INTRODUCTION: THE MATERIAL WORLD OF LATE ANTIQUITY, THEN AND NOW

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"Late Antiquity" is a fuzzy historical concept frequently applied to the later Roman Empire.[1] The geographical contours of the empire, which shifted continually around the local cultures ringing the Mediterranean, encompassed a Roman cultural matrix distinguished more broadly by the languages of the ruling elite in imperial and civic government and by the Christian Church: Greek in the east and Latin in the west. The emergence of Christianity from its Jewish roots in Roman Palestine to become the official and predominant religion of the empire, the most notable cultural change occurring early in the period from the third through the later fourth century, should not, however, obscure continued religious diversity and the vitality of earlier cultural traditions.

Temporal contours are no more sharply defined than territorial extent. For the purposes of this exhibition and catalogue, "Late Antiquity" extends half a millennium, from the third through seventh centuries CE, through drastic political, cultural, and religious change. During the fifth century, successful "barbarian" invasions in the west led, ultimately, to the severing of west from east, and the fragmentation of Western Europe into small kingdoms. Meanwhile the east remained relatively stable and, from the early fourth through the sixth century, the city of Constantinople (previously Byzantion) was refounded by the emperor Constantine as a new capital that grew in size and political power to replace old Rome. Beyond the eastern borders loomed the threat of the other superpower of the era, Persia (see map, pp. 16–17).[2] The balance of power was irrevocably altered in the mid-seventh century by the military successes of the early caliphates and the ensuing enlargement of the sphere of Arab culture and Islamic monotheism.[3] The subsequent configuration of the eastern Roman—Byzantine—empire was very different without the western territories that had been recovered only recently in the sixth century and without the eastern provinces of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria, which had been so important for their dense populations, wealth, and holy places. From their new perspectives outside of the empire, the inhabitants of Europe and former territories—even as they settled into new political orders and hierarchies of religious authority—maintained their venerable traditions while adapting to different cultural horizons and aesthetic tastes.

The term "Late Antiquity," then, conveniently encapsulates extraordinary cultural change as well as continuity: this is especially evident among the wealthy elite, those who owned the costly, luxurious items in this exhibition. Although this combination of change and continuity may seem contradictory at first, the incongruities resolve in repeated adaptations of traditional cultural expectations, including the expression of manly virtues through the theme of the hunt and womanly virtues through the ideals of beauty, as well as modesty and cloth making (figs. 1, and 2-5.1). These are but two examples that locate change and continuity more precisely within the nested spheres of person, family, and society. In many ways, textiles constituted a distinctively powerful material culture. They fulfilled basic needs such as clothing and furnishings. Textiles also put hopes and desires on display in their motifs, designs, and materials, rendering visible both social identity and the inner imagined self.

The essays that follow in Part 1 address the textiles as artifacts from several different perspectives. My essay "Material Meaning in Late Antiquity" considers the characteristics of textile furnishings, their functions, and their expressions emphasizing social and religious spheres of the household. Especially important for understanding the textiles in Late Antique aesthetics are the close associations of textile rugs and hangings to pavement and wall mosaics and wall paintings, and for the layering of meanings within a range of conceptual associations to cloth and cloth making. Whereas "Portraying the Household: A Brief Tour," takes up such associations among the textile furnishings in the exhibition as known from contemporaneous commentary to explore expressive strategies and viewer response, the next section, "Clothing the Self to Portray the Self Ideally," turns to similar explorations of the social significance of types of garments, the Late Antique system of dress, and imagery on clothing, paying special attention to issues of gender. The next essays in Part 1 address aspects of Late Antique imagery that confound expectations for persvasive Christian meaning. Helen Evans considers the endurance throughout the period (and beyond) of traditional, originally pagan, motifs. Jennifer Ball explores the magical purposes of protective and auspicious motifs. In the final essay, "Making Textiles and Assessing Their Value," I consider aspects of Late Antique textile production and assessments of value.

The essays in Part 2, the first to address American collections of Late Antique textiles, begin to sketch both their varied character and their modern value for scholars and collectors, including museums, in terms of education and the interests of the modern textile industry, artists, and designers. This emergent attention to the afterlives of these textile artifacts reveals modern chapters in their social history.

The American story begins in Europe in the late eighteenth century with Napoleon's scientific expedition to Egypt from 1798 to 1801. Textiles, along with many other artifacts, made their way to Europe, stimulating curiosity and spurring further exploration. Antiquarian hunters explored sites unsystematically, yet their finds piqued the appetite of a growing market for ancient art and artifacts. Beginning in earnest in the late nineteenth century with the emergence of the discipline of archaeology, excavations found such a bounty of Late Antique textiles in Egyptian cemeteries that they "harvested" them from bodies that had been prepared for burial in many layers of clothing and shrouds.[4]

