

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Textile Society of America Symposium
Proceedings

Textile Society of America

1990

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

Susan S. Bean

Peabody Museum of Salem

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Bean, Susan S., "The American Market For Indian Textiles, 1785-1820: In The Twilight Of Traditional Cloth Manufacture" (1990). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 595.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/595>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Textile Society of America at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

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

Susan S. Bean
Peabody Museum of Salem

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 Kallisunker 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 Ramduloll few to Ruggo Ram - the Salem and Boston 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 commented: "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 "Emerties 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 TEXTILES FOR AMERICA

Information in merchants' papers, newspaper advertisements of the period, and collections in historical societies and museums permit a preliminary view of the range and types of Indian cloth that were provided for the American market.

The enumeration of cloth types in American merchants' letters is very detailed. Henry Lee's correspondence, for example, contains references to more than fifty kinds of Indian textiles, and many of these were differentiated further according to the place of manufacture. The merchants, of course, had a deeper knowledge of this vast array of textiles than did the buying public. Newspaper advertisements in issues of the Salem Gazette in the years around 1800 show that often, especially in shorter advertisements, Indian textiles were simply included under the general rubric: "India Goods" (which at that period could also include products of China and Southeast Asia). But many advertisements included lists of Indian terms such as bafta, gurrah, mamoody, and bandanna as well as names of the towns, including Alliabab, Dacca, Gaureypore, etc., where the cloths were made [Fig. 1]. Many American consumers must have been familiar with Indian cloth types and the reputations of various weaving centers.

The terminology used to identify the cloths on the market must be treated with caution. The meaning of terms often changed over time. For example, in the seventeenth century baftas had been cottons from Gujarat; in the American period, baftas were white goods from Bengal. More interestingly, merchants used cloth names as marketing devices. The Lee firm wrote in 1810 to their representatives in Calcutta: "Do not invoice these goods by the name of Meergungee, but call them Shazard poer, Tilpah or some other name. The buyers are sick of the sound of Meergungee and it really affects the value of the article." Further, he warned: "There are ten different kinds or more of narrow and coarse mamoodies which go sometimes by one name and sometimes another." (Evidently Indian merchants played this name game, too.) They also directed, when buying emerties: "We would have you divide into two parts the longest ones and invoice by some other name." In sum: "We would have you pay no regard to names but only quality and dimensions" (Porter 1937:891).

Of all the textiles exported to America, white cotton goods were by far the most common, although printed and dyed cottons, silk goods, especially handkerchiefs, mixed silk and cotton goods, and woollen shawls were also important. Textiles containing silk and wool, which were exempt from the high tariff levied in 1816, took on a new significance in the later years of the trade. In India Bengal was the primary source; Madras, secondary; and all other places, only incidental.

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 Gangy, Manuikpore Gurrah, Jannah Cossah, and Laquire (Beverly Historical Society Archive) [Fig. 2]. Often white goods were dyed before export, especially for the African trade, for 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.

Sometimes American merchants purchased printed cloth, and occasionally they commissioned the printing of cloth in India or they exported white goods for printing in America. An example of "figured bafta" (or chintz) in red and brown on a white ground, ca. 1800, is preserved in a scrapbook at the Winterthur Museum Library [Fig. 4]. Examples of finely painted and resist dyed chintz palampores made on the Coromandel coast are much easier to find: The quilted palampore purchased by a Salem captain in Russia in 1820 (New England Historic Genealogical Society Collection) [Fig. 5], the palampore imported by Captain Hodges of Salem in the last quarter of the eighteenth century (Salem Maritime National Historic Site) [Fig. 6], and the Coromandel palampore imported to Salem by William Dean Waters early in the nineteenth century (Essex Institute Collection) [Fig. 7] are just three examples.

