Barmeri Katav-ka-Kaam
Patchwork and Applique

Project Report for The Typecraft Initiative Workshop
20-29 February, 2020, at Gogaji-ki-Khejadi, Barmer, Rajasthan, India
Supported by Rangsutra and Roshni
“But the utilitarian component I seek is not focused to make something that is useful more beautiful, but on the contrary, its focus (is) on the beauty of its utility.”
—Tania Bruguera (About Useful Art).
The Setting

Workshop took place in a village called Gogaji ki Khejdi in Barmer, Rajasthan. The image shows the landscape and the home where the workshop was held.
The Craftswomen

We worked with 15 craftswomen for the skill and design development workshop. (Left to right): Top Row: Chunni, Shanti, Tibu, Pawani, Paami and Bhaami | Bottom Row: Mangi, Khetu, Anita, Nirmala and Shanti. Not pictured: Jasoda, Chandi
Workshop Overview
Visit with the 15 craftswomen by the Rangsutra team, EXIM Bank and the Typecraft team.

The first day was meeting all the stakeholders for the project. There were a total of 15 women who were present.

As is visible in the image the women were sitting with their faces fully covered and were reticent on the first day of the workshop. As a way to introduce participants into the design process, the workshop started with an introductory part where Typecraft project was explained with samples of other Typecraft workshop experiences and exposed the aim of the workshop: to create letter forms using the imagery, patterns, techniques and materials of traditional textile local crafts.

To better gauge the skill and understanding of the group we decided to start by giving newspaper to cut patterns with. This ensured that we would not waste cloth through unwanted designs and patterns and also push the group to think and work with a new material. The use of paper also meant that the group could work quickly, and try out multiple designs.
As a first “warm-up” experience craftswomen started freely cutting old newspapers as a way to sketch cutting solutions that could drive to a useful approach to letter cuts. The idea was to provide a freedom space for experimenting and exploration. Since not all participants were familiar with textile cutting techniques, an introduction to folding and cutting was delivered by Kastura-Ram Pataliya showing samples of his work, along with inputs from the Typecraft design team: Ishan Khosla, Andreu Balius and Shirley Bhatnagar; and Kajal from Rangsutra.

During the first days, the cutting paper experience served as a catalyst for both learning and exploring forms.
As the day progressed, we realised that a lot of the women had never worked in creating patterns themselves. Typically Patterns are created by a “masterji”, a male figure and then the cut cloth is given to the women to sew. Thus eliminating an essential part of the process which they are not privy to. Participants were organized in different groups in order to improve closer communication and learning interaction among their members. Since participants were not familiar with the Latin alphabet, a series of cards with Latin letters were delivered as a helpful aid to understand the shapes. It supposed a real challenge for them, furthermore a way to learn the alphabet, too.

This sketching and ‘learning by doing’ process of work came up with interesting results.

While the women were getting a sense of how shapes emerge through the cut work, we also asked to look at the motifs associated with appliqué in Barmer like the tree of life.
While we kept the best and most relevant works aside for our reference, to encourage the women who were still struggling with cutting shapes in the form of the alphabet, we stuck those around the room and they formed a beautiful decoration.
Alphabet exploration

In the group of 15, all but one of the women were illiterate, slowly but surely as the cutting continued they were able to recognise the shape of the alphabets. Through the days they were able to move from simple cut forms to more complex ones.
Alphabet exploration (video)
Studying existing appliqué designs
Typecraft is not just about the Design of Fonts
Community building is a vital aspect of Typecraft

We also found that only Kastura Ram and his daughter were knowledgeable about all the stages of appliqué. We facilitated them to impart their knowledge and skills to the other craftswomen despite their hesitance to share their expertise. This, we felt was vital not only for equal benefit to the community but for the sake of efficiency of this and future projects. Typecraft is not only about the creation of fonts, moreover it is about sharing your expertise in type and design with a craft community but also inculcating a spirit of sharing and collaboration. Additionally, we called out the names of all the women one by one – selecting a design they had done as something that we felt could work – as a way to acknowledge and validate their contribution.
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Community building is a vital aspect of Typecraft
Craftswomen cutting designs

While on the first day newspaper spreads were used, during the following days, colour tissue paper was used for the exercise. Many women remained confused and despite the exercise and aim of the workshop continued cutting paper following their own criteria.

