





In bloom

Avalon Fotheringham was delighted to have a second chance to see a significant exhibition of Indian textiles from the TAPI collection—and to find it expanded and updated



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1 Court dress (*dodot*, detail), Coromandel Coast, India, 18th century. Cotton, 2.18 x 3.10 m (7' 2" x 10' 2"). TAPI, 00.187. Traded to Indonesia, where it was used in Java

2 Heirloom textile with hamsa pattern (*maa'*, detail), Gujarat, India, C14-dated 1250–1350 CE. Cotton, 1.02 x 4.04 m (3' 4" x 13' 3"). TAPI, 01.92. Traded to Indonesia, where it was used in Sulawesi



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When the TAPI collection first opened the exhibition 'When Indian Flowers Bloomed in Distant Lands' at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya museum in Mumbai in 2023, there was a general rush among Indian textile lovers to get to the show (see HALI 214–215). Founded by Praful and Shilpa Shah, the TAPI collection is one of the most renowned private collections of Indian textiles in the world, and its exhibitions are never to be missed. However, the five-week run of the 2023 show was all-too short for many to get to Mumbai in time.

It was therefore a great joy to learn that the show had reopened for a generous four-month run (8 December 2024–13 April 2025) in the Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum, Ahmedabad, just down the road from the Calico Museum of Textiles. Subtitled 'Masterworks of Indian Trade Textiles 1250–1950 in the Tapi Collection', it explored over 700 years of the Indian textile trade through material designed for markets on four continents. Curated by Deepika Shah, the display expanded on the 2023 exhibition by bringing the story up to the mid-20th century and taking it to new and farther coasts.

The narrative was traced through seventy-one pieces, including epic Southeast Asian market banner cloths, mammoth European market Kashmir shawls, tiny fragments of Japanese-market





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chintz, bright West-African market Madras handkerchiefs and much more—all testaments to India's indelible impacts on cultures around the globe.

The exhibition was mounted in the Lalbhai Gallery, a space divided into two spacious rooms adjoining a shared courtyard entrance. Shah used the physical division of the two rooms to her advantage by splitting the exhibition into eastern and western trade, with each hemisphere explored in its own room.

Although the Lalbhai is a sunken gallery space, both rooms are more than bright enough to allow appreciation of the spectacular colours of the fabrics and let visitors glory in their finest details. The casing of the wall-mounted flat textiles in extremely shallow frames allowed for the closest possible study of even the tiniest embroidery stitches and hand-drawn lines, while the displays of mounted dress broke up the visitor journey with moments of drape and texture.

On entering the eastern trade section, titled 'Patterns of Prestige: The Textile Trade to the East', visitors were greeted with a panorama of Southeast Asian market trade cloths representing every established design typology. As the section's opening text described, 'The insatiable appetite for Indian cloth is evident in the sheer volume and variety of textiles exported to Asia,' and volume and variety is certainly what the show delivered.

The eastern trade section included the earliest textiles in the show, the oldest of which has been carbon-dated to 1250–1350 (2). Such pieces are commonly referred to as 'heirloom' textiles, referring to their careful preservation as heirlooms passed down by their owners over generations. Among these are several well-known styles of Southeast Asian trade cloths: a red-ground resist-printed *hamsa* (sacred goose) *maa'* (2); double-ikat silk *patola* with marching elephants (3); an imposing *mata hari* with its central red sun; and a hand-drawn and dyed 'patchwork' design *dodot* (1). Any display of Southeast Asian-market trade cloths would be incomplete without these and other iconic styles, which together represent India's dominance of Southeast Asian textile markets.

Alongside these pieces, however, were lesser-seen works which attest to the range and quality of the TAPI collection. A Japanese collector's album of *sarasa* fragments showcased both Japan's deep admiration for Indian chintz and the range of chintz styles exported to Japanese shores (4). A late-18th-century Thai *su'a senakut* (soldier's tunic) painted with a demonic face (one of only a handful of examples worldwide) demonstrated how integral Indian chintz was to the material culture of the Thai court (5). And the individually hand-drawn feathers of the nearly life-sized peacock emblazoned on a *Monara Kodiya*, or peacock flag, offered insight into the important ceremonial roles played by Indian chintz in Sri Lanka (6).



