

## Chapter One - Silk Along the Silk Roads: Diversity and Eclecticism

**Sarah E. Braddock Clarke**

### **Pinpointing Byzantium: A Lost Culture Regained**

“Byzantium means more than wealth, mastery of the sea and the exercise of imperial power. (...) Byzantium is also hard to grasp, difficult to place and can be obscure. (...) It remains hidden behind the glories of its medieval art: the gold, mosaics, silks and imperial palaces.”<sup>1</sup>

Byzantine artisans created a metaphysical space between Earth and the heavens drawing together reality and imagination, it was enigmatic and possessed spiritual presence. William Butler Yeats devised his 1927 transcendental poem *Sailing to Byzantium* in his early sixties opening with:

“That is no country for old men. (...)” and continuing:

“And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.”<sup>2</sup>

The title evokes travelling to an age-old civilization, a fabled city of excess, steeped in wonder, but the content, conveyed as a metaphor for a spiritual journey, speaks of the frailties of human existence and frustrations of being elderly in a world where only youth is valued. Having a twenty-first century resonance, the opening line brings to mind Cormac McCarthy’s 2005 novel and the 2007 film by Joel and Ethan Coen, both titled ‘No Country for Old Men’.

Embracing a multiplicity and thriving on connections embedded within humanist traditions Byzantine culture was trans-historical, inter-continental, cross-cultural and multi-dimensional with diversity and eclecticism at its core. Celebratory, creative and cosmopolitan, open-minded and forward-thinking, this era was also mysterious and in a constant state of flux, containing inconsistencies that make it

hard to pin down. Following a journey from the East to the West untangles these ever-evolving approaches. A materially rich state, the Byzantine Empire traded in woven silks from East to West, building and strengthening its position by supplying these luxuries. Textile treasures were transported along the infamous Silk Roads and were seen as the ultimate commodity - paramount in global trade, economies, social change and new aesthetics. Byzantine silks, and especially those emanating from the Imperial Court, played a major part in establishing 'style trends' in silk weaving. A wonderful example of a palimpsest, the Byzantines drew from a mosaic-like mix of genres to convey multiple meanings. Not adhering to rules and refusing to see barriers they moved swiftly across a range of decorative styles. Such variations kept their culture alive for over 1,100 years, leaving behind a defined legacy where their love for colour, imagery and pattern was spread far and wide. Its enduring impression is seen in contemporary design where historic imagery is reinterpreted, while maintaining traces of its origins.

Domenico Dolce and Stefano Gabbana are fascinated with Byzantine culture and have paid tribute in several collections that use vivid colour, printed imagery and hand ornamentation. Silk is used in its many forms - brocade, Jacquard, organza, tulle and lace, frequently ornamented with metallic thread embroidery and applied crystals, paillettes, beads, mother-of-pearl encrusted stones and pearls. The Dolce & Gabbana<sup>3</sup> Autumn/Winter 2013/2014 *prêt-à-porter* collection was instigated by seeing the twelfth-century Byzantine mosaics of the Cathedral of Monreale, near Palermo, Sicily that illustrate Emperor Justinian, Empress Theodora, heavenly saints, and both real and imaginary animals in tesserae. Byzantium was a Christian theocracy, the church interacting as a divine bond between the terrestrial and the celestial; weavers made images of prophets and scenes from the Bible, such as the

Annunciation and the Nativity, for Christian patrons. Both Dolce and Gabbana had Catholic upbringings and are devout Catholics; a faith that is frequently visualized in their ecclesiastical references. Here, Roman Catholic Church vestments are inferred in silhouettes that act as canvasses for polychrome printed imagery. A mid-calf length dress depicts the Virgin Mary (patron saint of Constantinople) in draped robes of dark blue featuring gold stars and a stylized floral border print at the hem. The dress is embellished with crystals, beads, stones and paillettes and the dramatic look accessorized with a gold diadem, large cross earrings and embellished footwear. Blue is a colour associated with royalty in the Byzantine Empire, and here signifies the Virgin's virtue and humility as well as being the colour of the sky and heavens; such intense blues were obtained using imported indigo leaves from China and Japan. In another look, a garment has strong geometric patterns in rich reds and golds with border prints at cuffs and hem. **Figure 1.1.**

