

# Ruth Scheuing: Silkroads



January 23 - April 4, 2010

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# Ruth Scheuing: Silkroads

Ruth Scheuing's residency and exhibition project *Silkroads*, examines the myths and metaphors of the Silk Road. Working with digital maps and images, ancient textile patterns, and a programmable loom, Scheuing creates intricately designed woven blankets. For each tapestry, she merges the patterns and geography of this important historic trade route with key historical textile designs that were instrumental in bridging the cultures and economies of East and West. This corridor across Asia known as the Silk Road moved commodities, people, and ideas, including those connected with art and design.

The Silk Road transformed societies in fundamental ways — from the growth of urban trading centres to the spread of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. We can think of the impact of the Silk Road as comparable to the profound economic, social, environmental and political impacts the Internet is having on global culture today.

Working on one of only six computerized Jacquard looms in Canada, Scheuing will unite hand techniques and computer-aided technologies to create her Jacquard woven tapestries. Scheuing has arranged the TechLab so that it functions simultaneously as a shop window, contemporary gallery display, artist's studio and factory floor.

Brian Foreman  
Assistant Curator

## Artist's Statement

Textiles, specifically silk, came to symbolize exchange between East and West. Many other things, spices, ideas, religions, technologies and diseases also traveled along the Silkroad. It is not a specific road, but a route that went through different countries, depending on local politics, wars and goods to be traded. Most items or people did not travel the whole way, but only in little increments. I am interested in these many small events that then create big changes. Textiles are often seen as the carrier of culture, almost as the outside visible layer of a culture that people wear or display in their home. I use each textile to tell a specific story. Google Earth helps me to place specific textiles in a physical location and create a mix between facts, illusions, histories, realities and romantic connotations that linger.

During the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the design used in the coat for the Sogdian child had traveled from Persia to Sogdiana, a kingdom, that no longer exists today, where it was adapted, woven and worn by a royal child, who now carried the figures of standing paired and confronted ducks in roundels on the back, reflecting the iconography of hunting that originally produced it. The lining of the jacket consisted of a Chinese floral silk fabric that originated in the east. This garment symbolizes the exchange between cultures and belief systems.

After the collapse of the USSR, Kyrgyzstan started to re-discover its own felt making traditions and has developed it as a commercial enterprise and a way to create a new identity. It references earlier policies, when both China and Russia had moved people over vast distances in order to develop national, rather than regional, cultural traditions. The vest is placed on the Torogut Pass, opened in 1906 between China and Russia.



***Sogdian Child's Coat on the Karakoram Highway;***  
***38°56' N 75°25' E***  
design for Jacquard weaving,  
50 x 60 inches



***Kyrgyz Vest on the Torogart Pass, border crossing between China and Kyrgyzstan with Chatyr-Kul Lake;***  
***40°35' N 75°25' E***  
design for Jacquard weaving,  
50 x 60 inches



***Chinese Dragon Robe on Bogda Shan range, Tien Shan mountains near Turpan;***  
***43°20' N 89°24' E***  
design for Jacquard weaving,  
50 x 60 inches

The silk Dragon Robe, represents a powerful symbol, worn by emperors and other rulers in China for 1000 years from 960 onwards. These robes have a long tradition of referencing the land and mountains as design elements, so by placing the robe on the Tien Shan mountains on Google Earth, I continue in this tradition.

Google Earth might be considered one of the least exotic ways of travel, compared to Aurel Stein, one of the western explorers and cartographers, who traveled the Silk Road during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century to map the land and discover its treasures—His beautiful hand drawn maps interested me particularly. Stein also bought some book, written in a script, never seen before, which, as he discovered later, had been invented by local entrepreneurs. This shows that questioning the veracity of Wikipedia and other information sources is not new.

The Afghani war rug is placed in an area near Massoud's monument and burial place. War rugs started in 1979, when Russia invaded Afghanistan, and are still been made today, often by displaced persons in refugee camps. The meanings of war rugs with the weaponry portrayed has been interpreted in many ways and probably represent many different intensions by the makers, from polemical, commercial, and a recording of a changed reality.

