

A pierced, brass stencil made by artisans of the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company reveals the tensions that emerge, and also the possibilities, when a regularized, nearly geometric shape is overlaid with a pattern of curving, naturalistic forms (Fig.1). Two elements combine to form the ornamental structure of the stencil: a rosette shape with eight pointed petals, and a theme and variation on four leaves. The steadiness of the independent rosette, set against the sloping lobes of the leaf forms, creates a sense of two different materials –one mineral, one vegetal, one inert, and one living – that have grown to coexist together.

The rosettes with eight petals provide the horizontal and vertical axes for the pattern, although they at first appear to contribute a sense of circularity through their form. The eight-petalled flowers radiate outwards from an opaque circle. The central circular form is accentuated by two concentric rings of pierced dots inscribed around its middle and its edge. Eight petals grow out of this central circle, each tied to the middle by a thin stem. The petals are carved in a triangular shape, with gently rounded bottom edges and a tapered tip at the end. Again, a subtle line of pierced dots within each of the petals traces out their form and lends precision to the sharp tip at the end of each petal. The artist who carved this pattern did not separate the petals from one another, making the reinforcement of each individual shape by the piercing more important. Moreover, the negative space between the stems of each of the petals creates another circular rosette form, although this one is more geometric because each peep-hole of the negative space is carved as a regular pentagon. Together, the disk at the center, the radiating rosette in the negative space, and the outermost ring of petals nest within each other to forge a series of regular, concentric, circular forms.

Despite the circularity of the rosette pattern, the orientation of each rosette form asserts not a curving, orbital pattern, but a squared, geometric grid. The artist has arranged the eight

petals of the rosette at regular intervals so that they point outwards in the cardinal directions – north, south, east, west – and then the additional four petals emerge at regular intervals along the diagonal axes. Each petal that points up and down, or side to side, radiates outwards to touch at its tip another element of the second part of the pattern, forming continuous straight lines that become the longitudes and latitudes of the design. In this way, the circular rosettes reinforce a sense of an underlying pattern grid.

The second element of the pattern destabilizes this regularity through a theme and variation on four, rounded leaves. Working outwards from the circular center of this other patterned element, there is a cross formed of four compact lobes. Each of the four lobes of the cross meets another leaf shape – a thickly-cut fleur-de-lis – whose tripartite shape is again reinforced by the lines of inscribed dots. The dots pierce out the fleur-de-lis shape of two scythe-shaped leaves spreading outwards symmetrically, with one tapered leaf that grows up the center. These shapes are not cut with the same precision as the rosettes and it is only through the work of the pierced lines on the interior that these are recognizable as repetitive forms. The central leaves of the fleur-de-lis that are not connected to the cross reach out to touch the cardinal points of the rosette of the first pattern element. Thus the fleur-de-lis forms contribute to both the irregularity of the pattern, and to the more subtle grid beneath.

From the tapered space between each of the lobed cross's four arms emerge luscious, curving leaves – some with a little talons and others without. The leaves are tethered to the rounded crosses, the fleur-de-lis, and they even meet the original rosettes at the tips of the petals that are oriented diagonally. Despite being so firmly attached to the other pattern elements, the leaves determine the contours of most of the negative space of the pattern. This is where the irregularity in the carving of the leaves becomes most significant – the leaves are not fully

articulated, and some parts have not been carved away, bringing variation and unpredictability to the negative space. The leaves seem to have been based on a pattern with three bulging components, as well as a hooked tip, which often curves elegantly away from the fleur-de-lis that it meets. In some instances, there is vertical symmetry to the arrangement of the hooked ends of the leaves; however, this symmetry is not always present. The irregularity of the leaves' shapes, orientations, and carving accentuates their twisting curves. Their periodic thickness makes the more substantial leaves appear to droop, while others appear to have been torn or shriveled, giving them a naturalism that contrasts with the stiff regularity of the eight-pointed rosette. Although the metallic piercing of the leaves, which delineates a simplified, tapered leaf form, contributes some regularity, it also heightens the contrast with the erratic carving of the metal. Since the piercing does not penetrate through the metal, the heavy leaves block out the light. In their opacity, they evoke green flesh.

The contrast between the evenly-cut geometry of the eight-pointed rosettes, and the sloping inconstancy of the hooked leaves may also suggest the divergent genealogies of these two ornamental elements. The stencil was carved by an artist working for the Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company. As the name of the company suggests, the artist was likely trained in the carving of wood. Ahmedabad is also home to some of the most virtuosic ornamental stone carving in South Asia. The city's central mosque, the Sidi Saiyyed Masjid, for instance, contains examples of stone-cut *jali* screens with patterns of eight-pointed rosettes arranged along geometric grids (Fig. 2). In the case of the stencil, the rosette form has been transferred to another carved medium – this time, a flat expanse of brass, but in its rhythm between positive and negative space, and in the regularity of its petal forms, it lends itself well to the work of a carver, whether that artist is working in stone, wood, or metal. The undulating leaf form, on the

other hand, can be more readily encountered in the textile medium, where the dips and curves of the leaves would be amplified by the supple folds of cloth. A silk velvet textile from seventeenth-century South Asia (likely Ahmedabad) contains both a rosette and arching leaves, but in the context of this cloth, it is the green leaves that seem at home growing along the plush surface (Fig. 3). This single brass stencil, then, may represent the meeting of two ornamental lineages – one regular and stylized, the other unpredictable and naturalistic – but also a marriage of two very different media.



Pierced decorative metalwork from the Deanery, Ahmedabad Wood Carving Company (made) Lockwood de Forest (designed), Brass, c. 1908, Bequest of M. Carey Thomas, Bryn Mawr College 2012.4.6.t



Fig. 2 Jali screen, Siddi Saiyyed Mosque, 16th century, Ahmedabad, India



Fig. 3 Silk velvet, 16th c., Ahmedabad or Lahore, Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon