added to these spectacular pieces by small voided areas and lines which reflected the surrounding colour.

In paintings such as those which illustrate the Queen's copy of the *Shāh Jahān nāma*[2] we find accurate representations of velvets put to each of the uses described in written accounts of the early European travellers to India. The paintings enable us to identify the places from which the velvets originate. This is clearly indicated by a precise rendering of patterns or figural decoration which can be compared with surviving velvets whose origin is not in question. Thus, the paintings show that the types familiar in the Mughal court included personage velvets of Persian origin, velvets of Italian type, gold examples with Turkish motifs, and others with characteristic Mughal flowering plants.

This evidence is confirmed by reference to the *Aīn i Akbarī* which gives lists of the places from which gold brocaded and plain velvets were obtained for Akbar's court in the late sixteenth century. At this time, gold velvets came from Yazd in Persia, Europe (described as 'Firangi'), Bursa in Turkey and Gujarat and Lahore in India.[3] The inclusion of these last two place names indicates that although the Mughal court imported quantities of velvets from great distances, it certainly was not because its artisans lacked the knowledge of making velvets. It is clear, however, that Mughal ostentation required the widest range of these costly fabrics, and the resources of the court were devoted to obtaining them from every possible source in a calculated attempt to create the maximum impression of power and wealth. Despite its dazzling effect, this display was clearly motivated by political and diplomatic reasons as much as by an aesthetic attitude.

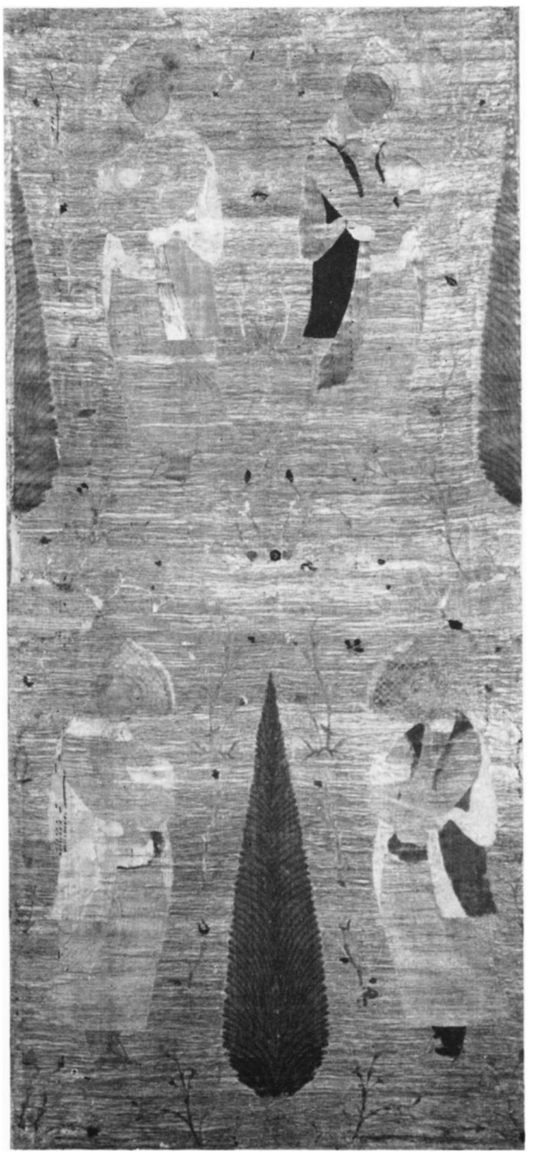
Velvets supplied elegance and comfort to the living area as covers, pillows, floor spreads to accommodate the serving of food and drink, as hangings on walls and over balconies. In his journal of 1616, Sir Thomas Roe described this scene: '. . . before the throne the principall men had erected tents, which encompassed the court, and lined them with velvett, damask and taffety ordinaryly some few with cloth of gould, wherein they retyred and sett to show all theyr wealth.'[4] Bernier, travelling to India in the 1650's, described the King giving audience '. . . under a spacious canopy of velvet or flowered silk,'[5] and elsewhere he records visiting a fine house in Delhi where 'each mattress has a large cushion of brocade to lean upon, and there are other cushions placed around the room, covered with brocade, velvet or flowered satin.'[6]

