

# **Oxford Asian Textile Group Lockdown Newsletter**

**28 July 2020**



## A word from Helen Wolfe, chair of OATG

Welcome to the first OATG *Lockdown Newsletter*.

I don't think anyone realised how long our lives would be restricted at the beginning of the lockdown in March or how different life would become. The committee and I send our best wishes to all members and hope you are keeping safe and well as you navigate through these difficult times.

We want to restart our programme as soon as we feel it's safe to meet together, but until then we decided to produce this newsletter with some topical articles and updates so as to keep in touch and to compensate a little for the lack of talks and events.

Like many other groups we are planning some online talks, which we will let you know about when we are able via email.

I hope you enjoy reading the newsletter, as you do the blog, which continues as normal, as well as the journal – the next issue of which is due for publication in October.

We always appreciate any feedback or suggestions for the future; please feel free to contact me or the editor – our email addresses are listed on the penultimate page.

Helen Wolfe, Chair

**p.s.** The OATG committee has agreed to hold subscriptions at their current level for the next two years. See the note from the membership secretary on page 22 for further details.

## A word from the editor

We will be publishing another *Lockdown Newsletter*. Like this one I hope it will contain news, updates and short articles written by you and possibly some guests.

I am therefore encouraging members to contribute a short COVID-19 and/or textile-related article. This could range from a paragraph or two with a photograph(s) to say three pages of A4 with commensurately more images. You could write about

- a favourite textile or a group of related textiles?
- have you undertaken an interesting textile-related activity during lockdown?
- have you an interesting tale about a trip in the past?
- can you tell us about a textile museum or exhibition that you have visited?
- what is the most unusual textile in your possession?

My email address is: [gavin@firthpetroleum.com](mailto:gavin@firthpetroleum.com)  
In the meantime stay safe and get writing!

Gavin Strachan, Editor

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**Front cover** Ella Kruglyanskaya *This is a Robbery*, 2019. Egg tempera, oil stick on gessoed panel. 56.1 x 37.8 cm. © Ella Kruglyanskaya. Photo: Ben Westoby.

## **An exhibition interrupted – and restored: *The Cloth that Changed the World: India's Painted and Printed Cottons at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto***

by Sarah Fee

Recent global events have caused us all to re-think our priorities and – if our families and friends have remained safe and healthy – to appreciate our many blessings. No doubt many readers, as myself, have continued to find solace and comfort in all things textiles, using extended time at home to re-visit (or finally catalogue!) old textile friends hiding in closets and under beds, to read those books we never seemed to have time for, to support artisans-in-need, or connect and share online in new ways and venues, perhaps creating new textile networks and friends we hadn't previously known.

That said, for many of us, textile research is more a lifestyle than a job, and dents in our projects have come not without some grief. In my own case, the last two years of my life have been consumed with leading the exhibition and publication project *Cloth that Changed the World: India's Painted and Printed Cottons*. [See Note 1] In 4,000 square feet and with some 60 objects, it represents the ROM's renowned (and expanded) collection of 'Indian chintz' (aka mordant and resist dyed cottons) for the first time since the 1970 exhibition *Origins of Chintz*. The exhibit further features a few rarely (or never before) seen pieces from private and public collections, in order to convey more fully the global reach of India's historic trades. Finally, it aims to bring the story of Indian chintz into its exciting current phase, by displaying contemporary fashion and fine art works.



*The entrance to the ROM's Patricia Harris Gallery of Textiles & Costume, as of 15 March 2020, showing three pieces that trace the exhibition's main narrative arc:*

- 1- painted and printed cottons as an Indian art,*
- 2- as a living art, and*
- 3- as an art desired by all the world.*

**Left to right:** *a seventeenth-century hanging for a palace in southern India on loan from Berdj Achdjian Gallery, Paris; Stone (Prosthor) 2014 by Ajit Kumar Das (ROM 2019.35.1); 18th-century Indo-European chintz palampore (ROM 963.13).*

*Photo by Deborah Metsger.*

## CHINTZ EXHIBITION AT ROM, TORONTO



The exhibition was due to open on 4 April 2020, and run through to September 2020. Our team was busily installing it – labels had been delivered, garments mounted, and the enormous *palampore* wall hangings installed (see photograph to the left) – when on 17 March Ontario made the decision to close museums as part of its efforts to contain COVID-19. ROM employees began working from home. Overnight, the team was disbanded,

Two remarkable, enormous eighteenth-century Indo-European chintz wall hangings (palampores) from ROM collections (ROM 934.4.7 and 934.4.14). Cherry picker equipment was used by preparators to install them. Photograph Sarah Fee.

our shared buzz, drive and excitement evaporated. I found an imperfect outlet for my still-elevated adrenaline in digging and moving plants around the garden. A few weeks later, the celebratory opening events and international symposium were put on indefinite hold. We all entered new ways of being and thinking and experiencing time, riding the various waves that rose and fell.

Now, four months later, there is good news to share on many of these fronts. My garden is in glorious bloom. Ontario has for the moment – through steady leadership and concerted communal efforts – flattened the curve and moved into Stage 2 re-opening. This means the ROM has re-opened its doors – albeit to limited numbers and following provincial social distancing and masking guidelines. Just last week our *Cloth that Changed the World* team was reconvened virtually to begin plotting the final phases of installation in a view to opening the exhibition in early autumn.

The current plan is to run the exhibition for one full year through to September 2021, to allow more visitors an opportunity to experience it. Preparators have returned to install objects. On my first day back in the gallery I was thrilled to see the completion of the cases dedicated to Indo-Iranian (see photograph at the top of the next page) and Indo-Armenian painted and printed cottons. On 13 July, our last international loan arrived safely in Toronto: a set of exquisite 18th-century Indian chintz (*sarasa*) pouches for *sencha* tea implements, on loan from collector-scholar Peter Lee – the little shipping crate containing the pieces had been stranded at Singapore airport since March when international borders closed.

