

Masters of the Cloth

Exhibition of Trade Textiles from the Tapi Collection, Surat, at the National Museum, New Delhi.



Textiles are integral to the social history of mankind. They are almost as essential as is the breath of man and have great significance in any society. However textiles are fragile and the marks they leave are not as permanent as that of architecture or sculpture, which perhaps understates their relevance; but the reach and consequent influence of textiles, is far greater. This is amply demonstrated in the Masters of the Cloth exhibition mounted at the National Museum, New Delhi; showcasing trade textiles from the Tapi collection, privately owned by Praful and Shilpa Shah of Garden Silk Mills, Surat, Gujarat.

The exhibition opening was accompanied by a scholastically enriching symposium. Speakers from U.K, India and the Netherlands provided valuable and interesting insights into the making of these fabrics and their trade, which has impacted almost the entire globe. It is a matter of great pride to know that fashion was dictated to such extent by the *Kashmir* shawl in France or that the textiles traded from *Gujarat* were revered by the Toraja people in South East Asia; that Indian textiles signified power and status for their owners in Indonesia and that the advent of the chintz led to a significant life-style change in Europe.

However, what seems to be the underlying message is that it was the textile making techniques that intrigued, rather than the designs. Although the earlier fabrics traded to Indonesia were those made in India for Indian people, this gradually gave way to Indian craftsmen making designs to cater for the various, diverse societies that were buying these fabrics. Initially the Europeans had no particular interest in Indian fabrics beyond the fact that it was the currency for trade for exotic spices from Indonesia, but this changed as they recognized the value of the luminous, dyed and printed cottons that could not be produced elsewhere because the Indian dyers had kept their unique and superlative technique a secret. This secret remained closely guarded and was not unravelled until the seventeenth century and it was the savvy trader that gave impetus to the expansive scope of trade, as revealed through this exhibition, by adapting to the tastes of the buyer, whether European, African and Iranian or South Asian – a trend that is prevalent till today.

Textiles from the famed East Indian, *Cholamandalam* (Coromandel) Coast: Block printed, painted and mordant-resist-dyed fabrics, alongside elaborate printed and painted Palampores with gold leaf (derived from *Palang- posh* or bedcover); exquisite *Kashmir* shawls and superfine muslin find place among the exhibits. Influence of Jain manuscript paintings, the *Ramayana* and traditional *Gujarati Patola* patterns find their way into these textiles even though Thai features, Japanese ‘Bingata’ designs, English flowers or East Timorese motifs are interwoven into their threads; along with prayer cloths (*Jainamaz*) from *Machlilipatnam* (*Andhra Pradesh*), made for the Iranian market.

The Collection on display has fabrics dating from the 15th century to the early 20th century. The diversity in making is as stupendous as is the diversity of motifs and the kind of influence the artisans had opened up to explore. One piece that I find absolutely fascinating is a Palampore fragment (Tapi 02.43) which has influences that pertain to the European fascination for all things Japanese and Chinese; which led to movements called Japonisme and Chinoiserie respectively. An 18th century fragment made for the western market, from the Coromandel Coast, this was found in Palu Indonesia. It is a cotton, resist and mordant-dyed fragment which has a circular lotus medallion, Dutch royal coat of arms, with a Japanese lady (probably a courtesan), seated in a bamboo grove, using a mirror to adjust the flowers in her hair. Below her is a row of gun-toting men that are clearly European and by her side is seated a pure white, fluffy rabbit! It seems to be a scene straight out of Puccini’s ‘Madame Butterfly’. Although the textile clearly predates the Opera, the correlation is astounding for it reveals just how much these trade textiles imbibed and narrated; which we remember by the work of such creative luminaries as Puccini, but was equally reflected in the work of a humble Indian textile craftsman through this fragile document.

Another interesting aspect is the relevance of textiles in the myth and lore in human society as revealed through the use of the popular Indian Madras cottons or the ‘Guinea cloth’ commonly traded to West Africa. These cut thread fabrics were and are still used by women as wrappers for the lower half of the body which they wrap to emphasize girth of the abdomen and suggest fecundity. Every Kalabari individual is said to own at least one such wrapper of Indian madras which acquired the name of ‘George’, probably after Fort St. George, the port used by Madras manufactures in the beginning of the 17th century. The cut-thread cloth was something to be treasured and handed down through

the family across generations and is considered a mythological gift. This fabric was the most cherished gift presented to a new-born, the most essential element for a funerary celebration - worn by the deceased and the mourners and also used to elaborately decorate the room and bed where the deceased would be placed.

In the Indonesian islands which have a rich textile culture, Indian textiles were considered a form of storing wealth, they served as costumes for the nobility, as festive displays, gifts and clothing and also as offerings during life-cycle rituals. They were often ascribed with magical properties and elevated to the status of heirlooms. It is because of this that so many of these textiles on view have been so carefully preserved and have survived many centuries despite the rather fragile nature of fabric.

The activity of textile making has been likened to a sacrifice in the ancient text of the *Rg Veda* and this is not without reason when one sees the painstaking effort of the master craftsmen who made the fabrics on view. It has often been noted that these sumptuous fabrics have traditionally been made by people of humble origins for the rich and powerful and that their activity did not necessarily enrich them in the material sense. However, when you see the intensity of devotion that is evident in the kind of painstaking work in the *Ari* embroidery, in the *Patola* dyeing and weaving, or the arduous and technically challenging process of the resist-mordant-dyed, block printed and painted *Kalamkari* fabrics, the sheer technical mastery of the *Jamewar* craftsman of *Kashmir*, as well as the joyously creative use of form, colour and technique in an age where there was no chemical synthesis or mechanical means of reproduction; then it is evident that they were rich in 'other' ways. The sacrifice if any is a matter of perception, for they possibly enjoyed the subtler, more spiritual qualities of living, rather than the more tangibly evident pleasures of material gain.

This is the mark of a true artist, a trait which has given Indian textiles the eminence they have enjoyed throughout the world. The glory of the past notwithstanding, nor the astuteness of the traders who ensured a worldwide, unabated reign, Indian textiles have lost their edge.

In an age where technique is no longer a closely guarded secret, only design can enhance the advantage of an age-old tradition and practice in crafting and trade. This will be possible only if there is a return to the kind of devotion evident in the making of the fabrics on display, a return to spiritual values. This would necessitate the inevitable embracing of a now almost forsaken way of life; going against the tide in a world that is presently steeped in material rather than spiritual values. I imagine this would only attract a few; but every dedicated drop they say, can redeem the lost waters of even a vast ocean; a little by little.

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