Indo-Portuguese Quilting Tradition: The Cross-Cultural Context

Patrick J. Finn
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, patfinn@zianet.com

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Indo-Portuguese Quilting Tradition: The Cross-Cultural Context

Patrick J. Finn, Fellow
The International Quilt Study Center and Museum
University of Nebraska - Lincoln
Vrindavan, India, March 2009
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Introduction

The arrival of the Portuguese in India at the end of 15th century marks the beginning of a significant period of bilateral cultural exchange of quilting concepts, designs and techniques. As early as the 4th century BCE, India had developed a rich and varied textile tradition recognized internationally. Subsequent to the Portuguese opening the trade route around the Cape of Good Hope in 1498, many Europeans voyaged to India in search of trade opportunities. However, it was the Portuguese who initially explored the potential of Indian embroidered textiles, including quilts. “It was their familiarity with Islamic and Judaic culture which enabled the new arrivals to interact with the local elite and access the sophisticated production of the karkhanas (royal workshops).”

The intent of this paper is to examine the mutual exchange of design concepts, motifs and techniques evidenced in both Indian domestic quiltmaking and the quilts made in India for colonial offshore markets. This paper also surveys the origins of design, the techniques employed and the context in which the quilts were produced.

The Europeans produced quilts not only at Satgaon, but also other locations on the subcontinent. This paper investigates these locations and their quilts types in hopes of better identifying the few remaining examples in collections worldwide.

The Historical, Social and Economic Context

“The sixteenth century was marked by two dramatic developments in India’s cultural history: the beginnings of European involvement in India’s international trade and the establishment of the Mughal empire.” A third, and at times overlooked development was the richly maturing Vijayanagar Empire ruled from Hampi, Karnataka. It was within this social, political, religious and economic climate that the Portuguese and other colonialists produced a distinctive group of embroidered quilts that have come to be known by various names: Bengalla quilts, Satgaon quilts, and those included under the broader heading of colcha. They have also been termed Indo-Portuguese; however, Irwin notes that this term is misleading and thus categorizes them as “objects made in Portugal by immigrant oriental craftsmen; works by Portuguese craftsmen resident in the East; and thirdly, works of ‘genuine oriental industry’ made in the East under Portuguese patronage.” The quilts explored here include those manufactured in India for European interests, i.e., the British and Dutch. Yet, what inspired this textile production? Where did the Portuguese see indigenous works? Who was producing them, and under what conditions? These questions, along with those raised by Palchoudhury and Dutta in Satgaon Quilts: An Initial Study, are addressed in this paper.

Where the quilts were made, who made them and for whom sheds significant light on the cross-cultural design features incorporated in these textile masterworks. Due to the lack of extensive documentation on quilt production of the period, it is worthwhile to reexamine the secondary sources in a historical and economic context. Therefore, pertinent timelines, European travel documents, records compiled by Indian residents and other art forms are investigated for clues that will lend an understanding of their design features. Additionally, the karkhanas are examined to shed light on one of the probable sources of quilt production for the European colonials.

In his article, Trade in Pre-Colonial Bengal, Biplab Dasgupta makes a persuasive argument that “External trade was never

1 Varadarajan, Lotika 16th Century Synthesis to Contemporary Globalization. Exhibition Notes
Craft producers are attached specialists (Brumfield and Earle 1987:5; Earle 1987:73), and economically and bound to the institutions that control production. Administered production is expected to be, were commercial activities, such as goods objects brought in the acquisition, expansion, manipulation, and expression ofelite status and political dominance. These “wealth objects” (Brumfield and Earle 1987:84) were produced to order and precious goods that convey social standing, or more common goods crucial to the acquisition of wealth and power through long-distance trade or as royal largesse. Furthermore, India’s highly structured social system and the Hindu, Muslim and Jain religions dictated a proliferation of specific skill sets through caste goods. Records. Quilts, specifically, were given as gifts to important persons. The Company’s servants as articles of private trade. By the Mughals under the karkhana scheme. This was a place to work at the discretion of foreign interests. This economic system was imposed by the administrative apparatus of the state in such production systems.” (Sinopoli, Carla M. The Organization of Craft Production at Vijayanagara, South India, 1998.) As will be established, the quality of quilts produced by the colonials could have been easily been produced under system.

