



## Imperial Chinese Court Robe Cutout

This cutout is of the backside of the Imperial Robe Cutout of Manchu Emperor's ceremonial twelve-symbol *jifu* court robe, 1723-1735, featured in Room 3.

There is a total of eight golden dragons on this imperial robe, five are visible on this reproduction (the ninth hides under the front fold of the skirt in the front which is not visible here). These dragons are part of the twelve symbols of imperial authority whose arrangement on the robe was prescribed by official dress edicts put into effect in 1759. The sun, moon, mountain, and constellation emblems are positioned symmetrically around the neckband. The other eight imperial symbols—dragon, ax, cups, flame, bat, grain, pheasant, and waterweed—are arranged on the front and back of the robe (See symbols below). Only the top members of the royal family—emperor, empress, empress dowager, and crown prince—could wear twelve-symbol robes. A bright yellow dragon robe like this could be worn only by the emperor himself.

This robe is a *jifu*, a semiformal robe worn by all who attended court or served in the imperial government. Its decoration symbolizes the concept of universal order – a celestial landscape of mountains, oceans, and clouds where dragons live. The dragon symbolized the emperor, known as the Son of Heaven, and permission to wear the robe was given by him. Rank was further distinguished by a hierarchy of color and ornamentation. This is a man's robe with a right-side flap closure, tapered sleeves and flared or horse-hoof cuffs, common to most Manchu-inspired dragon robes. Men's robes are vented on the front and back for ease in riding on horseback.

### Construction

The robe is made of silk in a tapestry technique called *kesi* (cut silk). Chinese *kisi* tapestries woven in a pictorial design and are extremely fine in texture and light in weight. The weave is finished perfectly on both sides so that the tapestries are reversible. The warps are vertical in relation to the pattern, rather than horizontal as in European weaving.

The silk fabric is multi-filament weave with a warp of .1mm and a weft of .2mm to .3mm. Imperial silk was both time consuming to produce and expensive, taking professional weavers 1 to 2 years.







Mia's collection of Qing dynasty textiles includes over 600 imperial robes, ecclesiastical, theatrical and military costumes, one the best and largest collections in the west.

## History

After the Manchu-Qing rulers seized control of China in 1644, they moved quickly to assert authority over the dominant Han Chinese population and established a dress code. Regulations codified dress for the imperial family, the Qing court and court officials, distinguishing the ruling elite and government from the general population. Women dressed according to the rank of their husbands.

## The twelve symbols of sovereignty

Probably as early as the Zhou dynasty (11th-3rd century BC), the twelve Chinese symbols of sovereignty appear. In 1759 the twelve symbols were reserved exclusively for the robes of the emperor. As a symbolic interpretation of the universe, these symbols of imperial authority assumed a cosmic significance and represented the emperor as the ruler of the universe. (Pang, 1989: 38)

Name of symbol	Symbol	Description
Sun		Represented by a red disc with a three-legged crow.
Moon		Represented by a light blue or green disc enclosing the legendary hare pounding the elixir of immortality.
Three stars		Constellation of three stars.
Mountains		Symbols of stability and the earth.
Dragons		Symbolize adaptability because of the transformations they can perform.
Pheasant		Symbol of literary refinement. The dragon and pheasant represent the natural world.

**Pair of bronze sacrificial cups**



Symbolize respect for one's parents. One cup has a tiger (physical strength), the other a monkey (cleverness).

**Waterweed**



Represents purity.

**Grain**



Represents the country's capacity to feed its people.

**Fire**



Represents intellectual brilliance.

The mountains plus the last four symbols represent the five elements of the universe. Earth (mountains); metal (cups); water (waterweed); wood (grain); fire (fire).

**Axe**



Represents the power to punish.

**Fu**



Represents the power to judge.

Adapted from (Pang, 1989: 39) Courtesy: National Gallery of Victoria.

### **Other symbols:**

**Celestial Landscape**, dragons flying amongst mountains, oceans and clouds

- Dragons = emperor
- Clouds = heavens
- Rock = mountains
- Waves – earth's oceans (with diagonal lines below representing standing water, *li-shui*)

**Pearls** grant wishes

**Coral** symbolic of wealth

**Red Bat** Chinese pronunciation of the word is similar to *hongfu*, which means great blessings.

**Resources:**

Robert D Jacobsen, *Imperial Silks, Ch'ing Dynasty Textiles in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, Volume I

Powerhouse Museum

[https://www.powerhousemuseum.com/hsc/evrev/chinese\\_dress.htm](https://www.powerhousemuseum.com/hsc/evrev/chinese_dress.htm)

The Art of Silk: King's Silk Art: Embroidery from Imperial China

<http://www.artofsilk.com/blogs/news/8404057-kings-silk-art-embroidery-from-imperial-china#.V9YDMCMrlzY>

**Power and Beauty Connection – Robes in Room 3 and Room 8**

**Collection Connection**