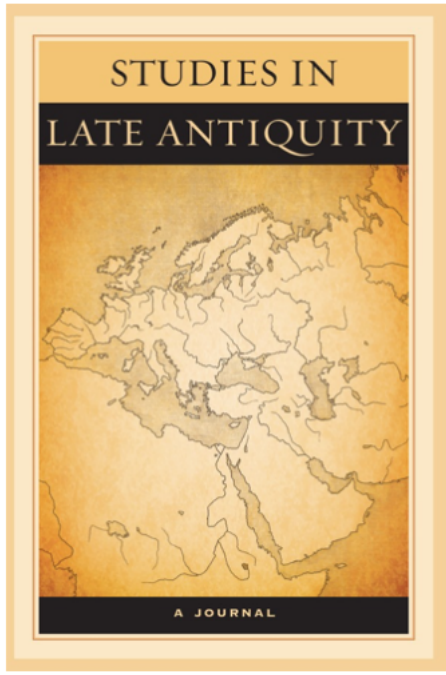
STUDIES IN
LATE ANTIQUITY
A JOURNAL

"From the Desert to the City: The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles," Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, Flushing, New York (September 13, 2018 –January 17, 2019) [http://gtmuseum.org/?page_id=128].

Warren Woodfin, ed., *From the Desert to the City: The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles. Selections from the Rose Choron textile collection with related objects*. New York: Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, CUNY, 2018. ISBN: 978–0-9832641–8-7. 93 pages, 92 color and 2 black-and-white illustrations, $40.00.

"From the Desert to the City: The Journey of Late Ancient Textiles" celebrates the recent donation of 85 late antique Egyptian textile fragments to the Godwin-Ternbach Museum at Queens College, CUNY.[1] Curated by Warren Woodfin (Associate Professor, Art Department, Queens College), Elizabeth Hoy, and Brita Helgesen (Co-Directors of the Godwin-Ternbach), the exhibition and

10. The video, views of the exhibition, and photographs of a selection of objects are archived online at: https://www.bgc.bard.edu/gallery/exhibitions/80/the-codex-and-crafts-in (accessed 29 October, 2018).

1. These textiles are commonly referred to as "Coptic." Scholars increasingly emphasize, however, the anachronistic and imprecise nature of this term, characterizing these objects instead as "late antique Egyptian" or "early Byzantine Egyptian."

accompanying catalog integrate these newly acquired objects with ancient, late antique, and modern works from the Godwin-Ternbach permanent collection as well as with loans from the Brooklyn Museum, Metropolitan Opera Archives, and several private collectors. In addition, large-scale paintings and fiber works by two contemporary New York artists are interspersed throughout the show. The result is an exciting, dynamic presentation that effectively positions late antique Egyptian textiles in their original social and functional contexts while animating these ancient objects through a rich consideration of their afterlives in the modern and contemporary eras.[2]

All the late antique textiles on display were woven from linen and wool—not the more luxurious material of silk—and thus they attest to the kinds of everyday fiber objects that dressed the bodies and homes of average people. These commonplace things represent a class of artifact found in institutional collections throughout Europe and North America. Despite their ordinary character, they show an impressive array of vibrantly colored, engaging motifs, from pagan mythological figures (Fig. 1) to patterns of plants and animals (Fig. 2) to busts of women, who might represent personifications of wealth and good fortune or portraits of actual people whose identities have been lost to the passage of time (Fig. 3). A small number of textiles show Christian iconography, including crosses and holy figures (Fig. 4). Together they offer compelling evidence for the visual and material environment of daily life in late antique Egypt.

