

The Splendid Sari, February 25, 2005-May 29, 2005

While traveling in India in the 1920s, Lucy Truman Aldrich purchased many of the saris shown here. She viewed them as objects of art; and, indeed, saris as a class represent spectacular achievement in textile design and technology. They also represent a unique, enduring style of dress that first appears in terracotta depictions of around 100 BCE. Although the age and fragility of the Museum's saris prohibit displaying them as draped and pleated garments, they must be understood as the traditional and fashionable women's attire of India as well as the ultimate in textile art.

The Hindi term sari derives from the Sanskrit word meaning "strip of cloth," a literal description of the rectangular, unstitched garment measuring about four feet wide by between thirteen and twenty-seven feet long. The cloth nearly always includes three design sections: central field, lengthwise borders, and endpiece (*pallu*). Out of such deceptive simplicity has emerged a dynamic garment that to this day symbolizes Indian nationality and culture. Women drape, manipulate, and structure the sari to express religious belief, social custom, regional identity, and class status, in addition to personal aesthetics.

Despite some degree of regional standardization today, the material, pattern, color, weave structure, embellishment, and manner of draping continue to convey local tradition and current urban fashion, as well as the craftsperson's great creativity and striking technical dexterity.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Indian; Gujarati
Sari, early 1900s-mid 1900s
Cotton; plain weave, roller printed
Gift of Mrs. Arnold S. Hoffman 1993.101

This lightweight cotton working-class sari exemplifies the freedom of design afforded by the mechanized printing technology used in the textile mills of Bombay and Ahmedabad since the mid-19th century. While the border imitates the stylized flowers and fringe motif (*jhaalar*) of expensive woven designs, the field's overlapping chrysanthemum pattern dispenses with traditional Indian repertoire, incorporating instead a modernist interpretation of Far Eastern auspicious symbols. Although most Indian women require a definitive endpiece (*pallu*), this sari has only two narrow borders exactly the same at each end.



RISD MUSEUM

Indian

Sari, late 1800s

Silk, metallic-wrapped thread; continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.319

For centuries, Muslim weavers in the town of Varanasi (North Central India) have produced an array of shimmering saris with golden patterns on silk grounds. Meandering vines (*bel*) and ornate, foliate *buta* motifs (a basic paisley element) continue to reveal an entrenched Mughal influence. Such is the renown of these brocaded saris, traditionally constructed on the complicated naksha drawloom, that women throughout the Indian subcontinent wear them, calling for specific motifs to suit their individual tastes. Today, because of the worldwide popularity of Indian cinema, brides living in places as far-flung as the Middle East and North Africa also clamor for these radiant designs.



Indian

Sari, early 1800s

Silk; compound plain weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.307

The distinctive figured saris made in Baluchar (Northeast India) have served as an emblem of regional pride since the heyday of their production in the early 19th century. The various scenes featured in the endpieces (*pallu*) of the saris - Indian noblemen, Europeans in trains, riders on elephants, ladies with servants, and courtiers smoking hookahs - speak of the confluence of Hindu, Muslim, and European elements in the arena of aristocratic Indian court life.



Woven on the naksha drawloom (see also the Varanasi saris in this gallery), the Baluchar examples show the loom's capability for detailed repetition. In no way an easy process, weaving one sari might require as many as fourteen helping hands and six months to complete.

RISD MUSEUM

Indian

Sari, early 1800s

Silk; compound plain weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.291



Indian

Sari, 1800s-1850s

Silk; compound plain weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.290



Chinese; Indian; Parsee? Parsi?

Choli, early 1800s

Silk; plain weave, embroidery

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.285

The dense, exquisitely drawn Chinese-style embroidery depicting perched songbirds, gnarled trees, lotus flowers, and peacocks immediately indicates that a wealthy Parsee woman wore this sari and blouse, possibly for her wedding. Fleeing their Persian persecutors in the 8th century, Zoroastrian exiles - known in India as Parsees - settled in the area of Gujarat in West Central India, adopted local customs and dress, and ultimately made fortunes in trade with China and Europe. This exchange brought silk satins to the Indian market, as well as the unique embroidered pieces shown here that were made in

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China specifically for the Parsee community. Though not worn by other Indians in the region, this sari would have been draped in the traditional Gujarati manner.

Indian

Sari, late 1800s

Silk, metallic-wrapped thread; continuous and discontinuous supplementary weft

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.318



Indian

Kornad sari, 1900s

Cotton; plain weave

Gift of Mrs. Barbara Deering Danielson 82.308.49

A departure from the complex structure and fine silk of many other garments displayed here, this sari of coarsely spun cotton from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu nonetheless shows the wealth of color and design inherent in everyday dress. Whether of cotton or silk, the Kornad sari, named after the village of its first manufacture, is recognized by its striped or checked field, plain borders (sometimes with small serrated pattern), and extensive length (here about 20 feet). In the Dravidian drape, the pallu end, indicated here by the orange stripe and change in field color, is tucked into the waist and folded over to form a sort of apron.



