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## Tracking the global influence of Indian fabrics

An exemplary new ROM exhibition highlights the worldwide impact of these textiles and the finely tuned techniques used to create luxurious pieces

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VISUAL ARTS



extiles are among the most fragile artifacts in any historical museum collection. The rule of thumb - or of professional museology - is that you can only show a textile once a decade if you want to preserve it for future generations. Well, the collection of 300- and 400year-old Indian chintz at the Royal Ontario Museum has not been on display since 1970, so no worries there. When last exposed to the light of day - or rather, low-level museum lighting - the colourful handpainted and block-printed cotton fabrics were used to explain how Europe fell in love with Indian chintz, imported it by the baleful and ultimately supplanted it with its own copies.

Today, in a more globalist moment, a new exhibition at the ROM uses the same collection, now strategically enlarged, to track the influence of Indian fabrics as they moved around the world. The earliest examples in a show titled The Cloth that Changed the World: India's Painted and Printed Cottons are fragments found in Egypt and date back to the 1400s. Remarkably, they still display strong blues and reds. In the adjacent cases, there are similarly patterned Japanese clothes associated with the tea ceremony and dating to the 1700s. Yes, Western markets mimicked India, from English floral chintzes to French "Provençal" fabrics, but by the 18th century, Japanese printers were also producing books of Indian patterns for their local artisans to

Still, the Egyptian and Japanese imports on display here are small things. What is really impressive about this show, organized by ROM curator Sarah Fee and installed in the fourth-floor Patricia Harris Gallery of Textiles and Costumes, are the soaring banners, long cloths and big dresses that Indian artisans produced for export to Thailand, Indonesia and the Netherlands (as well as pieces for Iran, Sri Lanka, Britain and France). With vibrant reds, sunny yellows, deep blues and more muted shades, their creators traced patterns of pleasing geometry, flowering trees and epic heroes. The visual effect of these luxurious pieces is irresistible.

The trick was a series of finally tuned developments in the application of dyes. Sure, the Indian artisans had remarkable colours - yellow from turmeric and pomegranate skin, blue from indigo and red from chav root - but the real secret was the mordant, the agent made from metallic salts that bound the colour to the cotton



A printer applies mordant to a piece from the Royal Ontario Museum exhibition The Cloth that Changed the World. The agent, made from metallic salts, binds the colour to the cotton fabric so it doesn't wash away.

fabric so it did not just wash away.

Today, synthetic dyes can be printed directly on to a fabric, but India's natural dyes were part of a lengthy process that involved pretreating the cotton to receive the colour, and applying resistant waxes and intensifying mordants before dunking it in multiple dve baths. The patterns themselves, delineated using the resists and the mordants, were either images painted by hand or repeating motifs printed in sections using carved wooden blocks. Copying these techniques in the 18th century, the English textile industry began by using larger copper plates to print the patterns and then, in the development that would make these fabrics affordable to the middle classes, rolling plates that could print long bolts of cloth.

Using mass production, England replaced India as the leading textile manufacturer in the world, and the influence came full circle: One of the most poignant pieces here is a colourful handkerchief bearing the figure of the Hindu elephant god Ganesh and dating to 1880. It was printed in Britain to be sold to the Indian market. Its colours are mainly synthetic: The invention of synthetic dyes in Britain and Germany in the 19th century industrialized the textile business vet further, and mass fashion was born.

While Indian block-printing was repopularized in the 1960s by Western fashion's taste for the exotic, it's only recently that Indian designers are returning to handpainting and natural dyes. They are represented here by several striking contemporary saris as well as a magnificent men's suit designed by Good Earth of New Delhi.

The suit is indigo, but part of the new designers' impetus is green. As this exhibition briefly discusses, the environmental implications of industrial manufacture have been disastrous: From the pesticides used on cotton plants and all the water needed for the dyeing process to the cheap clothes that wind up in landfills, mass production may be democratic but it's not kind to the

It was also not kind to the enslaved African-Americans who picked the cotton needed to weave all that cloth. Another display explains how the demand for cotton drove the transatlantic slave trade. It includes a 1910 photograph of an unknown African-American family, still picking cotton by hand 50 years after emancipation, and a long sack that would hold 45 kilos, or 100 pounds, of cotton. A cotton-picker was expected to fill his or her sack twice a day; this example, a long, drab shapeless thing dating to the 1950s, was donated to the ROM in 1986 by a relative of Gus Green of Louisiana, one of the last African-Americans to pick cotton by hand.

The curators could easily make two more exhibitions here, one about fashion and the environment, and the other about cotton, the slave trade and labour, but the textile department was squeezed into an illogical space on the fourth level of the ROM's Michael Lee Chin Crystal by architect Daniel Libeskind's 2007 renovation. The gallery's barn-like roof is too high for collections that are mainly human sized, the walls are awkwardly sloped and the floor plan is irregular. This is the rare show that fits more naturally in the tall space because of the large-scale clothes and banners, even if finding the right path through the exhibits in this lozenge-shaped room is

In a postcolonial era, museum collections can be successfully re-examined through the lens of race, as this one does. Increasingly society demands it. But let's be blunt here: It is also revealing to view museum practices through the lens of gender. If the appeal of floral chintzes and flowing saris is stereotypically female, then ambitious building projects and the so-called starchitect phenomenon are stereotypically male. The men who imposed such inefficient spaces on the ROM have departed, and ironically it now falls to four female curators - Fee is assisted by Deepali Dewan, Deborah Metsger and Alexandra Palmer to turn sows' ears into silk purses in the textile gallery. (Meanwhile Metsger, a botanist, has also curated a companion show, Florals: Desire and Design, identifying the flowers in various chintzes in the collection.)

