Following the Map: A Postcolonial Unpacking of a Kashmir Shawl
Abstract

This article traces the stories in and around one of four Srinagar “map shawls” (c. 1870), bringing postcolonial discourse analysis to bear on reading its changing and contending meanings. Its technical brilliance sits amongst changes in shawl production as a result of East-West trade, particularly during the nineteenth century. The shawl's meanings draw upon courtly dress and gift exchange, the social functions of cartography, local traditions of painting, the pomp of the Raj, commodity capitalism, personal souvenirs, gallery patronage and residual postcolonial rivalries. Its complex significance is “mapped” across trans-regional exchanges of power and cultural traditions in Kashmir, its use as a sign of conquest in imperial exhibitions, and its contemporary status as a prized work of exotic fabric art. Rehistoricizing and repoliticizing the Godfrey Shawl reveals a denser narrative than often circulates around Asian textile “collectibles”—one that lends itself to comparison with literary uses of textiles as signs of history and culture. Salman Rushdie’s novels Midnight’s Children and Shame also draw our attention to the Kashmir region through the device of textiles as symbolic inspiration and modes of storytelling “subaltern” to dominant histories. Attention to such narratives reveals limitations in some Western gendering of fabric arts.
Many people, despite centuries of embedded linguistic links between narrative and weaving (as in the double meaning of “spinning a yarn”), turn from deep interpretations of poetry and print fiction to look at a textile work as a self-evident surface. Especially, perhaps, when the work is hanging on a gallery wall, a fabric is taken as offering a “present” experience remarkable primarily for cultural exoticism, design elegance and/or technical virtuosity. In his deconstruction of some of the cultural assumptions and scientific methods behind Western colonial expansionism, Jose Rabasa (1986) makes the point that maps are not mere mimetic surfaces of natural spatial reach, but that they are part of a technology producing the idea of a universally present gaze as a meaningful possibility. They are also histories of all the journeys they summarize and all the maps they displace. Here I would like to bring together “flat” fabric and “flat” maps under a reading informed by postcolonial literary theory (that is, an awareness of the historical and present cultural dynamics engaged with colonialist legacies of power differentials) to show how textile art can carry a richly textured narrative full of the kinds of contending meanings we commonly expect from literary texts.¹

In the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) there is a large “shawl” which is a woven and embroidered map of Srinagar, the major city of Kashmir. It uses Mughal painting conventions of multiple perspective under a bird’s-eye viewpoint and is of sufficient detail for thirty weavers to have taken a year to complete (Brand 1995: 120). It was commissioned around 1870 for the court of Maharaja Ranbir Singh (ruling 1857–85; Crill 1993: 93) and was produced from the workshop of Sayyid Hussain Shah and Sayyid Muhammad Mir (Crill 1993: 94). The shawl was donated to the Gallery by the descendants of Major Stuart Godfrey in 1992. Godfrey had been a political officer (the Assistant Resident) in Kashmir and had bought the shawl from the State treasury in 1896. It is known to have been exhibited at the Delhi Durbar 1902–3 and at the Crystal Palace exhibition of Empire in 1911. The Godfrey shawl is one of only four “map shawls,” its supposed pair being in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London, which also holds another example on loan from the royal collection. The fourth is in the Sardar Pratap Singh Museum in Srinagar itself (Crill 1993: 91; Maxwell 1995: 70).

For all their materiality, objects are slippery; their meanings change according to the circumstances we encounter them in. From a Western perspective, “shawl” means something worn, usually by women; “cashmere” turns the humble
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knitted shoulder drape into a luxury fashion item, carrying with it notions of secluded beauty spots, lakes and hills and intricately swirling “paisley” patterns. In Indian context, up to the end of the nineteenth century at least, “cashmere” was simply pashmina—goat hair, admittedly brought down from the mountains and so costing more than cotton padding, say, but not an uncommon source of cloth and one that could be anything from stored lengths for ritual distribution at court to floor coverings and wall hangings. Major General W. G. Osborne, visiting a palace in 1838, for example, observed: “The floor was covered with rich shawl carpets, and a gorgeous shawl canopy” (Crill in Stronge 1999: 115). In the Sikh kingdoms that grew to include Kashmir, art was seen as continuous with both everyday life and the spiritual world. There is a hymn by Guru Arjan which states that “liberation is attained while laughing, playing, dressing up and eating” (hasandian khelandian painandia khavandian vice hove)

