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Color and Pattern: Tribal and Contemporary Ikats of India and Laos

Concurrent Exhibitions
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Color and Pattern:

Tribal and Contemporary Ikats of India and Laos

September 20 - October 15, 2010

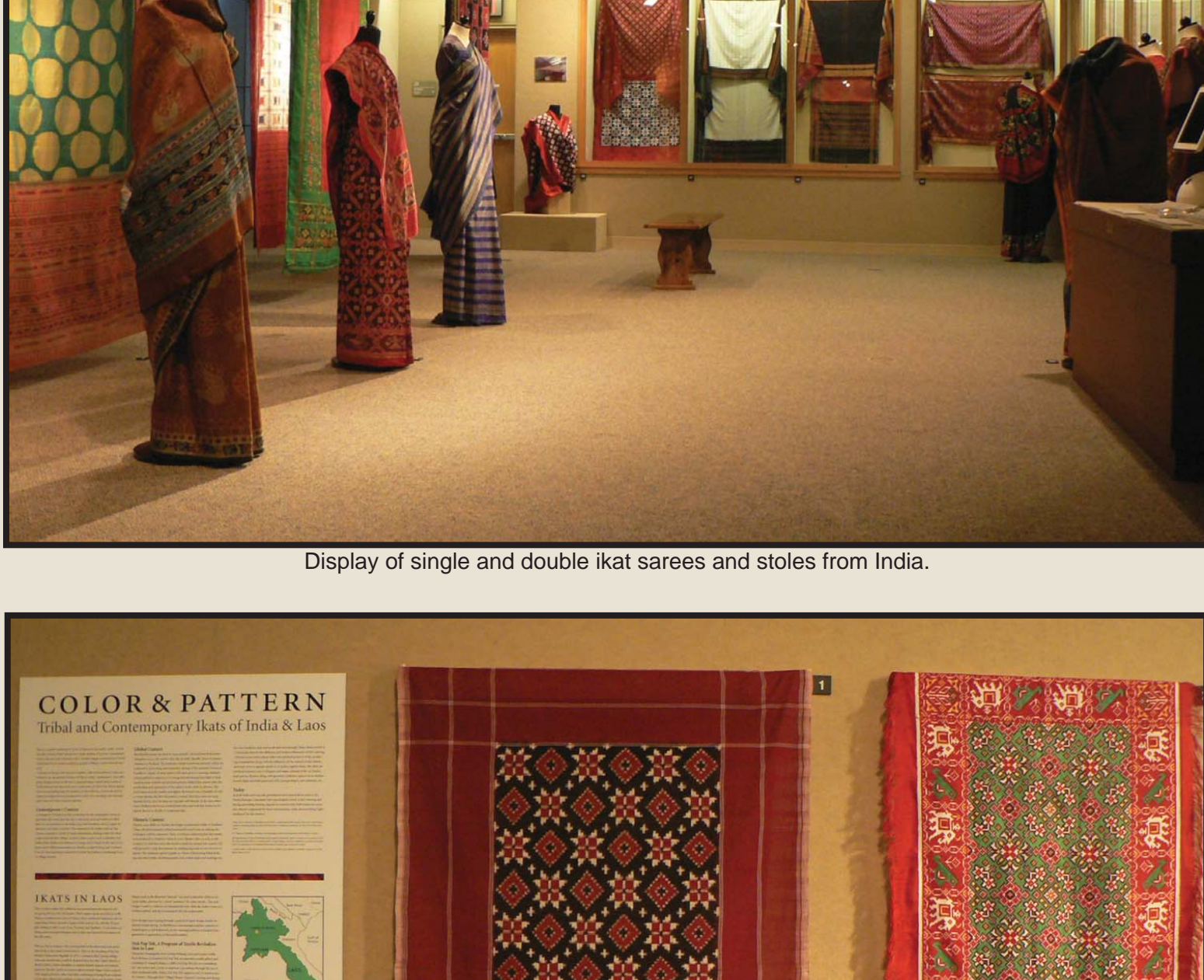
An exhibition of contemporary and traditional Lao tribal apparel, drawn upon centuries-old motifs.

