

T E X T I L E A R T

hmmmm ! Yes, textilesvery interesting !
TEXTILE ART ! Oh ! What does that mean ?
What is textile art ?

This is often the response that I get when people ask me what it is that I do. It is by now a fairly predictable response, but has over the years raised a lot of questions about why, I and others like me, do what we do.

What sets us apart from other artists ?

Are we artists or crafts people ? And, above all, do we need to conform to classifications or make distinctions ?

Textiles for me have meant sarees and furnishings, weaving, painting and embroidery. I have even used them in an Installation ! 'Art' for me has been something I fancied I practised even since I learnt drawing and painting, since the age of around six. When I started work as a Textile artist it was a natural evolution for me, but

I remember the very first piece that I had embroidered, a tapestry that took me nine months to complete and measured 24"x36", which I showed to a few people: Gitanjali Kashyap, the fashion designer, whom I had worked closely with, for nearly three years, remarked that it resembled something out of a home science course. She changed her opinion subsequently, but nonetheless that was her initial reaction. And, Renu Modi, Director of Gallery Espace promptly asked me if I had picked up a tapestry kit from John Lewis in London. Yes ! These are the kind of responses that I got, that really made me think about what I was doing.

The fact that people thought the kinds of thing they did bothered me, but when I met painter Paramjit Singh, he said that "people don't think too much of Art anyway". Dr. Jyotinder Jain, Sr. Director of the Crafts Museum, Delhi, says that "Anything is Art, that is presented as Art". Mr. Martand Singh of Intach, whose involvement with Indian Textiles is legendary, however, disagrees. He believes that it is essentially the expression of an individuals' consciousness that has the capacity to elevate the extraordinary from the rest, which qualifies anything as 'Art'. He goes on to say, that 'Art' cannot be defined by any kind of media of expression, but that the 'quality' of expression can become a criteria to establish parameters between 'Art' and 'Craft'¹. Here, artist Satish Gujral concurs, for he believes, that "painting without vision or emotion becomes mere craft". This eminent painter, sculptor and architect, goes on to say "it is the man, not the medium he works with" that great ideas do not make great 'Art', great artist do". Paraphrasing Majrooh Sultanpuri, he adds:

"where is there a unique subject in this world. It is my touch that makes any subject unique !".

Confused ? Don't be. I believe that knowing what eminent people, luminaries in their respective fields think, how their years of experience have helped them to define their perceptions, goes a long way in defining the criteria of 'Art' and therefore Textile Art within the framework of the Indian Context.

Textiles as a medium somehow always conjures up the image of craft. It has essentially utilitarian connotations and therefore the very need to even want to classify it as 'Art' is questionable. NitaThakore, a practising Textile Artist and Fulbright Fellow, recently returned from RISD (Rhode Island School of Design), U.S., says, that Textile Art in India, is a "term that had to be framed to give emphasis to a form of activity long in existence". And this I think, really is the crux of the issue.

Interior Architect Karan Grover, who is based in Baroda, says that he has been using Textiles to adorn the spaces he has created, from as far back as the early 1980's, and that he wasn't even aware that this was called Textile Art. To him beautiful fabrics whether contemporary or traditional, have always been an integral part of his aesthetic vision. This thinking is very much a part of Indian thought on 'Art' pre 19th century, before the British system of classification came into play. Prior to this, according to Dr. Jyotinder Jain, Indians "never called anything 'Art'", we "never had a word for 'Art' in the western sense.....Shilpa was applied to sculpture, painting, architecture, cooking, kissing, music, among others that constitute the 64 shilpas". He also mentions that "in the Ain-in-Akbari there are references to 'Kaarkhana' or ateliers where no judgement was made on the basis of a 'Art' being superior or a 'Craft' being inferior".

But, there is a difference between the beautiful fabrics created by the skilled weavers around the country and the work of Contemporary Textile Artists like Mahesh Borse, Monika Correa, Priya Ravish Mehra etc. A clue to what this is, lies in what Mahesh has to say. A graduate of NID, Ahmedabad, he has worked as a design consultant since 1985, working with exporters and other organizations. He felt his creativity was "getting restricted due to technical limitations of the handloom", that he could not achieve the kind of effect and patterns he wanted. Hence the idea of working with large surfaces developed. Here he used Punja (dhurrie weaving technique) hand tufting and applique that offer unlimited possibilities in terms and developing form and textures. He feels, that "one can actually treat the surface like a canvas".

