

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Summer *chaofu* (formal court dress) for a top-rank prince



China

Qing dynasty, ca. 1820–75

Silk gauze with embroidery in silk and
metallic-wrapped threads

55 1/2 x 67 in

Gift of Shirley Z. Johnson. Freer Gallery of Art, F2015.7

Describe

This robe for a man is called a *chaofu*. It has long sleeves, a hip-length bodice attached to a pleated skirt, and fastens at the side. The silk cloth is dark blue gauze, an airy material that indicates it was for the summer (winter *chaofu* were of heavier silk with fur lining or trim). The garment is brilliantly embroidered and glitters in the light. Large gold dragons with silver highlights appear prominently positioned in a

symmetrical arrangement on the front and back, as well as on each shoulder. Eighteen small dragons in roundels appear on the skirt. Dragons are auspicious animals that embody masculine power and symbolize imperial majesty. The number of claws the dragons have (five-clawed) indicates this *chaofu* was worn by a high-level member of the imperial family. The dragons are surrounded by symbols of good fortune such as five-colored clouds and bats, as well as by eight Buddhist treasures of which the lotus flower is one. Underneath the dragons on the front and back of the chest, deep water portrayed by colorful diagonal bands is pierced by a mountain at the center. Clouds float above. The design elements together reflect the Chinese conception of the cosmos.

Analyze

China has captivated the world for thousands of years with its skill and creativity in working with silk. The Qing dynasty, which lasted from 1644 to 1911, is especially known for its luxurious silk textiles. This robe, a *chaofu*, exemplifies the grandeur of Qing court costumes and is in pristine condition despite its age. It was intended to be worn on important occasions, such as court assemblies or state sacrifices. It is a rare surviving example of dress for a high-rank prince; because only a few individuals were of the rank that allowed them to wear this type of dress, not many were made. Moreover, owners often chose to be buried in them, as they were their most precious garments. There were detailed regulations written by court officials about the appropriate materials, style, and decoration for *chaofu* to be worn by different ranks of the nobility and court officials. The number and position of the dragons on this *chaofu* are what tells us that it belonged to a high-rank prince.

Interpret

The *chaofu* was the most important court dress in China's Qing dynasty, and it incorporates features from different cultures. The rulers of China in the Qing were ethnically Manchus, and in this garment, both Manchu and imperial Chinese dress traditions have been referenced. For example, the cuffs are shaped as horse hooves (broad at the top and narrow at the bottom). They resemble the bottom of the sleeves worn by Manchu hunters and archers. Such sleeves were made to be rolled up in daily life and lowered when hunting to warm the hunter's hands without affecting shooting. However, for this imperial garment, the shape is symbolic and was not worn on a hunt. The pleated skirt and dragon decoration are traditions incorporated from native Chinese dress. The *chaofu* thus embodies the Qing court's mandate to rule over a multiethnic empire.

Inquire

- Look closely at this robe and [zoom in](#) on the details. How many different animals and symbols can you find? What do you think these symbols convey about the person who wore this?
- Zoom out and look at the design of the robe overall. What words would you use to describe the style of this robe?
- The elegance and expense of this robe signified the power and status of the owner. How do we identify people of different levels of importance or office through their clothing? Is it important to do so? Why?
- Why is it important for people to have specific clothing for special occasions? What are some pieces of clothing you have that are for a special occasion? What sets them apart from other clothes?
- How do you express aspects of your identity through the clothing that you wear? Give an example of an item of clothing that expresses something unique or important that you want others to know about you.

Resources

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