### **Silk Roads and Silk Stories: Traversing Harsh Lands, Riding Monsoon Winds**

Silk, a natural protein fibre of ancient Chinese origin, holds great allure and has stood the test of time - yarn obtained from a silkworm's cocoon, conveniently already spun, is woven into fabric to clothe Byzantine emperors and empresses. James C.Y. Watt stated in his foreword for *Chinese Silks*: "Silk is as old as Chinese civilization. For thousands of years, since the Middle Neolithic era, it was an essential part of Chinese material culture, and was intimately related to the daily life of all social classes, from the people who worked on the production of silk and silk fabrics to the wearers of silk dresses. Beyond its practical use, it was appreciated for its aesthetic and tactile qualities."<sup>4</sup>

Silk fabric was coveted in Rome before the Common Era (CE) and Roman politician Julius Caesar was particularly captivated. This could be seen as the start of the luxury industry as this obsession, for both men and women, continued and an edict given: “So pervasive was the new fashion that in 14 BCE Rome’s Senate was obliged to issue a ban against men ‘disgracing themselves with the effeminate delicacy of silk apparel’, but to little effort it seems.”<sup>5</sup> On Chinese silks being beguiling, or even improper, Roman scholar Pliny the Elder remarked in his 50 CE publication *Natural History: A Selection*: “While they cover a woman, at the same moment [they] reveal her naked charms.”<sup>6</sup> Roman commentator Seneca in 1 CE disapproved of women wearing silk and stated in his writings *On Benefits*: “silk garments provide no protection for the body, or indeed modesty, so that when a woman wears them she can scarcely (...) swear that she is not naked.”<sup>7</sup> The first century saw increased silk trade between the East and Rome and in *Natural History: A Selection*, Pliny the Elder commented on the insatiable appetite among the Ancient Romans for luxury goods, such as Chinese silks in Italian markets: “We have come now to see (...) journeys made to Seres [China] to obtain cloth, the abysses of the Red Sea explored for pearls, and the depths of the earth scoured for emeralds.”<sup>8</sup> Italy is well-placed between Eastern and Western cultures and Anne McClanan wrote in her chapter of *The Art, Science and Technology of Medieval Travel* silks were: “(...) brought to central Italy through the busy conduit of trade provided by the Silk Road.”<sup>9</sup>

The Byzantine Empire had strong links with the great Silk Roads that allowed dissemination between East and West of ideas, philosophies, politics, societies, cultures, identities, scientific advances, materials, techniques, processes, and products. Such products included the namesake silks, pearls, gold, silver and spices

– a rich assault for the senses. Not uni-directional, trade routes operated in both directions with merchants tending to travel sections, usually between two commercial centres. Sprawling networks, both terrestrial and maritime, these interconnections crossed continents and oceans, having strong physical presences and infrastructures. Their reach was vast and through them people became aware of customs, traditions, religions and cultures of other lands. The name suggests the importance given to material culture, with silk as a mainstay, literally seaming disparate cultures. *Seidenstrasse(n)* (translates from German to English as Silk Road(s)) is a relatively modern term coined in 1877 by Prussian geologist/geographer Baron Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen. A scholar ahead of his time he undertook several expeditions to China and published his findings in five volumes, Volume 1 *China* writes of climate change, wind erosion blowing sediment from Central Asia to cause soil build-up on China's eastern plains, and physical and human geographies: "a significant part of his introduction to *China* is really a history of human activity across Eurasia, a history of travel, exploration, and the exchange of cultural information. In short, even though he barely employs the term, it is a history of the Silk Roads."<sup>10</sup>

Democratic in its sweep, nebulous, and deviating from the norm with a myriad of approaches, the Silk Roads gave precedence to the unconventional and unexpected. There is much in common with today's intermingling of cultures that honours change and values inclusion. In the twenty-first century international trade routes are being resurrected and revived, like the proverbial phoenix rising from the ashes, and extended. UNESCO<sup>11</sup> have initiated projects where multinational experts look at the Silk Roads' historical importance and consider its development, and the UN<sup>12</sup> World Tourism organization has an international Silk Road committee. The

World Heritage Committee,<sup>13</sup> the British Council<sup>14</sup> and the Japan Foundation<sup>15</sup> are other important institutions working to establish improved dialogues and relations. Numerous developments are underway, including road, rail and sea routes to create meshes and networks. In 2013, President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping proposed his *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI)<sup>16</sup> that involves bilateral projects to improve connectivity and co-operation between nations on a trans-continental stage ('Belt' refers to land-based routes and 'Road' sea-based). This ambitious venture, the *New Silk Road* is also the name for China Railway's direct rail freight service joining China's eastern city of Yiwu with Barking, East London. A *Polar Silk Road*<sup>17</sup> of Arctic shipping lanes has enabled access to, and movement through, previously frozen territories, partly due to global warming. Also, responding to increasing e-commerce, a *Digital Silk Road*<sup>18</sup> is improving and strengthening internet infrastructures to enable the digital technology of cyberspace to work within superfast, information-rich zones.