A few challenges remain: we still must re-think and re-create our many touchable elements – such as printing blocks and kalam pens, as well as the interactive iPads with enlarged motifs from the monumental *palampores*, carefully created so that visitors might zoom in to appreciate fully the exquisite detail of artisans' renderings of flowerings and animals. New floor graphics must be added to guide correct distancing and one-way traffic.

Nevertheless, the gallery begins to glow with the unrivalled colours of Indian chintz masterworks. We hope the vistas of mesmerising design, varied scales and shapes, the vibrant reds, blues, purples and yellows, the whimsical squirrels and deer, will offer solace and joy for eyes weary of screens and four-walls, or who have suffered greater trials or loss in recent months. We

## CHINTZ EXHIBITION AT ROM, TORONTO



*Happily installed on 12 July 2020: the case 'Made in India for Iran' with two finely painted and printed nineteenth century hangings made in southern India for export to Iran (ROM 934.4.75 and 934.4.80). Photograph Sarah Fee.*

hope to promote India's contemporary textile artisans whose livelihoods, if not their very lives, are threatened today as in so many previous times in history. They include Renuka Reddy of Bengaluru, Abduljabbar Khatri of Dhamadka (Gujarat), M. Kailasham of Hyderabad, Chandrakant Chitara of Ahmedabad, and Ajit Kumar Das of Kolkata (see photograph to the right).

We look forward to sharing this exhibition and the glory of India's painted and printed cottons with many of you from the international textile community, whether close-up in Toronto or through a virtual walk-through program. A tiny silver lining is that we may reach even larger audiences through enhanced online platforms. In the meantime, wishing you and yours well, and many good textile moments.

In the meantime, the Fashion & Textiles division at the ROM wishes you and yours health and happiness, and hopes that any of your own interrupted textile travels or research can resume soon.

For up-to-date information on opening dates and online programs, please continue to check the ROM website: <https://www.rom.on.ca/en/exhibitions-galleries/exhibitions/the-cloth-that-changed-the-world-indias-painted-and-printed>

**Note 1.** The companion publication carries the title, *Cloth that Changed the World: The Art and Fashion of Indian Chintz* (Sarah Fee, ed. ROM/Yale University Press). An exhibition preview can be found in *Hali Magazine* (Spring 2020, issue 203, pp. 86-95), and the story of the ROM's historic collecting of Indian painted and printed cottons in *Textiles Asia* (September 2019, Volume 11, Issue 2).



*ROM Senior Technician Karla Livingston completes mounting the ROM's recent acquisition, a fine work by Ajit Kumar Das from his 2014 Stone (Prosthesis), made with natural dyes, the kalam pen, and modern paint brushes (ROM 2019.35.1).*

## The gift of African wax print

by Helen Wolfe

In 2005 the British Museum set up a training programme, *The Africa Programme*, which was a series of collaborative projects working with museums in Kenya and Ethiopia and then later in Nigeria and Ghana. This innovative programme provided training for staff working in the museums of these countries. It covered many aspects of museum studies including education, documentation, preventative conservation, collection care and display. It also enabled the building of relations in which their staff and those from the BM could learn from each other: everyone learnt something.

Part of the programme was to provide training in the care of textile collections. The textile training course in Nigeria comprised three sessions each of two weeks over the period of a year. The first textile collection care training was held at the National Museum in Lagos, which was followed by training at the National Museum of Ibadan on textile mounting and display. This culminated in the team installing an exhibition *African Lace: A History of Trade, Creativity and Fashion* at the National Museum in Lagos. It was organised in collaboration with the Ethnology Museum, Vienna, and included loan textiles from the British Museum.



*Installing the exhibition African Lace: A History of Trade, Creativity and Fashion.*

Textiles and dress play such an important part in the cultural identity throughout Africa. There is a continuance of tradition in West Africa and Nigeria and Ghana, the two countries in which we worked, have a long and rich history of weaving and dyeing. In Ghana, notable are the colourful and intricately-woven narrow strip *kente* cloth of the Asante people as well as the stamped *adinkra* cloth traditionally used at funerals. Nigeria has a long and diverse heritage of weaving and textile production. This includes *aso-oke* fabric in narrow strips that is traditionally woven by men, and *akwete* cloth woven by women on a wider vertical loom, as well as the beautiful blue and white resist-dyed *adire* cloth.

In West Africa you still find traditionally woven and dyed textiles, but it is the use of wax print cloth that is now widely embraced. This is partly because it is more available and affordable than handwoven textiles, but also because of its versatility, vibrant colours, and the variety of designs which make it so attractive.

## THE GIFT OF AFRICAN WAX PRINT



*Participants proudly wearing their wax print to the opening of the exhibition.*

At the end of each training trip everyone in the team was presented with a gift. This would always be lengths of wax printed cloth, something that is very highly prized, and for me the perfect present. On my first visit to Lagos, I was given two pieces with a very bright bold design, typically Nigerian and much loved there. The next time I was given a black and grey piece with a dramatic design and a cloth with a smaller motif and softer colours, probably because the givers had observed the colours of what they considered my boring wardrobe.

It was a great delight to visit the markets and fabric shops with their vast array of textiles in every colour and design imaginable, an explosion on the visual senses. How could anyone who loves textiles resist buying yet more of these enticing cloth lengths? The result is a drawer and ottoman at home full of fabulous cloth.

### **What to do with all this cloth?**

I have made several items of clothing from the fabric, but as it is traditionally sold in six yard lengths, enough in the original country to make a long skirt, blouse and wrap, there is always plenty left over after making a European style dress, skirt or blouse.

For several years I have been making bags from the leftover fabric and which I have given to friends at Christmas and birthdays; but even so there is still plenty left. Then

## THE GIFT OF AFRICAN WAX PRINT

during lockdown, I wanted to do something useful as well as keeping myself occupied. I started making masks from the smaller pieces. I have now made over fifty, and sent them to friends and family at home and abroad, and am now even sending them to friends of friends.

Since the beginning of lockdown my only outing was to the supermarket, so why not wear something stylish and colourful!



