

From Pattern to Presence: Symbiotic Aesthetics of Tang Dynasty Textile Motifs Across Visual Culture and Contemporary Media

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Abstract

This paper examines the Tang dynasty textile known as the Roundel Paired Deer Pattern Brocade (Tuanke Lianzhu Dui Lu Wen Jin), as a case study in cross-cultural visual heritage. Drawing on anthropological theory, visual analysis, and design history, it argues that the textile's ornamental system, built from the interaction of circles and squares, enacts a philosophy of symbiosis: the productive coexistence of distinct cultural forms without the erasure of either. The paper proposes the concept of the “Symbiotic Aesthetic” to describe this logic, and traces its relevance from the early Tang period to contemporary practices of digital heritage and design reinterpretation.

Keywords: Tang dynasty textiles, symbiosis, cultural heritage, visual anthropology, pattern design, Silk Road

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Introduction

Textile patterns are rarely treated as objects of serious intellectual inquiry. They are more often described as decoration, pleasant, repetitive, culturally coded but ultimately surface-level. This paper argues against that position. Taking as its subject a single piece of early Tang dynasty silk, the Roundel Paired Deer Pattern Brocade, it proposes that ornamental patterns encode complex cultural arguments: about worldview, social order, intercultural encounter, and the nature of coexistence itself.

The textile under examination is a weft-faced polychrome brocade produced in the early Tang dynasty, approximately the seventh century CE. Its repeating pattern unit consists of a circular roundel, formed by twenty small pearls and four hollow squares arranged as a ring, enclosing a Tree of Life and two symmetrically paired deer. Between roundels, scrolling acanthus fills the intervening space. The palette is dominated by dark gold and forest green, both at low saturation, against an ivory ground.

What makes this object significant is not its rarity, but its legibility. Every formal element, the circle, the square, the deer, the tree, the colour, carries traceable cultural meaning. And the way those elements are combined reflects a logic that this paper identifies as symbiotic: a mode of coexistence in which distinct traditions and forms meet, transform each other, and produce something neither could have generated alone.

The argument proceeds in four stages. First, the paper establishes a theoretical framework drawn from cultural anthropology, treating pattern as a form of social text. Second, it introduces symbiosis as both a descriptive and analytical concept, and proposes the “Symbiotic Aesthetic” as a theoretical framework. Third, it analyses the geometry of the textile—the circle and the square, as the structural and philosophical vehicle for that aesthetic. Fourth, it situates the textile within its historical moment and considers its contemporary relevance.

Pattern as Cultural Heritage: An Anthropological Framework

Anthropology has long understood material culture as a form of social text. Clifford Geertz's foundational claim, that “a symbol is a vehicle for a conception”, establishes the methodological premise of this paper (Geertz, 1973, p. 91). Patterns, as visual symbol systems, do not merely illustrate culture; they perform it. They encode beliefs, enact social hierarchies, and transmit values across generations in a form that is simultaneously material and semiotic.

Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural anthropology provides a complementary framework. In his analysis of myth, Lévi-Strauss demonstrated that binary oppositions, nature and culture, raw and cooked, life and death, are not merely intellectual concepts but cognitive tools through which societies organise experience and resolve internal tensions (Lévi-Strauss, 1963). The same logic applies to ornamental pattern. The juxtaposition of circle and square, deer and tree, Chinese motif and Persian geometry, is not arbitrary: it represents a structural negotiation between different value systems, staged in visual form.

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) reinforces this position from a policy perspective. By recognising that craft knowledge, symbolic vocabulary, and transmission practices constitute living heritage, not merely the objects themselves—the Convention implicitly argues that patterns are active cultural agents, not passive records. The Roundel Paired Deer Pattern Brocade, understood through this lens,

is not an artifact preserved in a museum case. It is a living cultural form: its geometry still legible, its symbolic logic still operative, its intercultural history still unfinished.

The textile functions as social text across at least three registers. As cosmology, the circular roundel maps the Tang universe: heaven as a containing frame, life as its content. The bilateral symmetry of the deer and the axial Tree of Life express a worldview in which the cosmos is ordered, balanced, and hospitable to human flourishing. As social order, the palette encodes hierarchical value: gold, the most prestigious colour in Tang China, inherited from the Sui dynasty's fire virtue and associated with imperial authority, is present but restrained, in dialogue with green rather than opposition to it (Na, 1996). As intercultural memory, the textile is a material archive of Silk Road encounter, its Persian roundel and Chinese deer sharing a single visual plane without either subordinating the other. Each of the three primary motifs deserves closer attention, because each carries a distinct cultural load.

