



A sample of eighteenth-century chintz from India.



period, most Europeans had access only to woolen and linen fabrics, most of which were colored in dull earthen tones. The lightweight, colorful, easily washable cotton fabrics from India were nothing like the textiles with which Europeans were familiar. Europeans used Indian cotton fabric for a variety of items, including bed furnishings, upholstery, quilts, and decorative wall hangings. These fabrics were ultimately in such great demand that “one historian of the period remarked that the rate of consumption of Indian textiles by the Europeans was comparable to the discovery and spread of tobacco, potatoes, coffee or tea.”¹⁰⁵

Europeans called the fabrics they imported from India “chintz” (from the Indian word *chitta* or “spotted”). Initially, at least until the mid-seventeenth century, these textiles were used primarily to line garments made in Europe. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, they were valued in their own right. For the next hundred years, these chintzes would dominate British trade. The wealth thus amassed ultimately helped jump-start and finance the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century. In fact, the availability of Indian cotton textiles had several significant impacts: it “ultimately affected industry throughout Europe, altered patterns of agriculture, shook governments, and changed fashions and

concepts of cleanliness.”¹⁰⁶

Eventually, the prominence of Indian textiles undermined the local silk and wool industries of Europe. This inspired British manufacturers to force legal bans on Indian cottons, such as a 1721 law which prohibited the use of Indian pattern-printed cloths for the production of clothing and household furnishings in England. In addition to these legal protectionist measures, British manufacturers also managed to undermine the Indian textile trade through the development of new industrial processes. John Kay invented the flying shuttle in 1733, which greatly accelerated the speed of weaving. Mechanized roller-printing and cheap synthetic dyes were also developed, giving the British an even greater competitive edge over their Indian counterparts. In the end, India became merely a source for the raw cotton used in the Lancashire mills, and ironically, the cheap British finished goods that were produced there were sent back to India for sale.

Between 1600 and 1800, India was the greatest exporter of textiles the world has ever known. The influence of that history continues, not only through the survival of beautiful objects such as the robe we will discuss here, but even in our language. A wealth of Indian textile terms were shipped to Europe along with all of