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Ancient Design by Modern Hands

An Invitation to Textile Artists

Spiral Textile is an initiative to bridge the gap between historical textile researchers and the handweaving community. Collaborative exchange can help advance knowledge and expand the appreciation of textiles in history. To further this goal, we organised Spiral Textile as an *'open source' experimental archaeology project* to engage textile artists from around the world to reproduce a spiral design found on an ancient papyrus at Karanis, Egypt (Fig. 1). The papyrus (P.Mich. inv. 5143c) is now housed in the Papyrus Collection of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.



Fig. 1. Papyrus drawing with spiral pattern, P.Mich. inv. 5143c (© University of Michigan).



Object history

The papyrus spiral drawing is a unique artefact and the only known representational papyrus found in a secure archaeological context. The fragments were discovered in 1927 during the University of Michigan excavations at Karanis, a Roman town in the Fayum in Egypt (Wilfong 2014; Boak and Peterson 1931). The archaeological documentation of the site identifies the find spot as house C56b in the 3rd–4th-century-CE-era stratum. The finds from this house are comparatively rich with over 500 objects from daily life including textile fragments (Fig. 2), weaving materials (Fig. 3) and textile implements.

Analysis of the papyrus fragments shows that the repeating spiral pattern was drawn with a brush by a skilled hand. IR-microscopy has confirmed the use of iron-gall ink.¹ The condition of the papyrus suggests that the sheet was folded in half, then wrapped around an object with symmetrical areas of loss. Despite its fragmentary condition, the repeating spiral design is clearly visible.

Although we have examples of spiral designs on various media from Karanis, it is important to note that the motif is not confined to late-antique Egypt. During the course of our research, we have seen many objects with spiral designs in ancient and modern cultures from around the world. In a broad sense, Spiral Textile is a testimony to the importance and continuity of certain motifs over time.

About the project

We have framed Spiral Textile as a means to 'crowd source' research by reaching out to textile practitioners from around the world. Registered participants follow a set of guidelines pertaining to materials and techniques in common use in late Roman Egypt. Registration is open to all and the number of participants is unlimited.

The Spiral Textile guidelines are constructed to engage textile artists in historical research by presenting information about topics including fibre use, colour choice and evidence of production. Based on surviving textiles from the period, we have prescribed seven patterning techniques that may be used alone or in combination: tapestry (Fig. 4), flying thread brocading, pile weave, supplementary weft, taqueté, embroidery and resist-dyeing.

Our website includes images of archaeological textiles to serve as a guide and source of inspiration. To challenge participants, we have left technical choices such as yarn type and size, sett, weft density and finishing to their discretion. In addition to samples made according to the seven prescribed techniques, we will also accept 'modern' artistic interpretations



Fig. 2. Sprang bonnet patterned with S and Z twist yarns (Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 02.2549, © Julia Galliker).



Fig. 3. Length of purple yarn with one end wrapped around the rest in the centre to form a 'butterfly' for weaving (Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, 02.2605, © Julia Galliker).

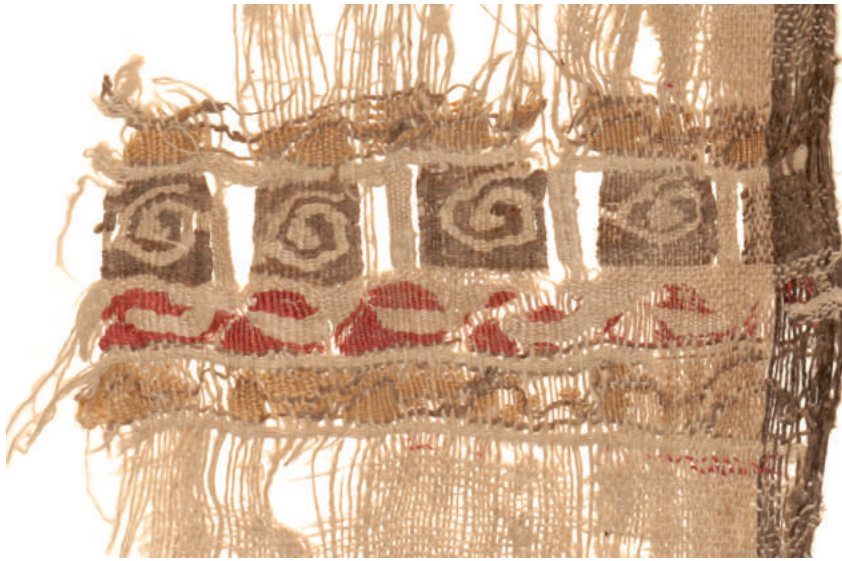


Fig. 4. Spiral pattern in tapestry technique, detail (Austrian National Library, Papyrussammlung, Vienna, inv. P.Vindob. Stoff 59 a–b, © Ines Bogensperger).

of the pattern. Registered participants may send in multiple samples. The final date for submission is 21st April 2017.

To record and analyse participant experience, we have constructed an online experimental archaeology survey to be completed as part of the sample submission process. This data is essential for historic textile research as we lack information from the weavers' perspective in ancient times. Data from this population of surveys will be interpreted to obtain a better understanding of ancient textile production, technology and craftsmanship. We will present our findings at international academic conferences.

Through this project, our goal is to build a community among interested persons from various backgrounds. We are inviting a number of individuals including academics and members of the handweaving community to write 'blog' posts for the website to inform and encourage multidisciplinary exchange. Project participants can also participate in discussions by joining our facebook group: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/spiraltextile/>.

Competition and exhibition

To showcase submitted samples, we have organised Spiral Textile as both a competition and an exhibition. Textile artists like a challenge, so the project includes a juried competition. We have defined a set of awards to encourage both artistry and experimentation. A category award will be given for each of the seven techniques. A special cross-category award will be presented for a sample that combines two or more techniques. An overall first prize will be awarded

to the best sample in the competition. To encourage submission of 'less than perfect' samples that contain important experimental information, we will also award five experimental archaeology prizes. Award textiles will be gifted to the University of Michigan for teaching and display.

All samples that meet project specifications will be included in a travelling exhibition for display at various locations in North America and Europe. While we are still finalising details, we have received enthusiastic support from our proposed venues. The samples on display are intended for touch by visitors to encourage public appreciation for the tactile properties of textiles. We will also post images of the exhibition textiles on our website with an artist profile for prize-winning samples.

For more information please visit the spiraltextile.com website or contact us via email: info@spiraltextile.com.

Notes

1. Personal communication from Marieka Kaye, conservation librarian, 24 June 2016.

Bibliography

Boak, A. E. R. and Peterson, E. E. (1931) *Karanis. Topographical and Architectural Report of Excavations during the Seasons 1924–28*. University of Michigan studies, Humanistic services 25, Ann Arbor.

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