

FROM THE DESERT TO THE CITY



The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles

Godwin-Ternbach Museum
at Queens College

INTRODUCTION

The Rose Choron Collection at the Godwin-Ternbach Museum

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In December 2016, the Godwin-Ternbach Museum at Queens College received the gift of eighty-five Late Antique textiles from the estate of psychologist, author, artist, and collector Rose Choron (1917–2014). Pieces from this bequest form the heart of *From the Desert to the City: The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles*. The exhibition highlights textiles from Late Antique Egypt placed in multiple contexts—their original creation and use in the third to seventh century CE, their modern archaeological rediscovery and influence in the early twentieth century, and their contemporary reception and capacity for inspiring new works—all with an effort to connect today’s audiences with our communal ancient past.

The first part of the exhibition provides a glimpse into the original use of these textiles, placing them in context with other household and religious objects, all of which echo motifs and themes that dominate the textiles: Greek mythology, the natural world, and symbols of health and prosperity. Highlights from the permanent collection of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum (GTM) include ancient glass and metalwork, while loans of significant pieces from the Brooklyn Museum offer additional insight into domestic and ceremonial life in Late Antique Egypt.

The textiles, which range in date from the fourth to seventh century CE, survived up to their archaeological discovery in the late nineteenth century due to the dry climate of Egypt and the burial practices of the time. The natural dyes used to color the wool in these textiles are still brilliant, with bold yellows, deep reds and purples, and surprisingly vivid blues. Deftness and variety of styles can be seen in this rich collection. Delicate modeling of color is used in depictions of the flora and fauna of the Nile. Contours of Bacchic dancers are described with natural linen threads in contrast to deep purple wool weft. Portrait heads provide additional clues to the hairstyles and adornment of women in the Late Antique world. The GTM textiles include fragments of garments and decorative furnishings like cushion covers and wall hangings. While textiles in this collection have a variety of motifs, they represent examples of everyday wear. Each textile is a record of the people of this period and a connection to the interlacing cultural strands of Late Antique Egypt. The visual motifs show the influence of ancient Egyptian imagery, Greco-Roman mythology, and early Christian iconography. Some of the pieces likely date after Byzantium’s loss of Egypt to Muslim forces in 642 CE; nonetheless, it is difficult to discern any immediate resulting change in the way the populace adorned their garments and textile furnishings. While “Coptic” has been used to describe these textiles, it limits the way we view them, as they were not used by Coptic Christians alone. Early Christians wore pagan Roman imagery and vice versa, just as today various emblems and logos appear on our shirts, shoes, and bags—some random, some proclaiming allegiances, interests, or claims to positions of status.

The second part of the exhibition addresses the archaeological discovery of “Coptic” textiles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here, comparative works highlight the impact of the rediscovery of these textiles on modern art from the visual to the theatrical. The exhibition considers drawings, paintings, and prints by Milton Avery, Henri Matisse, Max Pechstein, and Georges Rouault, who were interested in and collected Late Antique textiles. Also included in the exhibition are intricate illustrations of costume designs and set photographs from the Metropolitan Opera’s 1917 and 1922 productions of Jules Massenet’s opera *Thaïs*, which was set in fourth-century Egypt.

The third and final section juxtaposes the Late Antique textiles with contemporary works inspired by them. By tracing the reception of the textile arts of the Late Antique world into the twenty-first century, the exhibition attests to their continued vitality as sources of creative inspiration and scholarly insight. *From the Desert to the City* includes work by Brooklyn artist Gail Rothschild, who has created large-scale paintings directly inspired by the fragmentary condition of the textiles in the Rose

Choron collection. Figurative works in crochet by Queens-based Caroline Wells Chandler propel stylized Late Antique figures into bold, humorous, twenty-first century Technicolor. Considering myth, symbolism, and art history, Chandler's larger-than-life textile work captures the same cartoonish delight as the ancient pieces, with nude swimmers, twelve-foot centaurs, and delightfully distorted portrait busts.

The Rose Choron textiles highlight the diversity of Late Antique Egyptian culture. With this exhibition we are bringing that historic period to life for our audience. Exhibitions like this not only revitalize historical artifacts but create new ideas and further the discourse of what role art has in our lives. As the only encyclopedic museum collection in the borough of Queens, the GTM aims to present the over 6,000 objects in the collection in a way that brings them to life for a diverse contemporary audience. This exhibition places the GTM collection in a conversation that spans genres—history and archaeology, opera and theater, art history and contemporary art.