Chinoiseries represent the borrowing of imagery; exotic textiles had always been collected by the wealthy as a way to experience a foreign culture. Chinoiseires only pretended to be Chinese, and were in fact illustrations of Europeans interpretation of life in China, an example of a colonial altitude. They were also made to replace imports with local production, supported by high tariffs and in some cases by banning imports.

Napoleon gave financial support to Joseph Marie Jacquard, who invented the Jacquard loom from several earlier mechanical devices in 1801. The Jacquard loom was able to copy designs with very fine detail and some of these looms in Lyon, France, still weave fabrics from punched cards for Versailles and other royal palaces. As a major side benefit, the Jacquard loom lead to the computer via Charles Babbage, who invented the Analytical Engine in 1843. Ada Lovelace wrote about it in her translation of Manabrea's text: "The Analytical Engine Weaves Algebraic Patterns just as the Jacquard Loom Weaves Flowers and Leaves."



Now computer technologies create a similar shift in our lives. Most commercial textile mills have moved off-shore, where labour is cheaper. So now, Jacquard looms, with use of computers and E-Mail, have been adapted to create individual single pieces. I can send images to a factory to be woven, or I can control the whole process with a handloom specially designed for artist weavers, in this case a TC-1 loom developed in Norway.

I have long been fascinated by GPS technologies and satellite images as a symbol of our Cyborgian reality, where we view the natural world (us, nature), mediated by technologies circumnavigating the earth in our sky. As I sit here, I watch the raindrops on the trees in front of my window and then immediately immerse myself into a reality far away via the WWW. I use Google Earth consciously as a now ubiquitous contemporary technology, but also know that we have to stay aware of the potential of this tool to invade our privacy.

We generally assume that the imagery of textiles that adorn our homes will be pleasant and 'nice'. I am particularly interested in the ways 'nature' has been represented over time and how we aim to rearrange nature in design as we want it be, regardless of their specific histories

Ruth Scheuing, January 2010

## Interesting links:

On the development of the Jacquard loom and historical connections in a series *Connections, "Faith In Numbers"* by James Burke episode 4/5 and 5/5 on Youtube  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sunv0Q38wS8&feature=related>

Sketch of the Analytical Engine Invented by Charles Babbage  
By L. F. MENABREA of Turin, *Officer of the Military Engineers* from the *Bibliothèque Universelle de Genève*, October, 1842, No. 82 With notes upon the Memoir by the Translator  
ADA AUGUSTA, COUNTESS OF LOVELACE  
<http://www.fourmilab.ch/babbage/sketch.html>

Short bio of Ada Lovelace  
<http://www.agnesscott.edu/lriddle/WOMEN/love.htm>

NASA Visible Earth  
<http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/>

Gateway to Astronaut Photography  
<http://eol.jsc.nasa.gov/sseop/clickmap/>

Remote Sensing Tutorial by Dr. Nicholas Short  
<http://rst.gsfc.nasa.gov/Front/overview.html>

Silkroad Foundations: The Bridge between Eastern and Western Cultures  
<http://www.silk-road.com/>

Digital Silk Road  
many resources, maps, including old maps drawn by Aurel Stein, photos etc.  
<http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/index.html.en>

for a map with different timelines from 4cent BCE to the present  
<http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/imdsr/map/en/map.php>

Textile Museum of Canada Connecting Cloth and Culture  
Look at collection and Digital Threads, an interactive web project  
<http://www.textilemuseum.ca/>

Ruth Scheuing website: [www.rscheuing.com](http://www.rscheuing.com)

## About the Artist

Ruth Scheuing has exhibited her textile-based artworks across Canada and around the world. She was recently included in the exhibition *Art Textiles of the World: Canada* held at The Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles in 2009. Scheuing is an instructor in the Textile Arts Program at Capilano University and currently serves as Vice President of the Textile Society of America. She is represented in numerous public collections, and in 1996 was the recipient of the Chalmers Award in Crafts.

## Acknowledgments

The Artist would like to thank:

Surrey Art Gallery staff for their patience and interest  
Nina Jacobs, Digital Jacq-ART (loan of loom)  
Albrecht Meyer (my Mac-guru)  
Michael Lawlor (for digital printing and all around support)  
Canada Council for the Arts  
Tisha Singer (for historical advice/information)

The Surrey Art Gallery appreciates the continued support of our funders:



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