

What matters is
not what is written
on the page,
What matters is
what is written in
the heart.

- Gregory Colbert
(Ashes and Snow)

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Kala Raksha means Preservation of Tradition. The Kala Raksha Trust, a grassroots social enterprise, is dedicated to preservation of traditional arts. This trust encourages the creative capacity of the artist.

Kala Raksha was founded by Judy Frater along with local embroiders from the Rabari community of Kutch in 1993. Kala Raksha produces some of the most exquisitely hand embroidered and patch worked products made in Kutch. Using only natural fibers and wherever possible natural dyes, the Trust makes a wide range of garments, accessories and home furnishings.

In 2005, an education initiative blossomed into Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya, the first design school for traditional artisans. Here artisans are taught how to develop their craft and cater to the market without altering their traditions.

The Trust also maintains a collection of heirloom textiles on campus at Sumrasar Sheik, Bhuj. Kala Raksha is also the first to start an online museum with these heritage textiles.



About KALA RAKSHA



The Project Brief



To Develop Textiles in Weaving, Block Printing and Bandhani to Coordinate with Kala Raksha's 2010 Collection

Purpose

To fulfill the obligation of two Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya graduates to provide Rs. 7,500 of product to Kala Raksha in lieu of educational fees. To utilize this as an opportunity for the graduates to exercise their designing capability to create marketable products. To highlight the concept of Artisan Design.

Objective

The project focused on developing woven, block printed and bandhani textiles to coordinate with the embroidered products of Kala Raksha. As Kala Raksha's strength is embroidery, patchwork and appliqué, the textiles must highlight rather than compete with these products.

Due to time constraint of just 6 weeks, we were only to initialize the process and create samples. The samples were taken forward by Rutika, a diploma student of Srishti to design the final collection for Kala Raksha.



Initially, it was a challenge for us as we were not allowed to give our designs to the artisans. We had to take a step back and be facilitators in the design process. Since Kala Raksha supports Artisan Design, we had to make the artisans themselves come up with the concepts and develop their own ideas into designs.

A design brief and colour palette was given to us with the main theme being "Earth, Water and Air." As the artisans were taught the same design process at the Vidhyalaya as we are, we began by making them ideate and create mood boards. Old magazines were cut up and images pertaining to textures and colours were taken by the artisans from these and put together into a collage.

We then made them sketch from these mood boards and make layouts keeping in mind the overall eco-friendly theme. We then visited their homes to study their work and observe their work stations. We began weighing the strengths and limitations of each artisan and planned collaborating with them around their schedules.

We then narrowed down on the artisans we chose to work with. I chose to work on weaving with Ramjibhai. And the three of us decided to collectively work with the bhandini artisans Abdullabhai and Zuberbhai.



Conceptualizing

INSPIRATION
 - Based on work we have seen
 - Kabavaksha
 - other work
 - Make them sketch.
 - Pastel shades.
 - Patterns in the sand.
 - Jewellery.
 Dessert
 Skys
 Patterns
 Shady
 Sunset
 Cactus
 Himalayas
 Rocks
 formal
 official
 soft
 winter



Natural Dyeing Yarn

Artisan: Juned Khatri

One of the main demands of Kala Raksha for weaving was to create natural dyed shot fabric for embroidery. Hence, we decided to natural dye the yarn and then weave it.

An order for dyeing yarn was given to Junedbhai (a KRV graduate) from Ajrakpur. He is the son of Dr. Ismail Khatri who specialises in natural dyeing and Ajrak block print.

Around 10 shades of colours from natural dyes like anar, haldi, madder, sapan, alizarin, indigo and iron were obtained. A portion of the yarn was also tied to create textures. Totally, we had around 50 shades including the textured (ikat dyed) yarn. It was amazing to see the vibrant colours that could be obtained from natural dyes. They were 2 shades of yellow (anar & haldi), 2 shades of grey and black (from iron and jaggery), orange (madder), red (alizarin), pink (sapan), blue (indigo) and green (indigo & haldi).





