ARTISTIC CONNECTIONS

RE-FRAMING PRINTED TEXTILE DESIGN PROCESSES FOR FASHION BASED ON THE CHINTZ

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Abstract

In an era dominated by tidal waves of visual stimuli across various digital platforms, we find ourselves scrolling and swiping incessantly. Images flicker momentarily before disappearing, stored away in unseen databases. When we consider imagery related to fashion, particularly printed textiles, we observe that these pieces also showcase a multitude of visuals but, unlike their digital counterparts, printed textiles are permanently situated within a specific time and place. This permanence highlights a stark contrast with the rising tide of fashion waste, revealing the fleeting nature of our throwaway culture. Print lies at the core of the waste crisis in today's fashion landscape. Alarming statistics surrounding fashion production and waste underscore the issue; printed garments are disposed of just as swiftly as digital images are scrolled into oblivion. Wearing printed art is both majestic and powerful, yet contemporary fashion seems to be out of sync with this value. This research delves into the illustrious chintz, a motif that has maintained its appeal over centuries and has been cherished in the realm of fashion. An exploration of this motif and its applications on fabric reveals concepts of artistry, upcycling and the appreciation of printed pieces as heirlooms. This paper draws on historical lessons that could inform our modern approach to print design in fashion today, creating a bridge between textile artistry and fashion design while fostering deeper connections with garments through interaction with established print techniques.

Keywords: *Chintz, Motif, Textile, Print, Fashion*

INTRODUCTION

Part One, FORMER, delves into a historical analysis of the chintz phenomenon spanning the 17th to 18th centuries, uncovering its lasting allure. Chintz represents not just a design aesthetic but a collection of specific techniques developed by a collaborative community that significantly influenced the art, printing methods and the integration of textiles into fashion. Part Two, FUTURE, examines the lessons we can draw from chintz to enhance future practices, fostering a deeper appreciation, connectivity and awareness of art in garments. This study aims to forge a connection between the past and present, emphasising the importance of textile artistry and design as central elements of fashion design, pattern cutting and manufacturing. (Fig. 01).

FORMER

"I paint with a kalam, in stillness yet creating motion, a dance of the undulating trees with a thousand little steps and details. Forever in the present yet I travel in time, paying tribute to the many unknown artisans, their heritage resonating within me" Renuka Reddy, 2024.

For centuries, chintz, the vibrantly coloured and boldly patterned prints, have been coveted as fashionable dress, luxury furnishings, gifts and sacred objects, both throughout the Indian subcontinent and around the world. The desire first to possess and then later to imitate Indian chintz

Fig. 01

transformed the arts, industries and economies on five continents (Fee, 2020). Chintz ignited global trade in fashion and prompted mass and mainstream manufacture of printed cloth. Historians considering consumption argue that the commodities imported into Europe from Asia, especially cottons (chintz), became significant in cultural terms because they shaped European innovations, imitation and taste (Riello, 2013). Today, as global trends increasingly prioritise craftsmanship and slower lifestyle choices, there is a corresponding enhancement in the recognition and appreciation of Indian culture, print variables and motif sensibilities that were part of the chintz appeal. Renuka Reddy is an example of an artisan reclaiming the manufacture of chintz in India today by re-creating the detailed account of Antoine Beaulieu to craft chintz by hand. Reddy has exhibited this process and reminds the world that this was not necessarily a design process but a set of techniques that amounted to what made historical chintz so special.

Few chintz pieces from the 17th and 18th centuries remain compared to the millions of cloth items that were exported and consumed during that time. These garments were printed on cotton, which tends to break down. Yet, research indicates that these intricately printed textiles were so valued that they were often upcycled into smaller garments, accessories or home furnishings, being passed down through families or shared among communities. For instance, Figure 01 showcases a Coromandel Coast cotton print from 1740 that was repurposed as a lining for a straw hat created between 1750 and 1780. This hat, produced decades after the fabric was originally printed, serves as a notable example of the enduring nature of these textiles. An exploration of chintz offers insight into its unique qualities and how it has transcended the cycles of fashion.

