

BLOCKPRINTED FABRICS OF GUJARAT FOR EXPORT TO SIAM: AN ENCOUNTER WITH MR. MANEKLAL T. GAJJAR

MICHÈLE ARCHAMBAULT

GENEVA

In Pethapur, not far from Ganthinagar, the new capital city of Gujarat, lives one of the national treasures of India, Mr. Maneklal Gajjar, who keeps up the great tradition of his ancestors, making wood blocks for printing cloth.

His father, Mr. Trikamlal Gajjar, at the turn of the century was making the blocks for the "saudagiri fabrics" which were produced in Gujarat for export to Siam. "Saudagiri" (from the Persian *saudā*, "goods for sale"), which means "trade," was used as a general term for these blocks as well as for the printed fabrics and the designs especially created for the Siam market in the 19th century. The trade between Gujarat and Siam flourished for about one hundred years and ended around 1940.

Gujarat had long been a major textile-producing region in India. It also dominated the Indian textile trade with South-east Asia, particularly from the 17th century, as fabrics from different parts of India were brought to Gujarat and then transhipped to the export market. During the Ayutthaya period in Siam, prints from India were already very popular and were called "*pha gujarat*."

When we met Mr. Maneklal in his house in May 1988, he showed us design sample catalogues dating from his grandfather's time and told us that the original patterns for the "saudagiri prints" were always created in Siam. Simple designs drawn in black outline on beige paper were sent by the Malabari trading company in Bangkok to three trading companies, Maskati, Vasi and Baghwall, based in Surat (the important port in South Gujarat which had been recorded by many early European writers for its central role in the Indian textile trade, and which gave its name — "*pha surat*" — to the Indian printed fabrics of the Rattanakosin period in Siam). The textiles were so popular at the turn of the century that they were known by the names of the companies — "*pha Maskati*, Vasi" etc.

These trading companies would send the original Siamese sample designs to the block makers in Pethapur. The block makers would slightly modify the patterns by adding or

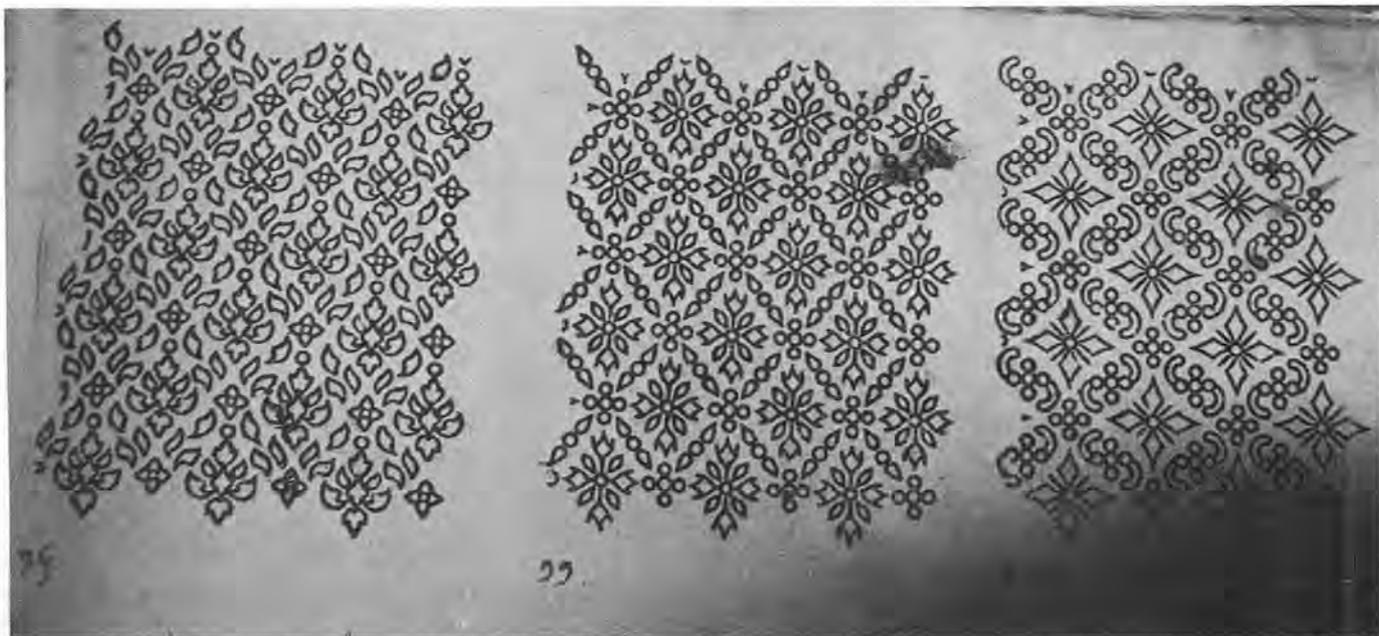
removing some decorative lines in order to balance the overall pattern properly, but always respected the basic motifs (Color plate, p. 40). The innovations of the block makers were then sent back by the Indian trading companies to Siam for approval. Once the designs were approved by their Siamese counterparts, the Surat-based trading companies sent messengers to the block makers, who could start carving the blocks.