Figure 1
mukti: Guru Granth cited in Stronge 1999: 41). The artistic images that express union with the Divine in Sikh scripture therefore emerge from everyday chores. Dyeing fabrics and stitching them, acts of dressing and applying make-up, working in a smithy or churning butter at home symbolize complete devotion and single-minded attachment to the One. The immutability of Truth may be perceived through a task as mundane as sewing: “Truth is eternal; once sewn, it never gets ripped asunder” (Guru Granth cited by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh in Stronge 1999: 41). With this in mind, we can see that the Srinagar map shawls might mean more than just a display of wealth or political power. They may in fact express what colonial romance came to imagine about the Vale of Kashmir—that life around Srinagar under benign rule was close to and coextensive with religious inspiration. If, however, we start our reading of the shawl text from the “reception” end of the imperial history that brought the Srinagar shawl to an Australian audience, we begin to track a less harmonious complex of shifting and contending meanings.

The Godfrey shawl is a combination of woven pashmina and embroidery. Originally shawls were woven in one piece (kanikar), and took a year or more to complete. Then men began sewing together sections of an overall design woven on different looms (tilikar or “patched” shawls) as a way of speeding up production (Crill 1993: 91). Needleworked shawls (amlikar) are reputed to have been introduced to Kashmir in 1803 by Khwaja Yusuf, an Armenian merchant, who merely extended the expressive range of rafugar—the men who stitched pieces together and embroidered extra work into the weaving. Embroidered shawls escaped the 26% tax on fully woven ones and became possible when Ranjit Singh’s unification of the North West in 1819 dispossessed some landholders, turning them to artisanal labor (Irwin 1955: 3–4). Embroidered designs at first imitated woven ones, but “a new genre arose in about 1830 that incorporated motifs with human figures and animals. This pictorial style was mostly used for patkas (sashes) and the edging of chogas (robes).” It then extended to large all-over patterns (Buie 1996: 45–7), the most elaborate examples of which are shawls depicting maps of Srinagar and the Kashmir valley (Crill in Stronge 1999: 127–8).

In galleries, objects are “frozen in time” (as with Keats’s Grecian um) and abstracted from their stories, despite the best efforts of modern curatorial practice. This materiality and autonomy of the thing is perhaps accentuated in the exhibition of fabric arts; they assume a quality of completion and self-sufficiency even as they also silently express the hands and the time that went into their making. In the case of the Godfrey shawl, resplendent on wall or back-room table, the self-presence of the artwork—the overwhelming detail coupled with the dominating size of the piece—presents its map as a flat, totalized image. But the shawl can also be read as a map of stories, a palimpsest of changes and differences. It includes the tomb of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin and the Shankaracharya Hindu temple
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(Thus indicating the multicultural tradition of Kashmir); shows the fort Hari Parbat built by Emperor Akbar, who annexed the valley in 1588 and visited the same year; depicts the famous gardens constructed by emperor Jehangir, contains in its fabric memories of Ranjit Singh, who took Srinagar in 1819 (driving workers away to Lahore, Amritsar, Rawalpindi because of taxes) and the British, who annexed it after the first Sikh war (1846) but sold it to the Dogra Maharaja of Jammu, Gulab. Such was the revenue from Kashmir that this ruler decreed weavers could not leave unless they found a replacement to do their work (Irwin 1955: 9). Presumably Ranbir Singh was the beneficiary of this not always popular move, and his commissioning of the shawls would thus be a display of his suzerainty to local Kashmiris and, if we credit the reason given for their production, a token of fealty to the Raj for establishing his dynasty. The self-contained work of art is thus also a catalog of exchanges of power.

One of the stories hidden in the Godfrey shawl is, of course, the “romance of exotic authenticity;” another is the story of constant transregional exchange. The Kashmir shawl has taken on a special signification of local identity, even though it has been a token of trade and Western adaptation. When early attempts to relocate pashmina goats to France and England failed (Buie 1996: 49–50) and substitute combinations were adopted for European shawl production, the specific regionality of the fully pashmina shawl was assured. Nonetheless, this sign of local identity is itself a product of imperial conquest and cultural exchange. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin, who ruled Kashmir from 1420 to 1470 and is credited with developing shawl production in the valley, had been taken into exile by Timur/Tamerlane. He spent seven years in Samarkand and after taking control of Kashmir sent artisans to Iran and Central Asia to learn how to produce the artworks of Islamic culture (Ali 2001: 18; Buie 1996: 39). The wool itself is imported to Kashmir from Ladakh and Western Tibet (Buie 1996: 41). This originary exchange was followed by British and French incursion on the subcontinent during which time Ranjit Singh rose to integrate districts of the Punjab into a unified kingdom (1780–1839). However, this unity was based on Muslim artillery, Sikh cavalry, Dogra, Gurkha, Sikh and Muslim infantry plus 200 military advisers from France, Italy, the US and the Anglo-Indian population (Stronge 2001: 23). The distinct identity of Kashmir became one of multiple traditions.

