

Mud-Silk

A Unique Collection

Learning Program Developer Kim Gough

What is it?

When you visit a museum, you see only a small selection of the many objects that make up the collection. But all the objects—displayed or not—are evidence of something, somewhere or somebody, and all have stories to tell.

The Royal BC Museum's collection of bi-coloured mud-silk from local communities is one of the largest in the world. It consists of 29 garments—jackets, shirts and trousers—made and worn between the 1890s and 1930s. Why is it here? Where did it come from? What can it tell us about British Columbia's early history? Read on to find out.

A Closer Look

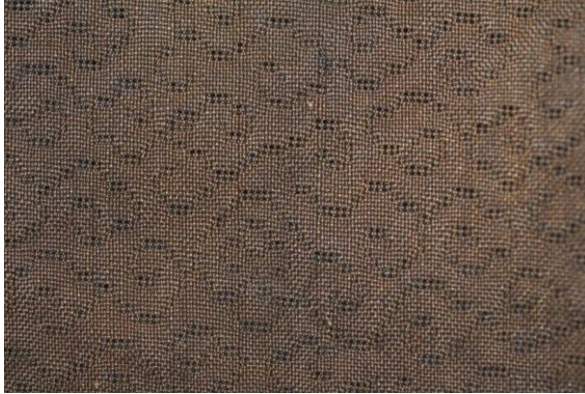


Mud-Silk – jacket and trousers

Up close, you can see that these silk garments are two different colours: a glossy brown or black on the outside and a dull orange-brown or mud colour inside. This is why we call them bi-coloured mud-silk.

Mud-silk is made by dyeing woven silk before spreading iron-rich river mud on the dry fabric, which is then baked in the sun. Although a number of cultural groups dye silk in similar ways, this particular technique of finishing the fabric with river mud is only used in Southeast Asia. It is especially associated with the Pearl River Delta, the area of southeastern China from which many early Chinese pioneers in Canada came.

Outfits like these don't come with labels, so conservation staff use microscopes and special techniques to identify them as mud-silk. Look closely at the weave and you can see patterns. These are traditional Chinese symbols like circles, which represent perfection, and groups of four squares, which represent prosperity. Cloud patterns like the one to the left are among the most common in our collection.



Reverse of mud-silk fabric with cloud pattern

Mud-silk is cool and comfortable to wear, water-resistant, quick-drying and easy to wash. These properties, together with the symbolism of the patterned fabric, made it a popular choice. Both high- and low-thread count garments are represented in our collection, suggesting that both rich and poor people purchased mud-silk for its functionality, comfort and beauty.

How did these outfits get here?

The British Columbia gold rush brought about the first major instance of Chinese immigration to Canada. Our collection of mud-silk reveals that these immigrants came from southeastern China and that labourers and merchants alike brought

traditional garments with them when they came for the gold rush, or afterward.

Early Chinese immigrants to British Columbia laid the foundation for networks of Chinese Canadians around the province (as visualized through the large mud-silk collection) and the world. These same trans-Pacific connections continue to this day.

References:

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Chung, Tzu-I. "Trans-Pacific Gold Mountain Trade." In *New Perspectives on the Gold Rush*, edited by Kathryn Bridge, 93–107. Victoria: Royal BC Museum, 2015.