The deer is the most semantically rich. In Confucian culture, the deer symbolises rank and prosperity: the word *lu* is homophonous with the term for official emolument, making the deer an emblem of career achievement and social advancement, a meaning that gained particular urgency with the restoration of the imperial examination system in the Tang period.

In Daoist tradition, the deer is associated with longevity and immortality, frequently depicted as the companion of immortals in mountain retreats. In this textile, the deer is neither purely Confucian nor purely Daoist: it inhabits both registers simultaneously, its significance accumulating rather than resolving into a single meaning. The deer stands at the point where social aspiration and spiritual yearning meet, which is to say, at the centre of early Tang cultural life. The scrolling acanthus (*juancaowén*) operates differently: it is less a symbol than a structural logic. Its continuous, curving growth, extending outward without termination, embodies the principle of unceasing vitality. It fills the interstitial space between roundels not merely as decoration but as argument: the world does not stop at the boundary of the circle. Life continues in the spaces between defined forms. The acanthus makes the negative space of the pattern productive.

The pearl ring (*lianzhu*) is the element with the deepest intercultural biography. Originating in Sassanid Persia, it travelled eastward along the Silk Road, was adopted by Buddhist iconographic traditions across Central Asia, and entered Chinese visual culture in the Northern and Southern Dynasties period. By the Tang dynasty it had been thoroughly naturalised, no longer perceived as foreign but as a shared vocabulary of auspiciousness. Its circular form carries connotations of completeness and good fortune that proved compatible with both Buddhist and Confucian frameworks. The pearl ring is thus itself a product of prior symbiosis, a motif that had already undergone one round of intercultural transformation before it was combined with the Chinese deer and tree. The textile is not a meeting of two traditions but of many, accumulated over centuries of exchange.

Symbiosis as Concept and Method

Defining Symbiosis

The term symbiosis derives from the Greek *syn* (together) and *biosis* (living): literally, living together. In biological usage, symbiosis describes relationships of co-dependence between organisms of different species. Three modes are conventionally distinguished: mutualism, in

which both parties benefit; commensalism, in which one benefits without harming the other; and parasitism, in which one benefits at the other's expense.

This paper applies these categories not as metaphor but as structural description. The Roundel Paired Deer Pattern Brocade is a mutualist object. Chinese pattern vocabulary and Sassanid Persian geometry enter into contact and both are enriched by the encounter. The Chinese deer acquires a cosmic frame it did not previously possess; the Persian roundel acquires living, naturalistic content. Neither tradition is diminished. Both are transformed.

At the same time, the textile refuses parasitism. No cultural form is consumed for another's benefit. The Chinese acanthus is not replaced by the Persian roundel; the Persian geometry is not overwritten by Chinese figuration. The contact is productive precisely because it is non-extractive.

The Symbiotic Aesthetic

On the basis of this analysis, this paper proposes the concept of the Symbiotic Aesthetic as a theoretical framework for understanding cultural encounter in ornamental form. The Symbiotic Aesthetic describes a mode of visual production in which: (1) no source tradition is hierarchically privileged; (2) each element undergoes transformation through contact while retaining its identity; (3) the combination generates meaning that exceeds what any single element could produce in isolation; and (4) multiple temporal layers, historical making, contemporary reading, future reinterpretation, coexist within a single pattern.

This framework extends beyond the Tang context. It offers a model for thinking about any ornamental tradition that arises from intercultural contact: not as synthesis, which implies the dissolution of difference into a new unity, and not as appropriation, which implies extraction without reciprocity, but as symbiosis, a relationship of mutual constitution in which difference is preserved as the condition of productivity. It is worth demonstrating each of the four properties concretely in the textile itself. The first property, non-hierarchy, is visible in the formal arrangement: the Chinese deer and the Persian roundel occupy positions of equal visual weight.

Neither functions as background to the other's foreground; they are mutually constitutive, each requiring the other to be legible. The second property, transformation without loss of identity, can be seen in the deer itself: it retains its naturalistic Chinese character (spotted, leaping, ribboned) even as it is recontextualised within a geometric Persian frame it would never have occupied in earlier Chinese textile traditions. The deer is changed by its new context, but it remains unmistakably a deer.

The third property, generative surplus, is most apparent when the three motifs are considered together: the deer alone is auspicious, the roundel alone is geometric, the acanthus alone is vegetal; but the combination produces a cosmological image, a bounded universe teeming with life, that none of the three elements could generate independently. The fourth property, temporal layering, is addressed in detail in the discussion of contemporary relevance in Section 6, but it is worth noting here that the textile's capacity for reinterpretation across fourteen centuries is itself evidence of its symbiotic structure: a pattern that had resolved into a fixed, closed meaning would not survive translation into new contexts.