The continued vitality of the collection is made possible through the vision and generosity of individual art collectors who are eager to further students' awareness of art and to provide a museum for the general public of the borough. The donation of the Choron collection to the GTM has created an opportunity for interdisciplinary engagement and fulfills the founding goals of the museum. The GTM was created as and continues to be primarily a teaching collection, designed to give students the immediate experience of handling and studying original works of art. As they have done for a number of past exhibitions at the GTM, Queens College's art history students have contributed to the research and writing for this exhibition and the accompanying catalogue.

The goal of the museum, however, is to creatively engage with students across all disciplines. From biology to business, education to economics, engagement with the visual arts can and should spark new avenues of exploration and invention. Through a greater understanding and appreciation of art, students can find a different angle from which to perceive their world, and by doing so become more imaginative, open-minded, and resourceful. During the development of this exhibition, these captivating but often unassuming textiles inspired intense and varied discussion. Whether these conversations were between scholars and artists on materials and meaning, or students reconsidering depictions of gender and navigating the complexities of provenance, this is the type of discourse that the museum aims to facilitate. With this catalogue and exhibition, we hope the Choron collection will foster and encourage transdisciplinary dialogue and understanding, provoke conversations, and continue to inspire for another thousand years.



Figure 1. Gail Rothschild, *Medusa*, acrylic on canvas, 2018, 40½ x 45½ in. (Source: courtesy of the artist)

MONUMENTAL REMNANTS

Gail Rothschild Interprets Late Antique Textiles

Thelma K. Thomas

The small, incidental, brilliantly colored tapestry fragments of the Rose Choron collection expand in Gail Rothschild's paintings to attain monumentality and a distinctive levity in the face of decay (fig. 1).¹

When the tapestries were woven, the strong warp threads stretched along the length of the loom. These threads came to be completely covered by the weft threads that traveled over and under the warp to create both the woven structure that holds the cloth together and the patterns that are integral to the cloth. The wefts of dyed wool threads of varying weights may veer in any direction—and so are called eccentric wefts—to draw lines and shape blocks of color, add shadows or highlights, and sculpt a topography that extends all the way through the thickness of the cloth (fig. 2). A supplementary weft of finely spun undyed linen may play across the surface to provide linear details (fig. 3). The colored, patterned, woven mass of these ancient textiles differs from the bland regularity of modern industrial cloth products. Rothschild observes this difference and accentuates it, in part, through drastic enlargement.

My responses to Rothschild's paintings are inextricably bound up with my responses to Late Antique textiles, which I often approach through magnification. When using my beloved Optivisor (magnifying spectacles), I nestle into a world that blurs beyond the heightened reality of the textile. Just to shift my focus to view another section of the textile requires moving my eyes, turning my head and perhaps even my shoulders or entire torso. The eyepiece of a microscope is better at blocking out everything except that one chosen section I've placed on the stage. I must move the textile across the stage to see a different section. The physical movement and time required to inspect magnified traces transforms the act of looking into a kind of journey. Rothschild's paintings evoke this sensational process for me, although I had not expected this from seeing photographs of her paintings. On the screen and on the page, both painting and textile can be encompassed in a single glance, but whereas magnification limits and trains my gaze on a small part of the whole, Rothschild's paintings open up vistas of detailed fields.

We first met when Rothschild contacted me during the 2016 run of an exhibition I had curated, *Designing Identity: The Power of Textiles in Late Antiquity*. That exhibition, like this one, was the kind of focused exhibition nurtured mainly by academic institutions.² Initial planning of that earlier show addressed the problem of how to display textile artifacts that are typically preserved in damaged, unprepossessing fragments, in a way that would engage viewers' visual imagination. Instead of requiring viewers to reconstruct in their mind's eye the textiles' original appearance at the moment of creation or first use in a distant, alien past, we made considerable effort to display examples of rarer, large-scale hangings and complete garments. We exploited how the still-vivid coloring resonates with modern tastes to make these tokens of the past attractive. (See Warren

