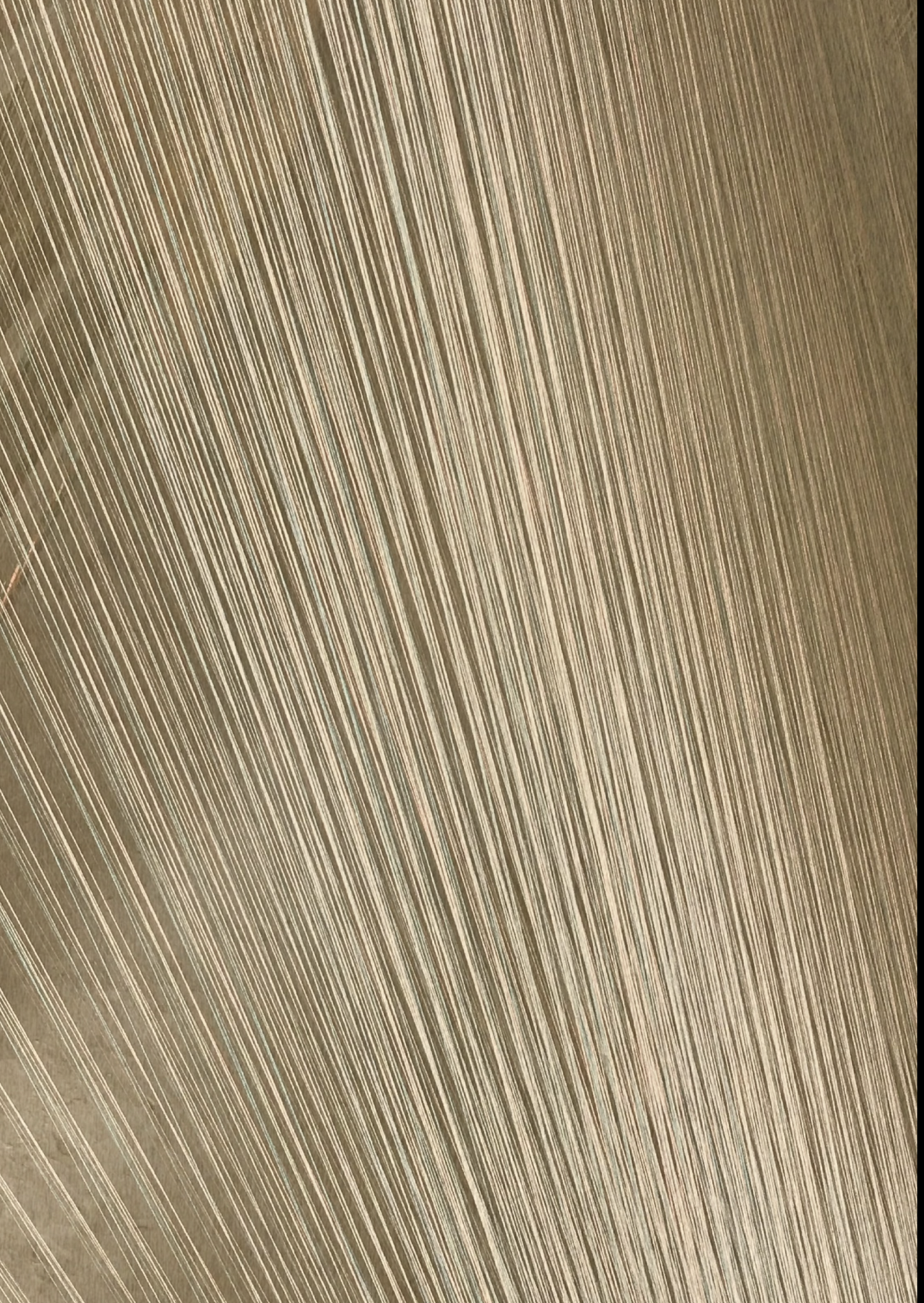
PRA-KASHI

SILK, GOLD & SILVER FROM THE CITY OF LIGHT



PRA-KASHI

Silk, Gold & Silver
from the City of Light

curated by Pramod Kumar KG

National Museum-
New Delhi

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Virtual Reality Experience: https://prakashi.netlify.app

INTRODUCTION

This exhibition has at its core 47 contemporary textiles woven at the workshop ASHA, in Varanasi. These include garments, shawls, textile panels, fabric lengths and borders representing the apogee of silk-weaving on the Indian drawloom over a period of 25 years (1993-2019). They are the product of a unique contemporary experiment when all similar historic centres of drawloom production worldwide (Mughal India, 1526 – 1857; Safavid Iran, 1501 – 1722; and Ottoman Turkey, 1299 – 1922) have fallen silent.

This exhibition charts the evolution of ASHA's design repertoire from floral motifs to animal images, and on to the human figure, the last being exhibited here for the very first time. Every fresh departure was the result of enhanced technical innovations, which meant greater complexity across multiple processes. The display represents the full range of luxury silks that were manufactured historically from the beginning of the first millennium using the Taquetè-Samite, Lampas, Extended Samite, Brocaded Double-Weave, Damask, Velvet and Voided Velvet weaving techniques.

This exhibition is supplemented with historic examples from the collection of the National Museum, which help connect extant examples with allied traditions of the past. Their contextual presence connects and separates India's unparalleled textile traditions across multiple media, formats and materials. Accompanying paintings and jewellery further highlight our understanding that the material culture of the historic past was not experienced in isolation but as a continuity of design, skill and aesthetics across various media.

The contemporary textiles are, in the end, the creation of a dedicated group of weavers, working together under the aegis of a traditional karkhana (workshop), sustained and made possible by enlightened patrons. The weavers were closely supervised in their use of the finest and most appropriate raw materials, sensitive draftsmanship and design, choice of fabric structure and careful execution, by technical virtuoso, Rahul Jain. Their work is an ode to an unbroken historical continuum preserving and regenerating some of the most refined human skill-sets from the Indian subcontinent.

Pramod Kumar KG

THE ASHA WORKSHOP, VARANASI

The textiles in this exhibition were hand-woven on traditional Indian drawlooms at the silk-weaving workshop, ASHA, in Varanasi. For over 25 years, ASHA's drawlooms have produced patterned silks incorporating the complex weaving techniques of the court silks of Mughal India and Safavid Iran, which had been extinct in India since the 19th century. The revived techniques include patterned velvet, lampas, samite, and taquetè, which together represent the great majority of the luxury silks woven for 2000 years at the classical silk-weaving centres of the old Silk Road. ASHA's silk panels now feature in several major museum collections, including the British Museum, London; the Musee Guimet, Paris; the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Textile Museum, Washington DC. In 2013, ASHA was selected as one of ten craft workshops from across the world for the Jameel Prize 3, coordinated by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Most recently, in 2016, ASHA's work was featured in '*Fabric of India*', a landmark exhibition on the history of Indian textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In late 1997, the National Museum, New Delhi, had showcased Minakar: Spun Gold and Woven Enamel, the museum's first exhibition since Independence of contemporary, hand-made Indian textiles. This exhibition is a befitting tribute to the atelier's remarkable journey of excellence over a quarter of a century.

KASHI / BENARES / VARANASI

Believed by many to be India's oldest and most sacred city, *Kashi* has been a spiritual destination for Hindu, Buddhist and Jain pilgrims since the first millennium BCE. From around the same time, the city has been also celebrated for its textiles. The city's weavers likely wove very fine cotton fabrics since antiquity, but they have been known in recent centuries for weaving luminous gold and silver-brocaded silks. These mirror the city's transcendental light, just as the waters of its sacred river, the Ganga, gather and refract sunrays at dawn. In the brocades of Kashi, precious metals are often so densely layered as to transform fiber and yarn into artefacts of ineffable radiance and purity. As finely handcrafted works, moreover, they remind us of the surrender, absorption and release that have been connected, in the Indian tradition, to the act of making. This immersiveness has been compared to *dhyana* or *sadhana*, the inward concentration or practice that illumines the mind and frees the soul. In some ways, then, these resplendent weavings of silk, gold and silver can be seen as a metaphor for *Kashi's* agency of illumination and transcendence in Indian thought and experience.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN
RAHUL JAIN (RJ)
AND PRAMOD KUMAR KG (PKKG)

15th April 2019, New Delhi

A velvet drawloom, Varanasi, 2019

SECTION 1: HISTORIC BACKGROUND

PKKG What do we know of the drawloom and its possible introduction into the Indian subcontinent?

RJ The drawloom was a specialized loom invented early in the first millennium in West or Central Asia to weave weft-patterned fabrics in which the pattern motif repeated, in principle, in both the weft and the warp directions. The drawloom could weave as many lengths of the same patterned fabric as needed. In these respects, the drawloom could be considered as one of the world's early proto-mechanical, or quasi-industrial, technologies capable of creating multiples of the same woven image and fabric. Once adapted to weaving mulberry silk, the finest, strongest, most lustrous of the major natural fibres, the drawloom developed rapidly into a sophisticated image-making device. By the end of the first millennium, it was capable of weaving very large and elaborate figural images rendered in many colours. Early in the second millennium, a Chinese Emperor of the Song dynasty (11th-13th century) noted that the weaving of images in silk had surpassed the art of painting, and that patterned silk was to be preferred over all other types of image-making. Not surprisingly, right up to the modern period, the drawloom produced the world's most elaborately patterned, luxurious and cosmopolitan silk textiles. Unfortunately, nothing is known about the introduction of the drawloom technology into India, but indirect evidence suggests a date early in the second millennium, possibly the 11th or 12th century. The earliest surviving drawloomed silks of India cannot be dated with certainty but have been assigned to the 13th-15th century period.

PKKG Why is the Pra-Kashi exhibition billed as a showing of contemporary drawloom textiles emerging from a history of over two millennia? What is the history of these textiles and where do these weaving techniques originate from?

RJ The show covers the three most celebrated genres of drawloom-patterned silk known from the past two millennia. One, the complex, complementary-weft patterned fabrics known to textile historians as taquetè and samite; two, the complex, supplementary-weft patterned silk called lampas; and three, a complex supplementary-warp patterned silk with a carpet-like pile, velvet. These three fabric types comprised most of the trophy

textiles woven at the great silk-weaving centres strung along the old Silk Road, and its various extensions, all the way from China to Spain. The oldest of the three genres, from the first millennium, are the taquetè-samites of Western and Central Asia; followed, early in the second millennium, by lampas whose origin has been variously attributed to China, Western Asia, and the Mediterranean; and then soon thereafter by patterned velvet, possibly of Central Asian or Eastern Iranian origin.

Drawloomed silk, with its powerful, often heraldic, images, emerged as a natural choice for imperial clothing. One has only to recall the dramatic roundel-patterned robe worn by the Sassanian Emperor Khusrau II in the famous 7th century reliefs at Taq-e-Bostan in Iran. The roundels enclose, appropriately, the Iranian simurgh, a mythical bird-beast endowed with perfect knowledge. Drawloomed silk also became an honorific and diplomatic gift at the highest levels of political control and patronage. It served as offering to great religious establishments, particularly in the Buddhist and Christian worlds. It is in their temple treasuries that many of the most remarkable surviving silks were preserved. Equally, drawloomed silk became a prominent part of the architectural décor of, and the political messaging inherent in, imperial palaces and tents, especially for receptions and celebrations. One of the most famous extravaganzas recorded in the early Islamic world, for instance, was the reception of an imperial Byzantine embassy by the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad in the 10th century. The caliph's palace as well as the entire processional route of the embassy were reportedly draped with thousands of textiles and carpets, many of which were patterned with figures of elephants, horses, camels, and birds. This was centuries before we come across the very similar accounts from Mughal India which are more familiar to us.

PKKG Are these techniques native to India, and if not, when did we start using / making them?

RJ None of these techniques is native to India, so far as we know. From the surviving material evidence, we know that silk samites were being woven somewhere in South Asia by the 13th or 14th century, perhaps even slightly earlier than that, and that lampas probably appeared sometime in the 15th century. The production of patterned velvets, on the other hand, is clearly recorded in Mughal accounts of the late 16th century. In general, India's formal written records for the weaving of such silks do not pre-date the 16th century. The earliest documents, in fact, are the traditional Assamese annals, *buranjis*, from the 16th century, which narrate the life and teachings of the great Vaishnavite saint Sankaradeva. He is said to have commissioned, in the mid-16th century, the weaving of a great silk scroll illustrating episodes from the early life of Krishna as described in the Bhagavata Purana. This description can be closely compared to some of the surviving Assamese lampas silks from that time. Just a few decades later, Abul Fazl, the court biographer of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, recorded the production and pricing of the velvets that were being woven at the time in Lahore and Gujarat.