The context which pervades quilt production of the period, Sinopoli defines these specialized workforces most succinctly: in complex societies, where most or all goods are produced by specialized, standing producers are distinguishing features of a number of modes of productive organization. These may be termed administered production, centralized production, and noncentralized production. Administered production is here defined as production that is directly regulated by some powerful nonproducing group or institution under the control of the political and/or religious elites.

5 Irwin, John & Hall, Margaret, (1973) Indian Embroideries, Calico Museum of Textiles. Ahmedabad: South, and the Europeans who traded with both. The best artisans were brought to the major urban centers, sometimes against their own wishes, to enhance the status of the royal courts and nobility and to work at the discretion of foreign interests. This economic and historic environment produced the unique Bengali quilts over a short period of time, and there has not been any textile since to match the unique designs and quality of workmanship.

The Trade Dynamics

To understand the context of quilt production, it is useful to discuss the manufacturing and trade dynamics of the period. India enjoyed a two thousand year old trade industry in handloom textiles dating from the Roman era. Indian craftsmen were skilled in a wide variety of techniques, most notably painting to the minds of foreign clients. This implies that Indian textile designs, colors and techniques would be modified to produce merchandise acceptable to offshore cultural sensibilities. Further, the foreign made-to-order textiles also influenced local textile design.

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up paying in gold and silver. In the first year the British spent 8.4 million pounds sterling in India in return for cloth and other sundry items.11 The British and Dutch were concerned about keeping a more significant share of their profits by creating factories inland as well as along the coasts and thus cutting out the Indian middlemen. Some of these karkhanas were quite large. The Dutch employed 700-800 silk craftsmen in the karkhanas in Kasim-bazar, Bengal. Major factories were also located in Gujarat at Ahmedabad, Bharuch and Burhanpur; in Agra, Uttar Pradesh; Lahore, Pakistan; Patna, Bihar; Dhaaka, Bengal; Masulipatam Andhra Pradesh; and Pipili, Orissa.12

The Colonials in Bengal

The group of quilts attributed to Satgaon and Hooghly, Bengal, as cited in Irwin/Hall13 and Karl,14 does not preclude the possibility that some of these quilts were also produced elsewhere, i.e., Cambay or Ahmedabad, especially the ones displaying a broader use of colored embroidery and background. The quilts of natural colored tussar silk embroidery on cotton, as found in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and Calico Museum, Ahmedabad collections, are possibly the most representative of the Satgaon/Hooghly style. Long before the Portuguese arrived in Satgaon, textiles were being exported from Bengal to China and other countries in Southeast Asia.15 The rise of Satgaon as a textile center emerged due to the convergence of the market forces of the times; it did not occur exclusively under the patronage of the Mughal courts, although the courts did play an important role. “The Mughal connection also made Bengal a major producer for the imperial court’s voracious appetite for luxury goods. This was especially so in the case of raw silk, the major centre of production of which was located in and around Kasim-bazar.”16 The first establishment of the Portuguese in Bengal occurred in 1536/1537 when King Mahmud Shah allowed Martim Afonso de Mello to build factories and offered to give them custom houses in Chittagong and Satgaon. Yet Mahmud Shah did not allow fortresses to be built.

During the late 16th and early 17th centuries, Satgaon died, mostly due to political exigencies that had coalesced to sponsor the rise of another nearby port city—Hooghly, on the principal flow of the heavily silted Bhagirathi River. With the end of the Sultanate in Bengal, Satgaon gradually lost its moorings.17 Further, in 1579/1580 Emperor Akbar called Pedro Tavares to Agra and presented him with many gifts and a farman (grant) that allowed him to build a city in Bengal wherever he liked. Upon his return to Hooghly, he established a permanent settlement there which grew into the greatest center of Bengal trade, supplanting the glory of Satgaon.18 The Akbarnama states, “Parthi ‘Tār Feringi [Pedro Tavares], who is one of the officials of the merchants of the ports of Bengal, had the bliss of an audience. He and his wife Nashūrna were from their happy star amazed at the laudable qualities of the sovereign, and from their good sense and propriety of conduct they found favor in the testing eyes of the world-lord.”19

