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INTRODUCTION

At the start of the seventeenth century, a nobleman in India hung a monumental textile measuring nine feet tall by twenty-four feet wide around the perimeter of a courtyard or high-ceilinged hall. The textile, now held in the Brooklyn Museum and divided into seven hangings, depicts a chattering world framed by waving palm trees and topped by pointed domes (fig. I.1a).¹ It is a world populated by women in saris and men in open-necked shirts, by hunters in leaf skirts, by attentive dignitaries with fin-shaped head ties, by African musicians in feathered hats, by European traders in ballooning breeches, and by Persianate or Central Asian noblemen in robes that cross at the chest (fig. I.1b).

By one interpretation, the hangings are windows onto a world clad in Indian cloth, for in their geographic diversity, the hangings uncannily represent the distant reaches to which South Asian fabrics traveled in the early modern period. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Indian textiles flourished as a bartering currency at Southeast Asian spice markets and were deposited in dowries and preserved as precious heirlooms in Indonesian, Malaysian, and Thai collections (fig. I.2).² Merchants carried cloths from Gujarat to consumers along the Arabian Peninsula and the Swahili Coast, where they were used as hangings, for sashes, as robes, and as turbans.³ Starting in the seventeenth century, consumers in Japan tucked South Asian cotton cloth, called *sarasa*, into linings for robes and belts and used it to wrap precious objects such as scroll boxes and tea bowls (fig. I.3).⁴ In Batavia, now Jakarta, the wives of Dutch traders, who called cotton cloth *sits*, sewed Indian cotton into shirts, gowns, and children's jackets (fig. I.4).⁵ In the latter half of the seventeenth century, English merchants began trading in this painted cotton fabric, which they called "chintz."⁶ The cotton was cool on the skin, it was easier to wash than silk, and the dyes were color-fast. The traded textiles folded into and reshaped the sensory and visual culture around them. Carried by sea and on long-standing overland trade routes, these textiles created a wide network tied together by a desire for cotton cloth.⁷

Yet for early seventeenth-century visitors to the nobleman's hall, the hangings may have also represented the inward pull of South Asian fabric. The textiles depict the faces of foreigners who came to coastal southeastern India through the maritime trade in things like nutmeg, elephant tusks, rubies, saltpeter, and stallions (see fig. I.1b). The figures on the cloth could therefore be seen as a compendium of local inhabitants and recurrent visitors, as well as a document of the diversity of people drawn to India's maritime entrepôts in the early modern period.

This monumental textile reminds us that the demand for South Asian fabric brought change and movement across different scales.⁸ On the small scale within artisan communities, the drive to produce textiles created disruptions and opportunities in cloth-makers' lives as artisans migrated locally between their villages and sites of patronage closer to the coast. At the regional level, textiles carried the ecological peculiarities and floral rarities of South Asia's diverse geography between princely courts and the Mughal imperial center. On the largest scale, textiles drew ships thousands of miles



FIG. L.1A Hanging, 7 pieces. Coastal southeastern India. Cotton, plain weave, hand painted, mordant and resist dyed, 1610–40. 108¼–109¼ in. (275–277.5 cm) × 37¾–40 in. (95.9–101.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Museum Expedition 1913–1914, Museum Collection Fund, 14.719.1 to 14.719.7.



to India's shores. The historical frame of reference must be flexible enough to address networks of varying scales and to find agency in small and large events, in artisan practices and long-distance trade, in minor fluctuations and broad trends.

The Art of Cloth in Mughal India focuses on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century overland circulation of textiles within South Asia before moving outward to consider global trade. Using diverse source materials—small-scale Mughal paintings, courtly and popular poetry, Gujarati stock-lists of descriptions, Persian travel narratives, and royal inventory records—this book crafts a new account of cloth as it moved among the Mughal imperial courts, to the kingdoms of Rajasthan, to the Deccan sultanates, and, far beyond, to the British Isles. The cultures of textile making and textile collecting at these sites were sophisticated in taste and cosmopolitan in orientation. Yet in each setting, local figures developed unique frameworks for understanding textiles based on the cloth's texture, the exoticism of its origins, and the intimacy of its use.

The book encompasses the geographic territory that roughly corresponds to the regions conquered or at least held in fractious submission by the Mughal Empire by around 1700. Objects such as the Brooklyn Museum textile that were likely made in regions further south are also included in this study because the craftsmanship that they represented drew patronage from the Mughal imperial family and other princely courts to the north. If we are to describe this geographic region how it was understood by many of its inhabitants and its rulers in the seventeenth century, we should properly call it not "India" but "Hindustan." Although as Manan Ahmed Asif has shown, the term and idea of Hindustan had largely been lost by the twentieth century, the Muslim rulers of the

FIG. 1.1B Details.

FIG. 1.2 Canopy or ceremonial hanging with patchwork design. Coastal southeastern India, made for the Indonesian market (Java). Cotton, plain weave, hand painted, mordant and resist dyed, seventeenth century. 148 in. (376 cm) × 84½ in. (214 cm). Banoo and Jeevak Parpia Collection, Ithaca, New York.







FIG. 1.3 *Sarasa* bag for hanging scroll box. Cloth: coastal southeastern India. Cotton, plain weave, hand painted, mordant and resist dyed, seventeenth or eighteenth century. Bag: Japan, Edo period. $3\frac{1}{2}$ in. (8.7 cm) \times $6\frac{5}{16}$ in. (16.0 cm). *Edo Kaleidoscope*, Miho Museum, 2014, cat. no. 112, p. 120. Private collection, Japan.



FIG. 1.4 Two baby jackets. Cloth: coastal southeastern India. Cotton, plain weave, hand painted, mordant and resist dyed. Jackets: the Netherlands, embroidery with metal threads, 1750–1800. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, BK-KOG-54 and 55, on loan from the Koninklijk Oudheidkundig Genootschap.

