



Coverlet (The Five Senses)

Circa: First half of the 17th century

Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India, First half of the 17th century

Silk embroidery

268cm high, 192cm wide

Provenance: Private USA Collection

Stock no.: A4720

This Gujarati coverlet or colcha was made for the European market in dark-blue plain weave silk with polychrome silk embroidery (red, yellow, white, green, orange, blue and brown) in chain stitch and with fringes in two colours. The design of this bedcover is organised around an eight-lobed central medallion enclosed with a border of Renaissance-style grotesque masques interspersed with flowers. This medallion is set within a large rectangular panel surrounded by wide borders featuring hunters some on horseback and animals in symmetrical order. The central field is decorated with a European-style dragon on top and below the medallion flanked by hunters, wild animals and birds, including peacocks on the corners. The figure of Touch, depicted as a red-haired woman stroking a small animal while seated cross-legged, is shown at the centre of the medallion, while female figures in the corners personify the other four senses: Smell (a woman smelling a flower), Sight (a woman gazing at her reflexion in a mirror), Taste (a woman drinking wine from a small goblet) and Hearing (a woman playing a lute), pictured clockwise. Each of the five figures (also the hunters on the borders) is dressed following the characteristic costume and hairstyle of the 1620-1630s. Although the hunting scenes are similar to those featured on earlier Bengali colchas, called de montaria (with hunting scenes) and made for the Portuguese market from the mid-16th century until their expulsion by the Mughals in 1632, the depiction of the female personifications in their courtly apparel is reminiscent of a set of prints on the Five Senses

(published around 1623-1627) by Johan Barra, or Jan Barra (1581-1634), a Dutch engraver who settled in London in 1627.

While the Portuguese were certainly the first to commission luxury goods such as prized silk textiles, directly to the centuries-old textile production centres of India, such as Bengal and Gujarat, other European patrons soon followed from the early 17th century onwards - on these Gujarati colchas see Karl, 2016, pp. 41-43; see also Peck, 2013. Apart from the present one, only five other examples of Gujarati coverlets embroidered with the Five Senses are known to have survived: one (273 x 193 cm) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Acc. No. [1998.587](#)) and a second (284.5 x 218 cm), very similar in its composition and decoration, featuring facing phoenix-like simurgh of Persian origin on the four corners on the central field, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (Acc. No. 1988-7-4, see Karl, 2016, pp. 257-58, Cat. No. 35); a third example in the Museu-Biblioteca Condes de Castro Guimarães, Cascais, Portugal; a fourth (278.7 x 197.3 cm), with winged lions and peacocks on the four corners of the inner central field, in the Art Institute of Chicago, Acc. No. [1982.18](#); and a fifth in the Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin. One other example, similar to these Five Senses' colchas in composition, colour scheme and decorative repertoire, albeit with the depiction of only one standing female figure with a parrot on the central medallion and double-headed eagles on the four outer corners, belongs to the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Acc. No. Carrand 2258, see Karl, 2016, pp. 255-57, Cat. No. 34.

Literature:

Karl, B. Embroidered Histories: Indian Textiles for the Portuguese Market during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Böhlau Verlag, Wien - Köln – Weimar, 2016.

Peck, A. (ed.). Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800 (exh. cat.), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thames and Hudson, New York - London, 2013.