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3 Ceremonial cloth (*patolu*, detail), Gujarat, India, 18th century. Double-ikat silk, 1.08 x 5.00 m (3' 7" x 16' 5"). TAPI, 05.34. Traded to Indonesia

4 Album of 150 hand-drawn *sarasa* of mordant and resist-dyed cotton, Coromandel Coast, India, ca. 1700–1850. Book: 35 x 48 cm (1' 2" x 1' 7"). TAPI, 07.127. Textiles traded to Japan

5 Thai soldier's tunic (*su'a senakut*), Coromandel Coast, India, late 18th century. Mordant and resist-dyed cotton, 1.16 x 0.76 m (3' 10" x 2' 6"). TAPI, 21.33. Traded to Thailand

6 Provincial flag, Coromandel Coast, India, for export to Sri Lanka, ca. 1775. Mordant and resist-dyed cotton, 1.30 x 1.57 m (4' 3" x 5' 2"). TAPI, 03.130



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One of the most exciting pieces in the eastern trade section was a hand-drawn mordant- and resist-dyed banner cloth depicting a Nayak ruler and his courtesans celebrating *Vasantotsava* (a spring festival). Dated to the early 18th century and believed to be unique, the banner is filled with vignettes of the ruler and his ladies playfully spraying coloured water on each other across a deep and verdant red field (7).

This cloth rewards as much study as time will allow to contemplate the extraordinary richness of its details. The ruler with his dark purple skin ‘embodying Krishna in his *leela*’ cavorts among the women, each depicted with her own unique combination of skin tone, clothing and pose. The drapes of their garments are sensitively portrayed in falls, pleats, ties and wraps, the subtly drawn outlines of their bodies suggesting the fineness of the fabrics.

The patterns of each garment are also unique, forming a compendium of motifs imitating multi-hued *bandhani*, hand-drawn floral *chintz*, block-printed *butis* and bold stripes. In John Guy’s essay on the piece published in *Sultan’s of the South: Arts of India’s Deccani Courts, 1323–1687*, he notes that the various designs of the women’s clothing may be ‘intended to denote the regional origins of the women of the *zenana*, thus graphically illustrating the territorial reach of the ruler they serve’. The dynamic postures of their bodies, swinging jasmine-covered plaits and flying *pallus* all combine to create a composition bursting with the joy of celebration.

Though not as finely drawn, the style and technical characteristics of this piece can be closely compared to a recently discovered set of



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17th-century kalamkari hangings depicting scenes from a Nayak court (published in *HALI* 203, pp. 64–65). However, while that group was produced for domestic consumption, the format of the TAPI piece is clearly related to the ceremonial *maa’* made for Indonesian markets. Indeed, this piece was collected from Sulawesi, Indonesia, but the circumstances of its commission and voyage east remain a mystery.

In the section titled ‘Designs on the World: The Indian Textile Trade to the West’, visitors were taken on a journey touching the Middle East, West Africa, Europe and the Americas. While each of the pieces in this section was likewise an exemplary representative of larger Indian trade textile typologies, several were especially fascinating for their rare or unique features.

The TAPI’s phenomenal early 18th-century embroidered *palampore*, last on show in Mumbai in the blockbuster 2023 exhibition ‘India in Fashion’, is one of only a handful of known examples in the world (9). The opportunity to examine its astounding workmanship at such close range—close enough to catch the wisps of guide drawings below a butterfly’s embroidered antennae—was a rare privilege.