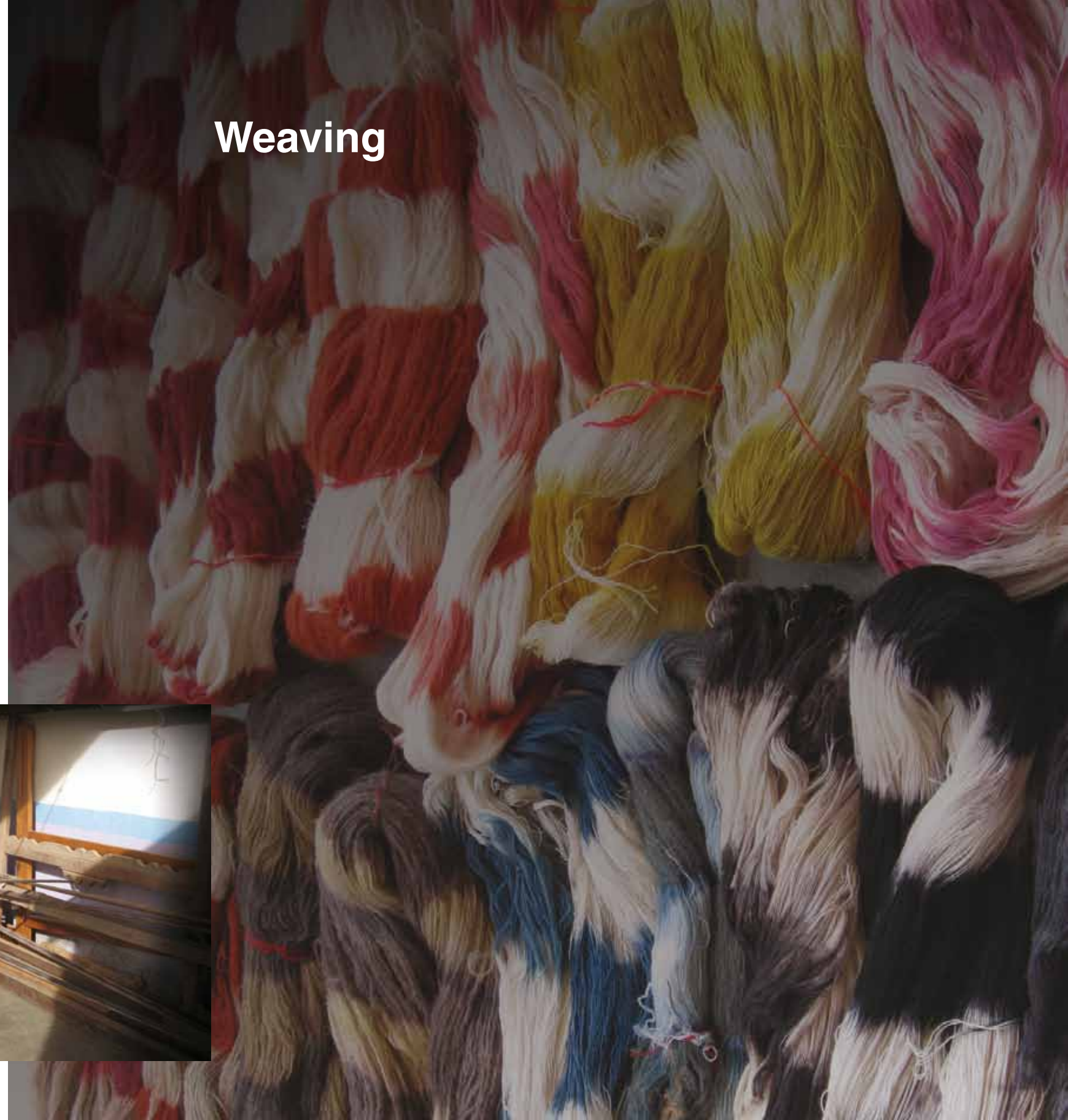
Artisan: Ramji Maheshwari

After graduating from KRV, Ramjibhai has taken a strong interest in creating textures in his weaves. He has tried to create textures by tie-dying yarn (ikat style) and then weaving them into stoles.

As he caters mostly to the foreign market; his colour palette mostly contained pale shades of greys, blues, pinks and achromatic colours. Though he had a whole motif bank woven by his fathers, he used modern motifs and minimalistic designs of stripes depicting his western influence.