The Silk Roads began as vibrant, land-based trails where twisting caravans marked the comings and goings of merchants with their camels - 'ships of the desert'. Journeys were often fraught, involving navigation across demanding, and vulnerable terrains of mountain ranges, deserts, dunes, steppes, valleys and plains. Traders would rest in community encampments, often at important junctions and oases, where they imparted stories of their trials and tribulations, and forebodings – the much-feared Taklamakan Desert, whose name alludes to 'go in and you will never come out'. The lives of the merchants, being nomadic, were rich in history, myths and folklore and story-telling was rife with a plethora of metaphors and symbolism. Terrestrial tracks were followed by maritime passages across oceans, seas and straits, occurring at a time of advancements in ship-building and

navigational technologies. Riding Monsoon winds across the Arabian Sea to the West coast of India was fast and efficient as traders could sail the high seas rather than travelling between ports.

There was a fascination in Medieval Europe for tales of adventures, tapestries that were (inter)laced with notions of the 'other' - the people with their different modes of dress and customs, and the strange animals. An example, still capturing contemporary imaginations, is the collection of eighth century Middle Eastern tales *One Thousand and One Nights*<sup>19</sup> where highly visual yarns reference shape-shifters as beings with supernatural powers, as well as relaying many animal fables and parallels can be drawn with the narrative content of Byzantine silks. Today, Silk Road merchants have largely been replaced by business agents from various industries, including textiles and fashion where sustainability and e-commerce have deployed a major shift towards online purchases and resales.

Edward W. Said declared the importance of medieval texts in his influential 1978 book *Orientalism*, where their descriptions of alternative ways of living are useful aids to the West's understanding of the East: "The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture."<sup>20</sup> His later 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism* considered the roots of European culture where he acknowledged the importance of the narrative: "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world (...)."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Andrew Bolton stated: "The art of the Middle Ages is an art of storytelling, and (...) attest[s] to the narrative infrastructure of Catholicism, as well as of related eastern Orthodox traditions that developed in the Byzantine Empire."<sup>22</sup>

The caravanserais, early roadside inns, became centres of commerce with traditional open-air bazaars establishing a consumer society. Settlements grew to

become wealthy cities, hubs of learning with intellectual debate that depended on the Silk Roads for communications. These early cities existed for centuries, even millennia and some are legendary - Byzantium that became Constantinople, now Istanbul in Turkey, and Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan, both of ancient Sogdian origin. Byzantium's inhabitants were culturally diverse and divergent aesthetics, approaches, traditions, languages and lifestyles merged. Exchanges in knowledge and beliefs had an enormous effect on the history and civilization of both Europe and Eurasia with Europe owing much to the Silk Roads - without its impact, the Western world as we know it today, would not exist. Ideas of governing, sovereignty, diplomacy and bureaucracy emanate from Byzantine thought, along with issues that we associate with the more contemporary - cultural inclusivity and gender equality.

Change was omnipresent and around 324 the Western Roman Empire noticed the favourable geographical location of Byzantium. They transferred the Eastern Roman Empire from Rome to this site, a port city with a natural harbour, once an ancient Greek colony. Emperor Constantine I, the first emperor of the Byzantine Empire, re-inaugurated Byzantium in 330 as a sacred city of Christianity, renaming it 'Constantinople' and this locus became the source of Byzantium's spiritual philosophy. On the Bosphorus Strait, straddling both Asia and Europe, Constantinople was ideally positioned at the crossroads of both land and sea routes and at the heart of the Silk Roads' span. Bridging East and West, it was perfect for trade and superbly aligned for power and wealth. John Julius Norwich wrote in his 1988 book *Byzantium: The Early Centuries*: The "new city of Constantinople became both the centre of the late Roman world and the most splendid metropolis known to mankind (...)." <sup>23</sup> Being the centre of the Byzantine Empire, and therefore European

civilization, gave great confidence to its rulers and subjects. A string of emperors and co-emperors followed with Emperor Justinian I being instrumental in bringing sericulture to the Byzantine Empire around 552, founding a silk industry with a highly-controlled hierarchy. “Byzantium was an autocracy, ruled by an Emperor half-way to heaven, (...). Some of these Emperors were heroes, others were monsters; but they were never, never dull.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Coalescing Fashions: The Material and Immaterial Unfolded**

