

CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

'23

INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL
CRAFT ON CONTEMPORARY
CRAFT CROSS-CULTURALLY

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ABSTRACT

Among the four dimensions of sustainability (environmental, economic, social, and cultural), it is the latter aspect that is least examined. However, understanding how culture contributes to the long-term sustainability of communities and societies is one key to a holistic understanding of sustainability itself, and further how it can impact the textile in different cultures. This project is based on understanding cultural influence when practice is moved from one place to another. As traditional artisans struggle with addressing the consequences of economic issues and finding new models of conducting their temporal business, their very existence and preservation contribute to the long-term sustainability of communities and societies as a whole. This project is taken further by following two approaches: first, to understand the values and ideals embedded in traditional textile which contributes to the textile industry and serves as the foundation of long-term survival; second, by acting 'culturally sustainable,' to ensure its endurance, thus vouching for safe interests of future generations. The project presents a perspective of a traditional practice moving from India to Sweden as a craft practice instead of a business opportunity to produce functional products. It investigates what happens to an Indian practice when it merges with the aesthetics of Swedish craft and culture. This paper puts light on the fact that eastern crafts are led by western designers and associations for its globalisation into industries. However, it is followed by the negative impact in the form of the exploitation of artisans and the loss of tradition in traditional crafts in this process. Also leading to singularity in craft all over world losing the cultural value. This practice-based research brings the two cultures (Indian and Swedish) and their traditional practices together in one work, presenting the influence of it on each other and presenting my perspective on these cultures being part of both without losing the cultural value and leading to evolution of traditional practice.

Keywords: Culture, Tradition, Regional craft, Circulation, Hand-made, Sustainability, Perspective

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BACKGROUND

Throughout my life, my culture played a major role in how I grew up, worked, and lived. However, I did not realize how it distinguished me from the rest of the world until I started to travel more and interact with people outside of my culture and understand their backgrounds.

I got introduced to seeing the life of Indian artisans while working as a fashion designer in India in manufacturing units after my bachelor's in Fashion Design from the National Institute of Fashion Technology, India. Manufacturing units are not an ideal place for weak-hearted people because that is where you observe artisans being trapped in the cycle of mass manufacturing and mass consumerism in extremely poor working conditions, giving up on their freedom of artistic expression and traditional slow craft to survive and earn a livelihood for their families. All these people are just some workers until you interact with them and get to know their stories to understand their relationship with their craft skills.

Abdul Samad is a skilled artisan in weaving and embroidery from India. Abdul has worked alongside numerous Indian and international designers, including myself, and during our discussion, he opened up about the hardships he faces in earning a livelihood as an artisan. In particular, he shed light on the pervasive issue of exploitation that plagues artisans in the industry. (Samad, 2019) It was sad to hear about his difficulties, but his story highlights the urgent need for fair treatment and compensation for artisans worldwide. He also spoke of his experience working with an international designer/artisan(western) who unlike him, had freedom of artistic expression and opportunities for continuing their practice for survival. He then questioned, *"why is it that artisans from some countries are more recognized and respected for their craft practice while artisans in India are hidden behind the system of big organizations, and hence from the world with no freedom and opportunities to express their craft and themselves."* (Samad, 2019)

I believe that was the point when I started to think about Culture in the context of Crafts in different countries which led me to think about sustaining a Cultural/traditional craft. Even though culture is one aspect of sustainability, it is the cultural sustainability that is least examined and recognized among the other dimensions of sustainability which are environmental, economic, and social (Moldavanova, 2013). Culture contributes to the long-term sustainability of communities and societies and is one key factor of the wise sustainability itself (Moldavanova, 2013; Nurse, 2008), which is why cultural studies play a major role in the field of arts and crafts (Cole, 2003; Sharrad & Collect 2004). Cultural sustainability is important and is an urgency now as it can play a major role in sustaining a practice to lead it towards future innovations while retaining the tradition and understanding its history of coming into existence (Moldavanova, 2013; Nurse, 2008).



Image 1: Embroidery Karigars working in export house in India, picture by Anjori Grover Vasesi, 2017

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH AREA

The purpose of this research project is to work towards the revival of crafts cross-culturally by presenting crafts through my perspective of experiencing cultures in circulation. By cultures in circulation, I refer to cultural exchange and cultural knowledge passing from one place to another evolving into a new practice. With my textile work, I am presenting that traditional crafts can evolve in the times of contemporary crafts, instead of what is happening in present times where traditional art and traditional craft skills mostly go unrecognized by people today (Bell, Dacin & Toraldo, 2021; Niedderer & Townsend, 2017). Through my work and research paper, I also want to discuss how traditional craft defines us and our history, and how different cultures co-exist with each other. I also analysed and studied cultural differences in a particular practice as we move from one cultural space to another.

Within my project, I want to highlight the makers around the world whose struggles mostly go unseen. Through my experience of the cultural shift from India to Sweden, my project questions and studies, *“why are there differences in the recognition and value of craft and its artisans as per different geographical locations for similar craft forms, and what is its impact?”* And *“what happens when the two cultures merge?”*

I aim to call attention to the importance of Cultural Sustainability with cultures entangling with each other in circulation through my experience of being a designer in India working with traditional artisans and currently being an artist in Sweden, to present the differences and similarities with the influence of traditional crafts within these two countries. With my craft practice weaving, I focused on showing my perspective on what happens when a practice and practitioner move from one place to another and how the two places influence the craft produced and how it represents a part of both regions in one.

IMPACT OF HISTORICAL MOVEMENTS ON TRADITIONAL CRAFTS IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

During modernism, in the times of originality and radical avant-garde movements, the crafts, the making, materials, and the makers were generally perceived in the western world as conservative and resistant to any change, something which lacks originality and is traditional. Craft was presumably considered an obstacle to the culture of imagination and technology (Niedderer & Townsend, 2017; Rowley, 2004). On the contrary, the other parts of the world which are not Euro-American had a different notion of modernism and did not follow the established template of Western modernism. The main reason behind that is post-colonialism which had shifted the notion of craft for people in other lands. Post-colonial practices mostly involved traditions such as crafts. The craft was the language used to express the local experiences of colonized people (Rowley, 2004).

