The present Focus section of The Newsletter contains ten papers. Some were discussed during the conference, others were written afterwards. They all reflect upon the changing roles of textiles in society. Textiles and dress have a significance that transcends their practical function, namely to provide warmth and protection. They also play a central role in social, economic, and spiritual interactions. Textiles and clothing speak volumes about the hierarchy of power relations amongst their users, including power that defines stratifications of class, wealth, and gender. In most cases, these tangible and intangible values of textiles are culture-specific, and their unspoken functions are fully understood within a particular tradition. Textiles are also repositories of techniques, for spinning, weaving, dyeing, printing, and embroidering, and these techniques travel over time and space from one group of people to another. The history of textiles also reflects the history of animal husbandry and the growing of plants, in order to produce the fibres needed for the textiles. All these techniques travelled from one group to another, and in the process they changed and adapted new features and meanings. Textiles moved easily from one area to another because of their portability. Their measurable value (in the raw material, knowledge, and the time and effort of labour put into them) makes textiles a perfect medium for commercial exchange and as items of tribute. The Silk Route between East and West from the Roman period onwards is a good example. At the same time, their intangible cultural value (as a medium to

Textiles on the move, through time and space

In October 2020, IIAS in Leiden organised a week-long online conference about textile and dress traditions that develop through time and space, and thereby often change their role and meaning. The conference was organised with the assistance of Sandra Sardjono of the Tracing Patterns Foundation in Los Angeles, Gillian Vogelsang-Eastwood of the Textile Research Centre (TRC) in Leiden, and Chris Buckley, Oxford. It replaced a ‘real’ conference that was planned to take place in Leiden, but which had to be postponed because of the corona pandemic.
express identity) was carried along with them, together with the movement of people. On these journeys textiles would lose their old values, acquire new significance, or communicate messages that may be changed or distorted in their new environments. The papers below look at specific materials, techniques, uses, and decorations that were used and developed for textiles in one particular region and which then moved, either physically or in the minds of artists and craftsmen and women, to other parts of the world, thereby changing the meaning of these textiles, their function, and their importance in society (Figs. 1, 2 and 3). The papers not only emphasise the adaptability of textiles to other cultures, over space and time, but they also reflect upon the ever-present process of adoption and adaptation of ‘foreign’ elements into a local cultural context. These include Indian chintz motifs on ‘traditional’ regional costume from the island of Marken in the Netherlands, American jackets being worn by Japanese yakuza men, or Chinese decorative designs being incorporated into Latin American ‘national’ costume.

The conference and some of the papers below were facilitated by the availability of large collections of textiles, namely the Cotsen Textile Traces Study Collection in Washington, a form of batik that developed in the 19th century. Batik Kompeni, which originates from the bomber jackets worn by American airmen stationed in Japan, and which is a garment that at the TRC in Leiden, writes about a ‘typical’ Japanese ‘bad boys’ in the 1950s and 1960s, sukajan, which in the early 19th century was copied originally produced in France; the other was made in Europe from a material produced in Japan. Contacts between Europe and Japan are also discussed by Ariane Fenneteaux from Paris. On the basis of a garment now in the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, she stresses the likelihood that India played an important role in the manufacture of ‘Japanese’ garments for the European market. Dale Gluckman from Los Angeles writes about an Indonesian batik collection now in Bangkok, which was collected during three trips made by the Thai king Rama V to the former Dutch East Indies. He made a collection that is marked by its diversity and the information that was added to each piece. Niaz Zaman from Bangladesh and the Canadian filmmaker Cathy Stavulak report on the development of a typical textile product from Bangladesh and neighbouring West Bengal in India. This is the kantha, which has in recent years been given a new lease of life and is now used not only for the traditional quilts, but also for large wall hangings. A paper by Nuning Y Damayanti Adisasmito from Bandung deals with a ‘typical’ Japanese garment from the post-war period, namely the sukajan, which is a garment that originates from the bomber jackets worn by American airmen stationed in Japan, and indirectly from the so-called letterman jackets that were worn since the mid-19th century by students at American universities. The sukajan becomes the characteristic garment of Japanese ‘bad boys’ in the 1950s and 1960s, and has since become a popular garment in Japan, which is often produced in China. The final paper is by Caroline Stone from Cambridge, who presents a number of examples of decorative motifs sometimes very unexpectedly finding their way to other countries and continents. Compare in this context to: International Morrison Batik, a kaftan made from Japanese material originally produced for an abl, or kimono sash (Fig. 2). The examples show how concepts of ‘static local tradition’ and ‘authenticity’ are often hard to substantiate.