Aside from their use in furnishings, velvets were used as animal trappings. Roe describes horses '. . . trapped and harnessed in gould velvets.'[7] 'When the King travels,' wrote Terry, travelling in India from 1615–19, 'he hath many elephants thus appointed for guard. They have faire coverings either of cloth or velvet or cloth of silver or gold.'[8] The extent to which velvets were used for garments is obvious when Roe mentions seeing '. . . 200 soldiers well mounted in coats of cloth of gould, velvett, and rich silks.'[9] Velvets were also worn by men of rank as reported by Della Valle in 1623 when he described the 'Prime Minister' wearing a 'sur-coat of velvet, guarded (ornamented) with gold at the bottom.'[10]

Among velvets imported from Persia were Personage velvets, or velvets delineating human figures. Three examples of early seventeenth-century Persian textiles give a clear image of the sumptuousness of both the drawings of the figures and the quality of the textiles themselves. The first example,[11] (Fig.24) is originally from the Jaipur treasury. A set of female figures is repeated along the width. Both the figures and flowers are of silk pile which stands out from the gold background. The velvet forming the ladies' costumes is of deep purple combined with gold and beige tones. Details in the costume are shown as fine black lines in the velvet. One figure holds a snarling dog on a leash, while the other plays with a pet bird. The ladies seem to be enjoying the unreality of an enchanted world where nature is arranged according to a system of gentle undulations.

[1] This article was originally presented at the Sixth International Congress of Iranian Art and Archeology, September 1972, Oxford.
[2] Manuscript of the Shāh Jahān nāma in the Royal Library, Windsor Castle.
[3] ABUL FAZL' ALLAMI: *The Ain i Akbari*, translated by H. BLOCHMANN, I [1873], pp.87–88.
[4] SIR THOMAS ROE: *The Embassy of, to the Court of the Great Mogul,* London [1899], p.126.
[5] FRANÇOIS BERNIER: *Travels in the Mogul Empire,* translated by A. CONSTABLE, London [1891], p.362.
[6] *Ibid.*, p.248.
[7] SIR THOMAS ROE, *op. cit.*, p.284.
[8] EDWARD TERRY: *Early Travels to India*, London [1921], p.306.
[9] SIR THOMAS ROE, *op. cit.*, p.255.
[10] PIETRO DELLA VALLE: *The Travels of, in India*, London [1891], p.248.
[11] Two other pieces of this textile are in The National Museum, New Delhi (≠56.29) and one other is in the Kier Collection.

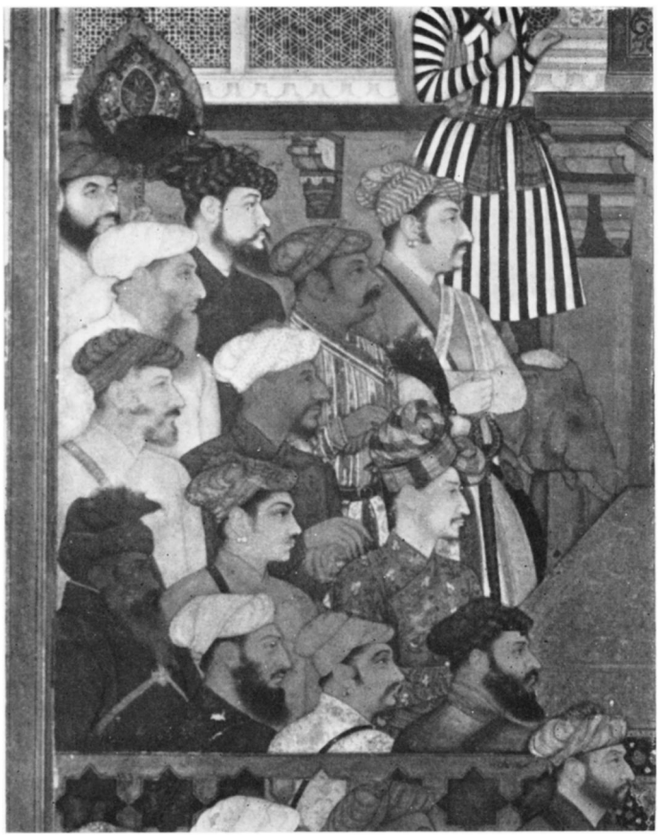
22. Velvet polychrome, Safavid, early seventeenth century. (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, No.962.60).



