

Before Shein: Philly Display Shows How China Conquered Textile Markets

Russell Flannery Forbes Staff

Updated May 27, 2024, 02:31pm EDT



An outdoor digital display illustrating "The Story of Ramie." SCIENCE HISTORY INSTITUTE

China today is one of the world's largest textile manufacturers; its exports accounted for 43% of the global total in 2022. The mainland China's 406 members on the [2024 Forbes Billionaires List](#) is sprinkled with textile and apparel industry leaders. Shein, led by Chinese billionaire Sky Xu, ranks as one of the world's most popular fast-fashion websites.

A new digital exhibition mounted across the outdoor facade of the Science History Institute in a heavily history-flavored district of downtown Philadelphia reminds that the country's success in textile making and export isn't all that new.

The exhibit, "The Story of Ramie," highlights 18 watercolor paintings selected from five albums of 19th century Chinese artworks that sequentially follow the use of ramie from soil to finished styling. Ramie is a vegetable fiber that has been found in ancient Middle East tombs, but entrepreneurial China was a big exporter of textiles made with it in the 19th century. "Albums like these were designed to appeal to international buyers and to help them better appreciate ramie as a high tech, luxury fabric made by master artisans," according to an institute introductory video.

The paintings celebrating the creation of ramie textiles were created in then-and-now Chinese export hub Guangdong province between 1830 and 1860, a time of tumult in China associated with the Opium Wars.

Unlike more lavish art sold in Europe for the rich, painter Sunqua turned them out for diplomats and other relatively short-term visitors to Canton – now called Guangzhou – and in a hurry to leave with memories of the country, says curator Lisa Berry Drago. Sunqua over the decades of his life produced art with social themes, notably exploring the degradation of individuals through opium addition – the most damaging drug of his day.

The blue color of some of the ramie displayed suggests they were dyed with indigo; indigo is made from leaves of a shrub grown and used in Asia for over 1,000 years; it still used in blue jeans today.

Besides highlighting China's early success, the paintings' focus on people as well as fabric reminds of a missing piece in much of the discussion of textile manufacturing today – the human element, says Drago.



“We live in this very globalized system where we don't get a glimpse of the people who manufacture our clothes. And that's in some ways intentional. We're not meant to think about the people who manufacture our clothes. I like these albums because to me, they're a very powerful reminder that making textiles has always been labor intensive and high-tech,” Drago said.

Ramie is still used today as a natural and biodegradable fiber that offers an alternative to synthetic fibers like polyester or nylon and offer buyers sustainability in their purchases, she said.

"The Story of Ramie" is part of a larger science- and technology-focused collection and displays at the Philadelphia site that also explore the evolution of synthetic fibers such as nylon through the history of companies such as DuPont and Gore-Tex.

The outdoor ramie display wraps up in October 2024.



Russell Flannery

Russell Flannery is an editor at large at Forbes and a country editor for the Forbes Billionaires List.