Stories of the growth and decline of European consumer demand for shawls and the effects on Indian production are by now well known (Irwin, Levi-Strauss). East–West interaction is reflected in Indian weavers quickly adopting the Jaquard loom and working with French pattern books at their side by the 1840s (Buie 1996: 47) and the apparent fact that green coloring in shawls was derived from boiling English baize and broadcloth (Buie 1996: 42). By the 1830s amlikar pashmina shawls had acquired pictorial patterns of their own (hunting scenes and soldiers marching, scenes from Persian romances, such as the 1852 Srikandar Nama picture shawl of Gulab Singh; Stronge 1999: 128) as well as the standard “paisley” styles (Crill 1993: 91). The Srinagar map shawls sign both fixed place and moving trade.

Postcolonial literary studies and its attendant theorizing stresses ideas of resistance and subversion to colonial power, exploring the contradiction that anticolonial movements often end up reproducing the politics and patterns of representation and repression of those they seek to overthrow (Ashcroft et al. 1989). Hybridity, ambiguous complicity in power structures, subversive mimicry are central ideas, and we can use these to discern other possible meanings in the Godfrey shawl and the interests in producing them (Bhabha 1994). The Australian curators, for example, reading from an ambiguously decolonized colonial position, celebrate the “glories of the Raj and court” imperial past represented in the shawl, but also note that it may have been produced as a subtle assertion of local power against Raj domination. Without official records, it is not possible to make definite pronouncements, but it is thought that one spur to production of this map shawl was the survey of Kashmir carried out by British geographers between 1855 and 1864 as part of the Grand Trigonometrical Survey of India (Maxwell 1995). In its commissioning, we may therefore read a counter-assertion of rights of surveillance and ownership, of the force of traditional cultural knowledge versus the scientific measurement of Western modernity. There is an implicit statement in the
teeming and peopled detail of the shawl's map, and its pre-modern multiple perspectives, that trigonometrical reproductions of landscape do not capture everything in their uniform and abstracting art. The embroidered map affirms the importance of intimacy of local knowledge and the richness of lived detail. Wrapped in such a shawl, Ranbir Singh would visually confirm the unity of ruler and city, its crafts, rivers and land. Perhaps more probably, the shawl would have been a wall hanging or table cover, or even a carpet before the throne (Rosemary Crill, personal communication), in which case there would still be a telling contrast between the “soft furnishings” of domestic comfort and artistic display on the one hand, and the cold functionality of a military “parchment” spread across a campaign table or office desk.

It is notable that once the shawls fall into gallery hands, they acquire a competitive edge sharpened by different stories. The V&A notes that there are only four extant map shawls and claims that its own is “arguably the finest” (Crill 1993: 90, 91), while the curator in the NGA makes the same claim for its antipodean counterpart (Robyn Maxwell, personal communication). Both evaluations stress rarity, technical skill (wealth of detail), and liveliness of figures as the criteria for supremacy (the Royal shawl on loan to the V&A is depreciated: “it lacks the charm of the tiny vignettes . . . and its design is much more static;” Crill 1993: 94, n. 5). Less scholarly works are not ashamed to recycle Orientalist enthusiasms: “The booming industry in [Europe] was producing extraordinary shawls, and yet those from Kashmir, steeped in all the mystery and perfumes of the Orient, retained a certain aura of authenticity” (Werther 1983: 8). This is the language of the collector and of humanist realism: uniqueness, superabundance of content, the mirror to social life—plus the exotic tinge of armchair tourism: you can “travel” to the Shalimar Gardens, Dal Lake, and Akbar’s fort in the panoramic “snapshot.” This fabric “snapshot,” however, is prized because it is not a mass-repeatable item of “soulless” modern technology: it speaks of human effort, care, whimsy even.