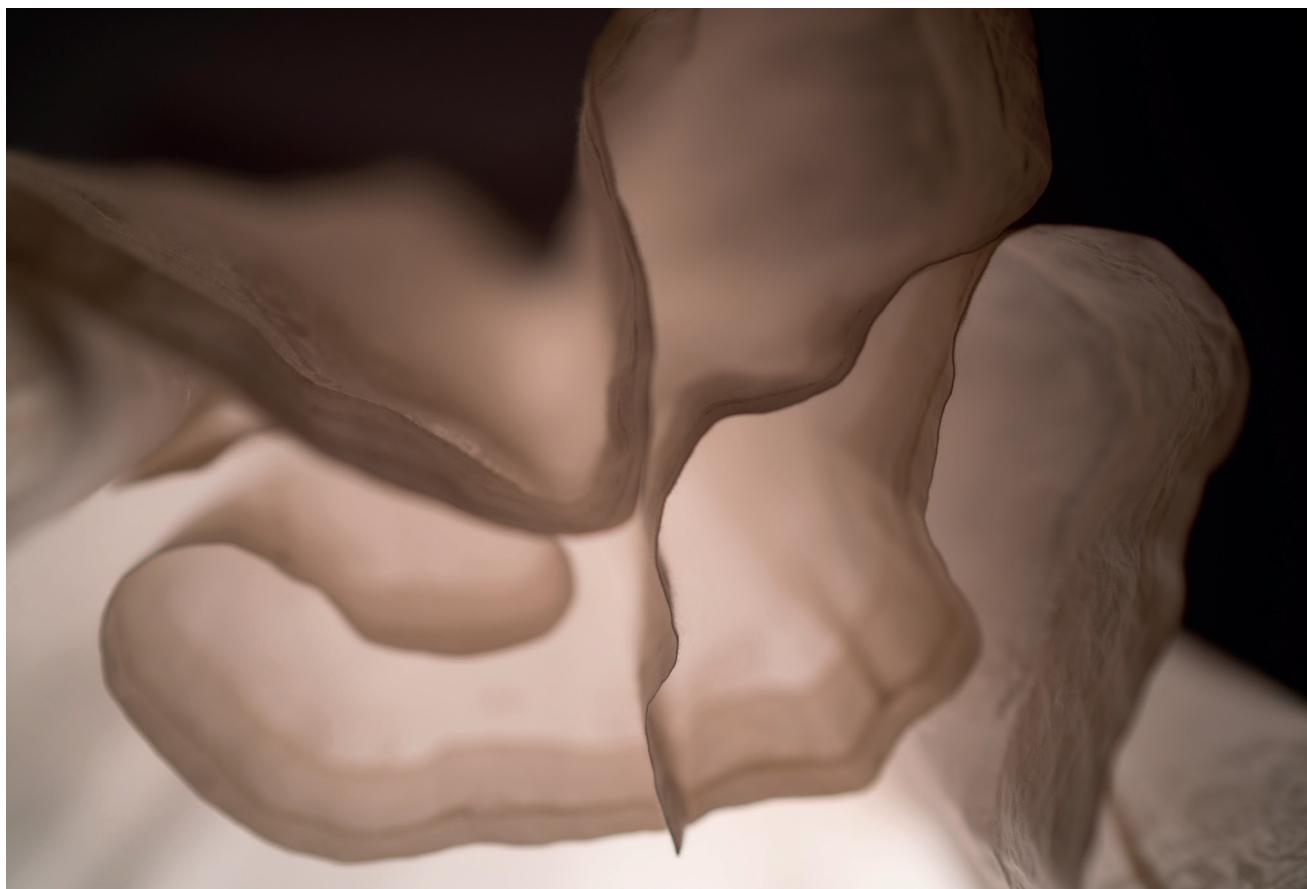


FIG. 1.5 Muslin cloth.
Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2015.
Drik Picture Gallery and
the Bengal Muslin Project.

Mughal Empire understood themselves as the Shahanshah-i Hindustan, the kings of kings of Hindustan.⁹ While I have deployed contemporary terms, such as “India” and “South Asia,” to refer to this geographic region, the breadth of “Hindustan” better encompasses the lands where textiles were made and circulated, including present-day Lahore, Pakistan, where monumental carpets were woven, and Dhaka, Bangladesh, the source of the very finest cotton cloth.

During this sixteenth- to eighteenth-century period there existed in Hindustan an “art of cloth” that is distinctive from theories of fashion or a linear history of textiles and dress. In this moment, encounters with textiles exceeded routine, utilitarian, or even status-related questions of display that are the primary uses to which we think of cloth as being directed. The phrase “the art of cloth” can mean many things. It refers to the making of textiles: the arts of dyeing, weaving, and embellishing cloth with prints and embroidery; and also the ways that cloth entered the allied arts of painting and poetry as washes of color, and as sources of puns and metaphors. The art of cloth encompasses the actions associated with using textiles: the arts of dressing and of fashioning the body; the arts of furnishing a space for a feast. Finally, this study takes the textile as an active subject and asks what cloth itself does: what it makes its wearer feel, how it occupies space, which images and memories it conjures in the mind. For these reasons, *The Art of Cloth in Mughal India* is not only about the aesthetics and techniques of cloth and cloth-making but also about the artful ways that textiles shaped the social, political, economic, religious, and aesthetic life of early modern Hindustan.

This book considers two types of textiles: garments that are worn and furnishings that are suspended from the walls or spread on the floor. The primary purposes of garments and furnishings seem obvious: clothing covers and adorns the body, and, on a social level, it communicates identity, affiliation, or rank. Textile hangings and carpets are both decorative and utilitarian—they enliven blank walls and floors but also provide shelter from rain and the sun or warmth and insulation for interior spaces. However, in the chapters that follow, we find textiles operating beyond these conventional roles. Clothing began to evoke the natural world, express political and personal feeling, and span the distance between diverse peoples and places. Textiles simulated forms of sensory experience, ranging from the feeling of humid weather to intimate, personal touch. Gossamer shawls and floral carpets conjured the climatic conditions of remote parts of the empire (fig. 1.5). Garments participated as actors in Mughal political life, building upon their traditional role as robes of honor as they became vehicles to express personal sentiment or political mistrust. Monumental hangings with imagery of built structures and figural scenes temporarily masked local architecture to create novel social spaces.