The collection was assembled by Rose Choron (1917–2014) beginning in the 1950s and donated by her estate. A previous exhibition of the Choron textiles was organized in 1999 and was also accompanied by a catalog.[3] That publication

2. "From the Desert to the City" joins several recent and forthcoming exhibitions of late antique Egyptian textiles in Europe and North America that together reflect a renewed interest in this material. See especially "Designing Identity: The Power of Textiles in Late Antiquity," Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW), New York (February 25, 2016 –May 22, 2016) (Thelma Thomas, ed., *Designing Identity: the Power of Textiles in Late Antiquity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016]); "Woven Interiors: Furnishing Medieval Egypt," The George Washington University Museum and The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C. (August 2019 – January 2020); and "Ornament: Fragments of Byzantine Fashion," Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, D.C. (September 2019 – January 2020).

3. Eunice Dauterman Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Egypt. The Rich Life and the Dance* (Urbana-Champaign: the Board of the Trustees University of Illinois, 1999). While the majority of the Choron Collection was donated to Queens College, several pieces were sold at auction, and a small number were retained by Choron's heirs; the 1999 exhibition included 101 textiles. Some textiles from the Choron Collection were also exhibited in 1980. See Alisa Baginski and Amalia Tidhar, eds., *Textiles from Egypt 4th-13th Centuries C.E.* (Jerusalem: L. A. Mayer Memorial Institute for Islamic Art, 1980).

FIG. 1. Black roundel with a riding nereid, Egypt, 4th-7th century CE, tapestry weave (linen warp; wool weft), 9.5 x 9.75 in, Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, New York, Gift of the Estate of Rose Choron, 2016.13.55. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

FIG. 2. Roundel with bird in vinestock, Egypt, 4th-7th century CE, tapestry weave (wool), 6.25 x 7.25 in, Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, New York, Gift of the Estate of Rose Choron, 2016.13.13. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

FIG. 3. Yellow-ground lobed square with propitious portrait, Egypt, 4th-7th century CE, tapestry weave (linen warp; wool weft), 10 x 10 in, Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, New York, Gift of the Estate of Rose Choron, 2016.13.61. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

FIG. 4. Purple roundel with cross and birds, Egypt, 4th-7th century CE, tapestry weave (wool), 6.5 x 6.5 in, Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, New York, Gift of the Estate of Rose Choron, 2016.13.11. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

focused on the early Byzantine context of the textiles—especially their iconographic and functional aspects—as well as on formal features and technical analysis of weave structures. The curators of the Queens College exhibition begin from a similar departure point, with an opening section on the first floor organized around "The Abundance of Land and Sea" and "In the Reign of Purple," and additional sections on the second floor dedicated to "Warriors and Dancers," "Daily Life in Antiquity," and "The World of Myth." Floor mosaics and limestone architectural carvings depicting motifs comparable to those found in the textiles demonstrate the robust intermedial decorative vocabulary that enlivened late antique spaces. Late Roman ceramic and glass vessels and bone furniture plaques—which, like textiles, served as domestic furnishings—prompt reflection on how these varied objects fulfilled the practical needs of their owners, while enriching households with propitious and protective imagery. The dissemination of textile motifs and styles among diverse late antique societies—as well as the trade in dyes, fibers, and finished textiles—is linked to sophisticated interregional networks across Eurasia.

Many of these approaches to understanding late antique Egyptian textiles are found in existing scholarship. Yet the curators expand upon these familiar ideas through comparisons with contemporary works of art. For example, a fourth- to seventh-century fragment depicts a stunning portrait of a nude figure engaged in the harvesting of grapes (Fig. 5). Their graceful, cross-legged, prancing step, elegant but powerful up-swinging arm, and gender-ambiguous bosom signal the pleasure and power characteristic of Dionysos' followers.[4] The original textile compresses this potent form into a mere 11 by 2 inches of tightly woven linen and purple-dyed wool that can be easily overlooked as one peruses the exhibition. But *Caryatid* (2018), an arresting acrylic painting by the Brooklyn-based artist Gail Rothschild, hung on the opposite side of the room, expands this delicate fragment to monumental proportions (Figs. 6 and 7).[5] Rothschild's 83-by-19-inch canvas seemingly reproduces every frayed edge and delicate stitch of the original; at first glance the meticulous painting can be mistaken for a

4. See Jacqui Hopely Monkell, "Purple Band with Bacchic Dancer," in *From the Desert to the City*, 48–49, cat. 22.

5. These works form part of Rothschild's "Portrait of Ancient Linen" series, in which she reflects on the "defabrication of textiles, capitalizing on an inescapable paradox—what is interwoven will ultimately unravel, and that which grows will inevitably decay." "Gail Rothschild; About; Biography," http://gailrothschild.com/about/bio.html (accessed 18 January 2019).

