



Voyage of Metal Threads Through the Age of Flamboyancy

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With an exclusive history and sensual feel, velvet is a pile weave fabric which has for centuries been a luxurious fabric associated with royalty and a sense of exclusiveness. This ostentatious fabric with its elegance has a soft feel and gives a shiny yet a classy look. Due to its grandiosity it has been used around the world by royalties. Velvet was manufactured from silk, wool as well as cotton, although, silk velvet was considered the most royal of them all and wool was the least manufactured. Cotton velvet was used for garments as well as upholstery.

Velvet was used in India by the royalties in many ways. For the most part, it was used in male and female garments for the royalties along with being used as an upholstery material for various occasions and decorations, as animal trappings, as fabrics used for the construction of processional standards, as covers for arms, as shields that were owned by the royalty and as covers and bags for silverware. The fact that it could be combined with gold thread added to its appeal. Silver and gilded metal wires in various forms such as flat metallic wires, *Zari* threads of varied thicknesses, bright check bullions, smooth and rough pearl purls, and many others were embroidered onto the velvet fabrics. Earlier, this was practiced only on silk velvets, however, with the passing of time, these metal components came to be embroidered on cotton velvet too.

The fact that the silver/gold thread embroidered velvet fabrics could only be afforded by the rich and famous, it became exclusively available to the royal families of India. Soon enough, its popularity led to its increased production in the *karkhanas* of several princely states of ancient India, the famous ones producing the finest quality including Gujarat (specifically Ahmedabad), Lahore, Murshidabad, Agra and Benaras.

With the exclusiveness, sense of style and fashion culminating from these fabrics, the introduction of international exhibitions gave India a platform as a colony of the British Empire to display some of its finest textiles.

International exhibitions arose out of the need and wish for Britain to exhibit its splendid artifacts that were being manufactured by them and their colonies. With the coming of the Industrial revolution and fashion being a major focus of many a rulers around the world, Britain started the trend of International exhibitions.

The first international exhibition to be carried out was in 1851 at the Crystal Palace from May 1st to 15th October 1851 in Great Britain, witnessing a footfall of 6,039,195 visitors. The Indian articles displayed at the Great Exhibition included exhibits manufactured at Murshibadad and Benaras.



Figure 1: The Indian Pavillion: Dickinson's compressive pictures of the great exhibition of 1851

Objects from Murshidaabad included gold embroidered velvet carpet with a long and two square pillows, forming a sort of throne for native princes.

Other objects from this centre included gold embroidered elephant trappings, awnings and green saddle cover, all made of velvet. Gold embroidered velvet carpets were native of Benaras. Objects such as musnud, embroidered with gold were also mentioned, however the type of fabric used for its construction was not specified. Although, there is a high possibility of the use of velvet, but other fabrics such as silk cannot be exempted.

Dickinson's compressive pictures of the great exhibition of 1851 show the presence of various processional standards and parasols which have been embroidered in gold and could very well have been constructed from velvet fabric, based on the objects' pictorial representations, but no mention of such objects has been observed in the official catalogue. The catalogue however does state that "The material of the Catalogue was thus obtained, but the form in which it appeared was as such as to require very considerable modification before it could be issued from the press. The necessity for reducing the size of the catalogue to one of convenience for use in the Building demanded that the material of which they were to be composed should be considerably condensed." The absence of various objects that have been observed in the pictorial representations could either be due to the aforementioned statement, else could be that the presence of these objects and materials used for the manufacturing of certain exhibits was common knowledge and not considered as a separate entity important enough to be mentioned in the list of objects displayed.

Like the catalogue of the 1851 exhibition, the 1867 Paris exhibition catalogue also categorically states "India, unmentioned in the official catalogue, has a variety of its brilliant products unclassified and unlabelled, except with the cards of the French dealers who exhibit them." Such statements make it hard to identify exhibits authentically from India and the specification of metal embroidery on velvet fabrics.

However, moving forward to the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in South Kensington, the exhibition gives information regarding velvet-weaving centres of the time, highlighting Benaras and Murshidabad as velvet pile carpet weaving centres and Tanjore, Salem and Warangal as silk pile manufacturing centres.



