

Introduction to the exhibition by the artist, Elizabeth Simson

Having been deprived of travel as a World War II child, I seized the opportunity, when it came in 1963, to travel overland to India.

Before I got to India I had a romantic preconceived idea of the country based on the Rudyard Kipling stories and films such as *Elephant Boy* so my initial reaction was of disappointment seeing the townsmen in western clothes - at that time, bell-bottomed trousers.

At first, I randomly photographed the many subjects that I found new and strange in a search for visual beauty. I began to notice village people at the bus stops and railway stations, coming to Jaipur to shop at the ironmonger and textile shops and they kindled an interest in what people wore and in textile production.

On my second trip I visited Borunda village and Rupayan Sansthan, the Rajasthan Institute of Folklore and Museum, that respected and recorded country life and culture. I mixed with farmers and craftsmen who were mostly illiterate but with their own culture which had evolved in an often hostile desert environment. I found their ways of dressing rich, functional and beautiful and their skills and creativity very stimulating. Turbans, in particular, intrigued me; the inventiveness was endless. Turbans were life enhancing, symbolic and functional - from one length of cloth a poor person, as well as a rich man, could have stylish headgear. The women's clothes too were beautiful and symbolic with pleasing colours and patterns.

Sixty years later a lot has changed and this is reflected in the way people dress and the textiles that are produced. There used to be a strong relationship between local craftsmen and their village patrons. This changed when a new patron, The West, began using the textile craftsmen. The relationship was neither so strong nor local and the designs became 'fashion', devoid of the original symbolism. The west wanted quantity and cheap goods which altered the product. The old patrons' village people turned to factory produced textiles because they were cheaper.

Many influences - screen printing; independence; technology - brought about rapid changes. For example, Pipar used to be a thriving block-printing town for the local area. The patterns they produced signified a group identity and place. Now there are only one or two printers and their past clients are now wearing cheaper factory cloth.

Sadly some tourist visits are now to settings depicting pseudo village life and displaying inferior crafts. Customers should not be shown a travesty of the past!

A record of traditional local dress and textiles is a reminder of the past and can be an inspiration for the present. There were technical skills and great artists among the weavers, embroiderers and tie-dyers - they should be cherished and remembered.

Clients selecting textiles spend many hours viewing and feeling samples in the shops. People also have a wide knowledge of different regional products from other areas and are aware of their quality and designs. I am impressed by most peoples' knowledge and feel for textiles. Winding turbans, dhotis and saris give a persons fingers a daily feel of a cloths drape, feel and texture.

Personally, I particularly treasure my Indian textiles because I know the craftspeople who have produced them, such as the late Rashid of Jaipur. I was lucky and I am thankful that I was able to experience traditional village life in north west India. Besides the beauty of dress and textiles I also appreciated the mud architecture and designs, the food, the songs, the hospitality, the beautiful thorn hedges and the decorated animals.

My photos are a homage to that rich culture that embellished an often tough life. Unquestionably, Indian textiles are a great art form.