The finest Indian cottons, known as muslin or mull, were imported in smaller quantities for the luxury market. Muslins were very fashionable through the 1820s and continued to be in demand after the market in staple cottons had collapsed. One example in the collection of the Essex Institute in Salem was imported before 1800 [Fig. 8]: The dress, with as complete a history as one could hope for, was made of striped figured muslin purchased by George Nichols in 1800 from Nasserwanjee Manackjee Wadia in Bombay for five dollars a yard. Nichols's bride used the cloth for her wedding dress in 1801, and in 1824 it was made over as a party dress for her daughter. Other similar dresses include an elaborately embroidered white mull dress worn between 1800 and 1810 by Martha Endicott Peabody of Salem (Essex Institute Collection) [Fig. 9] and a reception dress and shawl of muslin decorated with silver worn in Salem in 1824 by Sarah Derby Rogers [Fig. 10].

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, "taffaties," 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. Moorecroft'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 Nasserwanjee 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 created 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.

REFERENCES

- Aspin, Chris
1981 The Cotton Industry.
Bucks, U.K.: Shire
- Bhagat, G.
1970 Americans in India, 1784-1860.
New York: New York University Press.
- Furber, Holden
1938 "The Beginnings of American Trade with India, 1784-1812,"
The New England Quarterly XI:235-65.
- Montgomery, Florence
1984 Textiles in America, 1650-1870.
New York: Norton.
- Nichols, George
n.d. George Nichols: Salem Ship Master and Merchant.
Salem, Mass.: The Salem Press.
- Pickman, Dudley
1804ms. Journal. Peabody Museum of Salem, Archive.
- Porter, Kenneth
1937 The Jacksons and the Lees.
Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

India Goods!

On MONDAY next (21st inst.) at 10 o'clock A. M. will commence at Store, No. 13. Long Wharf, Boston, the Public Auction of the CARGO of the Ship RECOVERY, lately arrived from CALCUTTA, consisting of the following Articles.

—viz.—

TWO hundred and fifty bales of Cotton and Silk GOODS—consisting of Hurripaul Muslin Handkerchiefs, Stanupoon do.
Coolie Jorah Muslin,
Crundacoonah Noyancook Muslin,
Illiabab, Jallapoor, & Marah SANNAHS,
Kempoor, Chittabally, Boran, Jugada, Patrah BASTAS,
Tandah, Malmedy, Canpoor COSSOES,
Bearboom and Patna CURRAHS,
Emmerties, Jorah, Hammums,
Jalapoor Malmedy, Gingham,
Chintz of various qualities,
Bandanoes, Chopper Romals, black and corded Taffatics,
Falicate and mock Falicate Handkerchiefs,
Crimage Romals,
Long Cloths, Bullocks Hides,
Goat and sheep Skins,
2000 pair Shoes, &c. &c.

Aids at the same time and place,
(If not previously sold at private sale.)
1000 bags Sugar, 289 bags Ginger;
700 bags Pepper.

£ Approved Notes, payable in 60 and 120 days, will be received of purchasers, to the amount of 4000 dollars and upwards; at 60 and 90 days, of purchasers to the amount of 2000 dollars; 60 days of purchasers to the amount of 1000 dollars, and Cash will be expected of those who purchase to a less amount.

SAMUEL BRADFORD, Auctioneer.
No. 52, State-Street. March 9.

Fig. 1

Manick, bone Corral
30 by 1 1/2 Cubits
was 35 butters, 12 Corral
in water 11/12, 1/2, 1/4

Fig. 2

[illegible]

Fig. 3

A black and white photograph of a square textile sample, likely a rug or tapestry, featuring a complex geometric and floral pattern. The design consists of multiple horizontal bands of repeating motifs, including small squares, diamonds, and stylized floral elements, set against a light background. The pattern is framed by a wide border.

