

**A fine repository of textiles**

The Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad showcases regional embroideries of the 19th century, Mughal court textiles and miniature paintings among other artefacts.

**ALL IN THE DETAILS**

# On a lace trail in a spice state



In the port city of Kochi, **GOPIKA NATH** stumbles upon a flourishing embroidery industry that runs on age-old designs and the dedication of gritty women

An elderly lady sat by a well-lit window. Draped in a simple, printed white sari, wearing thick-rimmed glasses, head bent, with white net fabric in one hand and a threaded needle in the other, she stitched. Leonie Tankha was bemused by my interest in work she'd done for over five decades, working at St. Francis Convent in Kaloor for the last 46 years. She lowered the half-finished petit point embroidered net dupatta and looked up with a half-smile that didn't light up her eyes. The women around her revealed she was probably 63 years old and the oldest embroiderer there. At 41, Shilista had worked at this convent for 14 years and Ginni's tenure was 27 years. They are part of a handful of women I met on a recent visit to Kerala, who excel in the craft of exquisitely delicate petit point embroidery.

ers working at the Vimalayam Welfare Centre in Ernakulum, earned no more than Rs 5,000 a month. There wasn't much transparency or willingness to share details, with one nun shooing me away for asking too many questions. And the girls I met were unable to tell me who their clientele were beyond alluding to women who came from the North. Petit point sari borders fetch up to a lakh, and I paid Rs 5,000 for a small table runner and a two-inch-radius lace doily.

The art of lace-making is time-consuming and requires great dexterity, where nimble fingers use up to 72 bobbins to make the intricate lace patterns. No one really knows where this craft came from, but now produced in Kerala, it is being sold in Belgium as 'Bruges Lace'. The art could have travelled to India with the Syrians who visited Kerala around first century BCE. However, Egyptians, who were well-known for producing a netting of lace with bobbins, also came to trade in spices, so they too could have introduced it. The origins of both petit point and lace-work in Kerala are hazy. But, it is widely recognised that missionaries and Christian nuns from Europe reintroduced these arts in the 19th century, establishing the practice and quality seen today.

**“MANY WOMEN STILL OPT FOR THIS PROFESSION BECAUSE THE FLEXIBLE HOURS ENABLE THEM TO EARN AND ALSO TAKE CARE OF THEIR HOMES.**

tit point embroidery done at the convents in Thoppumpady and Kaloor also seem to carry forth patterns that were handed down to them by Franciscan nuns who set up the convents, teaching these soft skills to underprivileged women who didn't come under the ambit of matriliney prevalent among the Nair community in Kerala. Thus, empowered to earn, these women crocheted and embroidered articles inside these convents that were then shipped to Europe. The nuns would also take the articles to ships anchored in the harbour, selling to sailors on-board. Later, they took to visiting five-star hotels marketing their ware to travellers resident there.

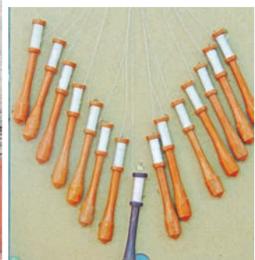
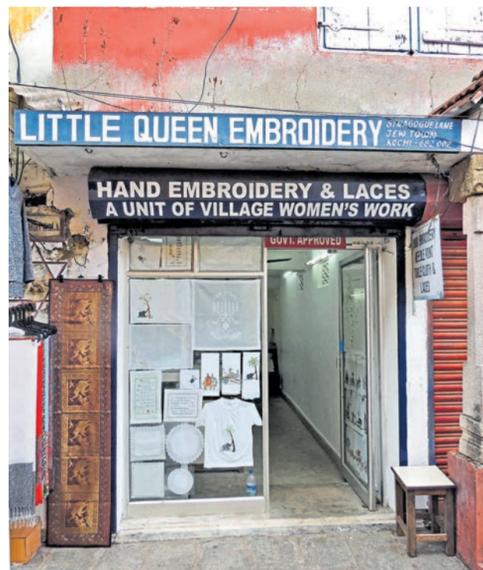
Cochin, the Zamorin finally conquered Cochin with some help from the Dutch, to be undermined by their interferences and eventually ceding the port to them.

But, Calicut or modern day Kozhikode itself, only began dominating in trade when the Periyar river flooded in the 14th century and the once fabled port of Muziris, gateway to India in the millennium before Christ, was ruined. The sustained success of Kochi, however, owes its accomplishment to a strategic four-party, 20th century alliance, which included the government of Madras and Travancore, for funding the development of the 'finest harbour in the East'.

**Across the seas**

Rich in history and natural vistas that include expansive backwaters, coconut palms and tall, overarching rain trees, Fort Kochi is a delight to amble through. Amidst thought-provoking artworks, the simple Kerala *mundu*, spice markets with heady fragrances of cinnamon, cardamom and flower oils, alongside Syrian, British, Portuguese and Dutch influences in cuisine, architecture and lifestyle, I wasn't entirely surprised to find delicate thread work imitative of the excellence of Belgian lace or petit point embroidery that was a once favoured pastime of French aristocracy. However, no one could give me a word for embroidery in Malayalam, implying that these embellishments may well be a collective impact of Arab, Syrian and other spice traders as well as colonialism — of the Dutch who succeeded the Portuguese, and the British who defeated the Dutch.

