

Creating wonders, *block by block*

India is one of the largest manufacturers and exporters of block printed fabric in the world

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From trees to animals to famous international buildings, all find a way to Indian hand block printing designs

The first mention of block prints in India can be traced back to the 12th century. Over time, the southern, western and eastern coasts in the country became popular hot spots for high quality hand block printed textiles and soon India became one of

the largest manufacturers and exporters of block printed fabric globally. Reason why the art form flourished in India was due to its acceptability by the royalty.

In India, three types of block printing have long been in use. The first is direct printing where the fabric (silk or cotton) is bleached and

then dyed. Thereafter, it is printed, first using the outline blocks followed by the ones to fill colours. The second is resist printing where the areas that need to be protected from the dye are covered with a clay-resin mix. It is then washed with the dye spreading into the protected areas through cracks, producing a rippled effect. This is followed by block prints to create more designs. The third is discharge printing wherein the fabric is first dyed and then a chemical is used to remove the dye from the areas that have designs in other colours. These areas are re-treated so that they can be re-coloured.

Gujarat and Rajasthan are the most prominent centres for production of hand block printed fabrics. In fact, a number of cities in Gujarat started exporting painted and printed calicoes (a tightly woven cotton cloth having repeating, often floral designs)

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as long back as the 17th century. The families of Paithapur in the state have been famous for creating intricate blocks and print textiles using mud-resistant technique called Sodagiri prints. Another village, Dhamadka is famous for block printed fabric, *ajrakh*, with geometric patterns. In Kutch region, popular patterns include black and red designs of animals, birds and dancing girls. Other famous hand block centres in the state include Bhavnagar, Jamnagar, Porbandar, Jetpur and Rajkot.

In Rajasthan, hand block printing is one of the top recognised textile crafts with different regions boasting of their own techniques, designs and colour schemes. While Sanganer is famous for calico-printed bed covers, quilts and saris wherein the outlines are first printed and thereafter, colour is filled in, Bagru is famous for its Dabu and Syahi-Begar prints wherein



Far left: A model wearing jacket and skirt with floral patterns; left: A hand block printed stole; below: A cushion cover with multicoloured hand block print





Clockwise from above: A wooden block used for hand block printing; a hand block printing artist at the International Trade Malaysia (INTRADE 2011) Exhibition in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; a woman printing a pattern on a piece of cloth



the former are designs in a combination of yellow ochre or cream with black and latter are prints in which portions are hidden from the dye by applying a resin paste.

Like most Indian crafts, hand block printing is passed from one generation to the next. With a tool kit including hammers, drills and miniature chisels, intricate patterns or designs are carved on to a block of teak wood with a wooden handle. These blocks vary in size and shape. But before these wooden blocks are used, they are soaked in mustard oil for a week to ensure the wood does not crack up when exposed to dry conditions of the printing process.

The process of block printing is a time-consuming and requires skill and teamwork. The three main tools of a block printed fabric are wooden blocks, fabric and dyes. With an incredible hand-eye coordination, the first block is aligned to the bottom left





An intricate hand block print

corner of the fabric. A sharp tap releases the *dabu* (a smooth paste which combines well-sieved and soaked black earth, tree gum and a powder from wheat grains paste to merge together) onto the cloth. The same process is repeated along the length and width of the fabric. To prevent the design from smudging, fine sawdust is scattered over the wet *dabu* once it has been printed. The printed portion is then sealed from the subsequent dyeing process. As soon as the sawdust has been scattered, the fabric is taken out in the sun to dry.

Apart from Gujarat and Rajasthan, the art form thrives in the states of Punjab, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. While

textile workers called Chhimba create floral and geometrical designs in Punjab, Andhra Pradesh is home to the block printing method which is applied to create exquisite *kalamkari* (a combination of hand painting and block printing) paintings.

Hand block printing artists in West Bengal's Serampur district create contemporary and traditional designs in bold and vibrant patterns.

With global audience increasingly becoming environment-conscious, this

age-old art form, replete with eco-friendly advantages, has gained worldwide popularity with the use of dyes made from natural and vegetable sources for making abstract designs and creative products.

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