“Hence not only the Portuguese but the local traders too left Satgaon and settled in Hooghly, which took the place of Satgaon as the principal port of Bengal and remained so till the middle of the 18th century. Even inland trade was diverted to Hooghly, though Satgaon remained the royal port and the seat of the governor and the imperial customs house till 1632, when Hooghly took its place officially as the royal port.”20 These distinctions become important when dating the quilts made in the ports of Bengal, had the bliss of an audience. He and his wife Nashūrna were from their happy star amazed at the laudable qualities of the sovereign, and from their good sense and propriety of conduct they found favor in the testing eyes of the world-lord.”21
Historians believe the body of King Sebastian was never returned, and many cults grew up around the potential of his return, likened to the return of the Savior. Nonetheless, there seems to have been a notable exchange at the close of the Battle of Al Kasr, enough so that mention was made in 1585. “The bed hangings made of matching sets of fine silk, Mr. Henry Garway bidding 20 pounds for it.” In 1629 Sebastian Manrique, a Portuguese missionary, wrote, “Among the more important commodities dealt in by the Portuguese in Bengal are very rich back-stitched quilts (riouissimas colchas, en las pespuntadas), bed-hangings, pavilions, and other curious articles worked with hunting scenes (obra de montaria).” The herba cloth was made from a ‘hebra’ which they spun like yarn. This yellowish cloth was termed as the ‘hebra’ of Bengal. The herba thread was most cunningly used to ‘stitch their coverlets, pavilions, pillows, carpets, and, and mantles,’ make them with flowers and branches, and personages, that it cannot be mended throughout Europe.” It wasn’t until 1691 that Dutch botanist Rumphius actually opened a cocoon and discovered that silk was made from a plant fiber that grew on trees.

These references begin to build a picture of the quilts made in Bengal at either Satgaon or Hooghly. However, before examining the implications, the other centers of quilt production will be reviewed, keeping in mind that Indians and other traders moved goods across the subcontinent. The ramification of this internal trade is that the colonialists possibly bought goods in Gujarat that were actually created in Bengal, the inference being that the colonists may have unknowingly misrepresented what they were seeing or buying. Remember that these are people who thought silk came from a plant.

Irwin, John and Margaret Hall. Indian Embroideries, Ahmedabad: Calico Museum of Textiles, 1973

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In another entry, "Barbara says that Cambay had skilled craftsmen of many kinds who manufactured coarse and fine variety of woven white cotton fabrics, printed cotton stuffs, silk cloth, colored velvet, satins, thick carpets, beautiful quilts, quilted articles of clothing etc. Cambay textiles found an extensive market in Western Europe, South Africa and South Asia (Burma, Malaya and Indonesia)." In 1585, J.H. van Linschoten chronicles from Cambay, "They make also fair coverlets, which are very fair and pleasant, stitched with silk, and also of cotton of all colors and stitching; pavilions of diverse sorts and colors."[31]

March 1, 1615 Swally Road, aboard the Gift. John Sandcrofte wrote to the East India Company and enclosures copy of letter sent by Rich. Steele [see ante, No. 811.] Account of indigo bought at Ahmedabad, Brunei, etc. of drugs bought by himself and Henry Elmore, and cotton yarn, Cambay quilts, carpets, etc.[32]

"Sends him by Mr. Mollineux, merchant of the Merchant’s Hop" a quilt which cost 6l.10s., and which he had made for him at Cambay."[33]

"Cloths to be bought. Wharf at Depot, Petition of Rich. Hall, anchor smith, referred to the committee for the yard. Sale of velvet, embroidered quilts, “biobees, or gilded screens,” painted “with some resemblances of warfare;” horses, fowls, figures, doors, etc., and other commodities, with names of the purchasers, and the prices."[34]

In Cambay they made quilts from pangerree cloth with red gazia used as lining. Although the Portuguese were initially responsible for introducing these fine embroidered textiles to the European; the quilt trade continued into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the supervision of the East India Company. Company records indicate that factors were given instructions to source ‘quilts and carpets of all sorts made about Cambay and other places.’[35] Materials were recorded as calicoes embroidered with sundry silks.