*Some of Helen Wolfe's face masks made with African wax print.*

### **Wax print: Africa's pride or colonial legacy?**

Since the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May, the mass demonstrations in the US and here in Britain and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been much debate about colonial legacy. The widespread use of wax print hasn't escaped scrutiny.

I would like to draw your attention to the article *Wax print: Africa's pride or colonial legacy?* by Claire Spencer <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/extra/4fq4hrgxvn/wax-print>. This article has looked at the different opinions on an even handed basis and given a good account of the historical background, but I would like to add my personal thoughts following my experience working with colleagues in the African museums and with the British Museum collection.

The history of wax print with its origins from Indonesian batik is well documented. During the Dutch colonisation of Indonesia in the 1880s, production started in the Netherlands, Manchester, and other European manufacturing areas where it could be produced in bulk and at a lower cost. Resin replaced the wax traditionally used in hand-printed Javanese batiks, but good quality double-sided cloth was still used. European production for the African market was dominant

## THE GIFT OF AFRICAN WAX PRINT

until the 1960s when factories opened in Ghana, but these new Ghanaian places of work were still producing high-quality wax print.



*Samples of African wax print.*

With the growth in popularity of fancy print, manufacturers in West Africa found an even cheaper method of fabricating cloth in bulk by printing it rather than using the more laborious resist process. The cloth was used to celebrate anniversaries, personal events and to endorse political occasions. As a result, new designs are constantly created which reflect the latest tastes and trends. And now, as with so many commodities, they have to compete with cheap imports from China. However, this is all part of the history and evolution of the cloth, and means that those who cannot afford the expensive traditional wax print are able to buy a cheaper fabric. To illustrate the innovation and creativity of the current industry, a Ghanaian fabric company has already launched a new line of designs inspired by the Covid-19 pandemic. <https://www.bbc/news/world-africa-53321016>.

Fashion is important in West African life. This means wearing your wax print in whichever quality, design or colour you choose. Wax print is worn with pride by both men and women, and the creativity involved in its making can only be applauded. The crackle usually seen as a defect in Indonesian batik is encouraged and exaggerated. Patterns have become bolder and now have more exuberant colours. Although many designs used today may have their origins in colonial times, the Africans have assimilated them and made them their own.

Now that the wearing of face masks in enclosed spaces is becoming the new norm, and is obligatory on public transport and shops, is it appropriate for an older white woman to wear African wax print?

Honouring the designers and producers of this wonderful cloth, I am wearing my masks with pride and with that extra a bit of style.

## The game of *chopat*

by Elizabeth Friendship

Chopat is an ancient board game from India. A version was reputedly played by Yudhishtira and Duryodhan in the great Indian epic Mahabharata and it is still played by all ages. The 'board' is usually made of fabric with the squares embroidered, but I also have a tiny one made entirely of beads and have even seen it scratched on an earth floor.



Two boys playing a board game.

When I saw the boys in the photograph on the left, I thought they were playing *chopat* but they were actually playing a different game, possibly *ashta chamma*. Their board has been scratched into the tiles of the bench and they are using pink and white pebbles for counters. The bench is too narrow for chopat, but it shows that these board games may be played with very simple equipment and are not only for the privileged.

The example in the photograph below was bought in Gujarat about thirty years ago. The wooden pieces came from a market, probably Rajkot. Each player has four pieces; red and green are partners and play against yellow and black. The cowries are used as dice. There should be seven but in my set one is lost. All seven are thrown and points are gained by whether they land up or down.



The chopat 'board' with pieces and cowrie shells.

## CHIN WEDDING BLANKET HANDWOVEN IN MYANMAR

This 'board' is made from a single layer of red cotton edged with blue bias binding and entirely sewn by hand.

There is no specific size for a board. The arms of this one measure 40 cm x 19 cm (15 ¾" x 7 ½") and are joined to a central square of printed cotton which is decorated with mirrors and sequins and edged with blue bias binding. One side is left open to form a pocket to hold the pieces when it is not in use and the arms fold over to make a neat square.



*Reverse side of the 'board'.*

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## Chin wedding blanket handwoven in Myanmar

by Katherine Preston

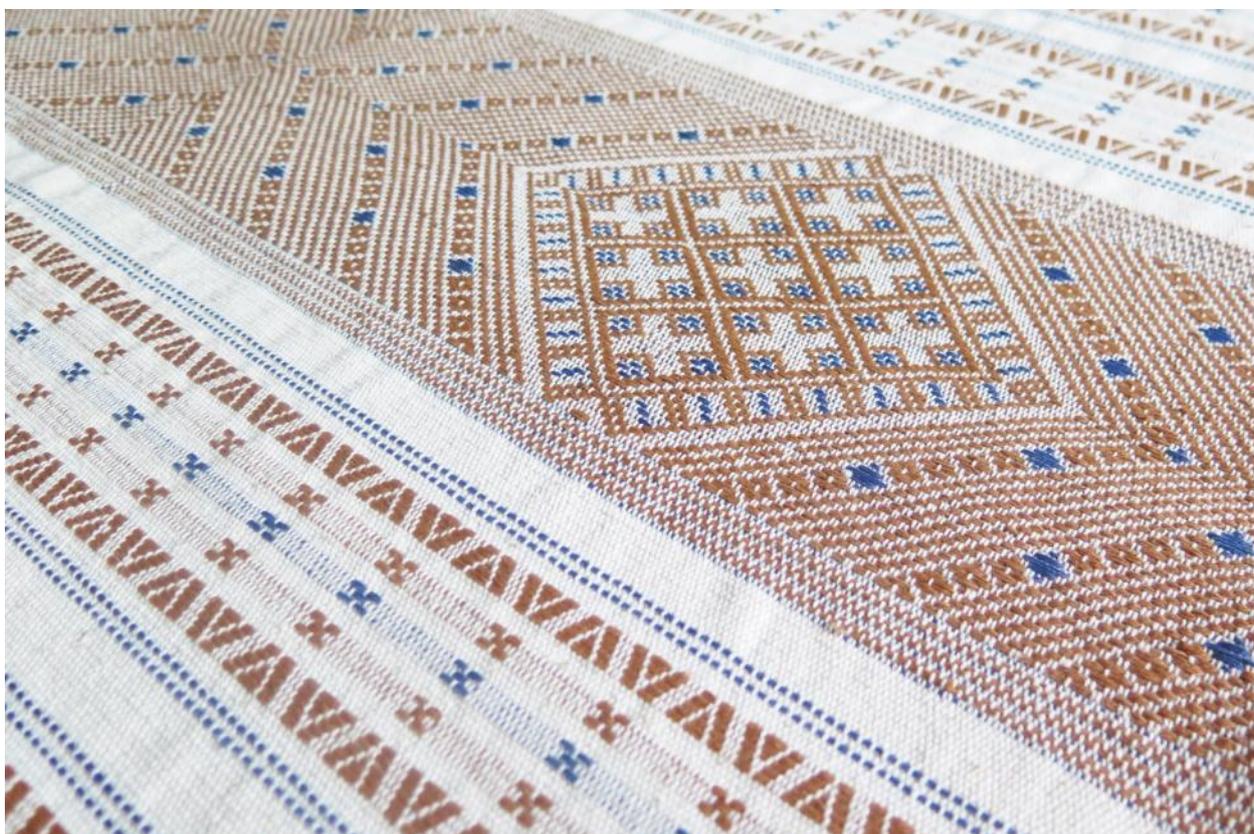
Numerous ethnic groups spread across the northern part of Rakhine State practice the time-honoured skill of backstrap weaving, each group having a distinct culture, and using specific motifs and techniques.