Fig. 4

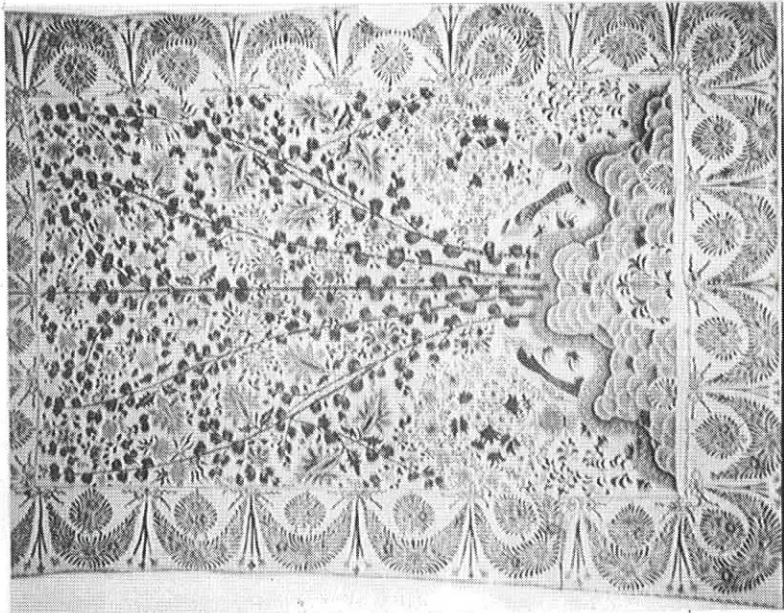


Fig. 5

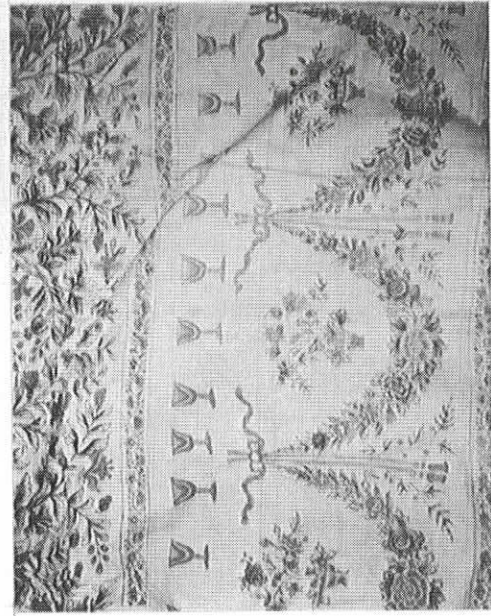


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