Colonial influencers had their impact on the art world through colleges and they also made crafts look like something which is recognized as commercial commodities. However, it also led to national movements in some countries, using traditional craft practices as a voice to oppose western modernist inclusion. For instance, the swadeshi movement in India by Gandhi, produced hand-spun and hand-woven cloth- khadi on a traditional spinning wheel (refer image 2) as a symbol of fight for independence during colonialism, and these practices followed further and impacted postcolonial practices. This is also an example that traditional crafts are not opposed to innovation rather they can be a way to new cultural practices from past to present and to future innovations, as a living cultural expression that is always evolving through cultural translation which is necessary (Rowley, 2004). My work is influenced by the colonial practice's nature, as I use a traditional craft skill of hand-knotted weaving on a traditional loom. I draw inspiration from traditional crafts and create evolving motifs that are placed in a contemporary context and space. Through my work, I aim to represent the notion of innovation through traditional practices.



Image 2: Mahatma Gandhi weaving cloth(Khadi) with charkha(spinning wheel), Sabarmati, India, late 1940's

CRAFTS IN POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism brought a critical approach to crafts' position in society challenging the modernist notion of craft, however, the shift was not drastic and the historic avant-garde movements were not completely abandoned as the current terms neo-avant-garde and critical practice suggest during postmodernism. But as the space opened for crafts, more opportunities came for contemporary craft practices in the diverse and integrated art world, and the focus in contemporary craft practices shifted to, representation over the object, and creation over skill. Although simultaneously, the focus also started to shift to mass production and mass consumption in the contemporary times which has impacted the traditional making and hand-made skills negatively (Adamson, 2018; Rowley, 2004) due to innovation of latest technologies and globalization also leading to divide between the consumer and the making process (Adamson, 2019; DeNicola & Wadley, 2006; Murray, 2010; Scrase, 2003; Sorensen, 2018). This argument is crucial to my research and practice as the research itself started from questioning exploitation due to mass production and mass consumerism. My practice represents a notion different from the mass-produced and mass-consumed products, shifting the focus back to creation and representation over the object as I am using a slow traditional weaving process to create work to represent the culture, and tradition; however, in a contemporary context.

TRADITION OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

Traditional crafts are a form of cultural expression that involves producing objects or materials using traditional techniques that have been passed down through generations. They're rooted in specific local or regional cultures and tied to the identity of communities. These crafts are important for preserving cultural heritage, and they also provide opportunities for creativity and innovation while promoting sustainability and resilience (Howard, 2003).

Traditional crafts have an image representing conservatism; however, the origin and invention of traditions and traditional crafts had a creative vision, started from the urgency of social needs. Traditions are an attempt to create social life structure establishing continuity with a suitable past, they are not stable, as they grow with the emerging values and behaviors, the making and creation of today may become traditions of tomorrow (Bubandt, 2005; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012; Niedderer & Townsend, 2017; Rowley, 2004). The invention of tradition is a result of new or dramatically transformed social groups with an effect on economic, political, and environmental aspects (Rowley, 2004). Also, through the above discussions, it is evident that worldwide entanglements of cultures and peoples have taken place in the past in many forms through which new traditions have been born out of (Sorensen, 2018). Traditional crafts are not a hurdle but a record of historic making techniques coming into existence which are a source to continue creating contemporary crafts moving from past to present towards future innovations opposing the idea of industrialization and prioritizing making with hands, building a connection between the maker, object, and user/viewer (Adamson, 2019; Bell, Dacin & Toraldo, 2021). Therefore, craft theorists, Niedderer & Townsend argue about the position of traditional crafts in the art world and how they can again be introduced into the contemporary art world while reviving them. Taking traditional skills and crafts to future generations through the evolution of contemporary craft with an influence of traditional crafts, allowing traditional crafts to survive, emerge and grow in unusual forms and places (Niedderer & Townsend, 2017). This idea of the innovation and creativity of traditional crafts for the present and future is what inspired me to evolve traditional crafts and skills in contemporary contexts and space.

EASTERN CRAFTS IN THE GLOBAL INDUSTRY

The craft's position in Asia has been a diplomatic topic as it has been greatly influenced by the global market designers which are in a way helpful to keep the craft alive and restored its recognition in society (Surette & Cheasley Paterson, 2022). But, through globalisation, it is also losing its emotional value and attachment it holds with traditional artisans. The traditional practice which was within a community holding emotional attachment has become something of the past. It has now become industrialized changing its form to modern design, as the designs for the production are generally led by western designers. Most of the crafts in Asia are led by westerners and subsequently, the original form gets diluted. The revival of the crafts in the eastern world has mainly been for economic reasons where they change the way of making through advanced equipment to produce more quantities of modern designs for the world. The craft still remains within the same community however the emerging roles of artisan-designer and the scale of production has impacted the material culture, environment, labour practices, motifs, and business relationship (Surette & Cheasley Paterson, 2022). It brings a concern if the craft is even a craft anymore or has become a manufactured product in this process of moving from a communal craft to a globalized form with a transformation of artisans to labourer's (Adamson, 2018; Bubandt, 2005). Therefore, by using a slow weaving process and traditional tools in my artistic practice, I am highlighting the beauty of slow craft and natural materials and also how it can be a way for a sustainable lifestyle, shifting from quantity to quality.

INDIAN HANDICRAFTS IN THE GLOBAL MARKET

The decentralised Indian handicraft industry has played a significant role in the Indian economy. India is one of the leading exporters of handicrafts in the global market, with a contribution of INR 168.51 billion (KPMG, 2013–17, 2017–22). This industry provides employment to nearly 7.2 million artisans (KPMG, 2013–17, 201722). It is known for utilising indigenous resources, small-scale operations, and traditional techniques. These crafts are deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of different regions. While some of these may be active and surviving, most of the other crafts are languishing or on the verge of extinction. The languishing crafts are those which may be practiced but are fading away into oblivion due to the onslaught of global forces. Factors like competition from foreign countries in terms of designs, processing, finishing, and technology as well as credit accessibility have served to augment the problem. The current scenario in the case of languishing crafts cannot be delinked from the history of colonial supremacy which served to weaken the base of these industries (Mansukhani, 2019). The credit and recognition to artisans and a group of community of artisans have mostly been neglected when these handicrafts went global. When products rich in craftsmanship are commercialised, the intellectual property embodied in these goods acquires market value. But neither the power of a patron nor legal rights protect such property or its owner's authorship and credit. The pervasive threat of being copied without credit has led countless masters to hide their knowledge (Surette & Cheasley Paterson, 2022).

