Foreword

Archaeologists have made some progress in the study of ancient Southeast Asian textiles, but the results of this form of research are likely to remain limited to verifying the types of plants used to make the fibres and dyes, and possibly the weaving techniques employed. It seems likely that we will have to depend on indirect methods for the foreseeable future in our attempts to reconstruct the textiles used in early Southeast Asia. Historical sources contain some data, but these have serious limitations. Most surviving documents only refer to textiles in passing. Many terms used to refer to them are no longer understood. Old Javanese vocabulary concerning textiles is extensive, a sign of their interest in this topic and its importance in society, but there is scant chance that the literal meanings of these words will ever be recovered.

For several years I taught a course on traditional arts of Southeast Asia in the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries, in which I emphasized the importance of textiles in trying to understand the roles of what in the West we call art and artists. No female artists and very few male artists are mentioned in ancient inscriptions. Artists were not a separate category of people in ancient Java; as in early twentieth-century Bali, the making of objects possessing what is now called artistic value was a common activity of children as well as adults, as were performances of music and dance. Artists were not marginal members of society, though some people were certainly recognized as more skilful than others in creating textiles or pottery, both of which were exclusively made by women. The high aesthetic and technical value of Southeast Asia textile production only came to be acknowledged in the West in the mid-nineteenth century. Since that time, scholars have elevated the importance of textiles as a medium of artistic expression in traditional Southeast

Asia from the status of a craft to the cultural equivalent of painting and sculpture.

Textile art in precolonial Southeast Asia had great ceremonial and symbolic value. Locally made textiles commanded high economic value not only within Southeast Asian societies but also in diplomatic gift exchange with China. Textiles were traded in both directions, into and out of Southeast Asia to South and East Asia. Indonesia may have exported large quantities of textiles to Cambodia during that civilization's golden age, as the author suggests, but unfortunately we know very little about regional trade within Southeast Asia during this period. Further study of textile patterns may enable scholars to recover information about this topic. Textiles possess major scholarly value as evidence of long-distance communication. One question for future research arises from the question of whether the medium of transmission of the designs was exclusively through textile trade, or whether some other media such as illuminated manuscripts were also involved.

Javanese sculptors in the thirteenth century devoted considerable attention to depicting the textiles worn by figures sculpted in stone. Temple reliefs in central Java may also have depicted textiles worn by people of that time and place, but textile designs might have been represented in plaster coatings that covered most of the reliefs—only faint traces of which survive. It is not known whether statues in central Java were similarly coated with plaster that was then painted. In India, as in ancient Greece, it was common practice to paint statues of divinities. It is possible that the change to carving detailed textile patterns directly on stone in the thirteenth century was correlated with increased social differentiation, which was denoted by the types of textiles people wore. The same types of textiles, and jewellery, were worn by both men and women, which suggested a relative degree of equality between the sexes. A fourteenth-century Chinese trader named Wang Dayuan wrote detailed descriptions of clothing worn in various ports in Southeast Asia. This gives the impression that clothing was a significant badge of local identity in the region. Wang would have easily appreciated this fact, since textiles played the same role in China.

Dr Pullen's book shows how useful it is to compare the evidence for cultural interaction as exhibited in textile motifs with communication patterns expressed in other media such as sculpture, architecture, language and ceramics. This book provides comparisons with textiles in many others parts of Asia: Nepal, Tibet, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Bhutan, Persia, the Sasanian Empire, Central Asia and China, and proposes a new, more detailed chronology of thirteenth-century Javanese statuary based on textile forms. This is a very useful contribution to the study of the history of Javanese art during the thirteenth century—a violent

yet brilliantly artistic period. Like jewellery, textiles display elements of both style and fashion. The idea of fashion has fascinated archaeologists such as A.L. Kroeber and David Clarke since the early twentieth century. Fashions change quickly; archaeologists and art historians can use them to create precise evolutionary sequences, which aid in the development of detailed chronologies.

Dr Pullen's analysis shows that thirteenth-century Indonesian sculptors were not making up designs; they were endeavouring to depict real textiles as faithfully as possible. This is useful in deciding whether to accept the assumption that the Indonesian statuary and reliefs were not depicting imaginary realms but were accurately reflecting the society in which the artists lived. Some relevant questions probably can never be answered. Were the motifs found on textiles symbols of character or status, or were bodies purely frameworks on which to hang textiles for display as symbols? And—something that we cannot deduce from the statuary—how important was colour?

The huge number of detailed illustrations found in this book will be a major permanent resource for other scholars. The assiduous effort by Dr Pullen to document these motifs and to trace their distribution over a broad swath of the globe is a significant and lasting contribution to the study of communication and exchanges of artistic ideas in general. I am very happy that the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute has agreed to publish this volume.

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