Fashion, an expression of self-representations and societies, has long salvaged different cultures – observing, borrowing, utilising and reshaping with Western textiles and fashion seeking inspiration in the halcyon Byzantine era. This era exerts a strong contemporary influence, just as Paris impacted on the fashion world during the early twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, dress codes have changed from the fourth to the twenty-first centuries. However, there are also commonalities: the elegance of medieval clothes with their high-on-the-neck, sleeves-to-the-wrists, and floor-sweeping robes parallels with contemporary clothing’s move to more modest dressing, covered-up and layered with comfort and ease built in for over-sized and gender-neutral looks. The contemporary fashion industry addresses diversity, a core value that the Byzantine culture presented centuries ago. Story-telling and image-making with Byzantine roots are being revisited in many contemporary fashion collections where sartorial coding of signifiers and the signified abound, melding imagery and speaking of things past. Most champion the transformative power of fashion to visualize and affirm new identities.

Interiors of Byzantine places of worship often had richly-coloured mosaics where light-reflecting tesserae conjured the ephemeral nature of Heaven and

Paradise. Writing around the year 500, Christian theologian/philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite put forward that to attain the heights of the spiritual realm it was necessary to be guided through the material, where the mind focused to contemplate the immaterial.<sup>25</sup> Many twentieth- and twenty-first century fashion designers have presented collections based on Byzantine style and especially its mosaics. Evoking the fashions of the time, mosaics captured the social and cultural elite – emperors and empresses in all their glory, chronicling the lives they lived. Constantinople’s Hagia Sophia, Ravenna’s Basilica of San Vitale, the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, also in Ravenna, and the Cathedral of Monreale, each have magnificent Byzantine mosaics. Created by skilled artisans using precious materials of marble, bronze and lapis lazuli they are finely detailed and appear as woven fabrics. The Basilica of San Vitale’s simple exterior contrasts with its interior mosaics suggesting the physical body and its spiritual reach respectively. Two mosaics flank the altar featuring Emperor Justinian (left), Empress Theodora (right), and their entourages. The couple’s dark-purple, silk robes denote power and their golden halos spirituality. Faces are detailed where dimensional nuances are captured, and fabric interpretation comes alive with textures and light-reflecting qualities.

Ravenna’s mosaics have inspired fashion designers worldwide; Gabrielle ‘Coco’ Chanel<sup>26</sup> visited on an inspiration visit with Duke Fulco di Verdura in 1930 and was especially interested in the portrayal of Empress Theodora. Years later, Karl Lagerfeld, fused the lost culture of Byzantium with 1960s references in Chanel’s *Métiers d’art* Pre-fall 2011 collection entitled *Paris-Byzance*. Empress Theodora had a ‘rags to riches’ story and a parallel is implied with Gabrielle Chanel’s own past. Characteristic Chanel tweed captured the look of tesserae resulting in square-shaped patterns. The garment was adorned with polychrome jewels giving light-

reflecting tones in homage to Chanel's love of Byzantine-style jewellery. Celebrating the past, the work of artisans associated with the House of Chanel are shown to advantage, where their attention to detail is in keeping with the high level of Byzantine craftsmanship. **Figure 1.2.**

In Italian fashion, religion often plays a powerful role and Gianni Versace favouring rich imagery and embellishment, referenced the elaborate mosaics of the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo for his Autumn/Winter 1991/1992 *prêt-à-porter* collection. Stylized Byzantine icons featured on garments that were heavily-embellished with crystals; Catholicism was part of Gianni and Donatella Versace's upbringing and they absorbed such symbolic imagery. Gianni Versace<sup>27</sup> visited The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1997 CE exhibition *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era: A.D. 843-1261*,<sup>28</sup> motivating him to work with lavish materials for his Autumn/Winter 1997/1998 *haute couture* collection, his final work, that exuded grandeur. He communicated carnality and sensuality with metal mesh, silk charmeuse and applied amber glass crystals for a shimmering gold evening dress that resembled contemporary chainmail and yet draped like bias-cut silk; the wearer being irradiated by its glow. Recalling a Byzantine processional cross, a highly-decorated emblem is wrought large across the body as defining imagery. Gold is impressive and plays a significant part in the Byzantine vision imbuing power, status, age and wisdom as well as symbolising Christ's rebirth. A transformative, almost metaphysical, quality is imparted by an emanating radiance making the wearer of gold robes appear sublime, as if they could transcend towards the heavens. **Figure 1.3.**

