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Court costume from Okinawa

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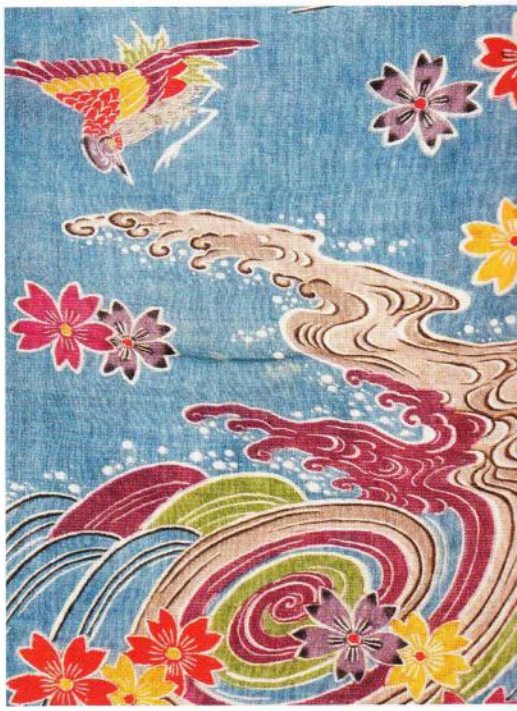

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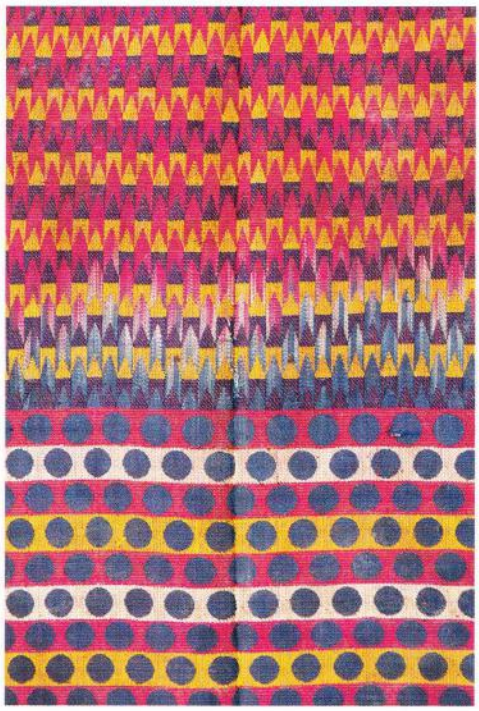
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Reviews

Marketplace

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Chintz ancient & modern

Handmade Indian chintz—once the textile gold of the Dutch East India Company, has returned to the Netherlands. Nathalie Cassee tells the story of a specially commissioned replica of a historic tree-design cloth

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1, 2 Front and back of the original 18th-century Gelderland quilt. The central Coromandel Coast tree and rope meander chintz panel is probably earlier than the outer border and the triangular pieces of the patchwork surround and back. 1.04 x 1.20 m (3' 5" x 3' 11"). J. Meester Collection, the Netherlands

Last December, the first new handmade Indian chintz arrived in the Netherlands for more than a century. A replica of an 18th-century tree and rope meander panel from a quilt in a Dutch private collection, it was made by a small studio in India that has revived this centuries-old technique, in which the cotton cloth is prepared and painted using mordant-and resist-dyeing methods with natural dyes. I had the honour to commission this in July 2016.

Indian chintz is soft, versatile and easy to maintain. The cotton is prepared by soaking it in dung and bleaching it, then using mordant and resist dyeing, so that the natural dyes are fixed into the cotton fibre itself. This results in fresh, deep, fast colours that leave the cotton soft and agreeable to use and wear. The colours improve with washing and ageing. Although it had been exported to southeast Asia since the 5th century and Armenian merchants had long traded it to Iran and the Middle East, the first westerners to encounter it were the Portuguese much further down the line, who opened up the sea route to the east in the 15th century. Dutch and English trading companies followed by the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

The arrival of Indian chintz at the beginning of the 17th century changed Dutch society. It was textile gold for the VOC (Dutch East India Company), bringing the great wealth that was the foundation of the Golden Age. Chintz first served as barter in the spice trade but was later directly imported as a primary cargo, with the trade bringing new fabrics, designs and ways of applying dyes.

