2016

Tracing textiles, motifs and patterns: historical to contemporary

Liz Williamson
Liz.Williamson@unsw.edu.au

Tracing textiles, motifs and patterns: historical to contemporary

Liz Williamson

Email: Liz.Williamson@unsw.edu.au

Introduction

Global trade, design influence and inspiration are central to the history of Indian textiles. Estimates vary but it appears Indian textiles have been traded for over 4500 years. Indian expertise in dyeing, weaving, embroidery, printing has been internationally recognised and sought after in all parts of the globe for centuries – it dominated this global trade with double ikat *patola* traded to Indonesia; Indian chintz's and Kashmiri shawls to Europe. Indian textile production and trade has been well documented by many researchers and in recent exhibitions such as the Fabric of India at the Victorian & Albert Museum, London in 2015.

In the first part of this paper I discuss my research into Fustat[1] fragments, a specific type of textile traded over centuries, fragments of which have survived, been collected, conserved and researched; they are block printed, mordant and resist dyed textiles that were traded between India and the Middle East. The second part of this paper discusses the Cultural Textiles course I conduct in Gujarat, India with students from my university, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) in Sydney, Australia. In summary, one part of this paper involves global trade, textiles existing because of trade; the other references cross cultural influences, translation of ideas, education and exchange.

The enquiry into Fustat fragments began with a purchase of a scarf from Dr Ismail Mohammed Khatri workshop in Ajarakhpur, near Bhuj in the Kutch area of Gujarat in 2014. Sufiyan Khatri, Dr Ismail's son, commented that the design I was purchasing was one of their 'Fustat' pattern.[2] The scarf was printed on fine cotton had a wide border pattern with repeating motifs in the centre field. Purchased originally in a square format, I discussed with Sufiyan commissioning the design being printed onto a series of rectangular silk scarves with natural dyes of indigo, Indian madder and iron. The scarf illustrates the successful translation and expertise in block printing onto fine silk, an adaption from the traditional Ajarkh on cotton for apparel.

I recognised the name Fustat from visits to the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad, Gujarat and their outstanding collection of Indian textiles. The tour guide regularly comments that Fustat textiles are the oldest Indian textiles in existence having been traded from Gujarat and in found in Egypt. She also brings Lothal, an Indus or Harappan (2500 BC to 1500 BC) site south of Ahmedabad into the story as the port where textiles left the region prior to Surat becoming the key trading centre under British rule. So, an interest in Fustat lead to a series of searches, visits, investigations and amazing observations of these intriguing and ancient textiles. This project was assisted by a residency in the UNSW apartment in the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris in 2015 and the opportunity to examine selected Fustat fragments in the Guimet Museum, Paris, the V&A in London and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, UK. This enquiry draws on published research by leading academic and museum curators; in-particular by Ruth Barnes on her

[1] Also known as Fostat or Fostate fragments; for this paper, Fustat spelling has been used.
[2] Conversation with Sufiyan Khatri, Ajarakhpur, Kutch, Gujarat, India in February 2014.

outstanding research documenting fragments in the Newbury Collection at the Ashmolean Museum; and publications by John Guy 1998: Noorjehan Bilgrami 1998; Eiluned Edwards 2014 and 2016; and Tapi exhibition catalogues from 2002 and 2005, plus others.[3]

Fustat fragments

The Fustat fragments are a group of Indian textiles excavated from various sites in the Middle East in the early 1900's that take their name from one site, Fustat, an old capital of Egypt from AD641 to 969.[4] After the capital of Egypt moved to Cairo (AD 969) Fustat become a rubbish disposal area and the fragments had 'apparently been discarded on these heaps over time'.[5] Uncovered or excavated in the early 1900's, they appeared in the Cairo markets offered for sale by dealers. As they were purchased from dealers, their exact location was not authenticated nor were they excavated in a true archaeological context'.[6] Originally traded from Gujarat as running metres or yardage, surviving fragments were purchased from dealers and markets in Cairo by collectors, connoisseurs prior to being donated to or purchased by museums with textiles, Asian or archaeological collections. They are now generally acknowledged to be made in Gujarat[7] as the dyes and techniques assumed to have been used are still in use today in this region. Similarly, motifs and patterns referencing architectural details of the area, are still seen today.