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Indian; Gujarati

Gharcholu sari, 1900s

Cotton, metallic-wrapped thread; plain weave, tie-dyed (bandhani)

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.299

Before fugitive synthetic dyes and repeated use gave this sari a brown hue, its ground would have been a red color typical of most gharcholu saris. Translated literally as "house dress," the gharcholu has been interpreted as the home of the bride, since it forms a focal point of the wedding ceremony, during which it is symbolically knotted to the groom's shoulder cloth. Its structure and design thus convey luck and happiness, with the now-faded dancing women, elephants, peacocks, and lotus flowers converging within squares of a ritually significant number to celebrate a joyful union.



Indian; Chinese

Sari, early 1800s-mid 1800s

Silk; compound satin weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.297

Made of tanchoi figured silk, widely coveted in Indian, these two saris represent another facet of the Parsee trade between China, India, and Europe. At first, Parsee traders imported this type of yardage into India directly from China; however, to satisfy an increasing demand by Indian women, weavers in Surat (West Central India) and later Varanasi (North Central India) learned to produce such satin fabrics with a small allover weft pattern. The Chinese weaver's integration of motifs catering to various markets stands out here. The red sari presents a subtle mixture of characteristic Indian buta (sprouting from Chinese vases) with a field design employing the Chinese ball-and-pearl lattice and "Buddha's hand" citron fruit; and the yellow sari a delicate floral trellis pattern that leans toward European tastes.



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Indian; Chinese

Sari, early 1800s-mid 1800s

Silk; compound satin weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.298



Indian; Gujarati

Patolu sari, early 1800s

Silk; plain weave, double ikat

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.295

Due to the time-consuming, precise process of resist-dyeing warp and weft threads before weaving (double ikat), the *patolu* sari is invested with considerable ritual status. It most often is worn by older women at weddings, but a bride-to-be may also don it as an auspicious garment.

This sari's lozenge pattern of flowers and heart-shaped leaves adapted from the sacred pipal tree is called Vohra *gajji bhat* ("design preferred by the Vohra Muslims"). The Vohra Muslim traders in western Gujarat are descended from Hindu ancestors and, despite the change in religion, have retained several Hindu customs, such as the celebration of the first pregnancy, to which such a *patolu* sari might also be worn.



Indian; Gujarati

Sari, early 1800s

Silk, metallic-wrapped thread; satin weave, embroidery, tie-dyed

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.289

Progressively increasing in density toward the *pallu* end, the meticulous embroidery on the purple satin ground of this sari creates a sense of pulsating activity. Dancing women alternate with colorful peacocks in the field, and *buta*, small flowers, and birds flourish in the end borders. The rich, celebratory imagery evoking folk and Mughal influences, as well as the end border of silver on a vivid red tie-dyed ground, would have made this sari a prized possession for its owner.



RISD MUSEUM

Indian; Gujarati

Sari/Odhani, late 1800s-early 1900s

Silk, metallic-wrapped thread; satin weave, tie-dyed (*bandhani*)

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.308

In Gujarat the *bandhani* (tie-dyeing) technique has long represented a pinnacle of achievement. In this piece, small knots were worked precisely to produce a spotted background with central medallions and borders of meandering floral motifs, while successive stages of dyeing resulted in contrasting colors.

Seamed down the center, this piece is wider than most saris. It might instead have served as a shawl, but the one gold end border also suggests a sari's *pallu*. However she used it, the young woman who wore this elegant garment would have been well-versed in the symbolism of the auspicious hues of yellow (auguring spring) and red (often referred to in Indian love poetry).



Indian; Gujarati

Sari/Odhani, late 1800s-early 1900s

Silk, metallic-wrapped thread; satin weave, block-printed resist

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.302

Like the *bandhani* garment in this case, the width of this piece indicates that it may be an *odhani* (head veil or half-sari). The length, however, approaches standard sari proportions. As Kutch and Saurashtra women wear both saris and odhanis, we can only be certain of the folk tradition that this article of clothing embodies. In these rural regions of Gujarat (West Central India), the block-printed dancing women, marching elephants, and peacocks on the deep-blue indigo ground signify fertility and protection, making them particularly appropriate symbols for ceremonies such as simant, which marks the seventh month of pregnancy.



RISD MUSEUM

Indian; Parsee? Parsi?; Chinese

Sari, early 1800s

Silk; satin weave, embroidery

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.286

The dense, exquisitely drawn Chinese-style embroidery depicting perched songbirds, gnarled trees, lotus flowers, and peacocks immediately indicates that a wealthy Parsee woman wore this sari and blouse, possibly for her wedding. Fleeing their Persian persecutors in the 8th century, Zoroastrian exiles - known in India as Parsees - settled in the area of Gujarat in West Central India, adopted local customs and dress, and ultimately made fortunes in trade with China and Europe. This exchange brought silk satins to the Indian market, as well as the unique embroidered pieces shown here that were made in China specifically for the Parsee community. Though not worn by other Indians in the region, this sari would have been draped in the traditional Gujarati manner.