In the poetic imagination of the period, for example, a cotton cloth from Bengal was analogous to the fine dew of early evening, while a lustrous silk replaced the smooth skin of a lover’s body. When a rich man enjoyed a peaceful night’s sleep, he imagined it as a “velvet sleep,” dense and soft in texture like the cloth.¹⁰ The Mughal emperors sent shawls of downy pashmina to their trusted noblemen to approximate the hand of the ruler on the vassal’s shoulder. Textiles covered over dry, desert forts, spreading verdant carpets of silk and wool flowers in gardens that saw few blooms.

This account includes textiles that were primarily valued for their materiality—for the soft feeling of their textures and the warmth of their pile—but also fabrics with large-scale figural imagery, like the hangings that opened this introduction, whose visual interest draws them closer to paintings. On the one hand, textiles with or without figural content share physical properties: their drape, their supple texture, and their mobility as items that can, for the most part, be folded, rolled, and carried. Yet figural textiles offer more immediate possibilities for interpretation, and they were abundant in the seventeenth century. In this study, I argue for the importance of bringing together material, visual, and cultural analysis in approaching textiles of the past. To fully grasp the workings of an art of cloth, we should attend to the materiality of painted figural textiles and recognize the visual importance and potential for meaning in what might otherwise seem to be lush but solely ornamental textile surfaces.

Past Histories of Cloth The past decades have seen increasing scholarship on textiles, much of which has focused on globalization and the role of Indian textiles in expanding and connecting distant economies.¹¹ Recent museum exhibitions have taken the global model as their starting point to explore the impressive mobility of objects ranging from ceramics and lacquerware to tea and textiles in the early modern period.¹² Indian cotton textiles are celebrated as the inspiration for a wide range of designs and innovations. Global art histories by their nature trace the story of the long-distance trade and recover the faraway consumer's perspective (often European) on what constituted "exotic" objects in this period of increased travel and exchange.¹³

The export trade in Indian cloth, while vast and lucrative, constituted a relatively small part of the domestic economy; even in the period of high trade in the eighteenth century, the circulation of cloth within Hindustan far exceeded that which traveled abroad.¹⁴ In the field of South Asian textile history, scholars have studied the cloth trade in its regional, Indian Ocean context and have reasserted the importance of researching the diversity of Hindustan's very specific, local textile traditions.¹⁵ Beginning in the 1950s, John Irwin began to analyze the South Asian textile trade on a more granular level, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad became important centers of scholarship.¹⁶ In subsequent years, the publications of Steven Cohen, Rosemary Crill, Jasleen Dhamija, and Rahul Jain, along with the work of many other historians, conservators, and museum curators, have opened up new understandings of the iconography and aesthetics of cloth, as well as the histories of dye materials, weaving techniques, and methods of loom construction.¹⁷ The research of Moti Chandra and Chandramani Singh recovered vital literary and archival materials.¹⁸ Together, this scholarship integrates technical analysis with visual interpretation and contextualizes cloth objects in South Asian art and history.

This study carries forward the focus on local production, not only for reasons of historical precision but also because seventeenth-century textile makers and consumers knew that the local ecology, including water composition, air humidity, and soil minerals, determined the color, fineness, and texture of a locality's cloth. However, at the same

time, this study takes from the global model the importance of mobility. Knowing the richness of regional specialties in textiles, consumers sought out fabrics from across the Mughal Empire. Cloth crisscrossed these spaces, carried in chests, bales, and reed tubes by bullock and riverboats from Assam to Machilipatnam. I combine in this study a sensitivity for the resolutely local practices of textile production with insights derived from cloth's mobility, for it is only at the bounded and yet still fluid range of what could be transported across Mughal realms that we can come close to holding in our minds these two vital traits of textiles at once.

Textiles and Politics in Mughal India The seventeenth century in South Asia marked a fertile time for the economic and artistic development of textiles. The years from approximately 1550 to 1700 saw vast urban expansion, increased trade, and relative social and political stability. In 1526, the historic capital of Delhi and much of North India were conquered by Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty, a lineage of Sunni Muslim rulers descended from the Central Asian emperor Timur and from Genghis Khan. Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) and his successors, Emperors Jahangir (r. 1605–27), Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58), and 'Alamgir (also known as Aurangzeb, r. 1658–1707), expanded the Mughal Empire throughout the seventeenth century. In the early modern period, the Mughal Empire competed with its rivals, the Ottoman Empire, the Uzbek khanates, and particularly the Safavid Empire in present-day Iran, for dominance over territory and trade in West and Central Asia.¹⁹ The end of the seventeenth century brought considerable turmoil and change after prolonged wars in the Deccan, incursions by Maratha forces, and the proclamation of independent regimes by members of the Mughal nobility.²⁰

With the support of the Mughal imperial court and regional elites, the textile industry expanded in the seventeenth century, constituting the second-largest sector of the domestic economy after agriculture.²¹ The adoption of new weaving technologies and the growth of silk production led to a leap in the sophistication and diversity of textile products.²² Increased imperial wealth from land revenues, an escalation in the export trade, and the patronage of urban and rural consumers stimulated the production of high-quality luxury textiles.²³ The security of the Mughal Empire allowed overland trade to flourish, and the increase in maritime commerce with Southeast Asia, West Asia, the Middle East, eastern Africa, and Europe expanded markets for Indian goods.²⁴ From the sixteenth to eighteenth century, Hindustan was responsible for more than one-quarter of total manufacturing throughout the world.²⁵

Moreover, by the end of Emperor Akbar's reign in 1605, the Mughal Empire ruled over a population of close to 110 million out of a total of approximately 145–150 million people on the subcontinent.²⁶ To put this figure in context, the population of the whole of Europe in 1600 was close to 78 million, a little over half the size of the total population of South Asia.²⁷ The French population, the largest in Europe, numbered 20 million people. Scholars would regard a study of "European textiles" in the seventeenth century as a capacious topic, full of cultural, religious, and aesthetic variation. The size of the

subcontinent's total population, almost twice that of Europe, reaffirms the significance of studying the movement of textiles throughout South Asia's diverse communities.