Jill Heppenheimer and Joanna Smith
Curators

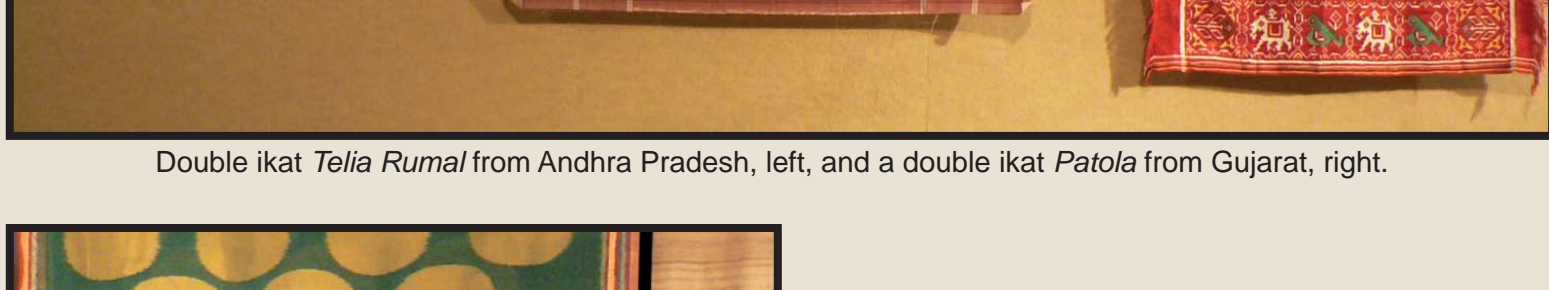
A dazzling group of single and double ikat from India is presented with documentation of warp and weft ikat preparation.

Wendy Weiss and Anjali Karolia
Curators

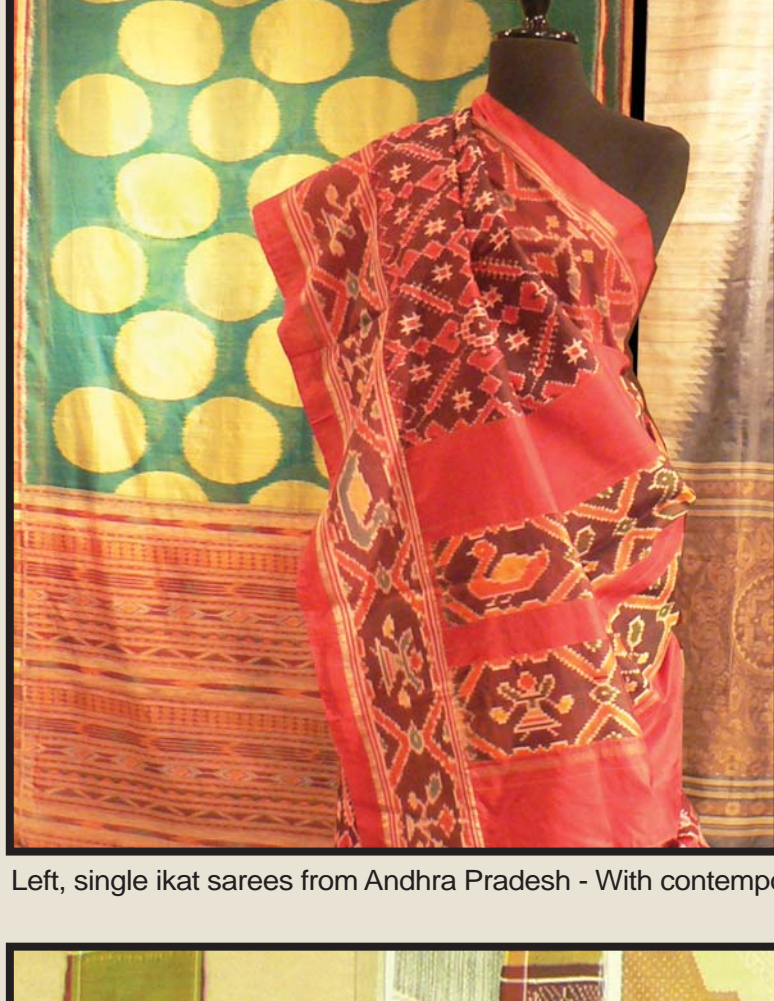
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Display of single and double ikat sarees and stoles from India.



Double ikat *Telia Rumal* from Andhra Pradesh, left, and a double ikat *Patola* from Gujarat, right.



Contemporary sarees from Andhra Pradesh.