*Chin wedding blanket woven on a traditional backstrap (body tensioned) loom by Daw Ma Thein of Chaung Net Village, the Laytu tribe in Minbya, Northern Rakhine, Myanmar.*

## CHIN WEDDING BLANKET HANDWOVEN IN MYANMAR

For a newlywed Chin woman, it is customary to weave a large blanket, which she will use with her husband over their lifetime. When one partner dies, the blanket is cut in two. One half is used to cover the body and the other half stored away until the second partner dies. Chin people believe that one day the blanket will unite the two spirits.



Detail from a Chin wedding blanket woven by Daw Ma Thein of Chaung Net Village, of the Laytu tribe in Minbya, Northern Rakhine, Myanmar.

The *pull-maw* motif has nine diamonds surrounded by a constellation of stars. The nine diamonds represent the islands where the tribes live. The border patterns surrounding the diamonds are the constellation of stars. The pattern expresses how the tribes live harmoniously with their surroundings and the universe.

The blanket is woven from cotton, dyed using regional natural dyes; *Ceriops roxburghiana* (mangrove) from Myebon and indigo, which in Myanmar is *Indigofera tinctoria*. Every community has its own spiritual rituals, recipes and techniques for creating natural indigo dye.



The full blanket.



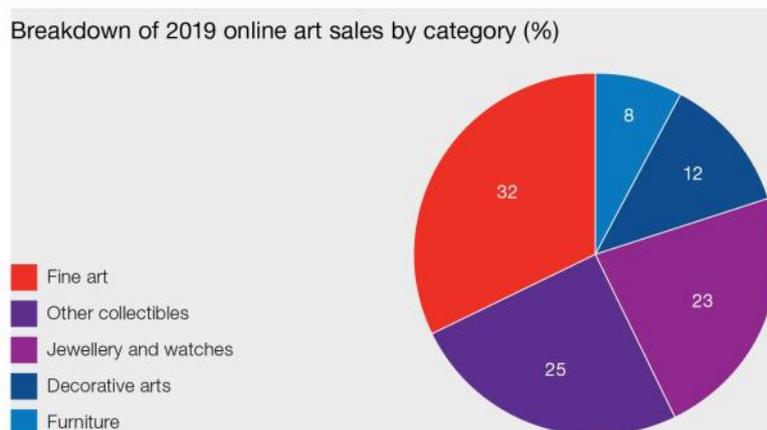
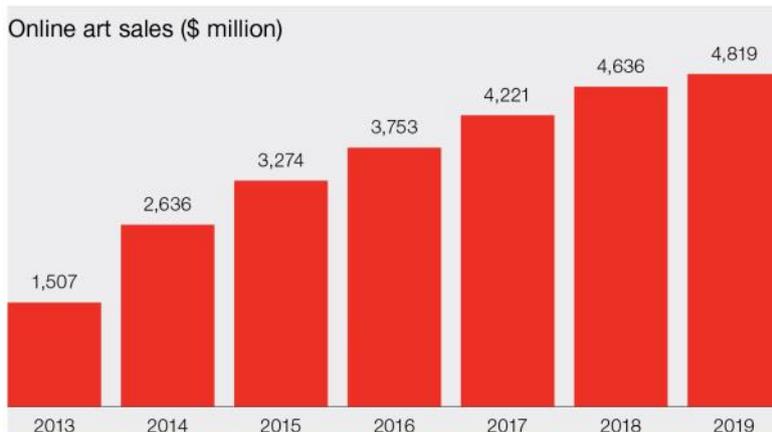
Laytu backstrap weaver Daw Ma Thein at work.

## Lockdown and the auction market

by Gavin Strachan

You may have thought that with Lockdown the auctioneers would be having a bad time. Travel was severely restricted and viewing and attending sales all but impossible. However, anecdotal evidence suggests some auction houses have increased turnover by up to 40% during lockdown and the limited empirical evidence confirms this.

The COVID-19 crisis suddenly meant that we had time on our hands. We may not have been able to travel, but we could access the internet and we had time to trawl. Online auction sites (and online dealers) became the main means to access antique and textile items for sale.



Both images from the *Hiscox online art trade report 2020*.

Pure online-only auction sales at Christie's, Sotheby's and Phillips generated US\$ 370 million in the first half of 2020 (to 28 June 2020), more than five-times higher than the same period in 2019. This is part of the general trend in online sales. The big three, Christie's, Sotheby's and Heritage (the major American multinational auction house), saw online turnover increase from \$636 million in 2015 to \$1 billion in 2019 – a 58% increase, equivalent to 12.1% compound growth a year).