For Priya, "Weaving is more spontaneous than drawing on paper". Trained at Shantiniketan, she moved instinctively towards textiles . She says "everything evolves when I see the material and feel its textures", that the "material is more important" to her than what she eventually creates with it.

When I spoke to artists like Husain and Arpita Singh, I was very intrigued by what they had to say about their experience of working with textiles. Ironically, the canvas that they work on is also a piece of woven fabric !

When Priya says the material speaks to her, I relate to it. When Mahesh expounds the immense possibilities of creating forms and textures, I second it. But, when I talked to painters who essentially used a 'fabric' as their base to paint on. who had worked with textiles beyond this..... I was genuinely surprised by their candour in saying that it didn't excite them to explore the myriad possibilities that the medium offered, to make their ideas/ image an integral part of the 'canvas', where like Monika Correa "you create the piece strand by strand like a mason placing the bricks that go into making an edifice. And this bestows a conviction and an authenticity that mere paint on canvas can seldom attain"where "the pleasure of weaving is the joy of seeing form and colour gradually unfold and come to life".

Having worked with textiles for the past 25 years I really found it very difficult to imagine that the making of fabric which has fascinated centuries of human minds, where even in the Rg Veda, the weaver is mentioned as the one who sets up the loom of consciousness as:

"The Man stretches the warp and draws the weft:
the man has spread it out upon this dome of the sky.
These are the pegs, that are fastened in place:
they made the melodies into shuttles for weaving",

would not hold the same sense of excitement of discovery and creativity for other artists as it does for me, Monika, Priya, Mahesh & Nita.

Painter M.F. Husain says that for the artist, the search is continuous. Working with textiles as with film, was for him, an experiment as part of this unending quest. For Arpita Singh, who along with artists such as Swaminathan, Waghela and Ambadas, worked as designers with the weaver Service centres in the 60's, says, that a "painter is totally different from a textile artist". Her three year stint with the Handloom board did not inspire her towards working with textiles as she is "only involved with the surface", the idea of getting involved with the making of the fabric did not interest her.

Although weaving and embroidery form an integral part of my textile experience and creative activity; for years, I have also painted on fabric, using dyes and not pigments. I have watched the colours seep in, to become the fabric — turn as luminous or as dull as the

fibre I wielded my brush on. I have marvelled at the fabric's ability to render fluidity, texture, transparency and opacity on a single surface, and best of all, to watch the shadows of the draped fabric create an ever-changing mood on an expression expelled from my imagination many yesterdays ago; giving it a new lease of life by the gentle breeze of a door closing or a window opening. This experience marred forever, my being able to put my brush on a canvas that was sized-rigid and taut. It could not recreate for me the magical experience as painting on fabric had done.

Maybe Akbar Padamsee's incisive comment to Monika Correa regarding her inability to implement "the gesture of the painter's brush sweeping diagonally across a canvas" is not possible for the weaver, but here, I surely did, across 6 yards of fabric at a stretch ! Maybe the fabric that I painted, adorned the bodies of women as sarees, flowed down their shoulders as dupattas, became a Rohit Bal or a Gitanjali Kashyap ensemble on the fashion ramp, but to me the experience was fulfilling, enriching and liberating. Shall I call it Art ?

In ancient India, "nothing was not utilitarian", but this concept has changed and why not ? It has opened up a whole new dimension to creativity, where the notion of Art for Arts sake is very much a part of our social consciousness today. But, the craftsperson still exists. He was trained by inherited ideals of "nothing not utilitarian" - a definitive link between form and function. He is no longer a part of the atelier that existed in Akbar's time, nor does he have the largesse of such enlightened patronage. He is now a part of a craft based handloom 'Industry'. Here profits and losses are of greater consequence than the evolution of his ideas, than the technical magnificence of the delicate delineation of a flowering creeper weaving its way flawlessly across yards of sheer chanderi or silk brocade. He is hard pressed to deliver fabrics that meet the care standards of Japanese, European and American washing machines, in Designs that pertain to forecast trends that he does not understand. He has in all probability never visited the shores of the country that he makes fabrics for. And, the price too had better be good, after all there are many in the pipe line that take their share of the profit before it gets to see these markets. So, what happens to his creativity ? Did we in India, get to inherit this incomparable wealth and repertoire of textiles, unsurpassed yet by any other nation in this world, merely by creating for criteria of commerce ?