FIG. 5. Purple band with Bacchic dancer, Egypt, 4th-7th century CE, tapestry weave (linen warp; wool weft), 10.75 x 2.25 in, Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, New York, Gift of the Estate of Rose Choron, 2016.13.24. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

FIG. 6. View of the gallery showing the placement and scale of *Caryatid* (Fig. 7). Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

blown-up photograph.[6] Its large scale facilitates an immersive experience, drawing the viewer into the complex architecture of the textile's woven structure and the alluring beauty of the figure's supple form. Rather than superseding its subject, however, Rothschild's painting urges the viewer to return to the textile with a keener eye and more open mind. The comparison enhances appreciation of the early Byzantine fragment as both a resilient survivor of time's ravages and a fragile remnant of intricate beauty.

A less direct but no less intriguing comparison can be drawn between this same textile and a massive crocheted panel by the Queens-based artist Caroline Wells Chandler.[7] Measuring a daunting 150 by 144 inches, the

6. As Thelma Thomas reveals in her essay for the catalog, Rothschild does not accurately document her textile models, but rather creates intentional "misinterpretations" that distort the colors, weave structures, and even motifs of the originals. "Monumental Remnants: Gail Rothschild Interprets Late Antique Textiles," in *From the Desert to the City*, 29. This transformative impulse is also apparent in Rothschild's titles, which reinterpret the subject matter of textiles—for example, a Dionysian grape-picker becomes a "caryatid" in Rothschild's painting.

7. "caroline wells chandler," https://carolinewellschandler.com/section/265942.html (accessed 18 January 2019).

FIG. 7. Gail Rothschild, *Caryatid*, acrylic on canvas, 2018, 83 x 19 in. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

FIG. 8. View of the gallery showing the placement and scale of *Icaro* (Fig. 9) and *Caryatid* (Fig. 7). Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

kaleidoscopically rendered, winged centaur in *Icaro* (2016) commands the gallery as it joyfully prances across the far wall, its raised hands clasped in victory (Figs. 8 and 9). Like Chandler's other works on display, *Icaro* playfully combines monstrous size with a Technicolor palette and a cartoonish rendering of facial features—turquoise dots for eyes, a warmly smiling, cherry-red mouth, blobs of inky black hair.[8] These seemingly naïve forms are complicated, however, by subtle details. The figure's sex is boldly announced by a prominently rendered phallus, but further examination reveals a potential contradiction in the human portion of the body, which displays prominently rendered nipples and a bouffant hair-do that lean toward the other end of the male-female spectrum.

8. In his essay for the catalog, Glenn Goldberg speaks of the domestic familiarity of Chandler's work, which he aptly compares to hand-made gifts, like a "sweater from my favorite aunt." "Friends and Gifts. An Artist's Apprecition of the Works of Caroline Wells Chandler," in *From the Desert to the City*, 33. His comment brings to mind the domestic, personal nature of many of the late antique textile fragments on display, which originally furnished the homes and dressed the bodies of their owners.

FIG. 9. Caroline Wells Chandler, *Icaro*, 2015, hand-crocheted fibers, 150 x 144 in. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

Icaro complements and amplifies the non-binary gender of the late antique grape-harvester displayed below it. Through this juxtaposition, the curators invite us to reflect on how, in both works, male genitalia are combined with suggestively female physical features, and the two figures' gestures and poses communicate different but resonant experiences of ecstatic pleasure. Chandler's riotous works draw us back to the surrounding early Byzantine textiles—and the society that produced them—with fresh eyes. Furthermore, the hand-crafted nature of the late antique and contemporary fiber works encourages admiration for the investment of skill and time, stirring empathy for the people who labored in their production. The monumental scale of Chandler's work helps fill and cohere the exhibition space, which consists of a two-story, centrally-planned hall and a narrow, second-floor gallery stretching along three sides (Figs. 8 and 10).

