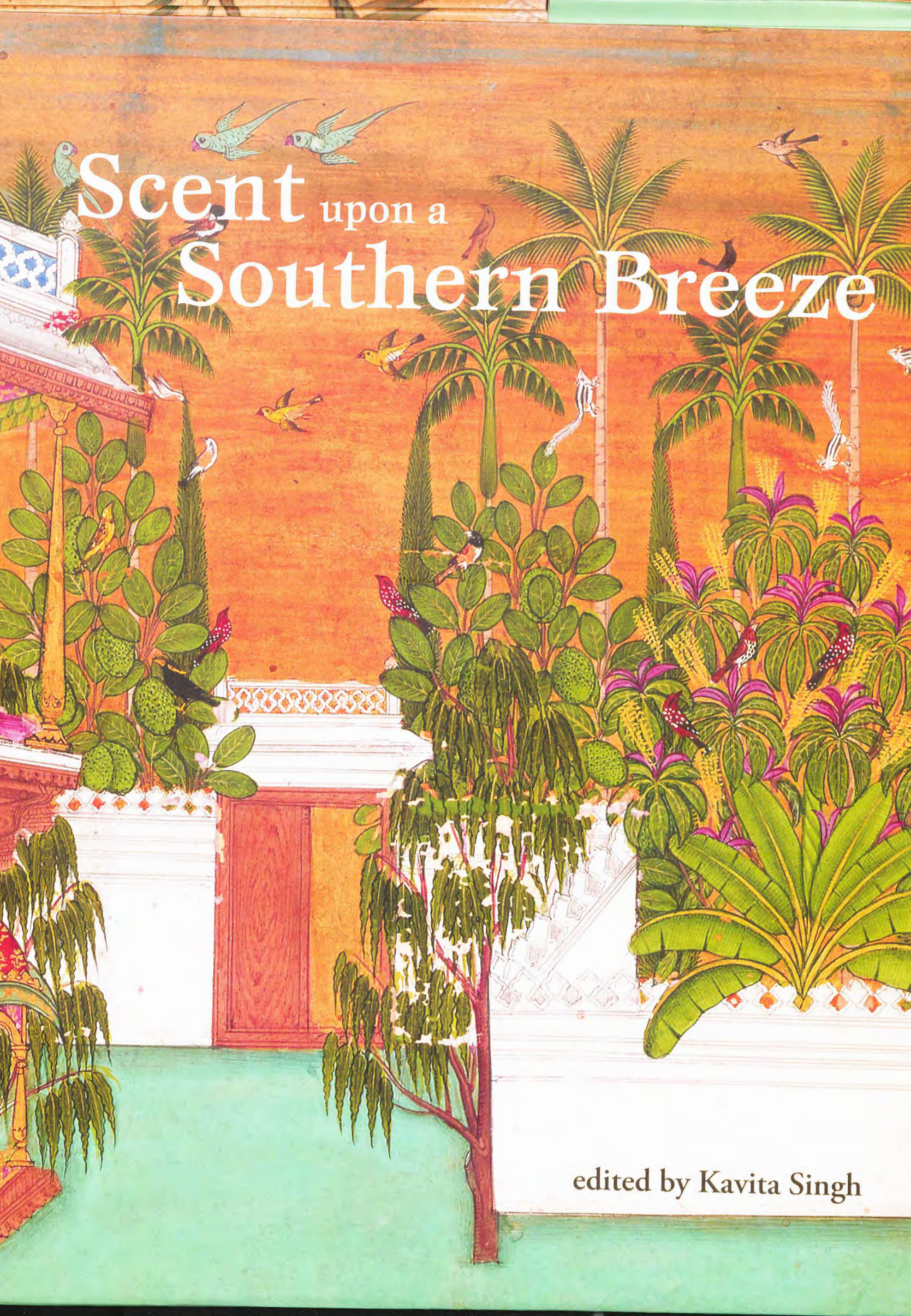




Scent upon a Southern Breeze

edited by Kavita Singh



Scent upon a
Southern Breeze
The Synaesthetic Arts of the Deccan

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Marg



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Page 6: "The Sun in His Chariot" from the *Nujum al-'Ulum* of 'Alī 'Adil Shah I, Bijapur, 1570.
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The Tree of Life and the World of Wonder

‘Aja’ib Imagery on 17th-Century Kalamkaris



Sylvia Houghteling

In 1669, the English East India Company sent to India an order for 2,000 cotton paintings of “large branches for [the] Hangings of Romes [rooms]”.¹ The cotton cloths that were supplied to Europe were painted with dyes to depict a bending tree whose branches swayed and dipped towards the ground (figure 1). Flowers tumbled off the branches and met flowers growing from the craggy pointed rocks below. Emerald leaves with serrated edges snaked up the trunk of the tree. The cotton hangings with their “large branches” were profoundly sensual. The branches, bursting with heavy flowers, curved to the ground and seemed poised to take root, yielding daughter trees below.