As this project required using natural dyed colours; it enabled the artisans to source as well as use natural dye in their work on an everyday basis; making them environmentally conscious.

Ramjibhai was enthusiastic to take natural dyeing in weaving forward and even dyed extra yarn for himself for his own collection.



Weaving

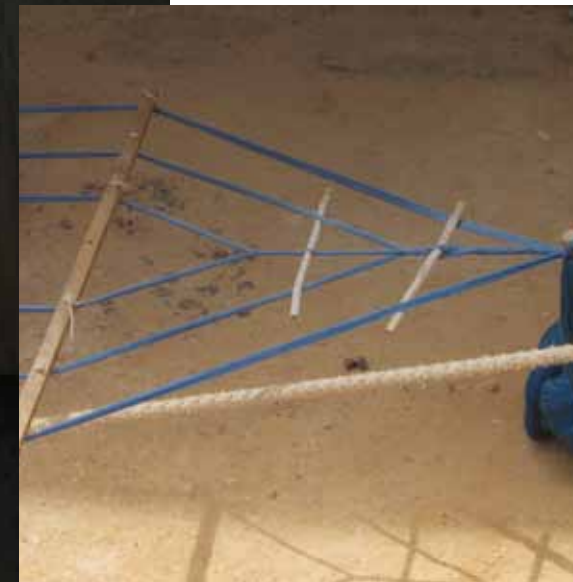


Learnings & Constraints with the Loom

The weavers of Kutch have traditional looms made of simple logs of wood. The warp threads are tied in a unique way at the end to hold the excess yarn. When a pick or end thread breaks, the weavers very easily join them back together by merely twisting the two broken parts with their fingers, without tying a knot. I found it quite fascinating as back in college we try complex knotting to join these broken ends together.

Ramjibhai was the only weaver in the village of Sumrasar. He had set up his pit loom with just two shafts or pedals. This meant he could only do plain weave for his own convenience. He believed in smart work rather than hard work.

Ramjibhai was not keen on setting up more than one warp for sampling as it was time consuming. Hence all the sampling had to be done on a single warp. We decided to put all the 50 shades onto one warp of 8 meters and explore different combinations of warp and weft yarn.



Since Ramjibhai had just two pedals, exploring different types of weaves was limited on his loom. Exploration in terms of denting was also not possible as he would merely twist the yarn from the new warp onto the old as it was less time consuming.

We thus decided to work more with colour, using different combinations for shot fabric as well as textures. Weaving in Kutch is primarily done with cotton. Kutch has a peculiar type of wool called “desi” wool which was traditionally hand spun.

We then went material hunting to Shroff Bazaar in Bhuj. We were lucky enough to find a mill spun variety of desi wool which we could also use in the warp. Thus, we decided to work with wool and cotton as Ramjibhai had never worked with silk before. Also silk yarn was very expensive as it is not locally produced.

Cotton (2/40's, 2/80's), Wool (2/30's, 2/60's, natural “desi” wool) were used in the warp and weft. The reed number he used was 40 and denting 2 per dent. Each colour took up 1/2 inch of the warp. The total breadth of the warp was 24 inches including selvage. The first 15 inches was used for shot fabric combinations while the rest of it was used for texture exploration.