PKKG Is there a chronology of what came first amongst the various textiles on display at the exhibition, such as Taquetè-Samite, Lampas, Extended Samite, Brocaded Double-Weave, Damask, Velvet and Voided Velvet?

RJ The show in fact follows the historical narrative: the first gallery opens with weavings derived from the oldest complementary-weft techniques from the first millennium: taquetè-samite. These include the opening exhibits, which had been shown in 1997 in our very first public exhibition '*Minakar*: Spun Gold and Woven Enamel', held in the same gallery. Also included are the silver-ground floral fabrics and shawls in the first gallery. The second gallery showcases lampas and velvet, the genres which came in the second millennium. The exhibits in the second gallery include lengths of voided, silver-ground floral velvets as well as coats stitched from non-voided, non-metallic silk velvet. The lampas group consists of a single set of five, identical qanat panels, reproduced from an imperial tent from the reign of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, arranged like a tent alcove. So, the first half of the show, covering the first two of four galleries, technically covers two millennia of luxury silk-weaving.

PKKG Which of the techniques mentioned above didn't exist in the subcontinent….I mean which of the above has left no trace by way of surviving examples? Across the historic textiles of the above-mentioned groups, which Indian examples survive today, and do we know where they were made?

RJ All three genres have left their traces in South Asia. Indian samites and taquetès are known from the 13th-14th to 19th centuries; Indian lampas from the 15th to the 19th centuries; and Indian velvet from the 17th and 18th centuries. Nearly all of the early Indian

samite and lampas silks were found in Buddhist temples and monasteries in Tibet, with a few examples having survived in Bhutan. Most were designed and woven specially for a long-standing Indian trade with the Buddhist world of the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions. There, many of these silks were used as canopies, curtains and banners in the Buddhist shrines and chapel halls. Some were stitched into ceremonial religious garments as well. A different group of early Indian lampas was woven with Vaishnav Hindu imagery designed specifically for the Assamese sattra monasteries, where these were used to wrap the sacred scripture, the Bhagavata Purana, traditionally kept atop a seven-tiered lion throne. As it turned out, these figured lampas silks did not survive in Assam itself but some happened to reach Tibet and Bhutan instead, where they were discovered in the late 20th century. The Mughal lampas that survives comprises exclusively of portions of one or more imperial tents. The surviving Indian velvets, too, are entirely of imperial Mughal production and comprise palace and tent floorspreads, qanats, curtains and balustrade covers. As the Mughal treasury was repeatedly looted in the 18th century, most of the Mughal velvets that are known today appear to have survived in the royal textile stores of the Rajput state of Amber-Jaipur.

Our knowledge of the precise sources of production for historical Indian textiles remains, even after a century of research, very poor. We cannot be sure, in fact, of the precise source of almost any Indian textile from before the 19th century, no matter what scholars and writers would like you to believe. In general, historical Indian accounts rarely record precise textile data unlike, say, the accounts from ancient China or medieval Europe. We are certain that lampas was being woven in Koch Bihar-Kamrupa, Assam, in the mid-16th century, and velvet in Gujarat and Lahore, in the late 16th century. From the early 17th century, we have a sketch of a working drawloom in the border of a miniature in the famous Gulshan album assembled for the Mughal Emperor Jahangir. It might be the only pictorial representation we have from before the late 19th century. Prior to the 16th century, the evidence remains unclear. Among the medieval centres that may have supported India's early drawloom industry are Delhi, Ahmedabad, Patan, Daulatabad, Varanasi, Koch Bihar-Kamrupa, possibly others. But we have no firm data, textual or pictorial, yet. There is no agreement, for instance, on the location of the workshops that produced the early Indian samites and lampases which traveled the trade route to Tibet.

Velvet weaver Shamim Ansari cutting warp pile loops, Varanasi, 2019

PKKG Does the process of making, the materials used, and the end use of surviving pieces, largely confirm that the products of the drawloom were always a luxury product available only to a few?

RJ Unquestionably. The fully evolved drawloom depended on an extreme division of labour - one of its key proto-industrial characteristics - among perhaps as many as two dozen different types of skill inputs. Add to this the cost of high-quality mulberry silk yarns and threads of precious metals, as well as the technical challenge and laboriousness of weaving elaborate, large-scale images. Not surprisingly, except for royal jewels, drawloomed silks were among the most expensive and exclusive objects throughout history. They dominated gifting, exchange and display at the highest levels. During the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, one length of the finest drawloomed velvet from Safavid Iran cost as much as an entire Razmnama manuscript, with more than 170 painted miniatures, commissioned by the emperor himself.

PKKG Why is the concept of repeat such a fundamental part of the exhibition? Does drawloom technology necessitate this? To your mind which historic example would be the most complex repeat that was woven in the Indian Subcontinent?

RJ As the drawloom was invented to weave multiples of the same image and fabric, the repeating motif lies at the core of its visual art. On the one hand, repetitive patterning offers infinite possibility for surface ornamentation and complexity. This finds its most extensive exploration perhaps in the surface design of the Islamic world. The Islamic cultures of the early second millennium, whether in Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, or Spain, produced drawloomed silks of complex surface ornament and visual texture. On the other hand, in certain regions such as India or China, where there were long traditions of free-form, naturalistic surface design, repetitiveness could also be viewed as the single biggest limitation of this art. There are of course a few exceptional instances in which drawloomed images become so monumental that they do not repeat at all. We find this in some Buddhist lampas banners from Ming China, velvet dais furnishings from Safavid Iran and lampas tent panels from Mughal India.

In the second millennium, as the drawloom technology moved further across the Asiatic, North African, and western European worlds, the design of drawloomed silks, quite apart from becoming ever more varied and richer, also came to incorporate various devices of visual deception. Patternmakers cleverly altered the arrangement, density and colouring of motifs to disguise the edges of the repeat, sometimes quite successfully eliminating the monotony of repetition. Indian weavers, however, never preoccupied themselves with highly considered design arrangements that minimize visual monotony. They depended, instead, on a sophisticated sense and placement of colour, using it to guide the eye seamlessly across pattern edges and transitions. I cannot recall any historical Indian silks that display the sorts of ingenious devices of visual deception found, for instance, in repetitive design in Iranian or Chinese silk-weaving.

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SECTION 2: ASHA

PKKG The ASHA workshop is a unique venture that began in 1993. One of the queries we constantly had during the showing of Pra-Kashi was the reason behind the establishment of the workshop?

RJ There was a very clear reason for attempting to reinvent the weaving of certain historical Indian silks. When I first saw a woven Mughal *patka*, or sash, up close, it was an extraordinary moment. The sash looked like an exquisitely-worked enamelled jewel rather than a thread-rendered fabric which you would expect, such was the refinement and depth of the textile workmanship. Although the woven flowers and flowering vines were hardly accurate in a botanical sense, they had an intensely naturalistic and affective quality that went far beyond a sense of either mere realism or of surface decoration. Put simply, the sash was NOT a textile. It was an artefact that had been processed to such a degree of sophistication (or degeneration, if you will), via such depth of engagement, that it had lost, or surpassed, nearly all its defining material characteristics. A more familiar Indian example of this would be the fabled cotton muslin, which could only ever be described by reference to woven air or flowing water. Conventional 'textile' descriptions simply didn't convey the Indian muslin's *rejection* of 'fabric' attributes such as material weight, mass, density, surface texture, colour and pattern.

My reaction to the Mughal *patka*, in fact, was precisely that of George Watt's reaction to a Mughal sash in the Great Exhibition at the Delhi Durbar of 1903. Watt noted that the

Pattern-maker Mohiuddin Ansari preparing the *naqsha* for the centre-panel of the woven triptych, Varanasi, 2016

sash, lent by the Raja of Chamba, one of the former hill kingdoms of Himachal Pradesh, was unsurpassed for its skill and workmanship among the many outstanding Indian brocades showcased at the grand event. He described its end-panel as: 'a field of the purest gold with six lilies growing from separate stems as if on the ground; the leaves with their parallel veins are so vivid and life-like that one involuntarily feels them in order to ascertain if they are not painted instead of being woven.' This confounding of media can open up an alternate or parallel zone of reality or experience, like Alice's looking glass, which completely transforms your sense of perception. That moment can be revelatory. In the Islamic tradition, when the queen of Sheba visits the palace of the prophet king Solomon, she mistakes the marble floor for water and involuntarily raises the hem of her skirt to step in. Realizing her mistake, she marvels at the material deception and converts to Islam.

I recall viewing in an exhibition a small silk coverlet from Safavid Iran which had beautiful flowers woven on a gold ground. I couldn't see a fabric. I saw instead a garden, like many would - but the garden was under water, such was the affective depth of the weaving, with its subtly-nuanced colours and the patina of the gold thread, and without being at all a realistic depiction of a landscape. My instinctive response was to dip my hand under the water in order to touch the flowers and confirm that what I was seeing was 'true'. Sometimes you have to metaphorically touch something in order to become aware of the many dimensions of its materiality, it's transformative power - its magical realism, if you will.

In Pra-Kashi, what everyone was invited to see as luminous woven surfaces of gold and silver (in keeping with the title of the show) were all, in my eyes, surfaces of water. After all, in the city of Kashi (Varanasi), the last crossing of the great river of *samsara*, it is water that delivers you to light - to the light of transcendence. Of all the visitors I happened to meet in the Pra-Kashi galleries, I met only one who compared the show, and the display, to an ocean - the woven motifs, the flowers, birds, animals, and human figures, were all adrift in water. I now recall wondering, in that moment, if ASHA's entire work was just a search for such a visitor.

You may recall that I had wanted, from the start of the exhibition project, to add to the galleries a faint background of sound, which was eventually missing from the show. I had kept recalling a particular piece of music: a work of musical Impressionism by Claude Debussy, called 'The Submerged Cathedral'. A prelude for solo piano, the piece is based on folklore from coastal Brittany about the sound of bells, chants and organ music, which people say can be heard under the waters. The sounds rise from the church of a mythical city,

famed for its beautiful gardens, which sank off the coast. In his composition, Debussy slowly raises the cathedral out of the water on a luminous morning, eventually letting it sink back until only its submerged organ can be heard. It is this piece of music that inspired the design for the two side-panels of the Vatican triptych that closed the show. I decided to adapt Michelangelo's figures to a pattern arrangement in which they are seen rising through 'water' toward Christ's light of redemption.

The purpose of Pra-Kashi was not to impress visitors with heroic Indian craftsmanship, although that was present. We wanted to share our continuing exploration of an altogether more universal, perhaps timeless, notion and experience of unstable materiality. From the start, we have single-mindedly pursed this seemingly unorthodox idea and this depth of immersion.

PKKG Do we know when and where the last workshop using drawlooms was before the establishment of ASHA?

RJ In the early 1990s, a few traditional drawlooms were still being used in Varanasi, as the local jacquard mechanisms were of limited patterning capacity. Many more looms, on the other hand, used the local jacquard machines in combination with the old drawloom mechanism, especially for the higher-end, traditional saris. On the same loom, a jacquard would be used for patterning the side-borders, and a drawloom pattern harness for the larger end-panel motifs and the paisley konias woven into the corners of the field. Today, to the best of my knowledge, there are no drawlooms in routine use outside ASHA. I am told, however, that there are a few demonstration drawlooms set up, along with restaurants I may add, for attracting tourists into one or two silk ateliers in Varanasi.

PKKG The textiles showcased at Pra-Kashi were woven on drawlooms....what went into creating a functional drawloom for complex weaves in contemporary India without having a surviving example to look at as a model?

RJ Each of ASHA's five drawlooms weaves an extinct type of historical patterned silk: brocaded samite, lampas, velvet, brocaded double-cloth, and brocaded weft-substituting twill. Each of these fabrics appears to have died out in Indian silk-weaving sometime in the 19th century, although some specialists believe that metal-ground patterned velvets were never woven in India after the 17th century. Strictly speaking, ASHA *did not revive* these fabrics. ASHA *reinvented* them, as there was no such 'tradition' left in India. Nothing was known about how these fabrics were woven here in the past. There were no traditional custodians or informants left. I personally trained a group of young, low-income, low-caste silk-weavers who were willing to abandon their Rs. 800/- art-silk sari weaving in order to learn a newly-invented set of weaving skills. I had trained in weaving in the US, and personally wove each of these fabrics on a handloom before attempting to transfer the techniques onto a traditional drawloom.