It is a condition of export art that it is often unable to name itself. These cloths have come to be known as “tree-of-life” textiles; they were given their name to evoke the Biblical tree of life in the garden of Eden, which was a popular subject for English and French embroidery of the 17th century. Thus, these cloths are usually seen as an early index of European intervention in the aesthetics and economics of South Asia. I hope to show that with their toothy leaves, bursting blooms and flaming thorns, the tree-of-life textiles epitomize a fantastical visual sensibility unique not to Europe, but to the cosmopolitan visual culture of the 17th-century Deccan sultanate of Golconda.

The Kalamkaris of Golconda

While Golconda is most famous for its diamond mines, in the 17th century the region was also known for its cotton cloths that were painted in liquid dyes. The cloths were painted at various sites in the northern and southern regions of the Coromandel coast, and at painters’ villages in Burhanpur and Sironj in present-day Madhya Pradesh. The textiles pleased many markets and were sent to far-flung locales.² They were shipped to consumers in Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Iran, in addition to the large numbers sent to sites throughout Europe (figure 2).³ They were known in Europe as “chintz”, and are called “kalamkari” (a Persian word literally translated as “pen-work”) in contemporary scholarship. In addition to the 2,000 cotton “hangings” cited in the 1669 directive, many thousands—perhaps millions—more were packed carefully

¹ Bed-cover (palampore), Coromandel coast, 18th century. Cotton; plain weave, mordant painted and dyed, resist dyed; 271.78 x 197.49 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Bequest of George Blumenthal and Gift of Indjoudjian Freres, by exchange, and The Friends of the Islamic Department Fund, 1982 (1982.66).

into water-tight chests and sent on European ships from ports along the Coromandel coast to Dutch, French, Danish, Swedish and English customers who eagerly hung the brightly coloured cloths on the walls of their homes or used them as palampores (bed-coverings).⁴

The painted cotton cloths from Golconda, sent by the thousands from the port of Machilipatnam, were known by European officials to be the finest in quality. South Asian artisans had perfected the spinning of cotton's ragged fibres to produce fine threads; they had innovated the use of dung, lime and citrus to bleach the cloth; they had discovered the mordants that would make the red madder or chay-root dyes vibrant and colour-fast, and they virtuosically painted a steady, calligraphic line with a bamboo or reed pen using watery, iron-based ink.⁵ In the Golconda region that is the focus of this article, the dyers had the ecological advantage of the running water of the Krishna river, which was rich in calcium that deepened the intensity of the ruby-red dyes.⁶

In the 17th century, these brilliantly painted cotton cloths were a revelation for Europeans. Accustomed to the dark colours and heavy textures of wool, European consumers were astounded by the thinness of the cotton, the whiteness of the bleached cloth, the brightness of the dyes and the exoticism of the designs. The painted cotton kalamkari revolutionized English visual culture across the social spectrum—bringing light and colour into the homes of the middling classes and the wealthy alike, inspiring generations of English embroiderers to enliven their woollen stitching, and, ultimately, generating the demand for cotton textiles that led to Europe's Industrial Revolution.⁷ For these reasons, kalamkari textiles have been most rigorously studied by European historians, and have been classified by art historians in the uncertain category of export art.⁸

Tree-of-Life Imagery

The bursting flowers on the palampores hint at their origins in the beady eyes and jagged mouths of demons that have few precedents in European art. These textiles occupy an important, and largely under-acknowledged, place within the history of South Asia. The tree-of-life textiles were a site where creative artisans digested the patterns of European embroidery together with motifs from Chinese porcelain, Ottoman brocades and Persian painting. Here, timid floral tropes converged with a fantastical form of painting depicting marvellous beings and composite creatures that flourished in 17th-century South Asian visual culture. As a result, the cloths that were sent to Europe contain traces of this wild play.