Perhaps it is significant that the V&A (a royal foundation collecting under imperial aegis) suggests the “twin” shawls of Ranbir Singh were commissioned as a gift for the visit to India of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII). By its own argument that the Royal shawl is clearly meant as a gift to British rulers because its landmarks are labeled in English (Crill 1993: 94, n. 5), the opinion of the English museum seems at least questionable, since its own shawl and the “twin” in Australia are both labeled in Persian script, and it is perhaps unlikely that a prince would order a couple of shawls three years in advance on the off chance that a visitor might reach Kashmir (Watt and Brown 1987 [1902–3]). Sir George Birdwood (1880: 367) alludes to the fact that His Majesty actually did receive during his tour in India a shawl worked with a map of the city of Srinagar (p. 352)—presumably the one on loan from the royal collection. The story behind the Australian shawl is
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interestingly different, as we shall see.

What is worth noting from the V&A commentary, is that pilgrims bought “town plan” paintings of the region they visited, depicting the major shrines, as souvenirs and devotional mementos. This style was also part of Indian mapping from the 1600s on (Crill 1993: 95). From Hall (1996), we also know that there was some production of palace murals and embroidered battle scenes in the northern Panjaban region from the late 1600s at least. Thus, there was a cartographic/panoramic tradition already in India and in textile practice before Ranbir Singh ordered his twin shawls. The V&A map shawl is described as altering the topography to include the Nishat Bagh and Shalimar Bagh, while the Royal Collection shawl adds “the nearby beauty spots of Martand and Vernag . . . in separate compartments on the side” (Crill 1993: 91). By contrast, the NGA shawl appears to have no major reorganization of the map, with the body of the shawl centered on the city and its social life, and names given to key bridges. What we might tentatively conclude from this is that one shawl at least may have been intended as a souvenir gift of leisure features, not unlike the pilgrimage paintings, while the other was designed to be kept in the Raja’s palace as a more political signing of local authority.

It is possible that Ranbir Singh had inside information and a personal agenda. He had been present at the 1846 Treaty of Bhairewal with the young prince Dalip Singh (Stronge 1999: 25). After the second round of fighting with the Sikhs, the British annexed the Punjab, incorporated the Sikh army into its colonial forces and exiled Dalip Singh to England where he became the darling of society (Jones in Stronge 1999: 152–63; Singh in Stronge 1999: 26). Dalip may have alerted Ranbir Singh to the possibility of a visit, and, as the beneficiary of Britain’s transfer of power after the Sikh Wars, Ranbir may well have sought to use the occasion to validate his rule to the local population and express fealty to his imperial sponsors. Certainly the making of twin shawls suggests a direct allusion to his predecessor, Ranjit Singh, who had commissioned a pair between 1819 and 1835 to commemorate his victories (Crill 1993: 91). But by the time the Godfrey shawl appears in the Delhi Durbar exhibition of 1902, its meaning has changed: it becomes an example of “native craft” and a sign of imperial possession.

George Watt (Watt and Brown 1987 [1902–3]) elaborates, in his catalog of the Exhibition:

Picture shawl—Major Stuart H. Godfrey has sent to the Exhibition a shawl that has excited the greatest possible interest. As a piece of colour it is very admirable, but in point of design it is devoid of artistic interest. The remarkable feature about this shawl, however, is the fact that it is a panoramic map of Srinagar and depicts the city with its palaces, people, mountains, lakes rivers and even avenues of trees with the names embroidered beneath each. Major Godfrey says of this wonderful fabric: “This specimen of the Kashmir hand-worked shawl was purchased at one of the sales of the surplus shawls of Kashmir, held by the Accountant-General, Jammu and Kashmir State. An account and photogravure of this shawl was published in the Magazine of Art in August 1901. The design is a plan to scale of the city of Srinagar as it stood in the time of the Maharaja Sir Ranbir Singh G.C.S.I., by whose orders the shawl was made. The shawl was, it is said, designed for presentation to H.M. the King Emperor, then Prince of Wales, had the Royal visit to Jammu extended to Srinagar. The chief places in and around the city can be easily identified from the shawl.”

George Watt’s Preface to the Delhi Exhibition catalogue describes its function as a “practical account of the more noteworthy art industries of India” set out “in a systematic sequence, under certain classes, divisions and sections . . . to afford descriptions by which the various articles might be severally identified, rather than to furnish traditions and historic details regarding them.” He regrets the loss thereby of “much of the beauty and poetry that appertains to the art crafts of this country” (Watt and Brown 1987 [1902–3]: v).