The Loom at Tana Bana



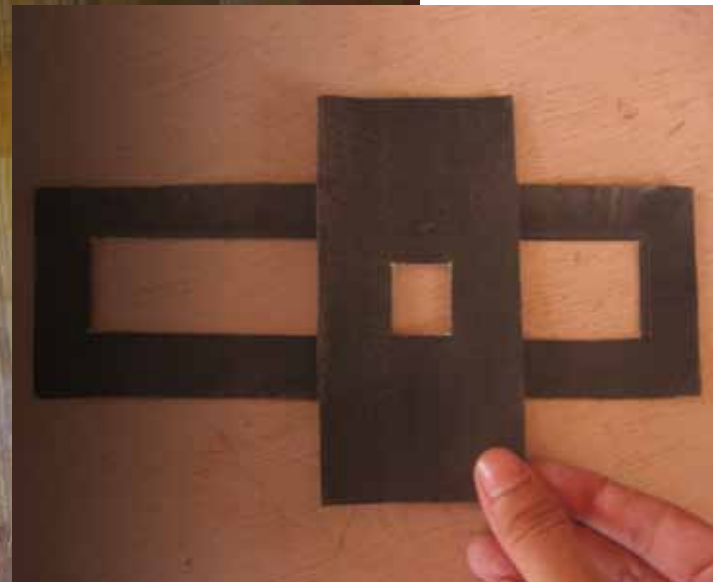
The Colour Blanket

Due to our limited time at Kala Raksha our project brief suggested that we create samples that could be taken forward by another design to create final products. Our samples were 2 colour blankets.

Ramjibhai and I selected colours based on the moodboard made by him. We arranged the colours in the warp and weft so as to depict sunset and the texture of water. (i.e. images from his mood board).

Since our colour blanket turned out to be a riot of colours. I made a small stencil which would help identify the colours and yarn combinations used in the warp and the weft. I also gave a written account of each yarn used in the warp and weft which could help the weavers in the future.

Since Kala Raksha prior to this sourced yardage from South India, this blanket would prove to be a guide for local weavers from whom Kala Raksha could source yardage from in the future, creating local employment opportunities.



The textures swatches could be used for stoles. By combining different colours of yarn in last 7 inches of the warp, we were able to create various combination of textures. Also by putting in tie dyed yarn in the warp and weft; we were also able to derive more textures.

There was a lot more scope for exploration. However, there was lack of commitment on the part of Ramjibhai due to a suddenly acquired acting role in a Bharatbala film on Swarnim Gujarat.



Textures for Stoles

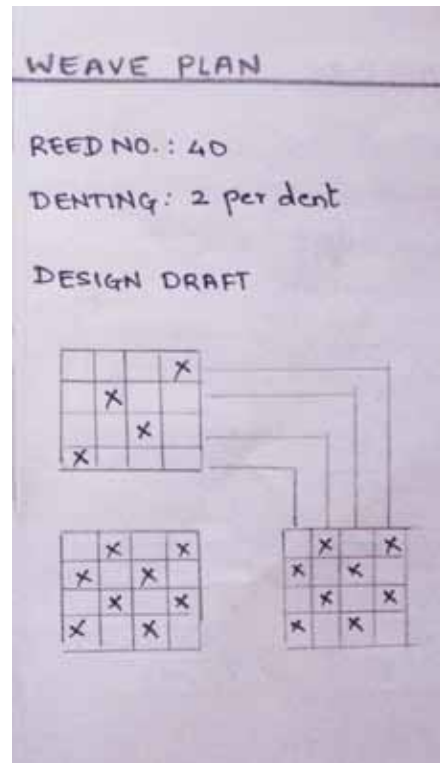
Shot Fabrics for Embroidery

From the colour blanket, the below swatches marked with a pin were taken forward into production for base fabric for embroidery.



Since Ramjibhai was busy shooting during the last lap of my project, I drew layouts that could be taken forward. I narrowed down on some of the combinations of weave that could be taken forward for embroidery. I then created layouts for stoles and suggested the possible embroidery that could go with these weaves. I also suggested placement of embroidery on these stoles.

Layouts for Stoles with Embroidery



Bhandini

Artisan: Khatri Abdulla Ealiyas

Abdullahai comes from the Khatri community of dyers who specialise in bhandini. Kutchi bandini is known for its small refined dots which the women folk of the community tie.

Initially, Abdullahhai found it difficult to draw and sketch. Also he would not find the time do the assignments we gave him at home. He had to work in an egg shop in Bhuj during the day which is his family's new business.

We found that he was slacking on his work and were in a fix as his sketches seemed to yield very poor designs. We then decided to do a colour workshop with him and cut out stencils of motifs.



As he began cutting out stencils of simple shapes and objects in nature. He began telling stories of these objects and describing them in a playful child like manner. We were very intrigued by these ideas and drew a parallel to the narrative appliqué that the women artisans of Kala Raksha create.

