

TRIVIA

Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing was the initiative of Founder & Director, Rachel Bracken Singh and her husband Pritam Singh. Pritam's father, John Singh, purchased the dilapidated *Chanwar Palki-walon ki Haveli* mansion in the late 1970s and began a 3-year renovation project in 1989.



Anokhi Museum opened in **2005**

Imprints of CULTURE

Anokhi Museum in Jaipur takes you on a vivid journey of hand printing and its history, inside a beautiful haveli

Gopika Nath

Planning a trip to the Anokhi Museum of hand-block printing, near Jaipur, I found myself reminiscing about a visit to Sanganer in 1975. I had picked up a typical Sanganeri block-printed, muted red fabric with small *booties*. It was sewn into a *salwar-kameez*. With sparsely repeated motifs, in *mehndi*-green and off-white with black outline, it was a favourite throughout my college-going years.

Printing on textiles by means of wooden blocks incised with a pattern is the earliest,

Traditionally, the printing community comprises the printers, dyers, and washermen

simplest and slowest of all textile printing methods. Block printing is *de rigueur* for every student of textile design in India, and I was no exception. We would buy carved blocks from Karol Bagh's Gaffar Market, for college assignments. Later, I used these professionally too. Carved to my specification by block-makers in Khizarabad near Friends Colony, the blocks were printed, in my studio, by a local *chippa*, to complement my free-style hand-painted saris.

I'd heard about the museum when it opened in 2005, but didn't get a chance to visit it. Recently, when I was in Jaipur, I headed purposefully to Kheri Gate, of the famed Amber Fort, to see this museum, housed in a Kacchwa Rajput, '*Chanwar Palki-walon ki Haveli*'. In ruins when bought by John Singh in the 1970s, this *haveli* was meticulously restored using traditional methods. To achieve the façade's distinctive colour is a painstaking process, detailed on the museum's blog.

Lovingly restored, this *haveli* now houses fabrics and facets of hand-block printing, as practised across the country.

To get to Kheri Gate where the museum is located, one passes the imposing Amber Fort atop the *Cheel ka Teela*, rising high above the Maota Lake. Driving past expansive ramparts, in pale pink and yellow sandstone, tucked away on the right-side wall of Kheri Gate, the museum is a quiet *haveli* in an otherwise busy tourist resort.

Walking through the seven galleries of the museum, all my senses were piqued and satiated. Through elaborate arches, narrow and steep stairwells, alongside painted walls with *jharokhas* and *jaalis* I ambled. Immersed in the nostalgia of the *haveli*, I imagined the *zenana* (women), looking through the lattice windows, the all male-gatherings in the courtyard below and also discovered the merits of a unique door-locking system, as I wrestled with the heavy wooden doors in the washroom. It was not just about hand-block printing, this visit was an experience in itself.

The history of block printing is replete with stories and varying facts that tell us it was an ancient art, which is still practised in India. Traditionally, the printing community



The *haveli*'s preservation project earned a UNESCO award for 'Cultural Heritage Conservation' in 2000

Blocks of Information



The extensive Anokhi Archives also provide a rich repository of clothing and home furnishings dating from the early 1960s to present.



The highlight of any visit is watching daily block printing and block carving demonstrations. Visitors also get an opportunity to interact with artisans.



The earliest woodblock printed fragments to survive are from China and of silk printed with flowers in three colours from the Han Dynasty (before AD 220).



The museum focuses on contemporary fabric ranging from innovative designs to traditional outfits still worn

The history of block printing is replete with stories and varying facts that tell us it was an ancient art

comprises *chippas* or printers, *rangrez* — the dyers and the *dhobis* or washermen. Bagru, Balotra, Bagh, Naliya and Ajrakh printing and patterns along with the work done in Sanganer and Farrukhabad are all featured in the museum, with numerous patterned fabrics, and garments made out of them. The implements for block-making and printing also find pride of place alongside the various stages of a complex art like Ajrakh. Local lore says it draws its name from the 'Aaj Rakh' of a laborious process, but the museum publications point to 'azrak' — blue for Indigo in Arabic. The varying prints — motifs inspired by daily life, can be read as a unique language of colour and pattern, each region with its own. Rivers, with their mineral rich banks vital for successful printing — the Sanjaria for Bagru, the now dry Luni where the 19 patterns of Balotra were printed in the Jodhpur region



TECHNIQUE BEHIND WOOD BLOCK

The wood block is carefully prepared as a relief pattern, which means the areas to show 'white' are cut away with a knife, chisel, or sandpaper leaving the characters or image to show in 'black' at the original surface level. It is necessary only to ink the block and bring it into firm and even contact with the paper or cloth to achieve an acceptable print.

as well as the Baghini in Madhya Pradesh, were part of the unfolding narrative, alongside Bandhini replicas created through the nail-impresions of Naliya. Also displayed were a range of natural and chemical processes including Dabu — mud-resist printing and gold and silver Khari printing.

On the rooftop, *chippas* Iqbal Mohmamed and Saleem Khan were busy printing. In another corner, Mujeeb Ulla Khan, a block-maker, demonstrated his craft. Sitting amidst a variety of intricately-carved blocks, he mentioned early mistakes and a rap from his Ustad. His *kalam* never still, he chiselled as he patiently answered all questions.

When I emerged from the museum after three hours, Raja, the young taxi driver, asked with utmost curiosity what on earth I'd done inside the *haveli* for all this time. I wonder if he would have understood the romance of fabric and history that grips like a bestseller — for that is the story of hand-block printing as it unfolds through the rooms and walls of the *haveli*.

— The author is a textile artist, art critic and a blogger based out of Gurgaon

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