

# THE CLOTH THAT CHANGED THE WORLD: India's Painted and Printed Cottons

Descriptive Audio Guide

## [Stop 1] Welcome

Welcome to *The Cloth that Changed the World: India's Painted and Printed Cottons*. My name is Sarah Fee and I am the Royal Ontario Museum's Curator for the Textile Arts of Africa and Asia. The objects in this exhibition are highlights from the ROM's renowned collection of Indian painted and printed cottons. Most pieces have not been displayed since the 1970s. The show also includes twelve objects borrowed from international collections, and never before exhibited in Canada.

New studies from the fields of art history, economic history, chemistry, and botany provide new ways of understanding these vibrant cotton cloths, sometimes called chintz. They are made by two different kinds of specialists: painters who apply colour using a special bamboo pen, and block printers who apply colours using carved wooden blocks. In addition to historic pieces, the ROM is excited to present works by contemporary Indian artisans who are innovating in these media today.

The exhibition begins with a narrow entry that widens into a large open space. Some textiles are displayed in cases along the perimeter walls, and others are displayed on three large platforms located in the centre of the room. Nearly all the objects on display were created by Indian artisans. These skilled craftspeople perfected the complex art of painting and printing cotton cloth, using natural dyes to create vibrant colours and dynamic designs that have endured for hundreds of years. On exhibit is an impressive range of historical and contemporary Indian painted and printed cottons. The largest of these textiles are the richly coloured wall hangings that measure more than 2 metres wide and 3 metres tall. Smaller works—including prayer mats, body wrappers, and saris—represent the variety of shapes and forms that consumers around the world desired.

The exhibition begins with a vivid wall hanging from the ROM collection that was created between 1720 and 1740. Most of the surface of this enormous piece—made in India for export to Europe—is covered by a gigantic sinuous tree growing from a rocky mound. The branches bloom with large colourful flower heads in shades of blue, red, and purple, and small flowers and fruits fill the spaces between. The wide outer borders are filled with stylized flower heads in hues of red and blue. On either side of the tree stand two green peahens with snakes in their beaks.

This magnificent hanging shows the unique features of Indian chintz that sparked desire around the world—a wide range of bright and durable colours; plants and animals that mix realism and whimsy; and gold finishing for added sparkle. More than 10 specialists worked to complete this piece. It demonstrates the fine hand-crafted details found throughout the exhibition.

This descriptive audio guide includes 9 other object highlights, each with its own story of how Indian artisans created cloth that changed the world. When you are ready, move to the next stop, **Painting and Printing for India**.

## [Stop 2] Painting and Printing for India

In front of you is an almost 150-year-old banner with Hindu stories from the ROM's global textile collection. It is comprised of four rows, and each row is separated by floral lines. Within each row, there is a range of detailed figures, animals, and plants. The figures appear on a white background and are rendered in a wide colour palette including several shades of red, blue, purple, and yellow. Each colour was skillfully made from Indian natural dyes and intricately hand-painted on cotton.

Indian chintz artisans perfected their skills and specialized their designs to meet the many kinds of demand for their work across India. Sometimes called narrative banners, textiles like this one could be displayed near temples or used during storytelling in villages. The design was inspired by the Ramayana, an Indian Hindu epic popular throughout south and southeast Asia. The story follows the travels of the hero-prince Rama, his wife, and his brother after they are exiled from their home kingdom. Artisans have depicted multiple scenes and characters from the narrative.

Learn more about the history and the extraordinary rejuvenation of this art, as you move to the next stop, **India Today**.

## [Stop 3] India Today

The art of painting and printing cottons using natural dyes is today undergoing exciting transformations in India. Over the last two hundred years, Indian chintz was threatened by European industrial imitation and the rising global demand for polyester fabrics. However, in India today, new generations of cotton painters and block printers—from rural workshops to urban art studios—are reviving lost techniques and innovating design. Thousands of block printers are again active, though only a small portion practice the complicated art of dyeing with natural plants. At the same time, there is an increase in the number of artisans who use the bamboo pen, or kalam, to create many kinds of works.

This piece by artist Ajit Kumar Das, is an example of contemporary art made using the kalam pen and natural dyes. This cotton canvas is taller than it is wide. The background is a sandy-yellow colour. At the centre are two large jagged boulders, stacked on top of each other. They rest on a smooth, brown mound at the bottom, partially propped up by a small wedged rock. The top boulder is painted in blues and grays, while the larger boulder on the bottom is mainly red and orange. Both boulders are intricately shaded with short brush strokes in browns, reds, yellows, deep greys, and soft blacks, that add three-dimensionality and depth. The artist has conveyed both a sense of balance and anxiety in this composition.