According to Mr. Maneklal, his father's designs were highly appreciated and big orders were made for "saudagiri fabrics."

The blocks were made, as they still are today, of teakwood coming from South Gujarat. The process of making the blocks was a long and difficult one. The teakwood had to be cut according to the design, either 5x5 or 6x6 inches and 3 inches high. The first step is preparing the surface, the procedure for which Mr. Maneklal showed us: he rubs the surface of the wooden piece using a file and then a smooth stone, sand and water. The second step is the chalk process: he pours water and rubs chalk on the surface of the piece using his index and third finger (Color plate, p. 40). Then the wooden piece is allowed to dry in the sun. The chalk is made, as it was in the past, by a nomadic tribe, the Vanjaras. They use block lome that they bury underground for over six months. They then take it out, put it into a piece of cloth, and mix it with gum arabic (from the acacia tree) and make balls which are dried in the sun.

When the wooden block is completely dried, it is ready to be carved. Mr. Maneklal starts drawing geometrical lines on the surface of the block using different compasses. With iron punches he hammers down the desired motif—flower, star, sun—producing the pattern in deep relief on the block. Each iron punch has a small embossed design at both ends; they are known as leaf, sun, moon, three-petal flower punches, etc. The fine outline of the pattern is chiselled with one among the thousands of chisels used by Mr. Maneklal according to the fineness of the motif. Then Mr. Maneklal makes fine holes with a drill along the outline (Color plate, p. 40).

The "saudagiri blocks" were carved with "butti"—flowers or sprigs—and geometric patterns. The flowers were com-



III. No. 1. A block with a design for the center field of the fabric.

posed of points or dots and would appear as flowers of three, five or seven petals, and could also be found enclosed in a network of geometrical patterns. Jasmine (*Chameli*), champa (*Michelia champaca*), tisi (*linum*, the linseed oil plant), and tuberose were suitably stylised according to the nature of the fabric, technique of production, and the number of colours to be used.

Different blocks were made for the center field of the fabric (III. No. 1) and for the border. The borders (*butto*) were made of five different parts with a separate small border (*tui*) dividing the five parts. Geometrical lines alternating with floral festoons gave a rhythmic elegance to the borders. Mr. Maneklal showed us old blocks and catalogues dating from his father's time with designs of borders always ending with "*tumpal*" (an elongated triangular form used in a row; III. No. 2). The blocks were always carved for an eight-colour pattern, but "saudagiri fabrics" were usually printed in three or four colours. Chemical dyes which were introduced to India in the early 19th century were always used for the "saudagiri fabrics." The piece of cloth was first dyed with one colour and then blockprinted with three different colours, one block for each colour. Mr. Maneklal showed us an original "saudagiri block" with spaces between the carved lines stuffed with wool, and explained that this block, which absorbed more dye, was usually used for filling spaces between fine outlines and consequently would imprint better on the cloth (III. No. 3). Another original "outlining block" had holes on each side so the air could

go through and thus the lines of the pattern would appear perfectly stamped on fabric (III. No. 4).