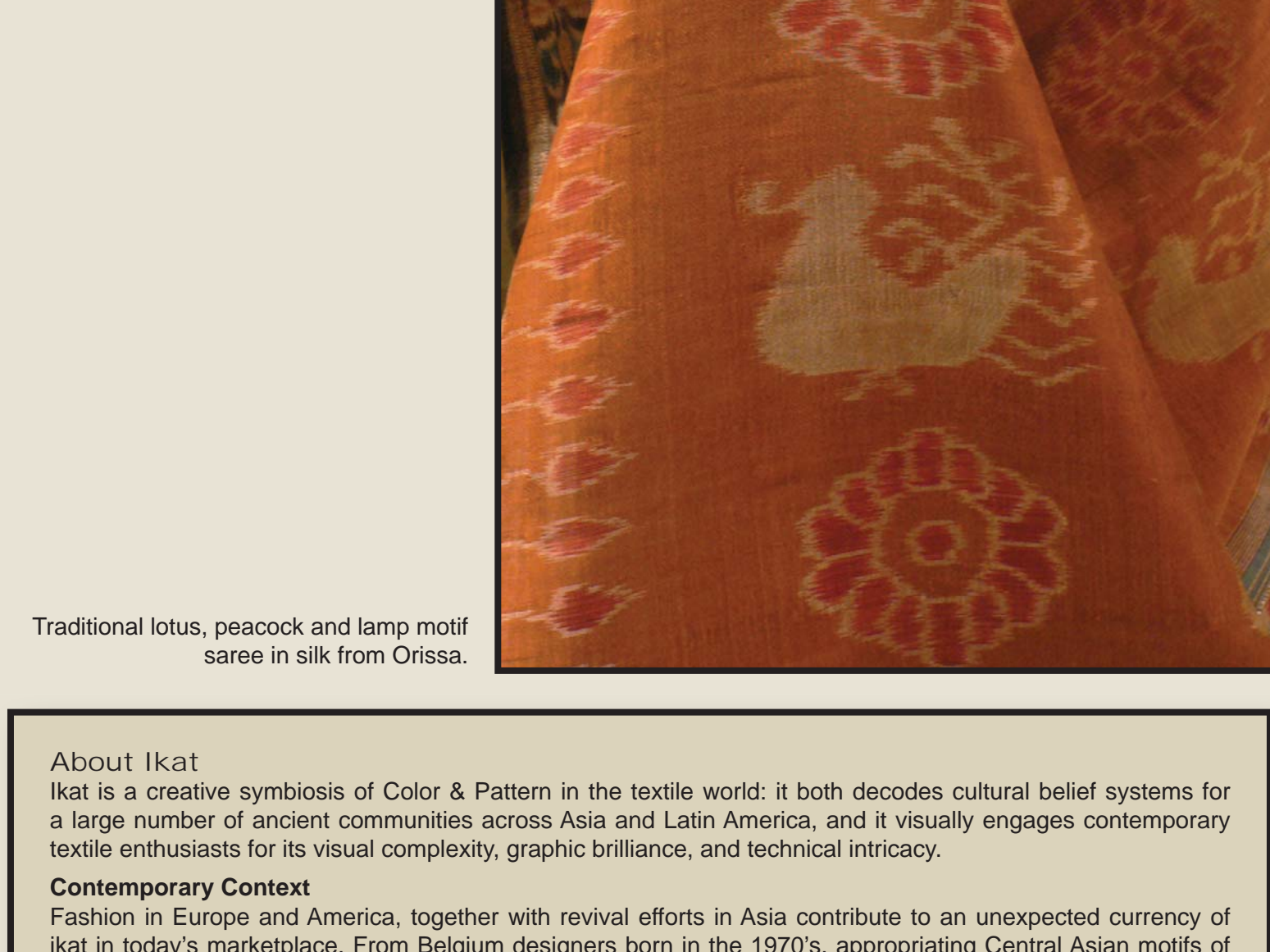
Left, single ikat sarees from Andhra Pradesh - With contemporary design, behind, and with traditional motifs, on dress form.



Contemporary single ikat samples, left, and double ikat stoles designed by Wendy Weiss, right.



Contemporary single ikat saree, left, on dress form, and traditional single ikat, Andhra Pradesh, red and green, draped behind.



Traditional lotus, peacock and lamp motif saree in silk from Orissa.

About Ikat

Ikat is a creative symbiosis of Color & Pattern in the textile world: it both decodes cultural belief systems for a large number of ancient communities across Asia and Latin America, and it visually engages contemporary textile enthusiasts for its visual complexity, graphic brilliance, and technical intricacy.

Contemporary Context

Fashion in Europe and America, together with revival efforts in Asia contribute to an unexpected currency of ikat in today's marketplace. From Belgium designers born in the 1970's, appropriating Central Asian motifs of Turkmenistan into their mid-2000's collections, to Dries Van Noten Spring 2010, incorporating large ikat patterns in his collection, American and European trendspotters have awakened to what was a receding, now reinvigorated, interest in these ancient patterns.