Initial dating of Fustat fragments was by appearance, design and colours only and estimates of trading period vary from 9th to 17th alternatively10th to 18th Centuries. In 1994-5 the Ashmolean museum conducted Carbon -14 dating tests on selected pieces from the Newbury Collection with results showing some as old as the 8th century; some eleventh and twelfth centuries while the majority the thirteenth century.[8] The remarkable fact is that these fragments survived in Egypt at all - surviving due to the dry climate. Similar textiles have this age have not survived in India's warm tropical climate. Consequently, the Fustat fragments are some of the oldest surviving Indian textiles in the world. Guy[9] details the significance of the fragments as actual evidence of the Indian textile trade (earlier evidence was via documents only); they illustrate the importance of textiles in medieval Islamic society; and fragments are related to similar textiles found in South East Asia and confirm the breadth of India's trade.

Construction, colours, motifs, patterns and design

Fustat fragments are hand woven, naturally dyed, mordant[10] and resist printed, rather coarse, hand spun cotton cloth assumed to be traded for the general domestic market, for apparel and

[3] See reference list for details.
[4] Fustat or Al Fustat is located near the present capital of Cairo.
[5] Rosemary Crill, ed. *The Fabric of India*, (London, UK: V&A Publishing, 2015) 146.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Pfister was the researcher to link Fustat fragments to Gujarat, India; followed by many others.
[8] Crill, *The Fabric of India*, 146.
[9] John Guy, *Woven Cargoes: Indian Textiles in the East*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 41.
[10] Mordants used are assumed to be alum and iron; either block printed or painted onto the cloth. Mordants assist with bonding the natural dye particulars to the cloth.

furnishing use.[11] Many of the fragments have remains of stitching threads, seams and pleats indicating use; threads used for stitching were flax, a fibre local to Egypt; frayed edges from being cutting or ripped; worn sections where the fibres have disintegrated over time. Of the samples examined, many were small,[12] appear to have been cut or as a remanent from the construction of a garment or interior furnishing. Given that they were uncovered from refuse heaps, it is implied they were excess, tailors off cuts or pieces of fabric of no value, were rubbish and disposed of.

The predominant colours of Fustat fragments are indigo (blue), Indian madder (red) and the natural cotton colour of the undyed and resisted sections of the designs. The cloth is dyed in combinations of blue and white, red and white plus patterns with all three colours together.[13] The resist material, possibly wax or a mud and lime paste, appears as hand drawn into the cloth or printed using a simple block or stamp to resist the Indigo dye while a mordant of either alum and iron have been used to bond the dye to the cotton. Madder requires a mordant to bond to the fibre, so where no mordant is applied, the colour will not take in the dye. Also, cloth first dyed in Indigo will not take the Madder dye unless alum has been applied.

The fragments examined all had strong, solid colours; some with faded sections. Generally, Fustat fragments are excellent examples of the durability of natural colours and clearly illustrate expertise in resist and mordant dye technologies. The Fustat fragments provide vital evidence of the Indian dyer's highly developed skills, indicating the sophistication of manufacturing and design aesthetics being used on apparently every day textiles from India at that time.

In terms of the motifs, patterns and design, Guy writes that the dating of the fragments 'concurs with stylistic comparisons which may be drawn with western Indian painting and sculpture' especially in plant formations and to architecture references to stone screens, mosques and tombs in Gujarat.[14] Carved stone as illustrated below are examples of Islamic architecture of Gujarat and illustrate a link to patterns of textiles produced in the state.

[11] Guy, *Woven Cargoes: Indian Textiles in the East*, 46 refers to a study of Jewish documents from Fustat that record the contents of an archival storehouse. *'…in medieval Middle-Eastern society, Indian cotton textiles were relevantly inexpensive utilitarian items for use as garments and as household furnishings by the lower levels of society.'*

[12] Majority of fragments examined in this study were small, appropriately A4 size.

[13] Barnes research at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford included carbon dating a number of fragments. This process confirmed the use of these dye and resist substances.

[14] Guy, *Woven Cargoes: Indian Textiles in the East*, 42.

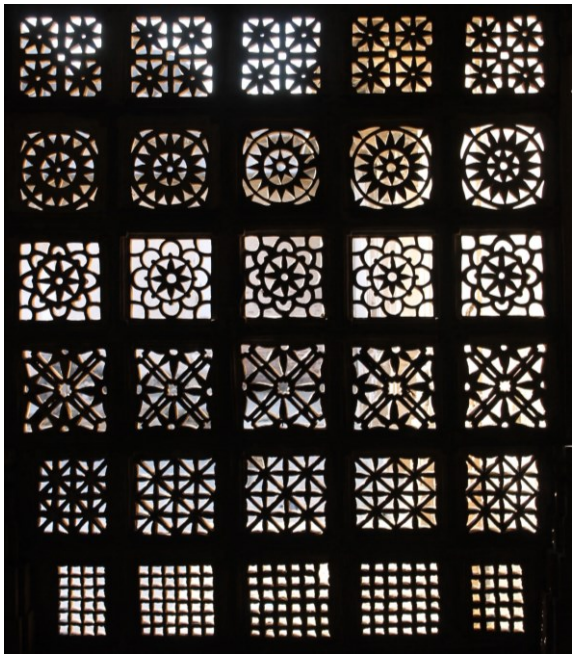

Image 1 - Jali screen at Sarkjej Rose [15] near Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.
Photo: Liz Williamson

