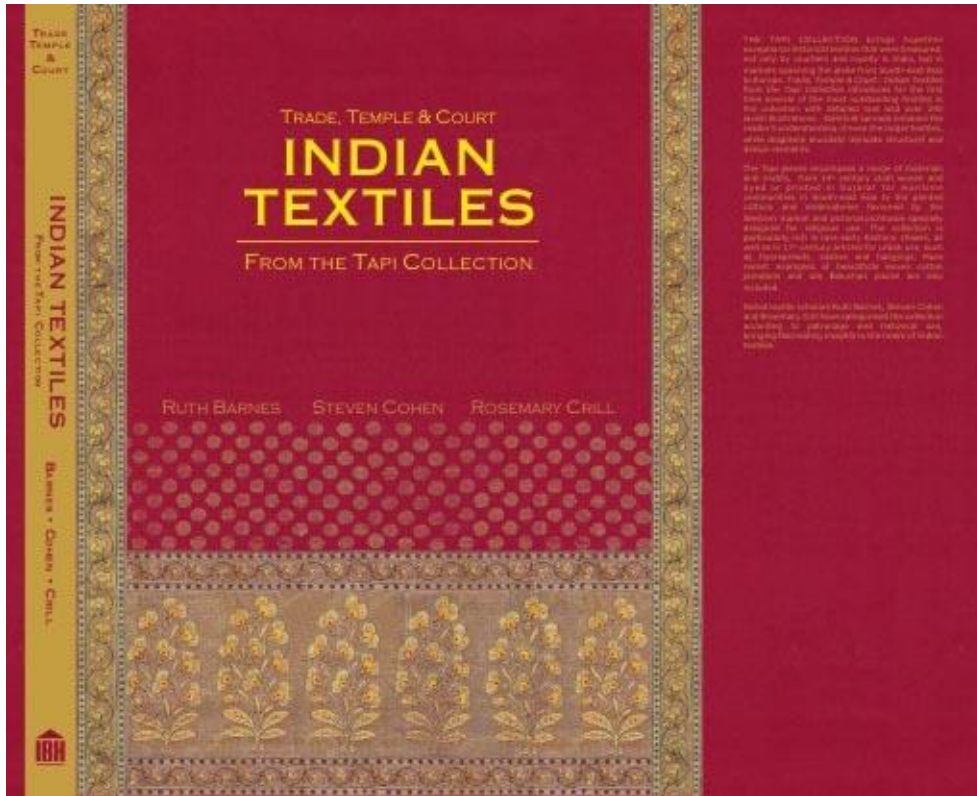


Trade, Temple & Court Indian Textiles from the Tapi Collection



Ruth Barnes, Steven Cohen & Rosemary Crill
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BOOK REVIEW

The Tapi Collection brings together exceptional textiles that were treasured not only by courtiers and royalty in India, but in markets spanning the globe from South-East Asia to Europe. Trade, Temple & Cloth introduces for the first time several of the most outstanding textiles in the collection. Noted textile Scholars Ruth Barnes, Steven Cohen and Rosemary Crill have categorized the collection according to patronage and historical use.

The Tapi pieces encompass a range of textiles and motifs from 14th century cloth, woven and dyed or printed in Gujarat for maritime communities in South-East Asia, to the painted cottons and embroideries preferred by the Western Market and pictorial

pichhwais specially designed for religious purposes. The collection is particularly rich in rare early Kashmir Shawls as well as articles for courtly and urban use.

The book is lavishly illustrated with visuals of textile pieces that comprise the Tapi Collection. Each section has an in-depth introduction with each textile discussed in detail; providing fascinating insights into the realm of Indian textiles and the impact they have had the world over. The textiles under discussion are said to be comparable with those in the collections of the Calico Museum Ahmedabad, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and other international museums of repute thereby ascertaining the importance of the Tapi collection. It is no doubt a book written by scholars for scholars but the information also provides a fascinating backdrop for designers and others who work in the area of textiles in the contemporary world.

On Textiles for the trade with Europe, Rosemary Crill takes us back to Vasco Da Gama's "world changing voyage of 1498", leading us in the manner of an explorer into the realm of the Indian Chintz. Embroidered bed-covers for the Portuguese markets, quilted chintz fabrics and furnishing fabrics for Europe are discussed in fine detail with references to aesthetic influences in Europe that were translated onto the fabrics made for this market in India. Of particular interest is Tapi 98.1835, an exquisitely painted Palampore (derived from Palang-posh or bedcover) from the Coromandel Coast c.1770, which at first sight "appears quintessentially Chinese rather than Indian." She goes on to establish its authenticity as being of Indian origin, concluding that given the carefully shaded colouring and detailing, that the painter must have worked closely from a Chinese prototype; providing revealing insights into the complexities of cultural links established through trade.

Steven Cohen on Kashmir Shawls rips away at all romanticized notions that have surrounded these legendary shawls in a systematic and logical manner which does not detract from the charm of the shawl but contrarily adds to the fascination that we all have for the unsurpassable skill in their making. He informs that the technique in itself is exceedingly simple but refined to a level of high complexity by the Kashmir craftsmen, owing largely to the extreme fineness of the warp and weft threads. We are told that the technique is more than likely to have developed indigenously or if introduced by travellers or conquerors, then in all likelihood it has evolved over centuries to encompass this level of skill and is therefore deemed to be indigenous and not imported.

Ruth Barnes writes on Textiles for the Trade with Asia, which is by far the most extensive portion of the book. She says that "Textiles have been- and still are- a major transmitter of design and technology, and they tend to convey considerable social meaning." We are further informed that the special attraction for Indian cloth lay in the quality of dyes used to decorate the fabrics. Indian supremacy in technology for mordant and resist- dyeing in printed and painted textiles from the Coromandel Coast is well known and the on-going research on these textiles adds considerable depth to the information we have on the subject so far.

It is fascinating to follow the writers' curious gaze which reveals socio-cultural dimensions to these textiles such that we are no longer aware of, nor conform to in our contemporary lives. This opens up the mind to explore and understand the relevance of textiles in ancient societies, imbuing the culture of textile making and usage in the contemporary and future world, with their scholarship and knowledge, to enable us to carry forth the precious, legendary inheritance of Indian Textiles with its due respect and dignity.

Gopika Nath