Using a methodology based on close reading and visual analysis, this paper illustrates a list of focus areas that define the qualities of chintz art in textiles and its success. By centring on the creative collaboration of stakeholders, the study uncovers the long tradition of creative processes that enhanced the enamour, appeal and success of the printed cloth. The research focuses on printed chintz specifically from India using hand techniques of kalamkari and block printing, both which later influenced the print revolution of Europe. The following areas of collaborative artistry and processes highlight the integral contributions of each stakeholder:

FREE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Design ideas sent to company agents in India were frequently accompanied by instructions to create in his own manner. The textile artisans added their own distinct flair, their personal handwriting. As a result, no two pieces were exact replicas. The Hindu craftsperson rarely copied exactly. Instead referencing foreign musters after his own manner (a phrase recurring in English East India Company records). Imposing upon the borrowed subject matter, it was precisely this indigenous contribution which had individuality and distinction to the designs and supplied what to the Europeans was their exotic appeal (Irwin & Brett, 1970). This free expression is the 'design leap' or 'creative act', a process Wang & Ilhan (2009) describe as the unpredictable provenance of creative acts — the brilliance of creating freely.

Hand-rendered sensibilities were embraced in the 17th and 18th centuries. The concept of accepting the particulars of an artist's work was celebrated and textile artisans were revered for

their creative flair and differences. In the 17th and 18th centuries, we can visualise the unboxing of a shipment of chintz cloth with delight over the cloths, impressed by the genius and creative spirit of the textile artists' works. By comparison, thousands of meters of printed fabrics are rejected today often due to trivial factors.

COLOUR GENIUS

Appreciating the art — and genius — of Indian chintz thus begins with appreciating the sophisticated techniques and colour chemistry developed by the subcontinent's artisans (Fee, 2020). The fastness of colour allowed (chintz) to be washed and to resist fading when exposed to light (Riello, 2013). The application of colour was an art that took many attempts to formulate and record in the 18th century, and the craft of resist application is one that Renuka Reddy has been inspired to recreate today. Reddy traces Father Corudoux's letter on the technique of Indian cotton painting in 1742 and 1747, as well as Beaulieu's account in 1734 (Fotheringham, 2015). Reddy shares the challenges of engaging with this process hundreds of years later, highlighting the effort and time spent to achieve such outcomes. Part of the majesty of chintz colours lies in the fact that humble ingredients were indispensable for achieving the durable and bold colours, including, but not limited to, buffalo milk, sunshine and animal dung, myrobalan fruit, tree gums, beeswax and rice starch. The formula revolved around key colours, and when initial chintz with red base grounds was received as sad by the account of the East India Company, artisans adapted to white base grounds with bold motifs and outlines. This shift to a neutral base colour contrasted with bold motifs exploded the demand and popularity for chintz in Western continents. These colour arrangements remained consistent over centuries.

TREE OF LIFE SYMBOLISM

The Tree of Life is a construct deeply embedded in India's ethos. TAPI collectors Shilpa and Praful Shah put the mystery of the chintz down to embedding the Kalpavriksha, a wish-fulfilling divine tree of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism religions. As the 18th century progressed, the flowering tree continued to evolve, at times becoming more overtly Chinese in style; this was especially apparent from 1770 with the addition of spiky leafed bamboo twining around (tree) trunks (Crill, 2020). The tree and its growing branches were always part of chintz design and remained a key metaphor for growth and life. Carl Jung (1934) claims that societies have always found their deepest value and sense of meaning in the realm of the mythic and transcendental. The mythic connotations of this growing tree remain part of chintz's design and storytelling, even today.

ADAPTING ARTWORK TO FOLLOW GARMENTS

As chintz made its way from home furnishings to fashion, its intricacies and layouts continued to evolve and adapt to suit fashion styles and yardages of fabric. Many archival examples demonstrate how border arrangements, motifs, repeat and overall designs were suited to fashions of the time, including the kimono-like banyan, which utilised the width of a selvedge, to full flared skirts that featured borders on the hem and sprawling tree motifs on the skirt. The repeats and artworks followed the cuts and fashions of the time and, perhaps in some cases, the opposite.