The COVID-19 crisis has significantly accelerated the prevalence of online sales. Again on anecdotal evidence, the number of items reaching their reserve has increased and are not withdrawn for lack of bids. This is particularly affecting the bottom and middle end of the market: in previous years average-quality items would not have attracted so much interest.

At the upper end of the market, Sotheby's reported a 131% increase in the number of lots sold online this year to May 2020, and a 74% increase in average price compared with 2019, while Heritage Auction reported a 10% increase in online sales for the first five months of the year.

Some of this information comes from a report by insurance company Hiscox on the online art trade. It has just been published and is available at [www.hiscox.co.uk/online-art-trade-report](http://www.hiscox.co.uk/online-art-trade-report). It contains an interesting list of online art sale sites – of which there are very many more than you thought.

Robert Read, Head of Art and Private Clients at Hiscox, surmises that the online success is causing a shift as to how the antique and art trade functions. "No longer will we have the joy and pain of crowded art fairs and gallery openings. Dealers will have to find new ways to create the buzz that makes us have to buy NOW, lest we dwell and lose yet another treasure that we can't live without. I am not sure how, but I am sure they will."

## Honoured Guests of the Chief of Nagaland

by David and Sue Richardson

About 15 years ago we set out on a textile research and collecting trip through Nagaland in North East India. We were excited to discover that there was to be an important Naga festival in November by the Lotha Naga at the village of Wokha, about 75km north of Kohima, so planned this as the highlight of our trip. We chose to organise our travel through an Indian agent who specialised in the region and had offices in Delhi and Slough (yes, really!), but were disappointed when they advised us that no such festival was planned at that time.

We stuck to our itinerary anyway and headed off to Assam, where the border officials carefully checked our protected area entry permits. It was a tricky time – the Indian government were combatting insurgents in both Assam and Manipur and during our travels numerous long military convoys passed us.

After exploring many great weaving villages in the north, we steadily began working our way south. The day before the supposed festival was to start we drove towards Wokha and were overjoyed to find that we had been correct all along – the Lotha *Tokhü Emong* would open the following morning. Unfortunately we could not stay in the brand new local hotel because it would accommodate government officials the next night, and had just been swept by army security specialists. We therefore stayed some distance from Wokha that night, returning in good time the following morning.



*Chief Minister Shompo Neiphiu Rio arrives with his entourage. He has since been re-elected twice more and is the current Chief Minister today.*

As we approached the village for the second time we were surprised to be stopped at a new checkpoint. To continue further we had to report to the senior police officer with our permits and passports. David was somewhat irritated by this, and told the officer that he thought this was a

## HONOURED GUESTS OF THE CHIEF OF NAGALAND

rather unfriendly way to treat foreign guests who had travelled half way round the globe to visit the village. The police chief was most apologetic and ensured us that it was purely to ensure our security. To make sure we reached the festival safely he would send one of his armed officers to accompany us to the festival site.

As we entered the village we passed large crowds of Nagas dressed in their finest ceremonial costumes heading for the festival, the men armed with spears, bows and arrows and home-made rifles. Soon the road was blocked with people who separated to allow our huge SUV to pass, the policeman shouting from the front passenger window for them to move aside.

We had always assumed that if we got to the festival we would be viewing the activities from afar, looking over the heads of the local people. This was not to be the case. As we entered the festival grounds our police bodyguard told the organisers that he was escorting important guests so they immediately directed us to the parking area in the VIP enclosure. After issuing instructions to the VIP hostesses, our bodyguard bid his farewell and we were escorted to front row seats right beside the podium and the seating area reserved for the Chief Minister and his senior politicians. We were handed copies of the festival programme, printed in English, and were impressed by the long list of cultural activities that had been scheduled.

Soon we heard the sound of the helicopter from Kohima landing with Chief Minister Shompo Neiphiu Rio. In no time he and his guests, surrounded by machine-gun toting commandos, were heading towards us to take seats on the podium which was right beside us.



*Naga dancers patiently wait for the activities to begin.*

After a welcome from the organisers, the Chief Minister took to the microphone and made a long speech in English. From our limited experience most Nagas do not understand English, so his words must have been meaningless to the majority of the huge assembly. After a few more speeches, the Chief Minister approached the microphone once more to announce that he was

## HONOURED GUESTS OF THE CHIEF OF NAGALAND

delighted to welcome two important guests who had travelled all the way from England to attend this important event – yours truly! We were invited onto the podium to shake the Minister’s hand, and then asked to make a short speech about the reasons for our visit. We explained that we loved not only the textiles of India but were also fascinated by the rich and colourful culture of the Nagas. It was vital that they preserved their traditions for the future.

Yet more long and tedious speeches followed, occasionally interrupted by gunfire as one of the bored, onlooking warriors fired his rifle into the air. The political message was the much same as everywhere – everything was wonderful and would be even be better in the future. After about three hours of this we gave up hope of seeing the festivities. Then suddenly the chief organiser came to the microphone to announce that the festival would begin.

The programme suggested that each event would take place in sequence, one after the other. We were completely misled. All the activities started at the same time. The arena was immediately filled with groups of richly dressed performers, each from a different Naga tribe. There were female dance groups, warrior dance groups, singers, freestyle wrestlers and a noisy tug of war. We leapt from our seats and ran from event to event, trying to photograph as much as we could.



*A war dance performed by warriors wearing hornbill feather headdresses.*

As the only white people in the crowd we stood out a mile. Once the events had subsided we were approached by a young Indian woman who asked who we were. We naively assumed that she must be a local woman, so replied slowly and clearly: “WE – ARE – DAVID – AND – SUE – AND – WE – COME – FROM – ENGLAND”. She responded instantly in fluent received English: “Oh, I am Vibha and I come from Oxford!”

It turned out to be Dr Vibha Joshi from the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Oxford, a foremost expert on Naga textiles who had obtained her D. Phil. about the Angami Nagas in 2002. She had just returned to further her studies into Naga material culture.