The sparse publication of archaeological evidence rendered dating by context impossible and severely hindered knowledge of what items were found together; and, frequently, finds were dispersed to museum collections across France, the rest of Europe, and North America. Only in the past generation, for example, have scholars undertaken the truly Herculean efforts necessary to document finds from the extraordinarily rich site of Antinoopolis, excavated by the French archaeologist Albert Gayet, and only in the past few years to reassemble the burial assemblages to which they belonged.[5] Although similar studies have been undertaken for the German archaeologist Robert Forrer and for such dealers as Theodor Graf and Dikran G. Kelekian, who counted the most important museums and private collectors in Europe and America as their clients, much work remains to be done to write the history of the modern discovery and dispersal of these textiles.[6]

American institutions and individuals participated in broader trends in collecting with the notable involvement of philanthropists who were bankers and businessmen. James Baker, who donated a large collection of textiles to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Frederic B. Pratt, who donated sizable collections to the Cooper-Hewitt and the Brooklyn Museum, were explicit about their desire for these ancient arts to inspire and teach modern craftspeople. The painter, design theorist, and Harvard professor Denman Waldo Ross donated pieces of extraordinary quality for the same purpose to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.[7]

Late Antique textiles, especially decorated textiles, were eagerly collected in part because the period of early discoveries coincided with intense interest in ornament and design within museums and the academy, as well as industry, and among the general public. The modern history of European uses of these ancient

textiles is better known: in France, for example, les Gobelins, the French national manufacturer of tapestries, built a collection of historic textiles for documentation and inspiration.[8] Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century presentations of these textiles found venues ranging from museum exhibitions to world's fairs, and even the dramatic stage, thanks to Gayet's efforts to fund his excavation projects.[9] They inspired creative responses from poets such as the Surrealist Maurice Heine (1884–1940), clothing designers such as Mariano Fortuny, painters such as Henri Matisse and the American Marsden Hartley, as well as other artists and craftspeople in Europe and the United States.[10] Indeed, although modern perspectives differ drastically from those of Late Antiquity, some of the responses were no less creative.

By the mid-nineteenth century, museums were collecting to inspire multiple audiences: especially well-known in this regard is the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.[11] Alois Riegl, a central figure for the development of art history as a methodologically rigorous discipline, began to formulate his theories of ornamental expression and the development of ornament while serving from 1886 to 1896 as curator at the Austrian Museum for Applied Arts in Vienna (Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst in Wien, now popularly known as the MAK).[12] His publications on Late Antique textiles from Egypt established their place within the wider world of artistic production, in contrast to other scholars, including Gayet, who saw them as something apart, as a kind of Egyptian folk art.[13] Although that view of "Coptic textiles" has long since receded from serious scholarship on the Late Antique textile industry, its products, and long-distance trade around the Mediterranean and beyond, echoes remain in earlier publications that continue to circulate.

Many American universities, like their European counterparts, possess collections of Late Antique textiles. Among these, the collection of the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology at the University of Michigan is important not only for its size and the high quality of many of its works, but also for the many pieces (about 3,500) from the university's systematic excavations at the site of Karanis in the Fayyum, Egypt. Some finds from the site were shared with the Bolton Museum in Manchester, England, where they were studied carefully by a leading expert in archeological textiles, Thomas Midgley.[14] In contrast, as museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, and the Textile Museum in Washington, DC, developed collections of fine arts, these institutions acquired large hangings displaying virtuosic skill in Late Antique tapestry weaving.[15]

Attention to the textiles as artifacts has long been undertaken in museums, although the history of that work is largely unknown. In Part 2, the essay by Christine Kondoleon, curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, relates quite closely to the interpretive efforts in Part 1 through her inquiries into the originating historical contexts for the use and meaning of the museum's important tapestry hangings. The essay by Elizabeth Williams, Post-Doctoral Teaching Fellow in Byzantine Art History at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection/George Washington University, illuminates the essential work of analysis and documentation by Louisa Bellinger, a founding figure in the study of Late Antique and Byzantine textiles, whose work built the Dumbarton Oaks census project for Byzantine (including Late Antique) textiles.[16] The scholars charged with the conservation and curation of museum collections are often best equipped to mine museum archives and records and to study the textiles. The entries by Kathrin Colburn, textile conservator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, present models of close, attentive looking at the textiles' materials, techniques, and physical features as evidence of their production and use in Late Antiquity and their overall visual effects. Colburn provides fundamental information for the understanding of Late Antique textile craft and artistry: her essay should be read in conjunction with the interpretive commentary of the essays in Part 1 of the catalogue as well as the essay in Part 2 by Brandie Ratliff. The essays by Edward Bleiberg of the Brooklyn Museum and by Ratliff, based on her work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, reveal for the first time how these textiles spurred surprising, close relationships between museums and the modern textile business.

Late Antique textiles provide intimate glimpses of lives that ended over a millennium ago. Museum collections of these textiles, which began to flourish in the late nineteenth century in the wake of archaeological explorations in Egypt, still continue to shape scholarship, now aided and challenged by technical analysis, art historical study, and ongoing archaeological discovery around Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. The American collections that make this exhibition possible[17] reveal the aesthetic interests of collectors and scholars as well as the creative concerns of modern artists, craftspeople, and industrialists. Since these textiles are also documents of modern life, this exhibition and catalogue begin to explore how the textiles produced social and cultural meaning, first in Late Antiquity and again in modern times.