Tree-of-life textiles have always exceeded the role of pure decoration through their suggestions of garden splendour, paradisiacal plentitude and impossible fecundity. The proposal that we see these textiles as emerging from cosmopolitan, non-European art-historical traditions is intended to open up the visual, cultural and "semantic horizons" of these objects, and not to lock in a single meaning for their iconography or style.⁹ John Irwin and Katharine Brett, the great historians of "chintz" textiles, first articulated the inherently hybrid, "polygenous" nature of these textiles that unite

2 Palampore, India, for the Sri Lankan market, first quarter of the 18th century. Cotton; painted resist and mordant, dyed; 182.88 x 113.19 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Fernando Family Trust Gift, in honour of Dr Quintus and Mrs Wimala Fernando, 2010 (2010.337).





3

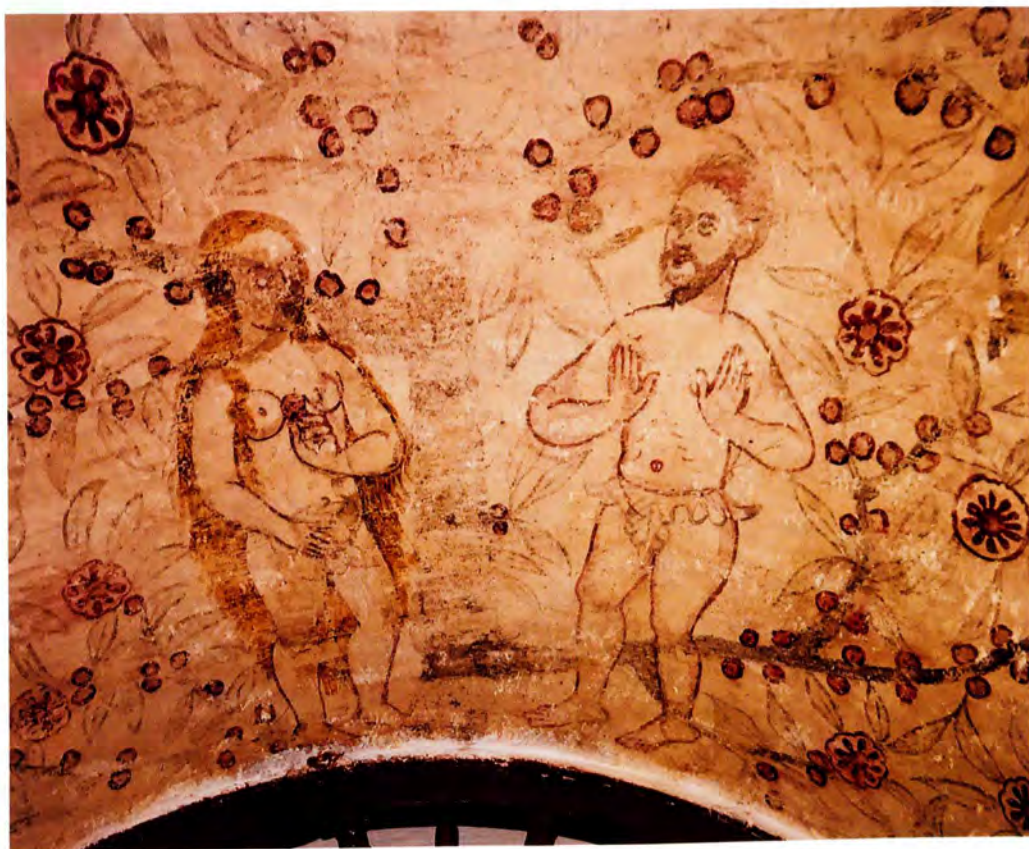
Jali screen. Sidi Saiyad Masjid,
Ahmedabad, Gujarat, c. 16th century.
Photograph: Sylvia Houghteling.