## HONOURED GUESTS OF THE CHIEF OF NAGALAND

Armed with photographs of Lotha and Angami textiles collected in the 1930s, now held by the Pitt Rivers Museum, she was showing them to local weavers to identify their names, their designs and motifs and how they were made.

Once the activities died down we walked back to our seats only to be immediately invited to join the other VIP guests for a very late lunch. A massive buffet of local delicacies had been laid out in a big marquee and young Angami ladies dressed in bright tribal costumes circulated, serving us strong home-made firewater from the mouths of dried gourds - a rare treat in a completely dry state.



*Never compete with Nagas in a tug of war.*

While we savoured our frog curry and smoked deer we chatted with our fellow guests, perched on the edge of a steep escarpment overlooking a vista of the Naga Hills. What an amazing country with its spectacular rugged landscape, its joyful and rich culture and its happy and welcoming people.

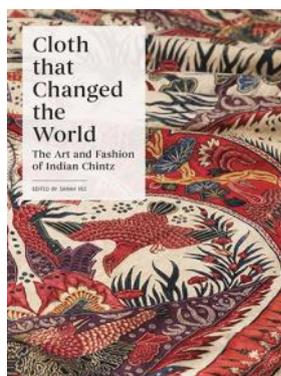
We have never been back, but our fond and amusing memories remain strong.

The main journal of the Oxford Asian Textile Group, *Asian Textiles*, will carry in a future edition an article on Naga textiles, both old and contemporary, written by Julia Nicholson and her colleague Joanna Cole, both of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford.

## What to read when stuck at home: a selection from *Crafts* magazine's suggestions

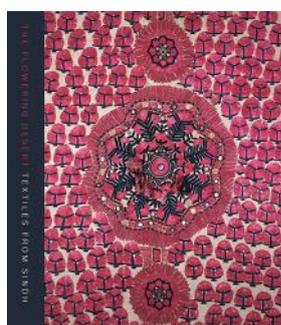
by Gavin Strachan

To help us through periods of isolation during the Coronavirus outbreak, *Crafts* magazine put together a reading list of twelve arts, craft and design books. Four of the twelve are directly relevant to textile enthusiasts. One of these four is *Cloth that Changed the World: The Art and Fashion of Indian Chintz* which is edited by Sarah Fee who has contributed the article on page 3 of this newsletter, and another is *Flowering Desert: Textiles from Sindh* which was reviewed in *Asian Textiles* 75 at the end of last year. A fifth book about Mrinalini Mukherjee *inter alia* explores her use of fibre, and at least a further two of the twelve titles are likely to be of interest to OATG members. Demonstrating its current publishing commitment three of the seven titles explored below are published or co-published by Yale University Press.



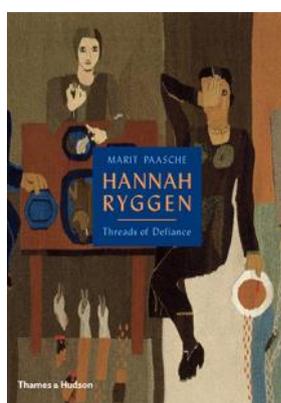
***Cloth that Changed the World: The Art and Fashion of Indian Chintz*** edited by Sarah Fee, published by Yale UP. £35 hardback. ISBN 9780300246797. 312 pages. 305 x 229mm 300 colour illustrations.

*Crafts* commented: 'This scholarly yet sumptuous book covers over a thousand years of the history of printed and painted cotton in its 300-plus pages, which are lightened by lavish illustrations. Published to coincide with a show at the Royal Ontario Museum, essays range from sacred wall hangings in Indonesia and luxury dress in 18th-century Europe, to blockprinting in high fashion today.'



***Flowering Desert: Textiles from Sindh*** by Nasreen and Hasan Askari. Published by Paul Holberton Publishing. £30 hardback. ISBN: 9781911300717. 168 pages. 280 x 240 mm. 150 colour illustrations.

*Crafts* commented: 'A treat for the eyes, this book showcases the textiles of south-eastern Pakistan, presenting dyeing, printing, weaving, mirror-work and embroidery in the context of individual items worn in everyday life. It draws on a private collection, parts of which have been shown at the V&A and National Museum of Scotland. Alongside the images are essays on the history of the region, its tribes and their differing styles, shedding light on a textile tradition that is among the oldest in South Asia.'



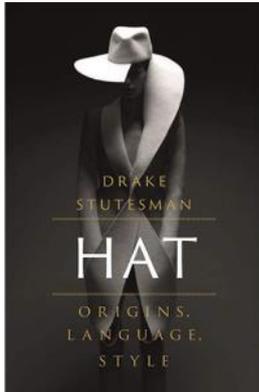
***Hannah Ryggen: Threads of Defiance*** by Marit Paasche. Published by Thames & Hudson. £24.95 hardback. ISBN 9780500094098. 288 pages. 247 x 176 mm. 122 illustrations. Translated by Katia Stieglitz.

*Crafts* commented on this biography of Ryggen: 'The Swedish-Norwegian modern artist, who died in 1970, was best known for her monumental, politically charged tapestries, which reflected her feminist views, her communist sympathies and her opposition to fascism even before the Second World War. Marit Paasche's detailed analysis explores the artist's move from painting to textiles, her participation in the Venice Art Biennale in 1964, as well as her influences and personal hardships, shining light on this often neglected practitioner.'

As Sarah Fee has written about her chintz exhibition elsewhere in this newsletter, and *Asian Textiles* has already published a review of Nasreen and Hasan Askari's book on Sindh textiles, readers should be well informed about these topics, but many may not know about Hannah Ryggen, although there was an exhibition of her work at Modern Art Oxford two and half years ago.

## WHAT TO READ WHEN STUCK AT HOME

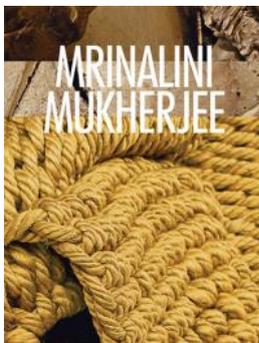
So following this article on *Crafts* recommended books is a bit more material about Ryggen than is provided in *Crafts* commentary.