The Mughal domain stretched from the edge of Central Asia to eastern Assam and, by the end of the seventeenth century, to the southern region of the Deccan, an east-to-west distance nearly as great as the span between London and Moscow (fig. I.6).²⁸ Noblemen and imperial officers were expected to serve long tours of duty in the military and as governors in provincial territories, far from their families and hereditary kingdoms. Merchants, artisans, and laborers became more mobile as the relocation of the court and constant military campaigning brought opportunities and disruptive warfare to regions throughout South Asia. Estrangement from home, and from the imperial courts in Delhi, Lahore, and Agra, became a central theme.²⁹ With the vastness of the Mughal Empire's geography, textiles began taking on new meaning within political and social life. As courtly chronicles and popular poetry attest, textiles became signs of conquered territories and a means by which the feel of the faraway lover, the climate of a homeland, or the demands of the emperor were carried to remote parts of the empire, to regional allies and foes.

In early modern Central and South Asia, textiles were also an indicator of healthy governance, reinforcing the importance of cloth at the nexus of art and politics. The Mughals, descended from the Timurid dynasty, modeled much of their self-representation on the example of the great Central Asian emperor Timur. Crucial to the performance of Timurid identity was the continuation of nomadic practices, such as living in tents, despite having built permanent stone and brick palaces.³⁰ As the Timurid painting in figure I.7 shows, tent constructions were elaborate and multilayered, combining utilitarian structures with decorative figural textiles. Timurid legend had it that settling down in Hind, as they called it, would lead to an emperor's downfall.³¹ The Mughal emperors continued to be mobile rulers, a practice made possible by a monumental apparatus of tents, carpets, and wall hangings—essentially a textile architecture.³² While the tent had dynastic symbolism, it was also a matter of political expediency for the emperor to move throughout the empire. Carla Sinopoli writes that “the shifting capital may be seen as a mechanism for dealing with the fluidity and near-constant conflicts that characterize many imperial societies, as well as the logistical difficulties inherent in ruling over very large and diverse

FIG. I.6 The Mughal Empire.

FIG. I.7 Timur holds audience in Balkh on the occasion of his accession on 12 Ramadan 771/April 9, 1370. Likely Herat. From the *Zafarnāma* of Sultan Husayn Mirza, 82 v. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, ca. 1467–68. Page: 9 $\frac{1}{16}$ in. (23 cm) \times 6 in. (15.2 cm). Painting: 7 in. (17.9 cm) \times 4 $\frac{5}{16}$ in. (10.9 cm). The John Work Garrett Library, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Gar. 3 c. 1.





polities.”³³ The mobility of the imperial camp provided a link to Timurid ancestors and a means of governing a vast, heterogeneous realm.

The lands known as Hindustan welcomed an influx of people from Iran, Central Asia, and East Africa during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, some of whom were brought by force and others who were drawn to the wealth and economic opportunity of the Mughal and Deccani courts and to the mercantile vivacity and relative religious tolerance of the empire.³⁴ As the rulers of Safavid Iran tightened their political control, and multiple wars with the Ottoman Empire threatened the economy, travelers arrived from Persian-speaking lands, including poets, painters, and carpet weavers, along with horse traders, Sufi devotees, and learned administrators.³⁵ These immigrant communities brought expertise but also clothing styles that permeated the Mughal court. In a manner that parallels what Mana Kia has described as the cultural continuities across the broader Persianate, or Persian-speaking, realms, inhabitants from early modern Iran, Central Asia, East Africa, and Hindustan consumed textiles in ways that defied geographic boundaries or their territorial origins.³⁶ A cosmopolitan courtier could display the correct manners (*adab*) or move between languages when traveling; so too could elements of courtly dress be altered or replaced, particularly because prevailing styles of untailored shawls and multiple waist-ties afforded many opportunities for literal layering. As Finbarr Barry Flood’s work on medieval South Asia demonstrates, the use of textiles and garments often confounded present-day distinctions based in religious identity, social status, and the meaning of courtly display.³⁷ Moreover, unlike their Ottoman contemporaries, the Mughal rulers did not establish sumptuary laws or impose regulations on non-Muslim dress.³⁸ In a period of pluralism, when place, affiliation, and identity generated overlapping affiliations, Mughal clothing styles allowed for the simultaneous expression of many homelands.

Textile History in the Shadow of a Commodity That such a light material as cloth could occupy such a weighty role in the early modern world seemed paradoxical even in the seventeenth century. In 1696, an English merchant wrote of India’s gauzy, yet expensive, muslin textiles: “Fashion is truly termed a witch—the dearer and scarcer the commodity, the more the mode. Thirty shillings a yard for muslins, and only the shadow of a commodity procured.”³⁹ The merchant’s lament deserves consideration. That the insubstantial cotton cloth could cost thirty shillings was an outrage to the merchant when what was obtained was not a thick piece of wool but only a “shadow of a commodity.” Of course, it was precisely because Indian muslin had the weightlessness of a shadow that it was so costly. It was not the muslin’s material heft but its diaphanous texture, spun by the finest spinners, that earned its prestige.

The tension that the merchant identified between the economic value and the material qualities of cloth also has relevance for writing the history of textiles. Finely made fabrics were certainly commodities traded on the open market. Unlike raw materials, however, their value was not determined solely by their volume but by complex assessments of aesthetics, rarity, and fashion, as well as their often costly materials. As Giorgio Riello has noted, part of cotton’s success in Europe was that it could be at once a luxury

and a commodity, at once aspirational and utilitarian.⁴⁰ Writing an art history of textiles does not require a denial of the economics of cloth but an effort to contextualize all of the other means, besides market price, by which textiles gained worth in early modern society.

Textiles also run through the many different approaches to interpreting Mughal history and culture. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the study of the Mughal Empire was led by a group of historians, political theorists, and economists centered around Aligarh Muslim University.⁴¹ The “Aligarh School” approach, based in Marxist theory, emphasized the bureaucratic and economic organization of the empire, focusing on price indexes, taxation rates, agricultural yields, and population growth to argue primarily for the extractive nature of the Mughal state.⁴² Yet Irfan Habib, a prominent Aligarh historian, has written rich and nuanced accounts of the history of the Indian textile trade and its technology.⁴³ He also incorporates poetry into his histories of technological advances. Habib notes that in one poetic couplet, a piece of wood was said to be dead until it was brought to life by becoming the stamp of a textile block-printer.⁴⁴

Tracing the periodic confluence and conflicts between the economic and aesthetic value in textiles can be one of the most productive ways to access the art of cloth in the early modern era. Aligarh historian Shireen Moosvi’s magisterial *Economy of the Mughal Empire c. 1595* calculated that the price of cotton cloth relative to wheat declined between 1595–96 and 1858–67.⁴⁵ The calculations that support this finding are outside the scope of this study; the significance of it lies well within. That the exchange value of cotton decreased between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries parallels the ways that the artistic and poetic meanings of cotton textiles diminished relative to other forms of art in the same period. Finding meaning in this economic narrative is part of the challenge of writing histories of objects that are a “shadow of a commodity.” How can art history hold weight alongside the industrial history of textiles, whereby cheap, machine-made cotton cloth from Britain replaced homespun South Asian goods? How can cultural significance stand beside real changes in a weaver’s ability to buy bread?