“the most diverse and disparate cultural elements”. “The odd thing,” they wrote, “is that the flowering-tree palampore appears no less exotic to Asian eyes than it does to European. Observed from either standpoint, its inspiration seems to be alien, irreconcilable with the observer’s own culture.”¹⁰

While Irwin and Brett argued that the motif derived from European pattern books sent to India, or emerged from an Elizabethan practice of placing actual tree boughs in bedrooms, they also recognized the flowering tree motif in Chinese calligraphy and Timurid painting.¹¹ Other scholars have pointed to connections between the textiles and pierced stone motifs on the jali screens of Gujarati mosques (figure 3).¹² The textiles simultaneously evoke the wish-fulfilling tree, garden pageantry and festivals, and the vibrant tradition of composite imagery that has enlivened South Asian painting and sculpture for centuries. Tree-of-life textiles also embody the energy of the cosmopolitan, hybrid visual style, known in Ottoman art as the “saz” style—a form of decoration that married the floral with forest imagery of hungry demons and lashing dragon-tails. As observed by Irwin and Brett, each additional visual source makes the final product less “reconcilable” with any single culture or visual style. Perhaps that is why, at the furthest reaches of our “semantic horizons” is the possibility that these outward-looking textiles are expressive of one of the weirdest of the wondrous tales of the early modern period that was circulating in the Persianate world and had made its way into small-scale manuscript paintings by artists in Golconda. It is the tale of the waq-waq tree—a mythical plant that bore not flowers or fruit, but women’s bodies and animal heads.

4

Adam and Eve, painting in Sé Cathedral,
Old Goa, completed 17th century.
Photograph: Sylvia Houghteling.



In the context of the Judeo-Christian world, the tree of life was fabled to have grown in the garden of Eden. It was both the tree of knowledge from which Eve ate the apple, and a mythically abundant tree that protected Adam and Eve after their expulsion from Eden. In Protestant religious texts of the 17th century, the tree of life was said to bloom continuously, producing fruit and flowers at the same time and providing shelter and sustenance for those who stood beneath it.¹³ English domestic embroidery of the 17th century depicted a stocky version of the tree of life. It resembles a fruit tree, quaintly laden with a variety of fruits (figure 5). That this iconography existed in South Asia is confirmed by a painting tucked into an archway at the Portuguese Sé Cathedral in Old Goa. The painted plaster stretching overhead depicts the tree of life curling around the figures of Adam and Eve, its abundant leaves sheltering the newly naked figures (figure 4).

In parallel stories, Sanskrit texts from the medieval through the early-modern period used the symbol of the *kalpavriksha*—a mythical wish-fulfilling tree—as both a term of esteem for beneficent kings, who gave to their subjects as generously as the wish-fulfilling tree, and for many actual kinds of trees that sustained people during times of drought or famine.¹⁴ According to some mythologies, the original *kalpavriksha* appeared at the time of the churning of the ocean, and lasted on earth until people began to wish for evil things, at which point the tree left earth for the heaven of the gods. In each of these mythologies, the tree is not a passive decoration, but an active presence—imparting wisdom, providing shelter and sustenance, and granting wishes for those good enough to ask.



5

The Tree of Life, British, first half of the 17th century. Canvas worked with silk thread; tent, Gobelin, and couching stitches; 57.15 x 61.28 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Irwin Untermyer, 1964 (64.101.1305).

Closer to the site of production, the culture of trees was alive with magical and spiritual associations in the early-modern Deccan. Ali Akbar Husain has analysed one of the most incredible images of trees springing to life in the context of the Bijapur poet Abdul's 1615 *Ibrahim Nama* written for Sultan Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II. In this extended metaphor meant to praise the king and evoke the coming of spring, a scented breeze dispatched by the sultan awakens the forest trees from their winter slumber and inspires them to form a composite caravan that marches to the sultan's Vasant (springtime) festival celebrations. At the sight of Ibrahim 'Adil Shah, the barren trees are restored to their full splendour of foliage and blooms; they present silken offerings and move their boughs up and down, as though perfuming themselves. Husain has shown that in a manner consistent with Indian literary traditions, the poet likens the blossoming trees to the courtly ladies. In Husain's translation, the poet evokes the colouring of textiles in his figurative language, writing that "the trees in their flush of foliage and opening blossoms are as if dyed in the colours of the ladies, who clearly outrival their cousins".¹⁵ In paintings from Bijapur during this period, flowering trees commune animatedly with wandering female yoginis and with sensuous, spiritual lovers, suggesting what Deborah Hutton calls the liminal, or "wild" space of a spiritual journey.¹⁶



The flowering tree textiles of the Deccan were never explicitly intended to illustrate a particular story; yet in their dynamic composition, they are suggestive of the enchanted trees of Ibrahim 'Adil Shah's garden, and the generously sentient wish-fulfilling tree. It is their visual appearance, not any single contextual narrative, that enlivens these trees. While regional myths and poetry resonate with the depictions of flowering trees on cloth, the three most distinctive features—their asymmetrical forms, jagged leaves and enormous flowers—emerged from Persianate and Deccani decorative traditions that exist at the border between the floral and the figural, the ornamental and the narrative. In recuperating the heterogeneity and, indeed, the grotesquerie of the flowering tree form, we can also assert the imaginative power of the artisans in South Asia who invented it.