Selected Fustat fragments

Musée des Arts Asiantique Guimet (Guimet Musée)[16] in Paris focuses on Asian art and has substantial holding of artwork from Afghanistan, Pakistan, South East Asia, Central Asian, China, Korea, India, Japan and the Arts of the Himalaya's. The Guimet houses the Riboud textiles collection which came from the Association for the Study and Documentation of Textiles Asia (AEDTA) founded in 1979 by Krishna Riboud and donated to the museum in 1990 and 2003. The textiles were collected by Riboud and the bequest gave the museum one of the largest collections of Asian textiles and objects in Europe (mainly Indian and Chinese costume and textiles, also Indonesia and Japan; mostly from the 15 to early 20th centuries). The Riboud archive include examples of most of the significant Indian textiles namely Jain embroideries, Mughal fabrics (velvets, carpets, Samite and Lampas weaves), Telia Rumals, Ikats, tie dye fabrics, embroidered and woven Kashmiri shawls, Kantha embroideries from West Bengal, Baluchari Saris, export Chintzes, Patola and a limited number Fustat fragments.[17] I'll describe three of the fragments examined in the Guimet Musée at the beginning of my research project (July 2015). Supporting information is from Valérie Bérinstain's chapter in *Quest of Themes and Skills: Asian Textiles edited by* Riboud, Krishna in 1989.

[15] Sarkhej is a mosque, tomb and royal retreat complex dedicated to the memory of Shaikh Ahmed Khattu Ganj Basksh, spiritual advisor to Ahmed Shah, founder of Ahmedabad built 1146 to1156. Indigo was cultivated in the surrounding area.
[16] The museum's collections can be viewed at http://www.guimet.fr/en/collections-en
[17] A selection of the collection is discussed in Riboud, *Quest of Themes and Skills: Asian Textiles.*

Image 2: Fustat fragment. Length 18 x width 18cm. Guimet Musée MA5681; AEDTA #1540.
Photo: Liz Williamson

The fragment shown in Image 2 is described as a Fustat textile fragment from the 15th Century, India probably Gujarat found in Egypt. Made from cotton, the design was created by block printed resist and painted mordant and dyed in two shades, red and brown. As Bérinstain writes 'this piece is particularly interesting first from a technical aspect and second for its iconography based on eight sacred geese or hamsas[18] around a floral motif or lotus'.[19] Jain writes 'the hamsa, a sacred geese or swan was a popular decorative motif in the arts of India. It represented purity and perfection, and was endowed in some of the scriptures with Brahmin or perfect knowledge'.[20] The interesting technical aspect of this fragment is the application of two ways of applying the mordant to the cloth - by block and brush in the one design. Before the mordant was applied, an outline of the motifs was stamped by block printing using a resist paste – this was done to prevent the mordant from adhering to the outlines. Then the two mordants were applied to the cloth which was then immersed on an alizarin dyebath (Indian madder). Where the iron mordant had been applied, the resultant colour is dark brown; where alum had been applied, the resultant colour is red. I showed this fragment to Dr Ismail and he commented on the blocks and how they had been turned to print the repeat.

[18] Hamsas is a circular motif common during the Gupta period; the motif also appears in Ajanta cave #1, 6th century.
[19] Krishna Riboud, ed., *Quest of Themes and Skills: Asian Textiles, (*Bombay, India: Marg Publications, 1989), 19.
[20] Rahul Jain, *Rapture: the art of Indian Textiles*, (New Delhi, India: Niyogi Books, 2011), 28.

Image 3: Fustat fragment. Length 10 x width 13.5cm. Guimet Musée catalogue number MA5683; AEDTA #1356.
Photo: Liz Williamson

The Guimet Musée fragment shown (Image 3) is described as a 16th century Fustat textile fragment probably from Gujarat India, found in Egypt; cotton, stamped mordant and resist dyed, blue and red. The design is essentially indigo blue and white with an Indian Madder (red) and white border. To create this piece, the cloth would have first been dipped into indigo with the central white pattern and border covered with a resist material (wax). After the wax had been removed by immersing into boiling water, alum was applied with blocks to the border before dyeing in an alizarin bath, thus the red colour penetrated only those areas where the mordant (alum) had been applied. In a conversation with Dr Ismail comments re colours and use. Colours worn contrasted to the landscape that people work in, so that people can be easily seen.