Once the pandemic closings become a distant memory, museums will still be deeply challenged to justify colonial-era collections while remaking themselves as community centres. If you want to be reminded of why the institutions exist in the first place - to conserve material culture and intelligently reinterpret it for subsequent generations - book a timed ticket, don a mask and check out an exemplary piece of programming.

The Cloth that Changed the World continues at the Royal Ontario Museum to Sept. 6, 2021.

## Live comedy these days: Funny strange or funny ha-ha?

J. KELLY NESTRUCK

OPINION



ow did you start the COVID-19 pandemic, where did you start it, and with whom? On stage at the Second City in Toronto, two epidemiologists are trying to

get answers out of improv comedian Chris Wilson, who is playing a kind of patient zero in a very of-the-moment variation on a classic improv game where a criminal must guess the crime he is being accused

The interrogators ask questions that hint closer and closer to the answers they are looking for, until, finally, Wilson catches on and confesses: He caused the CO-VID-19 pandemic by licking everything at Disneyland with Kathy Griffin.

The audience of just less than 50 - the provincial government-mandated maximum for gatherings at the time of performance - emits an unusual sound in response: cheers and chuckles, slightly garbled and dampened by masks.

It's true that we could all use a good laugh right now. But is it funny ha-ha, or just funny-weird to be going out with mouths and noses muffled, and sitting in physically distanced mini audiences while stand-ups and sketch comedians make fun of the dystopian world in which we

In most Canadian cities, the first performing art to return to live shows in the usual sense - that is, indoors and with an

in-person audience - has been comedy. Rick Bronson, owner-operator of a number of comedy clubs, got The Comic Strip at West Edmonton Mall up and running all the way back in May - and was promptly shut down by Alberta Health Services during a dispute over whether he

operated a restaurant or a club. Bronson then reopened the Strip with the blessing of officials in June, the same month he reopened House of Comedy in New Westmin-

ster, B.C. The Yuk Yuk's chain of stand-up clubs has been running for a couple of months now in Edmonton, Calgary and Ottawa, and, this past weekend, its Toronto franchise reopened, after having received a dispensation that allows up to 100 audience members in at a time.

It joined a slowly sputtering-back comedy scene in Canada's largest city that also includes the Comedy Bar, which reopened last month to 44 guests a show, and Sec-

ond City, which reopened earlier this month with an improv show titled Safer,

Shorter and Still So Funny. But walking into a comedy venue is not the escape from the cares and concerns of the outside world that it once was, I found at Second City. There was a list of questions from the bouncer at the door about symptoms

and recent travel. (At Yuk Yuk's in Toronto, chain CEO Mark Breslin tells me, you also get your forehead zapped and temperature taken.) Then, of course, I had to wear a mask as I made my way to my seat at a table, now carefully spaced eight feet away from any other table.

After that, health and safety was balanced with the need for food and beverage revenue, as you take your mask off to eat

The Second City HVAC system has, too, been tweaked so that it is no longer recycling part of its air, Second City Toronto executive producer Gary Rideout Jr. told me something I had never thought much about before, but which helped me relax.

Having done so, Wilson, Andrew Bushell, Natalie Metcalfe, Tricia Black and Nkasi Ogbonnah, the current cast, did make me laugh - the pointed Bushell and quick-witted Metcalfe doing so most reliably.

These five performers - who will soon be joined by a sixth – are getting COVID-19 tests every week, and while they don't wears masks on stage, they are limiting but not eliminating - their physical interactions on stage. The resulting body language and blocking often suggested adolescents on a first date.

It's apparent from what's on stage that Second City got this improv show up really quickly. The performers rehearsed for a week with director Ashley Botting over Zoom - and then the first time they phys-

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ically performed side-by-side was opening night on Sept. 3. Their comic chemistry is a work in progress.

The relatively quick return of comedy shouldn't be taken as a sign that the form is more resilient than other performing arts.

Second City Toronto has, through an unusual arrangement with Canadian Actors Equity Association, hired its current cast

as employees, so it can pay them in part through the Canada Emergency Wage Sub-

But like most stage artists, comedians and stand-ups are usually employed as independent contractors and so many have been dependent on the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and are eyeing its transition into a new modified employment insurance nervously.

The comedy clubs and theatres that comics work in are in an even more tenuous situation - and, unlike many dance, theatre and even circus companies, are

mostly ineligible for public arts funding. Ticket revenue (and beer and snack sales) is needed to pay the landlord, which is no doubt why many are up and running despite the risk that provincial health officials might change the rules for gatherings at any given moment.

Indeed, House of Comedy just had to move start times for sets earlier to respond to a new restriction in B.C. that liquor sales must end by 10 p.m. - and all the reopened comedy clubs in Ontario were carefully watching to see what Doug Ford said about gatherings this week as COVID-19 cases rose again.

Smaller outfits, meanwhile, have simply dropped like flies this summer. Montreal Improv announced it was closing permanently in July. The Improv Embassy in Ottawa announced it was going on "hiatus" in August. And, just this weekend, Vancouver TheatreSports on Granville Island announced it was going into "hibernation" for what it called "the foreseeable future."

The comedy carnage in Toronto has been the most pronounced - with several venues and bars known for stand-up nights closing before, on Friday, the news came that Bad Dog, a pillar of the comedy community, would be leaving its physical space near the Comedy Bar, opened only six years ago.

Bad Dog, which operates as a not-forprofit, is still giving classes and performing online and hopes are that it will, sometime in the future, be able to rent a new location one more accessible if less charming than its current, cramped second-floor

But newly appointed artistic and managing director Coko Galore says the comedy theatre is not pulling in enough revenue/donations online under its currently digital-only circumstances. "We have to push our online platform a little bit harder," Galore says. "We're not closing yet but if we don't do that then we would have to close." Some clubs may be open again, but the overall state of comedy in Canada is no laughing matter.