In my experience, I have observed in some organisations in India that the designers and artisans are treated as puppets working as per the strict design and creative direction from the western market and just using them for their traditional craft skills. It has generally been the produced craft traveling from one region to another, merging two cultures with craft practice. However, it is completely losing its essence due to a lack of freedom for artisans to create for western market while keeping the aesthetic of traditional craft alive in it. Therefore, I want to experiment with moving a traditional practice from one region to another and observe the mingling of two cultures that happens without any strict guidelines but intuitively and organically through experience. In this paper, I will further discuss my experimentation using Indian weaving techniques presenting a mix of traditional Indian and Swedish narratives in a contemporary space, expressing 'myself' associated with both the countries and their culture.

CULTURES IN CIRCULATION

The borders to traverse are mainly created by the political and cultural aspects which is also a cause for different traditional and cultural practices in different places (Kurki, 2014; Sorensen, 2018). However, different cultures and people have been deeply entangled with each other throughout history by the process of creolization like colonialism, genocide, slavery, and coolie trade (Sorensen, 2018). Through social groups and political movements, cultures have always been integrated, sharing traditional practices and in some cases leading to the birth of new cultural practices. A practice might have the same cultural origin but might grow differently in different cultures. In the force of intercultural geographies and mobility of craft practice, it is not the material or design that counts but the relative resistance of what is bound together, and how it reacts to another culture's inclusion (Kurki, 2014; Sorensen, 2018). When cultures are in circulation it leads to the exchange and movement of languages, ideas, and cultural forms, passing symbolic structures but as it converges into a specific space of representation, it can also start a dialogue of different perceptions (Bubandt, 2005; Kurki, 2014; Sorensen, 2018).

In the past, there have been many innovations, ideas, and resources that have traveled from the east to the west, which include, research, institutions, advancements in technology, and lastly arts and crafts. Although, in the records of the history of world art, i.e., books, it is not the whole world art which has been discussed but just the west or major emphasis on the west with the east being neglected in those records of world art history. Now with contemporary globalisation which describes the infinite interactions of cultures that change all the elements that come into relation with one other, western culture still dominates the world of art because of an influence on how previous generations have read about it (Sorensen, 2018). Artisans in western culture in the contemporary world have an opportunity to speak for their slow craft and traditional practices, and the need for those practices in the present society, and their voices are being heard but the artisans in the east are struggling to keep their traditional practices alive due to the cycle of mass consumption to create as per the needs of the western market as it is the dominant one having influence all over the world (DeNicola & Wadley, 2004; Kim, 2014). The traditional practices of the east with not much record in the books of history and very few people learning those hand-making skills are on the verge of ending with no way of reviving later if not now (Rowley, 2004; Sorensen, 2018).

There are many cultural interactions in the world and it's impossible to map them all (Kurki, 2014; Sorensen, 2014). So, through specific relational studies of artistic arc to connect artwork in different spaces across a specific trajectory in world history, I have analyzed and experimented with the two specific regions (Sweden and India).

METHODOLOGY- BECOMING A MIX OF TWO CULTURES THROUGH ARTISTIC PRACTICE

Studio practice for me is a place where I mix my technical making skills, design research and knowledge, emotions, and the ability to flow through with my craft. Combining all of these can be a difficult process since emotions and flowing craft form is something that comes with spontaneity while technical making skills and design process methods make it a bit rigid.

One example of me being spontaneous in my work can be seen in image 3 which was inspired by a study visit to Norrköping in 2022. The study visit to Norrköping inspired me to use waste fabric after observing the after-effects of industrialization on the city. Also, it felt like it was a conscious choice coming from the background of working and observing the mass waste from apparel manufacturing firms in India. I did an experiment with waste fabric in work 'Fabric Chaos' (image 3) by knotting them the same way as yarn in the hand-knotted technique. The abstraction in this work represents the chaos around the mass manufacturing industries and the exploitation of artisans and the environment by these firms. This piece evolved, me being completely in flow without any planning as waste fabric comes with a limitation to use, where it depends on the type of waste and so the pattern cannot be pre-planned which led to such abstraction in the pattern. I incorporated waste fabric (by the process of upcycling with waste fabrics) with yarns in my final project work as it can then become something planned with free-flowing elements in the form of fabric around.



Image 3: Fabric Chaos, 90×60 cm, Waste fabric from manufacturing units, Bhumika Sethi, 2022, photograph by Oscar Nord

I believe a mix of free-flowing elements with rigidness is what explains me as a person as well. But it has not always been like this. I have always planned my art projects in the past due to my experience of coming from a background of a traditional and strict curriculum of a bachelor's program in Fashion Design in India. When I started my studio practice at the beginning of the master's project, I tried to plan out everything before starting work, from a detailed sketch to a color palette and materials. However, I then started to merge my practice with the new culture and teachings. As I needed to let go of some rigidness of my past practices, or I would say adopt a new way of thinking to have the ability to become something else, which is something from both cultures.

At that point, I realised, that the culture in Sweden is shaping my practice and me into something new, like a merge of the two cultures in a person and a working place. It led to the beginning of an investigation to trace the similarities and differences between the cultures, as I continued becoming a part of both. While on the journey of investigating materials, techniques, colors, and motifs used in both countries, I focused on both traditional and contemporary crafts because I am a firm believer that history tells us more about the culture and, the present and future it is leading towards. One major alarming common finding between the two cultures was that hand-making is mostly replaced by machines, losing the individuality and originality of traditional in traditional crafts.

