
Block Printing: As An Art

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Abstract

India, since ancient times is known for its unique arts and crafts. Different types of hand printing techniques are used in this country by people of varied customs and culture. One of the most popular form of hand printing is - Hand block printing. The art of Indian block print textiles is a labor-intensive, painstaking process that has survived from ancient times to the present because of the beauty of the handmade products. Scraps of cloth found in the ruins of Mohenjo Daro, an ancient city of the Indus Valley Civilization, provide evidence that block printing was practiced in India as long ago as 3000 BCE. The art flourished in the 12th century under the patronage of the rajas. The 17th century saw a revitalization of the art. And still, here in the 21st century, block printing of fabric by hand is an art practiced by Indian artisans for the enjoyment of owners of those fabrics throughout the world. The three main tools of a block printed fabric are the wooden blocks, the fabric and the dye. It can take five carvers up to three days to create an intricate design in a block of teak for use as a printing block.

Keywords: Crafts, Printing, Blocks, Fabric

Introduction

India, since ancient times is known for its unique arts and crafts. Different types of hand printing techniques are used in this country by people of varied customs and culture. Applying coloured patterns and designs to decorate a finished fabric is called 'Printing'. One of the most popular form of hand printing is - Hand block printing. This art of printing has been in use since ancient times, but now-a-days it has found place in metropolitan cities of India and also the garments with hand block printing are being exported to different countries worldwide.

The major centres in India where block printing is done on large scale are:- Gujarat (Surat, Ahmedabad, Sangner, Pethapur), Rajasthan (Bagru), Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh (Farukhabad), West Bengal.

There are two types block printing famous in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan namely- Sangneri and Bagru. These two styles of block printing are almost same, the thing which primarily distinguish them from one another is the colour of background on which they are printed. Bagru prints are done on black and red background whereas Sangneri is done on white background. In western part of India the block prints are typically fine, however in eastern part the prints are bolder and bigger. Lepakshi and Ajarakh prints are also examples of the type of block prints. The unique feature of this printing is the amount of printing variations that can be made in the same type of motifs.

Sources of Inspiration

Block printed designs are enamouring. The imprints when impressed on the cloth add an amusing allure to the cloth. Be it bed linen, fabric for apparel or the curtains for your wall, hand block printing is the choicest style for innumerable years in the Indian handloom industry. Unlike the Phoolkari or most other design trends, hand block printing takes its cue from the age old form of arts like Mehendi Designs, and from abstract designs. A wide variety in design and the creative ability of a designer enables a range of patterns varying from simple waves and circles to more elaborate designs. The smaller patterns were at a time known as 'Chintz'. 'Buti', Buta, 'Jhal', 'Bel' formed the components of each block print.

Different Techniques of Hand Block printing

1) Discharge Printing

Firstly the fabric on which printing is to be done is dyed. The dye is removed from the part of fabric on which designs are to be made by use of a chemical. Then those segments printed are treated so that they can be re-coloured.

2) Direct Block Printing

The fabric used here is either cotton or silk. The cloth is first bleached, and then dyed with the desired colour. After that block printing is done on borders with carved wooden blocks then inside the borders.

3) Resist Printing

In this technique the part of the cloth which is not to be dyed is covered with the paste of resin and clay. Then the fabric is dyed with the desirable colour, at this stage the dye penetrates through the cracks which create wavy effect of colours on the cloth. After this the fabric is finally block printed.

Rich and colourful prints can be created through block printing. In olden times it was done with natural dyes but now it is done with artificial colours and synthetic dyes. The colours commonly used for printing are saffron, yellow, blue and red. The wooden blocks are used for printing. They are of different shapes and have designs carved at the bottom of the block. Teak wood is used for making them on which designs are made by skilled craftsman. These blocks are known as Bunta. Every block consists of a wooden handle and 2-3 holes which are made for the purpose of free movement of air. The blocks before taken into use are kept in oil for 10-15 days, which provide the them the softness required.