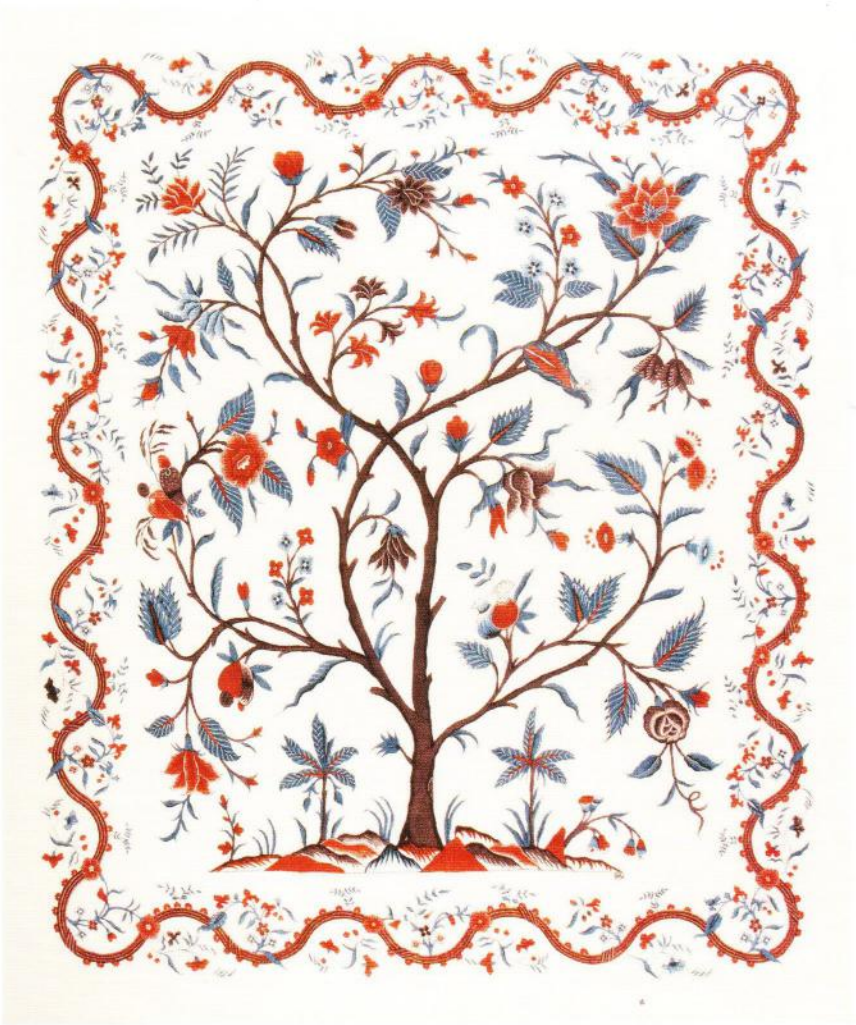
By the end of the 17th century, chintz had become widely popular among the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy of Europe. Designs were set out to be copied by Indian painters, and three-quarters of the cargoes coming to the west were textiles. Chintzes went all over the world, to Europe and America, and to southeast, east and west Asia, the Caribbean and west Africa. The artisans adjusted their artwork easily to the tastes and demands in different markets.

Chintzes were first widely used in the west as decorative home textiles, then later also for clothing and, in the Netherlands, traditional regional costume. The Dutch had a strong preference for red-ground chintzes, trees and large-scale floral designs as well as scattered floral motifs. In England, chintzes were first used as furnishing textiles. Only later did the English aristocracy follow the French and Dutch in wearing chintz as fashionable clothing.

The popularity of hand-painted chintzes from India was seen to pose a threat to the powerful wool- and silk-weaving industry in Europe, and the trade was banned for long periods, mainly to protect the French and English markets. By the mid-18th century, spinning machines made it possible to weave cotton using Indian yarn in the west. The first cotton-printing workshop was established in England in 1676, followed two years later by one in the Dutch city of Amersfoort, using block-printed mordants and resists with natural dyes.

Original handmade Indian chintz fell out of favour by the end of the 18th century. In the Netherlands, however, it remained popular in Frisian regional costume, such as Hindeloopen *wentkes*, well into the 20th century.