TRANSFORMING TRADITIONS AND TRADITIONAL CRAFTS IN MY PRACTICE

Traditional crafts can carry a notion of being old, something outdated, and not in trend, something not futuristic and with a lack of curiosity but I believe it can become a foundation for the future. However, one might question, why traditional practices are so dominant in my practice. Traditional practices play a significant role in my journey of being an artist and therefore that is something I wanted to emphasise from the beginning of my project. The reason why culture and tradition are important to me is because I have learned the skills, the meaning of craft, and the beauty and importance of traditional crafts from the traditional artisan in India. As I worked with them, they became like a family which made me see them more as creative personalities than just an artisan or workers. It made me see their joy of working collaboratively with the craft while also the pain and struggle to keep their traditional practices alive which even meant facing monetary issues and exploitation by the global textile industry. I wondered how something so beautiful, like a living art, handmade by an artisan can just be an object in today's world losing its real essence.

I practice the craft individually, however, I learned the skills and was drawn towards it in a collective environment where a group of people come together to work on one single piece. Therefore, I believe when I practice this craft, I just don't represent the craft but also the people from whom I learned it. The craft practice itself represents collectivity as every knot comes together to form a weave.

As I practice my craft in a contemporary space with an influence of contemporary aesthetics on traditional crafts, I also observed how the meaning of traditional has been changing throughout centuries and how we never know what traditional really is (Bubandt, 2005; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012; Surette & Cheasley Paterson, 2022). The traditional crafts have been evolving as they moved from one community to another and, from past to present and towards the future. Its original form and origin have always been unclear, which has been changing the meaning of traditional in different regions with new evolving sub-cultures and crafts (Bubandt, 2005; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012). However, globalisation has led the world to move towards singularity through global design where the regional crafts are diminishing leading to the risk of the loss of extreme cultural and traditional crafts knowledge which play a major role in society representing the evolution through these crafts skills as well as a sustainable way of producing and living without power machines and with natural ingredients (Adamson, 2019). Not only for the environmental cause but these crafts have the power to evolve into something new. Also, traditional and cultural crafts hold extreme value in terms of skills, knowledge, sustainable lifestyle, emotion, cultural identity, and community values.

TECHNIQUE AND MATERIALISATION: KNOTTED RUG WEAVING TECHNIQUE

In the beginning of my project, I experimented with different materials and techniques. I was working with an approach of mixing techniques and materials in one piece; however, I realized in the process of making that one piece with a bit of everything, it's losing the essence of a particular technique to shine out. I wanted to present various techniques in one textile work to present my diverse practical background however doing so it felt like I was just trying to show what I can do instead of using my practice as a way of communicating the importance of tradition in contemporary contexts. Therefore, I started using all the techniques separately to present the stages and processes in the project.

I would make a rough sketch (digital/hand-drawn) first from an inspiration image and then a digital weave plan which I would then turn into an embroidered prototype before turning it into a big weave, as it can be seen in image 4, image 5, image 6 and image 7.

Image 4 here is the inspiration to plan a rough layout of my idea which can be seen in image 5 followed by final weave plan and embroidery prototype in image 6 and 7 respectively. While doing the experiment weaves, the materials I used were majorly wool and cotton yarns which are commonly used in Sweden. Even though I was using the techniques I learned in India, I started to make the unconscious choice of materials and colours from Sweden. It was at that point, where in my research I started to think about these unconscious choices in my practice.

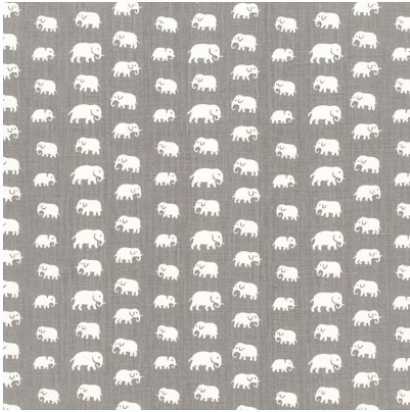


Image 4 (Inspiration):
Elefant Print, Svenskt Tenn,
Estrid Ericson

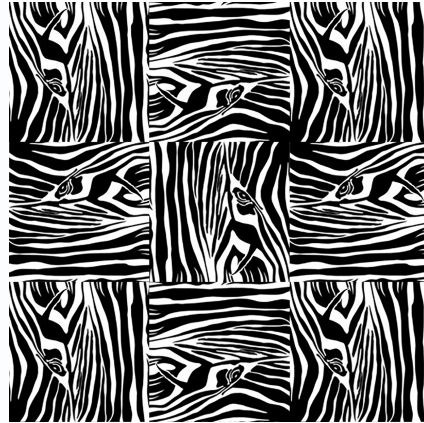


Image 5: Rough digital for Ambiguous
Motifs Story, 2022

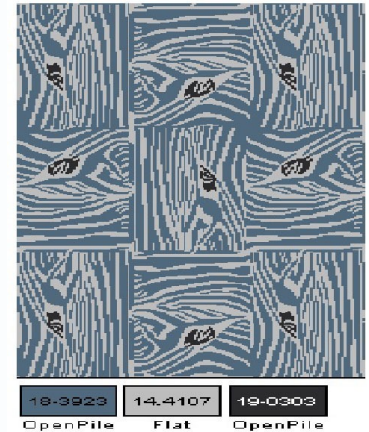


Image 6: Weave plan for
Ambiguous Motifs Story, 2022



Image 7: Embroidery prototype for Ambiguous Motifs Story, 80cm x 40cm, Cotton and Polyester, 2022

I developed my skill of working with hand-knotted weaving technique in the past during my projects with NGOs to support artisans in India. These artisans helped me learn this beautiful skill and helped me learn more about the history and values embedded in this traditional practice. Despite how common it is to see this technique on the rugs in Swedish households, I have not seen this technique practiced commonly by artisans in Sweden. Therefore, it is mostly seen as a commercial products' technique than a technique in artistic practice. I wanted to change that notion through my artistic practice. While practicing this technique back in India with artisans, I realised it has a lot of potential to express stories rather than just being a soft texture. I find the knotted technique therapeutic as you can control it as you continue to develop a piece. In a knotting technique, each knotted strand of yarn is individual yet has the power to develop into something meaningful when it all comes together.