I do not think so. The kind of textiles that we see even today, that many of us do not even realize, we are privileged to wear, cannot have been created out of criteria solely directed towards commercial prudence. They are a result of centuries of people working for self-

fulfilment and enlightened patronage. Where is that possible in a environment that is now called an 'industry'? As Priya Mehra says "most weavers live in terrible circumstances, a lot survive on government subsidies and on exporters demands". Does he have the luxury to be creative ? Has he the courage left to be uninhibited in his expression ?

I sincerely doubt it. Where designs are imposed upon them, when they have delivery schedules that tax their physical competence, let alone have to deliver to perfection, ideas extraneous to their own thought patterns, to cater for markets they cannot dream of being able to assess for lack of information and interaction ? No, they are not able to create the way they once did.

Once again, another western idea - the designer has come to stay. We play God with people who have skills we can never dream to master in this lifetime. We have ideas, we have concepts - "I think therefore I am", but is it enough ? I remember in 1997, when I went to the tribal area of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh, to work on a research and development project for the Ministry of Textiles. It was an absolute eye-opener for me. Not because I hadn't worked with weavers before, I had, from as far back as 1985. But, the contrasts between their lives and ours were so stark, that it shattered the ideals of the designer in me. Ever since, I have no longer felt comfortable imposing ideas and walking away. Ever since, Textile Art for me, has become a way by which I hope, to be able to give back to these very creative and talented artists of our country, a dignity that has somehow been robbed of them. Aside from my own creative expression and need to express, it is also, at some level an attempt to try and restore the artisans pride in craft, beyond monetary gains, for self-fulfilment.

Today power is associated with speed. The vision of a car zipping down the street connotes greater power than the man who ambles down the same street, collating his thoughts, resolving them, giving himself the time and space to do so. The 'power' to do so, is no longer perceived as such. We live in an age of information technology, where we are being seduced by a technology that negates the potency of knowledge that can never come from information alone. It does not have the 'experience' to back it. The idea of crafting as opposed to merely creating ideas in the head, has the capacity to incorporate the 'idea' alongwith the 'experience' of crafting it, that makes the idea more wholesome - sustainable beyond a mere concept that was the impetus for creating it.

Nita Thakore and Mahesh Borse work with craftspersons, working loosely within the atelier concept, that Martand Singh believes needs to be encouraged. Nita, who is based in Vadodra, says that this enables her to speed up the process, provide gainful employment and teaches new skills to underprivileged women who work with her. For artists like Monika Correa, Priya Mehra and myself, working as urban, educated, intellectual crafts people, working with our own hands, crafting the images and nuances of our expression, we hope to try and change the way that craft is perceived, beyond the criteria of its use. or time taken to execute, based on detail of work required, such as it is today. However, if only it were as simple as that!

According to Amba Sanyal, a textile writer and researcher, "the artist-craftsperson is a concept that has got more defined contours in the context of societies where the crafts are no longer an essential part of the economy, but have instead taken on an esoteric value". In the Indian context, she feels that "it is more difficult to find a convenient slot if you are a craftsperson who is not into reproduction of products and at the same time style yourself as an artist, which in some obscure way threatens your coexistence with traditional craftspeople".

The paradox of life !

While the Textile artists strive to expand and/ or explore the criteria that their 'Art' is judged by, in search of self - fulfilment, fulfilment of ideals and in search of excellence in their creativity, what will the story of Textile Art read like a 100 years from now ? Will it be the artists that blaze a trail ? Will the fabric dictate her 'ends' and 'pick' the path as she has done so far ? Will they who set up the 'loom of consciousness' with "the sacrifice that is spread out with threads on all sides" weaving backwards and forwards, inspire the craftsmen across the country to "take up the reins like charioteers" or will Textile Art become merely a vehicle for self-expression for artists who enjoy working with the medium. for the sake of its qualities alone ?

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