Figure 2: Indian Exhibits at the Great Exhibition of 1851

With respect to metal embroidery, the official catalogue states that a total of thirty- seven examples were displayed of embroidered goods, out of which few were metal embroidered. Elephant trappings, saddle cloths, masnads and carpets spread out before royal seats consisted of karchobi embroidery, however now this technique met with little demand at the time of the exhibition and the kar-chikan form of embroidery carried out with needle charged with gold threads popularized. In this technique, the pattern was usually drawn on paper, pricked with a pin and the paper was stretched over the cloth to be embroidered. Yellow colour at the time was put on over the lines of pinholes, and mark yellow the cloth beneath. In other cases the pattern was slightly stamped by means of a wooden block.

The images of the exhibition show the presence of objects such as scabbard covers. These scabbards have been observed to have had metal embroidered velvet covers, however the exhibition catalogue does not mention this information. This exhibition puts to light the change in the style of metal embroidery on fabrics including velvets that was coming about as the change in the century too was coincidentally was approaching.

In 1904, the Royal Commission International Exhibition held at St. Louis saw the presence of The Royal Presents included in this collection, which were gifted to Queen Victoria by various native princes of India on the occasion of the Jubilee celebrations of 1887 and 1897.

The catalogue states the influence of European ideas into the Indian art forms represented in some, if not all of the objects. The list of objects did include a variety of saddle and saddlecloths embroidered in gold on various coloured velvet fabrics of blue, purple and black. One specific saddlecloth was mentioned to have had the work of precious stones along with gold metal embroidery. Along with these were the mention of certain objects that had not been catalogued in previous exhibitions such as gold-embroidered red and green velvet bags, and a kneeling cushion of green silk velvet, richly embroidered in gold and silver threads, with gold and crimson tassels on the front corners. This kneeling cushion was presented to the queen by the Maharaja of Travancore.

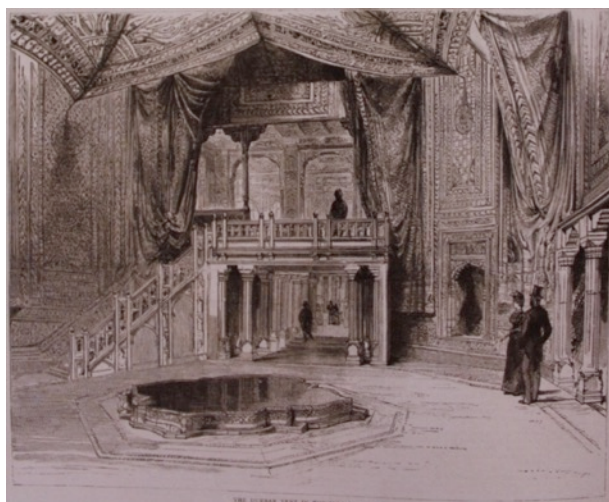


Figure 3: The Indian Section of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition

Towards the nearing of the 1950s, with the ever more increasing popularity of mechanized weaving and the influence of modern art led to the decline in popularity of various intricate art forms of India, one of them being gilded and silver embroidery on textiles. And so, thereafter, the focus of exhibitors shifted to displaying goods manufactured from technically advanced techniques, resulting in the focus shifting away from examples of labour intensive exquisite textiles.

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About the Author

Radhana Raheja is a conservator with a master's degree in Fabric and Apparel Science, specializing in textile conservation and documentation from Lady Irwin College, University of Delhi. She has done her internship in conservation of textiles with INTACH, Specialized Textile Conservation Unit, New Delhi. She has carried out a research work on 'A Study of selected consolidants for the conservation of velvet artifacts'. In this study, primary and secondary data tracing the history, types, usages of velvet, and consolidants used for textile consolidation were collected. She is presently associated with the Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur, as an Assistant Conservator under the supervision of Ms.Smita Singh, for the exhibition 'Royal Rajasthan: The Desert Kingdom of Jodhpur' in collaboration with The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.