The temporal gap between the late antique and contemporary works on display is bridged by the third theme of the exhibition, which explores works

FIG. 10. Overview of the gallery space during the exhibition opening. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

of modern art and design inspired by early Byzantine Egyptian textiles. Following their excavation and dissemination by archaeologists and antiquarians beginning in the late nineteenth century, antique Egyptian textiles were exhibited throughout Europe and North America, bringing them to the attention of modern artists who were intrigued by what they perceived to be the robust, pure beauty of these "primitive" works. The heavy black outlines, broad blocks of color, and expressive gestures in works on display by Henri Matisse, Georges Rouault (Fig. 11), and Milton Avery, among others, suggest indebtedness to Byzantine art. Indeed some of these artists recorded the inspiration they derived from viewing (and even collecting) early Byzantine Egyptian textiles. In the 1950s, Choron herself was inspired to collect "Coptic" textiles because of a resonance in form and spirit she saw between these late antique fragments and the works of early-twentieth-century modernist artists. By exploring Gretl Urban's eclectic, loosely-Byzantinizing costume designs for the Metropolitan Opera's 1922 production of Jules Massenet's *Thaïs* (first staged in Paris in 1894), the exhibition offers an original and

FIG. 11. Georges Rouault, *Sainte Pute* from the *Passion* series, 1936, color etching and aquatint on paper, 12.5 x 8.5 in. Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, New York, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Norbert Schimmel, 60.46. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

specifically New York perspective on earlier scholarship that has demonstrated connections between Byzantine art and nineteenth-century French theater design.[9]

Across the ground floor, a formal dialogue emerges between late antique, early modern, and contemporary portrait busts in multiple media—including a late antique porphyry sculpture, several early Byzantine textiles (e.g., Fig. 3), and works by Rouault (e.g., Fig. 11). This theme continues upstairs with a grouping of early Byzantine textiles and coins alongside works by Chandler (Fig. 12) under the label "Propitious Portraits." In a far corner of the balcony, which for

9. New York productions of *Thaïs* were staged in the wake of the French archaeologist Albert Gayet's much publicized claim to have excavated the clothed remains of the eponymous courtesan-turned-ascetic. Gayet exhibited and published these and other late antique Egyptian textiles in Paris beginning in 1901. These connections between archaeology and theater are explored fully in Woodfin, "Late Antique Textiles in the Era of Modernism," in *From the Desert to the City*, 17–19.

FIG. 12. Caroline Wells Chandler, *Klaus*, 2017, hand-crocheted assorted fibers, 30 x 18 in (left); and *Dustin*, 2017, hand-crocheted assorted fibers, 31 x 19 in (right). Photo: courtesy of the artist.

many visitors will be the natural terminus of the show, the section "Hidden Interventions" explores the well-known manipulation of late antique textiles by nineteenth- and twentieth-century dealers and collectors. The curators present several examples that were pieced together from disparate remnants to

create seemingly complete—and therefore more marketable—*objets d'art* (Figs. 13 and 14). Rothschild's paintings, hung adjacent to these textiles (Fig. 15), magnify their mismatched edges and modern sutures, exposing the composite nature of these pieces and the heavy-handedness of their "restorers."

The modern legacies of late antique Egyptian textiles feature prominently in scholarship of the last decade, which reconsiders the early excavation, display, and documentation of "Coptic" art. But the Godwin-Ternbach exhibition does more than consolidate and reiterate previous publications. It offers an extended timeline—up to the current day—along which to trace the persistent relevance of early Byzantine textiles and their powerful impact on artistic imagination. Chandler's and Rothschild's works tie these humble fragments from the sands of Egypt to a dynamic artistic community just beyond the doors of the museum, thereby offering contemporary viewers a point of access to archaeological objects that might otherwise resist engagement. Rather than treating late antique Egyptian textiles as desiccated specimens pinned to the wall for historical autopsy, "From the Desert to the City" brings them to life, both in their own time and in ours.

