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## Title of Object

Manchu Emperor's Semiformal Twelve-Symbol Court Robe

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## Photo of Object (optional)



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## Object Information

**Artist:** Unknown

**Country:** China

**Date of Object:** 19<sup>th</sup> C

**File Created:** 10/1/2016

**Accession Number:** 42.8.49

**Author of File:** Lucy Hicks

**Material/Medium:** Embroidered satin

**Reviewer of File:** Kara ZumBahlen

**Department:** Chinese

**Last Updated/Reviewed:** 2/1/2017

**Culture:** China/Qing

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## Tour Topics

Trends, Style, Culture, China, Royalty, Group 1 Highlights, Highlights tour 1600-1850, Trendsetting, Fashion/Dress, Power/Status, Identity, Leaders, Celebrations, Ritual/Ceremony, Symbolism

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## Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

When would you wear this?

Why would you wear this?

What do you think all the symbols mean?

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## Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Yellow is the color of the Imperial Family and reserved for celebrations (Christie's). Imagine being in a room and seeing the design of this robe that underlies all the magnificence and pageantry of the Emperors and so much of the meaning, philosophy and religion that is China. The room where the

Emperor would have worn this would have had red lacquered walls, blue and yellow roof tiles and then this magnificent yellow robe that would stand out against all those colors. (Epoch Times)

This robe has 12 different symbols: Per Christie's, "Emperor's robes were decorated with the 'Twelve Symbols of Imperial Authority': the sun, moon, seven-star constellation, mountain, fu pattern, axe head, dragon, flowery creature, seaweed, sacrificial cup, flames and the grain." (See National Gallery of Victoria diagram for the meaning behind each symbol.)

Dragon robes were thought to bring good luck to the people if the Emperor wore such a robe. Dragon Robes contained 9 dragons- 1 on each shoulder, 4 along the bottom, 1 at the top, back and breast. The dragon robe (like this one) was the most common worn at the time by both men and woman. (Epoch Times.)

Symbols on this robe: Bats carrying peaches and the swastika in the cloud form a happiness rebus (double joy). Symbols clearly visible on this robe- Fire for Intelligence/Ax for Power to punish/Square symbol for double happiness, the Ji for luck. Bottom border represents water. (National Gallery Victoria)

The symbolism is only complete with the coat is worn. The body becomes the world axis the neck opening is the gate of heaven. (NY Times)

Fastened with 5 metal ball and loop toggles, flared cuffs and a slit in both the front and back.

Per Christie's: "Officials who attended Qing dynasty ceremonies were expected to dress in a particular way. Formal robes were designed in the traditional style of the ruling Manchu people, and referenced their nomadic, horse-riding tradition. Known as chaofu, these garments featured a side-fastening jacket, apron skirt, and 'horse shoe' cuffs, first designed to protect the wearer's hands when riding in bad weather. Semi-official clothing was expected for government business, including the well-known jifu, or dragon robe, which was worn with a collar and outer coat. Like the chaofu, this long, side-fastening garment featured horse shoe cuffs, freeing the wearer's hands should circumstance require him to jump on a horse. Jifu robes were rich in symbolic meaning, representing the entire universe in their design — from the lishui waves at the base, anchored by a central mountain, to the dragons among clouds that swirled above, denoting authority."

Per artsmia: The exact rank of a court official could be ascertained by the color of their robe, type of dragon symbolism, materials used to decorate their accessories, color of the finial stone topping their hat, and the animal represented on their insignia badge.

The silk for these robes came from the Bombyx Mori moth. (Wikipedia)

Accessories were key. Hats (required at all ceremonies), scarfs, shoes, pouches/purses and scented bags.

Per Epoch Times: "Before any gown was allowed to touch the body of a Chinese emperor of the Qing Dynasty, it required two and a half years of labor at the hands of the court tailors. There was a special tailor's shop in the palace solely for making clothes. The patterns and cuts were developed there and had to be approved by the emperor and the highest imperial officials. Then, the patterns were passed along to the silk manufacturers. When the fabric was ready, it was cut by another artisan and passed onto a third to sew it together and finally, to embroider it. Only the finest threads were used for the embroideries—even those made from real gold. The emperor employed 500 artisans for the stitching and another 40 for the gold embroideries."