Rug and carpet weaving has evolved as a nomadic craft that traveled to other parts of the world from Persia and Turkey (Bennett, 1996). The carpet rug weaving traveled from Persia to Europe through trade and cultural entanglement as early as the Middle Ages, while it traveled to India at the beginning of the Mughal empire by Babur (King & Sylvester, 1983). The Persian rugs carried animal motifs as a symbol of authority and power, along with the motifs of birds and flora having different meanings such as fertility, abundance, purity, etc. (Abi, 2019). As these carpet practices shifted to Sweden and India, the motifs and symbols, and materials changed adapting to new spaces. While the Indian Mughal empire rugs were more intricate with geometric and floral motifs, the rugs in Europe were made with an all-over design of coiling floral stems and cloud bands like those of animal carpets but with minimal animal presence reduced to a few birds (King & Sylvester, 1983).

For my exhibition in January 2022, I worked on developing contemporary rugs with an influence of the traditional rugs of both Swedish and Indian cultures, where I was being a source of entanglement between the two cultures. The inspiration for this project was 20th-century Swedish textile artist Märta Måås-Fjetterström and the traditional rug-weaving artisans of Jaipur, India. As the evolution of traditional rug weaving in both countries is inspired by the traditional Persian rugs, there are many similarities to be noticed in the making technique and also some current factors like the decline of the craft and its quality. However, there is a vast difference in the values, motifs, and social groups around the practice.

The rug in image 8, is an abstract vision of an elephant animal motif which is generally to be found in Persian rugs, and also traveled to both countries, but the continuity of this motif in northern Europe (Bennett, 1996) amazed me, as elephants are not to be found there. As a person coming from the land where elephants are commonly found and having an experience of that real-life look, I took an opportunity to show not the general overall shape but internal details through the rug. Therefore, I decided to present a closer look of an elephant, the saggy skin around the eye through this motif. This rug is handwoven with pile-knotting and plain weave techniques from the material found and generally used in Sweden, i.e., cotton and wool.

The rug in image 9 is made with the traditional knotted pile technique on a vertical loom with a high density of knots, that is 55 knots per square inch, as the fineness of the carpet weaving is defined by the density of the knots (Bennett, 1996). This rug showcases an abstractive representation of reindeer motif and motifs of trees found in Sweden and is also seen in traditional Swedish rugs. These motifs are mixed with bordered geometric motifs which are inspired by similar motifs found in both traditional Indian and Swedish rugs. Using contemporary earthy tones for colors, the merging of two different cultural aesthetics is formed in this rug.



Image 8: Ambiguous Motifs Story, Wool and Cotton, 125×150cms, Bhumika Sethi, 2022, photograph by Oscar Nord

The traditional Indian loom and making techniques have been used with the traditional and contemporary aesthetic of Swedish rugs. Through this project, I have presented what happens when the two cultures integrate and the innovation it leads to.

The process of making these rugs might seem clear and predictable, especially since I used a digital layout as a guide throughout the weaving process. However, the challenge arose right from the beginning of the weaving process itself, which was to ensure that the warp was strong as it formed the foundation of the weave and to make an intricate design possible. One of the biggest challenges I faced was following an intricate design plan. Ensuring that each knot was placed correctly and that the design was executed as intended was difficult with the hand-knotted weaving technique. Maintaining consistent tension and density throughout the rug was also crucial, which required careful inspection of each knot to ensure it was secure and consistent with the overall design. Despite taking great care of all these important elements during the weaving process, I came to accept that there was no such thing as a perfect weave that I could achieve. I always dreamt of creating a perfect hand-woven piece that surpassed the finishing of mass-produced objects, but it was impossible. However, this challenge helped me to appreciate the beauty of handmade items even more. Each piece is unique in its own way, making it even more special and valuable. Though I still strive for perfection, I find joy in the creative process and the satisfaction that comes with creating something truly unique.



Image 9: Cultural Coalesce, Wool and Cotton, 125×150cms, Bhumika Sethi, 2022, photograph by Oscar Nord

CRAFTS POSITION AND TEXTILES IN SWEDEN AND INDIA

There is no doubt that artisans live a precarious, fractured, and marginalized existence, especially in developing countries for example, in India over the past 30 years the number of artisans has declined by at least 30%, with many artisans joining the ranks of casual wage laborers and the informal economy as mass-produced, standardised and cheap factory items have replaced many of the various goods once produced by the artisans. Moreover, essential raw materials have either become too expensive for the artisans to purchase, or else have been diverted to mass production (Scrase 2003, p.449).

But it also made me curious about the craft's position in the western world, and what could be the reasons for the decline in some traditional crafts there, for example, upholstery and rugs becoming more of a minimal functional object than an artistic craft piece which once represented individualistic style and a way of self-expression. One major reason is directly connected with developing countries which is that the developing countries became the hub of mass production and western countries of mass consumerism for those mass-produced products due to which the demand for artisan-produced goods reduced, hence the decline in the crafts there (Scrase, 2003). However, there exists a niche market for the products developed by artists and artisans, especially in western countries.

In a conversation with Swedish artist Petter Hellsing, he discussed how Swedish society has become more individualistic and away from the process of creating things. With very little relationship between the user and maker of the product, the craft produced becomes just a commodity to public and not some creation of value. As a result, there has been a decline in the value of crafts in society, with people prioritizing convenience over appreciating the time and effort that goes into making something by hand (Hellsing, 2022). Moreover, according to him, it's also because of the history of art v/s crafts in the Swedish society where arts are considered supreme when compared to crafts (Buszek, 2011; Hellsing, 2022). In his recent project as seen in image 10, the artist had been working with tapestries with abstract landscape motifs, made with yarns that he made himself by carding and combing from the waste raw wool procured from sheep farmers, without dyeing them, in its natural forms and colors. This traditional way of producing the slow craft is an inspiration for me, where a sustainable way of making has been prioritised.