The catalog accompanying the exhibition gathers diverse contributions. In an initial "Note on Provenance," Ava Katz (graduate student, Queens College)

FIG. 13. Portrait roundel with a veiled woman, Egypt, 4th-5th century CE, tapestry weave (linen warp; wool weft), 5.25 x 5.25 in, Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, New York, Gift of the Estate of Rose Choron, 2016.13.60. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

FIG. 14. Roundel with half-nude woman and lion hunt, Egypt, 5th-7th century CE, tapestry weave (wool), 6 x 6 in, Godwin-Ternbach Museum, Queens College, New York, Gift of the Estate of Rose Choron, 2016.13.46. Photo: courtesy of the Godwin-Ternbach Museum.

FIG. 15. View of the gallery showing the placement and scale of Gail Rothschild, *About Them Apples*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 57 x 60 in (left, foreground). Photo: courtesy of the artist.

describes what is known of the Choron Collection's acquisition history and notes future plans for expanding this documentation. A brief introduction by Elizabeth Hoy outlines the thematic structure of the exhibition and situates it within the broader educational mission of the Godwin-Ternbach as both a teaching collection serving the university community and the only encyclopedic museum in Queens. There follow five brief essays that explore the primary themes undergirding the show: the textiles' original production, use, and meaning in late antique Egypt (Jennifer Ball and Warren Woodfin); their formative influence on European and North American modernist artists and designers (Woodfin); and their ongoing dialog with artists of our own time, as demonstrated by the work of Gail Rothschild (Thelma Thomas) and Caroline Wells Chandler (Glenn Goldberg). A "Handlist of the Exhibition" inventories the objects included in the show and records their thematic groupings. In addition, new research and interpretation of select objects is provided in entries by Woodfin, Hoy, and the students who helped organize the exhibition (Katz, Susan Graham, Jaclyn Cline, Jacqui Hopley Monkell, and Maria Murillo). The catalog closes with a useful, up-to-date bibliography.

The essays and entries are informative and thought provoking, but some of this content was not transposed to the exhibition itself, which included only brief labels and wall text. In particular, Thomas and Goldberg offer exciting possibilities for thinking across the ancient, modern, and contemporary works in the show, but the range and precision of their interpretations are not fully captured in the gallery didactics. As a result, the provocative juxtapositions of ancient, modern, and contemporary material may have struck visitors who lacked access to the catalog as less coherent, even jarring. The color-illustrated catalog provides some sense of the stimulating groupings of objects and the concepts that tethered them to one another, but it does not include photographs of every piece in the exhibition. Moreover it cannot capture the range of scale and materials in the gallery, which contributed so much to this exuberant show and the exciting diachronic and intermedial resonances it generated.

"From the Desert to the City" delivers an engaging introduction to the historical dimension of late antique Egyptian textiles, and a stimulating reflection on their enduring artistic relevance. The product of a collaboration among regional scholars, artists, and students, the exhibition and catalog attest to the significant pedagogic, academic, and public value yielded from the innovative exploration and display of university museum collections. The show draws us closer to late antique textiles through the eyes and minds of scholars and artists

who offer different but complementary perspectives on these everyday—but no less captivating—ancient objects. Viewers leave with renewed admiration for the vibrancy and spiritedness of early Byzantine art as well as for the modern and contemporary works that it has inspired.

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10. The author helped facilitate the initial donation of the Choron Collection to the Godwin-Ternbach Museum, but played no role in the organization or execution of the exhibition and catalog under review.

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Studies in Late Antiquity (e-ISSN 2470-2048) is published four times a year in February, May, August, and November by University of California Press, 155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400, Oakland, CA 94612-3764.

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