

MATERIAL CULTURE

# The Ancient Art of Jaipur Block Printing, and What It Means to India

There are some traditions that are universal. Here, we highlight a single craft — and how it's being adapted, rethought and remade for the 21st century.

By Deborah Needleman  
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Fabrics clockwise from top left: courtesy of **Molly Mahon**, [mollymahon.com](http://mollymahon.com); **Suraj Narain Titanwala**; courtesy of **Block Shop**, [blockshoptextiles.com](http://blockshoptextiles.com); **Suraj Narain Titanwala**; courtesy of **Anokhi**, [anokhiusa.com](http://anokhiusa.com); courtesy of **Vikram Joshi**, [rangotri.com](http://rangotri.com); courtesy of **John Robshaw Textiles**, [johnrobshaw.com](http://johnrobshaw.com). Photograph by Kyoko Hamada. Styled by Theresa Rivera

Bagru, in Rajasthan, is still considered a village — and it is, in the ancient way its society is structured according to inherited roles and customs. But like many such Indian villages, it has been swallowed by encroaching urbanization. Straddling the highway to Jaipur, the town of 30,000 people is dense with two- and three-story concrete buildings that occlude any sense of the landscape. Cows and pigs eat the garbage that lines the road as teenagers in jeans zip by on scooters. But in home workshops scattered throughout, you can still find

*chippas*, a caste of printers who continue day after day to stamp lengths of cotton fabric with color using hand-carved wood blocks. They were taught this trade by their parents, who were, in turn, taught by theirs — each generation working almost exactly as the one before, going back at least 300 years.

While printing designs onto fabric most likely originated in China about 4,500 years ago, it was on the Indian subcontinent where hand-blocked fabric reached its highest visual expression. Indians possessed unparalleled expertise in the secrets of natural plant dyes, particularly with mordants (metallic salts that both create color and allow it to adhere to fabric). A kind of mud resist-printing, called *dabu*, which allows areas of a design to be reserved from dye, also flourished here. A series of combinations of mordant and resist stamping and dyeing enabled Indian printers to create uniquely complex designs, coveted from Southeast Asia and palaces of Mughal emperors to the far-flung capitals of Western Europe. Between outside influences and the diversity of the subcontinent's own indigenous communities and tribes, India has yielded one of the most magnificent pattern vocabularies ever. And yet for the past 200 years the industry has been on the precipice of extinction, doomed in part by the popularity that helped create it. Add technological advances, corruption, bungled policies and the greater income opportunities in India's cities, and the picture looks bleak.



From left: a depiction of dyers from a mid-19th-century painting; madder- and indigo-dyed fabrics hang on branches at the family workshop of Suraj Narain Titanwala in Bagru, Rajasthan. Titanwala works to preserve symbolic patterns that have been made in his village for hundreds of years (and are sold only locally). It is difficult to find printers willing to do this work, as the intricate designs are more labor intensive, requiring smaller blocks and more stamping than larger patterns.

From left: © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford/Heritage/the Image Works; Abhishek Bali

On a single road at the edge of Bagru, hereditary carvers, mostly fathers and sons, squat inside tiny open studios, chiseling designs traced onto teak. In the center of town, families of printers stand before long tables covered with fabric, dipping blocks into color and stamping them with a *thump thump* of the hand to ensure a strong print on the fabric. Each morning, the *dabu* printers, another specialized group, mix a batch of mud made from clay, lime and fermented wheat and sift it with their bare feet through muslin so their wives, and perhaps their children, can print it in patterns onto fabric before bringing it over to the indigo vats, operated by the men of yet another historical caste. Even the washing is done by a particular group, the *dhobi*, who stand all day waist-deep in water baths. All these activities, each part of the multistep process, center around a vast field, where fabrics — in indigo, madder, saffron and hot pink — are laid out to dry or hung from the rooftops of the surrounding buildings. India's caste system is less apparent in cities, but villages like this still operate according to it: *Chippa*, for instance, derives from a conflation of the Nepal Bhasa *chhi* (to dye) and *pa* (to leave something to bask in the sun) and *chappana* (“stamping” in Hindi); it also denotes one's caste, one's job, and is often also one's last name.