Alexander Hamilton in the eighteenth century observed that the people of Cambay ‘embroider the best of any people in India, perhaps the best in the world.’[36]

The King never puts on any garment more than once, and when he takes it off he at once delivers it to certain officers, who have charge of this duty, and they render an account; and these garments are never given to anyone. This is considered to show great state. His clothes are silk cloth of very fine material and worked with gold, which are worth each one ten pardaus; and they wear at times bajuars of the same sort, which are like shirts with a skirt and on the head they wear caps of brocade, which they call culas...When he lifts it from his head he never again puts it on.”[37]

Domingo Paes, a Portuguese merchant resident in the court of Krishnadevaraya, reported that the King gave the departing Portuguese ambassador, Chrstovao de Figueiredo, “a “cabahua” (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the king wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a cap of the same fashion as the King’s/Newar wore and to each one of the Portuguese he gave a cloth (tunic) of brocade, with a...
Skilled Hindu craftsmen were just as likely to find employment in the royal karkhanas as Muslims. The courts strived towards perfection in their manufacturing and did not practice discrimination within the workforce. The Europeans were interested in product that would be well received at home, who made it was clearly secondary. Even though the Portuguese had an agenda to convert the ‘natives’ to Christianity, they worked with whomever necessary to further their own interests. “Under the patronage of the various royal clans that ruled India, particularly the Mughals, the Rajputs and the Deccani Nawabs, the decorative arts and crafts reached unprecedented heights. These traditions were continued, and even augmented by later regional nawabs in Bengal, Mysore, Central India, Punjab, Awadh and Kashmir.” European traders did not fail to notice the relatively high quality of Indian craftsmanship and proceeded to set up their own karkhanas (factories) that rivaled the Mughal and Deccani establishments.”

Further evidence from the early records demonstrates that the export quilts of the period were made in karkhanas. “In the karkhanas (factories) of Akbar and Jahangir, Indian craftsmen worked with Persian and Turkish masters to create new art forms that integrated the best of both cultures. The creation of beautiful objects was not merely an act of worship, but also extended to domestic interiors with woven, embroidered, sequined, patchwork and printed material.”

Overleaf
Fig. 7 Accession Number I.S. 157-1953, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This detail of a large quilt or hanging may be considered typical of the Satgaon quilts of Bengal. Embroidered tussar silk on cotton. The materials, designs and the motifs all speak to similar quilts found in other collections and may constitute one distinctive style produced for the European market markets in the 17th century.

In writing about a select group of these quilts, Karl42 states that, “These textiles, the Colchas, were produced by professional embroiderers in local workshops in the Hooghly region near modern day Kolkata. They were commissioned by private Portuguese merchant settlers, who had created a flourishing trade network in the Bay of Bengal and beyond.”

“However, the karkhanas were not the only production centers sourced. Within Goa, missionary enterprises and the establishment of convents had led to traditions of embroidery being developed both among the new converts as well as within the cloistered precincts of the convents. Portuguese orphans sent out from the home country had to be taught trades and convents were well equipped to teach embroidery. The nuns, in any case embroidered items used in church ritual.”

42 Karl, Barbara A. Colchas from the Museo del Caramulo Venus and Mars a l’indienne” (Inv. No.: 461, 296 x 221 cm) Oriente August 2004

43 Varadarajan, Loka 16th Century Synthesis to Contemporary Glo-

Calization Exhibit Notes, Delhi

44 Technically, a chain stitch made by an ari only makes one puncture through the fabric, and the previous stitch pulls the next loop towards it. By contrast, in needlework the next stitch acts in a holding or tacking capacity so that each stitch is not pulled back, but rather forward.
Varadarajan provides another source for the manufacturing of colchas, interestingly enough, not Bengal. She makes an important connection between the embroidery arts of North Karnataka and Bengal, citing that both were strongholds of Hinduism during the Vijayanagar rule. “Moreover, as is made clear from the history of kaudi (quilting) and kasuti (delicate embroidery which had bifurcated from the quilted repertoire), the Konkan area had developed a sophisticated repertoire of embroidery long before the Portuguese arrived on the scene.”

The Portuguese conducted extensive trade with the Vijayanagar kingdom, as can be realized from the losses they incurred as the empire disintegrated into anarchy around 1567. To the Portuguese, the change was of vital importance as described in Robert Sewell’s translation.

