

A Dutch Sarasa: An Early 18th Century Coromandel Textile Design, from Holland to Japan

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Abstract

A rare and important Indian painted cotton chintz produced on the Coromandel Coast of southeastern India, was recently acquired in Japan for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and featured in the *Interwoven Globe* exhibition in 2013. It displays a distinctive European design dominated by bold strap work and elaborate cartouche motifs of French derivation, which can be assigned to the second quarter of the 18th century. The in-fill decoration of flowers and patterning is typical of Indian chintz production of the period. All are painted in a combination of resist dyed indigo blue and mordanted chay-based reds of variegated intensity of color. The workmanship is of a high quality, typical of Coromandel Coast chintz production of the first half of the 18th century.

The strap work and cartouches can most readily be traced to the later 17th century French vogue for such elements. They were routinely incorporated into a variety of design setting: interior design, architectural decoration especially modelled plasterwork, and in the layout of formal gardens most spectacularly seen at Versailles. This vogue was popularized beyond France, particularly by the designer Daniel Marot, a French Huguenot refugee who settled in The Netherlands in 1685. Daniel Marot's design repertoire built on that of his father, Jean Marot and his contemporaries, the French court designers Jean Berain and Jean Lepautre. Daniel Marot was taken up by the Dutch elite, a fashion led by William III of Orange. His prolific designs were widely disseminated through published editions of engravings, ensuring his influence was widespread. It is highly probable that the patterns for this painted Indian cotton were copied after designs by Marot or his immediate circle of imitators. The agency would have to have been a Dutch VOC commissioning merchant active on the Coromandel Coast in the early 18th century. Major centres of VOC activity included Masulipatam and Pulicat, both important ports and commissioning centres for the textile trade. Fort Geldria, established by the VOC at Pulicat, served as the company's headquarters for their Coromandel Coast interests.

A second aspect of this textile adds a further layer of interest. It has been quilted with fine cotton fibres and lined with a green Chinese silk, almost certainly Chinese. The pattern of the quilting stitches, visible on the upper surface, is entirely independent of the painted design. It is an asymmetrical design, with pineapple and cornucopia motifs amongst others, which suggests this quilting was executed following early to mid-18th century European taste. A discussion of where and when this painted cloth was quilted, and what proved to be its final market destination, follows. This quilt embodies a remarkable story of cultural migration, appropriation and acculturation in the early 18th century Asia-Europe trading world. The scenario is this: made on the Coromandel Coast of India, to a supplied European design, quilted in Asia in a European cultural environment, and traded to Japan where it served as a tea ceremony carpet (*tutsumigire*).

Key words: Textile trade, Coromandel, Sarasa, kalamkari, Marot, VOC, Pulicat, *tutsumigire*