

The Hidden Faces of European Haute Couture: Highlighting the Indispensable Role of Indian Craftsmanship in European Luxury Fashion

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ABSTRACT

European Haute Couture, the epitome of luxury and craftsmanship, has long been heralded as the pinnacle of fashion excellence. However, this recognition often masks a critical yet underappreciated facet of its creation: its dependency on Indian embroidery.

Europe has traditionally been the epicentre of fashion, particularly in haute couture. (Witzburg, 2020-21). Three out of four major fashion weeks are held in Europe, despite the continent representing only ten percent of the world's population and global market share. This dominance stems from Europe's historical legacy, starting with the emergence of Parisian couture and the Industrial Revolution's advancement of mass production. Furthermore, the perception of Europe as the definitive centre of haute couture is reinforced by Western ideals regarding fashion aesthetics and innovation.

Indian embroidery, with its centuries-old traditions has provided European fashion with craftsmanship that elevates their designs. The history and evolution of exquisite techniques such as India's zardozi, aari work, stone and beadwork, demonstrate the legacy of India's embroiderers who have been instrumental in shaping the aesthetics of many European couture pieces. Despite this, the recognition and credit for haute couture predominantly remains within Europe, marginalizing the significant input of these skilled artisans and this reliance remains largely unknown to consumers.

In recent years, India has become a hotspot for Western designers to execute their most significant embroidery work. Indian artisans' links to French high fashion date back to the 17th century, when tailors from Europe's royal courts would source textiles from the subcontinent. Today, a significant portion of the luxury industry's supply chain has been outsourced to India. Although fashion industry insiders acknowledge the significance of Indian embroiderers, it wasn't until Dior Couture's Spring/Summer 2022 presentation that the broader audience was aware of the Indian influence on European couture houses. (Assomull, 2023)

This study aims to underscore the collaborative nature of fashion and the extensive global effort underpinning luxury fashion, particularly highlighting the pivotal role of Indian embroidery in European Haute Couture. By illuminating how the skills of Indian embroiderers have seamlessly integrated into and significantly enhanced European luxury fashion, this study seeks to advocate for a more equitable distribution of credit within the fashion industry.

Additionally, this study challenges the predominantly Eurocentric narrative of haute couture, promoting a more inclusive understanding of fashion history that respects and honors the interwoven global influences that create true luxury.

This development paper proposes research in the following manner:

1. conducting a literature review incorporating diverse sources such as books, journal articles, blogs, and news stories
2. Conducting interviews with various stakeholders in the embroidery supply chain from agencies, embroidery house owners, to the embroiderers themselves.

By doing so, this paper **explores Indian embroidery's role in reshaping fashion narratives, emphasizing recognition, inclusivity and ethical practices**. Also, it seeks to uncover the indispensable contributions of Indian craftsmanship to European Haute Couture and call for a redefinition of recognition within the luxury fashion world.

Keywords: Haute Couture, Embroidery, Indian Craftsmen, Luxury Fashion, Ethical Enquiry

INTRODUCTION

The enduring dominance of European fashion, particularly in the luxury sector, is a narrative deeply rooted in history and global perceptions. Tom Ford aptly captured this sentiment when he remarked, "If I was ever going to become a good designer, I had to leave America." Europe has long been regarded as the epicenter of fashion design and craftsmanship, a status that continues to hold true today. This is evident from the fact that three of the "Big Four" fashion weeks are hosted in European capitals, underscoring the region's central role in shaping global fashion trends and luxury standards. Remarkably, European companies account for nearly two-thirds of global luxury-goods sales, with nine of the ten most valuable luxury brands hailing from this region (Schumpeter, 2023).