23. Velvet, polychrome, Safavid, early seventeenth century. (Cleveland Museum of Art, No.32.42.)

24. Velvet polychrome Safavid ,early seventeenth century. (Royal Ontario Museum Toronto No.960.257).

25. Detail from Shāh Jahān nāma, f. 122r. (Royal Library, Windsor Castle.) *Reproduced by Gracious Permission of Her Majesty the Queen.*



26. Detail from Shāh Jahān nāma, f. 50v. (Royal Library, Windsor Castle.) *Reproduced by Gracious Permission of Her Majesty the Queen.*

27. Detail from Shāh Jahān nāma, f. 72r. (Royal Library, Windsor Castle.) *Reproduced by Gracious Permission of Her Majesty the Queen.*

In a second Personage velvet of the same period,[12] (Fig.22) the figures are also set against a gold ground. One set of figures wears a jacket of *boucle d'argent*, rather than velvet. Twelve colours appear throughout this section of three sets of figures: rust, grey, beige, light yellow, green, light green, yellow-green, light blue, grey-blue, blue-green, and blue-red. Detailing is again done with a black line. The sets of Persian ladies become part of the overall decorative effect as they sway in and out. The foliage also corresponds to this undulating rhythm. The clear areas of soft blue, red-orange and rust hold their own against a gold background and sparkling silver blouses. This velvet is signed with the signature of 'Shafi' at the left of the pond.

A third Personage velvet again shows sets of figures placed against a gold ground. All the figures wear silver tunics, but the sleeveless coats, sashes, scarfs, etc., all vary in colour. The spiralling waved pond is brocaded in silver and the fine detailing of the branches on the cypress tree is achieved by painting with a darker green. Groups of male figures are enjoying the scent of a flower while pondering a tree growing alongside a pond. The rhythm of the bodies is less sensuous, being confined to a gentle tilt of the head. Floral sprigs function more as a background, filling the space with a rhythm that echoes the figures[13] (Fig.23).

Velvets with figures were used in India for furnishings and clothing, as were velvets with floral designs. Generally, items were made to show figures to their best advantage. In paintings from the Shāh Jahān nāma, we see velvets decorated with Persian figures used as animal trappings, coverings, and clothing. One shows (detail, Fig.25) an elephant trapping made of a figured velvet with a gold background. The figures of two angels are bending in towards the centre and are surrounded by individual floral plants. It is difficult to see exactly what type of repeat this is, as so much of the fabric is hidden by the large drum. Another painting shows (detail, Fig.26) a group of men at court, in the centre of which is a Persian officer in the Mughal service, wearing a flamboyant turban. He is wearing a cloth of gold, probably a velvet, which has a repeat pattern of seated Persian male figures and flowering trees. Another (detail, Fig.27) shows gold Personage velvets used as covers for the furled court standard. One figure is shown on each standard. (Possibly the matching figure is on the other side.) In this case, the male figure is definitely Persian but the female figure is Chinese. Again, as in all the previously mentioned examples, flowering shrubs grace the area between the figures.

In 1969 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art acquired a velvet with figures in the style of the three previous velvets discussed[14] (Fig.28). The design and the format is the same as the other three, and the detail appears to draw certain characteristics from each. Sets of female figures follow the length of the fabric. There is a slight twist to the bodies, but not the same relaxed grace. A continuous curving line throughout the fabric is achieved by the placement of the figures, by the movement of the shawl and the turn of the head, rather than by a swaying posture of the bodies. There are eight different colours: beige, orange-gold, light green, blue-green, light blue, green, yellow-green, deep red. *Bouclé d'argent* is used for the pond. The colours are juxtaposed, light and dark, rather than being used to carry on the rhythm or to highlight an area of the costume, as in the other velvets.

The turned head is handled in full profile, as is seen in many Indian paintings, and employs the Indian characteristic manner of depicting an eye from an almost frontal view, particularly reminiscent of the Golconda style. A thin blue line, rather than black, sharply defines the face from the background, and continues in the same manner around the body. It is very similar to the outlining of the leaves and blossoms in Indian floral velvets. The branches which come from behind the cypress trees create a direct movement rather than a soft curve. Each stem has a flower growing naturally at the end, rather than artificially arranged according to a decorative vision, as in the three previous velvets.