Trade and the Saz Style

European scholars, such as Irwin and Brett, have likened the serrated leaves of the tree-of-life kalamkari textiles to Flemish verdure tapestries, but a more likely origin for the snaking, toothy leaves was the region's trade and cultural ties with the Persianate world and the Ottoman empire.¹⁷ Within Islamic art, these leaves are characteristic of the saz style. Scholars suggest that the saz style is "named after a mythical enchanted forest of leafy plants".¹⁸ Indeed, enchanted creatures seem to inhabit the deep woods of saz paintings, with bizarre vegetation and serrated leaves barely hiding the lurking presence of fantastical beings. Within the textile arts, the wildly curving saz style is characterized by jagged leaves, composite flowers, mythical animals and palmettes.¹⁹

The saz style emerged in mid-16th-century Ottoman Turkey during the reign of Murad III, but it had its origins in the 15th-century reception of Chinese art in Herat and throughout the Persianate world. The saz pen-and-ink drawings, produced in the Ottoman imperial workshops, served as templates for brocade garments and polychrome ceramics, all of which contain the dynamic saz leaf that intertwines with dragons and demons taken from Persian and Chinese porcelains and painting (figure 6).²⁰ The style is sometimes referred to as the saz qalami, which connects the style with the arts of the reed pen, or qalam (also kalam), used by the artists to paint their virtuosic curving lines.²¹ The use of the qalam relates the saz style to the practice of kalamkari, pen-work. Kalamkari can be distinguished from block-printing because of the freehand style of the painting. Using a curving line and a flourish of the wrist, the kalamkari painters could capture the elegant spines and jagged edges of the saz-style leaves.

The painted walls of Lepakshi, located in southern Andhra Pradesh, provide evidence that the distinctive, toothy saz-style leaf existed in the Deccan by the 16th century (figure 7). Motifs like the saz leaf travelled from Ottoman realms, Iran and China to the cosmopolitan ports of Golconda not only via paper designs but also in the form of decorative art objects such as painted tiles and ceramic dishes that exposed the artists working at ports to new imagery. In a subsidiary image on a monumental painted cotton from the Victoria and Albert Museum (figure 8), the artist has lifted figures of the Madonna and Child (panel to upper right of main image). While past

7
Ceiling painting, Virabhadra Temple, Lepakshi,
Andhra Pradesh, late 16th century. Photograph:
Sylvia Houghteling.



8
Detail of a wall hanging, Coromandel coast,
c. 1640–50. Cotton; mordant dyed and resist
dyed; 259.1 x 152.4 cm. Victoria and Albert
Museum (687–1898). © Victoria and Albert
Museum, London.



scholarship has attributed this imagery to circulating Jesuit prints, it could also have been filtered through Mughal painting or an extant velvet from Safavid Iran.²² On the left-hand side of the same textile the artist seems to have captured a Hindu Ragamala scene in which a lone woman sways to unseen music (above the main image on the right), that would have circulated as a manuscript painting (figure 8). The painter has also worked to evoke the effect of translucent glazes in the depictions of Chinese porcelain vases with cloud collars (panel below the main image). When the artists of Golconda rendered mythological figures and phoenix-like birds, they may have been receiving this imagery not from pattern books, but instead, from the Chinese porcelain objects that the 17th-century European traveller William Methold recounts were popular as dishware among Muslim consumers at the port of Petaboli.²³

The style of objects introduced through the maritime trade with Iran, Turkey and China also corresponded with local figural traditions of asymmetry, dynamism and fantasy. An enigmatic kalamkari now held in the Musée de l'Impression sur Étoffes in Mulhouse, France, contains wild and unexpected figures.²⁴ Rosemary Crill has dated this textile to 1650–75 and posited that it was made for the Golconda court.²⁵ From the four edges of the cloth, fantastical figures spread towards the central medallion. There are swimming creatures stuffed with open-mouthed fish, beasts with ragged animal arms and blue snouts, yali-faced owls with animate wings, and an elephant made up of embracing monkeys. On this textile, even innocuous flowers seem to spout mouths, tongues and tails. The textile carries on the tradition of composite figuration in South Asia that can be found in sites ranging from the terracotta temples of Bengal to the courtly paintings of Golconda. Though aggressively figural, the differences between the imagery on this cloth and the flowers on the tree-of-life textiles are only a matter of degree, not kind; with two black dots for eyes and a pair of pointed ears,



the flowers transform into monstrous faces.