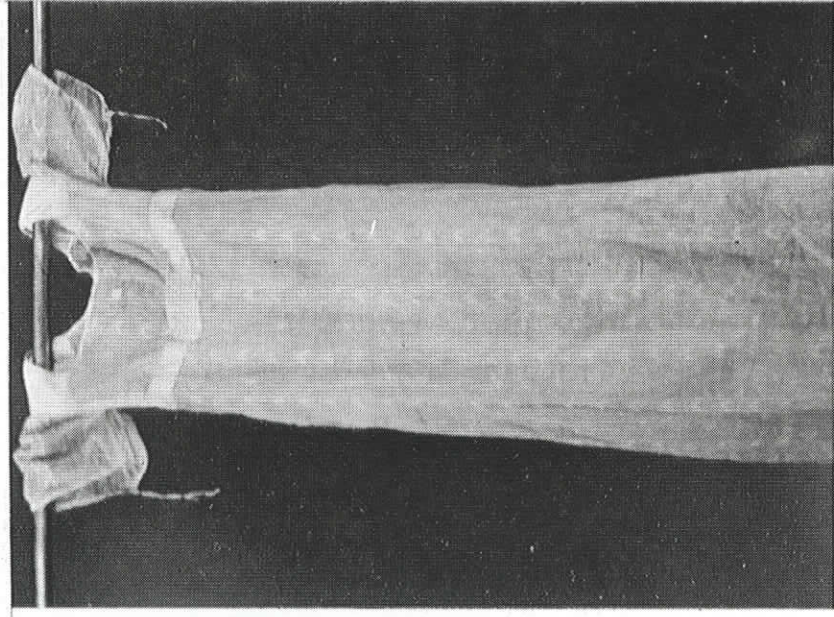


Fig. 8

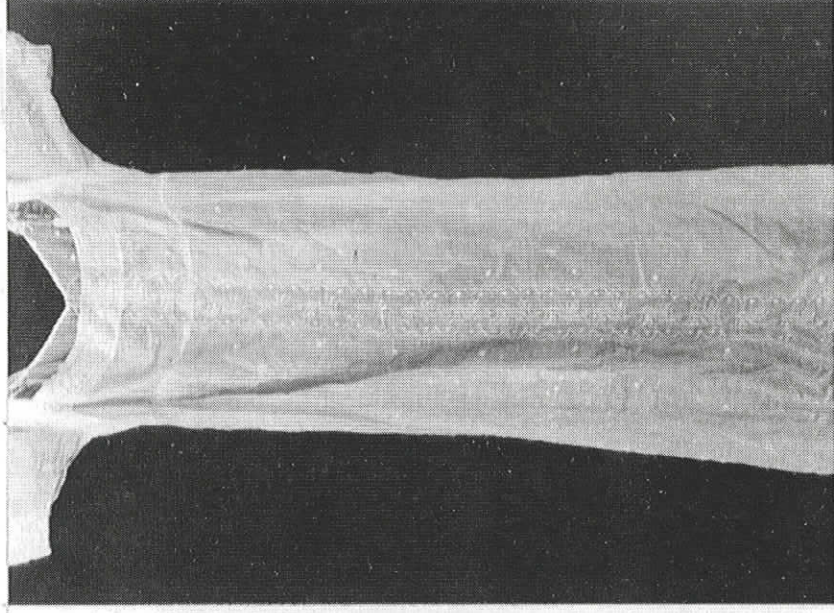


Fig. 9

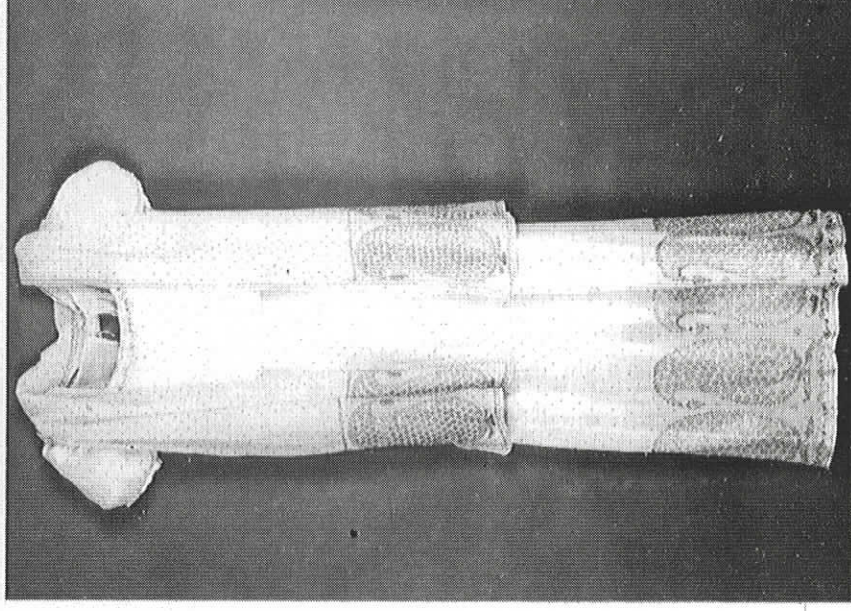


Fig. 10

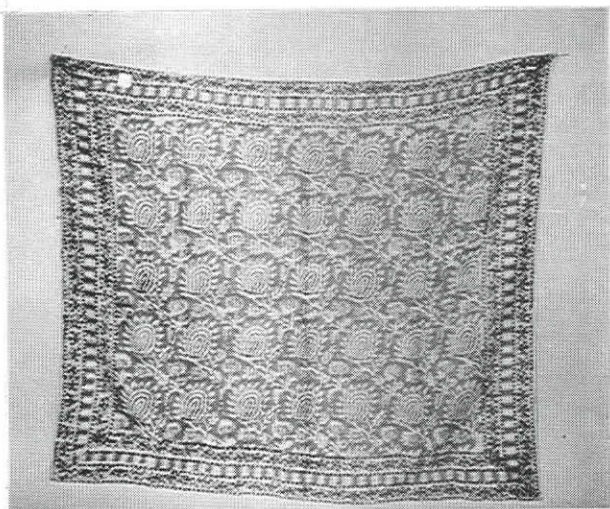