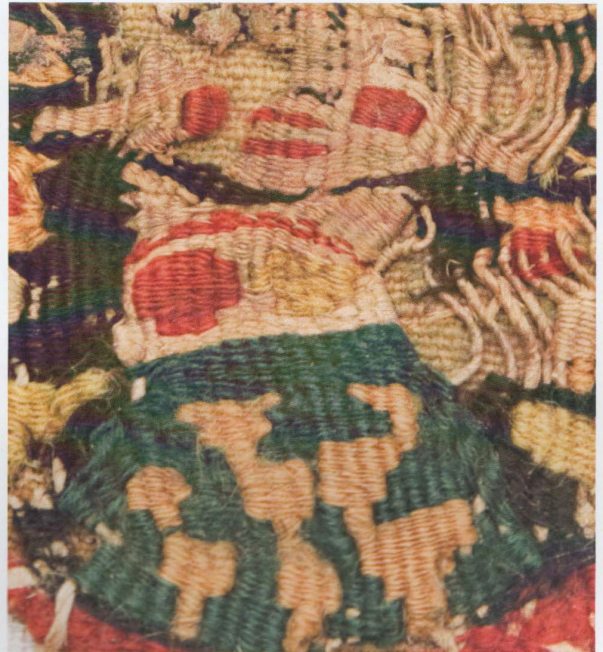


Figure 2. Detail of the eccentric weft in Yellow-ground roundel with a portrait bust, tapestry weave, Egypt, 4th–7th century, diameter 3½ in. (Source: Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College)

Woodfin's essay in this volume.) Rothschild, too, was struck by the colors and, for the first time, in that exhibition, the imagery caught her attention. She was hit even harder by the large scale of many of the pieces on display and was fascinated by the historical fact that many of the smaller decorations had been removed from articles of clothing. This imagery, when worn, made statements about the wearer and often served as protective or auspicious charms.⁵ As is clear in Rothschild's subsequent paintings, she was drawn as well to the continual reshaping of these cloth remnants over time. Much of her appreciation of the artifacts is founded in the consequences of their removal from the garments they had adorned. The missing tunics and bodies remained in her thoughts, as did holes and unravelings, the skewing of warp and weft, and other signs of damage. Each offers her an entry into the stories of the afterlives of these artifacts. In this respect she is, like a historian, in dialogue with the past.

For her participation in this exhibition on the Choron collection, Rothschild chose to paint textiles that spoke to her through their deterioration into shapes that intrigued her. Something similar to the expressiveness of the unmaking of cloth in these paintings prevailed throughout antiquity. That is evident in the enduring popularity of the Homeric character of Penelope: during the day, she wove her father-in-law's shroud, then in the evening picked apart her work; by delaying its completion, she also delayed the moment when, having fulfilled her obligation to the family of her missing husband, Odysseus, she would end the wait for his return and choose a new husband from among her suitors. Penelope's exertion of control over time and her life by the making and unmaking of cloth tells a key part of her story. Penelope's labor has long captured Rothschild's imagination, as has ancient cloth. In her paintings of textile artifacts, Rothschild represents each remaining pick of the weft and each unraveling thread as integral to a composite image of the textile's existence through time.⁴

In exploring cloth as a medium of expression, Rothschild's painting displays other affinities to ancient thought. As I look at her paintings, I am reminded of the conceptual explorations by cultural historians John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro of the poetics of weaving in pagan Greco-Roman antiquity, which bring to the fore the rich conceptual marriage of text and textile and demonstrate the centrality of weaving to history-writing as well as myth-making. Similarly, Nicholas Constanas demonstrated how common knowledge of the loom and the activity of weaving made cloth a useful motif for the lucid exegesis of difficult Christological notions in Late Antiquity.⁵ Rothschild is keenly aware that ancient textiles could be thoughtfully playful and intellectually sophisticated, that they were expensive and prized, noted and remarked upon. Her paintings remind us that looking only at the actual physical remains of Late Antique textiles misses much of their constitutive power as, for example, the clothing of individuals that shaped their visible presence—creating silhouettes—and represented them through carefully cultivated personal fictions—creating personas.

Now, however, Late Antique textiles survive as physical traces, tattered remnants. Thanks to damage inflicted by use and destructive environments over the centuries, the spinning unwinds and the weaving unravels. Rothschild's paintings seem to stop time like a snapshot to capture a moment in the textiles' ongoing deterioration. The abraded surfaces, tears, and holes that



Figure 3. Detail of the supplementary weft in Purple band with Bacchic dancer, tapestry weave, Egypt, 4th–7th century, 10¾ x 2½ in. (Source: Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College)

Rothschild finds so expressive are, for the historian and especially for the conservator, clues to the damage suffered over the textile artifact's centuries of unseen existence. The conservator treats such damages and protects textiles from future damage with the knowledge that the change never really ends and, in consequence, the textile is a kind of shape-shifter.⁶