The history of Haute Couture dates back to the 19th century in France, during the rule of King Louis XIV, and it has played a crucial role in establishing iconic luxury brands such as Christian Dior, Valentino, Chanel and Fendi (Kiyai, 2024). By the early 20th

century, fashion was predominantly dictated by Parisian couture houses. Among these was the prestigious House of Worth, founded by Englishman Charles Frederick Worth (1825–1895), who coined the term “Haute Couture” to denote luxury fashion. These houses catered to royalty, aristocracy and wealthy socialites who defined the fashionable elite. While the House of Worth epitomized exclusivity, other couturiers, such as Doucet, Doeuillet, Laferrière, Jeanne Paquin, and Callot Soeurs, also gained prominence. (Blackman, 2012).

The establishment of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture* in 1937 further solidified Europe’s dominance in luxury fashion. This Parisian association became a cornerstone of fashion professionals, maintaining the exclusivity and high standards of Haute Couture. Even today, it stands as a venerated institution with permanent and guest members shaping the luxury fashion landscape (Pouillard, 2016).

However, beneath the glittering façade of European Haute Couture lies a complex and often overlooked narrative—one that involves the hidden contributions of Indian artisans and their centuries-old traditions. India’s exceptional craftsmanship in textiles, embroidery, and dyeing has been utilised in Europe since at least the 17th century. French courts, including those of Marie Antoinette and Joséphine Bonaparte, sourced fine fabrics from India, though credit often went to French tailors who transformed these textiles into garments (Assomull, 2022). Today, the intricate designs showcased on Paris and Milan runways often owe their sophistication to the hands of skilled Indian artisans. These artisans, employed through ateliers and export houses in cities like Mumbai, contribute through embroidery, design, and garment production, yet remain largely uncredited (The New York Times, 2020). The lack of transparency between European fashion houses and the Indian artisans behind their creations perpetuates this disparity. Greater acknowledgment of these contributions could lead to mutual benefits, fostering a more ethical and equitable luxury fashion industry (Assomull, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian Embroidery in European Luxury Fashion: A Historical Perspective

India’s excellence in textiles has been recognized in Europe since at least the 17th century, with the country renowned for its fine fabrics, exceptional embroidery, and dyeing techniques. This admiration was reflected in the words of Alexander Hamilton, who declared that the people of Western India produced the best embroideries, possibly surpassing all others in the world (Poray, 2019; Crill, 1999). Over the centuries, India’s textiles became integral to European fashion, with French tailors and European aristocrats sourcing materials from the subcontinent. This relationship continues to influence European haute couture, where Indian designs, often borrowed or, in some instances, appropriated, have long shaped Western aesthetics (Assomull, 2023; Kohli, 2022).



Fig. 1. Lady Mary Curzon by William Logsdail

Lady Mary Curzon, Vicereine of Imperial India (Figure 1), represented Queen Alexandra at the second Coronation Durbar in Delhi, in 1903. Her dress designed by Worth, was embroidered in India, with peacock feather motifs, each eye studded with an emerald. (Blackman, 2012)



Fig 2. Queen Alexandra

Queen Alexandra, consort to Edward VII, is depicted in her coronation robes (Figure 2). A gold tissue dress woven in India, overlaid with Parisian spangled and

embroidered net. (Blackman, 2012)

Even today, many luxury brands, including Dries Van Noten, Vilshenko and Aquazzura, outsource their embroidery work to India or other countries with a strong tradition of handcrafting, acknowledging the excellence of Indian artisans (Cook, 2015). India remains a key player in the global fashion industry, with the textiles market valued at \$150 to \$250 billion (The New York Times, 2020). Yet, despite its pivotal role, the embroidery work performed in India is often unacknowledged by the Western luxury fashion industry.



Fig. 3. Buta Embroidery

This smoking suit was stitched in England around 1906 from printed silk produced in India for the European market. (Figure 3) The image demonstrates how the buta had become a fashionable motif, lifted from shawls and used as decoration with diverse production methods and applications. (Kohli, 2022)

A prime example is the Chanakya School of Craft, which has gained recognition for its collaborations with Dior and other luxury brands. This atelier was responsible for the intricate embroidery on the iconic Versace jungle-print dress worn by Jennifer Lopez (Figure 4) during the 2019 Milan runway show. Despite the craftsmanship originating in Mumbai, Versace did not publicly acknowledge the artisans behind the design (Jay, 2020). This lack of recognition is not merely a matter of credit but a reflection of systemic inequities within the global fashion industry. Indian artisans, despite their integral role in creating luxury products, receive only a fraction of the financial benefits

compared to the substantial profits garnered by these brands.