From the 1760s onwards, fabrics with vertically arranged motifs were fashionable in Europe and, consequently, chintzes were ordered with such designs. In its turn, the vertically patterned chintzes were imitated by printers across Europe (Hartkamp-Jonxis, 2023). Evidently, there was a conversation between print artwork and pattern cutting. This revered fabric was not to be wasted; many garments utilise chintz offcuts as facing and lining pieces, some with selvedge details still intact. A specific study of archival chintz garments in the future may allow for a further breakdown of analysis.

MYSTICAL EXOTICISM

Upon investigating the chintz, research showcased that reworking forms of inspiration in print textiles is not a new phenomenon and was a significant component of the chintz. Geiger (1979) describes the creation of textiles as connecting disciplines of ethnography, art history and collecting antiquities. Many printed textile artworks draw on existing motifs, references and imagery; this is a practice that is prevalent in textile inquiry and production today. McNeil & Riello (2016) describe the appeal of the ancient as sparking a fashion for the 'antique' that influenced everything from architecture to interior decoration and dress in the 18th century.

Many chintz designs feature a collective of motifs that amalgamate many references in one. The overall result was often a hybrid that included

original Indian influences, established canons in European textile design and some innovation introduced by the experienced eye of servants of the East India companies (Riello, 2013). Early chintz depicted flowering trees rooted in magnificent mounds formed by patterned shapes and often surrounded by intricate borders and vases with large bouquets. The mounds are said to look like Chinese hillocks, and could have been adapted along the way with pseudo Chinese design (Irwin & Brett, 1970). The trees, with their sinuous trunks, are said to reference 15th and 16th-century Persian and Islamic paintings and foot stones. The design(s) also resembles the rendering of trees carved in relief on a number of marble foot stones of Muslim graves in the vicinity of Pasai, in north Sumatra, Indonesia (Hartkamp-Jonxis, 2023). The flowering tree with sinuous trunks is also seen on the Sidi Saiyyed Mosque built in 1572-73 AD and is a famous mosque of Ahmedabad, a city in the state of Gujarat, India (Hartkamp-Jonxis, 2023). Several chintz designs with motifs closely referencing Japanese visual sources are preserved; these are often incorporated into fantastical scenes that become a mystical state of the imagination, not belonging purely to a single cultural origin. Once chintz had a foothold in the European market, many English and Dutch references and musters were sent to the artisans to incorporate into their designs. English flowers, distorted into something fanciful by Indian eyes to whom the plants were alien, were now welcomed in their new form as expressions of exotic fantasy (Irwin & Brett, 1970). Key chintz historians have located the exact sources referenced in chintz productions. Katherine Brett and John Irwin have made connections between 18th-century chintz and the British Publication 'Twelve Months of Flowers' by botanist Robert Furber, produced in 1730. Rosemary Crill highlights parallels to Jean Bèrain's 1710 architectural illustrations. Other Western elements fed directly into chintz designs, including the often strange re-workings of narrative prints, for example, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza incorporated into a tree design (Crill, 2008). The specificity of chintz inspiration is still in need of much further research, and Metsger (2020) conjectures that the imaginary flowers of chintz draw on the artist's experience of the rich flora of the Indian subcontinent and elsewhere — both in nature and art. Textile artists created scenes of morphological structures, embellishing them to create hyper-real imagery. Many chintz also added playful elements to otherwise formal layouts and designs; cavorting monkeys and fruit-stealing chipmunks are some of the many details incorporated. Majestic animals often took pride of place amongst the florals and scenes depicted. This playful relief allowed us a glimpse of relief from the artist's laborious work (Crill, 2020).

Overall, the fusion of fantasy and reality in delicately balanced proportions rendered the motifs and imagery included in chintz print artworks enchanting. This fantastical creativity blending references with imagination is an extension of free artistic expression, whereby the textile artists were given creative license alongside musters and references.

