

From Patchwork to Enlightenment – The Buddhist Monk’s Robe

22 August 2104 through 22 March 2015

To mark the anniversary “150 Years of Diplomatic Relations between Japan and Switzerland”, the Museum der Kulturen Basel presents the special exhibition “From Patchwork to Enlightenment - The Buddhist Monk’s Robe”.

Over the centuries, Japanese Buddhism has seen the emergence of different types of monk’s robes, so-called *kesa*. The garment consists of rectangular pieces of cloth sewn together. It forms a communication system in its own right, with a grammar and a symbolic language of its own. It stands for non-adherence to worldly things and for poverty. The textiles not only mirror the broad variety of the medium itself but also the garment’s intricacy: it is a symbol of Buddhist teaching, forms part of monastic ceremonies, reflects power and influence, and is a constitutive element of contemplative practice. *kesa* are a testimony to the country’s historical opening and the start of economic and cultural exchange between Japan and the West.

Grammar of the *kesa*

The patchwork follows strict rules: the single pieces of cloth are arranged in strips referred to here as columns. The *kesa* is enclosed by a border; the number of columns is always an odd number and is a reference to the use of the robe. Simple *kesa* with five columns serve as everyday dress; *kesa* with seven columns are worn when reading the Buddhist scriptures; *kesa* with nine columns are worn for preaching and during ceremonies. Garments with even more columns make reference to the power, rank and privileges of the person wearing it.

Buddhist monks and nuns are asked to carry their three robes with them at all times (*kesa* with five, seven and nine columns). However, even in earlier days the large *kesa* were often replaced by miniature versions because these were easier to stow in one’s luggage. Up to this day one finds sets of these miniature *kesa*, which are kept in a special cover.

Sewing as meditation

Many people try to resist the frenzy of modern life with the help of meditative practices and counterbalance the every-day hectic by relying on contemplative techniques. Buddhist schools developed a large variety of meditation methods already long ago. One of these – a little known form – is applied when sewing a *kesa*. Each meticulous stitch forms part of a contemplative process. The aim is to create a regular and perfect seam that looks like a string of fine pearls. Each stitch is performed with utmost concentration on the here and now, not leaving room for any distractive thoughts. The same kind of dedication and attention should be applied to everything one does in life, to one’s own benefit.



On display in the exhibition are roughly forty *kesa* of different shape, make and quality – from simple linen to precious silk. The show includes unique items from the museum's own collections and a number of extraordinary loan pieces. The exhibition is curated by Walter Bruno Brix. Apart from his own artistic work, Brix is a well-known art historian and one of the leading experts on Asian fabrics and cloths.