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Imperial versus local perceptions of Indian textiles

Donald Clay Johnson

The 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition in London brought together arts and crafts from around the world particularly those produced in the British empire. The great popularity of the exhibition documented how much people in Britain delighted in seeing the huge diversity of artistic expression from around the world. The following decades witnessed similar exhibitions in various European cities as well as contained the growth and development of museums. While Indian textiles had long fascinated people in Britain and had been eagerly purchased, museum holdings in both India and Britain of these distinctive fabrics have remained minimal.

British collecting activities and resulting museum collections of textiles from India thus present an excellent example of global perspectives between an imperial power, Great Britain, and India, a colony within the vast British Empire. Given the great diversity and artistic expression of Indian textiles it is strange museums overwhelmingly confine their displays to an extremely limited variety of textile types. Magnificent as these works are, they do not represent the depth and variety of Indian textile artistic expression. Most unfortunately both British as well as Indian museum collections of Indian textiles never evolved from the time of their original collecting activities and thus rigidly preserve a tradition or canon of a century and a half ago based on the concerns and interests of a handful of collectors and museum officials.

Take the case of embroidery in India. Recognized as one of the finest artistic expressions of numerous communities, embroidery has long been largely ignored in both British as well as Indian museums. Three examples point out this non-inclusion of distinctive embroidery in museums. First, the small but influential Parsi community initially rose to prominence building ships for the East India Company. Subsequently the Parsis engaged in trade and successfully competed with the British in the cotton and opium trade to China. While in China the Parsis observed distinctive embroidery techniques that so impressed them they brought Chinese embroiderers to India to teach their distinctive techniques to Indians. The transition from Chinese to Indian embroiderers within this tradition resulted in motifs and expressions suitably adapted to Indian cultural aesthetics and sensibilities. Embroidered works produced in China, for instance, contained pagodas, a motif that disappeared in works produced in India.
Another theme of Chinese embroidery discarded upon being culturally adapted to India was the scholar riding a deer.

Birds appear in works produced in both China and India but the portrayed birds quickly changed. For instance, roosters, a bird commonly shown in Chinese embroidery were transformed into peacocks, a bird that has long been a theme in Indian art.
Fascinating as the embroidery for the Parsi community is, particularly for its documentation of a transition from Chinese to Indian themes, one will not find any of it on exhibit in any British or Indian museum. In fact, if you consult any of the books produced by the noted textile scholar
and former Victoria and Albert Museum curator, Rosemary Crill, you will not find discussion of a single Parsi embroidery.

A second type of embroidery in India reflects a desire to show economic status through the extensive use of gold or silver thread. The ijar shown here is a women’s lower garment traditionally worn by both Muslim and Parsi women.

![Figure 5. Silk ijar with zardozi metallic embroidery. Photograph by author.](image)

Zardozi, the elaborate workmanship incorporates metallic threads in a tambour technique of exquisite detail done by selected Muslim communities. Using an awl or tambour one or several male embroiderers works at a fixed frame incorporating numerous metallic threads, sequins, and specially made gold or silver objects to produce the stunning motifs.
The great use of gold and silver threads naturally resulted in the desire to show as much of the valuable threads as possible. Thus, it often happened the valuable gold or silver thread was placed on a piece of cloth and a couching stitch used to stabilize or anchor it to the cloth.
Such artistic creativity however was totally passed over by those assembling museum collections and even after India became independent, no systematic effort has been made to acquire and exhibit these unique and distinctive textile expressions.

These two embroidery examples for distinctive communities in India raise the question as to why such examples were not collected in India. The Parsis certainly actively interacted with the British in India. But the interaction was commercial which meant they were considered boxwallahs and beyond the pale of administrators responsible for the formation of museums. In contrast the example of the tambour work it was made for elite women who lived in seclusion. Thus Europeans in India never saw such embroidery as they never met the women who wore it. Elite women who were in seclusion had no opportunity to interact with any men other than their close relatives. Thus only close family members ever saw their elaborate clothing.

Other barriers also prevented westerners from seeing the diversity of textile techniques and expression. For instance, textiles associated with religious rites often were elaborately made, but foreigners seldom saw them as most Hindu temples totally banned non Hindus. Consequently, only members of the religious community saw the fabrics used in temple rites.

Although everyone in this room has an interest in textiles, one has to remember in a colonial setting of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century it would have been a most remarkable British administrator who understood or appreciated Indian textiles. British taste and fashion in India during this time period slavishly followed trends in London even to the extent of dressing formally for dinner, even if one were in the middle of the jungle. The few individuals who developed an interest in Indian textiles were extremely rare but certainly nonexistent. One thinks, for instance of Dr. George Bidie who became interested in dyes and dyeing and collected examples in south India for the Madras Government Museum.

One wonders, thus, what was the reaction throughout the various administrative offices in India when the Viceroy’s office issued calls for examples of India’s arts and crafts. Most district officials had no idea of the distinctive art works produced within their administrative jurisdictions and certainly did not unduly bother themselves searching out things to be sent to the Viceroy. Princely India saved the proverbial day when such calls were made, thanks to elaborate court rituals that included the formal exchange of gifts between ruler and members of his or her court. The British established the office of resident in the various princely states. The resident functioned as a conduit between the princely court and the Government of India. Part of the resident’s responsibilities included attending formal court rituals which thus provided the opportunity to see the elaborate textiles typically exchanged in such functions. Such rituals at times included the British Resident in the exchange of gifts. Fearing the possibility of bribery or corruption the Government of India had strict rules against staff acceptance of elaborate gifts, thus the gifts given to residents went into a central gift office known as the Toshakhana, a special government treasury for the receipt and disbursement of presents. The works sent to the Toshakhana subsequently were either given as presents to Indians in a type of recycling or auctioned off and the proceeds used to purchase suitable works to be given at ritual occasions. The central repository of gifts from princely India with its rich holdings of notable Indian art undoubtedly identified and provided examples when museums began to evolve in India and
Britain. After a century and a half, however, of displaying such courtly examples it is time to re-evaluate textile expression in India and enrich museums with techniques overlooked earlier.

The ability to undertake such re-evaluations in fact only became possible in the twenty first century, thanks to surveys such as those of Aditi Ranjan and Jaya Jaitley who began to document India’s arts and crafts systematically. Such surveys bring to light a third overlooked important genre of textile expression. Embroidery is one of the few ways village women are able to express themselves aesthetically and their clothing often reflects this. Children’s clothing in particular often reflects a concern of a mother to produce a work of art for her child. Such works were worn in public but since many of the communities were common laborers and not seen in formal settings, their artistic expressions were totally passed over by those Europeans who saw them. This hood for an Ahir child from an agricultural community of north India shows the great effort made by its mother in making it. Although worn in public as protection from the Indian sun, it also served as an identity marker for the community.

![Figure 8. Ahir child’s embroidered hood. Photograph by author.](image-url)

Such hats, since they identified distinctive ethnic groups had great variation as this Muslim hat shows.
In conclusion, let me first thank the University of Minnesota Retirees Association and the University of Minnesota Graduate School for financial support to assist my research. Second, this brief discussion of three distinctive embroidery types in India, points out perceptions of nineteenth century British collectors of materials for museums in both India and Europe overlooked important textiles, which were valued and appreciated by Indians for their cultural
significance. Let us hope before it is too late and such works no longer are available, that museums will collect and display them.

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