There is a similarity between the garments here and those in the second velvet discussed (cf. Figs.29 and 30). Both have a headpiece with an egret, hair that falls free down the back, and a few single strands in front of the ears. Both have costumes with a short-sleeve jacket that reaches to the hips, an underblouse with cuffs and a shirt that opens in front, revealing an undershirt. The Los Angeles velvet differs in the following ways: the female figure wears a shawl folded and draped over the left shoulder and under the right arm, in the traditional Indian manner. She also wears an ear ornament and ear-ring. Instead of a scarf around her neck, she wears jewellery of silver and a curious neckpiece. Another distinct difference in the costumes of the figures in this velvet is the use of patterns on the fabric for the garments, rather than solid colours, as was used in all of the other previously shown examples. In this use of patterned fabric, the velvet design fails to achieve the overall rhythm created by the solid coloured costumes. The antecedents of this costume are not at all clear. It appears to be a hybrid of Indian, Persian, and European dress. Such a combination would have been possible in a situation such as the Mughal court, where these three influences met. In particular, the short-sleeve jacket appears to be Persian in origin, though it was introduced into India upon the arrival of the Mughal ladies.[15] The under-blouse is also known as Persian, but the cuffs are of definite European origin. The neckpiece is also puzzling. It appears to be a type of ruff. This type of ruff that falls across the shoulder, rather than standing out stiffly from the neck, was worn both in England and Holland in the first third of the seventeenth century.[16] The skirt with the front opening is a Rajput tradition that became part of the Mughal fashion.[17] This composite costume has also appeared in a Mughal painting of Europeans (Fig.30). In the figure on the left, the short-sleeve jacket, the under-jacket that matches the skirt, the necklace and headpiece, and the flowing shawl,

[12] One other piece of this textile is in the Kier Collection.
[13] Two other pieces of this textile are in the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Victoria and Albert Museum.
[14] Another piece of this textile is in the Kier Collection.

[15] This costume was brought to India by the Mogul ladies, and is referred to as a *nimtana*, a jacket which was frequently put on over the dress, somewhat like a vest, S. N. DAR: *Costumes of India and Pakistan*, Bombay [1969], p.38.
[16] V. SLOMON: *Bizarre Designs in Silks*, Copenhagen [1953], pp. 94–96. Slomon suggests that the starched and pleated collar may have been introduced into Europe from the Orient. He cites two paintings from Ceylon where this type collar appears, and one undated facsimile painting from Rajput.
[17] S. N. DAR, *op. cit.*, p.39.

all closely resemble the costume in the velvet. Such a painting helps to explain how items in an alien costume can be combined and misrepresented.

I have made a technical analysis of this velvet and have compared it with gold velvets containing both figures and floral designs whose provenances are certain. So far, I have not found two velvets, Indian or Persian, that were woven in exactly the same manner. Among basic types which occur in both areas, the noticeable differences are in the quality of the silk, the quality and amount of gold threads and the fineness of the weave. I had hoped that the technical study would produce a more conclusive result. Instead, it attests to the fact that skilled craftsmen travelled between the weaving centres of India and Persia.

Textiles with human figures woven into the design seem never to have been a popular theme in fabrics of Indian manufacture of this period. There are several examples that do exist, however; among them is the example dating from the sixteenth century showing rows of figures executed in a weft-pattern technique.[18] Another in this technique has a large figure of a cup-bearer, highly Persian in influence.[19]

Probably there were never more than a few velvets woven with Indian figures, but for the following reasons I believe that these two pieces were made in India. The drawing of the figures in a typical Indian pose, the strange costume that borrows from Persian, Indian and European sources, the more realistic use of the floral motif, definite outlines, and the use of the background space lead me to believe that it is Indian in origin, though Persian in inspiration. Why would the Indians have begun to weave velvets with such complicated designs when the supply of fine Personage velvets from Persia was sufficient?

During Shāh Jahān's reign, diplomatic relations between India and Persia were poisoned by Shāh Jahān's capture of Qandahar in 1638. Finally, the recapture of the city by Shah Abbas the 2nd in 1649 led to outright war, causing diplomatic contact to cease completely for the next ten years. It is more than likely that this would have prevented the import of fine Persian fabrics for a limited period.

Possibly during this time Shāh Jahān decided to have velvets woven at his own workshop. Such an adventure might not have proven to be a complete success. Though weavers could be found with a mastery of the technique, the Persian languid elegance did not come as naturally to Indian draughtsmen as it did to the Persians. Though some of the best Mughal painters were obviously able to imitate it, other Indian artists tended to lose it when they worked after Persian models.