Cultural codes of dress, gifting, and patronage obligations have always coexisted with the commodity histories of textiles in South Asia. C. A. Bayly argued, for instance, that the political responsibility of the emperor to patronize textiles persisted outside of the market-based economy for cloth. He wrote, “The use of cloth as a medium for integrating the kingdom might precede, supplement, or even outlast the operation of tributary flows of money, and at no point did cloth become ‘merely’ a commodity, whose production and distribution was solely determined by market forces.”⁴⁶ A cloth could be both a trade object and a politically expedient device. The cultural and political value of a textile could “precede, supplement, or even outlast” the monetary significance of a textile object.

Accounts of seventeenth-century South Asian history are not exclusively hard or soft, economic, political, or cultural. In addition to securing the foundation of Hindustan’s economy, textiles operated in the aesthetic realm in a manner akin to architecture, painting, and literature, and as part of the wider cultural sphere. The Mughal emperors and their surrounding Rajput regional rulers used architecture as part of a nuanced

political language; their patronage of painting workshops expressed their governing acuity as well as their refined connoisseurship.⁴⁷ Related research on Mughal, Rajput, and Deccani support for courtly literature and music affirms the inseparability of cultural history from questions of politics and economics.⁴⁸ More recent art historical scholarship has uncovered new areas of creative production and has deepened historical understandings of kingship, alliances, courtly structures, and the negotiations of style that were necessary within a multifaith, multiethnic, and economically prosperous Hinduistan.⁴⁹ Though usually overlooked as supplementary or merely ornamental, the art of cloth was foundational to these forms of aesthetic enjoyment and courtly entertainment, and worked to link together distant geographic spaces and to secure or unsettle hierarchical arrangements.

A History of the Art of Cloth Understanding Mughal history through textiles also alters our approach to Mughal arts and guides us to rethink the relationship between the textile medium and the history of art more generally. This study positions textiles as distinctive from other objects usually classified as the “decorative arts”—such as ceramics, lacquerware, and metalwork—but the model for thinking about textiles as interactive belongings can also be extended to objects made of a range of materials.⁵⁰

Before the early modern period, South Asian art, religion, and philosophy had included an expansive role for textiles beyond the material or mundane. For instance, textiles inspired a group of medieval Indian realist philosophers to rearticulate their worldview. The existence of cloths dyed with many colors or woven with variegated threads posed for these philosophers what Phyllis Granoff calls “a challenge to any simple understanding of the world,” because in these cloths unity of structure could coexist with a multiplicity of colors.⁵¹ A twelfth-century manual on the practices of Hindu gift-giving suggests the importance of textiles in religious life, and in afterlives as well. The texture of an individual’s clothing was an indicator of past good deeds: it was said that “men who give clothes to impoverished yogis gain soft, fragrant, heavenly clothes and are wafted by winds that smell as sweet as nectar.”⁵²

Recent scholarship in the history of European art has articulated further functions of the textile medium within the larger fields of art and architectural history. On a three-dimensional level, textiles are able to temporarily reconfigure space. Tristan Weddigen argues that the “fundamental contribution of textiles to princely display in premodern times” was their “power of transforming the interior into the exterior, the private into the public, and vice versa.”⁵³ Elaborate garments also constituted a plastic art: garments in Renaissance Europe, Ulinka Rublack argues, were a form of “polychrome sculpting.”⁵⁴ In the field of painting, Paul Hills has suggested that cloth could “conduct or quicken the narrative” of a work of art, expanding the reach of textiles from the spatial into the temporal.⁵⁵ Similarly, in early modern South Asia, monumental carpets and tents transformed the sandstone and marble Mughal architecture in front of which they hung; in the tailoring of densely woven silk that had been imported from the Safavid Empire, we see artisans sculpting garments that would keep their shape when worn on the body. And

in the unfurling of smaller-scale textiles to signal formal transitions in the course of a day, cloth became a way of marking and moving time.

Textiles also served as a means of aesthetic communication between distant geographic sites and cross-pollination among varied artistic media in the long-distance pre-modern trade that traversed Asia, Africa, and Europe. Mobile and highly coveted silk fabrics and wool carpets transmitted geometric and floral patterns, inscriptional styles, and figural motifs that reshaped the visual appearance of metalwork, ceramics, and architectural ornament and inspired poetic verses and even mathematical calculations.⁵⁶ Scholars of Islamic art in particular have focused on the “intermedial” and “transmedial” transfers that occurred between textiles and other art and architectural forms as artists sought to replicate material qualities of textiles, such as their drape, their sheen, complex folds, and fluttering orientation on a wall, in paintings and architectural decorations.⁵⁷ The pervasiveness of a textile aesthetic was never exclusive to Islamic art, however, and wide variation existed among regional and local artistic forms, and in the relationship at various times between textiles and allied media.⁵⁸ I build my argument for the art of cloth from the specific conditions of the Mughal Empire and neighboring, closely linked sites in the Safavid Empire and show that textiles in early modern Hindustan existed within and between the fields of architecture, sculpture, and more ephemeral areas of art, such as garden design and performance.