The third fragment illustrated (Image 4) is a Fustat textile fragment from the end of the 18th century, like the others, is recorded as found in Egypt, Indian probably Gujarat. Cotton fabric, stamped and drawn resist and painted mordant, dyed different shades of red and blue. As Bérinstain writes this fragment 'is decorated with sophisticated patterns and is of a later date. The ornamentation consists of elaborate medallions with floral stems of blackish-blue ground. The blue dye appears to have been applied with a brush. A few items in the collection of the Musée de Cluny apparently made use of the same technique. According to Schwartz's studies[21] this process of painting with indigo onto a fabric did not appear before the middle of the eighteenth century, so it can be assumed that his particular piece dates from the end of that century'.[22] The complexity of the printing process is comparable to the contemporary production of Ajarkh and associated wood block prints of the Khatri community created in many communities in India and Pakistan, particularly in the Kutch area of Gujarat.

[21] P. R. Schwartz*, Contribution à l'historie de l'application du bleu indigo dans l'indiennage européen',* Bulletin de la Societé Industrielle de Mulhouse, No. 11, Mulhouse, France, 1953.
[22] Riboud, *Quest of Themes and Skills: Asian Textiles*, 22.

Image 4: Fustat fragment. Length 20cm x width 20.5cm. Guimet Musée catalogue number MA5682; AEDTA #1355.
Photo: Liz Williamson

Contemporary Ajarkh

Fustat fragments are the antecedents to Ajarkh and the block printed textiles produced in Gujarat by the Khatri community; 'these designs are our life' to quote Dr Ismail Mohammed Khatri, leading Ajarkh printer in an interview in February 2016. Like the Fustat fragments, the Ajarkh process involves resist and mordant printing with approximately 14 to 16 stages; typically has a centre filed and several borders of patterns; traditionally printed on both sides to be more versatile. Although motifs and patterns have evolved, designs are still being produced by Indian artisans for their local communities, specifically the Maldharis community. Edwards in her 2016 book on block printed textiles in India, provides excellent information on this topic covering the process, the people, its history and uses.

Dr Ismail has first heard about Fustat textiles from Delhi based designer Jenny Housego. She had developed several designs referencing Fustat patterns which she needed printed in an 'safe' way eg not copied after her order was completed. He then viewed numerous fragments in the various UK collections, receiving permission to integrate into his production so he has a number called Fustat designs that are an essential part of his Ajarkh repertoire.

Cultural Textiles Fieldwork course

I'm fortunate to visit Gujarat regularly with a group of students from my university, University of New South Wales, Australia (UNSW) in Sydney, for a course titled *Cultural Textiles*. This fieldwork, intensive, three-week course introduces undergraduate and post graduate students to

social and cultural aspects of India through the lens of textiles, specifically handmade, artisan textile production. Social engagement and global impact are strategic priorities for UNSW and the Cultural Textiles course has been influential in these emerging designer's careers, and their understanding of how they as designers can engage in social impact projects and issues of sustainment. Of particular interest is the relationship between traditional and contemporary design, how textile traditions are maintained and how organizations assist artisans develop sustainable practices. The program allows students to experience India and conduct hands-on textile research by participating in a series of workshops, meet designers and artisans, and learning first-hand about the issues impacting on this field of contemporary design in India.

The Cultural Textiles courses explores the nature of production by the various groups of artisan, family, village and community, and immerse students in the culture of knowledge-sharing in the textile tradition and considers the impact of textile traditions on contemporary design. With this knowledge, students are equipped with knowledge of how to design for, collaborate with, commission or engage with these artisan groups in the future. The course involves visits to museums, studios, craft centres and several workshops on textiles techniques. At the block printing workshop with Dr Ismail and Sufiyan Khatri, Dr Ismail explains his family history and their migration from Sind to Rajasthan and then Gujarat, settling in Dhamadka, Kutch. Of interest to this project, he explains how, in the 1980's his father, Mohammad Siddik Khatri, began to translate traditional Ajarkh design for the contemporary market by printing table cloths, bed sheets, scarves and running metres rather than just traditional lengths for the local Maldhari community. By shifting production to different end products, materials etc the market changed to national and international. By the 1970's synthetic fabrics and chemical dyes (1950's) were readily available. To ensure his family's tradition, Dr Ismail's father taught his sons about natural dyes which the current business specialises in and they have been at forefront of revival on natural dyes in Gujarat. The 2001 earthquake and resultant environmental issues with water saw the community relocating to Ajarkhpur and work with government schemes for facilities.