**Hat: Origins, Language, Style** by Drake Stutesman. Published by Reaktion Books, £18, hardback. ISBN 9781789141368. 240 pages. 99 illustrations, 61 in colour.

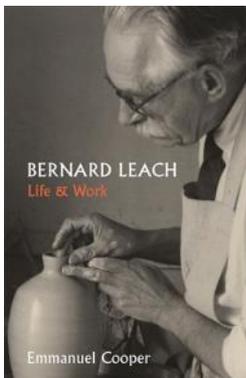
*Crafts* commented: 'From crowns, turbans and bonnets, the hat is given a turning over in this thorough text, with chapters examining its history, its ties with fashion, the making process and its public image. The hat differs from most items of clothing because it has only a tenuous relationship with the human body, which leaves ample room for examining its sculptural and performative qualities, as well as its links to power, status and tradition – all of which are explored here.'

Other volumes in the *Crafts* list of books for beating isolation which readers might enjoy include:



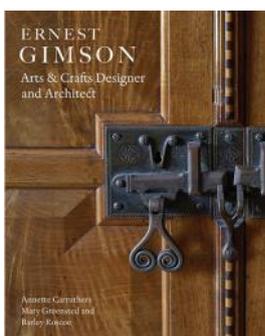
**Mrinalini Mukherjee** edited by Shanay Jhaveri. Published The Shoestring Publisher, US\$60, hardback. ISBN 9788190472098. 320 pages. 7.75 x 10 inches. 300 colour and 50 black and white illustrations.

The book explores the Indian sculptor Mrinalini Mukherjee (1949–2015). Knotting was her principal technique. She worked most with fibre and she was influenced by Indian and European sculpture, folk art and textiles. *Crafts* commented: '...this series of essays explores her use of materials and the craft-based ... experiences that laid the foundations of her practice. A series of images trace the evolution of her fibre-based work in the 1970s ...to her experiments with ceramics and bronze ... explaining ... work that fuses craft traditions, modern design and sculpture.'



**Bernard Leach: Life and Work** by Emmanuel Cooper. Published by Paul Mellon Centre/Yale UP, £30 paperback. ISBN 9781913107116. 440 pages: 235 x 156mm. 26 colour illustrations and 79 in black and white.

*Crafts* commented: 'First published in 2003, Emmanuel Cooper's classic biography of the father of British studio pottery was republished in time for the centenary of the Leach Pottery, which Leach co-founded with Shoji Hamada in St Ives. At over 400 dense pages, sprinkled liberally with footnotes, this is a deep dive into the man and the myth, exploring both his pioneering role and continuing legacy.'



**Ernest Gimson: Arts & Crafts Designer and Architect** by Annette Carruthers, Mary Greensted and Barley Roscoe. Published by Yale University Press, £50 hardback. ISBN 9780300246261. 372 pages. 267 x 216mm. 320 colour and black and white illustrations.

*Crafts* commented: 'Furniture designer John Makepeace said that Gimson's work was 'rooted in the social values espoused by [William] Morris, while anticipating the aesthetics of Modernism'. The text-heavy book runs through the designer-maker's interest in architecture, furniture, metalwork, plaster decoration, embroidery and more, contextualising it against the Arts and Crafts movement and Morris himself.'

## A note about Hannah Ryggen

by Gavin Strachan

Hannah Ryggen (born in Malmö, Sweden in 1894 and died in 1970 in Trondheim, Norway) wove politics into striking tapestries. This note gives some more detail about the weaver whose biography is one of the books recommended by *Crafts* magazine in the previous article.

A tapestry for Ryggen was a messenger: unlike a painting, it could be rolled up, moved and displayed, all without damage. While her work was included in several international exhibitions in the 1950s and 1960s, she is not well known outside Scandinavia. An exhibition at Modern Art Oxford two and half years ago was the first major presentation of her work in the UK.



Hans and Hannah Ryggen about 1935–1940.

Her life and work was vested in her respect for and dependence on nature and on other living things. She was also a committed activist against fascism, poverty, cruelty and injustice. One of the hallmarks of Ryggen's work is her passionate response to the socio-political events of her time. For instance, she confronted the rise of fascism in her 1936 *Etiopia* (the Norwegian spelling), which was displayed by Norway at the Paris Expo of 1937 in the pavilion adjacent to Spain's where Picasso's *Guernica* was shown. She confronted the Nazi occupation of Europe, which obviously included Norway and had a particular impact on her as her husband Hans was arrested and never really recovered from his imprisonment. As a result of the occupation she made several moving and trenchant works. She later confronted the post-war growth of nuclear power in *Mr Atom*, 1952, as well as the Vietnam War in *Blood in the Grass*, 1966, her only tapestry using artificially dyed wool.

Her work was admired in her lifetime in her own country. Her larger tapestries were, and are, mainly hung in public spaces as she believed that as many as possible should see them. Although she shunned private commissions, she gave away or bartered some of her smaller works, and these usually remain in private hands.

Ryggen was trained as traditional painter in Sweden. In 1924 she moved with her artist and farmer husband to the remote Norwegian area of Trondheimsfjord. Although she had woven before, here she taught herself all the processes necessary for making tapestries: from carding and spinning wool from her own sheep, growing flax for linen, producing natural dyes from locally-sourced insects, plants, bark and lichens, and finally, of course, there was the weaving itself. Tapestry freed her from dependence on commercial materials.

Woven images have long been a central component of folk art in Norway. While Flemish weaving went towards a three-dimensional and a naturalistic depiction, this never really took hold in Norway where the norm was for two-dimensional *flatestilen* in which elements of the background are at the top of the weaving and there is no illusion of depth. Instead, ornament, colour and the treatment of the surface play a more important role. Ryggen's tapestry style is informed by this folk tradition.