Federici has left us the following note on their trade with Vijayanagar, which I extract from “Purchas’s Pilgrims” — “The merchandise that went every year from Goa to Vijayanagar were Arabian horses, velvets, damasks, and satins, armesine [a sort of Bengal taffeta] of Portugal, and pieces of china, saffron, and scarlettes; and from Vijayanagar they had in Turkei for their commodities, jewels and pagodas, which be ducats of gold; the apparel that they use in Vijayanagar is velvet, satin, damasks, scarlet, or white bombast cloth, according to the estate of the person, with long hats on their heads called colae, etc.”

Sewell describes some textiles referred to by Nuniz and Paes; moreover there are numerous mentions of quilted tunics by both writers. About the king he writes, “There the king sits, dressed in white clothes all covered with (embroidery of) golden roses and wearing his jewels — he wears a quantity of these white garments, and I always saw him so dressed…”

In translating Paes, Sewell writes, “This building [ceremonial feastings area in the palace] was all hung with rich cloths, both the walls and the ceiling, as well as the supports, and the cloths of the walls were adorned with figures in the manner of embroidery…” Both these entries support the fact that there was a large amount of embroidery on display, both in clothing and used as decoration.

Thus the colonial quilts emerged out of highly structured social traditions produced at a time when the affluent members of Indian society heavily patronized the arts. The quilts’ sophisticated design also attests to their origin in an environment where access to advanced forms of art could be used as models; simple masters would not produce the complex depictions as seen in these quilts. Additionally the layouts/formats would coincide with embroidery work being produced at the time and reflect current imagery, albeit modified for European taste.

The Cross-Cultural Designs

“The Satgaon quilt is a document of the personality of a culture, a period and a system of a psyche that expressed itself in countless pure forms, images and allegories. It documents the history of the meeting of two widely different cultures undeniably rich in human experience, awakened curiosity and imagination — and a sense of drive and vitality.”

The convergence of cross-cultural influences and a highly skilled professional labor force produced this group of quilts that would never again be replicated. John Irwin describes them, “The tussar silk embroidered quilt […] represents one of the most important schools of Indian embroidery which flourished before the arrival of the Portuguese. Under the patronage of the latter the designs borrowed increasingly from Christian biblical sources and the repertory of Italian Renaissance ornament.” The eclectic design sources for these quilts and their variation of layout begs the question, “Who designed these quilts?” That will be addressed after examining the designs.
Fig. 8 This miniature shows the elaborate border designs similar to those found in many of the Indo European quilts.

Fig. 9 This intimate miniature shows a royal couple wrapped in a luxurious quilt and helps to prove that this type of covering was utilized by the Mughal rulers of the period.

Fig. 10 The Europeans in lower left are shown bringing gifts to the court of Akbar. Here they are exposed to the sumptuous designs in the carpet in the foreground and the quilt upon which Akbar rests his arm.

Fig. 11 This Iranian carpet detail demonstrates the similarities and influence between those of Iran and Mughal India.
“Whereas in the early sixteenth-century examples the motifs are predominantly Indian, from Hindu symbolism, the seventeenth-century embroideries appear to increase in Portuguese or European motifs.” Terpstra’s statement needs further research to validate his point; nonetheless the designs are geometric, floral and pictorial. In general appearance the quilts borrow from the Mughal artistic expression to densely fill the space, almost entirely. No area is left empty, adding to the luxuriant quality of these pieces. “Just as the religion of Islam embodies a way of life and serves as a cohesive force among ethnically and culturally diverse peoples, the art produced by and for Muslim societies has basic identifying and unifying characteristics. Perhaps the most salient of these is the predilection for all-over surface decoration.”

This Mughal artistic device of completely filling space is seen in layouts that were borrowed from the Persian Islamic carpet-making traditions and used in the Mughal courts. Not only were artists from Tabriz and Herat brought to India in 1549 to work in the Humayan’s karkhanas, but also the Mughals maintained close trade relations with the Ottoman Empire. At the turn of the 17th century, reforms encouraged in the textile industry diversified the trade relations with the Ottoman Empire. At the turn of the 17th century, reforms encouraged in the textile industry diversified the trade relations with the Ottoman Empire. The Mughal carpet repertoire reflects the Iranian style, having basic identifying and unifying characteristics. Perhaps the most salient of these is the predilection for all-over surface decoration.