An English rage in the 1700s for chic, cheap Indian floral cottons led to an enormous boom that coincided largely with the golden age of Mughal Empire patronage, when the Maharajah were outfitting their courts, themselves and their numerous women with finely printed diaphanous muslins. But the advent of mass production in England meant the end of this export market for India, and punishing colonial legislation forced the Indians to buy cheap imitations of their own work. In that moment, artistic knowledge, which had been passed down for possibly thousands of years, from one generation to the next, teetered on extinction.

Because Bagru always focused on the local market, catering to other rural tribes and communities instead of royal or British commissions, it didn't suffer the boom and bust of wealthier producers. Still, by the 1970s, Bagru's poverty worsened when its local base turned toward cheaply printed synthetics, and the industry was all but dead.



A grouping of blocks, chiseled by specialized carvers, in traditional patterns. Each color requires a separate block. Abhishek Bali

Around this same time, the Jaipur-based design company Anokhi began seeking out families with specialized knowledge to resuscitate traditional patterns and design new ones, helping to instill in craftsmen a sense of value in their work. Anokhi and others, along with a new wave of small, artisan-dedicated companies, such as the Los Angeles-based Block Shop, have helped keep both a village and a tradition relevant. Block Shop co-owner Lily Stockman moved to Jaipur in 2010 to study painting and eventually found her way to block printing; her sister Hopie, a textile designer, soon followed. Part of what distinguishes the pair from many foreign designers hiring artisans is that the two are craftspeople themselves, having studied and practiced the techniques they employ, allowing them to better understand the processes and possibilities, as well as the realities of the time and labor involved. The pair's work is grounded in an appreciation of these ancient practices, while the simplified geometries of their designs come from Lily's modernist aesthetic, and the pale saffrons and ochers of the California and Rajasthan deserts. Together, the pair offer good — not just fair — pay, and they support education, health care and clean water initiatives in the village.

Block prints are done by eye, and telltale signs of the human hand, even imperfections, are part of the ineffable humanity and beauty of the craft. But screen prints now have these mistakes designed into them: machines mimicking the imperfections of man. How, then, can craft survive in a world with so much stacked against it? Perhaps with the knowledge that it involves a culture built around a community, in which families and neighbors are working and living in tandem, often across religions, tribes and generations, from a shared history. It is not an easy life. But it is a necessary one. And finally, it may be that one doesn't so much see craft, but actually, feels it.



The Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing in Jaipur. Robert Harding/Alamy Stock Photo

## How to Try and Where to Buy: Block Print Textiles

### Buying, in and around Jaipur

**Anokhi's** expansive Jaipur emporium is often the first shopping port of call for top international designers and sophisticated travelers from India and abroad thanks to their vast, high-quality range of well-priced dresses, kimonos, bedding, tablecloths and gifts. Several years ago, they created a **Museum of Hand Printing** in a beautifully restored haveli near the base of the Amber Fort in Jaipur. It brings together a diversity of styles and techniques from around the country, not just for interested outsiders, but also to create a community where artisans can discover the greater context in which they work. [anokhi.com](http://anokhi.com)

While most *chippas* or printers in Bagru work for a host of clients, employing designs created others, **Suraj Titanwala** is one of the last printers still dedicated to keeping prints indigenous to the village alive. These patterns were used for hundreds of years for everyday use for local communities until the '70s when they were replaced by machine-printed, synthetic fabrics. The tiny, stylized floral motifs (*buti*) and geometrics — usually in indigo blues, madder reds and iron blacks — are quite distinct from the designs made for the Moghul courts or for export to other parts of Asia or Europe. Titanwala's work can be seen in the Anohki Museum and the Iwatate Textile Museum in Tokyo. Sadly, it is difficult to find workers willing to do the more labor-intensive printing these textiles require, making such fabrics not only difficult to buy, but in jeopardy of dying out. Should you go to Bagru, you can visit Titanwala and purchase directly from him. [sunriseprintersbgr@gmail.com](mailto:sunriseprintersbgr@gmail.com)

