The American Market For Indian Textiles, 1785-1820: In The Twilight Of Traditional Cloth Manufacture

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borne in mind that few merchants were also calico printers, and more work needs to be done to establish the connections between the two. Similarly, in the nineteenth century, most of the extant correspondence in United States sources must be with 'Shipping houses' and commission agents; direct connections between American importers and British manufacturers were the exception. However any such records must be of unusual interest.

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THE AMERICAN MARKET FOR INDIAN TEXTILES, 1785-1820:
IN THE TWILIGHT OF TRADITIONAL CLOTH MANUFACTURE

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A brisk trade in Indian cloth developed soon after the end of the American War of Independence in 1783 and continued to flourish until Congress enacted a prohibitive tariff in 1816 to protect the nascent U.S. textile manufacturing industry. For the period 1795-1805, U.S. trade with India well exceeded trade with all European nations combined for all commodities (Furber 1938:258). Cloth was the centerpiece of this trade: The piece goods imported in 1804-05, for instance, were about three times the value of all other goods from India, chiefly sugar, indigo, ginger, and a variety of spices and drugs (Bhagat 1970:42). Ironically, this trade was doomed before it began by the rapid growth and spread of the industrial revolution. After centuries of supplying the world with cotton textiles (and to a lesser extent, silk textiles), India was soon to become an importer of cloth manufactured in the West.

The purposes of this paper are to establish that there was a distinct American market for Indian textiles, to identify the varieties of cloth exported for the American market, and to sketch American resources for further study.

THE AMERICAN MARKET

For the heyday of the U.S.-India trade, from 1785 to about 1820, there is a tremendous amount of documentary evidence. But because the trade was carried on by a large number of independent businessmen rather than a single trading company, as was the practice in Europe, these materials lie scattered in private collections, historical societies, archives and museums. From these sources the development of a distinct American market for textiles can be discerned.

As early as the 1790s, there were Indian merchants specializing in the American trade. In 1806 Nasserwanjee Manackjee Wadia in Bombay, for example, was known as an agent for the American and French trades (George Nichols nd:34). In Calcutta, where Americans did most of their business, Ram Dulal Dey became such a valued expert that in 1801 more than thirty of his American clients presented him with a life-size portrait of George Washington.

A comment in the 1803-04 journal of Dudley Pickman, a prominent Salem merchant, indicates that the American market may even have had two segments. In describing the Calcutta firm of Durgapersaud and Kallusunker Ghose, he wrote that they "do some Southern (U.S.) business and more Northern business..." (Peabody Museum of Salem: Pickman Journal). Boston
merchant Henry Lee in an 1817 letter to members of his firm in Calcutta supports this conclusion, distinguishing among the Indian agents used by Northerners and Southerners: "The Southern ships will go to Ramshander Metie and Duggo Pesaud" (Porter 1937:1267).

There was a complexity to the American market beyond the distinction between the northern and southern states. Much of what was purchased by Americans was not for home consumption but was meant to be re-exported, primarily to Africa and to European colonies with slave economies in the Caribbean and South America, but also to Europe. For example, Henry Lee's business was very much involved in supplying coarse, brightly colored cottons that were wanted for the African trade in slaves, ivory, and gold and to clothe slaves in the New World. During the Napoleonic wars in Europe, Americans were neutral traders and flourished by supplying Indian cottons to continental Europe (Porter 1937:1174).

As American merchants became knowledgeable about the varieties of Indian cloth and the demand for them, the American market differentiated from the European markets. In 1810, advice sent by the Lee firm in Boston to its representatives in Calcutta already presumed a distinct American market. Because a large number of American ships were arriving, buyers were directed to look for different kinds of textiles to avoid an overstock of staple articles: "Buy as many of these kinds of Goods that are not sought for the Americans or that they have not time to collect... such as goods "for the Persian or some other Asiatic Market and also for the use of the natives of India" (Porter 1937:876-77). Again, in an 1815 letter discussing checks and custers, Henry Lee of Boston commended: 'The Americans are the only buyers of these two and many other manufactures" (Porter 1937:1136). Lee expanded on this theme in a comparison of East India Company goods and those purchased for the American market when he wrote that he would send a "printed Catalogue of the last sale of the Company's goods but you [his New York correspondent] would not understand it. The qualities and dimensions differ so much from our goods that it is not easy to make a comparison..." (Porter 1937:1001).

The demands of the American market were evidently strong enough to have an effect not only on cargoes selected, but on textile production itself. In 1810, Henry Lee noted that "Emeries formerly came 28 X 2: we presume they now make them wider because wide goods of late years have been more in demand among the Americans" (Porter 1937:892-93). American merchants resident in India often commissioned products for their market. In 1807 Andrew Cabot stayed in Calcutta to gather cargo and himself ordered the printing of cloth to Henry Lee's specifications.

Indian white cotton goods, before the establishment of the textile industry in the United States in the 1820s, were the staple textiles for domestic use in
America for “sheeting” and “shirting” fabrics. Examples of these white goods are extremely difficult to identify in museum collections; there is nothing obviously “Indian” about them. It is very likely, however, that a great many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cotton textiles in American museum collections are Indian.