In fact, this proximity made every piece equally a delight to discover: getting near enough to a quilted *chintz palampore* to trace how its bright yellow quilting stitches were worked along the outlines of its flowers, making them practically invisible; to contemplate the skill and labour of the *kani* weavers who made the massive, psychedelic Kashmir shawls esteemed by French princesses and Russian traders; and to ponder the



7 Ceremonial hanging of king and consorts (detail), Coromandel Coast, India, for export to Indonesia, ca. 1700–1720. Mordant and resist-dyed cotton, painted details, 1.00 x 6.96 m (3' 3" x 22' 10"). TAPI, 07.121. Used in Donggala-Poso, Sulawesi

8 Sultan Hamengku Buwono V (1820–1855) of Yogyakarta, Java, wearing patola trousers, 19th century. TAPI, A.07.38 (24)

9 Embroidered palampore, Gujarat, India, for export to the Dutch Republic, ca. 1720–1740. Cotton embroidered with silk thread in chain stitch, 2.16 x 2.65 m (7' 1" x 8' 8"). TAPI, 00.108



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origin of the silver-wrapped thread chain-stitched on a never-used chintz shaving cloth that made its way to New Canaan, Connecticut.

One of Shah's most significant contributions to the 2025 version of the show was the expansion of its narrative into West African and Caribbean-market trade cloths. Both stories are told through the medium of Madras, multicoloured checked cotton handkerchiefs made in South India. Trade records indicate that Madras handkerchiefs were traded to West Africa as early as the 1730s, one of many varieties of Indian textiles used as currencies in the slave trade.

Worn as clothing in the form of wrappers, over centuries Madras became a key signifier of cultural identity for the Kalabari community of the Niger delta and served as the basis for *pelete bite*—a local form of textile art in which designs are created by cutting and removing sections of thread from the cloth. The exhibition included several

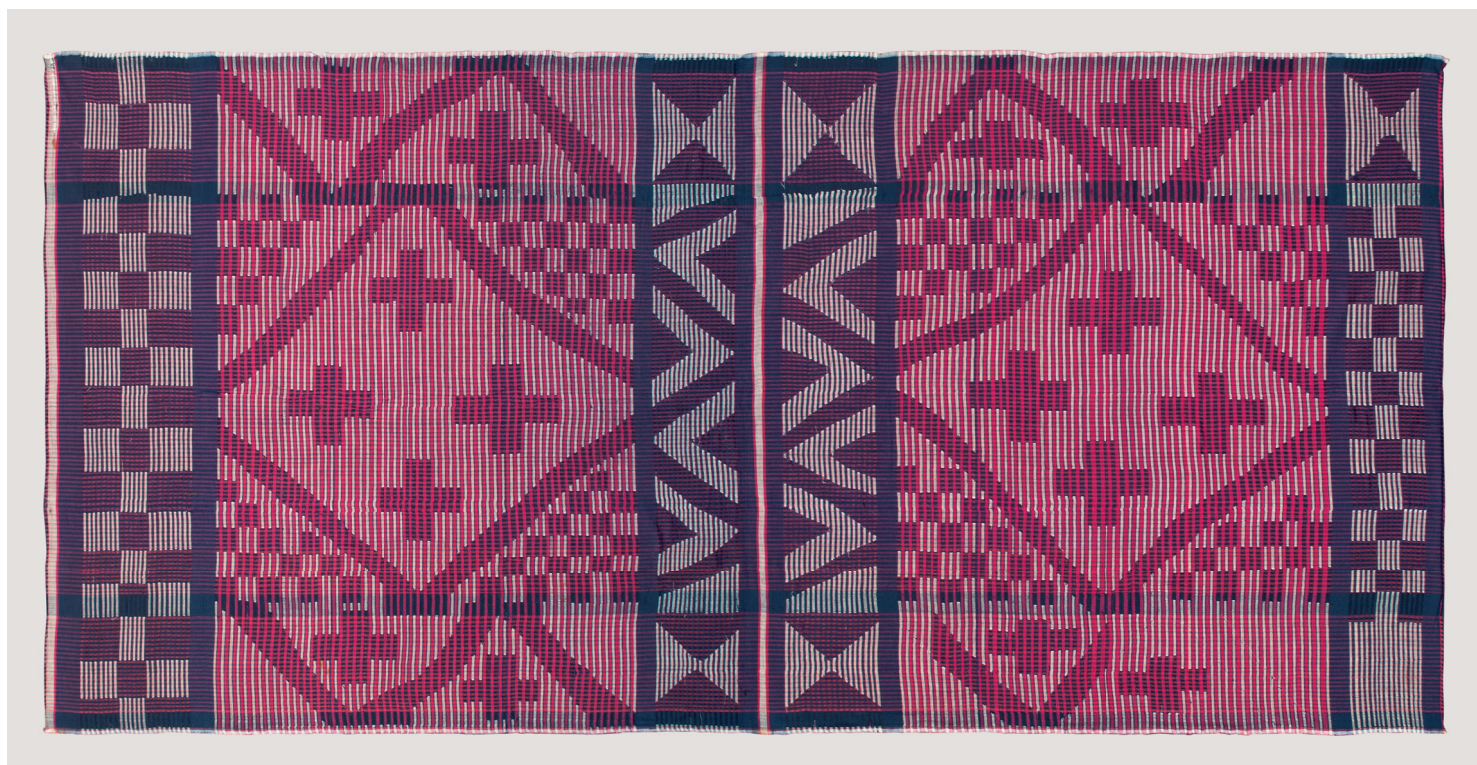
early 20th-century examples of this art form, in different patterns and colourways: the material intersections of South Indian and West African creativity (11).