A resurgence of interest in ikat production for the marketplace stems in part from this trend, but is also due to the local need and vitality of tribal dress in communities across India, Laos and elsewhere, such as Japan, Indonesia, and other countries. The majority of the Indian and Lao ikat weavers continue to reside in rural communities, finding outlets for their output beyond their villages, in more urban centers such as Bombay and Delhi where Bollywood influence is strong, and in Kutch in the state of Gujarat where tribal communities are close by. Luang Prabang and Vientiane, Laos are also important markets for ancient ikat patterns continuing in use by village weavers.

Global Context

Ikat literally means 'tie, bind or wrap around', derived from Malay *Mengikat*. In Lao, the word is *Mut Mii*, in India, *Bandha*, *Kasuri* in 'jean, bind or wrap around'. The technique results in intricate patterns, which are achieved by resist-tying and immersion dyeing of the sequenced sections of bundles or 'chains' of warp and/or weft yarns prior to weaving. Multiple colors applied in the process of re-tying and dyeing from light to dark result in more colorful and detailed patterns. Skilled ikat weavers plan the positioning and registration of the pattern in the cloth in advance. The more knots tied, the smaller and tighter the bound area of bundles of weft or warp threads, the finer the pattern created. Most ikat yarns are warp threads, but in Laos, the ikats are typically weft threads. In the case where more detailed patterns are created, both warp and weft ikat chains are designed, known as double or compound ikat.

Historic Context

Historic texts differ on whether ikat began in Indonesia, India or Southern China. Traditional and tribal communities took turns at refining the techniques and the outcomes. There is evidence indicating that ikat textiles were produced in Southern China by non-Chinese tribes as early as 6th Century CE, and ikats were also found in India by around 7th Century CE, with geometric warp ikat patterns on clothing depicted on cave frescoes in Ajanta. The technique spread rapidly as a form of decorating tribal clothing and ritual cloths, clarifying gender, class, tribal origin and marriage status, into Southeast Asia and north and west through China. India served as a critical junction for the diffusion and further refinement of ikat weaving.

Today

Patterns across each culture reflect the spiritual practices of the producing communities, along with the influences of the natural world. Motifs used may serve to appease spirits or to protect against them. We often see mythical creatures such as dragons and nagas, animals of the air (birds), land and sea, flowers, along with geometric patterns: squares as in checkerboards (light and dark-good and evil), lozenge shapes, wave patterns, etc. In both India and Laos, the government and organizations such as the World Heritage Committee have encouraged revival of ikat-weaving and dyeing, providing training support for weavers; this both retains an essential cultural component for these communities, while also providing 'right livelihood' for the weavers.

Indian Ikat

Patola of Gujarat

Of India's legendary textile heritage few are as highly prized as the Patola, the double ikat silk fabric in which both warp and weft yarns are separately tied and dyed before weaving to create patterns of unmatched richness and subtlety. An extremely complicated process developed over the centuries.

Patan (ancient capital of Gujarat) has been the center for production of Patola silk lengths for centuries and still continues to be the main center. From the 11th century onwards references in praise of Patola appears in the writings of many eminent poets and authors of Gujarati literature. The hereditary weavers of Patola in Patan are the Salvis, who are primarily Jains, but may also belong to the Hindu community. According to them they were brought to Gujarat from the South of India in the 10th century. These double ikat silk textiles are mainly woven as saris and are worn at social and religious ceremonies by the Hindu and Vohra Muslim women.

Bold grid based patterns combined with intricate geometrical, floral, and figurative motifs characterize Patola. Some common motifs seen in these textiles are the elephant, parrot, dancing doll, floral baskets, leaves and stars. Different communities had specific preferences of design, usually following the dictates of their religion. Colors used are mainly red, yellow, green, white, and maroon.

Apart from the double ikat silk Patola in Gujarat, in the last few decades single ikat sarees are being produced in Rajkot and its neighboring villages in Gujarat. They employ similar designs as of the Patola but are produced in single ikat, thereby cutting the costs and time of production. These are locally called 'Rajkot Patola'.

Bandhas of Orissa

The ikat technique of Orissa is known as Bandhas and they have a distinctive curvilinear appearance. The weavers are of Salvis, Bhulia Meher, and Gandia-Patra castes. The characteristic trait of these textiles is that the ikat technique is combined with brocade bands along the lengths of the saris borders and in the end pieces, anchal/pallav, and also occasionally in the field.

In these textiles, forms are deliberately feathered so that their edges appear hazy and fragile. This is achieved by the use of very fine count yarn, tied and dyed in very small sets.