This colourful, experimental sensibility can also be seen on carpets from this period. North Indian carpets in the late 16th century were known for their experimentation with twisting, grotesque animal forms. The carpets made in Golconda in the 17th century maintained a hybrid style, reflecting the diversity of the region's carpet-weavers who had emigrated from Iran, Turkey and Central Asia. As Steven Cohen has shown, the weavers willingly departed from the style of Persian carpets that were also imported in large numbers. Deccani carpet-weavers used yellow, gold, white, salmon and mustard more liberally



9a and b

The Kevorkian Hyderabad carpet with detail, Deccan (Hyderabad?), c. 17th/18th century. 325.12 x 1595.12 cm. Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (CA.17.1997.OL).
© Museum of Islamic Art Doha.

than their Persian counterparts; they filled the space with heavily-outlined jagged leaves.²⁶ Large-scale carpets from early 18th-century Hyderabad contain apparent similarities to the palampores in the prevalence of bright pinks, in the curving forms of the saz-style leaves and in the variation and inventiveness of the multihued floral forms (figures 9a and b).



The Textile Life of the Waq-Waq Tree

While artisans in many media experimented with the saz-style feathery leaves, the even more exotic motif of the waq-waq tree was travelling throughout the Islamic world in Arabic- and Persian-language manuscripts and early printed books, possibly even finding its way onto the overblown blossoms of the flowering tree textiles. As a decorative technique, the waq style refers to the combination of floral and figural patterns and runs in parallel with the European “grotesque”. Both the waq style and the European grotesque share the composite floral vines that taper off into a human or animal figure. One of the seven principal techniques listed in explanatory texts about Persian painting, the waq (or vaq) ornament can be seen in painted representations of Timurid tents and on Mughal carpets.²⁷ As Laura Weinstein’s research has shown, the waq style also appears in the borders of album pages made for the Qutb Shahi sultans of Golconda.²⁸

All of these are examples of figural arabesques, or what European scholars would call “grotesques”—composite floral vines made up of human or animal figures. A waq-style plant appears in a 17th-century painting from the Benkaim Collection, now at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and another version held at the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad. Both paintings have been tentatively attributed to the Deccan (figure 10). The plant that fills the ground of the paintings produces saz-style leaves, whose jagged edges resemble the leaves on the tree-of-life textiles. The branches of the plant blossom into the heads of animals such as elephants, deer and dragons, and, in the centre, into a composite demon face. In dialogue with this small-scale painting, the palampore’s flowers no longer look so straightforwardly floral.

When the waq style is used in the context of a tree, it can also be an illustration of fables from Arabic and Persian literature that come under the heading of ‘aja’ib, a genre of the wondrous and fantastical.²⁹ In the earliest tales, the composite tree was the talking tree that Alexander the Great encountered at the frontier of India, whose fruits had been replaced with the heads of humans and animals: during the day, it warned him against further invasions, terrorizing him about his endless conquests; at night, it spoke sweetly to him, but foretold his imminent death.³⁰ That some version of this story reached South Asia can be confirmed by the late 16th-century Mughal *Darabnamah*, a complex love story involving the ancestors of Alexander who also encounter a talking tree (figure 11).³¹

The most well-known version of the waq-waq story is of a tree that produces lovely ladies as fruit. The story is told in Qazvini’s 13th-century *Geographical Dictionary*, and in various other geographies and stories of marvels associated with the ‘aja’ib genre. A widely circulated version of this story appeared in a 16th-century printed Ottoman text called the *Tarih-i Hindi-i Garbi*, which described the West Indies and the discovery of the Americas.³² The waq-waq tree is said to exist along the sea route to America on an island that is in the “Green Sea” that divides Hind, or India, from Sin, or China. In classical ‘aja’ib form, the islands in this sea contain all kinds of wondrous creatures—cats with wings, tiny humans whose language cannot be understood, enormous white apes that eat elephants and camphor trees that spread

10

A floral fantasy of animals and birds (waq-waq), Mughal, early 1600s. Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; page: 37.62 x 26.67 cm; painting: 19.84 x 12.54 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift in honour of Madeline Neves Clapp; Gift of Mrs Henry White Cannon by exchange; Bequest of Louise T. Cooper; Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund; From the Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection (2013.319). © The Cleveland Museum of Art.