The Varanasi drawloom was still in use in a few places in the city when I started out. All its foundational features were still available for study and experimentation. I re-modelled some primary parts of the structure harness of the drawloom, as I needed two sets of warps for each of the three major historical fabric genres. I added to the existing structure harness a larger and more complex arrangement of warp ends passing through the heddles. I added one or two additional sets of treadles to the existing set, which required a more complicated sequence of treadling. I left the primary pattern harness unchanged but increased its size in order to accommodate the heavy pattern lifts needed for these older, extinct fabrics. I arrived at all these changes via 'backward engineering', i.e., extrapolating loom operation from the weave data I had gathered from microscopic analysis of dozens of historical Indian and Iranian examples. There was simply no other way. What was extraordinary - magical, again - was that none of the changes I made disrupted the working of the existing Indian drawloom. We were able to weave our first fabric, in the complex taquetè technique, on the very first day of operation in Delhi.

PKKG Who were the key technical resource people & enablers who came together to make this happen?

RJ The physical changes I hypothesized for the Varanasi drawloom were expertly made for me by Anwar Ahmed, a master technician from the traditional sari-weaving industry. Anwar came to live with me in Delhi to set up our first taquetè/samite drawloom. The loom worked smoothly from its very first day of operation. Anwar had been recommended to me by the National Awardee Varanasi *naqshband* (pattern-maker) Jaffer Ali, who also made for us the pattern *naqshas* (pattern modules) for our first three patka designs. In fact, Jaffer

Ali's only son, Aziz Ahmed, who was otherwise unattached to any professional work, was so captivated by the first floral border pattern I had sent to them, that he came to stay with me in Delhi. It was he who lifted the pattern while Anwar Ahmed wove up the border in the taquetè technique. After a few dozen wefts were woven, of the gold-ground floral border, I recall Aziz declaring that if we succeeded in completing the weaving, it would become a *yadgar*, memorable, document of the art of Indian silk-weaving.

Several months later, when that first *patka* was woven up, I took it to Martand Singh (Mapu) for his opinion, as he was widely regarded as India's leading textile afficionado. With a design of bold Asiatic tulip plants in its gold end-panels, and a complete absence of minor decorative frills, it was a handsome textile. It caught Mapu so completely unaware that he declared it the most remarkable silk he had seen woven within India. He also declared that our drawloom would run for 20 years. More than 25 years later, that drawloom at ASHA is still running.

I had been led to Jafar Ali *naqshband* by a key resource-person in Delhi itself: the Varanasi silk-weaver and National Awardee Shahjahan Ansari who operated a demonstration drawloom in the textile gallery of the Crafts Museum. A few years into our initial experiments, Shahjahan also brought to our workshop several young silk-weavers from his own village outside Varanasi. Some of them are still with us after 25 years. I would like to acknowledge that, even before we set up our first drawloom, my first publication in the field had been an attempt to unpack the Indian drawloom for textile students and researchers across the world. It was Shahjahan Ansari who had first explained to me, in Delhi, some of the mysteries of traditional drawloom technique and operation. I incorporated all these major and minor aspects of Indian drawloom weaving into my article for the 1993-94 journal of the Textile Museum in Washington DC. I can never forget the generosity and affection of any of these specialists and associates.

PKKG What was the first historic technique adopted at the ASHA workshop's drawloom and what was the chronology of techniques that were revitalized; are we able to chart a chronology of techniques revived?

RJ At our workshop we proceeded as though we were tracing the development of the drawloom along the old Silk Road itself. We began in 1992-93 with taquetè, a start that

Silver-ground, three-colour pile velvet on-loom, Varanasi, 2012

was so unexpectedly successful, in technical terms, that we moved swiftly to samite and its various derivatives and refinements, some of which we continued to weave up to the present day. Lampas came some years later, around 1995-96, and velvet only in 2007.

PKKG While the initial decade of work at ASHA was in the Delhi area, the workshop eventually moved to Varanasi. Is the city and its living weaving traditions possibly the only enabling environment today for this high art form?

RJ ASHA was based in Delhi until the end of the 1990s. After that the weavers moved back to their villages outside the city of Varanasi and returned to working in their familiar community and surroundings. As our own experience showed, it was quite possible to set up drawlooms far away from a long-established locus of the industry. This explains perhaps why so many powerful empires since the early first millennium located their imperial drawloom workshops in places of their own choosing. The Mongols sacked, one after another, most of the renowned drawloom-weaving centers of the medieval world - Hangzhou, Samarkand, Herat, Balkh, Merv, Nishapur, Baghdad. But instead of killing off the drawloom weavers like tens of thousands of the inhabitants of those cities, the Mongols re-settled the craftsmen in the empire's main strongholds to the east and west. The highly systematized, quasi-industrial nature of drawloom-weaving would have enabled its relatively free movement across the very wide geographic expanse of the Asiatic world, except of course where geoclimatic conditions were simply too unfavourable.

PKKG One aspect of the textiles on display that fascinates me is that the hand that drew the pattern invariably dictates the end-result. Would you explain the primacy of the patternmaker in determining the aesthetics of the finished product?

RJ Traditionally, the patternmaker, *naqshband*, was the soul of the art of drawloomed silk. The aesthetic and material values embedded in celebrated historical objects in any medium drew from great depth of sensitivity and talent of visualization. Whatever little is known of great drawloom patternmakers of the past suggests that they were highly accomplished artists. In the Indian tradition, we know that they trained for years as apprentices under older masters, just as classical musicians would. *Naqshband*s belonged to distinguished family lineages and seem to have cultivated multiple talents and skills.

The famous *Ghiyas naqshband* of 16th century Yazd, in Iran, was an accomplished poet-litterateur. The silks he designed, and inscribed with his signature, were the most coveted of all textiles not only in Safavid Iran but also in early Mughal India. In Varanasi, local masters of architectural mural painting and *sgraffito* work are known to have taught or influenced young *naqshbands* who were training to become expert draughtsmen. In turn, *naqshbands* sometimes lent their skill of surface decoration to other media. I recall meeting one Varanasi naqshband who sometimes painted the multi-level wooden *taazias* for Muharram.

Quite apart from their ability to visualize and render complicated images within the limits of repetitive surface design, naqshbands were also skilled technical specialists. They determined the fabric, yarn, and dye parameters for drawloomed silks. Their skills included, it must not be forgotten, a complete mastery over the mathematics of repeating woven patterns. Compared to the naqshband, drawloom weavers and their assistants seem to have played a subsidiary, and a mechanical, role, certainly at the higher levels of this art.

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SECTION 3: PRA-KASHI

PKKG Why Pra-Kashi? In your mind how did light become synonymous with the textiles on display?

RJ I recall Mapu once telling me that his guru, the *mahant* (head priest) of the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi, had mentioned to him that the name Kashi, still preferred by many residents of the city of Varanasi, is derived from '*prakash-i*', that which emits light, or that which enlightens - the proverbial City of Light. The Kashi Vishwanath temple houses one of the most revered of India's twelve *jyotirlinga*, the lingams of light. The *jyotirlinga* in these Shiva temples are believed to have been fashioned from meteoric rocks, which emit light upon entering the earth's atmosphere. The analogy could not be more apt. The tradition of Kashi's drawloomed silks has one singular and outstanding material characteristic: resplendent reflectivity because of the profuse use of very pure gold and silver threads. ASHA's fabrics take that impression of reflectivity and purity even further by burnishing the metallic surfaces and suppressing almost completely the fibrous character of the silk yarns. No other title for the show could have projected better our homage to the city and its art.

Operating the pattern naqsha on a drawloom, Varanasi, 2019

PKKG The 48 textiles from ASHA on display at Pra-Kashi abound in the use of varied designs, patterns, and motifs. However, their strong affinity to a classical design repertoire from Mughal India, Safavid Iran, Ottoman Turkey and Renaissance Italy suggests that there was possibly a thought process that dictated this. Would you care to elaborate on the directions chosen?

RJ I noted earlier that our fabrics are modeled very closely after certain historical genres from these cultures. These fabrics had become extinct in Indian production sometime in the 19th century. The quality of image-making in these genres depended crucially on the choice of materials, in combination with specific weaving techniques. Our initial explorations, therefore, were focused almost entirely on accurately replicating the materials and technical workmanship. In those initial years, the simplest and most cost-effective way forward for us was simply to follow the historical visual models as well. But instead of copying the design of, say, specific historical Mughal textiles, I chose to adapt pattern motifs from Mughal architectural décor and painting instead, as there was such an abundance of those references readily available. Between the Mughal palaces and gardens of Delhi and Agra, there was a wealth of carved, painted and inlaid floral decoration. I assembled albums of my photographs of these buildings and sites. The Red Fort in Delhi I found particularly inspiring because it showcased the most formal culmination of High Mughal floral design under the Emperor Shah Jahan. Equally, fine reproductions of Mughal paintings with flower subjects or borders could be accessed via many published books and auction catalogues. I chose motifs and images as they came up before me, rather than in a planned manner. In general, as I am not a design practitioner per se by training or desire, the course of our work was dictated by technical developments in weaves and refinements in workmanship, rather than by a clear and considered design trajectory and evolution.

PKKG A premium on the quality of raw materials dictates the product that emerges from ASHA's workshops. It's also evident in the exhibition that a substantial and judicious use of metal thread, both silver and gold, were crucial for the making of several of the textiles on display. Would you explain the importance of metal thread in the drawloom process to achieve the aesthetic results you desired and your journey to achieve the same? Both in procuring the yarn and in using it while weaving.

RJ I have pointed out the transformative quality of image-making in certain genres of gold and silver-ground textiles of Iran and India of the 17th and 18th centuries. I had had an opportunity to study some of those very closely in American and European museums. These 'crossover' objects defied conventional description and classification and were an almost obvious choice. Within three years of arriving in Delhi and setting up ASHA's first drawloom, Anwar Ahmed won a National Master Craftsman Award for a *patka* he had woven. Incredibly, the award was received for *tar-kashi*, i.e., a genre of North Indian metalwork, rather than for handloom weaving. What could otherwise have been contested as an error of judgment was, to my mind, the perfect validation of the idea I was chasing. Unquestionably, metal thread lay at the heart of these shape-shifting objects.

By the time Anwar won his award, I had already run into India's last specialist manufacturer of artisanal-quality metal thread, Shyamsundar Jaiswal of Varanasi. I needed metal thread of highly specified weight and character, quite apart from a very high purity of gold and silver. Commercial metal thread would have yielded a mechanical, and soulless, character of fabric, defeating the entire purpose of our experiments. I took Shyamsundar to examine historical metal-woven fabrics in the Bharat Kala Bhavan collection in Varanasi, to convey my requirements as precisely as possible. More than 25 years later, at the age of 70, he still manufactures bespoke metal thread for our workshop, no matter how small the quantities needed for our small operation. Historically, these genres of metallic fabrics were often calendered, or heat-stamped with surface patterns, in a final finishing process that intensified the sense of visual deception. We have experimented with both hand and roller calendering over the years. For hand calendering, I sourced large, heavy wooden mallets from the makers of *gazak* (a traditional sesame-and-jaggery sweet) of old Jaipur city, as the art of hand calendering (*kundi*), or heat stamping (*uttoo*), of woven textiles had disappeared. The effect of the wooden mallets was beautiful for its subtle variations on the fabric, but the work was too heavy and laborious for our weavers to sustain in-house. At one point, they asked me if I was running an *akhada* (a traditional gymnasium) or a hand-weaving workshop. Eventually, we settled for a mechanical, heat-calendering process available in Bhagalpur, in Bihar, which is routinely used there for large quantities of commercial silk fabrics.

PKKG Pra-Kashi charts the evolution of ASHA's design repertoire from floral motifs to animal images, and finally on to the human figure, the last being exhibited here for the very first time. What did every departure entail by way of complexity and technical innovations over the last 25-plus years?

RJ Our drawloom story has been one of a simple and linear technical evolution, both in the nature and complexity of weaves, as well as in the absolute size of the woven motifs. From taquetè to samite to lampas to velvet has been a journey of progressively complex loom-manipulation. At the same time, the absolute size of the drawloom has kept increasing as we pushed its patterning capacity in terms of the width and length of repeating motifs. From a 400 draw-cord (= jacquard hooks) pattern harness we have surpassed 1000 draw-cords, for which there is probably no drawloom precedent, in a complex weave, anywhere since the late 18th or early 19th century. Our Mughal lampas tent panel, 1 m wide and 2.5 m tall, has a single monumental flower motif. While nearly 1000 draw-cords are needed for the width of the image, I think up to 15,000 pattern-lashes (= jacquard cards) are needed for its length/height.