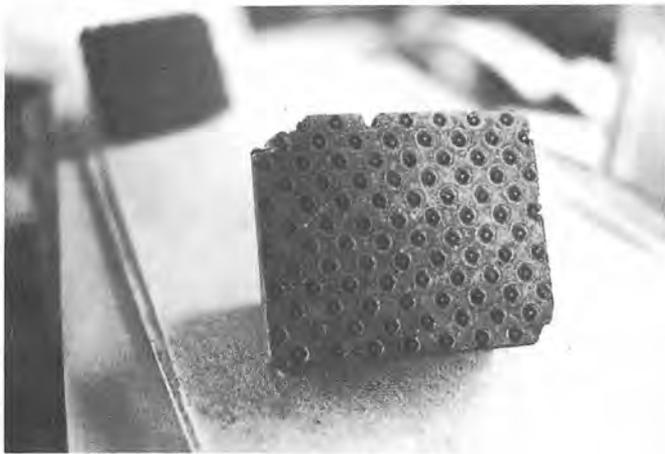
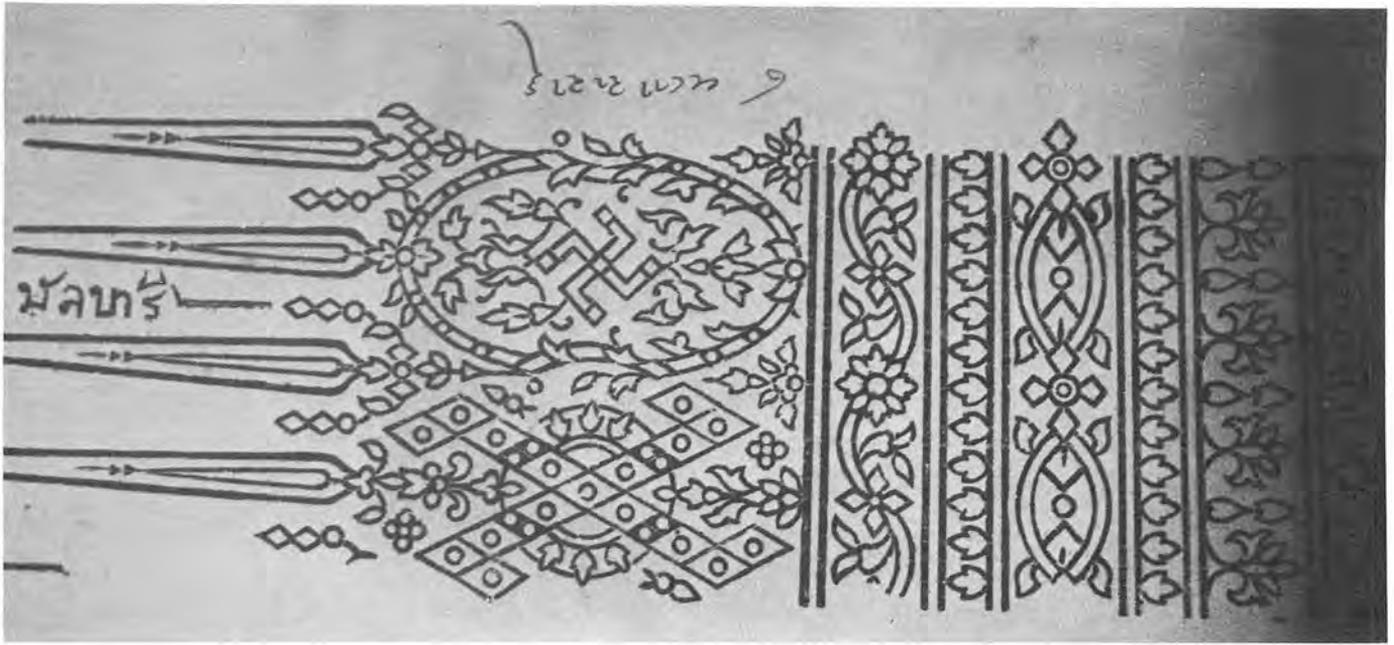
Blocks were used by the printers mostly on cotton fabric which was imported from Great Britain. The printing was done in Pethapur itself by thirty families, and also in Ahmedabad. Mud resist dyeing technique was used by the printers. Parts of the fabric were coated with mud which became hard when drying. This mud paste served as a reserve which could be removed after dyeing by immersing it in hot water and by washing.