COTTON

Critical to chintz was the cotton it was printed on. This was finessed over the course of 5,000 years. Archaeological evidence links the domestication of one species, the so-called tree cotton (Gossypium arboreum), to the rise of the great Indus Valley civilisation that flourished from 3500 to 2000 BCE in the area bridging today's India and Pakistan (Fee, 2020). Reddy (2020) shares that even after approaching master weaver Jyotish Debnath, he was unable to reproduce a cotton similar to an original chintz today. Credit must lay in the majesty of the superbly weaved cotton fibre mastered in India.

UNDERSTANDING DEMAND: KNOWING THE MARKET

Indian artisans had already been dealing with customisation for centuries because they produced specific products for various Asian markets. Surviving artefacts show the flexibility of producers in adapting to the requirements of consumers from thousands of miles away (Riello, 2013). European East India companies displayed acute awareness of the importance of colours and designs, often conveying recommendations on what had to be purchased in India. Riello (2013) gives the example of the Dutch East India Company servants imparting orders that sarasa cloths had to have just one flower and a range of leaf patterns.

Irwin & Brett (1970) highlight a letter that marks the first known occasion on which directions were issued from London about adapting Indian patterns to suit Western taste. Before these sorts of instructions, the appeal had been simply that of novelty or curiosity combined with impressive qualities of cheapness and non-fugitive dyeing. In

1662, for the first time actual patterns were sent out for the Indian cotton-painters to copy:

"We now send you herewith inclosed, several patterns of Chints for your directions, and desire you to cause a considerable quantity to be made of those Workes"
India Office Records, Letter Book III p.161 (Irwin & Brett, 1970).

Raveux (2014) shares evidence of Marseilles client requests that can be found in a register of correspondence kept by the Marseilles trading house Tiran & Rampal in Smyrna between 1679 and 1683. An active relationship and consistent feedback loop continued to shape and refine chintz for the market.

CROSS CLASS DISSEMINATION

Chintz was a print motif that was adored by all and controversially disseminated class distinctions, age and gender. Its allure was so strong that consumers seemed indifferent to who else might wear the same design. In the 18th century, chintzes democratised the consumer market in Northern Europe as the upcoming middle class could afford to buy low-priced chintzes with simple, floral motifs. For the more well-to-do market, chintzes with more intricate patterns were available. Lemire (2003) has emphasised the importance of creating new distribution channels and fostering established ones (shops, second hand, peddlers etc), which allowed the new fabric to reach all consumers, rich and poor alike. These physical spaces allowed consumers to learn and discuss trends and tastes and appreciate both textile art and garments. These spaces fostered community, interests and an appreciation of the arts and fashion.

The above eight focus areas demonstrate the partnering of both artistry and design. These are not separate disciplines, but intertwined. The pairing of design strategies such as print repeat and fostering markets with free expressive artistry demonstrates an ability to create longevity. Reflections on historical chintz give way to opportunities to create and foster garments, printed textiles and stakeholder relationships in a new way in the 21st century.

FUTURE

"What is consider(ed) worthy of saving in this world and what do we let go?" Rithika Merchant, 2021

As observed in Former, chintz was not a decorative artwork sought to be applied to exisiting fashion, trends or garments. It was a collection of artistry, techniques and a collaborative community that worked together. This community collaborated to form the artwork, patterns, shapes, designs and market them even from a distance. This feels absent today. As McQuillan & Rissanen (2020) identify, the traditional separation of design roles in fashion, particularly in larger mass-market and ready-to-wear companies, is a key challenge for fashion design (solutions) and further distances fashion design from issues it could address. Wood (2007) further highlights that design needs to become an integration of disciplines; in this regard, meta-design is a methodology to nurture the emergence of new ways of designing that forge creative links across industries. Whilst examining historical chintz practices the forces of both artistry and design intertwine. The *je ne se quais* of printed chintz is challenging to define to one certain attribute, but perhaps the collaborative fusion of art and design aided the historical allure. A contemporary observation of design following art is pointed out by McQuillan & Rissanen (2020) in Zandra Rhodes' Silk Crepe de Chîne Wrap Dress 'Chinese Squares' from the Chinese Collection Spring/ Summer, 1980 (Fig. 02). This is a demonstration of print, pattern and yardage working together. In this regard, the textile leads the garment design, with the pattern cut around the hand-painted square motif to not disrupt the painted lines and form. In an industry where design and pattern cutting have often led textile design, a major opportunity is presented to work with design and pattern cutting to optimal outcomes, as was often the case with chintz. Zandra Rhodes' Chinese Square example displays this possibility, yet it is not often the case in commercial fashion. The current fashion system supports a model where artworks are often purchased from a catalogue of seasonal designs and made to work or fit within existing patterns, designs and seasonal staple garments.