The evolution of woven imagery at ASHA was linear too. As our flower motifs were modeled after naturalistic, if not botanically accurate, historical originals, moving on to believably accurate images of birds and animals was an obvious progression. The five *shikargah* panels, woven as a set, have some uniquely naturalistic images of endangered Indian birds and animals. The impression of dimensionality, even in that miniature scale, however, required a larger drawloom with a larger pattern repeat capacity. In the same way, the realistic human figures in the Vatican triptych pushed that envelope further. Capturing the smooth natural contours and the very high degree of modeling in Renaissance figuration required great technical bandwidth. Despite using a 1000-cord drawloom, the shading and dimensionality of the figural motifs used up so much of the patterning bandwidth that the actual woven scale of the repeating motifs could not be larger than a miniature or an icon. Perhaps it was this very trade-off that prevented patternmakers in the past from creating realist human images in drawloom weaving.

PKKG When did you begin thinking about possibly creating the human form on the drawloom? Some historic examples from India do exist for this don't they? Your choice of artwork while breathtaking in its execution must have posed many a challenge in its making. Were the weavers hesitant about tackling the subjects?

A reverse of a gold-ground, figural samite, on-loom, Varanasi, 2019

RJ At my US college, I had trained in Western representational art. I had studied Greek, Roman and Renaissance figuration, and learnt figure drawing and painting from one of America's last representational painters of the 20th century: Paul Georges. Not surprisingly, I toyed for years with the idea of weaving the highly dimensional and realist human figures of the classical Western tradition. Our drawlooms simply did not have the technical bandwidth to accommodate such motifs, particularly if you wanted to design repeat arrangements that were pleasing and believable to the eye. There was, in addition, no precedent for such images in the entire history of drawloom weaving. Given my training, I had no feeling at all at the time for the abstract and dramatic figural traditions in the 'folk', the 'regional, the 'other', the 'in between', realms of representation. It was somewhere in these genres that the historical drawloomed figures fell, and there were less than a few dozen examples known from across the entire Old World. In India, there are figural lampases and velvets from the reigns of the Mughal Emperors Akbar and Jahangir, but their human images are all flat and unmodelled, in keeping with medieval Indian and Iranian pictorial styles. The figural lampases from Assam feature human images in an even more abstracted local style. So, yes, attempting to adapt a subject such as Michelangelo's Last Judgment, arguably the world's most celebrated fresco, was heroic indeed, to say the least. But, after all, it was designed to serve as the climactic exhibit in Pra-Kashi. It was also a choice that allowed me to retreat, happily, into the very genre and space which introduced me to art in the first place. I had come full circle.

ASHA's weavers have worked with me for so long that they have no inhibitions about weaving any genre of image. After 25 years, their disconnect from the Varanasi silk-weaving industry and its trends is complete. Else, the aspect of nudity in Michelangelo's figures, or even the use of the human figure itself, could have posed a challenge. While human figures have appeared sporadically in Varanasi silk for more than 150 years, there seems to have been a strong shift away from such figuration in the past decade. Most patternmakers and weavers in the mainstream industry now refuse to create such images, which suggests a new wave of orthodoxy among local practitioners. Our problem was that even if Varanasi patternmakers were willing to recreate the Christian figures of the Vatican triptych, they were never trained to render highly dimensional human figures in perspective. So, there was no choice in this instance: after more than three decades, I had to go back to figure drawing myself, and draw out and colour the huge, wall-sized point-paper plans needed for this weaving. It was the single biggest design challenge I have faced in this journey. The end-result, while far from perfect, was believable and pleasing when viewed as a coordinated set of three panels.

PKKG The display of textiles, jewelry and paintings from the National Museum's collection added the much-needed historic element to ASHA's contemporary exposition. While we were selecting the objects, I recall your comment that the drawing across varied mediums was possibly executed by the same group of artists who created the textile patterns. Would you care to elaborate on the atelier of artists who worked on different object and material categories and the resulting continuity of design, skill, and aesthetics across various media?

RJ The Safavid and Mughal gold-and silver-ground textiles we set out to re-create were woven during a period of great imperial wealth, stability, and centralization. The surface design of the times transcended media, as captive imperial workshops could ensure artistic and administrative control over the production of luxury goods and set standards of taste and fashion for the day. Clear visual messaging, it must be remembered, was important as much for political control as it was for aesthetic need. There are High Mughal textiles with floral motifs that are indistinguishable from those found in the borders of imperial albums or in pietra dura inlay or on enamelled gold objects or on painted glassware. The floral design of the imperial silk-lampas tent, which I described earlier, has such close parallels in carved architectural panels in both sandstone and marble, as well as in tesserated tilework, of the 17th century, that they must all emanate from the same imperial building atelier. There are Safavid silks woven with human figures that are indistinguishable from those that appear in Iranian painted manuscripts or on ceramic ware. Clearly, the roles of painters-draughtsmen-patternmakers-designers co-alesced in periods of extraordinary patronage.

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SECTION 4: WAY AHEAD

PKKG What are things that you felt you could not achieve at ASHA? Were they technical/design limitations or limitations of the mind?

RJ By far the single biggest limitation in our work, which I have never ceased to regret, is the absence of natural dyes. In the early years when the workshop was still in Delhi, Vinay Singh, who supervised our dyeing, and I experimented with a variety of plant materials to see if we could create a useable palette. Unfortunately, our efforts at the time only yielded rather dull and unappealing colours. These were so far removed from the jewel-like reds and blue-greens seen in High Mughal velvets or lampases, or from the attractive teal, salmon and citrus tones in later Safavid silks, that we simply gave up on the option. In those days, dyeing with plant materials was still in its infancy in the field. More than 25 years later, when I tried for a second time, natural dyeing skills and colour tones had improved considerably in the field, but I was informed by a well-known Indian specialist that the twistless silk floss we use for weft would not take clear, bright natural tones. I have had to give up once again.

A second limitation in our work, in my view, has been the absence of the use of flat wire, *badla*. As you may know, High Mughal velvets were often faced with silver *badla* instead of silver *zari*. There are metal-ground Safavid silks that are woven with *badla* too. Unfortunately, contemporary Indian *badla* is too thin and light, and presents an unpleasant, tinsel or lurex-like appearance, unless used very sparingly or in juxtaposition with other metal threads. We needed, on the other hand, pure silver *badla* that was several times thicker and stiffer. You may know that inserting *badla* in the weft is a specialized technique, but none of our weavers had ever learnt it.

A third limitation, so far, has been my inability to spend enough time in Varanasi in recent years to be able to make the changes that would be needed in our velvet drawloom, and velvet-weaving implements to reproduce the phenomenal Italian velvets of the Renaissance. For sheer range of surface effects, and monumentality of design, those are unsurpassed. We would need to incorporate several types of metal thread, as well several heights of silk pile. We would need to introduce, for the first time, weft brocading which, in the case of velvet, must be manipulated from below the fabric.

Another genre of design, which I would have liked to work with is calligraphy. Superb examples of woven calligraphy exist from the past, from Buyid and Seljuq Iran, Mamluk Egypt, Almoravid and Nasrid Spain, as well as Ottoman Turkey. The genre is a challenging one, as script can be of unlimited length and only sections of it, say an invocation or a dedicatory phrase, can be accommodated within the limits of repetitive patterning.

PKKG What are the learnings from ASHA that you would have done differently in hindsight?

RJ The one major thing I would have done differently would have been to keep a formal archive of our work. Neither did I have the formal training and tools of design

Velvet drawloom assistant, Rizwana Begum, Varanasi, 2019

management, nor did I ever find the time for these niceties as I had to single-handedly supervise all aspects of technique, materials, design, and colour at the workshop. As I did not draw a formal income from ASHA, I had to spend most of my time as a consultant to Mapu's various textile projects and books. If you remember, ASHA was initially set up as a final research project for a master's degree in textiles, which I had been pursuing at the Philadelphia College of Textiles before I arrived in India. The workshop was experimental; it was exploratory; it was a learning aid. It was never intended to create 'marketable' products for profit or for financial 'sustainability.' It lacked, from the start, a formal structure and administration.

PKKG The people working at ASHA have remained a tight and cohesive group of weavers and ancillary workers. Why have they stayed on and do you see their next generation picking up on this. If not, why?

RJ Far from being cohesive, the weavers and families attached to each loom are quite independent of the others, as they are from different households and villages. Further, each group works on a different type of fabric, so there is little exchange of working notes between them. Why they have stayed on, and still refuse to leave the project, are questions that are perhaps best answered by them. We have a lot of video footage of my conversations with them about these, and other, issues. From my perspective, I think a few things have worked well in my favour. One, they came to work with me when they were very young, nearly all were in their early 20s, except for one or two of the drawboys. They have grown up with me. We have always enjoyed a great camaraderie, and the issue of our belonging to different communities has never surfaced. I sometimes sense that they wonder at my complete ease when I am within their working or personal space, and my single-minded commitment to their skills and livelihoods. After all, we couldn't be from more different worlds and backgrounds. Two, our experimental, not-for-profit set-up was funded continuously for more than 20 years by the Textile Art society founded by Suresh Neotia and Lekha Poddar, an act of patronage and vision which was very rare, perhaps unique, for those times. As our craftspeople were paid regular wages without fail since a young age, they never suffered the anxiety that weavers have often reported suffering within the traditional Varanasi market. There, all but the most accomplished silk-weavers have been at the mercy of wholesalers or middle-men, enduring long periods of waiting to offload their work or to be paid for it.

During our project, however, the world has also changed beyond recognition. Most of the younger members of the weavers' families today have little understanding of, or patience with, the value of fine craftsmanship. After all, if you cannot slow down your personal time to that of a snail, you cannot operate our drawlooms. Like youngsters anywhere today, the weavers' children are aspirational and savvy, and do not wish to sit anymore in the ground pits that are a part of the traditional Indian drawloom. They would rather learn a quick new skill, such as repairing cellphones, and earn as much, or perhaps much more, for far less work. So far, only two youngsters in our group of weaver families seem promising trainees who could potentially take two of our five looms forward.

PKKG What would it mean to for ASHA's products to be contemporary in the 21st century? Would that be a technical or a design directive?

RJ Classifying the hand made as historical, or contemporary, or futuristic, may be a convenient discursive device but it belongs to a linear, and thereby simplistic, frame of observation and reference. These limiting terms can inadvertently miss the diversity and flux of ideas and concepts that are embedded in objects, and in traditions of making, which reference long histories. Let me describe ASHA's practice as I see it, and you can decide for yourself where you would prefer to locate it today.

ASHA's silk-weaving is not a 'craft' as the term is popularly understood in India, given that 'craft' almost always implies some combination of the following: hyper-local tools, materials and artisanship; village and domestic production; women's skills and labour; local trade and use; etc. In the spectrum of the hand-made, ASHA's silk-weaving is located at precisely the opposite end. It represents the most sophisticated (or most degenerate, if you will) form of 'factory' production of the pre-industrial era. These factories (loosely, *karkhanas*) and their production depended on technical, artistic, mechanical and mathematical tools and skills of a very high order, nearly all of which were cosmopolitan rather than local. Equally, these *karkhanas* depended on an extreme division of labour among dozens of processes, in which most participants could not have played any direct creative role.

ASHA did not revive a struggling traditional art. Instead, ASHA reinvented historical fabrics that had died out more than a century or two ago in India. ASHA was not set up, therefore, to preserve an existing tradition of Indian silk-weaving, or to 'support'/'protect' a struggling family lineage connected to a particular craft, or to create new markets for an antiquated manufacture, i.e., the sorts of concerns that have preoccupied India's craft patrons and practitioners since Independence. ASHA's fabrics were not designed for a highly specified end-use; they have never given in to the tyranny of prevalent fashion or retail. Unlike any other Indian craft that I can recall, ASHA's practice defies attribution to any specific period, region, culture, or community. Note how this contrasts with the idea of Geographical Indication (GI) tagging that has been taking hold among India's craft practitioners and communities in recent years. To my mind, ASHA's practice subverts every notion and aspect of current production in India's traditional arts. Do you know of another project in the field which is more independently positioned?

In the end, ASHA offers a singular documentary window to certain types of historical objects which transcended a boundary or limit in their concept, process, meaning and value. Since its inception, the workshop has pursued a depth of engagement which possibly mirrors a historical precedent of excellence in making, and which produces occasionally a surpassing material artefact.