The history of cloth used for garments in the Mughal Empire inevitably intersects with the fields of dress and fashion history, areas of scholarship that have sought in recent years to encompass cross-cultural and comparative studies.⁵⁹ The history of South Asian courtly dress offers rich subject matter for these efforts given that the Mughal Empire absorbed styles of dress from throughout the Islamicate world, East Asia, and Europe, in the form of small hats or high boots. However, this book addresses additional questions, exploring new means by which studies of sartorial culture can expand our understanding of the material and conceptual worlds of the past.⁶⁰ In the chapters that follow, I point to ways that cross-cultural research on fashion and textile objects could emerge from studying the art of cloth in the Mughal Empire. I introduce the possibility that cloth carries with it a sense of its local ecology, and that textiles might be regarded as transformative, fluid, and perishable goods. I consider the emotional valence of cloth and how it retains memories and conveys warmth and affection. And lastly, and perhaps most central to this study, I foreground the differing sensory experiences of wearing diverse fibers, whether wild silk, fine wool, or shadow-thin cotton.

Sensory Histories of Cloth Textiles can be a ritual fabric, a marker of time, or a piece of art. Textiles also have a unique sensory importance. Cloth surpasses other media in the intimacy of its use. It makes a direct address to the senses in the way that it retains scent, in the texture of satin or crepe as it wraps around the body, and in the rustling sound of silk taffeta. By attending to experiences beyond the visual, *The Art of Cloth in Mughal India* recovers the sensory significance of cloth in the seventeenth century and the phenomenological and metaphorical meanings that were attached to textile objects.⁶¹

The history of writing about sensory experience is complicated by the fact that “untiring sensuality” was one of the most pervasive, and problematic, stereotypes of “the Orient” put forward by European scholars and travelers.⁶² Colonial officials and early European social scientists proposed racialized typologies that placed cultures in a hierarchy based on their engagement with the senses, with the sense of sight as the most disembodied, civilized, and refined.⁶³

Recently, scholars have reinstated the importance of bodily experience within cultural histories of the early modern world.⁶⁴ Important work has illuminated the long intellectual history of the senses in South Asia, affirming that the pleasures of the body were never incompatible with the sophistication of the mind. Sheldon Pollock’s work on the philosophy of *rasa*, or aesthetic experience, recovers the sensory metaphor of *rasa* as “taste” or “flavor” as it relates to food, suggesting the possibility for a direct, bodily experience of art within classical Indian aesthetic theory.⁶⁵ Scholars of South Asian

FIG. 1.8 Shah Shuja as a child (detail). Attributed to Manohar, Mughal Empire. Folio from the Late Shah Jahan Album. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, ca. 1620 (painting) and ca. 1650 (borders). 14 $\frac{7}{16}$ in. (36.7 cm) × 9 $\frac{13}{16}$ in. (25 cm). Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: The Art and History Collection, LTS1995.2.98.



history, art, and music, notably Daud Ali, Emma Flatt, Dipti Khera, and Katherine Butler Schofield, have shown that sensuousness and corporeality, far from being the signs of decadence that Europeans claimed, were integral to social relationships, courtly comportment, and the robust project of kingly rule.⁶⁶

Writing on Mughal courtly culture has been enriched by more embodied histories of the imperial state and the social world of the court. The work of political historians has shed light on the corporeal practices of Emperor Akbar and his imperial servants, and on the bustling cityscape of Delhi, yielding a more socially diverse, locally inflected understanding of the Mughal Empire.⁶⁷ Within gender studies, historians have found in narratives written by Mughal noblewomen a way to return a sense of “flesh and blood” to the better-known court histories of the Mughal emperors.⁶⁸ Studying the historical presence of the physical body has yielded a more nuanced understanding of political formations and gender relations during the seventeenth century.⁶⁹ Textiles inescapably yield stories of people otherwise less visible in histories: while few women’s or children’s garments survive, inventory records detailing the huge volume of objects that entered the courtly collections serve as reminders of the many different kinds of bodies, beyond the figure of the emperor and his noblemen, who inhabited the Mughal world, such as the baby Shah Shuja, a son of Shah Jahan (fig. I.8).

Moreover, textiles, like the bodies they once clothed, were hardly fixed and stable over time. Textiles are more vulnerable to humidity, insects, and light than many other objects, and even in the seventeenth century, they were known to have a surprisingly fleeting life span. With the exception of jute and hemp, many textiles become moldy when wet for a sustained period of time.⁷⁰ Cloths traveling between India and Britain could become “spotted” and “rotten” during the journey.⁷¹ Such accidents were less likely to happen at shorter distances. Like the melons and grapes that were harvested in the cool hills of Hindustan and sent to the dusty plains, textiles, dyed in turmeric and scented with rosewater, traveled with urgency along seasonal pathways to widespread courtly sites throughout the Mughal Empire. That textiles might be thought of as semi-perishable products, and not as inert objects, has implications for our thinking about regional versus global trade.⁷² A textile object that had been shipped halfway around the world was different in nature than a cloth consumed in the more immediate vicinity of its making.

Textiles in early modern South Asia were granted the privilege of changing and expanding while in an owner’s possession.⁷³ While the deep red and blue dyes of madder, chay root, and indigo were expected to remain vibrant as long as the cloth itself, other colors were more short-lived. Pink, yellow, and red dyes made from the flowers of saffron and safflower were known as *kacchā* dyes, meaning temporary, raw, or unripe, and were prone to fade quickly.⁷⁴ Some cloths were described as “freshly dyed” and had a startlingly bright pink color.⁷⁵ Others were valued for their more subdued hues, like the color of a dying rose. That a textile’s colors could be fleeting, like the painfully brief spring season in India, is captured in the spring festival of Holi. The Mughal emperors participated in the celebration of Holi, spraying colored water pigmented with red *kumkum*, saffron, safflower, and turmeric, which stained the white clothing of the Holi players.⁷⁶ Color on

cloth, like seasons of the year, could be understood as an ephemeral state of being. While textiles kept their freshness longer than fruit, and many have survived in storage for centuries, an acknowledgment of the temporal dimension of cloth focuses attention on the sensory experiences of its circulation. In a moment when global histories prevail, this underscores the value of looking at objects and their regional contexts up close.

