

Patterns of Trade: Indian Trade Textiles

By Patricia Bjaaland Welch

Once upon a time men risked their lives for cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg; scarlet cloth was one of the most highly sought trade goods in the world; and a feud between the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the English East India Company (EIC) resulted in a truce (on 11 April 1667) wherein the Dutch gained a tiny island in Indonesia's Banda islands called Run (pronounced 'roon'). In exchange, the English gained Manhattan. This is the world that the Asian Civilisations Museum's (ACM) current exhibition *Patterns of Trade* unveils.

In 1750, India produced one-quarter of the world's textiles; not surprising considering how sought-after they were throughout Asia and Africa. We forget now that as late as the 14th century the English thought cotton was an animal product (like wool). As late as the mid-18th century their cotton thread was still so inferior that it could only be used as the weft on a linen or wool warp-threaded loom, as the strands were so weak. Imagine how delicate and soft pure Indian cottons would have seemed to European skin!

Europe's craving for pepper sent boatloads of explorers in search of its source. It was the astute Portuguese who first succeeded in rounding the horn of Africa in 1488, enabling Vasco da Gama's arrival in the Indian coastal town of Calicut (origin of our word *calico*) ten years later. In 1511, when Malacca fell to the Portuguese, to their surprise they found 1,000 Indian (Gujarati) families already in residence fully in charge of the thriving intra-Asia textile trade between their homeland and Asia's ports.

The Portuguese quickly learned to trade their European-sourced goods for Indian textiles before continuing on to the Spice Islands. By the time the VOC and EIC arrived, the triangular trade pattern was set. "You want my spices?" the King of Calicut had written in a letter da Gama carried back to Europe. "Sure, I have lots of them. And in return, I want gold, precious stones and scarlet cloth." Other local chieftains demanded printed cloth, cloth with gold threads and other textiles with special designs, and specified colours in exchange for their bags of peppercorns, cinnamon and nutmeg.

The earliest textiles in ACM's *Patterns of Trade* date from the 13th to 15th centuries, all from Gujarat, all bearing Indian motifs drawn with a pen known as a *qalam*, and using mordant-dye and resist-dye techniques. Centuries before Europe discovered the art of dyeing cotton (which as a plant derivative is much more resistant to dyes than wool or silk, which are animal products), India discovered the chemical secret of using metallic oxides (such as alum and oxidised iron) vinegar, salt or even urine, to stimulate the absorption of colours. These older cloths are predominantly neutral, black and red, with designs of women performing a traditional *dandia* dance, battling demons, or carrying the string instruments known as *veena* and parrots, in addition to hunting scenes, friezes of horses and elephants, geese in roundels, etc. Older Gujarati cloths dating to the 9th century with some similar



Dandia dancers, Gujarat, 15th century



Manuscript wrapper with celestial figures, Coromandel Coast, late 18th century

designs have been found in a garbage dump in Fustat, Egypt (once the capital of Abbasid Egypt) – a textile historian’s miracle given the fragile nature of cloth.

But the most famous of Gujarat’s trade textiles are its *patola* – those rarest of textiles highly prized by the Indonesians and limited to their nobility. *Patola* have tie-dyed silk threads forming the fabric’s weft as well as its warp (a process known as ‘double *ikat*’). These were highly sought-after as prestige goods used in ritual gift exchanges, making them an excellent store of wealth for their recipients. *Patterns of Trade* includes both older and more modern pieces, as well as an 18th century blockprinted piece mimicking a real *patola* for comparison purposes.

The Coromandel Coast, with its natural dye centres and ample cotton and rice crops, was another important source of textiles and home to several European trading posts (the Dutch bases in Pulicat and Negapatnam, the English in Madras and the French in Pondicherry). The Coromandel Coast, together with Bengal and Gujarat, were India’s main textile production centres.

The weavers of the Coromandel Coast produced beautiful hand-painted and block-printed cotton textiles (*kalamkari*) made to satisfy the region’s discerning (and increasingly demanding) markets. *Patterns of Trade* has examples destined for such foreign markets as Thailand and the Middle East, the former featuring typical Buddhist and Ayutthaya/Bangkok motifs and the latter the non-figurative alternatives of geometric, calligraphic and floral designs.

A large number of the textiles on display are *ma’a* cloths – the name given them by the Torajas of Sulawesi, who having acquired them through the port town of Makassar, safeguarded and preserved them for generations as sacred gifts from their ancestors. According to textile expert John Guy (*Indian Textiles in the East*, p. 86), “*Ma’a* cloths acquired a central place in Toraja beliefs, featuring in the local creation myths which centre around deified ancestors who are screened in heaven by a curtain of *ma’a*.”

of home spinning and weaving to reinvigorate India’s textile industry.

By 1701, spices had become so commonplace in Europe and the demand for cotton so insatiable that England stepped in to protect its own home industries with an act that prohibited the import of painted or dyed calicoes and silk, which had so little effect that it had to be followed up in 1721 with another act banning the import of *all* Indian cloth, exempting only thread and raw cotton. The West’s Industrial Revolution with its flying shuttles, spinning machines and jennies added blow after blow, proving ruinous for the Indian textile industry. Meanwhile, European appetites had turned from spices to tea and Chinese tastes from Indian textiles to opium.

By 1900, the country that once supplied one-quarter of the world’s textiles was supplying only two percent, and one of Gandhi’s most symbolic of home-rule acts was the encouragement



Palampore – floral motifs with eight-pointed star, Coromandel Coast

Patricia Bjaaland Welch says that this exhibition – with its opportunities to incorporate global trade history, politics, exploration, wars and textiles all in one exhibition – has been one of her all-time favourites to guide.

Photos courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum

Don't miss the Monday Morning Lecture on 12 March, *The Voyage of the Flowering Basket: Traditional Indian patola motifs in contemporary Southeast Asia* by Kim Jane Saunders. Her article will also appear in the May/June issue of *PASSAGE*.