Fig. 11

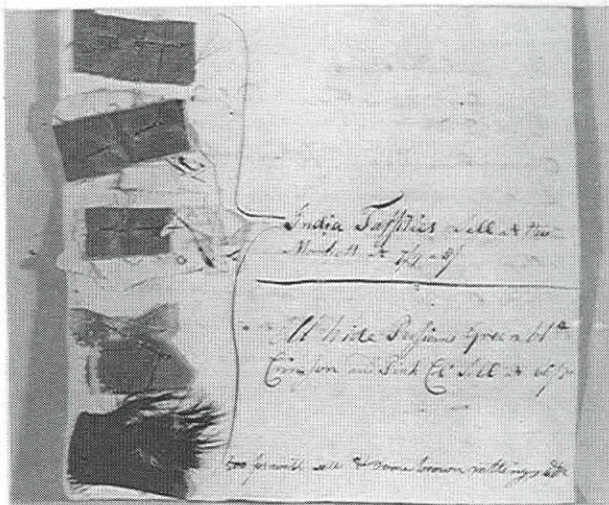


Fig. 12

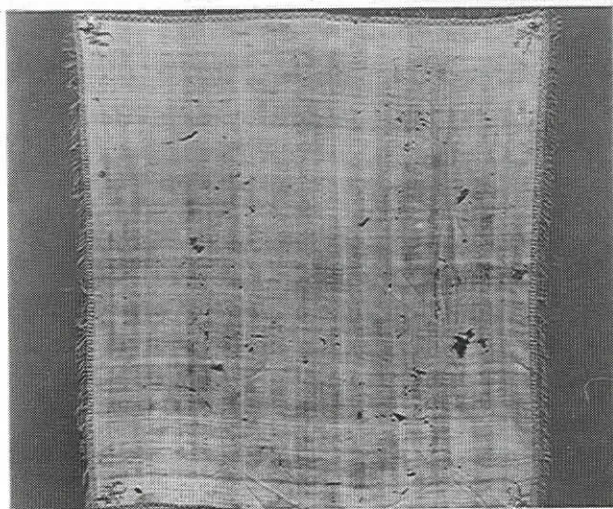


Fig. 13

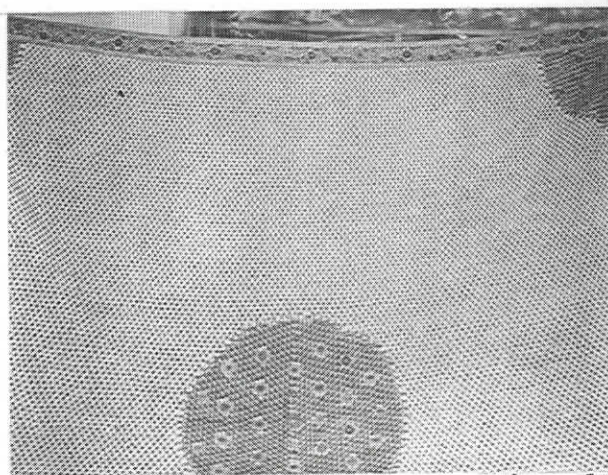


Fig. 14