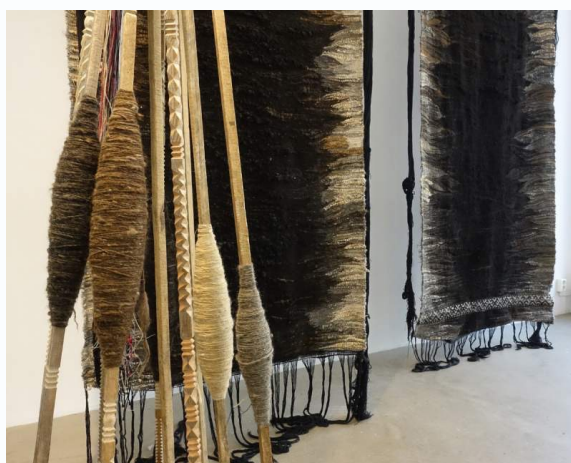


Image 10: Vända Blick, Petter Hellsing, 2020

The history of weaving in Sweden can be traced back to the Middle Ages however, there is no specific evidence of when it started and how it transformed itself as per the cultural heritage of Sweden, as many tapestries, and scriptures in Sweden in the past have been lost in war and fires. It is known that these tapestries were usually pictorial, depicting people, animals, birds, or flowers on a dark background. Also, religious scenes, especially the Annunciation and hunting, were common subjects, but their meanings, evolution, and place in society are unknown. However, tapestries got famous in Sweden in the 19th and 20th centuries with a lot of innovations in traditional ones (Hansen, 1996).

Inspired by the conversation with artist Petter Helsing, I created the work titled 'Two Perspectives' using natural materials and vegetable dyes. In this weave, I got inspired by two cultural art paintings, one from traditional Indian art called Pattachitra paintings and one from 19th-century Swedish folk art paintings from the southern part of Sweden. Turning human pictorial motifs inspired by these paintings into a weave through hand-knotted weaving technique was tough and therefore I had to turn to another knotted technique called Tibetan/Nepali knots which are denser and require more tools. This technique is practiced in some extremely small regions in India and Nepal. This practice originated in Nepal by a small community developed years ago in the 7th century and presumably evolved indigenously and in isolation.

The rug 'Two Perspectives', I created in image 11 is double-sided/reversible with each side having different design and representing two cultures (Indian and Swedish) in me. Each side shows livelihood in traditional times, which metaphorically is still quite present in today's time. If we see these narratives, it has some common elements like nature and animals around, majorly a horse, which was extremely important in ancient times for transportation and travel. I mixed these narratives with basic stripes and neutral-coloured blocks presenting a merge of traditional and contemporary aesthetics. I also aimed to bridge the gap between art and craft as I turned an art inspiration (painting) into a woven craft piece.



Image 11: Two Perspectives, Wool and Cotton, 100×185 cm, Bhumika Sethi, 2022, photograph by Oscar Nord

FLAMSK WEAVE AND PATTACHITRA PAINTING

I worked with the knotted weaving technique for my final project work. For the inspiration of my project, I researched the motifs and meanings of the Flamsk weave of Skåne from Sweden and the Pattachitra painting from India. These two cultural practices come from very different lands with no cultural connection at all and are very contrasting from each other as one represents craft practice while the other is an art form. They are also different in terms of aesthetics and the story it represents.

Yet these two traditions have a few similarities in colors and symbolism, and entanglement between such two traditional cultures is something to be experimented upon.

- *Flamskväv, Sweden*

Flamskväv is essentially a Skånian adaptation of the Gobelin tapestry techniques brought from Flanders. The weave came from immigrant Flemish weaves of Denmark, who brought their tapestry weaving skills and practiced them here however, slowly the style of weaving changed due to cultural infusion (Whidden, 2015). The application of weave was mainly over furniture. As this weave started to spread, it became more popular among peasant women and became a craft generally practiced by women. I decided to work with this traditional craft because it has evolved from another traditional practice in the past, which presents that traditional practices can evolve from past to present and towards the future.

With major use of colours red, black, and white, while other colors were used to add more details to it (Hansen, 1996; Whidden, 2015). The commonly used motifs are birds (mainly parrots), red bulls, a betrothed couple, the occasional castle, and biblical imageries. This craft in contemporary times has turned into more individual creativity and not collective belief, with an influence of contemporary designs (Hansen, 1996; Whidden, 2015).



Image 12: Carriage cushion in Flamskväv, 49×98 cm, Source: Nordiska Museet, photograph by Nina Heins

- *Pattachitra painting of Odisha, India*

Pattachitra painting, or Pattachitra Art, is a traditional painting style that has its roots in Odisha, India. Etymologically speaking, Pattachitra means picture or painting on cloth, paper, and palm leaves which is how this art form is practiced (Dhyani, 2022).

This 3000-year-old art form is generally practiced on paper, and the artists spend several hours creating the hand-painting depicting songs, stories, and folklore from Odisha. Besides being popular as a ritual and historical storytelling, a lot of people consider it to be a great souvenir to take back from their trip to Puri (in Odisha) (ibid).

The theme of the Pattachitra Art form is usually based on Hindu mythology and is amongst one of the oldest art forms that are still in practice in Odisha. Dating back to the 12th century, it is one of the oldest and most popular art forms from the Indian subcontinent. Researchers and subject matter experts believe that this art form marks the origin of the Patta style of art that is popular today (ibid).

The traditional Pattachitra Art uses only a few colours like red, green, yellow, black, white, and indigo. In the Pattachitra paintings, artists use colours from conch shells for white and Hingul stone to create the colour red. These hues are combined to create magic on canvas and tell the tales of the land based on the theme the painter has selected (ibid).



Image 13: Pattachitra folk art, Odisha, India

I have further experimented with the blending of motifs and symbolism from both cultures from my perspective, each with its own unique purpose - one being a craft form for furniture and the other an art form inspired by Hindu mythology. While both art and craft forms have distinct values, I found common ground in the shared motifs which represent basic livelihood. Through the process of weaving, I have created and will be presenting innovation in traditions of textiles when contrasting traditions are entangled culturally. I have used wool and cotton yarn along with the waste fabric for the final artwork.

CONNECTING CULTURES

My final exhibition work is based on the overall theme of my practice which is merging of different traditional cultures and practices, leading to birth of new practices in contemporary world, taking forward the traditional in a new form to future generations. The final work is inspired by the traditional aesthetic of Pattachitra painting of India and Flamsk weave of Sweden as discussed above. To create this work, I have used hand-knotted weaving technique.