عمل مخصوص
۹۴

طهر و سیه گفت که حال من نیز اینچنین بود و دست و پا آن شب تمامجا بود و ندانم تا روز شد آن آواز از آن درخت
که شد مهراسب بگریست تا آن آواز یکی می آمد یکجا که کرد و میوه درخت چون سر آدمی بود و دو دانه کوش
شد آن بجهو آدمی مهراسب از آن درخت کلی برگه آتی سرخ از شاخ آن درخت بگرفت مهراسب از آن درخت
داشت روی طهر و سیه کرد و گفت که هرگز چنین درخت دیده گفتم فی سب از اینجاست و نه از
آن درخت بیشتر شد مهراسب گفت نباید که این کسان را بگویم بگویند که این درخت را از
دیگریست که هیچ ایشان را ندانند و او را دست و پا می دور در میان شده و این جزیره را جزیره و آن را
بس هر دو میزنند بدان جزیره صد نفر از پخته مرغ ویدند مهراسب از آن پخته مرغ داشت و بگفت و
در ساعت در صد و پانجاه برمان کرد و دو روز و آن کشند شب را بجا می سیدند که هر چه درخت بود و
بود و سینه میوه خوش بود و بر گوشه بختند تا که روز شد از آن نعمت خورون گرفتند خدا که سر شدند و بختند
دریا آمدند و نشسته و در دریای میگریستند تا طهر و سیه گفت این یکجا می نشین و خدمت هر دو است که
کاشی چند درین جزیره باشم تا از غرض و حل را حکم جیت که اگر جایی دیگر میوه نباشد که ازین نعمت نیام
مهراسب چون این سخن از طهر و سیه شنید گفت ای خواهر و برادر من تراست اگر صواب بینی برویم اگر نه

11

Tamrusiyah and Mihrasb under the Waq-Waq Tree, manuscript of the *Darabnamah*, Mughal, late 16th century. Opaque watercolour on paper; 35.88 x 22.86 cm. British Library (Or. 4615, f. 44r).
© The British Library Board.

so widely they cover the sky. Then there is the island of waq-waq on which, the author writes:

There is a kind of great tree whose fruit, which grow among its blossoms and boughs, are always lovely women such that those who see the beauty of their shape and the grace of their bodies are astonished...and in the branches of the tree they are suspended from their heads like a kind of fruit. Sometimes they all make the sound "wak-wak". Therefore they call the aforementioned island "Wakwak". If at some time one of these women be cut off from the base, she lasts for about two days. Then she perishes, and her beauty of form breaks up. It is related that sometimes men come together with them. They find a pleasant smell and a great taste.³³

Of the many iterations of the *Tarih-i Hindi-i Garbi* there is one copy of the book that has been identified as having a Deccani origin.³⁴ Mark Zebrowski has identified the painting of the waq-waq tree from the Museum of Islamisches Kunst in Berlin as having a Golconda origin, but the painting has not been connected to the *Tarih-i Hindi-i Garbi*. Yet it embellishes upon the imagery of the waq-waq tree from other versions of the text.³⁵ Its trunk is enlaced with naga snakes and its branches are filled with brightly coloured horse, leopard and camel heads. The nude, dangling women, posed in gestures of modesty, seem only to extend the explosion of life on the tree's forms, while below the tree, smaller plants are brimming with fish and a wide diversity of mammalian heads. Stylistically, the painting of the waq-waq tree departs from the tree-of-life textiles. It is set against a dark ground and lacks the airy brightness of the white cotton cloths. Yet it evokes a fecundity, and a wondrousness that is shared between the two media—the painting and the palampore.

Exports of Imagination

Global exchanges can occur along both exalted and quotidian paths. The tree-of-life textiles were painted and washed in the bright sunlight of the Coromandel coast. They were then packed onto ships, transported around the Horn of Africa, sold and unfolded in the domestic space of a European woman's dressing room, or unfurled on top of a marital bed. These textiles are among the most intimate material encounters of the early-modern world.

