

Imperial Splendour: Textiles in Royal Life

This painting of a Mughal court scene from the 17th century features Emperor Jahangir presenting Prince Khurram with a turban ornament, a momentous occasion where the prince was given the title, Shah Jahan, which means “King of the World.” Regal figures and ministers are depicted in ornate jamas, turbans and patkas. The courtroom is set under a grand canopy and furnished with exquisite carpets, fans, bolsters and wall hangings. These fabrics served as symbols of the Empire’s wealth – imparting luxury and grandeur across various aspects of imperial life.

Historically, the production of Indian textiles relied greatly on the patronage of royal families. These textiles went beyond lavish attire and were used to enliven indoor and outdoor spaces, projecting a sense of prestige and power.

Embellishing Interior Spaces

Intricate textiles were used to accentuate the living spaces of noble families. For example, in this 17th century Rajput painting, we see the use of wall hangings, glittering screens and carpets decorated with floral designs. These textiles conjure multi-sensorial experiences, imbuing the building with a greater sense of comfort and splendour. The next time you walk through old forts or palaces, try to imagine how their bare structures were transformed through the use of fabrics.

Conjuring Palatial life Outdoors

The use of textile furnishings also extended beyond the walls of the palace. Constructed using expensive and elaborate fabrics, tents and shamianas fulfilled various functions, from serving as administrative centres, to places of respite, entertainment and privacy. Indian royals routinely travelled long distances with their entourage, setting up expansive camps over the course of their journeys. This 19th century painting by the artist Tara captures how such camps imitated the grandeur of palatial life. Nestled under an embellished tent, Maharana Swarup Singh, his courtiers, musicians and dancers are seated on ornate carpets. Upon closer inspection, we can see that the stallion and hunting dog are also clothed in patterned, pink blankets. Set in the midst of the forest, the tent symbolises power over the elements, while also showcasing the prestige of the Emperor.

Projecting a Sense of Extravagance

The use of textiles as a form of display served as a common political tool across Indian kingdoms and empires, including the British Raj. During the height of the British Empire’s hold in India in the 19th and 20th century, the crown hosted several large-scale events in India and abroad. These included the three Delhi Durbars, the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Colonial and Indian Exhibition amongst others.

During these events, the British administration organised spectacular displays showcasing the riches of the Empire such as velvets, carpets, tapestries and furnishings. The sumptuous nature of these fabrics were intentionally leveraged to create an atmosphere of extravagance. However, the splendour of these displays

painted a very different image from the realities in India at the time. While they flaunted the Empire's riches to the world, millions of Indians were dying due to widespread famines towards the end of the 19th century. The glamorous use of textiles also embodied such contradictions as they concealed the exploitation of Indian resources that went into their making.

To this day, textiles continue to contribute towards an image of opulence across Indian cultures. Used as decorative elements in homes, worn on special occasions and exchanged as gifts, they remain associated with projections of status and soft power.

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