PKKG You once mentioned that the Lampas produced at ASHA is possibly one of heaviest silk textile being made on the loom contemporaneously anywhere in the world. What role does physical touch and feel, and materiality have for the future of textiles?

RJ Yes, I think silk fabric of this weight is not woven anywhere else today. It must be remembered that the Mughal emperor's entire private tent was constructed with such fabric. We know of at least one pair of such tents, which would have been commissioned by Shah Jahan himself. Unless you have walked upon this fabric, or come into contact with its heavy, satiny surface, it is difficult to appreciate how powerfully sensuous the weight, mass and density of cloth can be. I feel that the affective power of cloth decreases in direct proportion to the increase in the presence of hard, unyielding, and unresponsive materials in our immediate environment. As fabrics have far more intimate contact with our skin and body than any other material, our response to cloth is fundamentally conditioned by our evolutionary response to the sensation, colour, smell and taste of the natural world – to contact with air, water, and earth, and with plants, animals, and other humans. I believe it is these responses that account for our complex sensory relationship with cloth. As people

distance themselves more and more from natural environments, materials and structures, cloth loses more and more of its affective power in our life and imagination. That does not mean we use less fabric. It just means that our relationship with it is less meaningful and enduring.

PKKG ASHA has had a successful run of nearly 3 decades now. What do you see as its future and would you hazard a guess on its productive longevity? Why must ASHA live on?

RJ The average age of ASHA's weavers is now around 50. Given the concentration and physical engagement needed for weaving our fabrics, I expect them to continue working with reasonable physical ease perhaps for another 4-5 years. While I think some would like to carry on working further, I would prefer to dissuade any who may be compromising their eyesight or developing any other health constraint at this stage of their life and work. In the meanwhile, we continue to try and engage younger family members so that the looms can transit seamlessly to a new generation.

I don't see ASHA's future as being different from its past. ASHA has been, and will remain, an exploration of wonder and beauty, of immersive making and engagement, and, ultimately, of knowledge and learning. These values may flow or ebb in different periods of time but will never die out. In whatever time it has left, ASHA will continue to inspire and provoke people to dip below the surface of the obvious and the everyday and touch the flower of magic.

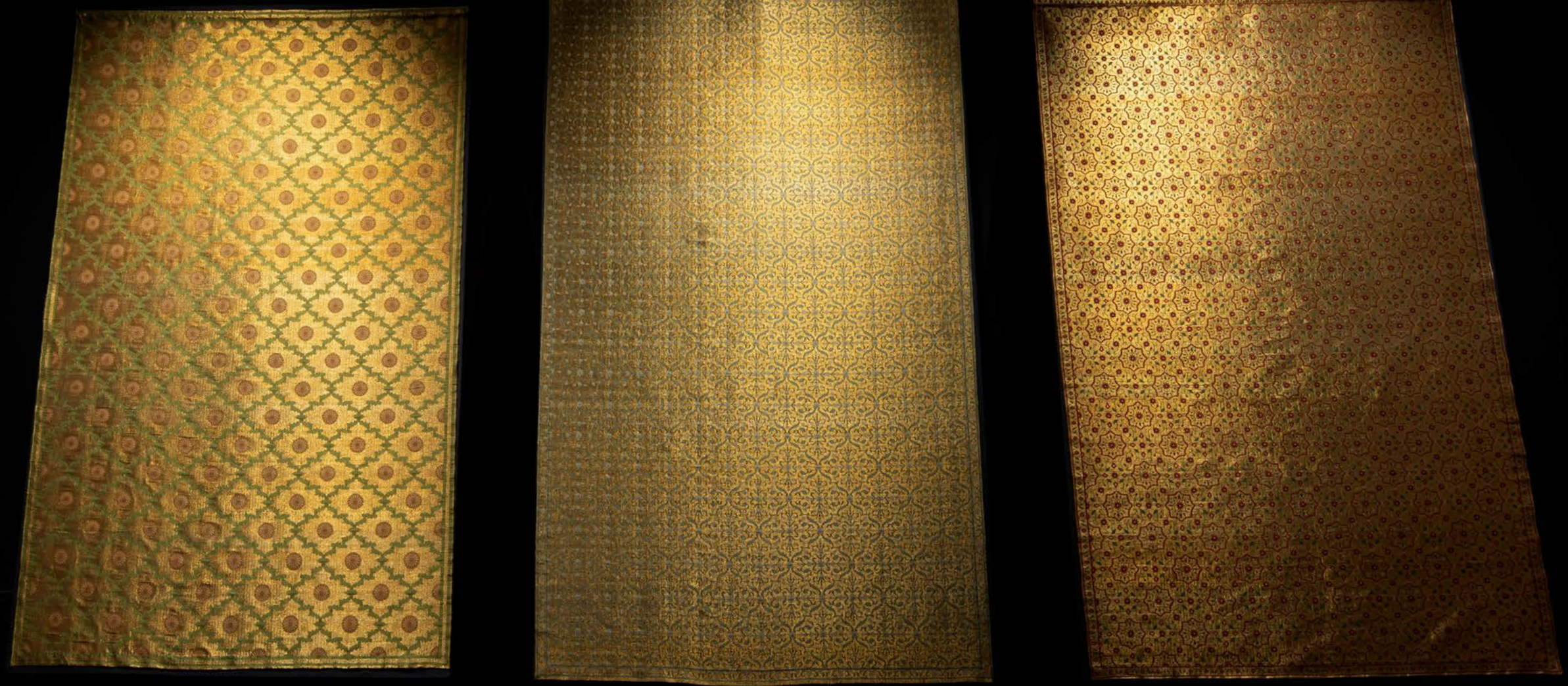
Pile warp creel, velvet drawloom, Varanasi, 2019

MINAKAR

The *Minakar* (The Enameller) textiles were inspired by the "cloths of gold" woven in Mughal India and Safavid Iran in the 17th and 18th centuries, in which silk-weavers used the ancient samite weave, and its variations, to conjure up on cloth the appearance of enamelled gold. The examples on display showcase the aesthetic preoccupations of the historical examples. They were woven using an older design idiom but do not attempt to replicate specific originals. With their polychrome patterns set jewel-like against metallic grounds, these contemporary shawls and fabric panels bring alive the grandeur associated with these textiles in their historical courtly milieu. They comprise a singular modern body of work that follows closely the exacting technical and artistic standards of the past.

SHAWL · Silk and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave, Delhi, 1997
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

SHAWL · Silk and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave, Delhi, 1997
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata



PANEL · Silk and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave, Delhi, 1997
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

PANEL · Silk and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave, Delhi, 1997
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

PANEL · Silk and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave, Delhi, 1996
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

PATKA (SASH) · Silk, silver-gilt and silver thread, brocaded double-weave end panels and borders, with twill-damask field. Mughal India. c. 18th century CE
National Museum Acc. No.: 58.64/17

PATKA (SASH) · Silk and silver-gilt thread complex complementary-weft weave with inner warps; brocaded with silk. Mughal India. c. 18th century CE
National Museum Acc. No.: 58.64/8

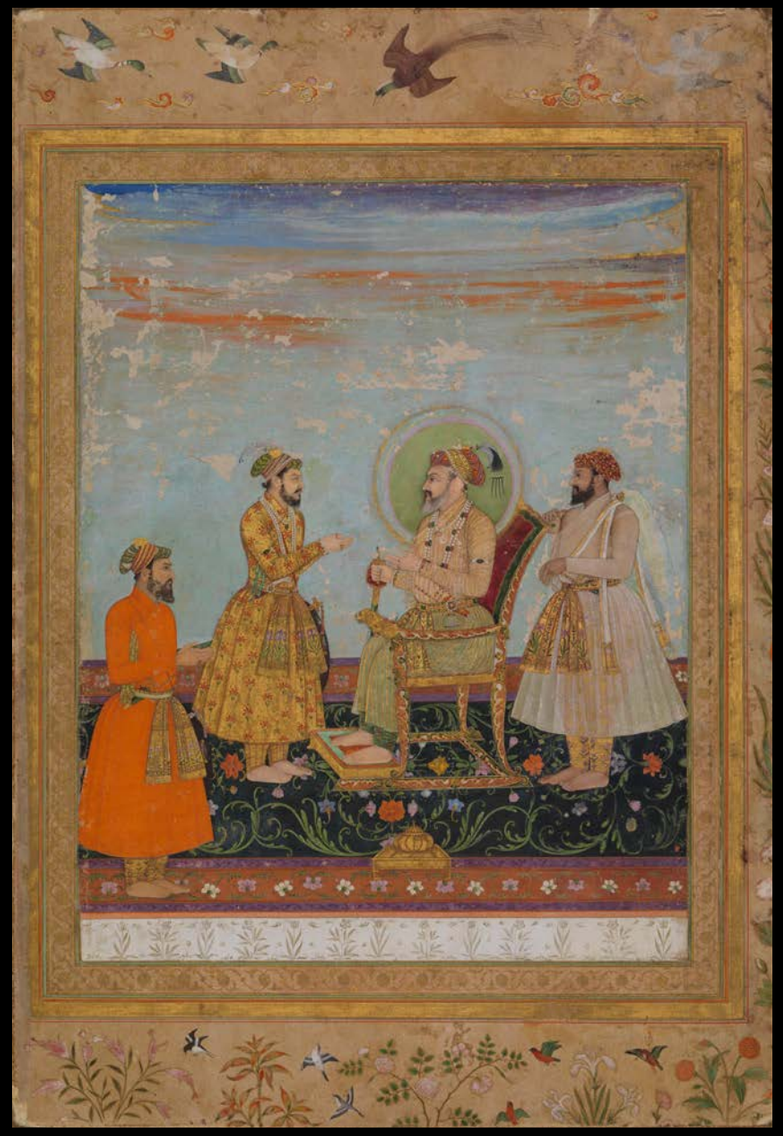
PORTRAIT OF SHAHJAHAN · Late Mughal India, c. 1800 CE
National Museum Acc. No. 60.978

FLORILEGIA

Flowers have provided a lasting inspiration to motif, pattern and scale in the design and vocabulary of nearly all the arts of the Indian subcontinent. Their myriad forms under the rubric of Buti, Buta, Bel and Jaal allowed for an endless possibility of patterns and designs across varied textile techniques. Seen here are some of the finest examples of silk, cotton and metallic yarns used to create brocaded double weaves, taffeta, extended samite weaves and twill tissues. These designs showcase the finest delineation of small and large patterns across multiple registers of silk and metallic grounds that allowed for diverse end-use as garments, draped textiles, and other court accessories. Exaggerated and over-scale floral motifs were also used for the creation of spectacular Qanats (tent panels) for court tents, besides offering the possibility for three-dimensional design in luxurious velvets.