“The Mughal carpet repertoire reflects the Indian style, albeit more naturalistically interpreted. During the reigns of Shah Jahan (1605-1627) and Shah Jahan (1627-1657), a native floral style emerged which coexisted with and serves as a cohesive force among ethnically and culturally diverse peoples, the art produced by and for Muslim societies has basic identifying and unifying characteristics. Perhaps the most salient of these is the predilection for all-over surface decoration.”


Characteristic of many of these quilts is the depiction of hunting scenes, like Portuguese hunters on horseback galloping through a forest of creepers and vines in chase of real and fanciful animals and birds. Both the Babarnama and Akbarnama are illustrated with the Emperors engaged in the popular pastime of hunting. These scenes were easily translated into embroidery with Europeans riding the horses instead of the Mughal hunting party. The way in which the horses are depicted can easily see the Islamic/Peruvian influence.
Mythic animals are drawn from both Indian and European origins. The double-headed bird motif is one that exemplifies the wide-ranging influences incorporated into these quilts. It is most commonly associated with the Holy Roman and Byzantine empires. In Byzantine heraldry, the heads represent the dual sovereignty of the Emperor (secular and religious) and/or dominance of the Byzantine Emperors over both East and West. The design was in use in the East for centuries before it was officially adopted by the Byzantines and was independently adopted as the symbol of several other historical states, such as early medieval Armenia.

The *Gandaberunda*, the Hindu mythological double-headed eagle, has its linguistic origins from Kannada, the language spoken in Karnataka. Ancient Hindu texts, i.e., Vishnu Puranas, reveal the Gandaberunda to be a personification of Lord Vishnu. Shown with two heads and beaks connected to one body, the Gandaberunda is believed to possess unimaginable strength. The Gandaberunda is seen on one side of many of the coins struck during the reign of Achuthadevaraya (AD 1530 - 1542) of the Vijayanagar Empire. The ceiling painting of the Virupaksha Temple at Hampi also illustrates a double-headed bird.
A bedcover made in India for the Portuguese market in the late seventeenth century (Accession Number 1988-7-4) in the Philadelphia Museum of Art shows a Persian version of an eagle with two heads and fantastic peacock tail feathers. This is a common rendering of the Gandaberunda. On the Bargello colcha (C 2255) a crowned double-headed imperial eagle, “although in its earliest form an Eastern symbol, here stands for the Holy Roman Empire.”

Also embroidered into the repertoire of vignettes are maritime scenes of ships, fish, and a variety of eastern and western mythical sea creatures. Mermaids of western origin swim alongside makara, a Hindu/Buddhist crocodile sea monster and mount of the Hindu god Varuna. Some authors have drawn parallels between the narratives of Noah’s Ark and Matsya, the first of Vishnu’s ten incarnations. In both legends a great flood threatens to destroy the human race, and the heroes cross the great abyss to save humankind. Moreover, the seafaring colonists were enamored by oceanic folklore, and much of their traveling in India, especially by the Portuguese, was along the coasts. Many of the Indian animal motifs are transformed or westernized in the quiltmaking process: the makara evolves into a dragon. Nagas and naginis, a fantastic race of snakes in Hindu mythology, become sea sprites or mermaids, while Nrisimhadeva, the half-man half-lion incarnation of Vishnu, transmutes into a griffin.

Scholars have written extensively on the Biblical and Greco-Roman narratives depicted in these quilts, including the legend of Hercules and the Judgment of Solomon. Some of the imagery was derived from gifts given by foreign visitors to the Mughal courts. The imperial courts in particular received paintings as gifts from the Europeans. “The fleet of 1614 carried out 78 oil paintings: 41 of them, commissioned in London, were portraits of the King, the Queen, Sir Thomas Smythe, assorted lords, ladies and citizens, and two fanciful depictions of the ‘Great Mughal’ and ‘Tamberlane’; the rest, brought from studios in Rouen, depicted classical and religious subjects like Mars and Venus, the Judgment of Paris, and Adam and Eve.”

Abu’l Fazl explains in the A’in- i Akbari, “painting and figures and weaves [lit. knots] and wonderful designs (tarh’ha) gained currency, and world-travelers, able to recognize quality products were wonderstruck. In a short while, the sagacious Emperor obtained familiarity with all theoretical and practical aspects of that art, and from his patronage, skilled masters of ready understanding belonging to this country also learnt it.”