The quote is of interest for its unstable terminology—industrial arts; art crafts; art manufactures, beauty and functionality—in which Eastern art production is both recognized and kept at a distance from Western high culture. In awarding prizes for “artistic merit,” beauty is acknowledged, but placing the awards in the context of
an exhibition of the produce of a country divided into “Loans” and “Main or Sale Gallery” art is subordinated to trade (vi). As Narayani Gupta also makes clear in her “Introduction,” the exhibition (labeled after the museum in Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1987 [1901]), the Ajaibghar—the “wonder house,” xiv) estranges their own art from the Indian people, even as it makes them aware of the continuities and regional differences of culture across the subcontinent. Moreover, it is based on a double project that looked forward to trade and backward to salvaging dying crafts. In this context, the Srinagar shawls map enthusiastic self-congratulation, colonial bad conscience, and well-meaning patronage. Imperial spread and modernizing economics had given access to cities and arts of wonder, removed princely patrons and displaced artisans, had created both overseas markets and obstructive trade barriers favoring British goods, all in the name of spreading universal well-being.

The *Magazine of Art* in 1901 rehearses the usual story of the collapse of the shawl industry at the Franco-Prussian War, but also concentrates on the economics of production in Kashmir (cheap forced labor under feudal control) (Levi-Strauss 1901). British limitation of princely powers and civil reforms meant agriculture, carpet-making or silk factories were more profitable activities than weaving. Ranbir Singh’s commission of 1870, then, may have been also an attempt to subsidize an industry of great local cultural significance but declining viability under the globalization of imperial economics. The *Magazine of Art* notes however, that “The Kashmir State still sends an annual tribute of shawls to the British Sovereign. Some of these have been valued at £300 each” (p. 452). Here we have a likely explanation, independent of rumors of a royal visit (dismissed in the article as “legend”), of the meaning and provenance of the Royal map shawl, if not also the V&A half of the “twin” Srinagar shawls.

The NGA, on information from Godfrey’s grandson, is of the opinion that Godfrey bought its exhibit himself. The circumstances are outlined by the 1901 *Magazine of Art*:

*A considerable number of State shawls collected in the late Maharaja’s time were sold a few years ago by the advice of the Accountant General, in order to prevent deterioration and loss of interest on unproductive capital.*

(p. 452)

Godfrey picked up his “Naksha” or map shawl at one of these sales. It is valued for its “minutely fine” work, “artistic blending of colours,” and rare use of only vegetable dyes. Meanings have shifted, then, from courtly symbols of fealty to artwork valued for technical skill that can be converted from the cultural obsolescence of “unproductive capital” (as determined by a modern and British Accountant-General) into hard cash.

As a gift by the Godfrey family to the Durbar and the exhibition, the shawl becomes a sign of collective British control of a region, validated by the fact that the article appears in the “language” of the native and framed by the pomp of Raj political
ceremony on the one hand, and panoptic imperial surveillance on the other. It speaks of the power of Empire to collect all kinds of things from all around the world, to survey the native ruler even as he surveys his own territory and to wrest that view from him (Maxwell 1993). On the wall of another former colony, in an era when both India and Australia are independent nations, the shawl becomes an artwork signifying the past glories of Asia—an example of a genre of artistic production (the shawl) and a period of art history (the Mughal, then Sikh kingdoms). It is valued for its skill of execution, the curiosity of its different sense of perspective, and the vibrant colors of north Indian art. Perhaps there is also an exchange with the viewer in which he or she is subtly coopted into the view of the native maker, seduced by the beauty of the thing into a “barbarous” appreciation of the imaginary space of the map. Without program notes, however, this space is not meaningful except as a general signifier of the exotic elsewhere; with them, it is still not the history of the text that is immediately available so much as a set of “touristic” images of “pale hands I loved” and earthly paradise which the viewer has to draw on.

NGA curator Robyn Maxwell adds to this popular culture archive the family story that Godfrey married the daughter of the Resident. Given the nineteenth-century custom of giving shawls as wedding presents (Werther 1983: 6), we might guess that the Srinagar shawl became a gift to cement a professionally propitious marriage. This is an interesting possibility, since it underlines the fact that trade under imperialism was not all one way: that those in power were subtly influenced by those they ruled and less subtly influenced. While the British had consistently reduced courtly symbolism to commercial barter, they themselves took over much of the panoply of oriental grandeur and ritual performance.