REVERSIBLE COAT · White silk twill brocaded with silk, lined with red silk-and-cotton taffeta brocaded with silver-gilt thread. Varanasi, 2008

The flower motif on this coat was borrowed from the end-panel of a Kashmir shawl, dated to c. 1700, in the collection of the Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad.
Cristina Patnaik, New Delhi



EMPEROR SHAH JAHAN (r. 1628-1658) RECEIVING DARA SHIKOH, FOLIO FROM THE LATE SHAH JAHAN ALBUM · Opaque watercolour, gold, and ink on paper. Mughal India, c. 1650 CE

The Emperor, his son and courtiers all wear elaborate *Patkas* (waist cloths) besides other woven metallic textiles, highlighting their use in courtly life.
Courtesy of LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

REVERSIBLE TUNIC · Silk and silver-gilt thread in brocaded double-weave, gold end-panel with brocaded, red twill-damask field; lined with brocaded green silk-and-cotton taffeta. Varanasi, 2008
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

SHAWL · Silk and silver thread in brocaded double-weave, silver end-panels and borders with yellow twill-damask field. Varanasi, 2008

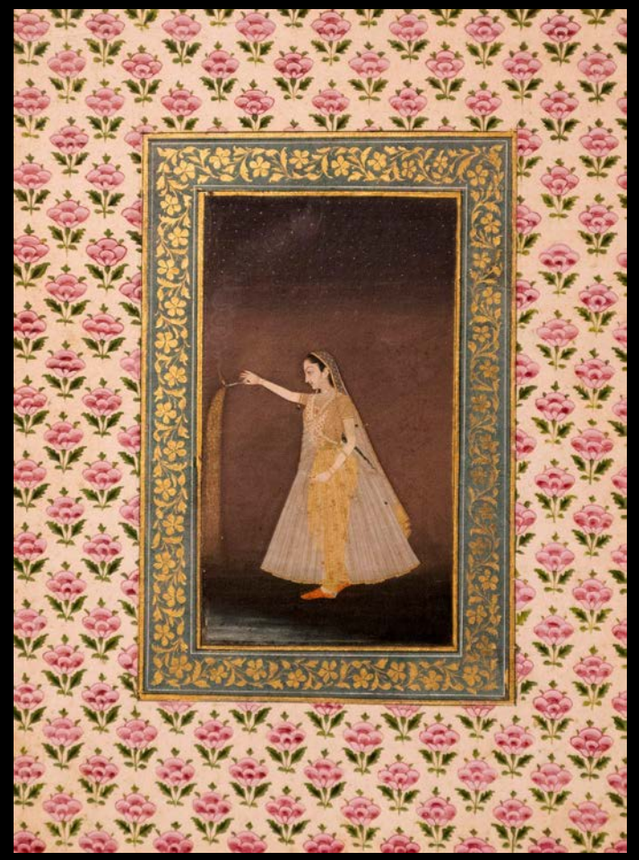
The end-panels and borders reproduce the floral patterns of a Mughal patka, in the collection of the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk-and-cotton taffeta brocaded with
silk, silver and silver-gilt thread. Varanasi, 2009
Jamuna Enterprises Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk-and-cotton taffeta brocaded with
silk and silver-gilt thread. Varanasi, 2009
Jamuna Enterprises Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver thread twill tissue
brocaded with silk. Varanasi, 2016

This flower motif was borrowed from the end-panel of a Kashmir
shawl, dated c. 1700, in the David Collection, Copenhagen.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata



LADY HOLDING A SPARKLER · Mughal India c. 1660 CE
National Museum Acc. No. 52.41

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver thread in extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2017

The flower motif here was borrowed from a Deccani miniature painting, dated c. 1660. Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver thread in extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2017

The flower motif for this textile was borrowed from the border of a Mughal miniature painting, dated c. 1650. Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk-and-cotton taffeta patterned with silver-gilt and silver thread. Varanasi, 2009
Jamuna Enterprises Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

SHAWL · Silk and silver thread twill tissue brocaded with silk. Varanasi, 2017

The flower motif here was borrowed from a brocaded twill tissue, dated c. 1700, from Safavid Iran, in the collection of the Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

SHAWL · Silk, cotton and silver thread; End-panels and borders of silk and silver thread twill tissue brocaded with silk; plain twill field with cotton wefts. Varanasi, 2011
Suresh Neotia and FamilyCollection, Kolkata

BORDER LENGTHS · Silk and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave.
Varanasi, 2009

These border lengths are reproductions of a floral border, dated c. 1700, from Safavid Iran.
Jamuna Enterprises Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi

KANTHI (NECKLACE) · Gold, white sapphires, enamel Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, c. 19th century CE
National Museum Acc. No.: 96.234

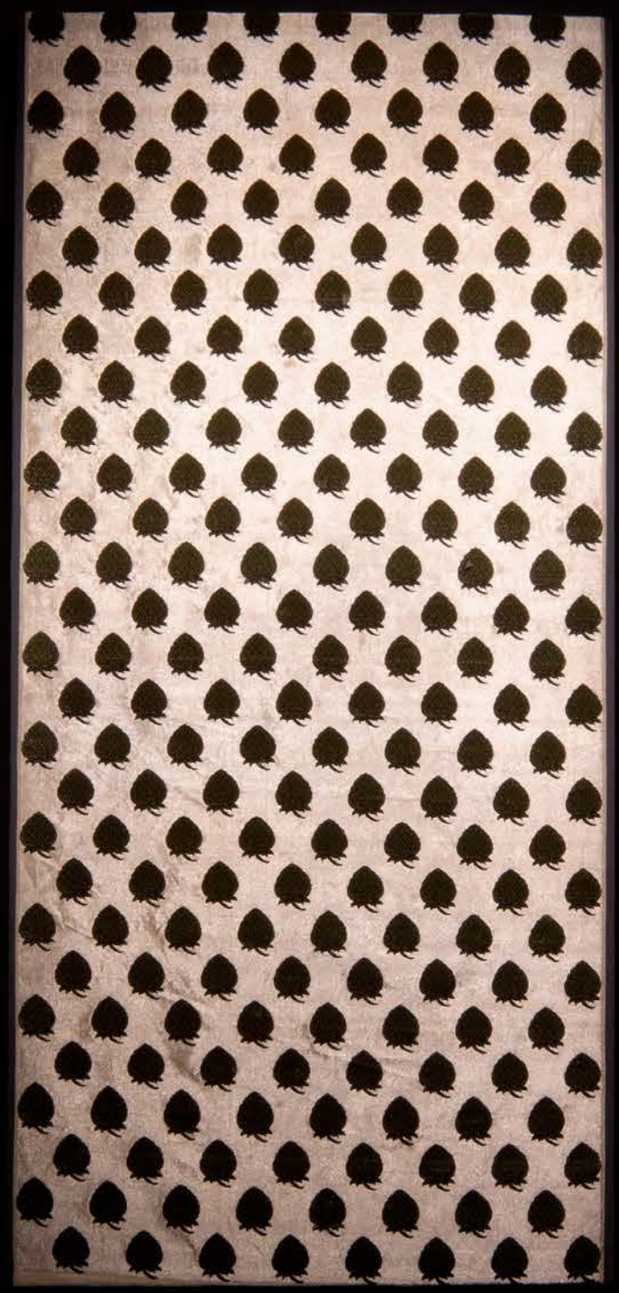
BAZUBAND (ARMBAND) · Gold, diamonds, enamel, Rajasthan c. Late 19th century CE
National Museum Acc. No.: 62. 640

BOX · Gold, diamonds, enamel, Jaipur, Rajasthan, c. Early 20th century CE
National Museum Acc. No.: 89.1034

KADA (BANGLE) · Gold, diamonds, enamel, Jaipur, Rajasthan c. 20th century CE
National Museum Acc. No.: 87.444 (2) and 87.444 (4)

MAKHMAL / VELVET

The contemporary velvets on display include two distinct categories; 'voided velvet' seen here across three textile lengths and the 'solid pile velvet' technique represented by three garments. These are referenced against rare historic examples from the National Museum's collection, which include a celebrated Iranian figural panel in the penultimate section, woven with silk and silver-gilt thread with multiple colours of pile. In the velvet garments, the entire surface is covered with a plush, two-colour silk pile. The distinctive design draws inspiration from the ubiquitous Mughal chevron pattern as well as from imperial Ottoman influences. The voided velvet fabric lengths are all woven with patterns in three colours of silk pile against backgrounds of silver thread. The omitted areas of the pile allow for the creation of contrasting texture, colour and dimensionality besides a wide repertoire of patterns.



VELVET LENGTH · Voided velvet woven with silver thread and
three colours of silk pile. Varanasi, 2016

The flower motif on this textile was borrowed from a Mughal carpet,
dated c. 1650, in the collection of the former Maharajas of Amber-Jaipur.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

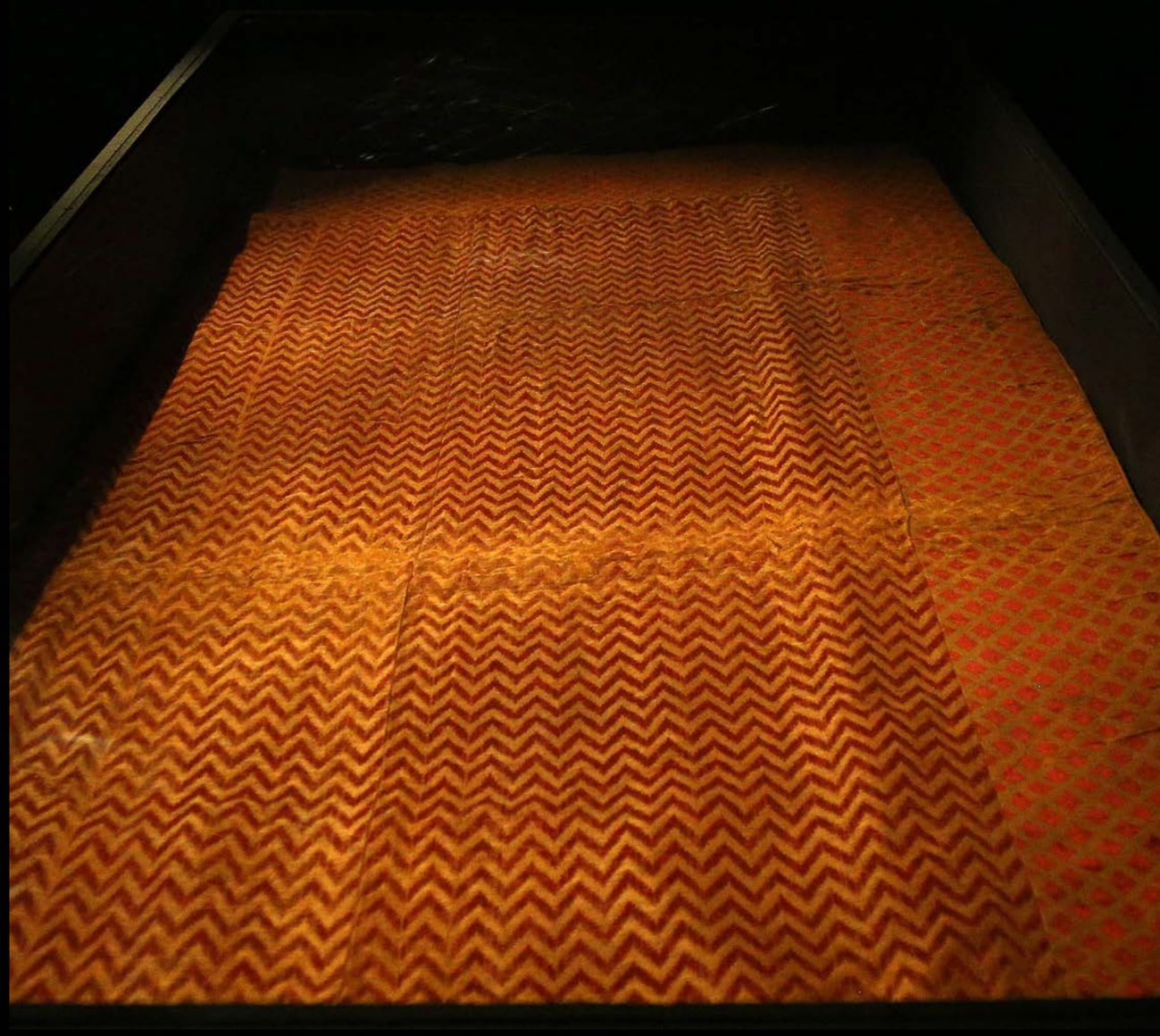
VELVET LENGTH · Voided velvet woven with silver thread and
three colours of silk pile. Varanasi, 2018

The flower motif here was borrowed from a Mughal carpet,
dated c. 1650, in the collection of the former Maharajas of Amber-Jaipur.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

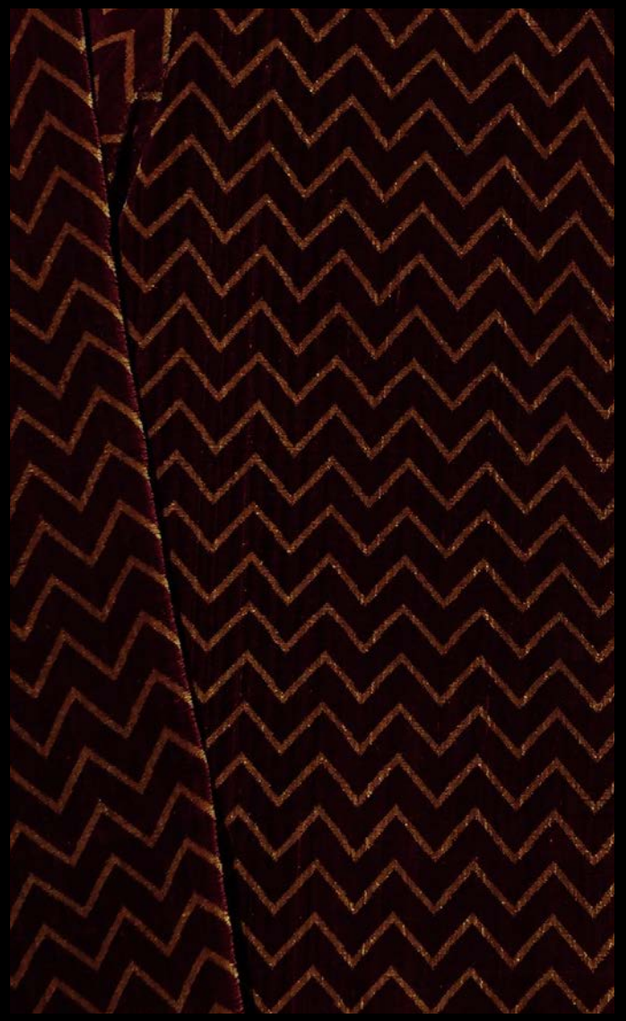
VELVET LENGTH · Voided velvet woven with silver thread and three colours of silk pile. Varanasi, 2012

