



NEW DIRECTIONS IN CRAFT

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India Project 2005 - Design Academy Eindhoven



PROJECT

We, along with nine other Man and Humanity Master students from the Eindhoven Design Academy collaborated in a project together with craftspeople in the area of Kachchh, India, to contemporise the crafts.

Crafts are an integral part of Indian identity. These once commonly used crafted objects now struggle on the market in competition with mass-produced goods, therefore reducing sales and viability of the craft. This scenario also forces sons and daughters of craftsmen to take up menial jobs in the city rather than learn the craft, customarily passed on through the generations.

For a period of six weeks we lived and worked together with local craftsmen to share our culture, know-how and skills, in order to commonly develop alternative ways to maintain their rich, traditional crafts in a post industrial world. The results of this collaboration were exhibited in New Delhi at the India International Centre.

This project was done in association with Eye, Icco, the Royal Netherlands Embassy, and local NGO's: Dastkar (Delhi) and Khamir (Kachchh).



CONTEXT

Kachchh is a desert area in the most western tip of India, bordering Pakistan and the Arabian Sea. It is renowned for its unique craftwork. The village of Rudramata was built by a Harrijan community in the aftermath of the major earthquake in 2001, to relocate some of villagers from Khavda, where the community was originally based.

We were put up with the family of Bhojabhai and Pababen Kesa Marvada, to work with leather and embroidery, crafts traditionally practiced by the Harrijan tribe.

While Pababen was working with the other women on dowry pieces (mainly *kanjiri*, the traditional dress), Bhojabai generally worked alone on *mojri* (traditional wedding shoes in Gujarat and Rajasthan), sandals, mirrors with leather frames, and decorative wall or ceiling hangings, in order to sell them to the local market or to tourists who happened to drop by in their improvised shop. All leather products typically consisted of one type of leather, sometimes dyed with a dark brown colour as a variation, since there was only one type of leather available in Bhuj.



Harrijan Dolls.



Leather candle holder in shape of *bungha*, with stitched embroidery.



A *thora* traditionally hangs above the entrance door of the *bungha*.



A *kanjiri* worn by the married women of the Meghwal tribe.



APPROACH

The theme of this project was: 'at home', which we interpreted as: 'sharing our daily lives'. With this in mind we went to India to experience how people value this interpretation in their own homes.

For the duration of the project, we valued the chance to stay at a family's home as an opportunity to establish a relationship with the craftspeople. This gave us a unique insight of their cultural traditions and the hardship of their lives as well as facilitate a good collaboration and mutually

growing understanding in the workshop.

As a result of living closely with the family, we became interested with the importance of marriage in their culture, more specifically the dowry. It was both fascinating and confronting to realise that the women of the tribe spend most of their younger lives embroidering the contents of their dowry (instead of going to school for example). This dowry consists mainly of *kanjiri*, the traditional dress, which is put in the dowry bag, passed on from mother to daughter. The daily act of embroidering becomes a slow building of their home-to-be, with its underlying fears,

hopes, aspirations and dreams. In effect, the embroidery is like story telling, the dowry speaks of their personal histories, tribe culture, etc.

From their marriage traditions we took inspiration to work on leather bags. I asked the women to embroider small square pieces as if it were the only piece they could bring with them in their dowry bag. This resulted in two series of leather bags containing smaller removable embroidered bags.

The concept of the 'dowry bags' stemmed from these observations, as a result of living with the craftpeople. In this



collaboration, it was crucial for us to develop products that remains relevant to them, that consider their preoccupations and cultural heritage.

PROCESS

The daily act of craftwork is of equal importance as the finished piece. For this reason, the process of this collaboration requires as much emphasis as the end result. Audrey began the project by learning the intricate art of

embroidery; the different stitches practiced by the Meghwal women, the way one must sit, what thickness of thread is required for the different parts of the pattern, what colour combinations are appropriate.

Matthijs worked with Bhojabai in the leather workshop, to explore new possibilities with leather and how to apply them to new products. Experimentation was conducted with dyes to get different looks, since the only available type of cow leather is naturally tanned and easily fades in the sun. By forming leather with a wooden mould in the sun we came to a series of mobile covers, which Bhojabai

was able to sell to the local market.

After this stage of experimentation, we both worked on the identity of the crafts and tried to optimize and apply it as a trademark for their product range. Matthijs translated the distinctive elements of hand stitching and punching into leather products, while Audrey worked on an embroidery catalogue, visiting cards, hang tags and a brand identity. We worked closely together, to incorporate the embroidery pieces to the leather.



BUSINESS CARDS.

Each card is unique.
The punches are made
by the craftsman.
Also, this card exists
with a plain back so a
craftsman unable to af-
ford his own order may
buy only a few (from
Khamir, Kachchh NGO)
and customise them.



BUSINESS CARD HOLDERS.

Stitched leather with
embroidered front and
punched leather back.



PRODUCTS

The dowry bags, business cards, as well as the leather bags, wallets, and business card holders were displayed at the International India Centre in New Delhi during the 'at home' exhibition, together with the work of the other students and craftspeople. The exhibition saw many visitors, many of which were interested to see these products go into production.

BUSINESS CARD:

This card can be distributed at fairs, in the main town of Bhuj nearby, or when tourists come to the village. It depicts the *mojri*, shoe worn on the wedding day, the product that was traditionally made by leather crafts-men. The cards also have punches around the circumference, that are typical of Kachchh leatherwork. The craftsman creates his own pattern of punches on the cards, thus making each one unique, individualised and recognisable, like the handmade leather products they make.



DOWRY BAGS:

In effect, embroidery is like story telling, the dowry speaks of the women's personal histories, tribe culture, etc. I was fascinated with the rupture which occurs in the lives of the women before and after marriage, from the family home to a strangers household, and from child to woman, all in a day. The dowry is their only baggage, what they take with them to their new life, the *essential*.

The women embroidered these pieces as if it were the only piece they could bring with them in their dowry bag. The rich colours and variety of imagery are all recognisable of the traditional Harrijan embroidery of course, but they also reflect the rich emotional baggage of each individual woman.

LEATHER BAGS:

These bags are a marriage between the village men's leather work and the women's embroidery, each contain a smaller removable embroidered 'dowry bag'. True to the Kachchh leather work and embroidery style, these bags are a first step in increasing cultural awareness with urban consumers.



Travel Bag.
3 sizes (S,M,L)
Handcrafted, stitched and punched leather, including embroidered pen holders and removable inner bag.



Weekend Bag.
3 sizes (S,M,L)

Handcrafted, stitched and punched leather, two inner embroidered pockets.





PARTICIPANTS:

Leather Craftmen:

Bhojabhai
Arjun

“Design can be used as a tool for cultural exchange, connecting people”

Embroidery Craftwomen:

Bachchaben
Bijiben
Dhaiben
Mulaben
Pababen

NGOs:

Dastkar
Khamir

Film Crew:

Kapil Das
Avinash Kumar

Mentors:

Jatin Bhatt
Birgitta de Vos

The Man and Humanity students

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