Apart from a present for his wife, or an attractive souvenir to take away at the end of his tour of duty, maybe the Major was also acquiring by proxy the idea of aristocracy, elegance, and belonging represented in the textile. Maybe it was a way of expunging by commodification the message implied by the Maharaja or inferred by his colonial advisers that “You British may have power, but it is the power of the barbarian. It will take centuries before this place civilises you.” Of course, having to deal in cash to obtain the shawl merely confirmed the truth of this, even as it also showed the steady decline of old ways and symbols of authority.

The practices of the Raj, while they reduced princely rituals to economic exchange as befitting a “nation of shopkeepers,” also borrowed the ceremonial shows of Indian rulers. Under the Mughal emperors and princely states, authority was symbolized as a mutually binding relationship between ruler and vassal by ritual exchange of cloth for tokens. Sometimes sewn into gowns or caparisons for horses and elephants, these “robes of honour” were specifically produced for the palace and kept ready for ceremonial distribution in toshkhanas (treasuries) (Waghorne 1994: 18).

The Mughal would present a khelat which, narrowly construed, consisted of specific and ordered sets of clothes, including a cloak, turban, shawls, various turban ornaments, a necklace and other jewels, arms and shields, but could also include horses and elephants with various accoutrements as signs of authority and lordship . . . Under the mughals and other Indian rulers, these ritual prestations constituted a relationship between giver and receiver and were not understood as simply an exchange of goods and valuables. The khelat was a symbol “of the idea of continuity . . . depending on contact of the body of the recipient with the body of the donor through the medium of the clothing.” (Cohn 1996: 635–6)

Having not long ago battled to shed the mystique of kingship, and with the increasing Victorian sense of personal space according to codes of the puritan genteel, it is not hard to surmise how a mercantile empire might misread such an exchange. Reduction of courtly symbols to cash value had begun in the Sikh kingdoms of north India long before Ranbir Singh found himself advised of a cashflow problem. The French general, Jean François Allard, accumulated gifts of cloth from his thankful master. (Presumably he was supposed to make a living from gifts from underlings and pilferage in battle, but also his savings disappeared in a bank collapse.) Court gifts assumed the significance of “pay” and Allard became a cloth merchant in France in order to gain
the cash on which to support his family (see illustration in Crill in Strong 1999: 121).

After the 1857 “Mutiny,” Lord Canning began the process of replacing Mughal power with British rule by combining the “royal tour” show of power with the pomp of a Mughal durbar. In distributing privileges and titles to loyal princes, he also handed out khelat. However, the Western sense of equity and probity detected in the ritual “gift” and the return of nazar and peshkash (coin and precious possessions) the threat of an Eastern “bribe.” (Thomas Roe, emissary from the English court, rejected the gift of a gold shawl by the Governor of Surat in 1616 for fear he would be under obligation before he had determined the reliability of trade there. Irwin 1955: 10.) Worried by the excesses of its profit-driven planters and the corruption of its nabobs (as seen in the trial of Warren Hastings), the British government sought to preserve an even-handed distance as it adopted the outward display of Oriental rule. It converted khelat tokens of fealty to cash-value items for which exact recompense would be made. Gifts presented would be stored in the state exchequer and available for sale. Rewards for service became “objects” subject to signed bonds that could be demanded back (Cohn 1996: 650). The map shawls therefore tell stories of both a new imperial power of a different, more calculating kind and beneath that, an older symbolic mode ritual allegiance.

Joanne Punzo Waghorne (1994) makes a detailed analysis of rituals in a south Indian princely state, showing that the outward dress of courtly decoration was a kind of performance of spirituality through icons. She extends her argument interestingly to suggest that the Victorian mantelpiece and clutter of domestic display was a substitute for Catholic and kingly pomp which borrowed from the paraphernalia of the Hindu court encountered in colonial administration (pp. 249–55). “The rituals the British contrived both at home and in India were rituals that literally clothed the empire with sanctity. They dressed and redressed their subjects and themselves” (p. 113). In doing so, they adopted the esoteric understanding of their Indian vassals that “The spiritual body is not inside or underneath the fleshly body, it is layered on top of it” (p. 254). To what extent was the display of the Srinagar shawl in Major Godfrey’s drawing room an attempt to take on the aura of gold thread and hilltop temples as a dignifying cover for raw material power?