With their evocations of women of flesh who taste like fruit, they are also among the most erotic objects to have travelled on the high seas. Scholarship on hybrid forms like the grotesque or the waq-waq tree emphasize the utility of ornament for subversive means. In the case of colonial Latin America, ornament has been identified as a site where local artisans could render pre-Christian deities under the guise of "meaningless" floral decoration.³⁶ The case of the artisans who painted the flowering tree textiles is historically distinct. The artisans in Golconda were not suppressed, but were encouraged to use their imaginations. As an English East India Company official wrote to the agent commissioning the cloths, "Let them use their own fancies in those works and colours which they can best perform, for it is not material what the fancies or works the Patterns are, so [long as they] be finely done and [in] lively colours."³⁷ Instead of incorporating their own religious beliefs, the artisans seem to have been experimenting with the monstrosity of the outside world to which these cloths were to be sent. If the textiles evoke a demon face, an Ottoman dragon-tail, or an unmarked island's dangling damsel, it is because the artists were imagining the vastness of the ocean's wonders.

When these cloths arrived in Europe, was the suggestive ornament domesticated, was the meaning insignificant or lost? Can another culture's monstrous imaginings transport? Or did the fabulous tree gain other meanings at the end of its voyage? If the Golconda artist painted the tree as a composite of all outlandish exoticisms, in Europe it was perhaps taken to be the depiction of a uniquely Indian arboreal phenomenon. In the 16th and 17th centuries, European scholars, poets and theologians thought

that the tree of life might have had its origin in the Indian fig tree, commonly known as the banyan tree. The lineage for this idea can be traced to Pliny, but it was revived in the 16th century by the Dutch humanist, Johannes Goropius Becanus (1519–72). The idea of the banyan tree as the tree of life was also discussed at length by the New World explorer, Sir Walter Raleigh in his *History of the World* (1614).³⁸

This idea was popularized when John Milton imported the Indian fig tree into his imagery of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden in his epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1667). In Book IX, Milton writes that Adam and Eve sought cover from:

The fig-tree, not that kind for fruit renowned,
But such as at this day to Indians known
In Malabar or Deccan spreads her arms
Branching so broad and long, that in the ground
The bended twigs take root, and daughters grow
About the mother tree, a pillared shade.³⁹

In this stanza, Milton locates the tree of life firmly in “Malabar or Deccan”. While the slender stems on the painted cotton cloths do not resemble the “broad” trunk of an Indian banyan tree, and the leaves, with their tapered ends, depart from the rounded shape of the banyan's leaves, the morphological similarities may matter less than the metaphorical qualities the design suggests. Milton casts the tree as a feminine, maternal presence that “spreads its arms” low to the ground to birth “bended twigs” that will become its daughters. He enlivens the tree of life by making it not a European creation, but an export from India.

Did British consumers make this connection between the Indian trees on their textiles and the Biblical tree of life? One cloth that may have led them on this path is an 18th-century kalamkari bed-cover (figure 12). Perhaps presented as a marital gift, it is full of suggestive figures—at the top, pairs of birds and squirrels, and below, two loving lions, companionable monkeys, peafowl, and other varieties of animal, insect and human couples. Tucked between the lowest branches of the monumental tree are two naked humans—a man and a woman, like Adam and Eve, into whose outstretched hands fruits fall from a heavily laden branch. And lest the cloth only be enlivened by European tales, we see dangling from a low-hanging branch at right a flower with a wondrous “demon” face.

We should bring these objects into the canon of Deccan art because they contain manifestations, embellishments and revisions on some of the most pervasive, and yet still only faintly-understood phenomena of the “Golconda style”—the oversized, animate flowers, the dynamic twists and turns, the bright colours and the fascination with the fantastical. Although they are items of export, these textiles are also intensely local and particular to their place of origin and stand as a reminder of the complexity of global study. It would be easy to say that these objects emerge from a primordial mythology of the life-giving tree that persists across time and geographical space. Yet, in this case, artisans have created something different that was a necessity in this early-modern age of mercantile exchange: the tree-of-life textiles, and by extension, many similarly suggestive elements of Deccan art, have been fortified with the

12

Chintz palampore (textile panel),
Coromandel coast, for the European
market. Mordant painted and resist dyed
cotton tabby; 276.01 x 220.98 cm. Royal
Ontario Museum (934.4.11). With
permission of the Royal Ontario Museum.
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ability to sustain many myths. In their strong boughs, these trees hold Adam and Eve, Alexander's soothsayers, and the heartfelt wishes of devotees. Even though the imagery has been quieted, we can still hear the chattering of monkeys, the shrieks of demons and the waq-waq cries of wailing women.

Notes

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