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Kalamkari or Chintz: An Anglo-Indian Hanging in The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Melinda Watt

Introduction
This paper will present ongoing research on a unique and important eighteenth-century painted cotton hanging now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as theories on the significance of the narrative depicted in the work. The hanging illustrates one or several military conflicts involving European and Indian combatants, presumably on the Indian subcontinent, and was very likely commissioned by someone connected with the British East India Company. (Fig. 1)

This hanging was first exhibited when it was on loan to the museum for the exhibition Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800 (on view from September 26, 2016 to January 5, 2014). The museum was able to acquire this textile in 2014, and in the spirit of that collaborative exhibition, the author would like, first and foremost, to acknowledge contributors to this research. The hanging is now the responsibility of the European Sculpture and Decorative Arts department because the Met divides the textile collections in departments by culture and period, and a decision was made that the textile should reside in the department responsible for culture for which it was presumably created. However, the acquisition was proposed by the Interwoven Globe curatorial team, which was comprised of contributors from five departments within the Museum, and we were very clear that the most important fact was that the museum pursue this acquisition, not which department acquired it. By it’s “hybrid” nature, the object could reasonably reside in a number of places within our curatorial structure. The catalogue entry for Interwoven Globe was authored by John Guy¹; this paper expands his research and introduces the possibility of a broader reading of the narrative but makes no claims to being conclusive.

The key contributors to this research are as follows: the Interwoven Globe curatorial team: Amelia Peck (who conceived the project and served as lead curator), Amy Bogansky, Joyce Denney, John Guy, Elena Phipps, Marika Sardar, and Kristen Stewart; other colleagues at The Metropolitan Museum of Art including Sheila Canby, Christine Giuntini, Navina Haidar, Donald LaRocca, Stuart Phyrr, Pierre Terjanian; former Met research fellows Sylvia Houghteling, Rachel Parikh, and Liza Oliver; Titi Halle, owner of Cora Ginsburg LLC; Ellen Smart, independent researcher; Amy Miller, former curator, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; Kirsten Toftegaard, curator, Designmuseum Danmark, Copenhagen; Sjoukje Colenbrander, independent researcher, Amsterdam; and Rosemary Crill, former curator, Victoria and Albert Museum.²

² Any errors presented in this paper are the sole responsibility of the present author.
Fig. 1: Hanging depicting a military conflict in Southern India, mid-18th century (before 1763), southeastern India, painted cotton, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Purchase, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund and Louis V. Bell Fund; Larry and Ann Burns and Brett and Sara Burns Gifts, in honor of Austin B. Chinn; and Austin B. Chinn and Joseph Conforti and Douglas Jakubowski, Gifts, 2014 (2014.88)
Physical characteristics and usage

We can assume that the purpose of this painted cotton cloth as a hanging within an interior space – the directional nature and size indicate this. But the meaning is less certain: was it a piece of propaganda, a commemoration of a specific event, or a celebration of victory? Is it a unique, stand-alone work, or part of a larger iconographical program?

The physical characteristics are as follows: the hanging measures 116” high (9 ½ feet) by 103 ¾” wide (maximum dimensions in both directions). We believe that it’s missing approximately six to eight inches at the top, which would complete the sea and sky above the ships, and the floral border that appears on the other three sides. By way of comparison, this is within the range of painted cotton tree-of-life palampores made for the western European market. Measurements of examples in the Met’s collection range from 107 to 122 inches high, but narrower than the present hanging, with widths ranging from 82 to 91 inches wide. These palampores are often made from a single, very wide, piece of cloth. However, the hanging is pieced; to quote the conservator’s report: “The hanging is constructed from four lengths of fine hand-spun and hand-woven plain-weave cotton fabric.”

Two central panels are each about 41 ½ in. wide, the right panel is about 7 ½ in. wide and the left panel is about 4 ½ in. wide.

The colors are remarkably well-preserved, suggesting that this hanging has been displayed only for a limited period since its creation. The technique is that which we see in other painted cottons: a combination of painted mordants, dyeing, applied resists and a limited amount of directly applied color (yellow).