Byzantine fashion began in the fourth century when the Imperial Court and aristocracy led regal lifestyles, setting the style for sartorial choices. Robes of

decorative silks were worn by elite dignitaries: secular rulers - emperors, empresses, the court and nobles. In addition, ecclesiastical leaders donned silk brocade vestments that proclaimed their elevated status. For both court and religious arenas, silhouettes tended towards simply-cut, body-covering garments - ideal for portraying large-scaled motifs, repeats and borders. Eastern-influenced elements were adopted such as silk woven fabrics with striking imagery and patterns in audacious colours. Purple, was paramount to the Byzantine Empire and favoured in all its shades, but especially popular was a scintillating fade-resistant reddish-purple extracted from the marine snail *Bolinus brandaris* (formerly known as *Murex brandaris*). Originally produced in the ancient port city of Tyre in Lebanon, strict guidelines were in place for who could wear 'Tyrian purple'. Embellishment was lavish with metallic embroidery and jewel-encrusted decoration using filigree gold, silver-gilt, *cloisonné* enamels, rock crystal *cabochons* and precious/semi-precious stones – amethysts, emeralds, sapphires and pearls. To complete the high decoration, head-dresses with veils, diadems - jewelled crowns or headbands and long, dangling pearl earrings were worn. It is this sense of opulence, from head to toe, that has attracted fashion designers to the Byzantine.

Constantinople was the largest and wealthiest city in Europe for centuries, remaining the seat of the Byzantine Empire from 330 to 1453 and revelling in a golden age from the sixth century, when Justinian I ruled. In China, woven silks continued to develop and evolve, maintaining them as a desirable commodity: "Exquisite textiles such as brocade, tapestry, and embroidered silk cloth, which demanded complicated looms, high technical skill, and a sophisticated division of labor, were mainly the products of large workshops under government control."<sup>29</sup> Detailed rules were drawn up for the wearing of clothes; Constantine VII wrote or

commissioned the tenth century *Book of Ceremonies*<sup>30</sup> where dictums set forth elaborate hierarchies of dress codes. The Byzantine period reached a pinnacle before its' decline was marked in the early thirteenth century, the light of this admirable period being extinguished in 1453 when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks.

Samite is often mentioned in medieval texts, "The weft-faced compound twill weave is capable of suspending accurate interpretations of imagery due to an advanced technique using drawlooms. This is a weave structure first associated with Sassanid Persia, the pattern is indebted to the same culture."<sup>31</sup> Despite being rooted in a strict geometric system of construction, expressive imagery emerged where fine, strong, lustrous silk was well-suited. The inherent diagonal structure is revealed and both the textiles' face and reverse are covered by weft threads using binding warp threads - the weft holds the motifs. The reverse side of a true samite has no floating weft threads, instead they are interlocked within the weave to create a dense textile, resistant to decay. Examples have survived - their energetic imagery and descriptive textures continuing to delight contemporary audiences. Samite would have been considered similar to current fashion collections - that elicit a need to possess - and Byzantines enjoyed sumptuous colours that announced hierarchies. Natural dyes (plants, insects, minerals) were used to achieve key colours of violet/purple, gold, red, and blue, and silk took dye up readily for retina-searing intensities to enhance complex imagery. Colour was heavily coded within imperial and ecclesiastical worlds; generally, the deeper the colour, the more prestige was attached; such distinctions of status giving order to the Empire.

