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Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

DYED FABRICS
Indian Block Printing

DF 52

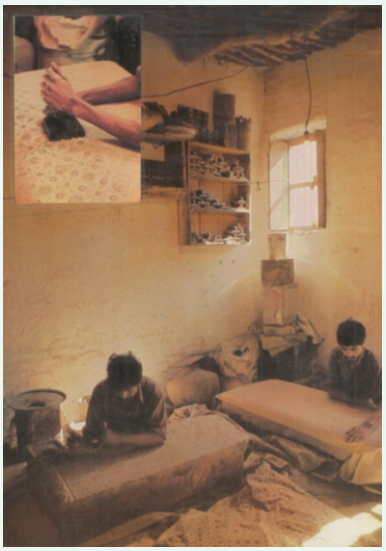


Hand printing fabrics using block of wood is widespread in the Indian subcontinent, but the areas traditionally associated with the craft are Rajasthan and Gujarat, in the north-west of India, next to the border with Pakistan.

The main tools of the printer are wooden blocks in different shapes and sizes called *bunta*. Blocks are made of seasoned teak wood (called *seesham*) by trained craftsmen. The underside of the block has the design etched on it. Traditionally each block has a wooden handle. Each colour in a design needs a separate wooden block. Some blocks have cylindrical holes drilled into them to allow the air to pass through and to release excess printing paste. The new blocks are soaked in oil for 10-15 days to soften the grains in the timber.

The printer works using a wooden trolley with racks, which has castor wheels fastened to its legs to facilitate free movement. The printer drags it along as s/he works. On the upper most shelf trays of dye are placed. On the lower shelves printing blocks are kept ready.

The fabric to be printed is washed free of starch and soft bleached if the natural grey of the fabric is not desired. If dyeing is required as in the case of saris, where borders, or the body is tied and dyed, it is done before printing. The fabric is stretched over the printing table and fastened with small pins.



The printing starts from left to right. The colour is evened out in the tray with a wedge of wood and the block dipped into the outline colour (in this case a dark red). When the block is applied to the fabric, it is slammed hard with the fist on the back of the handle so that a good impression may register. Sometimes a point on the block serves as a guide for the repeat impression, so that the whole effect is continuous and not disjointed.

Left: Block printing in a family workshop. Note the blocks stacked up on the shelves on the wall.

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The outline printer is usually an expert because s/he is the one who leads the process. If it is a multiple colour design a second printer dips their block in the next colour and uses the point or guide for a perfect registration - and so on, gradually building up a complex colourful pattern. Skill is necessary for good printing since the colours need to dovetail to make it a satisfying whole.

Different dyes are used for silk and cotton. Traditionally vegetable dyes were used, but in modern times factory made products have become increasingly common. After printing the dye needs to be fixed into the cloth so that it won't wash out.

The lengths of cloth are then rolled in wads of newspapers to prevent the dye from adhering to other layers and steamed in boilers constructed for the purpose. After steaming, the material is washed thoroughly in large quantities of water and dried in the sun, after which it is ironed.

Block printing combines craftsmanship with factory methods. It can be quite time consuming, but far less so than, say, embroidery. In the days before machines it allowed the production of large amounts of regularly patterned cloth. The disadvantage is that the pressure to work quickly results in the misalignment of patterns and colours.

Most printing blocks have geometric or floral designs on them. The blocks in this box are created more for the tourist market than for use in India. Nevertheless, some fabrics do feature images of animals such as those which can be seen on these examples.

Textile printing is an ancient art. Although the time and place of origin are uncertain, examples of Greek block printed fabrics from the fourth century BC have been found. The technique was also used in Japan and Indonesia. In Britain the contact with India brought about by the growth of the British Empire led to block printed fabrics becoming increasingly well known and popular. The English designer William Morris was influenced by Indian patterns when he designed block printed cotton fabric and wallpapers in late nineteenth century.