Elsewhere Abu’l Fazl speaks of Akbar’s interest in the textile arts and specifically kashida, literally meaning ‘figure embroidery.’ Fazl, the Emperor’s scribe, also details Akbar’s interest in textiles in the Arif Quandahari, written before the A’in- i Akbari, at which time Fazl would have no need to fabricate in order to please the emperor.

Fazl also writes, “Skilful masters and workmen have settled in this country, to teach people an improved system of manufacture. The Imperial workshops, the towns of Lahore, Agra, Fatehpur, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, turn out many master-pieces of workmanship; and the figures and patterns, knots, and variety of fashions which now prevail, astonish experienced travelers.” Interestingly Fazl does not mention Bengal in this list, even though there is ample evidence that Akbar’s court produced many textiles there.

Other Examples

Fig. 19 An Indo Portuguese Quilted Hanging from the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad, Gujarat (detail)
Cotton, embroidered with natural, yellow wild silk made in Satgaon, Houghly District, Bengal; c. early 17th century. The imagery embroidered on this quilt depicts the many cross-cultural influences that entered into the design repertoire utilized by both the artists in the karkhanas and those working independently in the trade hubs of Medieval India.

The six pointed star embedded in the latticework of the central ground is clearly Persian in character, while the men seated at a table playing chess are wearing European dress. The man on horseback also wears western clothes. However, the depiction of hunting scenes comes from a tradition found in many Mughal paintings of the period. The man on the far right is shown waving two but is wearing western style clothing.
This later Mughal quilt from a private collection in Jaipur is from 19th-century India or possibly Safavid Persia. A rectangular form, the quilted cotton ground is embroidered with red, green, orange and gold/silver threads with a trellis design. The central lotus medallion sends out spiraling split-palmette leaves with elaborate floral terminals and is bordered by floral and foliate scrolls. A similar piece came up for auction at Sotheby’s, London in April 2008.

Given the provenance of the Jaipur piece, the origin of both quilts is most probably Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Although the ground color appears different, both quilts display the same miniscule, diagonally checked quilting. Comparing the inside of the floral borders, there is marked similarity of the ‘partial’ motifs and half-flowers. The same leaves, scrolling and flower designs are also seen in the ceiling details of Akbar’s tomb at Sikandra near Agra.
This cotton quilt from Ahmedabad, Gujarat (c. 1855) is quilted with cotton thread and twisted cotton blue batting. A comparable piece is found at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Accession No. IS 5415.) The similarities include the use of the backstitch, blue batting, fringe design, size and overall pattern. The lyrical display of the paisley, zigzag geometry and materials also suggest these two pieces could have been created in the same workshop.
Fig. 22-24 Sikandra, Tomb of Akbar the Great, Agra, Uttar Pradesh

Construction of this architectural masterpiece began in 1600 by Akbar and was completed by his son Jahangir from 1605-1613. The design details are similar to the quilts depicted here. Europeans traveling through and living in Agra would have undoubtedly been shown this magnum opus in progress and interpreted the style in the textiles they commissioned.
The quilts measure 100 to 120 inches in length and utilized layouts found in the ‘summer carpets’ used by the Mughals. Although of a later date, the two pieces in the Jaipur collection (Fig. 20&21) and the pieces up for auction at Sotheby’s show similar design forms. The materials were cotton and silk; both were used for the base fabric and the embroidery.

Rosemary Crill of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London separates the quilts into three categories:

1) A very heavy quilt made of cotton, embroidered with yellow tussar silk on a background quilted with the backstitch and the borders containing French knots
2) A lighter weight textile used for garments where the quilted figures are worked in chain stitch but may be left empty inside
3) Quilts done in yellow silk, where either red or blue is used. This latter category is less prevalent and may have been produced in Portugal [or in Gujarat, where there was broader use of color.]

Quilts were also made of qutni, “a kind of satin made of half cotton and half silk. As for the quilts made at Samana near Patiala be made of amburt or achnum as these fabrics proved to be more lasting.”

Silk, cotton, jute and sometimes linen were used as the ground fabric while the embroidery was mostly created with tussar silk and occasionally cotton.