Painting cotton with natural dyes is intricate and time-consuming. It may take several months to finish one cloth. The steps



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3 Replica of the central chintz panel of the Meester quilt, India, 2016. Courtesy Kashmir Heritage/G. de Jong/Ms. J. Meester/R.Reddy

4 The steps in mordant painting and dyeing Indian chintz. After G.P. Baker, *Calico Painting & Printing in the East Indies in the XVII and XVIII Centuries*, London 1921, p.17, reprint Ahmedabad 2013

5 Detail of the replica chintz

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involved begin with preparing the cotton and making it receptive to bonding with the vegetal dye by soaking it in a fatty astringent substance. After washing and bleaching, the design is drawn on the cotton with a bamboo pen (*kalam*), using alum mordant for red and iron mordant for black outlines. Then the cotton is boiled in a solution of a red dyestuff such as chay root (Coromandel Coast) which colours the alum mordant red and the iron mordant black. The dye only fixes to the parts where the mordant has been applied. After repeated washing and bleaching the cloth is again soaked in an astringent mixture. By repeating the first steps, different hues of red and black can be added to the design. By mixing alum and iron mordants other hues such as purple can be achieved.

The next step is to bring in the indigo blue. Fine resist lines are drawn onto the cotton with wax (for example the lines in the leaves of the tree), which is also applied to all those parts of the cotton which must be prevented from going blue. Then the cotton is immersed in an indigo vat, after which it oxidizes and turns blue. After scraping and boiling out the wax, green or orange or other mixed yellow tones are obtained using direct vegetal yellow dyes such as turmeric, all of which are fugitive. For that reason, most of the green is no longer visible in the paintings discussed here. Rinsing and bleaching (in dung and sun) is repeated during the process to enhance the fixing of colours and make the ground fabric paler. In the end the cotton is starched, beetled and polished for a glossy finish. This makes the cotton less prone to staining and gives the design extra depth.

The design in both the original and the replica chintzes is a flowering tree surrounded by a rope meander garnished with flowers. Trees, flowers and garlands were popular motifs for Dutch-market chintzes throughout the 18th century. The centrally placed tree emerges from a rocky mound and has branches with large leaves and flowers. It is flanked by two stylised palms, also standing on the mound. It fits into the fashion of the period for

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depicting trees with sinuously curving branches bearing oversized flowers. By the second half of the 18th century, Chinese-style thin foliage took over, with chrysanthemums, bamboo and peonies as specific motifs.

The model for the replica is the centre of a patchwork quilt from Gelderland, in the collection of Joes Meester. It is assumed to date to the period 1780-1790 (An Moonen, *A History of Dutch Quilts*, Eindhoven, 2008). Meester told me: 'The quilt has been in family possession for a few generations now. It was inherited from my late aunt. She never married and after passing away in the fifties of the last century, she left this quilt and a 17th-century sampler with needlepoint lace, which sat in an old chest. Since then it has been on display in my ancestral home. Unfortunately, we do not know where or when she acquired it. Only later did we learn more of the true age and uniqueness of the piece. Since then it has been to the USA where a collection of reproduction quilt fabrics was made by the Windham firm. This fabric, called 'Josephine', is now sold out and no longer available. In 2008 the quilt featured in a book on the history of Dutch quilts.'

There are however some indications that the chintz (tree and meander) centre of the quilt, which measures 1.04 by 1.20 m, is older than late 18th century in date. It certainly appears to be earlier than the surrounding outer border and the fabrics within which it has been mounted. The border is a chintz in which the green has survived, whereas no green can be seen in the tree design.

The triangular fabrics of the patchwork quilt date to a later period, which suggests that the centre might have been used initially as a wall hanging and only much later made into a quilt, with the outer handmade chintz border added at the same time. Another indication that the original central panel of the quilt may be earlier than the late 18th century is the coarseness of the original cotton used, which has a linen-like look and feel, comparable to earlier Indian cotton fabrics. The V&A has a comparable tree with rope meander chintz in the collection which dates to 1750-1760. In the mid-18th century some border meanders had rope motifs, which supports the assumption that this specific tree and rope meander are of earlier date than the quilt itself.

The arrival of Indian chintz at the beginning of the 17th century changed Dutch society... bringing the great wealth that was the foundation of the Golden Age

Both the original 250-year-old quilt and the replica are currently on display in the exhibition 'Sits, katoen in bloei' (Chintz, Cotton in Bloom) at the Fries Museum in Leeuwarden until 10 September 2017. The Fries Museum has one of the most extensive and important collections of chintzes in the Netherlands. The exhibition is accompanied by an eponymous and compact book by Gieneke Arnolli and other authors, featuring a wealth of colour illustrations.