This work is part of a series by Das, titled Prosthor (or Stone). Based in Kolkata, Das worked in cloth dyeing and printing before turning to kalam paintings. In this series, he explores memories of early personal and professional struggles. Das' piece is an example of the exciting ways that contemporary Indian artisans are transforming the ancient art of chintz.

To learn more about the qualities of chintz that have appealed to—and attracted—the world, move to the next stop, **Made in India for Indonesia**.

## [Stop 4] Made in India for Indonesia

Nations around the world wanted Indian chintz, with its uniquely bright and beautiful patterning. Indian artisans innovated to appeal to each distinct export market, and until about 1770 dominated the world production and export of coloured cottons.

The piece before you demonstrates how Indian chintz makers carefully customized designs to please the many niche markets in Indonesia, with its many distinct islands and cultures.

This masterwork made in India for export to Java or Sumatra—like those made for Europe—is enormous, stretching more than three metres long. Its design is bold and unique. On the white base cloth, a large orange-red sunburst fills the centre and dominates the work. Short, curved lines radiate from the core of the sunburst. Filling the cloth background is a grid-like pattern of faintly printed light blue flower sprigs. Indian chintz made for eastern Indonesia often includes strong elements of red, a colour associated in many cultures with fertility and power.

A piece such as this was used in Indonesia not for everyday fashion, but for ceremonial display. In the great courts and ports of the Indonesian islands of Java and Sumatra, elites wrapped their bodies with these large cloths. On the islands of eastern Indonesia, notably Sulawesi, communities used narrow chintz banners to transfer ancestral blessings at large ceremonies, by draping the cloth around houses, elders, and offerings.

During this time of global trade, Indonesia was an important market for Indian chintz. Indonesian traders demanded Indian textiles in exchange for the precious spices such as nutmeg, mace and cloves that at the time grew nowhere else in the world. When Europeans began sailing to Indonesia from 1500 in search of spices, they were obliged to barter using Indian cloth such as this large sunburst ceremonial wrapper.

When you are ready, move to the next stop **Made in India for Egypt**.

## [Stop 5] Made in India for Egypt

We know about the long history of India's chintz exports to Egypt thanks to the many textile fragments that survived in Egypt's arid environment. Some are more than one thousand years old.

Despite the great age of these fragments, their colour and pattern remain vibrant. Some are painted, some are block printed, and some employ both techniques. Colour combinations are of three kinds: blue and white, red and white, and red, white and blue. Designs vary from geometric shapes to stylized plants and birds and may include Arabic inscriptions.

The case before you contains six small chintz fragments that represent this once-bountiful trade of Indian chintz to Egypt. Carbon-14 testing reveals that some of these pieces are more than 700 years old.

The six fragments are grouped to demonstrate the three colour combinations. To the left are two fragments block printed in blue and white geometric designs, such as stepped squares; in the center are designs in red, blue and white, including one fragment with large painted leaf forms; to the right are two fragments depicting plants and birds rendered in several shades of red on white.

The largest textile fragment is at the top right. It is about a metre long, and about 30 centimetres tall. Artisans used blocks to print red and red-brown patterns on a white ground; the patterns are arranged in three rows and consist of stylized flower heads and birds shown in profile; the bird may be the pea fowl, a bird native to India. The holes in the piece were likely caused when the iron-rich colouring agent, used for making the red-brown colour, began to break down the cotton after hundreds of years.

When you are ready, move to the next stop **Creating Colour and Design**.

## [Stop 6] Creating Colour and Design

It is very difficult to get cotton cloth to absorb and retain coloured dyes. This prompts the question: how did Indian artisans come to master and dominate this difficult art? New research in botany and chemistry has revealed some answers, although the precise science of some chemical reactions remains a mystery. This section considers how India's textile artisans developed and perfected durable colour using what may seem like humble ingredients. The table case here contains many small pots of colouring ingredients, that include rusty nails, and plant parts—such as roots, seeds, and powdered leaves.