The layout of the Indo European quilts range from casual to very formal. The former is exemplified by a quilt (Accession No. 322) in the Calico Museum, which contains an all over pattern of flowering creepers, animals, people and mythological figures. At first glance it appears to be a formal layout because of the controlled use of solid and linear motifs. An example of the latter is a hanging in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello Inventory Number C 2255 and has a very strict, formal and controlled layout. Both pieces are from the early 17th century and are attributed to Bengal.

The Bargello quilt is chain stitched on a purple blue cotton ground, and the Calico one is on fine white cotton; both are stitched with tussar silk. The motifs are characteristic of these types of quilts and include themes from European and Eastern decorative arts and religion. The motifs borrow from a number of different sources: indigenous Indian designs, the reinterpretation of Persian and European designs used in the Mughul courts and purer European designs – “Christian biblical sources and the repertory of Italian Renaissance ornament.” (Irwin) Later even Chinese textiles came via Europe in the form of the popular Chinoiserie.

The division of the quilts into rectangles or registers with repeated concentric borders and central medallions is a form seen in many Indian textiles and the architecture of the period. The Virupaksha Temple ceiling displays not only a layout similar to the quilts, but also other elements worthy of consideration. To the right of a central lotus mandala there are encircled cameos. (Fig. 27) This design element is used in the quilts to highlight important portraits of nobility and personages. Other similar devices include the crowding of figures, the motifs used in dividing lines and borders, and the narrative quality in some of the registers portraying scenes from everyday life and those of the epics. Of particular interest is the central panel of the lower triptych. (Fig. 28) Here is found a caparisoned elephant and horse in a similar stance as seen in many quilts. Finally, there are number of mythic animals quite similar to those embroidered on many of the quilts.

The broad and diverse range of sources becomes obvious when collectively viewing these masterpieces of embroidery and quilting. As a product developed and produced over a hundred year period, these quilts certainly remain a testament to the creative adaptability of the Indian craftsman. It is far easier to identify the origins of the individual designs than to imagine the design process itself.

When the Portuguese arrived, they undoubtedly saw textiles that sparked their imagination and reminded them of the colchas made in Portugal. Whether these were seen at the imperial courts or in the marketplace is unknown. However, embroidery was a sophisticated art form by the time the Portuguese became involved in the textile trade, and export quilts remained a mainstay long after their tenure in Bengal.

It can be reasonably assumed that the design process developed over a period of time with its roots found indigenous embroideries. The influences from the imperial courts of Vijayanagar and the Mughal Empire are more likely to have been the ‘spark’ that ignited the Portuguese passion for embroidered...
quilts. It is very possible that inspiration also emerged from the compositions characteristic of the native kantha of Bengal. Although these folk quilts, made for home use by untrained housewives, were different in many respects, the two genres share features that cannot go unmentioned. Primary among them are the combining of apparently disparate motifs, the stitching employed and the characteristic use of a central medallion.

The degree to which royal quilts or rural kanthas influenced the Portuguese cannot be known, but it is fair to conclude that each contributed to the resulting textiles. For example, a quilt (Accession No. 32) in the Calico Museum is more naïve and lacks the formal structure of some of the other pieces, perhaps being made earlier in the design process; John Irwin dates it to the early 17th century.

Conclusion

The Medieval period in India, marked by three disparate power groups, experienced a Renaissance in the arts and architecture. Despite the constant conflict between the Mughals in the north, the Vijayanagar Empire in the south and the onslaught of European colonials, the claim for empire precipitated a lavish display of wealth and power. Luxury goods rose to new heights, embellishing the glory and pride of indigenous and foreign rivals alike.

Historically, cloth has been a hallmark of a culture, giving it a tangible identity. Whether a flag, clothes or furnishings, cloth is an immediate sign of wealth and station. India’s long trade history in textiles put her in the position, at a time of great internal evolution, to transform the world’s textile industry. It was remarkable that internal strife led to increased creative adaptability and economic prowess. Industrialisation and other factors unfortunately hampered these creative trends and reversed the economic dynamic. However, it is within this context that some of the most beautiful and unique textiles were produced; among them the Indo Portuguese quilts.

The quilts produced at this distinctive time in history contained elements from around the globe and across the centuries. The wonder of their beauty attests to the creative genius of India’s craftsmen and is only increased by the mystery surrounding their provenance.