With these stencils his could draw easily. His designs turned out to be the best of the lot. Its suprising how initially we thought there was no hope or initiative from his side, but after some persuasion on our part and the support of his family; he shocked us all with his work on the day of the final presentation.

The stole on the previous page represents the fish jumping out of water, the dupatta on this page represent a stylised version of the half moon.

Prior to this project all his bhandini designs were drawn by a commissioned artist or karighar in Bhuj.





The motifs on this stole represent mountains or sand dunes. For this stole he decided to keep an element of a traditional motif at the border which can be seen in the picture at the bottom.

As the colours of bhandini are bright and vibrant and as the Khatriis no longer dye their fabric with natural dyes, chemical dyes (acid dyes) were the only solution.



This stole carries a motif of lightening. He explained how lightening strikes on a rainy day while cutting out this motif. He also explored with texture on this piece. He used a brush and sprayed different shades of dye on the fabric to give a rainy day effect.

His hard work got him orders for his stoles and dupattas to be sold at a designer store called Mélange in Mumbai. He also became a mentor for a men's class at the Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya. Currently he has been given an order by Kala Raksha to produce this version of a stole to compliment the Paabi bag which Kala Raksha is amous for.

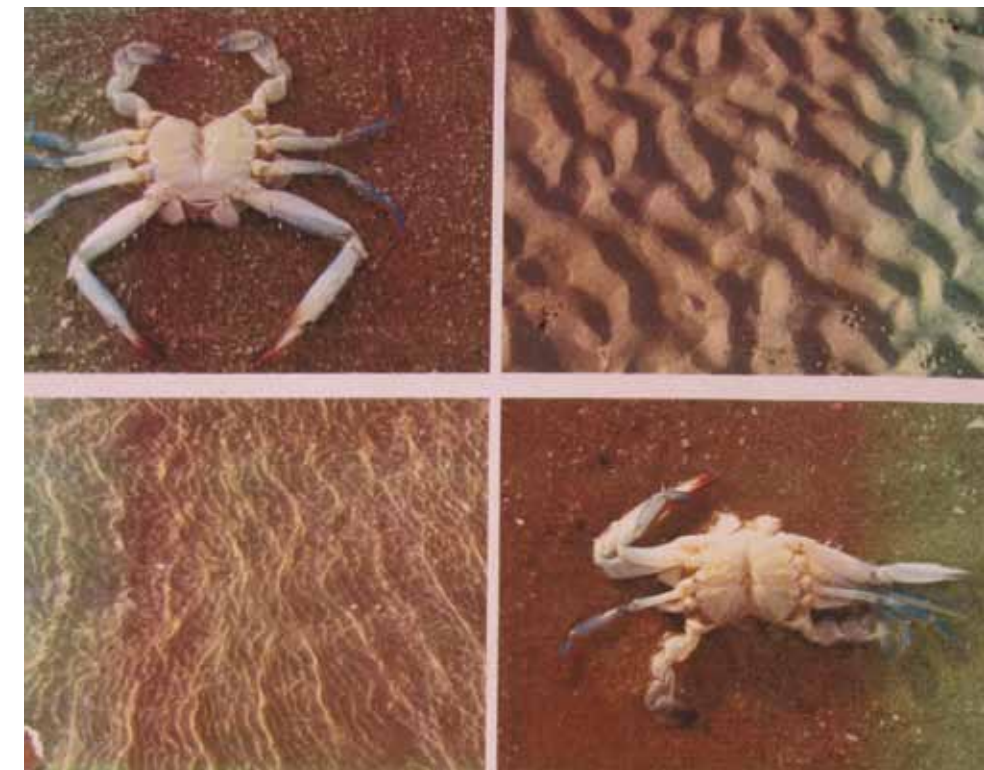
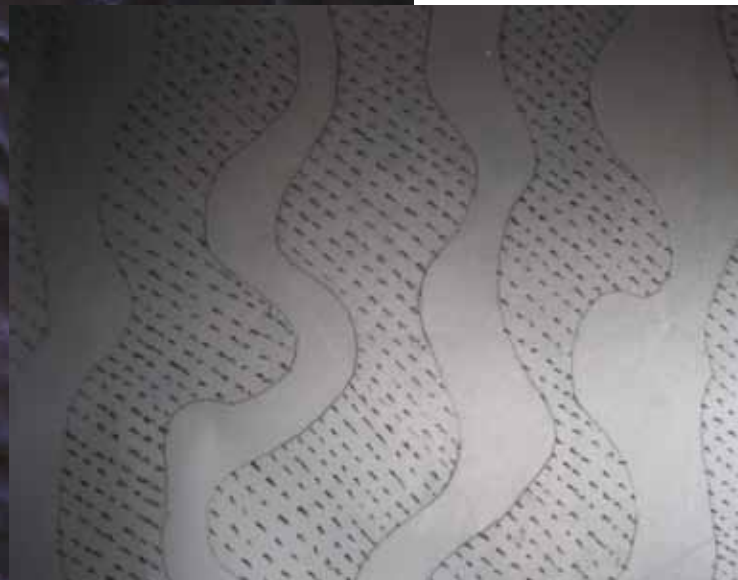