To summarize, these first three days provide some very good results in terms of ideas and drawings for the designing of letter forms.

Bhami Devi was an enthusiastic participant, while we were not able to use many of her patterns, she had a sense of geometry and symmetry in the patterns she created.
Participants were organized in different groups in order to improve closer communication and learning interaction among their members. During the second day of the workshop word had got around to the village women and on the third day number of participants swelled up to 20 women! However once skills and interests were gauged, 15 women were allowed to participate.

During the workshop the women would have easily cut over 200 patterns in paper.
Craftswomen cutting designs

During the third day, a different approach was tested with participants. They were asked to create the alphabets using a combination of shapes.

Modular approach to create letter forms
Midway through the workshop, we notice the women are able to recognise the alphabets and are trying to recreate them in a variety of ways. We are not insisting on proportions or patterns at this stage.
Shanti Devi has made a circular shape which can be used to make the letter O, and Kastura Ram holds up the letter H.
Patterns and alphabets

Vertical created by one of the women is recreated to form the Alphabet K
Alphabet Collection

As the workshop progresses the most relevant letters are kept. As the paper is very thin, we realise the cuts will not be as delicate on cloth, plus we have to imagine the final design once the cloth is folded.
Design Iteration #1: The Tree of Life (applique)

Kastura Ram had started a direction of lettering based on organic forms of the tree of life. We used that as a starting point to work on this direction.
Design Iteration #1: The Tree of Life

(Above) Patterns cut by Kastura Ram, demonstrate an excellent understanding towards design and the project. (Right) He was able to provide the initial clues as to how to create the alphabet.
Understanding Traditional forms: Organic

Tree of Life curtain, Barmer Appliqué and the design team inspecting the cut out of Tree of Life pattern
Alphabet Exploration

Since participants were not familiar with the Latin alphabet, a series of cards with Latin letters were delivered as a helpful aid to understand the shapes. It supposed a real challenge for them, furthermore a way to learn the alphabet, too. This sketching and ‘learning by doing’ process of work came up with interesting results by the second day of the workshop which were collected for further consideration.

Letter forms belonging to the English Alphabet were shared to make them understand the aim of the workshop.

Small cards with the alphabet are made and these were passed around amongst the women. Meanwhile the pattern cutter Kastura Ram was taking initiative to come up with letterforms – based on the tree of life organic design – on his own.
Patterns and alphabets

The craftswomen trying out various alphabet given to them. Here, Jasoda is trying out an N.
Applique in progress
Analysis of Applique Alphabets

We realised that, it was better to keep the motifs bold and properly enclosed in the white space, rather than have many small delicate forms that are not enclosed within a white space as we can see the letter Z is visually more bolder and pleasing than the letter S where the white shapes have no clear form.
In the K on the left, it is hard to see the designs of the branches (in black) and one just sees white lines. While, for the K on the right, we used chalk marks to close the gaps – it is easier to see the designs enclosed in black.
Design Iteration #2: Patchwork

For the patchwork direction, we made the letters more geometric and also took inspiration from the paper-cuts the craftswomen had done in the first 3-4 days.
Towards the end of the workshop, two distinct styles of lettering emerged. One was using the patchwork with chevron edges based on the cut work of the women. The second direction was Applique, that is negative cutting. The two processes gave very different results. Here, the Typecraft team works on the letter design. Some patterns that came out of paper were specially appreciated due to their delicate nature and beauty. The design team worked to create the alphabet Q to match the original form of craftswomen closely as possible.
The Process of Creating a Patchwork
The designers along with Katsura Ram working on various paper-sketches for patchwork letters.
Collection of various shapes that will be used in creating patterns on cloth.

One of the craftswomen, Nirmala working on a design using the shapes as reference
A Comparison: Patchwork and Applique Alphabets

Taking into account the size of cloth used for the workshop, we started drawing the set of letters of the Latin alphabet with a same relation of scale and proportion. Those drawings were supposed to be the referential model were cutting designs would be applied. Understanding the difference between Patchwork and Appliqué techniques made clear the two different approaches that were used for the design of letters. Towards the end of the workshop, two distinct styles of lettering emerged.

Two variable styles have emerged using patchwork and Applique.

