The Last Craftsmen

PHOTO ESSAY

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The textile and fashion industry has evolved over time, becoming heavily mechanized since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. In this modern era, handicrafts have retained their rustic charm. The painstaking process of hand-block printing has been recognized for its authentic and unique artistry. The art and skill of painting with blocks was passed down generations forming a long lineage of craftsmen.

Historically, the cities and villages of Rajasthan have been the epicenters of hand-block printing — Sanganer, Bagru, Kaladera, Jairampura, and Jahauta. However, the industry is struggling to compete with machines that produce output much quicker and is facing unique threats, especially during Covid-19.
Today, most workers in this industry are migrants from Farrukhabad in Uttar Pradesh who have settled in Jaipur and nearby villages. Due to the pandemic, they lost their jobs and had to return home. However, the owners of these workshops realize the importance of preserving this craft and try to do so by offering security to their workers. Riddhi Siddhi, a workshop famous for Mughal Printing, helps the workers retain their jobs especially since they could be the last generation carrying out hand block printing of this kind. Other workshops also do their best in protecting this craft. For instance, Indus Art & Emporium strongly believes in manufacturing original hand blocks and their prints.

**Technique & Process**

Exploring the process of block printing reveals why supporting local artisans is so integral to the survival of this craft. Given that block-printing is a labor-intensive process, at every step workers play a crucial role in contributing to the final outcome. The process begins with expert craftsmen carving out a peculiar design onto a block of Sheesham wood. The meticulously designed block takes around 2-3 days to be created. Once the blocks are made, the artisans move on to prepare the dye coloring. Hand-block printing often involves dull and dark colors which give a traditional Indian look. Most places such as Bagru are involved in creating organic, environmentally friendly dye where the coloring is created using local ingredients like vegetables or indigo crops.
This quality of block-printing is likely to survive for another 8-10 years. That is why our printers have been associated with us for 15-20 years. Their forefathers have been doing the same work and that is how this skill was passed down. But the government is not doing enough to encourage this work so that we can have a new generation of printers.”

— Harsh, owner of Riddhi Siddhi textiles in Jaipur
Once the necessary materials have been prepared, a 7-meter piece of cloth is chosen and given a background color, if required. The cloth is then put up on a long-high table which can be worked upon by 2-3 workers at once. Block-printing happens in layers such that workers initially print the outline of the cloth, its borders, and then the main designs. In fact, the time taken to finish a product is dependent upon the number of colors in the design since layers are distinguished by color. It takes around 20-30 minutes to complete one layer of printing. However, the fabrics also take to dry up before the next layer can be printed making hand-block printing a tedious task. Despite the time-consuming nature of this process, workshops in the Bagru Industrial area produce up to 50000 designs a year.
Over the years, domestic demand for hand-block printed fabrics has declined significantly. Since most people are from average middle-class families, hand block printing is considered to be an expensive luxury that they cannot seem to afford. An alternative is becoming popular — screen printing — where fabrics are printed on through machines. Manufacturers invest in huge machines for screen printing fabrics which print on cloth quickly and thus, requires less labour. This capital-intensive method allows them to mass-produce 30x more fabrics than what can be produced by hand-block printing. Such techniques are popular in Sanganer where the art of hand-block printing is being diluted.

Competing with the cheaper alternative of screen-printed fabrics, the industry now primarily survives on exports to European countries like Italy. There is high demand for such authentic handicrafts in the west as foreigners visiting India would come to Jaipur to specifically buy hand block printed fabrics. However, due to the pandemic, the disruption in the international economy has caused a sharp decline in sales and thereby production as well.
While the machine-based alternatives do fulfill the demand within the country, they seem to displace an ancient art of the Indian subcontinent. The legacy of hand block printing which was introduced in India with the advent of the Mughal Rule is at a threat of dissipation. Craftsmen and their families which were involved in the making of this art since generations are at risk of not being able to sustain themselves. With urban encroachment and industrialization, there has been an erosion of the authentic art and design of hand block printing. Despite the attempt of many fashion designers to bring back the hand block printing demand, its prominence has reduced.

In the face of these challenges, the handicraft industries continue to adapt by being environmentally conscious and following sustainable techniques while retaining their rustic core. The workers practising this art have been instrumental in spreading their love for this unique craft. As consumers, it is our responsibility to encourage this essential part of our culture and history by protecting it from disappearing... by making sure that this generation is not the last of the craftsmen
“Owing to the new techniques and modern machines, the production for block-printing has reduced. The factories that followed the authentic methods of block printing have now moved on to screen-printing.” - Teerath Kacholiya, Indus Art and Emporium
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THE TEAM

The Trunk Door is an enterprise committed to giving the tireless workers in India’s textile and handicraft sector, a voice. As an online business rooted in India with its branches spreading overseas, the tree of its business curates a collection of hand-made works in block printing, mughal art, chikan work to name a few, providing its customers the best shades of these authentic made-by-hand craft

JIGNESH MISTRY is a Senior Research Analyst and the Visual Storyboard Team Lead with the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), Jindal School of Liberal Arts, O.P. Jindal Global University. He is a freelance photojournalist, who has been working in the field as a journalist for over 11 years. Jignesh started his career as a nightshift news photographer at a daily tabloid during his graduation. Since then, his work has been published at multiple magazines, wire agencies and national newspapers. He is also involved in undertaking photography workshops for students in academic institutions. He has been engaged with the PAIGAM network and is a regular contributor at The Wire, The Press Trust of India and other International Wire Agencies.