So far only one example of named samples of white goods has been found: a 1796 letter from Benjamin Pickman of Salem to Israel Thorndike of Beverly with six samples giving dimensions and prices of Oud Cossah, Marath Sanna, Marath Gany, Manulkpore Gurrah, Jannah Cossah, and Laquire (Beverly Historical Society Archive) [Fig. 2]. Often white goods were dyed before export, especially for the example, brown gurrah or blue guineas. One sample of a blue guinea, made in South India for the African trade, has been preserved in an 1809 letter to Henry Lee (Massachusetts Historical Society: Lee Papers) [Fig. 3]. The swatch is of a coarse cloth dyed a dark blue. The desired shade is described in the letter as copper blue, like the throat of a pigeon.

Second to white cotton goods in quantities imported were large square cloths, invoiced as “handkerchiefs,” and popular as neckcloths, headcoverings, and bundle wrappers. Some of these seem to have been cotton, such as blue gilla handkerchiefs, but most were silk. The most common of the silk handkerchiefs, called “bandannas,” had floral designs printed on thin twilled silks in reds, yellows, and chocolate browns with black outlining (such as this example probably imported in the middle of the nineteenth century, Peabody Museum of Salem Collection) [Fig. 11]. Other types of handkerchiefs, so far known only by name from merchants’ letters, are romals, especially choppa romals, also known as flag handkerchiefs, sooty romals, lungee handkerchiefs, and real and mock pulicat handkerchiefs.

Of the pure silk textiles, “taffatties,” plain weaves in many colors and stripes, are the most frequently mentioned. A letter in the Peabody Museum archive written in about 1790 includes five taffatie swatches (Peabody Museum of Salem: Crowninshield Papers) [Fig. 12]. These swatches show the delicate variations in coloring achieved for the American market. Cora cloth, the thin silk on which bandannas were printed, was also imported and popular as a lining material. Indian silks competed with Chinese and Italian silks and were most in demand when the latter were scarce. Mixed silk and cotton textiles, especially seersuckers, ginghams, and custers, were also common as furnishing fabrics and for men’s and women’s clothing. A remnant of a bolt of gray and white seersucker imported to Salem in 1800 is preserved at Stratford Hall in Virginia.

Kashmir shawls were the only woollen textile import. Although shawls were never imported in great quantity, they were a luxury garment much coveted by American women from the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, Americans called these garments “camel’s hair shawls,” for they did not know what sort of animal the wool came from. Moorcroft’s classic study of Kashmir shawl production was not published until 1823.

A shawl at the Essex Institute in Salem, thought to be the first imported into the United States, was owned by Elizabeth Clarke who died in 1810 [Fig. 13]. It was purchased for the then-enormous sum of sixty dollars. Mrs. Clarke embroidered her name in the corner near one of the very awkward bows attempted by the weaver to please his western clientele. Though badly moth eaten now, the shawl is very fine pashmina and must have been quite beautiful in 1800. Another shawl with a well-documented history, now in the collection of the Essex Institute, was given in 1801 by Nassarwanjee Manackjee Wadia of Bombay to George Nichols of Salem for his wife [Fig. 14]. Ironically, as the popularity of the shawls increased in the nineteenth century, the textile trade itself was declining.

THE IMPACT OF THE AMERICAN MARKET FOR INDIAN TEXTILES

The American market, both for home consumption and re-export, provided one of the last major outlets for Indian handmade cloth in a world economy
soon to be dominated by mill-made textiles. Between 1785 and 1820 a very
significant proportion of the cloth used in the United States was handspun,
handwoven, dyed, printed, and painted in India. Americans wore Indian
cotton and silk clothing, and they furnished their homes with Indian cloth.
American merchants brought Indian cloth to the plantations of the South
and the Caribbean and to South America; they supplied Indian cottons that
were traded for slaves in Africa; and they provided Europe with staple cotton
textiles from India. The demand for Indian textiles both at home and abroad
helped create a wealthy mercantile class in the new United States. Ironically,
wealth that was created by this trade in Indian textiles was used to build
domestic textile manufactures (and accompanying banking and railroad
industries), and the duties levied to protect these new industries caused the
decline of the trade in textiles from India.

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When Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Louis XIV’s minister for finance and economic affairs, said: “Fashion is to France what gold mines are to the Spaniards,” (quoted by Minchinton 1977,112) he recognized how significant the manufactory of fashionable luxury textiles was for the economy of France. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century many absolutist rulers of Europe who pursued mercantilist policies fostered the production and trade of expensive textiles.

Tremendous resources went into the making of woven silks, lace, tapestries, fine embroideries and table linens. The best designers and craftsmen were employed who used the most valued materials, such as silk, precious metals and stone. Textiles, as they appear in painting and surviving pieces, are to a considerable degree responsible for our notion of the seventeenth and eighteenth century as an era of extravagant luxury and splendor. A study of the interrelationship of luxury textiles and the theories and policies of mercantilism will provide the historical background necessary to understand why this period created textiles of extraordinary artistic and technical quality.

Although the usefulness of the term mercantilism has been questioned by some (De Vries 1976,236 and Blaich 1973,1-10), in the context of this paper the following widely used definition is still helpful. Here the term mercantilism refers to economic theories and policies which European countries applied to different degrees and at various periods during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Implementing mercantilist policies governments forcefully intervened in economic processes in order to expand national income and to use economic power for political ends (Minchinton 1969,vii and De Vries 1976,236–237). Striving for a positive trade balance rulers sought to accumulate monetary wealth which they regarded the key to political power. For the first time governments extensively and systematically used protectionist measures to increase the production and trade of goods. They granted generous financial support and privileges to new enterprises, controlled the quality of goods through industry regulations, and tried to ward off the import of competing foreign goods through high custom duties.

Luxury textiles received particular attention even though they formed only a small part of the entire textile production, the leading economic sector in Europe