Artisan: Zuber A. Khatri

Zuberbhai also belongs to the Kathri community of dyers. Unlike Abdullabhai, he had a keen interest in drawing and was very forthcoming with his ideas. He did not require much persuasion and came up with his designs without much help from us.

This stole came as an inspiration from his previous mood board of textures in sand (below to the right) which he used for his final collection at the Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya.



Zuberbhai is fascinated by movement. Most of his designs has an element of movement to it. He also has a keen eye for patterns in nature. He did not require to be pushed much. He was very forthcoming with his ideas and sketches.

His sketches were the first to get approved even though he joined us a week later into the project.





Zuberbhai was also very self critical in his work. He would point out to us not only the attributes but also the flaws in his work. He had a good eye for design and composition.

He mentioned to us that earlier the Khatri's used kerosene while transferring the design from the gateway sheet onto the fabric. But now a days, they use Surf Excel as its cheaper!

He too got orders from the design store Mélange in Mumbai for these fabrics.



The block printing community comes from a village called Damadka on the outskirts of Bhuj. This community has now been split into two with a settlement of people having moved closer to the city of Bhuj to a place called Ajrakpur. (where we natural dyed our yarn)

Block printers in Kutch are famous for a particular type of block printed fabric called Ajrak. To make this fabric, there is 14 step procedure using natural dyes. Very few people still make original Ajrak.

For our project we worked with Mohmadbhai which Sunayana took forward to make samples of block print.

Block Print



Embroidery

Kala Raksha is famous for its exquisite embroidery. It was formed on the basis of an artisan initiative of women embroiderers in Kutch. The main embroidery styles that Kala Raksha works with is Soof and Kharek embroidery. This type of embroidery involves counting the warp thread while embroidering the fabric. The design primarily consists of triangular geometric patterns.

The below examples of embroidery are Paako, Soof and Rabari. The yardage which we were producing would be used as base fabric for such embroidery by the artisans.

Kala Raksha supports Artisan Design, by which the design are completely done by the artisans unlike other institutions which give out printed designs upon which the artisans stitches. Kala Raksha recognises the creative potential of an artisan which facilitates production of one of a kind master pieces as opposed to machine like replicas.



Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya was initiated to teach artisans how to improve their skill and make their products commercially viable. This school is open only to artisans and is the first ever design school for artisans in the world.

We were given the opportunity to be a part two of the final classes of the course. We attended the women's class on Marketing and Costing and the men's class on Concept Development. After a student graduates from Kala Raksha their work is exhibited at a fashion show or Mela held at the Vidhyalaya.

Unfortunately, over the past few years two factories have come up on either sides of the Vidhyalaya which pose a threat to its existence.

Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya



Craft Exhibition

The Craft Mela was held in Kutch by Kala Raksha and the Kutch Museum during our stay. We assisted the Kala Raksha team with setting up of some of the display at the exhibition.

Kala Raksha products are put on display as well as those of its graduates. Artisans showed off their skills through craft demonstrations while Kutchi music played in the background.



Bibliography

Web sites

www.kala-raksha.org

www.kala-raksha-museum.org