### **Imagining New Natures: Beasts, Birds, Hybrids and Harbingers**

Byzantines had a unique way of showing accordance with their world where an all-encompassing approach resulted in vivacious imagery which displayed visual rhythm. Ever searching for the new, they developed a stylized aesthetic made manifest in samite, amalgamating images/patterns to reflect their ideas, beliefs and ambitions. Imagery used on these silk textiles recorded the worlds of the people who designed them, revealing humanity in all its guises, from saints to emperors to hunters as well as displaying the artistic mode of the time. Also evident was a strong connection to animals and birds, with their imagery often dating back to ancient times; myths and biophilia were conveyed with prevalent images of trees, plants, flowers, fruit and foliage. The history of Byzantium is in line with the Chinese Song dynasty (960 to 1279) when the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi* most likely began with its appreciation of nature and acceptance of change. Medieval artisans also delved into their imaginations to create unbounded realms of fantasy, merging the secular and the religious by combining the natural, supernatural and spiritual.

Venetian merchant Marco Polo travelled the Silk Roads to Asia between 1271 and 1295, living there for seventeen of those years; his writings were considered instrumental in revealing details of life in the East to the people of the West.<sup>32</sup> Observing the commerce between Persia and China, and marvelling at the silks he saw in the bazaars he desired textiles that were 'richly wrought with figures of beasts and birds'.<sup>33</sup> Alexander McQueen's<sup>34</sup> Autumn/Winter 2010/2011 *prêt-à-porter* collection was posthumously titled *Angels and Demons* after his death in February 2010. Here, his last collection, took inspiration from Byzantine art. Symmetrical feline imagery in a bold scale with a stylised border makes a strong impact, worn over a gold bejewelled top, accessorized with over-the-knee boots. **Figure 1.4.** Volumetric silhouettes followed medieval proportions utilising polychrome silk digital Jacquards,

vintage brocades and silk satins. A dramatic red coat made of silk and metallic thread in a twill weave, has exaggerated flared sleeves and is cinched at the waist by a leather belt.

The preference for purple in the Byzantine era was at odds with Confucian values that considered red, being a primary colour, the purest and most virtuous. When the knowledge of achieving purple dye was lost with the fall of the Byzantine Empire, the Roman Catholic Church chose scarlet for its cardinals, symbolising blood, divine love, compassion and fire. Deep reds were obtained using dried/crushed insects (cochineal/carmine/kermes) or plant-based roots (madder).

Pictorial and narrative in content, imagery was often symbolic - the meanings waiting to be deciphered. Images of good luck were used such as those from China's Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), considered a golden age in Chinese history. "In Han times, artisans who wove multi-coloured brocade fabrics liked to place auspicious characters for longevity and prosperity among lively animal motifs."<sup>35</sup> Chinese, both young and old, tend to be superstitious, believing in *yù yì* (translates from Chinese to English as connotation), a metaphor behind the actual object. Its use is apparent in all areas of life in China, from birth to death, where symbolism is generally rooted in Chinese folk culture. The images might be propitious, convey happiness or chase away evils.

Images of birds were harbingers of good fortune and metaphors for the soul: "Thus, the empty cages and the birds dispersed in the foliage could refer to a paradise in which souls might flutter in the branches, like birds free from incarceration."<sup>36</sup> They express freedom especially when presented flying where they serve as messengers between different states, alluding to spiritual dimensions. Italian fashion house Valentino<sup>37</sup>, founded by Valentino Garavani has often used the

Byzantine era and its associated imagery as inspiration. The Spring 2016 *haute couture* collection designed by Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli looked to the Byzantine Empire and to Mariano Fortuny's mix of Eastern-influenced Byzantine and Western-influenced classic aesthetics. An evening dress has large-scale peacock imagery embroidered on silk tulle, its distinctive tail feathers spread in majestic display. The peacock has its origins in South Asia, immediately recognisable due to its iridescent colouring, metallic sheen, ornate patterns, distinctive crown feathers and resplendent fan-like tail. In Byzantine culture it symbolizes power, but also vanity and was typically presented standing formally in a frontal pose, its tail feathers spread out symmetrically behind to create a semi-circle, resembling a halo. For Romans, the peacock represented immortality, and for Muslims, the Universe as the spread circular form of tail feathers conjured up the Sun or full Moon. Some cultures believe the peacock feather ends betoken the evil eye of the female demon named Lilith, a harbinger of bad luck, misfortune and death. However, the peacock is generally seen as a bringer of good fortune and closely linked to imperality. The clothing is accessorized by a body chain with spiral motifs and a gold writhing snake headpiece. **Figure 1.5.**

