

Late Antique Textiles from Egypt: The Collection of Martin Johan Rücker Freiherr von Jenisch

An exceptional feature of the Museum of Byzantine Art is textiles from Egypt from Late Antiquity to the first centuries of Muslim rule (ca. 3rd–15th centuries). With approximately 1800 objects, it is the largest collection of its kind in Germany.

For some of its most valuable textiles, the museum owes a debt of thanks to Martin Johan Rücker Freiherr von Jenisch (1861–1924). He served as consul general of the German Empire in Egypt between 1903 and 1906. During that period, he supported the excavations of the German Orient Society there. Advised by the Egyptologist Ludwig Borchardt (1863–1938), the founder of the German Archaeology Institute in Cairo, Jenisch acquired a considerable collection of Egyptian antiquities. He bequeathed the majority of his objects to the Ethnological Museum (today the MARKK – Museum am Rothenbaum) in Hamburg, thus laying the cornerstone for its Ancient Egyptian collection. While he was still in office in Egypt, almost 40 of von Jenisch's Late Antique textiles made their way into the Early Christian Department of the newly opened Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. They included complete or largely preserved tunics, blankets, and hangings (Fig. 1) as well as smaller-format tapestries (Fig. 3) that once adorned articles of clothing or decorative textiles (see additional examples in Room 113). Today it is not possible to establish which archaeological site the textiles came from, since the claims of the dealers in this regard are divergent. Some of the objects show similarities with pieces that are ascribed to the Upper Egypt city of Achmim-Panopolis, one of the most important archaeological sites for textiles.

Nineteen textiles previously owned by Jenisch have been missing since the Second World War. They were either destroyed in the turmoil of war or, in the best case, annexed and stored in an unknown location,

such as some large-format tapestries with designs from the circle of Dionysus (Fig. 2), which were originally part of a large wall hanging. A complete decorated tunic and a nearly complete curtain with hunting motifs have also been missing since the war (Fig. 1).

The loss of textiles of such quality and rare iconography leaves behind a notable void in the holdings of the Museum of Byzantine Art. The donation of five tapestries fabrics by von Jenisch's grandson Christoph Freiherr von Jenisch in 2020 partially closed this gap.



Fig. 1 Wall hanging, 5th–6th centuries, SMB-SBM, Inv. Nr. 6233. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst / Archive



Fig. 2 Watercolour after a fragment of a wall hanging with a female dancer from the circle of the god Dionysus, 5th–6th centuries, SMB-SBM, Inv. Nr. 9243. © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst / Archive



Fig. 3 Tapestry with an Equestrian Portrait, 4th–5th centuries, SMB-SBM, Inv. Nr. 6241 © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst / Antje Voigt