As she composes her images, Rothschild works from gridded photographs rather than from the textiles themselves, interpreting (or, as she says, "misinterpreting") the textile medium in paint rather than diagrammatically explaining the details of fabric structure or motifs.⁷ Her paintings also avoid a documentary mode that would, for example, accurately represent each pick and stitch. Instead, she re-creates the weaving in paint, altering the weight and number of threads and weft rows as well as the sizes, shapes, and colors of motifs. Her defining brushstrokes in *The Big Frieze* put so much emphasis on the silhouette that each wrapped thread resembles a fat bead on a string (fig. 4). By re-creating the threads, weave, and object through emphatic delineation and dramatic enlargement (*The Big Frieze*, measuring 34½ x 77 inches, is ten times larger than its inspiration, "Band with Nile swimmers, flora, and fauna" [cat. no. 116], which measures only about 4¾ x 12 inches), Rothschild has developed an effective strategy for composing an open-ended narrative about making and unmaking. As she put it, her images are a sort of meme of unraveling, making a joke of warp and weft. They establish a tension between the intact painted image and the ruined subject. Framing a partial view of the artifact and drawing attention to details invites the viewer to notice damages (who removed the faces?) and repairs in *About Them Apples* (fig. 5, compare cat. no. 107).



Figure 4. Gail Rothschild, *The Big Frieze*, acrylic on canvas, 2018, 34½ x 77 in. (Source: courtesy of the artist)



Figure 5. Gail Rothschild, *About Them Apples*, acrylic on canvas, 2018, 57 x 60 in. (Source: courtesy of the artist)

For me, this tension also resonates with how tapestries, which in reality are three-dimensional objects, may be imagined as two-dimensional when viewed from a frontal representation of their surface, as in a photograph in a book or on a computer



Figure 6. Gail Rothschild, *Caryatid*, acrylic on canvas, 2018, 83 x 19 in. (Source: courtesy of the artist)

screen—the kind of photographic image that Rothschild works from. Similarly, tapestries seem most planar and grid-like when still framed by the loom. Once completed and removed from the loom, cloth changes shape in response to being draped over bodies or hung along walls; it responds to folding and manipulation, the forces of gravity, gusts of air, and gentle breezes.⁸ Of course, even on the loom, textiles are never truly two-dimensional across a weft row, or even at the point of a single pick. In contrast to their appearance in photographs or the flat expanse they had while on the loom, their proximate presence insists upon the thick eccentricities innate to the technique of tapestry weaving.⁹ Rothschild highlights their three-dimensionality by establishing a light raking from left to right that casts shadows in an otherwise undifferentiated space.

Of course, Rothschild's paintings are filtered through her own concerns. From her years of rock climbing, she sees the intricacies of the textile surface as the setting for a meandering private journey, much as a rock climber “reads a route” on the surface of the rock to see a way forward. While composing, as she zooms in and out of magnification on her iPad, Rothschild loses track of the scale of the actual textile. Her paintings monumentalize through magnification. The gigantism of her paintings, which makes it possible to follow visually the intertwining weft with virtual muscular activity, also requires a plausible physics of wrapping and unwrapping that Rothschild thinks of in terms of architecture. From her thirty years of marriage to an architect, she recognizes analogies between building and weaving and perceives the rhythm of weft rows as like the rhythm of rows of bricks. Adopting the monumental scale of architecture allowed her to see *The Big Frieze* take on the appearance of an entablature when it was hung high on the wall in her studio; the same process transformed the androgyne Bacchic dancer into a caryatid (fig. 6).

Each pick of the weft and unraveled thread becomes a building block in the open-ended retelling of the afterlife of a piece of cloth. In the painted unmaking and remaking of a female figure woven into another cloth, the hair untwines, escaping the structure of cloth and the cloth image to become *Medusa* (see fig. 1). In this interpretation, the cloth is a membrane akin to the long-dead skin it once enveloped, and ruptures in the cloth wound the skin in the image. By magnifying the scale and taking up multiple perspectives within her composition, Rothschild invites the viewer to take a journey across telling expanses that are simultaneously minute and vast. By such means, she addresses the long life of the artifact, its ever-changing three-dimensional sculptural presence, the dynamic relationships between these aspects of the thing, and our visual impressions of it.