Procedure of Hand Block Printing

- **Preparation of colours**

The art of making colours for textile printing demands both chemical knowledge and extensive technical experience, for their ingredients must not only be in proper proportion to each other, but also specially chosen and compounded for the particular style of work in hand. A colour must comply to conditions such as shade, quality and fastness; where more colours are associated in the same design each must be capable of withstanding the various

operations necessary for the development and fixation of the others. All printing pastes whether containing colouring matter or not are known technically as colours.

- At the beginning of the block printing process the fabric is first washed then bleached (if required). For a coloured ground it is then dyed.
- The cloth has always to be brushed, to free it from loose nap, flocks and dust that it picks up whilst stored. Frequently, too, it has to be sheared by being passed over rapidly revolving knives arranged spirally round an axle, which rapidly and effectually cuts off all filaments and knots, leaving the cloth perfectly smooth and clean and in a condition fit to receive impressions of the most delicate engraving. Some fabrics require very careful stretching and straightening on a stenter before they are wound around hollow wooden or iron centers into rolls of convenient size for mounting on the printing machines.
- If the borders are to be made, then the cloth at the border area are tied then dyed. After that the fabric is spread on the printing table and fixed firmly with small pins on the table.
- The process of block printing is done from left to right. The wooden block is dipped in colour tray then applied by pressing it hardly on the cloth. The point on the block facilitate in sequenced repeat printing.
- Good printing skill and practice is necessary to get uniform and clear block printing. The time duration and costing for printing depends upon the number of different colours used i.e. single colour printing takes less time and is of low cost whereas two or more colours printing requires more time, hard work and colours.
- Multiple design printing cannot be done by one printer only, so two or more printers are required to (according to the designs) do the job. In block printing providing colour variations is not an easy task. The colours are generally tested for their fastness and effect before applying on the garment.
- Different types of dyes are use for printing cotton fabric- such as indigo sol, pigment dyes and rapid fast dyes. The rapid dyes once prepared for printing have to be utilized on that day only.
- Pigment colours are used more as its procedure for usage is simpler compared to other dyes and after mixing them for printing it is not necessary to use them the same day only as they can stored for some time provided they have to be stored in containers having lids to cover it. The pigment colours before the application has to mixed in right proportion with kerosene and binder.
- New shades are obtained by combination of basic colours in different proportions. The drawbacks of pigment colours are that, they consists of tiny particles which don't dissolve completely as a result are left as residue on the fabric. Whereas, indigo sols and rapid dyes gets completely soaked into the cloth. Indigo sols do provide vibrant colours like pinks and greens.

- After printing the garment is dried in the sun, which fixes the dye to the cloth. Then each layer of cloth is rolled in newspaper and steamed in boilers. This procedure of steaming is done for both silk and cotton fabric. This steaming process is followed by washing, drying of fabric in the sun and at last ironing.
- This whole procedure fixes the print permanently on the garment.

Various garments like saris, kurtas, shirts, salwar kameez, dupattas, skirts, etc are made from block printed fabrics. In recent times the export of block printed garments have seen a steep increase as its demand has increased especially in western countries because of its durability and distinctive patterns and designs.

Facts and Comparisons

- Hand block printing will cost you five times less than a Phulkari and is five times more popular than it
- The state of Rajasthan is the home of hand block printing
- Hand block printing technique is used in almost every industry related to fashion and interiors
- Use of natural colours has increased the demand for hand block printing by more than 40%
- It is extremely difficult to find out whether a fabric is screen printed or block printed
- During the Mughal era, the block printing technique was a design technique much admired by the imperial class.

Future of Block Printing

The future of block printing looks quite impressive from the point where the industry stands today. Hand block printing have reached a point where further innovation is required in the process of printing. From blocks, it is now time to move on to something more customized, where people can contribute in the designing of the prints and impressions. Just like engraving, where people can customize utilities, hand block printing should be made more customization oriented.

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