When explorers of the New World described animals they had seen, their accounts of extraordinary beasts stirred imaginations. Artists would attempt a facsimile with known animals but, as they were unable to use direct observations, concocted forms sprung up. Illustrators gathered information - assembling and interpreting from stories to create fabulous blends of the familiar and the strange, some benign, some terrifying. In his introduction to *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* the translator Charles William Reuben Dutton Moseley stated: "Written accounts from travellers, historians, and others towards the later Middle Ages

explored diverse approaches to describing, chronicling or recording journeys taken and those merely imagined (...). Both Marco Polo's travelogue and the book of John Mandeville, for example, portray various beasts and peoples who are monstrous in appearance and behaviour."<sup>38</sup>

Make-believe was part of the Byzantine consciousness and hybrids were popular. Most were benevolent and beneficent winged creatures, part-animal, part-bird that have a modern relevance where the underlying symbolism still echoes. The Surrealists for example - with their emphasis on unconscious, awakening minds and visionary dreams, enjoyed conjuring up hybrids. Their inclusion of imaginary beings rests in an unsettling arena, a space between what is known and what is unknown. Thierry Mugler,<sup>39</sup> known for his *outré* designs, presented an Autumn/Winter 1997/1998 *haute couture* collection that centred on dramatic presentations of strong women. He ended the Paris catwalk show spectacularly with his Chimera dress where different sets of DNA genetic information showed a body in mutation, transcending biology. Descending from Greek mythology, the fire-breathing Chimera monster, usually female, is composed of several animal parts - a lion's head, goat's body and serpent's tail, its name appropriately linked to illusory notions. A hybrid is presented with the segmented body of an amphibian, feathered crown of a bird, iridescent scales of a fish and long, wiry hair of a mammal – a fascinating, yet incongruous composite. A variety of materials were used including silks, velvets and leathers. In Byzantine times there was a preference for imaginary beings such as this - super-human and winged that mediated in liminal spaces between physical and spiritual realms. **Figure 1.6.**

Many combinations and transformations emanate from the compelling Ancient Greek mythologies where humans, animals and birds possessed supernatural

powers. The phoenix comes from Chinese and Japanese mythologies, an avian symbol, in both East and West, of the Sun rising and setting. Its image is linked to immortality through regeneration and resurrection and also prosperity and happiness. As Pliny the Elder wrote in his 1 CE publication *Natural History: A Selection* “the island of Socotra and legendary home of the phoenix, that lays itself to die on ‘a nest of cinnamon and sprigs of incense’.”<sup>40</sup> Other combinations include the omniscient sphinx with a human head (male or female), lion’s body and bird’s wings, and Pegasus, the mythical Greek winged horse, considered divine and immortal, often shown with floating ribbons on its neck and fetlocks. With a mammalian head and body of a bird, the simurgh most likely originated in Persian mythology and symbolizes immortality; known in Sassanian lore for being wise, benevolent and intrinsically linked to nature, whose home is the *tree of all germs*, from where it disperses plant seeds. In Dolce & Gabbana’s<sup>41</sup> aforementioned Autumn/Winter 2013/2014 *prêt-à-porter* collection, inspired by the magnificent imagination of the Byzantines, the popular griffin hybrid was placed centre-stage. Turquoise-winged, the griffin is set within a decorated surround on the bodice of this full-length dress alongside other animals, birds, insects and stylized florals, while blue-robed saints appear at the hem. The griffin, half-lion, half-eagle with a leonine body and paws, eagle head and wings, is symbolic of power and a guardian figure, a protector of treasure and the dead. **Figure 1.7.**

Such imagery plunders many sources, actual and fictional, that could be considered a precursor to postmodernist thinking where historical times are foraged, differences lauded and expressions of change omni-present. Just as a whole stream of past adventurers sought to encounter something offbeat to the quotidian, so did postmodernist designers. Imagery, often narrative-laden, takes from everywhere –

ransacking cultures and times, magpie-like in its quest for reappraisals, renewals, restructures and representations. Postmodernism is positive and life-affirming, having a *collage/bricolage* approach resulting in medleys of unexpected juxtapositions and fluidities. Such combinations can relate to the Byzantines who so brilliantly mastered this aesthetic of excess, where assortments are presented that elide centuries of design history; a decontextualized bazaar.