One was using the patchwork with chevron edges (kangoori) based on the cut work of the women. The second direction was Applique, that is negative cutting. The two process gave very different results in terms of proportions and look.
As the workshop progressed, we were trying to find an appropriate design language rather than creating the entire alphabet. So many versions were made.

In the pictures above two very distinct design types have emerged using the same alphabet outline. The overall design is more stronger with multiple motifs are used rather than one.
Design Iteration #3: Jaali
In order to push for another design direction, we looked at the lexicon of existing cushion cover, and bedsheet designs as a starting point to do some more letters like the X. Here the focus was to play with just the lines and basic shapes unlike the floral plant-forms for the other directions.
Design Iteration #3: Trellis

In order to push for another design direction, we looked at the lexicon of existing cushion cover, and bedsheet designs as a starting point to do some more letters like the X. Here the focus was to play with just the lines and basic shapes unlike the floral plant-forms for the other directions.

Letters such as the X and Y created by looking at the trellis (jaali) and other geometric designs from typical Barmer Applique cushion covers.
Summary of Workshop Process
Understanding the difference between Patchwork and Appliqué techniques helped to understand the two different approaches that were used for the design of letters. A first test was made with letter K using a shape nicely cut by Kastura-Ram’s daughter. Nirmala with her father Kastura Ram holds up the letter K which she created from start to finish. She was the only woman in the workshop who had prior expertise with the entire process of applique. Therefore she had an excellent balance between design thinking and skill.

While most of the women have experience in stitching, the process of creating patterns, tinching and folding was something they picked up during the workshop.

Nirmala and Katsura Ram hold up the first almost ready alphabet based on the paper cut by Nirmala.
Process: 1A. Design by the craftswomen

On the first couple of days, the craftswomen struggled with making letters in paper cutouts.
Process: 1A. Design by the craftswomen

Discussing the K patchwork made by Nirmala
Process: 1A. Design by the craftswomen

A collection of paper cuts made by various craftswomen — shows a range of expertise, from some who are much more skilful at cutting and understanding form to others with a more rudimentary understanding.
Process: 1A. Design by the craftswomen

Since the artisans were struggling with letterforms, we composed some of them from their cutouts
Process 1B: Design by the Typecraft team with Kastura Ram

The design by the craftswomen happened in parallel with Typecraft team’s work with Kastura Ram
Process 1B: Design by the Typecraft team with Kastura Ram
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Process: 2. Tinching

Piru Khan teaching tinching skills to craftswomen
Process: 2. Tinching

The images show Tinching being taught to the participants for the first time with help of Kajal from Rangsutra and Piru Khan from Katsura Ram, and Roshini. This process is usually done by the pattern cutter. We wanted to democratise the learning and not have only Katsura Ram handle the pinning of the fabric.

Kajal and Piru Khan explaining the process of tinching to the artisans

Shanti and Tibu are busy with sewing of the alphabets.
Process: 2. Tinching
Process: 3. Drawing and Pattern Transfer onto Cloth
Process: 4. Cutting Cloth

First the cloth is cut with a chisel, then with scissors for the more finer details.
Nirmala shows us how cloth is cut traditionally, not with a scissors but with a hammer and chisel. This allows them to cut multiple pieces of cloth in one go.

The black cloth post tinching has white chalk powder dusted on to the cloth and the chisel in a single blow cuts the forms.
Process Pictures
Process: 5. Pasting

Kastura Ram is sticking the cambric cloth onto the organdie base cloth, and then drying them in the sun
Process: 6. Folding and Stitching (Applique)

Nirmala working on her own design of the K directly on cloth as a patchwork
Process Pictures
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Process Pictures
Interaction with the Community
Interaction with the community

We developed a friendly relationship with the women at the workshop and with the children of the women many who would come post school, children often would join in and cut paper and enjoy creating their own patterns. Andreu Balius shows images of Spain to the women and where he comes from on a globe.
Interaction with the community

The children enjoying paper cutting post school.
In the image are participants: Pawani, Anita, Tibu, Pami, Nirmala, Khetu, Mangi, Chuni | Men: Katsura Ram, Piru Khan, Ishan Khosla and Andreu Balius.
Day 10: 29.02.2020 | The completed letters
Addendum

Attendance list of all the 15 craftswomen in the workshop. As one can see most cannot sign their name.
Dhanyawad!
typecraftinitiative.org