A United East India Company (EIC) mark appears in the lower left corner on the back of the hanging. (Fig. 2) Variations on this stamp are known to have been used on textiles made for the British East India Company throughout most of the 18th century and is therefore of limited importance in terms of dating the piece. What is does make clear is the fact that, despite inaccuracies in the rendering of details such as the British Union Flag and the British royal coat-of-arms, this was almost certainly conceived and made for a British client.

3 Christine Giuntini, Conservator, Metropolitan Museum of Art, report dated August 30, 2013.
A brief summary of the broader context in which this work was created is necessary for an understanding of the reasons why such a hanging might have been created. From the first arrival of a Portuguese fleet in 1498 on the western Indian coast, European powers vied for sea access to, and control over, the rich resources of the subcontinent, as well as its position in the increasingly global maritime trading world.\(^4\) Any European country with aspirations to economic power beyond its own borders tried to establish a so-called “East India Company” to facilitate direct access to southern and East Asian trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The English and Dutch organizations were by far the most prosperous, but the French company, despite have less success along the Coromandel Coast of India—source of most painted cottons—was a thorn in the side of the British EIC.

One result of this inter-European competition was that during the middle of the 18\(^{th}\) century there was a series of conflicts in India, known locally as the Carnatic Wars. The First Carnatic War (1746-48) was essentially the South Indian stage for the War of Austrian Succession taking place in Europe. The Second Carnatic War (1749-54) did not have a corollary in Continental Europe, it was a conflict between British and French interests, which included each nations’ local allies. But perhaps most significantly for the purposes of this paper, is the Third Carnatic War (1756-63). This was the South Indian stage for what was known in Europe as the Seven Years War, and in North America as the French and Indian War. Two battles are particularly notable during the Third Carnatic War: the siege of Plassey of 1757, for which Major-General Robert Clive (1725-74) became famous, and the British taking of Pondicherry in 1761, led be Lieutenant-General

\(^4\) See Peck et al, *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800*, especially John Guy, “‘One Thing Leads to Another’: Indian Textiles and the Early Globalization of Style,” pp.12-27; Marika Sardar, “Silk along the Seas: Ottoman Turkey and Safavid Iran in the Global Textile Market,” pp. 66-81; and Melinda Watt, “‘Whims and Fancies’: Europeans Respond to Textiles from the East,” pp. 82-103. The *Interwoven Globe* team owes a great debt to our predecessors in the field, who we hope are fully and properly acknowledged in our publication.
Eyre Coote (1726-83). Both of these have been proposed as subjects of the painted cotton hanging in The Met.

Description of the narrative and major motifs depicted in the hanging
Given this brief historical background, we return to the object itself. The composition is arranged in five major horizontal registers (possibly more, depending on how the action is interpreted); each register depicts a different scene or parade of the combatants active in the conflict between European and local powers on the Indian subcontinent. More than 800 human figures, either individually drawn, or implied by the massing of headgear and weapons in compact groups, appear in the hanging.  

The bottom register (Fig. 3) shows a parade of British soldiers carrying five Union flags, with attendants and allies in Muslim dress. Despite the creative color scheme and additional stripes, I think we can be certain that this flag is meant to be Great Britain’s Union flag. This was adopted in 1606 upon the union with Scotland (the current “Union Jack” dates to 1801 with the addition of Ireland). The drawing seems to indicate that this is taking place in front of their walled fortification, with cannon at the ready above them. On the far right behind the lead figure on the largest horse, is a more complicated wall or door, and a roughly drawn interpretation of the British royal arms, indicated by the lion and the unicorn who flank the shield carrying the arms.

![Fig. 3 Detail of Hanging depicting a military conflict in Southern India, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (2014.88)](image)

In the second register (Fig. 4), Muslim and Hindu soldiers, probably allies of the British as they carry a Union Flag as well, also in parade formation. In the upper portion a battle is being waged - a siege upon a stationary position, by infantry, mounted soldiers, cannon and elephants. The triangular banners carried appear decorative rather than symbolic.

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5 My sincere thanks goes to Met intern Sandra Holm for undertaking the task of counting and extrapolating a number for the human figures.
The central, or third register (Fig. 5) is perhaps the most obscure: between conflict raging above and below, a vivid blue river flows, around an island dense with foliage and wildlife. Various types of vessels, large and small, appear with fishermen, hunters, animals and fish, and mermaids. This register has most in common with the decorative palampores made for western consumption, where fanciful landscapes sometimes anchor the main motif of a tree—of-life. We’ve speculated as to whether this is a specific place, or if this is a symbol for the seemingly timeless country of India, engulfed in modern conflict.