Furthermore, parallels can be drawn between Byzantine blending of natural with mythical imagery and contemporary amalgamations of reality with fantasy. An estrangement exists in current society operating within a post-truth world where characters transmogrify, giving rise to ‘uncanny’, but captivating, experiences. Besides textiles and fashion, other sectors that have come under the Byzantine spell are computer gaming, with its use of composites, and fashion photography, with its retouching - both art forms where reality and escapism blend and imagination often reigns supreme. Contemporary imagery effervesces with evocative depictions inhabiting actual or virtual worlds and moving between pasts, present, futures - Walt Disney’s cartoons and Japanese anime are genres overrun with epochal transformations. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century literature reinterprets medieval bestiaries with their permutations of fact and fiction. Popular examples include the unicorn, representing purity and innocence, and possessing magical powers, as found in Lewis Carroll’s fictional books *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*<sup>42</sup> (1865 CE) and *Through the Looking Glass*<sup>43</sup> (1871 CE); the hippogriff, a mythical creature first mentioned in Virgil’s *Eclogues*<sup>44</sup> from 39 BCE with the head, front legs and wings of an eagle and the body, hind legs and tail of a horse from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*<sup>45</sup> series of stories from 1997 onwards, with subsequent films, and the book series *A Song of Ice and Fire*<sup>46</sup> by George R. R. Martin, the first

published in 1996 CE, followed by the television series *Game of Thrones*, first aired in the United States, 2011. This epic fantasy drama has a cult-like following, referencing Greek myths and medieval times where regal silk ensembles exemplify power.

For Valentino's<sup>47</sup> Spring 2014 *prêt-à-porter* collection the designers Maria Grazia Chiuri and Pierpaolo Piccioli spoke of their collection as a 'fashion opera', taking inspiration from *Medea in Corinth*, the 1813 classic Roman opera based on the mythological Ancient Greek enchantress, and Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1969 film *Medea*. Elegant long silhouettes allow stylized imagery to step forward – set within medallions confronting winged lions flank a tree of life while surrounding images of animals, birds, insects, flowers and foliage are contained within smaller roundels. Byzantine artisans used repeat patterns to denote stability and constancy, and distinctive design elements followed certain formulas. The lion, connected to the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, and to Christianity, is a sacred and long-revered symbol representing the Sun and imperiality; while the tree of life extends to the heavens, representing fertility and the bounty of Earth. **Figure 1.8.**

Italian fashion house, Etro<sup>48</sup> began as a textile weaving mill in 1968 CE, founded by Gerolamo 'Gimmo' Etro, and soon known for high-quality fabrics, including fine silks. The symbol of Pegasus is used for Etro's branding and their reputation built on a use of vivid colours and multifarious patterns, especially the ancient paisley motif, that became Etro's signature. This family business has a deep knowledge and appreciation for antique textiles, expanding into fashion, they offer a maximalist aesthetic that takes inspiration from different cultures. The vision for their Autumn/Winter 2009/2010 *prêt-à-porter* collection took inspiration from Byzantium where Veronica Etro, the creative director for womenswear, looked at these historic

times but imparted a contemporary feel. Fluid, multi-coloured silks are teamed with metallics and a strapless dress displays symmetrical printed paisleys and stylized florals in fuchsia, purple, burnt sienna and gold contrasted with black. Accessories, such as a fringed collar, referenced the grandeur of Byzantine jewelled collars.

**Figure 1.9.**

This homage to Byzantine times is seen through a contemporary filter where imagery presents a unified graphic language, and aesthetics are synthesized from many lands and histories. Byzantine woven silks had flair and panache that enjoyed differences in narrative and artistic expressions; its heritage holding an energy and a certain *élan*. Culturally and artistically its empire left a durable legacy: “In our own day there remains to us only one continual reminder of the genius of the Byzantines: the splendour of their art.”<sup>49</sup> The Byzantine era still inspires and influences textile and fashion designers in their choices of materials and colours, and their utilization of images and patterns that conjure time-honoured struggles between good and evil. Such a study is timely as many world conflicts concern differences in religions, cultures and lifestyles. It was not all peace and harmony during the Byzantine era; there were many hierarchies in place, dictatorship and subjugation were rife, and there was even terror. However, there is much to be learned from the co-operative and collaborative Byzantine Empire that, with its wide footfall, understood centuries ago that art and design were entirely global. Postmodern, polymath culture capitalizes on this once-glorious time of heightened creativity - a beacon of civilization where a *modus operandi* is offered and a reminder presented of the commonalities of a shared world heritage. Distances travelled can be symbols of progress and the Byzantine spirit endures as Silk Roads pave the way for advances, the past treading with the present, our journeys not yet completed.

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