The design vocabulary of these fabrics is wide and varied: fish, bird, elephant, deer, lion, duck, tortoise, shell, lamp, stars, trellis, dice motifs, architectural forms, waves etc. The Meher weaver community from Baragarh and Sonapur weaves in cotton and tussar (wild silk), whereas weavers from Naupatna use only silk. The dice motif is done in double ikat known as Saktipal sari, whereas in the other patterns the borders are normally in warp ikat and the end pieces or pallavs or anchals are in weft ikat. They use a wide range of colors like reds, yellows, greens, blues, purples, and so on.

The most striking feature of the Bandha sari is the end piece or anchal, the oldest design being the Bichitrapuri anchal. However, there are numerous variations composed of rows of floral, geometric and figurative forms, which are separated by brocade bands.

Apart from saris Orissa ikat weavers also produce yardages, dupattas and bed and table linen.

Ikats of Andhra Pradesh

In Andhra Pradesh ikats are known as Pagdu bandhu, Buddavaasi, Telia Rumals and Chitki. Ikat weaving was introduced in this region about two to three generations ago in the early nineteen hundreds. Since the ikat technique is relatively new to the weavers of Andhra Pradesh they are more settled in Chirala where they produced double ikat cotton rumals (square pieces of cloth 36"x 36") in simple geometric patterns. These were called Telia Rumals of Chirala. Its basic structure has a strong diagonal or square grid, in which geometric floral, or rarely, figurative motifs in double ikat are woven. This formed the central unit and was invariably framed by a red border usually 8" wide. The overall color scheme is red, white, and black.

Most ikat designs produced in Pochampalli have a strong influence of Patola design motifs. Modification in color and form have resulted in design variations commonly identified as 'Pochampalli Patola'.

The ikat weavers of Andhra Pradesh have diversified their product line from saris and rumals to yardages with completely contemporary design vocabulary. They are producing single, double and combined ikats in cotton and silk for domestic urban and international markets.

The Lao ikats

Within this exhibition are sourced from the majority ethnic group, the Lao-Tai (Tai Kadai). Their origins can be traced back to the Yunnan (southwestern) area of China, where southward migration, due to expanding Chinese dynasties, began in 18th century CE, with the Tai peoples settling in what is now Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. A sericulture tradition and weaving techniques such as ikat were learned from traders on the silk routes.

The Lao-Tai are animist with a strong belief in the afterworld and spirits that reside in the natural environment. Prior to the founding of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, a woman's ethnic group, village, class and marital status could be deduced from her skirt (sinh). Motifs reflected earlier cultures, Buddhist or animist beliefs, legends and cultural practices. Specific motifs of ancestor spirits include nagas, sihos and other mythological beings from traditional Lao epics, along with symbols of nature. Tube skirts and shoulder cloths are the primary vehicle for woven ikat patterns, used in both daily life for protection, and in ceremonies for healing, appeasing, or honoring the various spirits.

Shapes such as the diamond, 'lantern', are used in shoulder cloths or funeral cloths, and may be a visual 'container' for other motifs. The crab image is used as a wish for an abundant harvest, while the snake is seen as a fertility symbol, and also is associated with the underworld.

Even though Laos is going through a period of rapid change, textile traditions remain strong. As Buddhism is increasingly popular, animism is looked upon as old-fashioned; yet, the weaving tradition is handed from generation to generation, so the motifs endure.

Ock Pop Tok, A Program of Textile Revitalization in Laos

Veomane Doungdala, from Luang Prabang, Laos and Joanna Smith, from Britain, co-founded Ock Pop Tok, an innovative textile gallery and workshop in Luang Prabang, in 2000. Ock Pop Tok, the Lao translation for 'East meets West', works to empower Lao artisans through the use of their traditional skills. Today, Ock Pop Tok supports over 25 women master weavers. Through their 'Village Weaver Projects', weaving and dyeing skills are re-introduced to rural communities, providing sustainable income to around 200 families.

About the Exhibition

Wendy Weiss, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Dr. Anjali Karolia, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara, have curated this presentation of traditional single and double ikat from India, including documentation of warp and weft ikat preparation.

Mr. Vaghela G.Vithalbh of Somasar, Surrendranagar, Gujarat will demonstrate tie binding in October.

Jill Heppenheimer, of Santa Fe Weaving Gallery, together with Joanna Smith, cofounder and co-director of Ock Pop Tok ('East Meets West'), a weaving studio in Luang Prabang, Laos have curated the Lao portion of this exhibition of contemporary and traditional tribal apparel, drawing upon centuries-old motifs.

A small number of other ikats from Asia have been included in this exhibition to provide a visual survey of the global context for ikat.

All the textiles exhibited are in private collections

Exhibition support from the Lentz Foundation and the College of Education and Human Sciences International Seed Grant

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