The fourth register (Fig. 6), where European soldiers appear under a double-headed eagle banner: for me this flag is the most challenging to decipher because of its apparent specificity, and yet it is out of place in the most obvious events we can connect with the composition. The EIC’s main competition in the Indian trade was their Dutch counterparts, the VOC; this symbol has nothing to do with the Dutch at this point. In Europe, of course, it is an emblem of the Habsburg Empire, so a broader reading of the iconography as pertaining to the global conflicts would include a reference to the Austrian Habsburgs. Another possible reference could be to a short-lived East India company venture: the Austrian Imperial Ostend Company, active between 1722 and 31, and which did have bases in India. This would push the dating several decades earlier than we have determined up to now.
Finally, in the top portion of the hanging (Fig. 7), we find one or several battles in progress. The fortress at the top has triangular projections that are typical of both land-based and coastal fortresses of the period. This appears to be a coastal fortress, and to the right of it we finally see the French Compagnie des Indes ships, with their sterns toward the viewer, as if in flight. French Compagnie des Indes flag—a triple fleur-de-lis surmounted by a crown—was adopted 1756, however, these motifs had been used in combination by the French long prior to this date, so we can’t be positive that this provides a terminus post quem. At this point we have to ask whether the European leader on horseback in the center is the same as the one below, or not. They are not wearing identical clothes, nor are the horse trappings the same, but the large scale of this figure compared to the surrounding ones indicates that he might be of the same importance in the narrative.

Fig. 7 Detail of Hanging depicting a military conflict in Southern India, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, (2014.88)

With regard to uniforms worn by the European combatants, military dress expert Amy Miller’s initial impression was that the silhouette of the uniforms pointed to the first Carnatic War, a conflict associated with the War of Austrian Succession (1746-48).6 Because the double-headed eagle is commonly associated with Habsburgs, this could explain the presence of the European Soldiers under a double-headed eagle banner; they were not present on the Indian subcontinent but were part of the large global conflict. The various hand weapons are indicted with some specificity: rifles of the matchlock and flintlock types are both present, these were introduced into India with various European forces as early as the 1520s. A type of punch dagger (katar) known all over the Indian subcontinent, but a shape specific to the southern regions; a sword particular to the Indian subcontinent called a kanja, which is a relatively broad, flat tipped sword, as well as black tipped spears and curved swords.7 There are two types of cannon, and one mortar in the upper left- which had just fired a shell whose trajectory is traced by dotted lines as it is about to hit its target.8 (see Fig. 7 above)

6 Personal communication, 2013
7 I am particularly grateful to Rachel Parikh for her comments on the Indian weapons.
8 Many thanks to The Met’s Arms and Armor department staff for setting me straight about cannon versus mortars.
A Comparison to other monumental painted cotton textiles

In terms of monumental figural designs executed in painted cotton, arguably the best known examples are hangings with architectural features and dating to about 1640-50, one of which is in the Met’s collection.9 This type of hanging with figural decoration appears to have been made for a relatively short period time, probably produced in the Deccan for use in a courtly context. However, they do have characteristics in common with the present work: they are wall decorations combining Indian characters and motifs with European ones. In the eighteenth-century battle hanging, the audience is almost certainly a western one, instead of domestic Indian audience. It has to be said that the quality of drawing in the seventeenth-century work is more fluid, and the decoration is more carefully considered and incorporated into each scene than we find on the 18th century military scene. But both of The Met’s pieces display a striking combination of western concepts of perspective and three dimensionality, alongside the highly detailed filling of flat areas of pattern more commonly associated with the Indian painted cottons for dress and furnishings.

Two eighteenth-century painted cotton textiles in the Karun Thaker collection perhaps come closest to The Met’s hanging in terms of drawing style and composition concept. One is a fragment of a larger work that shows part of what appears to be a Dutch fortress; the second is identified as a ceremonial hanging, with scenes in three registers and the unique depiction of a Dutch East India Company (VOC) coin.10 Neither of these pieces has the range of color seen in The Met’s piece, however.