Each printer would print a particular design as shown in the original sample catalogues. Each printer wrote his name under a particular design he specialised in (III. No. 2); the printer's name under the border is "Pasasarai".

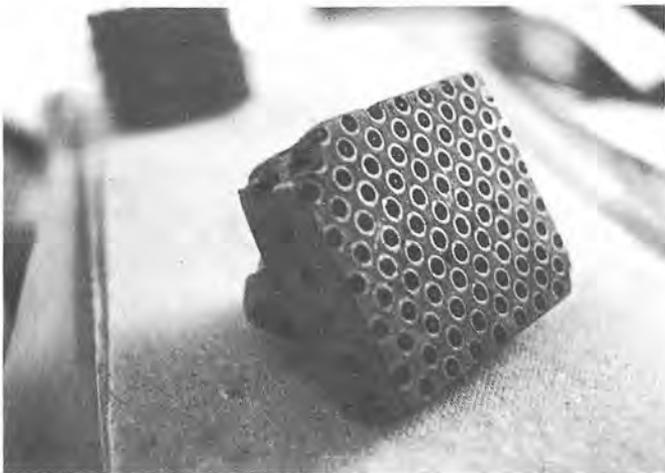
According to Mr. Maneklal, production of the "saudagiri fabrics" would stop for four months every year during the rainy season as the prints could not take well due to the very damp weather. During that period the block makers would do some carpentry work in houses (windows, stairs etc.) and the printers would weave cloth.

The usual length of one piece of "saudagiri fabric" was five yards, as the fashion of the time in Siam for both men and women was to wear the "*pha nung*" as "*pha nung chong krabeng*" (the piece of cloth being wrapped around the lower body and pulled through the legs, like an Indian dhoti). The "*pha nung*" was worn by women in the "*pha nung nang*" style, but in that case the fabric was more precious. The remaining portion of the cloth would be used for women as a shawl ("*pha sabai*").

From catalogues and books depicting old textiles made in India for Siam it seems that these "saudagiri prints—*pha surat*" were made for local markets and worn by common people. In his book entitled *Le Royaume de Siam*, published in 1870, Amédé de Gréhan, consul of Siam in Paris, thus describes the



Ill. No. 3. The spaces between the fine lines are stuffed with wool.



Ill. No. 4. Air holes on the side of an "outlining block."

Ill. No. 2. A "tumpal" design for a border.

costume of the common people: "Leur costume est des plus primitifs. Il se compose pour les femmes comme pour les hommes d'une simple pièce d'étoffe d'Indienne teinte (*langoutis*) qu'ils attachent à la ceinture en ayant soin d'en relever les deux bouts." (*Langouti* comes from the Hindi *Lagoti*: a piece of cloth hanging in front from a waistband). ("Their costume is extremely simple. For women and men as well, it is made of a simple piece of dyed Indian cloth (*langooty*) that they tie around the waist, being careful to pull up the two ends.")

Obviously Indian prints were copied in Siam itself and the result was what is known today as "*pha phim*," another example reminding us that traditional fabrics have always provided considerable inspiration to the producers and designers of the emerging generations. In her book entitled *Made in Thailand*, published in 1964, Margaret Ayer wrote about the production of "*pha phim*:" "Patterns were carved on hardwood boards and different dyes were applied to the various parts of the design. The board was the size of the piece of material and they did the whole job at one printing."