The exhibition of the Godfrey shawl, brought out from a modern state “treasury” in an art-museum context, also reproduces in secular cultural terms something of the religious experience (darshan) of the public given a sighting of the Raja or his regalia. At the same time, it signifies several kinds of loss—the reduction of the sacred to the secular, the severance of ties to place in the globalization of commerce and cultural exchange, the colonial disruption of communal ties and traditional art practices, the loss of links to a romantic past and imperial grandeur, the loss entailed in the shift from handcraft production to mass machine production.
When we consider the multiple stories and readings of an object such as the map shawl, we have also to think about how those meanings alter according to context. It is worth reflecting on the fact that the NGA calls its prize exhibit not the Ranbir Singh Shawl or the Sayyid Hussain Shah and Sayyid Muhammad Mir shawl, but “the Godfrey Shawl” after the family that donated it. If we look at this from a postcolonial viewpoint, it amounts to a preservation of colonialist attitudes in which natives were anonymous: only white colonial officers had their names recorded in photos, historical accounts, etc. It also perpetuates the craft–art distinction in which craftwork was supposed to have been produced by anonymous peasant workers for local collective consumption and “real” art was made by famous named individuals (Gurian 2001: 27). In this case, the two master embroiderers are recorded, but in a provenance hierarchy favoring the commissioning ruler and the donating imperial agent. Naming the shawl after its donor, however, continues a tradition of honoring the gift rather than the commodity cash purchase. So the gallery downplays the Maharaja’s role, since he has descended from gift giver to cash-strapped merchant, and acknowledges the symbolic cultural wealth of gift giving that was originally inherent in the making of the shawl. In this respect, the Godfrey shawl recuperates traditions of textile usage in Indian courts which were destroyed by the modernizing trading Empire that Godfrey represented and that led to the arrival of the shawl in Australia.

Another reason for the naming lies in Gurian’s observation that exhibited artifacts are assigned value on scales of uniqueness and representativeness. Artworks tend to be valued as unique while manufactures are examples of an industry (Gurian 2001: 26). However, an artwork is also valued because it is representative of the output of the artist (“typical of his/her genius”), and handicrafts which in colonial times were exhibited as “native manufactures” characteristic of production from a region or colony, were then, and increasingly now, valued as unique to a place or worker (and these days for their rarity—“the only surviving example”). The Godfrey shawl occupies a small and contested zone of valuation at the intersection of these criteria. It is a prime example of the art of the shawl and Kashmiri textile production, and of a very small subset of “map shawls”—only four. It is exhibited as a representative item amongst a collection of Asian textiles, but presented as the best (and therefore unique) example of its (discontinued, and thus doubly unique) kind. To call it by any other name (the “Srinagar shawl,” for example, or the “Ranbir Singh shawl”) would “devalue” the NGA’s holding by indicating its representativeness of the other shawls in other places. This is, paradoxically, to highlight the commodity value of the shawl as unique art object, since the nature of the “ethnographic” Asian textile collection is to present a representative selection of objects “acquired” rather than bought and valued for their exotic colors, elaborate techniques, and cultural traditions.

Bringing postcolonial writing to bear on our readings of the Godfrey shawl rehistoricizes and repoliticizes its status as isolated art object, valued principally for its exotic splendor and gloriously elaborate technique. Reinvesting it with some of its density of narrative also allows us to see it alongside other narratives. We can think, for example, of how Salman Rushdie (1982 [1981], 1984 [1983]) uses the same kind of map of Kashmir within a deconstructive fantasy of national history as contending stories (Midnight’s Children and Shame both refer to key sites on the Srinagar map shawls and use shawls as central symbols of inspiration and resistant storytelling).

At a more theoretical level, we can read from the Srinagar shawl and its male rafugar and weavers onto works such as Sadie Plant’s (1998) Zeroes + Ones to suddenly see how Eurocentric much gendering of textile work is. In the interests of breaking the Western binary of “blokes do machines and birds do embroidery,” she points to the origins of computer technology in a female mathematician and a history of weaving which she generalizes as female. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1993) and others have cautioned feminist criticism against unwitting neocolonialism in imposing Western middle-class assumptions of Enlightenment universalism on Third-World women. Plant provides a slightly different instance of this in erasing from the record the place of men in textile production even now in
South-Asian handloom and embroidery work.

