

Square Altar Table Aprons

By Trevor Vale

For centuries, fabrics replete with auspicious motifs have been used to decorate the long, square altar and offerings tables in Chinese temples – whether Buddhist, Daoist or a syncretism of both.

Early altar fabrics from the Tang Dynasty (8th – 9th century), made as frontal valances for long altar tables, have been found in caves near Dunhuang in China's present-day Gansu Province. Extant examples of these altar fabrics, depicted in wall paintings in these caves are, however, hard to find although small collections of late 19th and early 20th century pieces are in some museum and gallery collections. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts has aprons dating from the mid-17th, early 18th and mid-to-late 19th centuries.

Altar table aprons, usually 90 x 110 cm (approximately square), are made to decorate the front surfaces – and occasionally the sides and rear – of the small temple altar and offering tables, generally positioned to the side of the main altar. The layout of the square apron, with auspicious motifs filling both the main body and the upper panel, has not changed greatly over the years. The old temple aprons in various collections do not differ in their framework and range of designs from the inexpensive machine-embroidered aprons that can be purchased from retailers of Chinese religious paraphernalia today. Other than the way in which an embroiderer positions and interprets the motifs, the three personified attributes *Fu* (good fortune), *Lu* (prosperity) and *Shou* (longevity), the Eight Immortals, dragons, phoenixes, Chinese lions, the *qilin* / *báizé* (mythical one-horned animals) and floral arrangements appear repeatedly.

A shift away from this conservative approach in decoration can be seen in the household aprons made for wealthy Straits Chinese in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, during the late 19th and early-to-mid-20th centuries. These intricate and superbly worked fabrics from workshops in Southern China, were made to decorate the portable square tables that were placed in front of ancestral or household shrines and family temple altars during ceremonial and festive times.



Three examples of Chinese altar table aprons

These fabrics display a wider range of motifs. In addition to the motifs mentioned above, bats and butterflies, peony and lotus blossoms, vases of flowers, baskets of fruit, gourds, incense burners, propitious beribboned objects, calligraphy and geometric symbols augment the central theme or were used as fillers on the decorative borders. Motifs were worked in couched gold and silver thread, in fine satin and 'Peking stitch' and with raised and padded embroidery (stump work) to give a three-dimensional effect. Such embellishments as beads, buttons, small mirrors and reflective metal discs were often added. Interestingly, though the Straits Chinese have a well-recognised tradition of creating fine pieces of embroidery, large embroidered panels and fabrics having a quantity of couched metallic thread were rarely fabricated by Straits *nyonyas*.

Indonesian Chinese and Peranakan Chinese in Java and Sumatra in particular, did not restrict themselves to imported embroidered aprons, but also made use of decorated cloth produced by the batik process by workshops on Java's north coast. Designs on batik altar cloths are all produced with hand-drawn wax. These fabrics are a visual delight as they often incorporate elements from non-Chinese cultures into the overall pattern, as well as interpretations of traditional figures, with colour combinations that are not found in China-sourced embroidered aprons. Domesticated and wild animals, *wayang* characters, figures from European story tales, *garuda*, aquatic creatures, and picturesque landscapes are added to the wealth of motifs to be found on these embroidered cloths.

Trevor Vale is a medical scientist with an interest in the textiles of Southeast Asia.

Photos courtesy of the author