Most textile designers do not have their names associated with their fashion artworks but are often recognised as artists in other practices. In today's digital economy, it should be standard

Fig. 02

to trace the origins and recognise the artisans behind fashion creations. Textile designer Zandra Rhodes stands out as a notable example, having gained decades of recognition for her collaborative designs, including recent partnerships with Celia B in 2024 and Valentino in 2016. Another example is Rithika Merchant, who collaborated with Chloe in 2018 to bring her art to life across various textile mediums and has partnered with Dior in 2025. Merchant's work invokes a mystical blend of symbolism, personal inspiration and storytelling, key components seen in use with chintz. At the recent Dior couture showcase in 2025, Dior collaborated with Merchant to bring to life the stories of her ancestors through the series 'The Flowers We Grew'. Merchant's artworks were translated into stitch by the master artisans of Chanakya and the graduate women students of the Chanakya School of Craft, Mumbai. The collaboration highlights the intertwined relationship of all stakeholders. Whilst Merchant's art was not part of the fashion garments, it was immersed into the haute couture experience, with the artworks exhibited for a period after the show had closed.

Fashion and textile hybrids Zandra Rhodes and Rithika Merchant pave the way for respective collaborations that not only recognise their art and personal aesthetic but intertwine it with fashion design and sensibilities around cut, shape and fit. This engagement in the creative process fuels the majesty of these garments; these are pieces to be cherished by collectors in the same way chintz fashions were once upon a time.

CONCLUSION

This historical analysis of chintz presents a model that bridges the gap between fashion and textile design, emphasising a co-creation process that is intrinsically connected. This process adds value to garments and highlights the unique qualities of each fashion piece. By fostering a collaborative spirit, it contrasts with the current mechanical processes that recycle ideas, trends and patterns, leading to increased consumption.

The positive impact of transitioning to a chintz-inspired model, as illustrated in FORMER is evidenced by both Rhodes and Merchant. This shift aims to slow down the rate of discardment and foster a deeper connection between wearers and their garments. Moving away from a programmed model of fashion, which Fletcher (2014) describes as passive or closed, adds value to fashion and combats rapid consumption and waste.

In this context, a garment is less likely to be discarded thoughtlessly; its fate should not be relegated to oblivion, which, in reality, means ending up in landfills. The visual appeal of a garment should outweigh the fleeting visuals of the digital age and its permanence deserves reverence. The printed textile artworks on garments tell stories, evoke emotions, and showcase artistry that enhances their allure and significance. With greater connectivity to our clothing, there is hope that each garment will be cherished for decades and passed down through generations, much like the chintz textile highlighted in Figure 01 (Fig. 03).

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Coromandal Coast Cotton (1740) made into a straw hat lining approx 1750-1780,
Dutch Republic Hartkamp-Jonxis, E. (2023).
When Indian flowers bloomed in Europe: Masterworks of Indian trade textiles, 1600-1780, in the TAPI collection.

[Fig. 02] Silk Crepe de Chîne Wrap Dress 'Chinese Squares', Chinese Collection Spring/Summer, 1980, Collection of the San Diego History Center, Gift of Lucretia G. Morrow, Copyright Zandra Rhodes.

[Fig. 03] Rithika Merchant 'The Flowers We Grew'. (2025, January). https://www.dior.com. https://www.dior.com/

Fig. 03

en_au/fashion/womens-fashion/haute-couture-shows/the-flowers-we-grew

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