The Geometry of Symbiosis: Circle and Square

The Circle

The circle is the dominant formal element of the pearl ring that defines each roundel. In Chinese cosmological thought, the circle corresponds to heaven: it is continuous, without beginning or end, and represents cyclical time and regenerative life. The roundel functions as a cosmic enclosure, a bounded world within which the deer and the tree coexist.

Crucially, the circle is also a liminal zone. The pearl ring does not simply separate inside from outside; it constitutes a threshold, a space that belongs neither fully to the enclosed world nor to the outer field. This threshold is where the Chinese and Persian formal systems meet. The pearl ring is simultaneously a Chinese visual motif and a Sassanid-derived structural device. It is, spatially and culturally, the Zone of Symbiosis.

From a perceptual standpoint, Arnheim's analysis in *Art and Visual Perception* is directly relevant: the circle exerts a centripetal force, drawing the viewer's attention inward toward the enclosed figures (Arnheim, 1974). The roundel thus operates as a visual argument, it says: look here, this is a world worth attending to.

The Square

The four hollow squares within the pearl ring are the textile's most formally subtle element. In Chinese philosophy, the square corresponds to earth: it is the geometry of measurement, order, and human construction. The saying "heaven is round, earth is square" encodes a complete cosmological picture, in which circle and square are not opposites but complements, the two shapes required to describe the full structure of reality.

The hollow squares are negative space, voids rather than filled forms. Yet they are structurally active. Without them, the pearl ring loses its rhythmic variation and becomes visually monotonous. Their emptiness is, paradoxically, a formal presence. This accords with Gombrich's observation in *The Sense of Order* that decorative systems depend on the interplay of figure and ground, presence and absence, for their expressive range (Gombrich, 1979).

Symbolically, the hollow square is also the formal language of transition. It marks the boundary between the enclosed world and the outer field, a threshold that is neither fully inside nor outside, neither purely Chinese nor purely Persian.

Modular Logic and Replicability

Beyond their symbolic functions, the circle and square together constitute the structural logic of the textile as a repeatable surface. A circle is radially symmetric: it extends the same distance in every direction, and can therefore tile seamlessly against adjacent circles in any orientation. The gaps that appear between tiled circles are not incidental; they are exactly proportioned to receive the scrolling acanthus that fills the interstitial space. The pattern, in other words, is designed from its foundational geometry for infinite extension.

In the author's own restoration practice, tiling the single repeating unit outward produced, step by step, the full surface of a large hanging. This process made explicit what was always structurally implicit: the design is a generative grammar, not a fixed image. Each circle is a

module; the textile is the result of applying a rule. As long as the rule is transmitted, the pattern can be reproduced, and thus survives. Restoration Figures 1 to 3 below document this process, from the surviving historical fragment through the reconstructed repeating surface to the simulated application on a large hanging.

Figure 1

The Surviving Textile Fragment, the Roundel Paired Deer Pattern Brocade, Early Tang Dynasty (7th century CE)



Source: Public image resource of the China National Silk Museum.

Figure 2

Restoration of Complete Repeating Pattern Unit, Showing Bi-Directional Tiling Logic of the Roundel and Scrolling Acanthus Filling the Interstitial Space



Source: Reconstruction by the author.

Figure 3

Simulated Application of Reconstructed Pattern on Large Hanging, Demonstrating the Surface Effect Produced by Modular Repeat



Source: Reconstruction by the author.

This has significant implications for the theory of cultural heritage. The vitality of the pattern does not reside in any single physical object. It resides in the formal logic, the set of geometric relationships—that allows the pattern to be reconstructed. Replication is not degradation; it is the mechanism of survival. In this sense, the geometry of the textile is itself symbiotic: the circle depends on the square grid for its placement, the square grid depends on the circle for its visual content, and the whole depends on the interstitial ornament for its surface completeness.

Historical Layers: Silk Road Symbiosis

The pattern does not appear from nowhere. It is the product of a specific historical encounter, played out across several centuries of Silk Road exchange.

In the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (fourth to sixth centuries CE), Chinese weavers began producing textiles in Sassanid Persian styles, particularly the pearl roundel, to supply western export markets and to meet the aesthetic preferences of non-Chinese communities resident within China (Zhao et al., 2014). This was the first contact: imitation as a form of cultural attention.