This unique panel features a *Sharifa* (custard apple) motif borrowed from a brocaded twill tissue, dated c. 1700, from Safavid Iran. Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

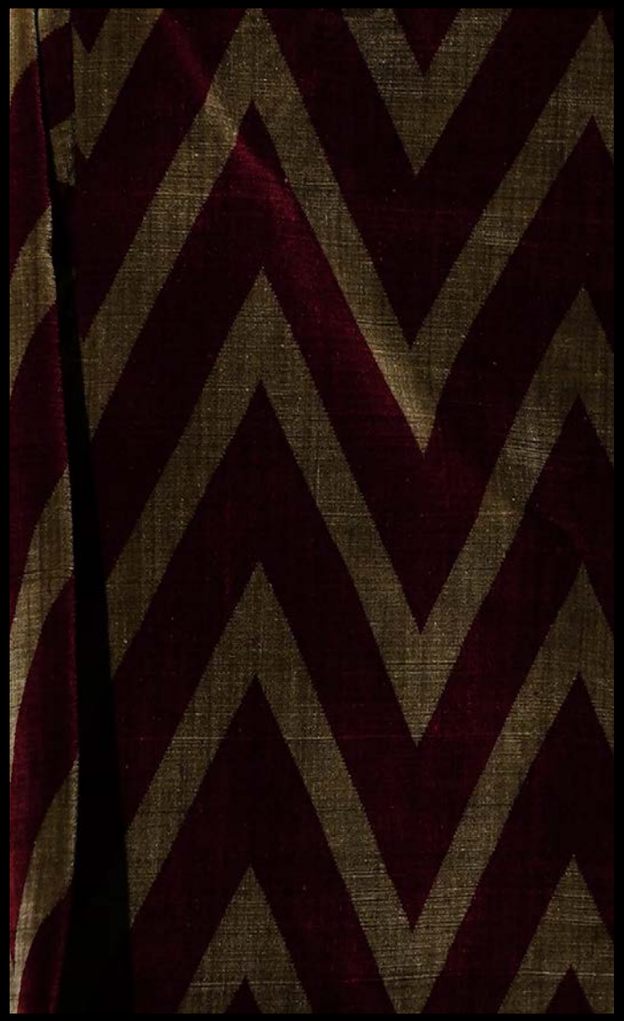
CURTAIN · Woven silk and silver-gilt thread velvet.
Mughal India, c. Second half of 17th century CE
National Museum Acc. No.: 59.203/15



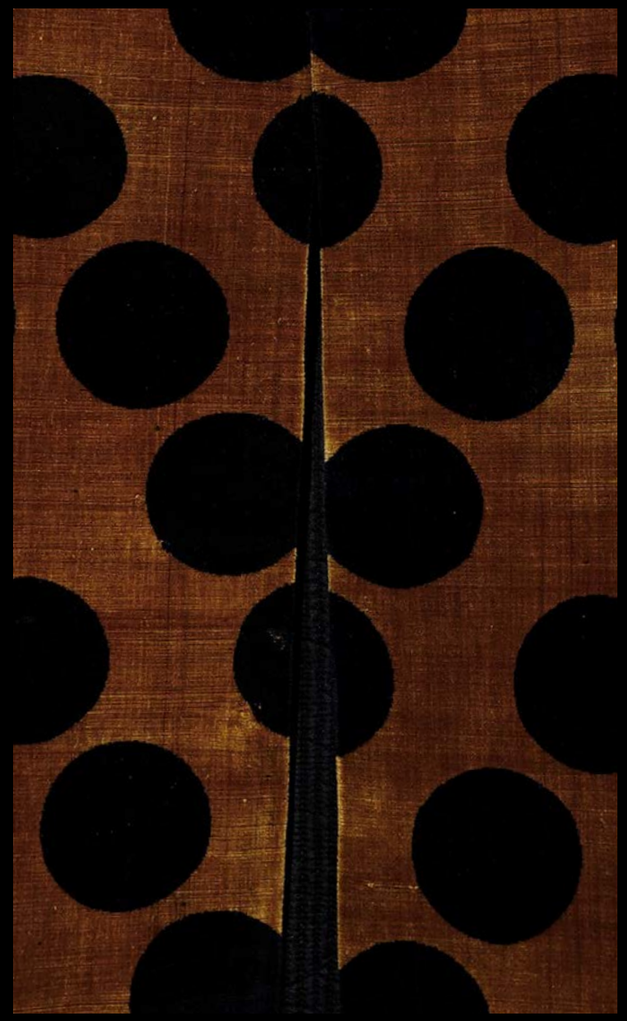
DAIS-COVER OR CURTAIN · Woven silk and silver-gilt thread velvet.
Mughal India, c. 18th century CE
National Museum Acc. No.: 59.203/1



VELVET WAISTCOAT · Silk velvet woven in two colours of silk pile. Varanasi, 2010
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi



VELVET COAT · Silk velvet woven in two colours of silk pile. Varanasi, 2009
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi



VELVET WAISTCOAT · Silk velvet woven in two colours of silk pile. Varanasi, 2008

The design featured here is a reproduction of an imperial
Ottoman velvet pattern from the 16th century.
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

QANATS

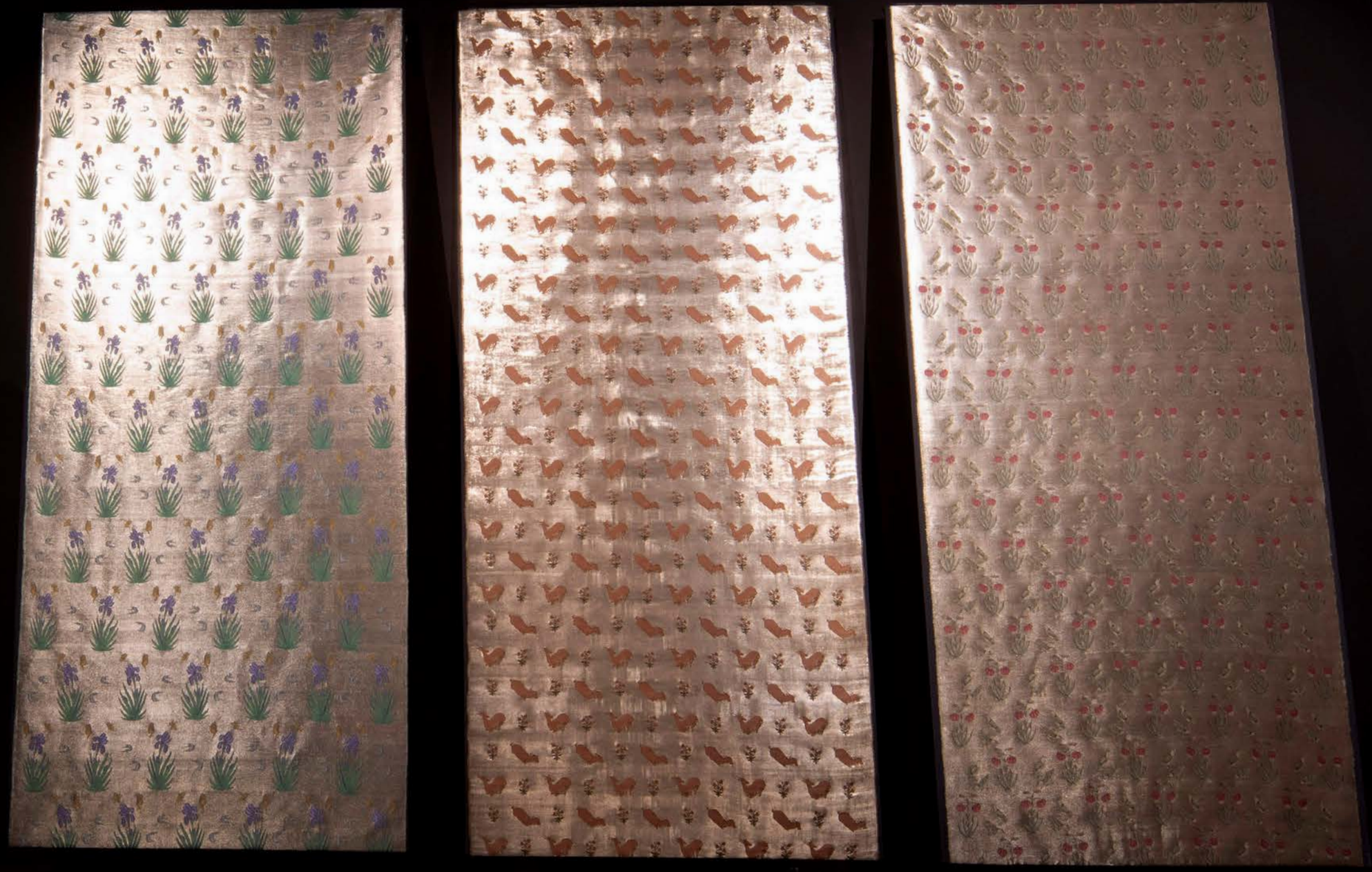
Qanats or tent wall panels were an intrinsic part of Indian court paraphernalia along with carpets, furnishings and animal trappings. A vast amount of tentage was needed to house imperial camps which were large tented cities on the move, with components that frequently needed replacement. The five, identical panels seen here are inspired from a mid-17th century, imperial Mughal example at the Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad. These wall panels would have been used in conjunction with canopies, awnings, carpets, bolsters and cushions, pole covers, accessories and trims within a royal chamber. Woven in a lampas weave, the central flowering plant placed under lobed arches is an artistic composite of botanical details from several flower species. The chief appeal of this set is the monumentality of the central motif.

QANATS (TENT PANELS) · Woven silk lampas, Varanasi, 2016-2019

These textiles are reproductions of a woven silk *qanat* from an imperial Mughal tent ensemble, dated c. 1650, in the collection of the Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad, and in other museum collections.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

SHIKARGAH

Medieval Indian decorative art traditions are replete with depictions of birds and beasts, as well as images of animal hunts often referred to as *shikargah*. The popularity of such patterns entered common parlance, thanks to simplified representations on costume fabrics and saris since the 19th century. The *shikargah* textiles displayed here, however, are woven in the much older samite-weaving technique using silk and silver thread, with the more ornate set of five worked in silver-gilt thread as well. The set highlights several species of birds and animals from India's endangered wildlife, in addition to the more familiar species. The birds include the Tree Pie, Himalayan *Bulbul*, Paradise Flycatcher, as well as aquatic species, and Siberian and Sarus cranes. The animals include the endangered Wild Ass of the Kutch and the Snow Leopard of the Himalayas, along with the more common Asiatic lion, forest deer, mountain goats, crocodiles and pythons.



FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver thread in extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2018

The motifs on this textile were borrowed from a Deccani
miniature painting, dated c. 1660.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver thread in extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2018

The motifs here were borrowed from the border of a
Mughal miniature painting, dated c. 1650.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver thread in extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2019

The motifs featured on this fabric were borrowed from the border of a
Mughal miniature painting, dated c. 1650.
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

SARI · Silk brocaded with silver-gilt thread. Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh,
c. 19th century CE

The *shikargah* or hunting themed sari is a classic genre of *Banarasi* silk-weaving. The sari features fine details such as leaping deer and hunters wielding matchlocks. In the *pallu*, miniature *shikargahs* appear in the form of paisleys enclosing animals and birds, all intertwined with flowers and foliage.
National Museum Acc. No.: 85.353

GHAGRA (SKIRT) · Silk brocaded with silver-gilt thread and silk.
Gujarat. Late 19th or Early 20th century CE

This skirt has a unique design inspired by the traditional shikargah or hunting theme, depicted in medieval paintings, objects, carpets and textiles.
National Museum Acc. No.: 97.23

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2003
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver-gilt thread in
extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2004
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk and silver-gilt thread in
extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2003
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk, silver and silver-gilt thread in
extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2004
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

FABRIC LENGTH · Silk, silver and silver-gilt thread in
extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2004
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

THE PASSAGE

Surviving examples of human figural images in courtly Indian textiles are few and far between. They would have been known, however, in all textile genres, including woven, painted, printed and embroidered textiles. Featuring prominently in the early woven textiles that survive from the Mughal era are European figures adapted from the Christian imagery brought to India by Jesuit priests. Christian themes, similarly, appear in miniature paintings from the late 16th and early 17th centuries at the Mughal and *Deccani* courts.