The most likely place for Indian velvets of this quality made at this time would have been one of the court workshops at Lahore, Agra, Delhi or Ahmadabad. In Ahmadabad, there was a well established weaving centre which probably produced the best known of the Mughal velvets, those with floral designs. Pelsaert, travelling near the end of Jahangir's reign, mentions Ahmadabad in particular as the place in Gujarat where velvets were woven. 'Ahmadabad,' he wrote, 'receives annually from here (Agra) large quantities of Patna silk, to be manufactured there into ormesines, satins, velvets, and various kinds of curious stuffs.' Another source which confirms Ahmadabad as a centre of velvet production is the traveller Della Valle, and the author of the Mirat-i-Ahmadi who states that a court manufacturer was there.[20] The Gujarat weavers had confirmed skill but the temporary manufacture of Personage velvets was probably carried on at the court itself by weavers of foreign origin. During the latter part of Shāh Jahān's reign when interrelations with Persia were strained, the principal court was Delhi.

Besides the Los Angeles velvet and another piece of the same fabric in the Kier Collection, I have been able to find only one other velvet with an Indian figure. This example, in a painting in the Shāh Jahān nāma, shows a velvet standard cover with a single figure, quite clearly Mughal in design (detail, Fig.31). The female figure is in Indian dress with a cap and an egret. The face is also in full profile. As we have seen in the earlier paintings from the Shāh Jahān nāma, textiles from various areas of the world were painted with considerable exactness, and textiles with human figures were also copied in the same manner. Therefore, if the velvet that the artist was painting in the picture did indeed have an Indian figure on it, he would have painted it with the same faithfulness to the original. This solitary example in a manuscript dated at the very end of Shāh Jahān's reign strongly supports the view that during these few years Personage velvets were manufactured in India.

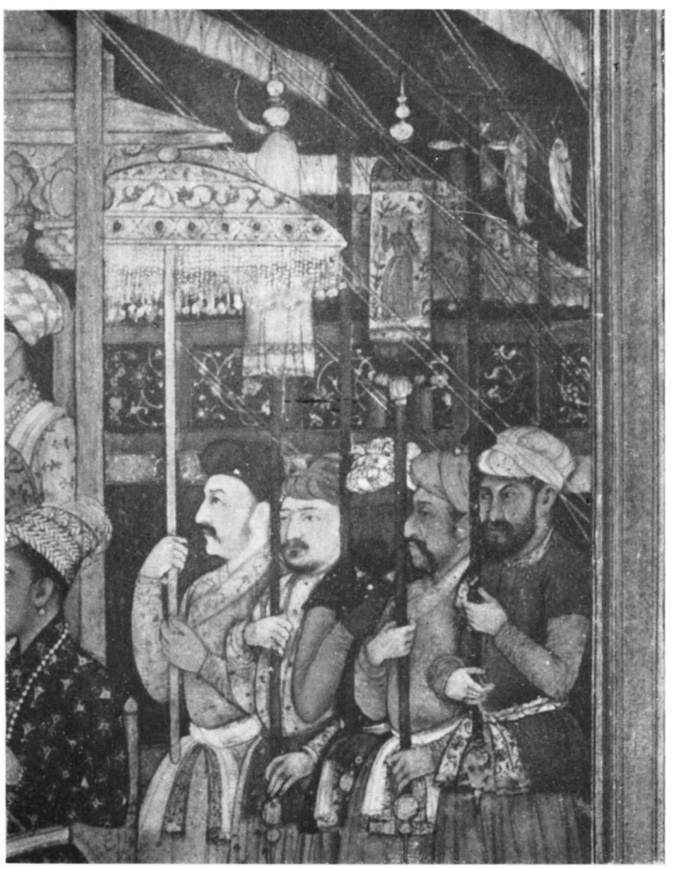
[18] Los Angeles County Museum of Art, No. M.71.13; other examples of the same and similar textiles are in the Cleveland Museum of Art, The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., and The Calico Museum, Ahmadabad.
[19] Los Angeles County Museum of Art, No. T.R.717.

[20] PIETRO DELLA VALLE, *op. cit.*, p.92, and *Minat-i-Ahmadi*, trans. C. N. SEDDON and S. NAWAB ATI, Baroda [1924].

28. Velvet, polychrome, Mughal 1650–60. (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, No.71.13.)

29. Detail from the Velvet reproduced in Fig.28.

30. Mughal painting of Europeans, seventeenth century. (Victoria & Albert Museum, I.M. 14–1913.)



31. Detail from Shāh Jahān nāma, f. 97v. (Royal Library, Windsor Castle.) *Reproduced by Gracious Permission of Her Majesty the Queen.*