Mr. Meklal pointed out the very interesting fact that many "saudagiri patterns" are still used today to carve blocks and print fabrics for local markets. The "saudagiri fabrics" which were so fashionable in Siam for almost a century still appeal to the taste of local customers in Gujarat. Following the path of tradition it is not surprising to see surviving forms of "saudagiri patterns" today in Thailand.

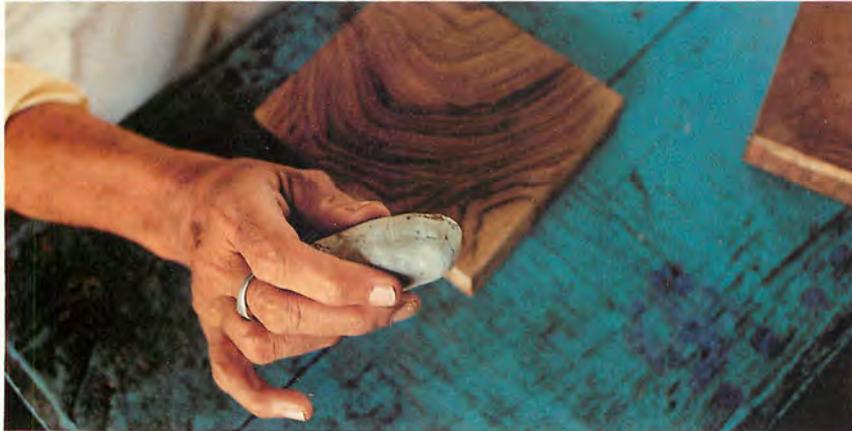
COLOR PLATES FOR "TAK GREEN AND WHITE WARES," p. 43.
AND "BLOCKPRINTED FABRICS OF GUJARAT," p. 71.



A fragment of a white-glazed bowl collected at a digging site in Tak by the research group of Chiang Mai University and tested for the report on white-glazed wares with green patterns (p. 44).



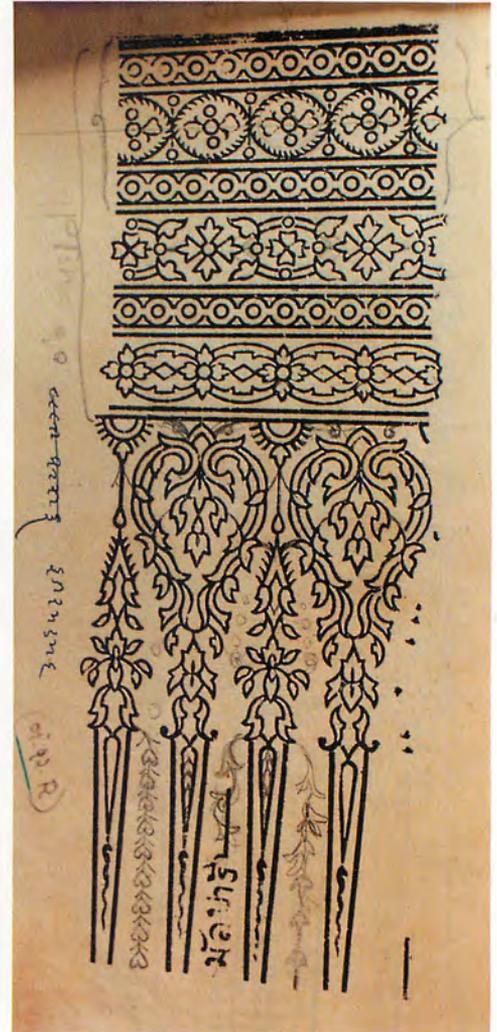
An example of the white-glazed wares with green patterns excavated in the Tak area in the mountains along the Thai-Burmese border (p. 43).



Smoothing the block with chalk to print saudagiri fabrics (p. 71).



Drilling holes to outline the design for saudagiri fabrics (p. 71).



Sample design for saudagiri wood blocks. Note the word "Malabari" in vertical Thai letters at the bottom (p. 71).