Indeed, the continual fashioning and refashioning of Madras by cultures all around the world is one of the most powerful Indian trade textile stories. Today Madras plays an integral part in the cultural dress of many Caribbean cultures, where it has been fashionable since at least the mid-18th century. Its Caribbean popularity in turn influenced European and American tastes for Madras, as demonstrated by a mid-20th century American Madras plaid jacket, still bearing its department-store label declaring it to be made of 'Hand Woven Madras Loomed in India.'

And it continues to be reinterpreted by new generations of designers globally, including Yohji Yamamoto, whose 2024 collection Madras-







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10 Quilted chintz bed cover, Coromandel Coast, India, traded to Europe, early 18th century. Mordant-and resist-dyed cotton, painted, stuffed with cotton waste and quilted, 2.08 x 3.09 m (6' 10" x 10' 2"). TAPI, 00.167

11 Men's wrapper, present-day Tamil Nadu, India, for the Kalabari, West Africa, early-mid 20th century. Yarn-dyed and woven cotton, 0.90 x 1.82 m (2' 11" x 6' 0"). TAPI, 05.18

inspired ensemble is patterned with checks tie-dyed in Japan. The inclusion of this ensemble, one of TAPI's most recent acquisitions, brought the story of the Indian textile trade right up to the present day, and demonstrated the continual impact of Indian textiles on global exchange.

Throughout the exhibition the interpretation of the textiles was supported by carefully chosen objects and images which added more context to the production and trade of the textiles displayed. At the entrance to the exhibition visitors were greeted by large-scale maps of major Indian production centres and global trade routes, giving a sense of where the pieces came from and just how far they travelled. Reproductions of early 19th-century engravings depicting Indian textile artisans at work helped convey the labour and skill involved in their making, while a small display of raw natural dyes showed visitors where all the brilliant colours of the fabrics around them ultimately came from.

Several of the contextual images included on labels were reproductions of artworks also held by the TAPI collection, including Jain paintings, stone friezes, 19th-century photographs and 20th-century advertisements, which speak to the breadth of the collection and the commitment of the Shahs to understanding the wider histories of the pieces in their care.

Some of the most compelling contextual images sourced for the show were modern and contemporary photographs showing similar textiles still in use: *maa'* hung from a roof in Sulawesi, Madras worn by revellers in Saint Lucia, and the Sultan of Yogyakarta in *patola* trousers. These images brought the historic textiles in the gallery into the immediate present—showing how Indian trade textiles became entrenched into cultures all over the world, changing the ways people celebrate, worship, mourn and live day-to-day.

Ultimately, the story of this exhibition was the story of how Indian textiles changed the world. ♡