Fig. 4. Versace Dress worn by Jennifer Lopez, Getty Images.

Credit: Miguel Medina/Agence France-Press — Getty Images. (Latte, 2022)

The lack of acknowledgement has significant repercussions. Artisans who create these fine embroideries are often undervalued, making it difficult for them to sustain their craft. As a result, many young people in India are dissuaded from pursuing careers in embroidery, believing that it offers limited financial rewards and career prospects. This devaluation of the artisans' contributions impacts the long-term sustainability of the craft itself (Poray, 2019).

A Changing Narrative

However, the scenario is gradually changing with designers realising the importance of credit sharing in order to highlight the contributions of local artisans and their sustainable practices. The Dior Fall 2023 showcase, through its partnership with the Chanakya School of Craft, sparked important conversations about the need for ethical practices and equitable recognition in the luxury fashion industry. Beyond the grandeur of its presentation, the Dior Fall 2023 showcase represented a deeper, more meaningful narrative. It highlighted the brand's collaboration with the Chanakya School of Craft, an institution renowned for its dedication to preserving and advancing traditional Indian craftsmanship. This partnership underscored the often-overlooked contributions of Indian artisans to the global fashion industry. (Vasudev, 2023). The event thus served as a reminder of the need to recognize and value the labor and

artistry of these artisans, whose contributions are pivotal to the success of global luxury brands.

METHODOLOGY

This development paper suggests using a combination of primary and secondary research. The secondary research involves reviewing literature from a variety of sources, including books, journal articles, blogs and news articles. The primary research includes conducting interviews with different stakeholders in the embroidery supply chain, such as agency representatives, embroidery house owners and embroiderers.

Primary Research

Since the 1980's several Indian companies have been actively creating embroideries for European designers as well as producing the garments, many of whom are based in Mumbai. The purpose of conducting one on one interviews with various stakeholders in the embroidery process right from agents, to the owners to the merchandisers, to the karigars (embroiderers) in order to understand the Indian perspective. One such exploratory interview was conducted with Ms Smita Singh, Founder and Creative Director - Mirandola Designs, a handwork atelier specializing in hand embroideries and handwoven textiles, with operations in Mumbai and collaborations with artisans across India.

The discussion revolved around the appreciation of credit within the luxury brand ecosystem, discussing critical issues surrounding craft and handwork. It gave insight into the challenges of artisans and the changing dynamics of the industry.

1. Credit Recognition in Craftsmanship:

Ms. Singh pointed out that credit recognition for artisans in the industry is still very limited and often superficial. Symbolic gestures do not really give them meaningful acknowledgment of their contributions. She observed that the business-driven nature of the industry often puts the artisans and the craftsmanship at the backburner of the creative process.

2. Sustainability and Credit Recognition:

An important portion of the discussion dealt with finding a balance between sustaining crafts and giving credit to artisans. Ms. Singh said the most important thing is first to make sure that the craft is financially viable. When the craft is financially sustainable, there is space for ethical crediting and acknowledgment. As she puts it, though both are very important, the livelihood of artisans and the preservation of their skills have to take precedence over the other.

The conversations really made rich insights with the interplay of making, sustainability

and ethics in ways that gave an anthropomorphic view of many of the current challenges to face this industry of handwork.

CONCLUSION

Acknowledging Indian artisanship is not merely an ethical imperative but a necessary step toward fostering equity and inclusivity in luxury fashion. As the industry evolves, it must address the disparity between the indispensable contributions of Indian artisans and their undervalued status. By embracing transparency and celebrating the true origins of its creations, the global fashion industry can move toward a more sustainable and equitable future, one that honors the artisans who form the foundation of its success.

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