The central panel here, along with its two flanking textiles, are woven in silk, silver and silver-gilt thread in an extended samite weave. Their European figures are adapted from "The Last Judgement" fresco, painted by Michelangelo in c. 1534 CE, in the Sistine chapel, Vatican City, Italy. The woven images, in some ways, reflect the revered Indian ideal of *Kashi* as the earthly portal for the final release, *moksha*, as the soul rises to free itself from *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth. The rite of judgement and the subsequent passage of the soul converge as a profound metaphysical idea across religions and cultures. *Kashi* remains, even today, a bedrock for human faith.

VELVET FRAGMENT · Woven silk and silver-gilt velvet with pile substitution.
Safavid Iran. c. Mid-17th century CE

This outstanding figural velvet from Safavid Iran depicts a pair of noblewomen, dressed in part-European, part-Iranian costume, in a garden landscape. The full length of this textile features a non-repeating design of four such figures, along with unusual allegorical Christian motifs such as a leashed hound.
National Museum Acc. No.: 56.29

RUMAL (COVERLET) · Cotton painted with dye-mordants, indigo and resists (*kalamkari*). Probably Coromandel Coast, c. mid-17th century CE

Coverlets such as these were made for the Mughal, Rajput and Deccani courts, and for the Iranian market. This coverlet depicts a Deccani pavilion with a princely figure dressed in Persian costume, reclining against a bolster, and offering a flower to the woman serving him wine.
National Museum Acc. No.: 48.7/103

ALTAR PIECE · Silk satin embroidered with silver-gilt thread and silk.
North India?, c. mid-17th century CE

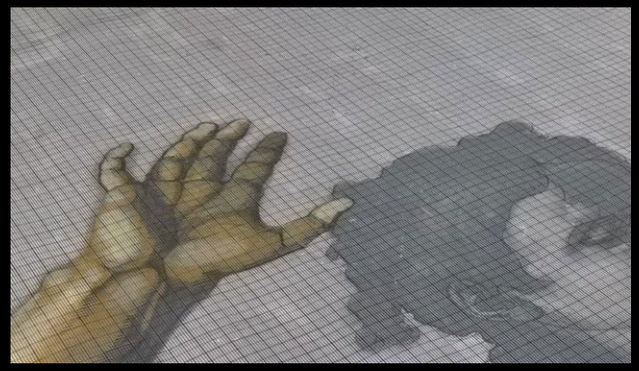
A very rare, early example of heavy Indian metallic embroidery, this textile was used as an altarpiece in an Armenian church. The central figure of the panel is the Virgin Mary surrounded by the four Evangelists or gospel writers: Matthew on the left, symbolised as a winged man; John depicted as an eagle on the right; followed by Mark symbolised by the winged lion on the left; and, on the right, the winged ox of Luke.
National Museum Acc. No.: 48.7/33

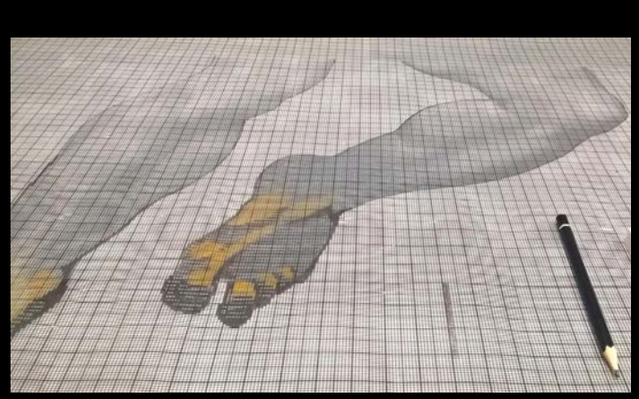
THE NATIVITY · Mughal India, c. 1725-1730 CE
National Museum Acc. No. 52.42

TRIPTYCH · Silk, silver and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2017-19

These figural images were adapted from The Last Judgment frescoes, dated c. 1534, Vatican City.
Suresh Neotia and Family Collection, Kolkata

Colouring the point-paper plan for the centre-panel of the woven triptych, Rahul Jain, Varanasi, 2016





Fresco Detail, The Last Judgment, Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, 1534
Sample weaving for centre-panel of triptych, Varanasi, 2017

Detail, point-paper plan for centre-panel of woven triptych, Varanasi, 2016


Those who dedicate their actions to God, abandoning all attachment,
remain untouched by sin, just as a lotus leaf is untouched by water.

Bhagavad Gita

PADMA

The *Padma* or the Lotus (*Nelumbo Nucifera*) is the National Flower of India. As a sacred flower, it occupies a unique position in the art and mythology of ancient India and has been an auspicious symbol of Indian culture since time immemorial. The *Padma* Awards are one of the highest civilian honours of India announced annually on the eve of Republic Day (26th January). The Awards seeks to recognize distinguished service of high order in public service.

PANEL · Silk and silver-gilt thread in extended samite weave. Varanasi, 2000
Lekha and Anupam Poddar Collection, New Delhi

PADMA BHUSHAN SURESH NEOTIA (1936-2015)

The late Suresh Neotia was a founder patron of the society Textile Art of India, which supported for 20 years the experimental silk-weaving workshop ASHA established by Rahul Jain. Shri Neotia was a leading industrialist, entrepreneur, art collector and philanthropist of his time. He was the co-founder of *Ambuja* Cements and associated companies and a recipient of the Harvard Business School – Economic Times Award. He established *Jnana Pravaha*, a leading cultural resource and educational centre in Varanasi, which now houses his extensive art collection; as well as the philanthropic trusts, Neotia Foundation and Shri Govind Deo Ji Trust. He supported and guided numerous institutions of excellence across India, such as Indian Institute of Management (Ahmedabad), Jawaharlal Nehru University (Delhi), Indian Institute of Technology (Gandhinagar), Banaras Hindu University (Varanasi), CII – Suresh Neotia Centre for Excellence (Kolkata) and the Indian Institute of Craft and Design (Jaipur).

PADMA BHUSHAN MARTAND SINGH (1947-2017)

The late Martand Singh, or *Mapu* as he was affectionately known, was India's best-known expert and connoisseur of traditional and contemporary textiles and fashion. Mapu's contribution to the revival and resurgence of India's traditional textile techniques and processes in the late 20th century was unparalleled for its visionary breadth and aesthetic depth. He inspired and guided, over four decades, legions of Indian craftspeople, designers, researchers and students. His early training as the director of the Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad led to the founding of *Amr Vastra Kosh* in Delhi, which produced modern India's most comprehensive documentation of the traditional saris of India. Mapu commissioned the extraordinary *Vishwakarma-Master Weavers* exhibitions for the Festivals of India as well as other textile exhibitions for the Development Commissioner (Handlooms), reviving and reinterpreting, many textile genres languishing across the country. He also conceived the landmark shows, *Costumes of Royal India*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and *Khadi: The Fabric of Freedom*, in New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bengaluru.

Left to right: Alauddin Ansari, Mohiuddin Ansari, Saddam Ansari, Rahul Jain, Kamaluddin Ansari, Shamim Ansari, Jamaluddin Ansari, Hasmat Ansari, Shauqat Ansari and Naseem Ansari.

PADMA SHRI RAHUL JAIN

Rahul Jain is a leading expert on the traditional textile arts of India. Apart from his well-known scholarship and writings on India's historical textiles, he is recognized across the world for his workshop practice in drawloom silk-weaving. For 25 years, he has run the experimental workshop, ASHA, producing some of the world's finest, and rarest, woven silks. Apart from his own research, writing and practice, he has assisted and promoted the traditional weavers and production houses of Varanasi, for which he was awarded, in 2015, the Padma Shri by the Government of India.

PRAMOD KUMAR KG

Pramod Kumar KG is the co-founder of Eka Archiving Services, (www.ekaresources.com) India’s first museum advisory firm that provides its services to a range of institutions, collectors and collections. He has worked with a vast range of artefacts that vary greatly in their materiality besides helping with nuanced aspects of cultural and heritage management. He has curated shows and lectured extensively across India and internationally. He is a published author and has made contributions to several edited volumes besides journals, magazines and other publications.

GLOSSARY

Brocade: a popular term for a heavy silk fabric richly patterned with gold or silver thread; a patterning technique in which discontinuous supplementary ('extra') wefts of silk or metal thread are individually inserted for each pattern motif.

Brocaded Double Weave: a two-layer fabric common in the end-panels and side-borders of Mughal court *patkas* in which the front layer is a twill weave and the back layer is a plain weave; the two layers are separable but don't interchange for patterning; instead, the front layer is patterned separately with discontinuous brocading wefts, and with one or two continuous wefts carried in the back layer; Mughal court *patkas* in this complicated weave were the most sophisticated patterned silks ever woven in the Indian subcontinent.

Damask: a silk fabric patterned with the contrasting warp and weft faces of the same twill or satin weave, resulting in a tone-on-tone pattern, believed by some to have been developed first in Damascus, Syria, and by others to be of Chinese origin.

Drawloom: a specialized loom for weaving patterned fabrics, in which the loom parts ('harness') used for creating the pattern are independently operated from the loom parts used to create the structure of the fabric; the pattern harness was operated by a special loom assistant, a 'drawboy'; drawlooms were invented in West Asia early in the first millennium.

Extended Samite Weave: by the middle of the second millennium, the samite weave developed several minor variations and refinements the most 'extended' of which were used by Iranian silk weavers in the Safavid period; these sophisticated variants were characterized by a higher density of yarns, fancy twill bindings, the use of 'inner' warps for non-pattern purposes, and large numbers of brocading wefts.

Lampas: a heavy and complex, weft-patterned fabric structure developed in the early second millennium in Asia or Europe, in which a foundation weave was patterned with an independent, supplementary weave, often with two different weaves employed for textural contrast and pattern relief; lampas-weave silks, together with silk velvet, were the most prized of all luxury textiles right up to the 19th century.

Samite: the samite weave developed from taquetè (see below); samite replaced the plain weave binding of pattern wefts in taquetè with a simple twill binding, allowing clearer, denser colour and pattern definition; the samite weave was used across Asia for the most spectacular patterned silks of the late first and early second millennium; samite was gradually superseded by patterned lampas and velvet in the second millennium, but remained in use in India and Iran right up to the 19th century.

Taffeta: a warp-faced, plain-weave silk of medium weight and dense construction.

Taquetè: the taquetè weave, developed early in the first millennium somewhere in West Asia or the Eastern Mediterranean, was a complex, weft-patterned fabric structure with two independent warp systems: an 'inner' warp that helped create the pattern but did not appear on either face of the fabric, and a 'binding' warp that secured multiple patterning wefts into a plain weave; from the middle of the first millennium, taquetè was gradually superseded by other, more complex fabric types, but remained in use in India and Iran right up to the 19th century.

Tissue: a light metallic plain-weave (or occasionally twill-weave) fabric with warps of silk and wefts of metal thread.

Twill: a simple fabric type in which the weave repeats on three or more warp ends and weft picks, producing a characteristic diagonal ridging and a looser structure and drape than plain weave.

Velvet: a heavy silk fabric with a napped, carpet-like ('pile') surface created by pulling up to the surface, and shearing, a supplementary silk warp held under the foundation weave; patterned silk velvet first appeared around the 13th century in Central or West Asia, reaching its apogee during the 15th-17th centuries in Renaissance Italy, Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran, Mughal India and Ming China.

Voided Velvet: a silk velvet patterned by leaving the pattern 'background' fully free of the pile yarns; often, the 'voided' areas were covered with a supplementary weft of metal thread.

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PATTERNMAKERS: Jaffer Ali Naqshband and Mohiuddin Ansari
WORKSHOP SUPERVISORS: Azizul Haque and Anwar Ahmad
GENERAL ASSISTANT: Alauddin Ansari
METAL THREAD (ZARI) SPECIALIST: Shyamsundar Jaiswal
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