Evidence for the sensory qualities of objects exists in the textiles themselves. Given their delicacy, however, few cloths from the seventeenth century survive; in the absence of the objects, the art of textiles can be partially recovered through texts. As Olga Bush and Margaret Graves have demonstrated recently, poets writing in Persian and Arabic imagined a linked relationship between literature and various crafted objects.⁷⁷ The relationship between texts and textiles was particularly close.⁷⁸ In the medieval and early modern periods, a figural language of textiles flourished in the writings of Persian poets, whose work circulated among the Persian-speaking elite of South Asia. These poets linked their craft to the work of weaving—the structure of the poem was the warp, while the metaphors, similes, and figures of speech were the embellishments added in the weft.⁷⁹

Textiles also appear in more popular forms of poetry and in unadorned inventory lists. In the chapters that follow, I examine many types of texts that enumerate textiles—from the price lists of the cloths in Emperor Akbar’s treasury to the couplets describing fabrics found in Rajput popular poetry. These all share a genre of the inventory—where textile names, pronunciations, associations, and prices are all that remain. I contend in this book that meaning can be made from these lists, even if the textiles they describe cannot be found. And in their overlap with lists of fruits and flowers, textiles emerge from these records as more akin to perishable goods than their identity as the consummate long-distance trade items would suggest.

One of South Asia’s most beloved figures, the poet-saint Kabir, was born into a humble weaving family in the fifteenth century. Metaphors of textiles and weaving permeate his poetry and Kabir is often depicted in paintings weaving at a loom (fig. 1.9). To this day, the best known of Kabir’s devotional poems, which are often sung, presents the human body as a *jhīnī-jhīnī chadariyā*—a cloth (*chadariyā*) with a “subtle, subtle” (*jhīnī-jhīnī*) weave, crafted from the warp and weft of the mystic yogic veins. Elsewhere, Kabir uses the same word, *jhīmī*, to describe the sound of voices in the sky, or the feeling of breath, suggesting that the “subtlety” of this cloth gives it a texture like air.⁸⁰ Kabir writes that he “wrapped [the cloth] with such care” that he maintained it, while others—humans, gods, and sages—allowed it to get dirty.⁸¹ In Kabir’s poems, the body is often a clay pot, a garden, a fort, a city—all contained metaphors that enclose a space inside.⁸² In *Jhīnī Chadariyā*, the body is the wrapping itself, the “subtle cloth” that is thin and fragile. Through his metaphor, Kabir conveyed the insubstantiality of life.

The poetic language of textiles also borrowed from the natural world in this period. Yet in a telling reversal, living gardens and birds—the actual flora and fauna—were given their highest praise when they were likened to luxury cloths.⁸³ In the seventeenth century, the Deccani poet Nusrati transformed the typical directionality of the textile metaphor: instead of using similes to liken fabric to the natural world (as in, “the cloth was as

FIG. 1.9 Kabir weaving with two attendants. Mughal Empire. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, early eighteenth century. 18 1/8 in. (46 cm) × 12 3/8 in. (31.5 cm). The British Museum, London, 1920,0917,0.29.

blue as the sky”), it was the flowers and avian creatures that came to resemble fabrics. In Nusrati’s 1657 Sufi love poem, the *Gulshan-i ‘Ishq*, this kind of manufacturing metaphor brought to life a spring garden. As Ali Akbar Husain has shown, Nusrati made the flowers into the weavers of grand textiles. The garden was adorned with “fabrics and tapestries woven by flowering climbers that spread a velvety *mandap*, [or] canopy, above.”⁸⁴ Nusrati fills this garden with birds who are dressed in the finest cloths of South Asia. A golden oriole (*pilak*) wears “yellow *pitambar* silk” and a brown shawl.⁸⁵ The bulbul wears a black sari with a red border. Nusrati writes that the red-headed merlin (*tirmiti*/



turumti) dons what might be a dotted tie-and-dye fabric, clothing the falcon in the pattern of a *bandhani* cotton textile (figs. I.10 and I.11).⁸⁶

The metaphor of a velvet garden and sari-clad birds—a natural world made by textile means—holds significance not only for histories of South Asian art and material culture; it is productive too for a truer understanding of global trade in the early modern period. Textiles made for the Mughal court absorbed novel flora and fauna circulating from the New World: pineapples abound, and a North American turkey cock can be seen parading among other birds on a small-scale cotton cloth. One Mughal velvet includes in its pattern what is likely an American chili plant, its thin red chilis glimmering as silk pile against a silver ground.⁸⁷ By the same measure, the millions of export textiles sent from Hindustan to East and West Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not shed their worlds entirely upon being packed into watertight chests. If the Deccan's springtime gardens can be understood as textiles woven by climbing plants, and the birds of Nusrati's imagination are actually clothed in holy yellow silk and tie-dyed cotton, then the South Asian textiles that fanned outward to global ports bore with them not just indelible dyes and lustrous threads but also the flowering vines of gardens and the feathered bodies of birds.

Structure of the Book The five chapters of this book reconstruct the exceptional role that textiles came to occupy in early modern South Asia: textiles partook in the bodily rituals of kingship and were reminders of the smells and textures of home; textiles helped provincial citizens understand distance and diversity; they inspired visions of the broader world linked together by maritime trade. To bring economic and political histories into conversation with the sensory and poetic dimensions of textiles is not

FIG. I.10 Red-headed merlin (*Falco chicquera*) in flight. Nal Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, Gujarat, 2018.

FIG. I.11 Textile with imitation tie-dye (*bandhani*) pattern. Made in Gujarat; traded to Egypt. Cotton, plain weave, printed resist, dyed in indigo, ca. fifteenth century. 5¾ in. (14.57 cm) × 16⅞ in. (42.03 cm). The Textile Museum, Washington, D.C., 6,300. Acquired by George Hewitt Myers in 1954.



simply a methodological choice I have made in this book: it is borne out in the archival and visual record too. Moving from the most intimate to the furthest flung, *The Art of Cloth in Mughal India* reveals the potential textiles held to mediate between the spiritual and the material, as well as the active presence of cloth in every aspect of courtly life.

The chapters of the book proceed in broadly chronological fashion from the late sixteenth century until the cusp of the eighteenth century. Although in the first two chapters the narrative recovers the relationship to textiles at the imperial court, this account moves beyond what Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have critiqued as a “personality-centered” approach to the Mughal Empire that focuses exclusively on the succession of emperors.⁸⁸ Alongside the imperial rhetoric, I bring in the voices, names, and personalities of those outside of the court, including anxious officials, chatty merchants, activist artisans, and popular poets.