India's unique natural environment offered some advantages, including indigenous cotton, potent dye plants, special waters, and strong sunshine. At least 5,000 years ago, India's farmers domesticated a species of tall tree cotton, and later adopted an African species. Consumers around the world adored cotton's novel qualities. It was soft, washable, lightweight, and held colour well. Cotton slowly replaced ancient fibres such as linen, hemp, bark cloth, wool, and hides. Use the interactive on the left to feel the different textures of these materials. Imagine how it would feel to wear these cloths.

Above all, the world wanted the vibrant and durable colours that Indian artisans created. Three dye plants native to India provide especially strong substances for colouring cotton: leaves of indigo for blue; rhizomes of turmeric for yellow; and roots of the chay plant for red.

The process for creating coloured pattern is long and technically challenging. For example, to create pattern in red or black, artisans first pre-treat the cloth with a solution of myrobalan fruit, then paint or print the cloth surface with a metallic salt, or mordant. Alum is used for red and iron fermented with cane sugar is used for black. Then, artisans boil the cloth with the roots of a red dye plant. There are many more unsung heroes of Indian chintz including animal dung from goats, sheep, or camels that provide complex ammonia and proteins necessary to bleach and brighten colours, as well as rice water that provides a shiny coating or glaze to the finished piece.

Pattern is made in two basic ways: stamping substances onto the cloth using carved wooden blocks, or painting them using a bamboo, or kalam, pen. Indian artisans' combined skills in weaving cotton, painting, printing, dyeing, bleaching, and glazing made their cloth superior.

The sounds of making Indian chintz can be heard from the speakers in this section. Listen for the flowing waters that wash the cotton cloth and the rhythmic beats of Indian artisans beating, stamping, and working with their material during the process.

When you are ready, move to the next section **Made in India for Iran**.

## [Stop 7] Made in India for Iran

Iran in central Asia was among the world's greatest importers of Indian chintz, and Iranian merchants were great traders in the cloth. To please this important market, India's cotton painters and printers created novel forms such as prayer mats, and designs built around cypress trees, architectural niches, and pious Islamic inscriptions. Iranian customers also favoured black outlines, spiky vegetation, foreign fancies such as European floral swags, and a final coating with rice water to give dress fabrics a reflective sheen.

On the right side of this case is an example of the mats or hangings created in India for export to the Iranian market. This piece was made approximately between 1825-1850. This rectangular textile has an elaborate design that is painted and printed with shades of red, blue, black, yellow, and deep purple on a white base colour, or ground.

A large framed archway, known as a mihrab, is located at the centre of the textile. It is flanked to the left and right by several columns, filled with flowering vines or miniature cypress trees. The top of the arch has many pointed decorative ornaments, known as finials. The space inside the arch, or centre-field, is filled by offset rows of delicate multi-coloured flowers. At the bottom of the textile is a row of joined, drooping garlands of flowers, a feature sometimes called a swag.

Iran reportedly banned imports of Indian chintz in 1925 to protect its own textile industry.

When you are ready, move to the next stop **Made in India for Europe**.

## [Stop 8] Made in India for Europe

European trading companies started sailing directly to India from 1498. By 1650, they were carrying enormous quantities of Indian chintz back to Europe. These brightly coloured cottons from India impacted how Europeans dressed themselves and furnished their houses.

This platform showcases some of the exquisitely painted cottons that filled wealthy European homes in the 1700s. On the platform are two free-standing walls. They display four large chintz hangings that Europeans used to cover walls or beds. Each of these enormous textiles tower over 3 metres tall. Placed in front of the walls are two women's dresses and one man's informal dressing gown made of colourful Indian chintz designed for the European market.

In front of you is one of the ROM's finest examples of Indian chintz. Intense reds and blues create strong contrast against the white base colour of the textile. The wide borders depict vines blooming with large flower heads that climb along the tops and sides. In the centre is a tall flowering tree, a very popular motif within the European market. Its slender tree trunk emerges from a mountainous landscape at the bottom. The tree's branches sprout with a wide range of unrelated flowers and fruit. Hidden in the mountains are pairs of animals and small human figures dressed in fashions from the 1700s. While the design was made by Indian artisans, the imagery comes from sources that originate in India, China, Iran and Europe.

Some motifs are realistic while others reflect the artisans' imagination. Six of the tree branches sprout feathery fan-shaped plumes resembling palm leaves. The great skill of the artisans is revealed in the intricately drawn animals. For example, two smiling lions wearing crowns rest in the mountain at the bottom right of this wall hanging. The painter was likely inspired by the crowned lions on the coat of arms of the Dutch Republic, which was incorporated in several other textile arts of Asia. At the top of the tree perches a pair of birds. The artisan carefully defined the feathers and created texture with white lines; their curved beaks, crested heads, and squared-off tails suggest they were partly inspired by some sort of pigeon or dove. Other animals in the rocky mound include a doe and buck. Their red-colour and rows of spots suggest they are the Spotted Deer, India's most common species.