Viewed from this contemporary perspective, the map shawls tell another story of changing meanings. For example, the production of chikan embroidery in the Lucknow district has progressively moved from male master craftsmen to female pieceworkers under pressure of mass production. Feminist concerns certainly apply in this context (since work is regarded as “spare time activity” and not worthy of proper labor regulation), but are crossed with religious factors (most handwork is done by Muslim women who are able to work at home, thereby affirming purdah tradition as gendered ethnicity) and class differences (some women become agents, distributing and collecting materials and taking a commission) (Wilkinson-Weber 1997: 51, 53, 60). In other aspects of this textile production, however, and in other weaving crafts, particularly amongst Muslim workers, men continue to take a major role (Bismillah 1996; Wilkinson-Weber 1997: 49).

In the same spirit of historicizing and contextualizing through following intertextual traces, the map shawls of Srinagar, with their dreams of paradise gardens and courtly elegance, plus lost artisanal excellence, push out to us in today’s world. They hint at the fact that in the name of universal ecologicial interests the West has put an embargo on the production of finer luxury pashmina, beggaring master craftworkers, in part because with China’s involvement with global capital, Chinese hunters are massacring the goats for wool previously collected from sheddings on rocks and bushes (Macdonald 2000). The Srinagar maps also point to the fact that very few of us are now likely to see the fourth example or the city it is housed in, because the multicultural harmony of Kashmir has become a war zone in which tourists can be hijack pawns (Ali 2001). The materiality and multiple contending stories of the shawls show us how in realpolitik, theories of hybridity offer no comfortable solution and debates on textual performances of diasporic identities mask all kinds of suffering. At best we only ever have an uneasy syncretism and there are forces that push to resolve even this into simple oppositions of totalizing uniformity. Aga Shahid Ali’s poem (1997) can be read against the text/s of the Godfrey shawl. Ironically it carries the title of the place that helped create its status as a priceless art object by decimating the craft production which gave shawls their fame:

A History of Paisley:

Their footsteps formed the paisley when Parvati, angry after a quarrel, ran away from Shiva. He eventually caught up with her. To commemorate their reunion, he carved the Jhelum river, as it moves through the Vale of Kashmir, in the shape of paisley.

You who will find the dark fossils of paisleys
one afternoon on the peaks of Zabarvan—
Trader from an ancient market of the future,
ali of chronology, that vain
collaborator of time—won't know that these
are her footprints from the day the world began.

(Oh see, it is still the day the world begins:
and the city rises, holding its remains,
its wooden beams already their own fire's prophets.)
And you, now touching sky, deaf
to her anklets
still echoing in the valley, deaf to men
fleeing from soldiers into dead-end lanes
(Look! Their feet bleed; they leave footprints on the street which will give up its fabric, at dusk, a carpet)—
you have found—you'll think—the first teardrop, gem that was enticed for a mogul diadem into design . . .

. . . three men are discussing, between
sips of tea, undiscovered routes on emerald seas, ships with almonds, with shawls for Egypt.
It is dusk. The gauze is torn. A weaver kneels,
gathers falling threads. Soon he will stitch the air.

. . .

Notes
1. One of the things that has happened in postcolonial studies since the early 1980s is the mixing of disciplinary metaphors and critical practices, so that literary criticism now affects how historians read the past and both are borrowing from movements in anthropology, with everything being brought to bear under a rubric of cultural studies on phenomena such as museum exhibits and gallery curating. This article follows such a theoretical hybridizing, attempting also to bring together a field criticized for its overly textual practices (Parry 2002) with a historicized tracing of the meanings of and around “the Godfrey shawl” as a particular item from material culture.

2. Globalization led to protectionism, with Lockwood Kipling and others appointed to schools of art training with the aim to “rescue” Indian art and craft (Watt and Brown 1987 [1902–3]: xiii) although the resulting market for salt cellars, tie boxes, cigarette cases and serviette rings threatened to erode the higher skills of Indian craftsmen. The museum/exhibition offered a way of both promoting and containing Indian cultural production so that it could supplement but not interfere with the work of Empire or Britain’s image of itself as the center of world production. Cohn notes that Lockridge Kipling was assigned the task of designing the uniforms and decorations for Lord Lytton’s Imperial Assemblage (Cohn 1996 [1987]: 668). As art school and museum director, Kipling senior was also part of a movement through the 1870s to categorize all of India.

3. Rosemary Crill claims the Godfrey shawl was bought by “the Governor of Kashmir, who later sold it to Captain Godfrey, an official at the Kashmir Residency” (1993: 95).

Bibliography