The work is in the shape of an octagon with one side open or one side for the entrance (refer image 16), making it a form of space where people can enter. There are different artworks on both sides of the rug.

- The outward side

The outward side (image 14) represents the work inspired by Pattachitra painting of India. I have represented a variation of Pattachitra in contemporary world. The reason I selected this traditional art is because it pictures traditional mythological stories which have been a major part of my life when growing up in India. However, I decided to keep this work on outer side because it represents my identity which people generalise when meeting me for the first time and a strong association with my homeland. Another reason to have this outward is that the culture and art with folk stories represent life outside the house, in a community and society.

The textile work is divided into various story frames, each depicting a unique meaning or narrative. Although I come from an urban city in India, my representation reflects my observations and experiences of rural life, gained through visits and conversations with individuals from these areas.

The first frame showcases an Indian temple, its devotees, and the religious rituals that are observed. I selected this frame first because culture and religion hold significant importance in Indian society, as well as in my personal life.

The second frame represents rural livelihood in India, where men typically engage in work outside the home while women manage domestic chores. The representation is somewhat abstract yet figurative.

The third frame shows that women in India especially in rural areas are often confined indoors due to societal norms based on distorted religious beliefs. This limits their opportunities and progress; highlighting the need for comprehensive efforts to address gender inequality. The animal motifs like snake and crocodile represent the danger of the outside world confiding women at home.

The fourth frame depicts the changing times where women are increasingly leaving their homes for work or education, migrating to cities. However, due to societal structures that restrict their agency and impose male supervision, women remain dependent on men to some extent.



Image 14: Connecting Cultures- Outside octagon, Rough digital, Wool x Cotton, 480cms x 90cms, Bhumiika Sethi, 2023

- The inward side

The inward side (image 15) represents the work inspired by Flamsk weave in Sweden which was used for upholstery and is itself an example of evolved form of a traditional craft. As an inspiration, I have used the symbols of this craft with the 19th-century traditional Swedish folk stories from the south of Sweden. I decided to keep this craft inwards because it represents the change in my identity which is happening slowly, starting from the little habits and mainly something which my close ones or I can observe. Another reason to have this inward is because Swedish folk stories often depict a lifestyle that is individualistic, emphasizing the living style of a family or a person rather than that of a community. This idea of self-reliance and personal freedom is an important aspect of Swedish culture and is reflected in the stories that are passed down through generations.

The textile work is a collection of various frames that depict my personal journey in Sweden. Through the use of abstract floral circular motifs in each section, I aim to symbolize the individualistic society of Sweden. As the artwork is based on my own experiences and impressions of the country, it reflects a personal touch.

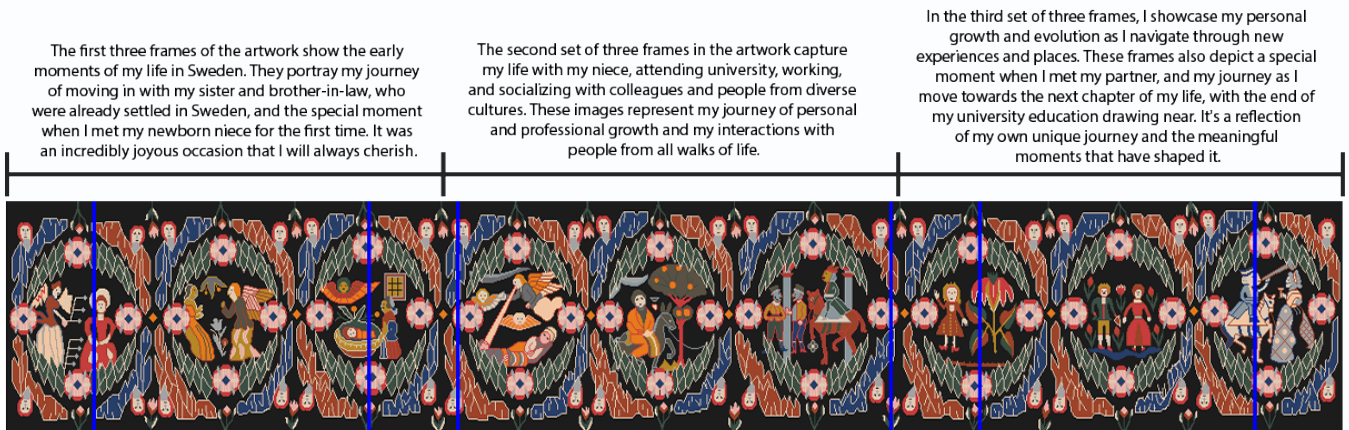


Image 15: Connecting Cultures- Inside octagon, Rough digital, Wool x Cotton, 480cms x 90cms, Bhumika Sethi, 2023