One of the projects the Cultural Textiles students undertake is to design a range of floor rugs to be block printed in natural dyes by Sufiyan Khatri. This project is interesting an example of how an understanding of historical motifs and patterns can influence contemporary design. The block print workshop is a highlight of the CT course; the expertise and knowledge of the Khatri community; the generosity and openness in terms of techniques, processes and materials is clear; as is the relaxed workshop environment. In exchange, Sufiyan enjoys seeing the ways student use his wood blocks, playing with placement and creating different patterns and combination.

One of the designs selected for production in 2016 was designed by Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours student, Jessica Skinner. Her range was titled *Mizan*, a series inspired by the 'juxtaposition of organic and geometric shapes within the cityscape of Ahmedabad. The unique quality of the native plants softens the harshness of the city's angular structures and evokes simplicity. The ancient Arabic term Mizan, meaning balance has been applied to illustrate the elaborate geometric designs and masterful repeats of Islamic art. These designs are a contemporary representation of classic floral motifs that have been reinvented to harmoniously balance the symmetrical and geometric characteristics of traditional design'.

Image 5: Jessica Skinner, Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours student 2016. LHS printed rug; RHS design. Photo: Liz Williamson

Conclusion

The cross currents of textiles are intriguing. An ancient global trade in fabrics, resulted in fragments being found, sold, collected and documented. Running metres printed in Gujarat centuries ago, have survived and are available today. Unique circumstance has meant that they exist today, available for this and future generations. With contemporary practice they continue and these motifs and patterns inspire and continue to give pleasure. Fustat fragments are central to our understanding of historic Indian design, trade and technical expertise in mordant and resist block printing. They play an invaluable role in understanding historical terms of trade, and as reference for contemporary practice. They are excellent example of textile evolving, of not being static. Martand Singh and Rahul Jain wrote in 2000 'the design of textiles, as that of architecture, has never been a static phenomenon. It is in a state of continuous transformation, changing and developing in response to user's preferences and producer's capabilities. The transformation of design is essential for the survival of any textile tradition'.[23]

It is interesting to link my enquiry into Fustat fragments with design outcomes from the Cultural Textiles course. Globalised trade has resulted in these fragments surviving to provide, along with their engagement with artisans, aesthetic impact with motifs, patterns and colours for contemporary design. These students have an experience that impacts of their careers and, hopefully offer numerous ways of continuing an engage with Indian artisans.

[23] Martand Singh and Rahul Jain, *"*Indian Textiles in the 20th Century: Crises in Transformation*" in 2000: Reflections on the Arts in Indi,* Pratapaditya Pall, ed. (New Delhi: Marg Publication, 2000).

References

• Barnes, Ruth. *Indian Block Printed Textiles in Egypt: the Newbury Collection in the Ashmolean Museum.* London, UK: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1997.

• Barnes, Ruth, Cohen, Steven and Crill, Rosemary. *Trade, Temple and court: Indian Textiles from the TAPI collection*. Mumbai: India Book House, 2002.

• Bilgrami, Noorjehan. *Sindh Jo: Arajkh, cloth from the banks of the river Indus*. Bangkok: White Orchid Books, 1998.

• Crill, Rosemary. ed. *The Fabric of India*. London, UK: V&A Publishing, 2015.

• Edwards, Eiluned. *Textiles and Dress in Gujarat*. London, UK: V&A Publishing in association with Mapin Publishing, 2014.

• Edwards, Eiluned. *Imprints of Culture*: *Block Printed Textiles in India.* New Delhi, India: Niyogi Books, 2016.

• Guy, John. *Woven Cargoes: Indian Textiles in the East*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998.

• Jain, Rahul. *Rapture: the art of Indian Textiles*. New Delhi, India: Niyogi Books, 2011.

• Riboud, Krishna. ed. *Quest of Themes and Skills: Asian Textiles.* Bombay, India: Marg Publications, 1989.

• Ronald, Emma. *Ajrakh: patterns & borders,* Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India: Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing and AMPH Publications, 2007.

• Schwartz, P.R. *Contribution à l'historie de l'application du bleu indigo dans l'indiennage européen', Bulletin de la Societé Industrielle de Mulhouse, no 11, Mulhouse, France, 1953.*

• Shah, Deepila. *Masters of the Cloth: Indian Textiles Traded to Distant Shores*. Surat, India: Garden Silk Mills. TAPI Collection exhibition, 2005.

• Singh, Martand and Jain, Rahul. 'Indian Textiles in the 20th Century: Crises in Transformation' in "*2000: Reflections on the Arts in Indi'*" edited by Pratapaditya Pall. New Delhi: Marg Publication, 2000.