### Trying, in and around Jaipur

If you want to try your hand at block printing, a great three-hour taster course is offered by the Jaipur-based **India Beat** travel company, which will also take you through Bagru to see how the carvers, indigo dyers, mud printers and washers are all part of a deeply interconnected and interdependent process. [indiabeat.co.uk](http://indiabeat.co.uk)

For those a bit more invested, **Jaitex** is a family-run operation with a professional compound on the outskirts of Bagru that is working to reintroduce natural dye recipes and techniques using local insects, vegetal matter and minerals (much of this knowledge was lost since the onset of synthetics). It offers one and two day courses in printing and natural dyeing. [jaitexart.com](http://jaitexart.com)

**Rangotri** is part of a consortium of producers working to redress the water pollution caused by toxic dyes. It harvests monsoon water and recycles waste water at its workshop on the edge of Bagru, where it also offers one to two day workshops in printing and dyeing. [rangotri.com](http://rangotri.com)

For a deeper dive into the world of natural dyes and other techniques like mud-resist printing (*dabu*) and tie dye, **Wabisabi Project** in Bagru offers workshops from one to seven days. [wabisabiproject.com](http://wabisabiproject.com)



Block Shop's Hopie Stockman (left) and her sister Lily have partnered with the Chippa family in Bagru, India, since 2010 to bring their signature oversized hand block prints to life. Shown here are two prototypes launching in June 2018. [Amit Sihag](http://AmitSihag.com)

### Online

*Some of the finest foreign designers of Indian block prints are, not surprisingly, themselves craftspeople, who have put in the time and learned the very techniques they are commissioning. This allows them to not only better understand the limitations of the craft, but also to more creatively push its boundaries.*

**Block Shop Textiles** based in Los Angeles and Jaipur was started by the artist Lily Stockman and her sister Hopie Stockman, a textile designer — both craftswomen who have spent years studying with the artisans they now employ. Growing up on a farm in New Jersey, Lily says their mother insisted her four daughters be “scholars *and* practitioners” in all they endeavored — “to learn the history, but also to do the work.” The sisters have been able to push their block prints into a scale and style new to this craft’s ancient history (Lily describes their style as being like an “oversized Bauhaus-futurist-meets-’70s-cocaine-den” look). While their work is definitely not an adaptation of local styles, or based on any Indian imagery at all, it is completely grounded in the regional techniques and expertise — from plant and mineral-based mordant printing to kantha stitching. From time to time, the pair host printing and dyeing workshops at Block Shop’s compound in Joshua Tree. [blockshoptextiles.com](http://blockshoptextiles.com)

Over the past 17 years, **John Robshaw** has been responsible for bringing Rajasthani hand-printed fabrics into American homes. Robshaw was first drawn to block printing, which he studied in China and India, because he loved how surprising the variability was that occurred as the initial drawing was turned into a finished product. In Bagru, for instance, a handmade textile passes through weavers, vat dyers, mordant brewers, mud resist printers, block printers and washers. And between every stage, each piece is left to dry on a field in the sun, where it could be subject to rain, humidity, passing motorbikes, and the roaming cows, and again worked on by a particular person who could be tired or distracted, using colors that can vary according the batch of harda nuts or pomegranates used to mix the dye that day. Even though his business has scaled — Robshaw now sells to department stores, catalogs and hundreds of retail shops, and has added screen and rotary printing to his process (consumers demand consistency) — his designs always tell this kind of story of the happy accidents and multiple layers of the process. [johnrobshaw.com](http://johnrobshaw.com)

For high-quality Indian block printed bedding and table linens in wonderfully designed iterations of regional styles — including the simple folk style of Bagru dabu printed indigos; the complex red and blue Islamic-inspired geometries of Arjakh prints (traditionally worn only by Muslim men in a few isolated communities); and the fine, florid swirling prints of traditional Kalamkari — **Maiwa** in Vancouver has been a trusted resource for 30 years. It has a textile school that offers year-round courses, a foundation dedicated to education and poverty eradication for traditional artisans, and sells DIY supplies and dyes. [maiwa.com](http://maiwa.com)