



Man's Long Sleeve Jacket

SURFACE TREATMENT

- What: *Indigenous Weaving: An Exhibition of Native Objects from the National Museum of History, Taiwan*
- Where: International Museum of Art & Science, 1900 Bicentennial
- When: Through Oct. 2. Hours: Tues.-Wed., 9am-3pm; Thurs., 9am-8pm, Fri., 9am-5pm; Sat. 10am-5pm; Sun., 1-5pm
- Contact: 956-682-0123 or www.imasonline.org
General admission is charged.

Craft Alone

The new exhibit at IMAS, *Indigenous Weaving: An Exhibition of Native Objects from the National Museum of History, Taiwan*, leaves the viewer curious for more. The exhibit features 40 native weavings from seven of Taiwan's sixteen indigenous tribes: the Atayal, Truku, Amis, Puyuma, Paiwan, Rukai, and Tau. "They are all absolutely gorgeous," exclaimed Jennifer Cahn, IMAS Curator. "The weaving techniques used by the Taiwanese are very old, whether they are contemporary materials or the original ramie fibers."

Populated for 6,000 years, Taiwan is located off the Chinese mainland. Because of its isolation, the textile tradition, even among the various tribes, remained unique for a long time. Slowly, influences from the mainland affected all groups except the remote Tau. For thousands of years, ramie, a plant fiber resembling linen and one of the world's oldest fiber crops, was the island's primary fiber. Later, cotton, wool, and other materials including plastics and metals, were introduced from the outside.

An entry display shows the squared-cloth backstrap loom system that was traditionally used to weave the fine cloth; the pieces were then sewed together to make a garment. This was also the preferred system for the indigenous meso-American peoples. Rukai textiles are the most impressive. One of the more stunning pieces in the show is the "Rukai Woman's Dress." The detail is amazingly beautiful with embroidery patterns including the sun and one hundred-pace snake. Patterns reflect the owner's status and position. Generally, single women's clothing is more colorful and intricate, middle-aged women's clothing is comparatively plain, and elderly women wear mostly black or blue. Rukai menswear is similar to female garments; all the patterns and weaves are alike, but

the sewing style differs between the sexes. The “Rukai Man’s Long Sleeve Jacket” in the rear case is a breathtaking example of fine textile craft. Although none are shown in this exhibit, I understand that men's trousers worn with these gorgeous long-sleeved tops may be culottes.

But somehow, the exhibit seems incomplete. The fault is not so much the number of pieces displayed, but rather the installation itself, which assumes that the viewer knows how these garments are worn. Exhibits displaying articles of clothing within a known culture can assume an audience-knowledge of how the clothing must be worn, but most people in South Texas probably are not familiar with indigenous cultures. A few old photographs were helpful. Mostly, we are shown isolated parts, such as the “Atayal Woman’s Legging” shown on an isolated mannequin leg, or waistbands folded in a case. Although there are dresses and jackets, one cannot help but wonder what other garments were worn with them. The displays utilize a few old generic mannequins, walls, cases, and pedestals. The ambiance surrounding the actual wearing of these textiles is missing, and could have added greatly to the appreciation of these pieces. The use of the light toned mannequins seems a curious choice in representing an Asian culture and seemed to lack sensitivity; the mannequins primarily evoke feelings of window displays in rural American mercantile stores. Taiwan’s indigenous cultural achievements could be more supportively presented.

This is the first step of an exchange exhibit between IMAS and the National Museum of History in Taipei, where part of the IMAS collection will be show next year.

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