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Research Article

PROMOTION AND SUSTAINABILITY OF A TEXTILE CRAFT: A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

A designer creates designs that are attractive and functional and uniquely suited to the human needs. Architecture can be an inspiration for a fashion design. It may seem a little surprising to use an architectural building as an inspiration for textile and fashion design, but all examples of architecture, can cause a creative spark to the designer.

When the world is buzzing with “sustainability” and “environment-friendly” as the newest big trends of the future, for many centuries, innumerable crafts have existed in harmony with nature. One such craft is the Ajrakh block printing. Traditionally, Ajrakh is the name of a block printed cloth with deep crimson red and indigo blue background, bearing symmetrical patterns with interspersed unprinted sparkling white motifs. This research is an endeavour to contemporize the preliminary resist technique called Rekh used in Ajrakh printing and to create a collection of ensembles that feature a range of ready to wear garments. The silhouettes are contemporary and wearable with simple highlights. The print inspiration is the city of Vadodara, using the “Vad”- Banyan tree combined with print derived from the 4 gates of the old city. The textiles have been printed using resist technique (rekh) on Mashru fabric. The use of natural dyes makes this collection sustainable and skin friendly.

This craft has been on a decline because modern, quicker methods of printing and bright chemical dyes are replacing the natural, muted colours. But with efforts of the master craftsmen and increasing awareness among the urban people, this craft is slowly gaining momentum. Because of being an environment friendly ancient craft, Ajrakh, is slowly gaining visibility among the cosmopolitan.

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INTRODUCTION

Textile Crafts of India: Current Status

Textile heritage is part of our culture and if we lose these, we will lose an important aspect of our culture. Our aim is not just to empower artisans, but also to encourage the younger generation in artisan families to learn and continue evolving these heritage crafts. This can only be achieved when craftsmen not only get recognition, but also opportunities to create, innovate and sustain the art.

Instead of giving the artisans a livelihood, we aim to enable them to innovate and create a market for their craft. The goal is to make India's hand-crafted textiles as inspiring as any global brand. This will inspire the younger generation in artisan families to preserve their generations-old textile craftsmanship.

A glimpse into the Art of Ajrakh printing

The word ‘Ajrakh’ is believed to have a number of different meanings. According to some historians it has originated from the two words in Hindi-Aaj rakh, meaning ‘keep it today’. It also stands for “making beautiful” according to other sources. The word Ajrakh is also said to have been coined from the word “azrak” meaning blue in the Arabic language.

Ajrakh is one of the oldest types of block printing on textiles still practiced in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan in India, and in Sindh in Pakistan. In Gujarat, the main centers of Ajrakh are Dhamadka, Khavda and Ajrakhpur. Ajrakh can be said to be of two types- Ek-puri, which is printed on only one side and Bi-puri, which is printed on both the sides and hence is a double-sided fabric.

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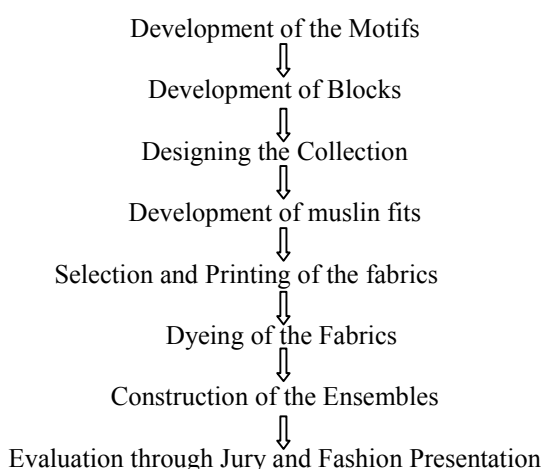
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A resist of lime and gum arabic is printed on to the cloth to define the outline of the design. This is known as Rekh. If the cloth is to be double sided, this stage is repeated on the reverse side of the cloth.

Purpose of the project

Often traditional arts or handicrafts do not get the rightful attention. These craft die a slow death eventually. The art of Ajrakh printing which is now practiced by very few artisans is undergoing the same destiny. Hence this project was undertaken to promote the art to make it coterporarized as per to days market needs with silhouettes that are contemporary and wearable with simple highlights. The use of natural dyes makes this collection sustainable and skinfriendly. Also the idea behind using Rekh only instead of complete process was to add a different dimension to the fabric.