The first chapter begins early in the Mughal Empire, examining the period roughly covered by the reign of Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605). The chapter surveys the landscape of cloth in the Mughal Empire using evidence from popular literature in Gujarat, the inventories of Akbar’s court, and from contemporaneous paintings and descriptions of cloth. South Asia’s distinctive ecology, its geographical range, and its cultural diversity yielded a varied array of textile forms and textures. As the Mughal Empire integrated various regions, cloth circulated more widely. Textile materials opened the way for political and religious compromises and allowed individuals to collect on their bodies materials from across the wide range of an expanding empire.

The second chapter examines the role that textiles played in political life under Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–27). At a time when high-ranking figures in the Mughal court and the military were both mobile and widely dispersed, and when norms of sociability



and courtly pleasure linked Mughal spaces, courtiers and Emperor Jahangir himself used textiles to convey intimate feelings to those far away. The chapter offers an extended analysis of what is thought to be the earliest extant Mughal robe of honor. Using this garment with its figural patterns, the chapter shows how textiles that were sent throughout the empire engaged in a sophisticated play between absence and presence that connected allies and rivals across great distances.

The third chapter looks at the spatial role of textiles in constructing sites for courtly performance. It focuses on the regional court of Amer (known in English-language histories as Amber), whose rulers were positioned as high-ranking noblemen and trusted generals within the Mughal Empire. The textiles amassed by the Kachhwaha ruling family of Amber represent the most well-documented and best-preserved collection of textiles from seventeenth-century South Asia. The cloths offer an approximation of what might have lain in the actual imperial storehouses, which have been completely dispersed.⁸⁹ The chapter shows how these regional rulers created layered spaces that expressed the partial nature of their sovereignty. Moreover, studying a regional court instead of the imperial center allows for a wider view of how early modern Mughal society experienced textiles. The patronage of cloth was never solely top-down as thriving bazaar markets gave diverse merchants and consumers access to a wide array of textiles.

The fourth chapter studies how the political and cultural conditions of the seventeenth century reshaped the production of South Asia's most widely coveted textiles: the painted and printed cotton cloths made along the southeastern Coromandel Coast and exported from the port of Machilipatnam. The arts of bleaching and painting the cloths with dyes were so rooted in their natural environment that merchants and courtiers traveled great distances to procure them; this chapter presents new evidence that even the Mughal emperor's own agents traveled to Machilipatnam to commission cloths. I also track the differing scales of upheaval that occurred in textile history during this period, from the movement of artisans to escape famine and conquest to the jostle for goods that existed between foreign and semi-local merchants, as well as the courtiers of kings. The textile objects themselves demonstrate how much political, social, and artistic meaning can exist in a medium that has historically been situated as a decorative art.

The final chapter follows the path of Indian textiles to early modern Britain, where the seventeenth century was bookended by two female monarchs: Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603), the founder of the East India Company, and the Glorious Revolution's Queen Mary II (r. 1689–94). While nuances were certainly lost in transit, imported textiles opened up the spaces of the home to novel textures and wondrous figures and flowers from abroad. Alongside the story of collecting, I examine female English embroiderers who incorporated both fabric fragments and decorative aesthetics from South Asian cloth into their work. I hold these textile examples, often blooming with floral imagery, alongside the history of the importation of actual (and highly fragile) flowers from Asia into English hothouses to consider both the possibilities and the limitations of transporting the freshness of cloth to distant places.

Together, the chapters of this book trace distinctive kinds of movement across the space of the Mughal Empire, from the travels of far-fetched textiles to the imperial

center (chapter 1), to the dispersal of imperial gifts, made possible by a postal system staffed by foot runners (chapter 2). The book proceeds to track a regional ruler who, though he served in nearly constant campaigns in the military, always deposited his textiles back home (chapter 3) and then turns to the smaller, but no less significant, movements of textile dyers and painters who relocated from sites close to favorable materials to other parts of the Coromandel Coast (chapter 4). When textiles traveled further abroad to Britain, the fabric inspired its female consumers to replicate the aesthetics of the Mughal textile world in other forms of cloth (chapter 5).

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The textiles under study in this book challenge accepted narratives of empire, the meeting of cultures, and the meaning of decoration. These objects operate outside of long-standing binaries and debates that are familiar in art history, including distinctions between the fine and decorative arts; between luxury and large-scale production; and between Mughal imperial production and regional, “sub-imperial” arts. This book demonstrates that regional objects were cosmopolitan in origin and influence but were also treasured by the imperial court for their unique materials and specific techniques of production.

The open relationship to objects cannot erase the inhumanity that coincided with a diversity in taste. There is a temptation to find in the freely moving, polyglot objects of the long-distance trade an escape from the violence of their political and social moment.⁹⁰ In the early modern period, textile makers and other artisans from Asia were taken by force or under exploitative conditions to sites as far away as colonial Mexico.⁹¹ So-called “Guinea cloth” purchased by Europeans from India was reexported and sent to the west coast of Africa, where it was used as a bartering fabric in the terrors of the slave trade.⁹² Except in rare cases, artisans in South Asia worked in conditions of economic insecurity and did not own land to cultivate food or control their own materials for production. The sophisticated global objects of this period emerged from a historical moment of extreme violence and inequality.

The art of cloth in the Mughal Empire can, however, help to balance a historiography still weighted toward Europe. The exchanges traced through the chapters of this book preceded the emergence of exotic, chinoiserie imagery in the eighteenth century, showing that Europeans were not the only people to have their eyes opened by a diverse visual and material culture. Innovative and luxurious textiles that moved throughout East Asia, Africa, and Central and West Asia allowed regional rulers in Hindustan access to a high level of cosmopolitan manufacture that was still largely unavailable in Europe. In repositioning the story of Mughal cloth as one of manufacturing dominance and artistic creativity rather than gradual impoverishment, and in recounting the rich political and poetic lives of textiles in South Asia, this book demonstrates that the global reach of Indian textiles was not the result of European imperialism but preceded it. Cloth had woven together an empire and imagined distant worlds long before Europeans crowded onto Hindustan’s shores.

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