When you are ready, move to the next stop **Consequences of Mass Consumption**.

## [Stop 9] Consequences of Mass Consumption

Widespread desire and demand for Indian chintz led to imitation in Europe, which historians link to the rise of the Industrial Revolution.

From the 1600s, craftsmen across Europe tried to block print cottons using Indian methods. But they struggled to imitate India's bright colours and fine details. Finally, around 1750, Britain and France mastered mass block printing cloth; to keep up with demand, they invented new printing technologies, such as engraved copper plates and engraved rollers.

European cotton printers had an important advantage over Indian artisans—they could respond quickly to changing fashion trends since they lived near their national customers. For example, from the 1770s consumers demanded fabrics with imagery from new scientific illustrations, or from European classic literature like the French green roller-printed textile on the platform in front of you.

This textile features repeating scenes of classical figures and imagery from Greek mythology. In the centre scene, a robed woman places a bird on an altar. Nearby, a winged man befriends a mighty lion. This design is known as *le lion amoureux* or "the lion in love." Other animals and finely hatched geometric shapes complete the background.

Records indicate that this furnishing textile was roller printed in 1809 by the famous French printing firm operated by Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf outside of Paris. This example on display is one of the two known samples of *le lion amoureux* that is printed in green.

The green colour makes this patterned cloth unusual. Unlike other colours from natural sources, there is no single dye plant that can produce a permanent green colour. Instead, historically, to create green, artisans printed yellow on top of blue. Testing suggests that this French roller printed fabric may have been created by simultaneously printing yellow and blue.

In the 1800s, the rise of Europe's industrial cotton textile manufacturing profoundly changed how the world consumes resources and contributed to environmental damage that remain today. As awareness grows today of the increasing environmental destruction caused by the textile and garment industries,

manufacturers and consumers increasingly seek new sustainable solutions to responsibly source materials, fabrics, and garments. Buying less or purchasing used clothing are just some of the ways we aim to regain balance.

When you are ready move towards the next and final stop, **made in India for Canada.**

## [Stop 10] Made in India for Canada

Throughout the 1900s, India's chintz exports plummeted. This began to change in the 1970s when global markets again came to desire natural fibres and India's handcrafted textiles. Canada was no exception. A major source for Indian printed cotton fashions in Canada was "Sarah Clothes", a fashion company operated by Ottawa native Sarah Pouliot from 1976 to 1999. Based in Jaipur, Rajasthan, Sarah designed romantic silhouettes, inspired by historic European and Asian cuts; her fashions were popular with Canadian women of all ages, for work and leisure, and from day to evening. Sarah was aided by her daughters, Andrée, who designed prints and graphics, and Madeleine, who oversaw distribution across Canada, including six "Sarah Clothes" boutiques located in Ottawa, Montreal, and Toronto.

Displayed in the case here is a classic, four-piece, layered Sarah Clothes cotton ensemble. Rich reds and warm yellows come together in a block-print called Baroque, which was included in Sarah's Winter 1982 collection. The ensemble on display consists of a maroon-coloured blouse tucked into a long printed and pleated skirt. Over this is worn a long, quilted sleeveless vest that reaches to the hem of the skirt. The cut of the vest was based on a Tibetan garment that Sarah sketched when she visited the ROM in the summer of 1979. Completing the outfit is a matching block print scarf with a bead trim that is wrapped several times around the neck.

Indian and foreign designers, such as Sarah Clothes, helped to sustain chintz artisans in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by modernizing designs and connecting makers to new consumers. Today, growing numbers of chintz makers collaborate with fashion and furnishing brands—inside and outside India—to co-design products that appeal to contemporary audiences.

The world would be a much different place without the rich colours and mesmerizing patterns that Indian artisans created. The desire first to possess and then later imitate Indian chintz transformed arts, industries, and economies across the globe. Today again, Indian chintz is thriving as the world re-discovers this unique—and uniquely beautiful textile art—and artisans innovate to meet the contemporary tastes.

Thank you for listening, and I hope you enjoyed touring the exhibition ***The Cloth that Changed the World: India's Painted and Printed Cottons.***