At Little Queen Embroidery, a small shop run by Thomas in Mattancherry, in the Jewish quarter of Kochi, I found some superfine lace-work as well as delicate embroideries. I bought a petit point organdie runner and a small lace doily. Hard pressed to make a choice as the pieces were pricey, I was happy to note value being accorded for such extraordinary hand-work. However, all the women I met in the convents at Thoppumpady and Kaloor and embroider-



**BEAUTIFUL HERITAGE** (Clockwise from above) Little Queen Embroidery, Kochi; petit point sari border work; embroiderer Leonie Tankha; bobbins used for lace making; (top) embroiderers at St. Francis Xavier's Convent, Kaloor; a lace doily. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

For thousands of years, travellers have sailed to Kerala for spices. A hundred years ago, missionaries docked into the harbour of Cochin with an intent to empower women and spread Christianity, and Kerala became one of the main centres that produced fine lace and embroidery. This once-flourishing trade has diminished for many reasons, not least the increase in other job opportunities open to women today. However, many still opt for this because the flexible hours enable them to earn and also take care of their families. Along with the women sitting over long frames doing extraordinarily fine petit point for sari borders at St. Francis Xavier's Convent in Kaloor, I also met nine-year-old Amna and seven-year-old Vyshna, who showed off their amateur skills. Flexible working hours enable women to work according to school schedules, and these girls learned petit point watching their mothers finish work and waiting to be taken home.

Everyone complained that things were different now with greater education and job opportunities opening, and with less and less women doing embroidery and not enough work to go around, how would these practices continue. While their anxiety has validity, I was heartened to see these two young girls so proud of their endeavour and eager to show me how to do it too.

**FROM KERALA TO DELHI**

# A house that travelled...

When George Oommen was 16 years old, he inherited a two-storey house on a river in Mepral, a village in the verdant southern Indian state of Kerala, where his father had grown up. By tradition, the house was always passed to the youngest son, which he was. But it wasn't a house he needed or wanted. He was a teenager, living with his family in Delhi. After college, he moved to the United States to study at Harvard, where he worked for three decades as an architect. Ten years ago, he became a full-time abstract painter.

raised it again, the land was unstable and no one in our extended family was willing to return to that remote location."

Oommen, 75, still travels to India, which inspires his painting, but he does not go to the house. Rather, he goes to an island called Mankotta that still has the unspoiled air of the time when he lived in Kerala as a boy amid landscapes devoid of modern roads and shopping

pen. Fortunately, a friend, Pradeep Sachdeva, 59, heard about his predicament and agreed to buy the 2,000-square-foot house and move it piece by piece to his own three-and-a-half-acre farm in Sadhrana village, south of Delhi, where he lives.

Sachdeva, an architect, saw a future for Meda as a guest-house at his weekend house. He is known in India for his interiors at resorts like the Samode Palace in Rajasthan, and in Delhi for the large urban renewal projects such as the Dilli Haat market and the 20-acre Garden of Five Senses.

Oommen was overjoyed. "I never

**“THE JOINERY WAS SO SIMPLE AND SOPHISTICATED THAT WITHIN SIX WEEKS MEDA WAS REASSEMBLED.”**

thought of taking it apart and putting it in another location," he said. But villagers who rarely ventured 100 miles outside Mepral did not want to see it go 1,500 miles away. "In that secluded area, which is largely below sea level, people historically went to Meda seeking refuge during floods," Oommen said. But it was either move it or destroy it. "Their important icon would have been entirely lost if we had not moved it. I



**DETERMINED** Pradeep Sachdeva

Malayalam on the staff of Sachdeva's firm recruited Narayan Achari, one of the last Mepral carpenters skilled in building traditional Kerala wood houses. Together with a small team, they dismantled, numbered and documented Meda's individual components. As a last nod to tradition, before the parts were loaded onto northbound trucks, they sought blessings at the local snake temple for safe passage.

In the spring of 2011, Achari and his assistants put the house back together at Sachdeva's farm on a new ground floor with walls of plastered brick. "The joinery was so simple and sophisticated that within six weeks Meda was reassembled," Sachdeva said. "It looked better than ever and good for another hundred years."



malls.

About seven years ago, Oommen decided he had to sell the house because his children did not want it. But potential buyers were interested only in the land, so they would have dismantled and sold Meda as well-seasoned timber and artefacts for tourists. He did not want that to hap-



**RELOCATION** Glimpses of the 'Meda' home that was shifted from Kerala to Gurugram. PHOTOS BY PORAS CHAUDHARY/NYT

feel I saved a piece of my family," he said. For the move in late 2010, a speaker of

A modern bathroom and kitchen are both cordoned off by partition walls from the otherwise open-plan ground floor. "I really wanted a columnless space for this adaptive reuse of the building as a functioning, contemporary home," Sachdeva said. "If I did not make it usable, it would gather cobwebs. Now, friends come and stay, and occasionally I use it, too."

He also turned to some of his friends to help re-imagine the house. The British designer John Bowman, who lives and works in Rajokri, created a cast-iron spiral staircase and brass railing leading to the top floor. It replaced a dilapidated exterior wood staircase whose treads were repurposed as a dining table and shelving. In a bathroom added upstairs, Bowman fashioned a dull-brass sink etched with a leaf pattern and a cast-brass circular shower pan, echoing the building's handmade aesthetic and its natural surroundings.

Upstairs, "we tried to conserve nearly everything as it was, although we did add electricity and plumbing," Sachdeva said. The guesthouse, oriented north-south as it always was, is in a garden now. "It seems to belong there, even though the environment is completely different culturally and climatically," said Sachdeva. "I know trees," he said. He took great care not to harm any while relocating Meda, and never worried about Meda's old wood faring poorly in this much drier, foreign place. "I think it is very old and like steel," he said with conviction. "Nothing will happen to it now."

**ZAHID SARDAR**  
The New York Times