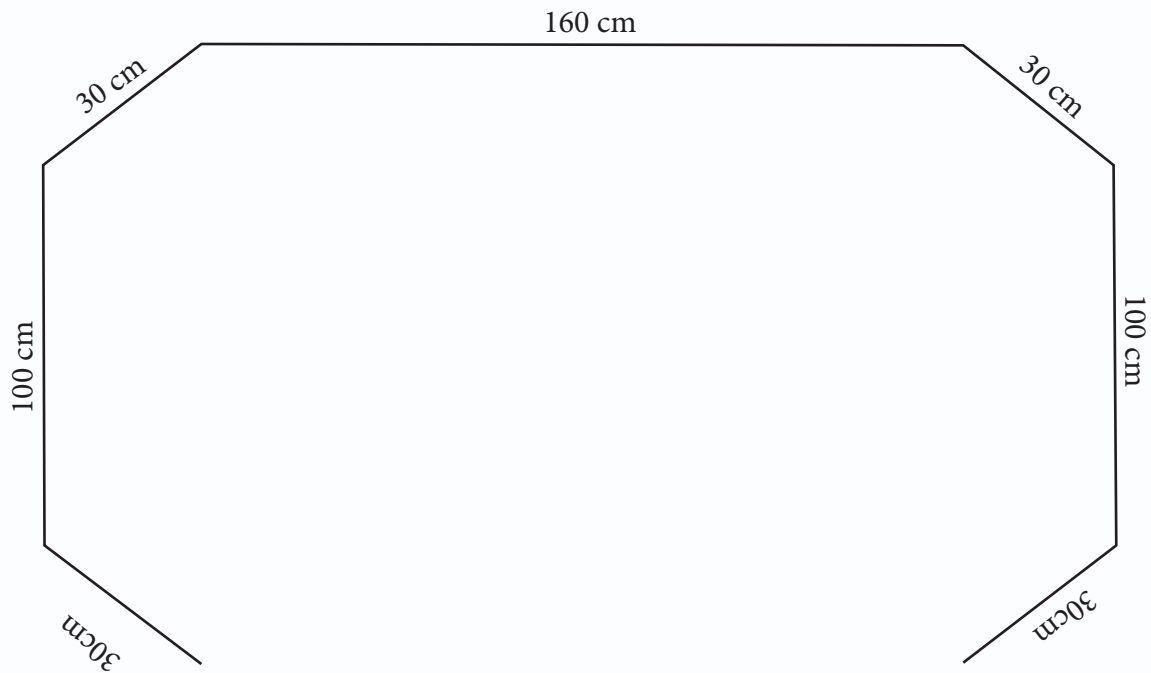


Image 16: Structure layout for the work Connecting Cultures, 480cms x 90cms, Bhumika Sethi, 2023

The weaving process for this artwork was done in 14 separate pieces, 7 for each side, (refer to image 16 for reference) which were then stitched together to form the final piece. The weaving was done in separate panels so that it could be folded on the corners, sewing them to form the octagon shape. Patience was crucial during the slow and precise weaving process. However, the real challenges arose when it was time to sew the different pieces of weaves together, as even the smallest imperfections became noticeable. As an artist, it can be difficult to overlook these imperfections, but I was prepared for unexpected errors and obstacles before starting this project, as it was my first time creating a space through textile weaving. Each completed weave panel brought me closer to realizing my big textile dream, and although the journey was full of surprises and disappointments, it brought me joy to see it all come together in the end.

The work 'Connecting Cultures', represents the two cultures in me. My perspective, where two traditional crafts are coming together to evolve into a new craft form, a new definition of traditional from my experience. The work is inspired by my journey of living in Sweden and this project will grow with more influences from Swedish craft knowledge. The colours used throughout the journey of this practice-based research project show how I have moved from working with lighter warmer colours to darker colours which are influenced by the weather changes around me. However, the work doesn't use the exact representation of Swedish traditional craft technique but is an adaption to it mixed with the traditional technique I have been working with.

CONCLUSION

Culture is an important part of our life. It may define the people around us, our habits, food, clothes, and a lot of other things. However, it is least examined among the four pillars of sustainability (environmental, economic, social, and cultural). Also, the nature of culture has not been much discussed in the academics in the past.

Just like how environment, social and economic aspects of sustainability are not stagnant, it can be argued and observed through some cultural exchange examples in the past that neither is culture. But it is still perceived as something outdated, old and conservative which makes the discussion around culture even more important. Cultural knowledge is important; however, it can be said due to changes observed from past to present that cultural knowledge never remains stagnant and keeps on evolving due to factors like cultures meeting or changes in other factors of sustainability.

The evolution of traditional cultural knowledge in terms of craft is the main theme of the research paper. The tradition in traditional crafts keeps on changing and evolving, changing the meaning of culture from generation to generation. However, it's important to keep the culture and tradition alive in a growing form, and not move towards singularity, leaving diversity behind, which can be seen happening because of globalisation.

Through my practice, I have illustrated a series of artworks of cultures in circulation with particular research based in India and Sweden because of them being culturally contrasting, which also represents my journey. Also, having a connection with these two countries, one being my homeland and one where I'm experiencing living and working, were appropriate choices. The cross-cultural practice developed through these projects also challenges the notion of craft and tradition being conservation and leads to innovation through craft. It is a representation of cultures co-existing and innovating through each other.

My final artwork 'Connecting Cultures' is a true representation of how a culture impacts your existing cultural identity and knowledge, which is quite slow yet makes a change forever. It is generally not that evident in the beginning but with time you start adapting a lot of things unconsciously. It will never become the other culture completely or just go back to the existing culture. It becomes a new cultural practice and identity altogether. To conclude, the nature of culture and the play of traditional practice is yet to be fully examined in society and this project projects a scenario of two traditional practices coming together as a positive example of cultural connection.

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Images:

- Image 1: Embroidery Karigars working in export house in India, picture by Anjori Grover Vasesi, 2017
- Image 2: Mahatma Gandhi weaving cloth(Khadi) with charkha(spining wheel), Sabarmati, India, late 1940's, Source: gandhiserve.org
- Image 3: Fabric Chaos, 90×60 cm, Waste fabric from manufacturing units, Bhumika Sethi, 2022, photograph by Oscar Nord
- Image 4: Elefant Print, Svenskt Tenn, Estrid Ericson
- Image 5: Rough digital for Ambiguous Motifs Story, 2022
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- Image 15: Connecting Cultures- Inside octagon, Rough digital, Wool x Cotton, 480cms x 90cms, Bhumika Sethi, 2023
- Image 16: Structure layout for the work Connecting Cultures, 480cms x 90cms, Bhumika Sethi, 2023

Primary Research Source:

- Interview with Artist Petter Hellsing, Bachelor in Sculptures from Konstfack in 1989, currently working with textiles. (28th February 2022)
- Experience working with weaving artisans in India- Interviews in process. (Including an interview with Abdul Samad). (19th September 2019)
- Visit to National Museum in Stockholm (To understand and learn about traditional weaves in Sweden and, the traditional Swedish folk art and craft and how the contemporary crafts evolved). (2nd July 2022)
- Visit to Fotografiska Museum in Stockholm to view Terry O'Neill's exhibition (Learning the story behind his pictures and the influence different cultures had on him and what got lost in the translation of those cultures because of different factors like language etc.) (23rd August 2022)