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## Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

The nomadic Manchu overthrew the Ming and created the Qing Dynasty. The Manchu were not barbarians or destructive but relied heavily on the Chinese official class for their new duties as rulers. The Manchus/Qing clung to a more reactionary form of Confucianism becoming more Chinese than the Chinese themselves. The Manchu accepted the Chinese ideograms, customs, rituals and science. They adopted Buddhism and affected some changes, especially in the robes. Manchu took over the most luxurious courts in history at the time. The capitol was moved to Peking—fortifying the north frontier. This improved agriculture production and thus improved the population growth. Big advancements in silk production and overall in the textile industry. Really helped increase the size of populations within cities as there were now jobs in textiles. (Wikipedia)

From the Ming to the Qing, one of the clearest distinctions made was that of court attire. Official court robes were changed from the skirted, voluminous, wide-sleeved red gowns of Ming to the yellow, tight-sleeved, side fastening, slit robes, trousers, and riding boots of a nomadic warrior society during Qing. These robes represented one of the most sumptuous, symbolic, and technically accomplished systems of official dress ever developed. 3 categories of robes: Formal, Semiformal, Informal. Yellow was reserved for the Emperor, Empress, Dowager Empress and heirs apparent. (Artsmia, imperial silks)

Per Christie's guide: In these politically fraught times, what you wore mattered. Clothes were designed to indicate rank and status, becoming so distinct that the wearer's position in court could be ascertained at a glance. By the time of the Qianlong Emperor's reign (1736-1795), these strict sartorial rules had been outlined in an official guide: The Illustrated Catalogue of Ritual Paraphernalia. Official directions covered: Color; Symbols of Imperial Authority; and Animals.

Clothing and robes like this were considered status symbols and the general public was not allowed to wear or even possess such garments. "The twelve symbols of ancient imperial authority, express the emperor's imperial authority and qualities as well as his responsibilities to the people he ruled. Originally only the emperor could use the twelve symbols. By the 19th century, however, they also appeared on the robes of the empress, dowager empress and the heir apparent. This robe's bright yellow ground identifies it as being made for a member of the imperial family." (Denver art museum)

The Imperial Family rarely left the palace complex so robes like this are only seen by servants and the court.

Mia collected 600 Chinese robes from a 1941 auction, and they were donated in the 1970's.

Every symbol on a robe—either prominent or obscure—has significance and refers to ancient Chinese mythology or Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist values (National Gallery of Victoria):

Religious symbols like: canopy, conch, vase, wheel of law or lotus

Taoist Immortals-deer, crane, plants

Auspicious- flowers, insects, animals

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## Current Mia Label Information (optional)

The designs on this robe depict the Twelve Symbols signifying authority and power. They include the sun, moon, constellation, rock, fu (the Chinese character for happiness), dragon, axe head, pheasant, water plant, sacrificial vessels, flame, and garden.

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## Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Denver Art museum, woman's imperial robe: <http://denverartmuseum.org/object/1986.157>

Christie's collecting guide: Chinese Robes: <http://www.christies.com/features/Chinese-robos-collecting-guide-7813-1.aspx>

Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_the\\_Ming\\_dynasty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Ming_dynasty) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qing\\_conquest\\_of\\_the\\_Ming](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Qing_conquest_of_the_Ming) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_silk](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_silk) And [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic\\_history\\_of\\_China\\_before\\_1912#Qing\\_dynasty .281644.E2.80.931912.29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economic_history_of_China_before_1912#Qing_dynasty_.281644.E2.80.931912.29)

Mia website: <http://archive.artsmia.org/art-of-asia/explore/explore-collection-imperial-silks.cfm>

*Art Beyond the West* by Michael O'Riley

*Arts of China* by Michael Sullivan

*The Manchu Dragon* by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (free publication for download): [http://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/the\\_manchu\\_dragon\\_costumes\\_of\\_the\\_ching\\_dynasty\\_1644\\_1912](http://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/the_manchu_dragon_costumes_of_the_ching_dynasty_1644_1912)

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Imperial Robe (great diagram of different symbols), National Gallery of Victoria: [http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/asianart/resources/pdf/AsianEduRes\\_DVD\\_Imperial\\_robe.pdf](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/asianart/resources/pdf/AsianEduRes_DVD_Imperial_robe.pdf)