Ideas float through Rothschild's thoughts as she paints: clothing worn close to the skin is like skin; painting is like stitching; the act of stitching is suturing, the mending of a wound; time works on cloth, using it up and preserving it . . . These are her distinctly personal ruminations on cloth and decay, her inner journeys spurred by her ocular experience, yet they parallel those of painters and poets, dealers and critics going back to the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁰ The innovative juxtaposition of ancient and modern textile work in this exhibition helps elicit modernity as the inescapable lens through which we see and interpret the ancient remnants.¹¹

- 1 This essay is based on my own observations and reflections, on conversations with the artist over the past two years, and an interview on June 28, 2018. For biographical information and an introduction to the full range of Rothschild's work, visit <http://www.gailrothschild.com>.
- 2 Key to initial planning were Jennifer Chi, then Exhibitions Director and Chief Curator, and Roberta Casagrande-Kim, then Assistant Manager of Exhibitions and Publications, at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University. See Thelma K. Thomas, ed., *Designing Identity: The Power of Textiles in Late Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- 3 See Jennifer L. Ball, "Charms: Protective and Auspicious Motifs," in *Designing Identity*, 54–65; Henry Maguire, "Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990), 215–24; and Henry Maguire, "The Good Life," in G.W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar, eds., *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 238–57.
- 4 See Rothschild's *Portraits of Ancient Linen* series (2012–present) at <http://www.gailrothschild.com/artworks.html>.
- 5 John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Fabric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Nicholas P. Constatas, "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3, no. 2 (1995), 169–94. These and other citations are mentioned in Thelma K. Thomas, "Material Meaning in Late Antiquity," in *Designing Identity*, 20–53. See also the information-rich, multimedia presentation "Text and Textile: An Introduction to Wool-Working for Readers of Greek and Latin," at <http://classics.rutgers.edu/62-home-page-section/137-welcome-text-a-textile>.
- 6 This continual shape-shifting is at the heart of a mystery solved by the mathematician brothers Gregory and David Chudnovsky. High-resolution digital tiles of the famous Unicorn Tapestries at The Cloisters of the Metropolitan Museum of Art did not fit together seamlessly despite a carefully planned and executed photographic campaign. "The tapestries, they realized, had changed shape as they were lying on the floor and being photographed. They had been hanging vertically for centuries; when they were placed on the floor, the warp threads relaxed. The tapestries began to breathe, expanding, contracting, shifting." From that realization, it took only three months of toiling over the mathematics of vector field displacement and the calculations of their homemade supercomputer for the Chudnovsky brothers to succeed in fitting the tiles together. The quotation is from Richard Preston's "Capturing the Unicorn," *The New Yorker*, April 11, 2005, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2005/04/11/capturing-the-unicorn>. This story was simply and engagingly retold in the Nova special "ScienceNOW: Profile: Brothers Chudnovsky." Although the video is no longer available on the PBS website, various presentations of it may be found on YouTube.
- 7 For example, over the past two years, Rothschild has changed paint mediums for the different physical characteristics they bring to these compositions. The glossy acrylic of *The Big Frieze* differs from her earlier work in matte and flat paints as well as from the nonreflective medium of spun and woven wool.
- 8 On spatial and other aspects of cloth, see, e.g., Tristan Weddigen, "Notes from the Field: Materiality," *The Art Bulletin* 95, no. 1 (2013) 34–37.
- 9 These eccentric weft passages in tapestry-woven cloth can be seen as like manifestations of non-Euclidean geometry albeit untamed by principles. The mathematician Daina Taiminia explores and diagrams non-Euclidian geometric forms in her crochet work, some of which may be seen in the Institute for Figuring online exhibition "Hyperbolic Space," via <http://www.theiff.org/index.html>.
- 10 In addition to the essay by Warren Woodfin in this volume, "Late Antique Textiles in the Era of Modernism," see Thelma K. Thomas, "From Curiosities to Objects of Art: Modern Reception of Late Antique Egyptian Textiles as Reflected in Dikran Kelekian's Textile Album of ca. 1910," in Joseph D. Alchermes, Helen C. Evans and Thelma K. Thomas, eds., *ANAΘHMATA EOPTIKA: Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Mathews* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2009) 305–17; and, see the fantastic, surreal album composed mainly of textiles discovered by the archaeologist Andre Gayet by his admirer, Henry Bryon: Nancy Arthur Hoskins, *The Coptic Tapestry Albums and the Archaeologist of Antinöe, Albert Gayet* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).
- 11 See T'ai Smith, *Baubau Weaving Theory: From Feminine Craft to Mode of Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) at, e.g., 164.