Research Design



METHODOLOGY

Development of Motifs

The inspiration for developing motifs were the two things with which our city of Vadodara is identified. The first being the “ Vad” or the Banyan tree and the second The four gates of the old city in form of a map.



On the West is the Laheripura Gate, on the South is the Champaner Gate, on the East is the Pani Gate and to the South it the Gendi Gate. The centre of the city has the pavillion called the Mandvi.

Development of the blocks

Once the motifs were developed they were sent to Ajrakhpur to Shri Abdullah Khatri -(State level Award winner 2015)for block carving. Finally two sets of blocks were prepared.

Designing of the collection



The major objectives that were kept in mind while designing the ensembles were minimalism, wear ability, contemporarization and market acceptability.

Hence an array of ensembles were designed which included skirts, shorts, palazzos, tunics and saree.

Firstly the garments were made in muslin fits so that the fittings could be checked on the models and the necessary changes could be made.

Along with this the placement of the motifs were also decided.

Selection of Fabrics

The fabric that was selected the entire collection was plain Mashru fabric which was dyed in beige, black and red colour.

Printing of Fabric for the collection

- The cloth was washed in water to remove any finish applied in the mill or workshop. It is crucial to remove these finishes for the dye to fix to the cloth. This was followed by a process known as Saaj which involves soaking the cloth in a solution of castor oil, soda ash and camel dung overnight, and leaving to dry the following day in the sun.
- The cloth is dyed in a cold solution of Myrobalan (powdered nut of the harde tree). Myrobalan turns the cloth into yellow color and works as a mordant, helping to fix the dyes. The cloth is then laid flat to dry in the hot sun. This process is called Kasano.
- Khariyanu stage. A resist of lime and gum arabic is printed on to the cloth to define the outline of the design. This is known as Rekh. If the cloth is to be double sided, this stage is repeated on the reverse side of the cloth.



Dyeing of the Fabric

- A paste was made by fermenting scrap iron (horse shoes, etc), *jaggery* (raw cane sugar) and *besan* (gram flour). This mixture was left to ferment which takes about one week in the hot season and two weeks during the cold season; a yellowish scum on the surface of the mixture indicates that it is ready for use. The liquid, or “iron water” was drained off and added to tamarind seed powder. The iron and tamarind solution was thoroughly mixed, and then boiled for one hour. The resulting “iron paste” was printed on to the cloth (*kat*) the colour is black.
- Tamarind seed powder was mixed with alum (aluminium sulphate) and then boiled for one hour to produce a printing paste for red areas of the design. Traditionally *geru* (red clay) was used but chemical dye is now more common. Printing of the alum paste is known as *kan*.



Construction of the ensembles

Once the fabric was dyed and printed the garments were stitched and checked for the fitting.

Evaluation of the collection

The collection was evaluated by a jury and also through a fashion presentation. It was considered very appealing and commercially viable and received the best collection award during Kairos 2017, Annual Fashion Show of Textile and Apparel Design, Institute of Fashion Technology Faculty of Family and Community Sciences, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.

CONCLUSION

Traditional fabrics in contemporary silhouettes are definitely finding favour among today's generation. This is evident from the works of many designers such as Sanjay Garg, Anavila Misra, Rahul Mishra and Aneeth Arora to name a few. Billimoria is all for this revival by new-age designers. "Our textiles need active revival by all leading designers, due remuneration for the hardworking artisans for their craft and good working conditions. By adapting the multiple warp and weft techniques, many fusion and contemporary styles can be created for modern fashion lovers.

By adapting this culture of reviving old art forms we will only make our heritage richer and support this amazing art of making fabric and translate that into timeless beauty." As beautiful as these textiles are, the sad truth is that many a craft is now dying owing to the current generation opting for more viable career options. Dongre agrees, "The sorry fact is that this is a tradition which survives by passing on its legacy and wisdom from fathers and mothers to sons and daughters, down generations. Today, most children are not keen on taking up the tradition as they do not see monetary value in this art form."

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