By the early Tang period, Central Asian and Persian textiles were entering Chinese markets in large quantities, and Tang weavers had fully absorbed the technical innovations they carried: the three-end twill weft compound weave, weft-dominant patterning, the use of doubled weft threads (Zheng & Zhu, 2020). These were not superficial borrowings. They represented a fundamental restructuring of Chinese weaving practice, driven by encounter with an equally sophisticated tradition.

The Roundel Paired Deer Pattern Brocade represents the mature synthesis: Chinese naturalistic figuration, the leaping deer, with its Confucian associations of rank and prosperity and its Daoist associations of longevity, placed inside a Persian geometric container, the pearl roundel, against a ground organised by Central Asian acanthus scrollwork. The result is neither Chinese nor Persian, but a third thing: a visual form that could only have arisen from the specific historical conditions of the Silk Road at its peak.

The dominant colour—dark gold—encodes this historical moment with particular precision. Tang China inherited from the Sui dynasty the fire virtue, which associated imperial authority

with yellow. But the yellow of this textile is restrained, at low saturation, in dialogue with green. Its sources: artemisia, gardenia, wood were widely cultivated, reflecting both agricultural prosperity and advances in dyeing technology (Hang & Xu, 2011). The colour speaks simultaneously of imperial hierarchy, agricultural productivity, and the natural world: a convergence that characterises the early Tang worldview at its most expansive. What the textile ultimately reflects is a particular quality of cultural confidence that distinguished the early Tang from both its predecessors and its successors. The encounter with foreign forms—Persian geometry, Central Asian figuration, Buddhist iconography—was not experienced as a threat to Chinese identity but as an opportunity for expansion. Tang culture was, in the formulation of many historians of the period, genuinely open: open to foreign persons, foreign goods, foreign visual languages. But this openness was not passive absorption. It was selective, transformative, and ultimately self-assured. The Tang weaver who combined the ring with the Chinese deer was not copying a foreign model; they were using a foreign formal device to make a Chinese cultural statement in a new and more powerful visual language.

This combination of openness and confidence, borrowing freely without losing oneself, is precisely what the Symbiotic Aesthetic describes. The textile is not evidence of cultural anxiety about foreign influence; it is evidence of a culture sufficiently secure in its own identity to engage with difference productively. Arnheim's observation that visual balance produces psychological security is relevant here not only at the level of formal composition but at the level of cultural psychology: the balanced, symmetrical, harmoniously coloured surface of this textile embodies and transmits a particular disposition toward the world, ordered, expansive, and unafraid of encounter.

Contemporary Relevance: The Pattern Lives

The Symbiotic Aesthetic is not a historical curiosity. It has direct relevance to contemporary practices of digital heritage, design reinterpretation, and interdisciplinary scholarship.

When a Tang brocade pattern is digitised, three processes occur simultaneously. The historical object is preserved, its geometry archived in a form that can be transmitted indefinitely. The pattern is translated, from silk thread to pixel, from loom to screen, in a transformation that changes the medium while preserving the logic. And a new symbiotic relationship is created, between the historical maker and the contemporary reader, separated by fourteen centuries but united within a single formal structure. The pattern does not become contemporary; it becomes simultaneously historical and contemporary, occupying both temporal positions at once.

In design practice, the motifs of the Tang roundel tradition have entered fashion, graphic design, and architectural surface decoration. In each case, the symbiotic logic is reprised: a historical form is brought into contact with a contemporary context, and both are transformed by the encounter. The historical motif gains new expressive contexts; the contemporary design gains historical depth and symbolic resonance.

In academic work, the interdisciplinary approach modelled in this paper itself enacts the Symbiotic Aesthetic. Visual analysis, cultural history, anthropological theory, and design practice each contribute a distinct lens; none is sufficient alone; and the combination generates understanding that none could reach independently. The method mirrors the object.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Roundel Paired Deer Pattern Brocade is not a decorative object but a cultural argument, one made in circles and squares, in gold and green, in deer and trees and pearls. Its formal logic enacts a philosophy of symbiosis: the productive coexistence of distinct cultural forms, in which contact generates transformation without erasure.

The concept of the Symbiotic Aesthetic, proposed here, offers a framework for understanding ornamental pattern as a mode of cultural thought rather than cultural illustration. It suggests that the formal properties of pattern, its geometry, its colour, its structural logic of repetition, are not neutral or decorative, but argumentative: they make claims about how the world is ordered and how different things can live together within it.

A piece of cloth, woven in China fourteen centuries ago from a meeting of Chinese and Persian visual traditions, still carries that argument. It has not expired. Every time it is examined, digitised, reinterpreted, or cited, another layer is added to a conversation that began on the Silk Road and has not yet ended.

Circles and squares. Woven into silk. Still speaking.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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