All Ryggen's tapestries were created directly on the loom without preparatory sketches. Her work combines her personal candour with folk narrative and her predilection for social

## A NOTE ABOUT HANNAH RYGGEN

commentary. Her colours, which she took extremely seriously, have depth and subtlety partly as a result of her weaving technique but also because the wool was dyed with natural ingredients.



*Hannah Ryggen We are Living on a Star (1958). Tapestry woven in wool and linen 400 x 300 cm. Its large size meant that it was 13 months on the loom plus the time it took to card, spin and dye the wool. The New York Times review of the 2017-18 Oxford exhibition, published on 1 December 2017, commented on the tapestry that it 'unites two enduring themes of Ms. Ryggen's work: her broadly socialist, anti-fascist response to world events, and a profound love for her family and the living earth that sustained it. Commissioned in 1958 for the [Oslo] Cabinet Building ... Ms. Ryggen's 13-foot-high, hand-woven work shows monumental male and female figures embracing before a blue ovoid form that represents the world, suspended amid planets in a night sky.'*

Ryggen's maturer tapestry style arrived after her period of learning in Trondheimsfjord and begins with the weaving of *Fishing in the Sea of Debt* (1933). One of her most poignant works is *We are Living on a Star* (1958) which she wove after her husband's death on the loom made by him.

A strength of the biography *Hannah Ryggen: Threads of Defiance* is not only does it describe the life of the weaver and her family, but it also discusses in detail contemporary and historic art movements that have relevance to Ryggen's art, as well as comparing and contrasting her with others working in Scandinavia and Europe at the same time. Ryggen's own large archive of news cuttings, photographs, sketches and letters informed the writer of the biography.

## Good news on OATG subscriptions

Every cloud has a silver lining! While it has been most frustrating that our programme of talks has been curtailed this year, it has meant that we have not had to pay for speakers or for the hire of venues. Consequently the Group's finances are in better shape than they would otherwise be. As a small compensation to our members, the OATG committee have agreed to hold subscriptions at their current level for the next two years. They will therefore remain at £25 for a single membership and £35 for a joint membership until 1 October 2022.

This bizarre year is nevertheless passing quickly, and it is now only a couple of months before subscriptions for 2020/21 become due – on 1 October. Now that the rates have been frozen there is even more reason for those members who still pay by cheque or cash to set up a bankers order. Some 55% of our subscribers already do so. This greatly reduces the administrative burden, as we still suffer from many late payments and spend several months chasing late payers.

Instead of posting a cheque to the Treasurer, simply download and print a bankers order from the OATG website, fill in the details of your account and post it to the branch of your bank.

Just click on the 'banker's order' link on the membership page of the new OATG website: [www.oatg.org.uk/membership](http://www.oatg.org.uk/membership)

David Richardson, OATG Membership Secretary

## Contributors' biographies

**Sarah Fee** joined the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in 2009 and now serves as Senior Curator of Global Fashion & Textiles, responsible for the museum's 15,000 textiles from Asia and Africa. In 1997-98 she read for an MSt with Robert Barnes in Anthropology at Oxford University at which time she formed a friendship with Ruth Barnes and attended several OATG events. Fee received her PhD from the School of Oriental Studies (INALCO), Paris, with a dissertation examining the social significance of textiles in southern Madagascar. Barnes consulted on the project *Cloth that Changed the World* and contributed two chapters to the exhibition catalogue.

**Elizabeth Friendship** was a theatre designer and then started the Department of Theatre Design at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. A trip to India sparked numerous visits to Asia and a fascination with the dress of ordinary people. Her three books on costume include *Making Working Women's Costume: Patterns for clothes from the mid-15th to mid-20th centuries* (2017) and *Creating Historical Clothes: Pattern Cutting from Tudor to Victorian Times* (2013).

**Katherine Preston** is a textile designer who studied Printed Textiles and Surface Pattern Design at Leeds College of Art, then worked for the British textile company Fermoie where she ran the studio. Fermoie created printed textiles with the depth of woven fabric which was rotary screen-printed to order from hand-drawn artwork. After six years there, she moved to Myanmar working as a designer of textile and craft projects, and also for Turquoise Mountain, the British charity founded by Prince Charles, where she focussed on preserving and promoting Myanmar's textile heritage. She is now back in the UK and setting up her own studio.

**David and Sue Richardson** are passionate about textiles, particularly those of Central Asia and South East Asia. They have lectured in the US and the UK and have contributed many articles to various journals including *Hali*, *Textiles Asia* and *Asian Textiles*. In 2012 their book, *Qaraqalpaqs of the Aral Delta*, was published by Prestel. Over the last 30 years they have travelled extensively in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Burma, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Indonesia. The results of their research into the textiles of these areas can be found on their website [www.asiantextilestudies.com](http://www.asiantextilestudies.com)

**Gavin Strachan** is editor of OATG's *Asian Textiles* and of this newsletter, and is currently researching Scandinavian and Balkan textiles.

**Helen Wolfe** is chair of OATG and has worked at the British Museum since 1976, initially at the Museum of Mankind where she installed over 100 exhibitions. When it closed in 1999 she set up the British Museum Textile Centre at Blythe House and is now Collections Manager of the BM's textiles.

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**OATG Facebook** <https://www.facebook.com/OxfordAsianTextileGroup/>

**Password for 2020 editions of *Asian Textiles and Newsletters*  
on the OATG website**

**Password 20dhurrie**



For those still unable to get to a hairdresser you might like this Ottoman silk and metal-thread embroidered barber's apron, late 18th Century, decorated with composite trees designed with polychrome threads on a red silk ground and silver thread highlights. 157 by 97cm. Elaborately-embroidered aprons would normally have been part of a suite of embroideries including a cloth to drape over the back, and several hand towels, and used in the shaving of the Sultan and courtiers. This apron shows the effect of increasing European influence on Ottoman embroidery during the eighteenth century as the strong colours of the sixteenth and seventeenth century gave way to more pastel hues and naturalistic drawing. For further discussion of the royal shaving ritual for which these aprons were made, see R Taylor *Ottoman Embroidery*, London, 1993, pp.106-9. Photograph and description: Sotheby's London sale 10 June 2020.