Possible design sources

To date, not a great deal of progress has been made toward finding precise sources for the motifs the hanging. We assume that, like painted cottons produced by Indian artisans for western markets, sources such as an engravings or an illustrated books would have informed some of the specific European motifs. A collection of contemporary historical narratives and images was very likely employed in constructing the narrative of the composition. One such source is historian Richard Owen Cambridge’s 1761 work, titled An Account of the War in India, between the English and the French, on the Coast of Coromandel from the Year 1750 to the Year 1760. In this history, the author expresses respect for Muslim warriors in particular, illustrating one very close to an equestrian in our hanging, which is likely an illustration based on a Mughal miniature. It is notable that the attention with which both Europeans and Indian soldiers are drawn in the hanging indicates the political reality of the shifting local and global alliances, even if we can’t read it precisely.

It can be argued that the Met’s painted cotton hanging deserves a place in the genre of history painting. However, in mid-eighteenth-century Great Britain, “history painting” was considered a relatively new field, even by the admission of contemporary English critics. Monumental and artistic imagery of current political events was even more unusual. The East India Company

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itself has been called “too commercially orientated to be an enlightened patron of the arts.”

Several of the earliest British works of contemporary narrative political or history painting date from this period, and confront the subject of the expansion of the British Empire. Artist Frances Hayman was commissioned to create decorations for a pavilion at the London “pleasure garden” of Vauxhall and two of these works celebrated victories in India lead by Robert Clive, one of them being this scene depicting the end of the battle of Plassey in 1757. (Fig. 9)

![Image of Lord Robert Clive meeting with Mir Jafir after the Battle of Plassey (1757)](image)

“Lord Robert Clive meeting with Mir Jafir after the Battle of Plassey (1757),” Frances Hayman, ca. 1760, modello for the lost original made for Vauxhall Gardens, National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 5263)

The relative dearth of material can be explained in part by the limited interest among the populace of the British Isles concerning events in India and the Far East. One could argue for a deplorable lack of curiosity on the parts of people who wore chintz and drank tea, but we recognize the same phenomenon today. The overseas conflict uppermost in the minds of the

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British was that with the French and Spanish the Americas. All of which makes the Met’s painted cotton hanging even more compelling as an historical document.

Conclusion
While the British captured Pondicherry in 1760-61, it was returned to the French in 1763, though by then the British had cemented their position as the supreme colonial power in the region. This position was maintained even after the dissolution of the EIC in the nineteenth century, until end of the British Raj in 1947. We presume therefore that a terminus ante quem for this piece in which the French are an adversary is 1763. But whether the hanging depicts a single campaign, functions as an allegory for the Seven Years War, the three Carnatic Wars, or an earlier conflict isn’t certain.

At the Metropolitan Museum, we’ve been calling this the “Bayeux Tapestry of the Seven Years War” for obvious reasons. It’s an appropriate misnomer since the embroidery at Bayeux is no more a “tapestry” than this painted cotton hanging. Like the Bayeux Tapestry, this piece begs the question: “Why a textile”? Why was this imagery preserved in this form? I would suggest that one reason lies in the significance of the international textile trade in the conflicts on the Indian subcontinent. This commission may reflect both an appreciation of the skills of cotton painters, and an attempt to promote this type of textile. In the India office records at the British Library, one can find numerous complaints about the difficulty of securing high quality painted and printed cloth. This object may have been commissioned to prove the EIC administrators in London, for example, that figural drawing, and a wide palette of colors executed at a very high level of skill was still available, in addition to the more sanguine purpose of celebrating the company’s military dominance on the Indian subcontinent.

The invention of this hanging was based on well over a century of an exchange of ideas and motifs between east and west, and the “hybrid” nature of the imagery in this work was, by this time, quite a standard. However, this particular commission displays a greater degree of both specificity on the part of the English, and artistic license on the part of the Indian artisans than we normally see in such textiles.

This paper presents just some of the issues and avenues of research, but can't be considered comprehensive – clear there are many questions that we hope to answer in time. We will display the hanging in the inaugural installation of our renovated British decorative arts galleries scheduled to open in 2019, where it may be identified as a “chintz.” And at some point it will also be displayed in the Islamic Art department’s south Indian gallery, where it will be called a “kalamkari.” Whichever term is used, this is outstanding example of narrative art.