

Integration of Craft and Graphic Design to Create a New Indian Aesthetic: A Pedagogical Experiment

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Abstract

Contemporary design education, to a large extent, is reflective of Western principles that have long been guidelines for the right design aesthetic. This often overlooks the wealth of indigenous design elements prevalent in India's cultural heritage. Traditional Indian crafts embody complex design philosophies rooted in cultural traditions. Delving into these nuances is essential for expanding the global design vocabulary and promoting a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity. Indian design practitioners inherently understand these "Indian" elements, offering a distinctive perspective that can inspire others. Shilpa Shastra, an ancient text on arts and crafts, plays a pivotal role in understanding the principles of Indian aesthetics. However, its inclusion in modern design curricula remains limited. Scholars have emphasized the need for decolonizing design education by reconnecting with indigenous knowledge systems. While design schools have launched programs to integrate traditional crafts, Western design ideologies still dominate the curriculum. This article attempts to bridge this gap by presenting a pedagogical approach that integrates craft-based learning, supported by frameworks like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which calls for the inclusion of indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage in higher education. This research also advocates for the decolonization of Indian design education by critically examining design structures within their cultural and historical contexts. It seeks to merge Western concepts with traditional Indian heritage, fostering a potential global design language that integrates modern Western principles with indigenous historical inspirations. The larger goal involves a comparative study with Western design and the formulation of comprehensive guidelines for more nuanced design education. The objective is to establish a coherent design philosophy rooted in Indian design elements, presenting an alternative and innovative approach to students that resonates with their cultural backgrounds. It emphasizes the importance of providing design professionals with both universal design tools and insights from Indian design, promoting a harmonious

balance between cultural heritage, design coherence, and functionality. Ultimately, this initiative aims to empower future design professionals with a distinctive style deeply rooted in India's rich cultural heritage.

Keywords: Decolonization of design education, graphic design, elements of design, Indian design, Indian crafts, pedagogy

Introduction

Culture serves as an expansive medium for civilizations to express their experiences, beliefs, and stories through diverse forms such as language, food, music, and art. Historically, societies across the globe have employed symbols and imagery, from intricate carvings to hieroglyphics, as tools for communication. These visual representations held profound significance, reflecting not only the artistic craftsmanship but also the philosophical and cultural beliefs of their times. In today's context, understanding these ancient expressions presents both a challenge and an opportunity to bridge historical knowledge with contemporary learning methods.

In antiquity, particularly in India, craftsmanship was revered as both art and science, guided by ancient treatises such as the *Shilpa Shastras*. These texts outlined comprehensive guidelines for various crafts, emphasizing meticulous processes and knowledge. Unlike modern divisions, the *Shilpa Shastras* advocated an inclusive approach, fostering the development of both practical and intangible arts. The *Shilpa Shastras* saw disciplines like architecture, sculpture, painting, and textiles not only as creative pursuits but also as expressions of universal principles that connected the tangible and spiritual realms. This deep cultural reverence for craftwork is a testament to a holistic worldview that saw art as a vehicle for conveying spiritual themes, value systems, and ways of life (Coomaraswamy, 1934).

In a classroom setting, these concepts can be utilized by educators to demonstrate the importance of culturally rooted practices in contemporary design and creative industries. The structured guidance from the *Vastu Shastra*, or the sacred principles of *Natya Shastra*, for example, offers more than just artistic techniques—they provide students with philosophical frameworks that connect creativity with cultural heritage. In this context, classroom action research (CAR) serves as a valuable tool to investigate how students can introduce, interpret, and apply these ancient ideas in modern design practices (Khasinah, 2013). By involving students in activities that allow them to engage with these principles actively—whether through hands-on projects in architecture, textile arts, or graphic design—they gain insight into the cultural and spiritual significance of their work.

The study conducts a design experiment by integrating these principles into classroom action research, which could be a project where students create their own designs based on the craftsman's guidelines. Through reflective cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—key components of CAR—students could explore how Indian folk art, despite its lack of formal structure, embodies sophisticated design principles passed down through generations. This practical engagement allows the students to recognize the intuitive knowledge embedded in these traditions and foster a deep connection between historical practices and modern design applications.

Moreover, classroom discussions can juxtapose the evolution of communication through visual arts, such as the development of printing technologies like Gutenberg's printing press, with India's ancient artistic traditions. In such activities, students could critically analyze how modern graphic design, often dominated by Western aesthetics, overlooks the philosophical depth present in indigenous art forms. By drawing upon cultural traditions, students not only explore diverse design aesthetics but also develop an understanding of the socio-cultural narratives that shape those designs.

The aim of this academic exploration, conducted through classroom action research, is to highlight the relevance of India's millennia-old graphic design concepts and their potential to inspire a uniquely Indian sensibility in the global design arena. Through structured classroom activities that blend theory and practice, students are encouraged to engage with indigenous design traditions. This not only nurtures a deeper connection to India's artistic heritage but also enables students to explore innovative design approaches that are both culturally authentic and globally relevant.

In summary, by employing classroom action research to explore these traditional design philosophies, educators can create learning environments that foster both cultural appreciation and practical application. By tapping into India's vast artistic heritage and applying these ancient principles to modern design challenges, students can contribute to the enrichment of both local and global design discourses.

Literature Review

Design education has long relied on Western methodologies as the gold standard, prioritizing uniformity and cohesion in design curricula. However, this approach often sidelines indigenous design elements, neglecting the rich tapestry of Indian cultural heritage and crafts that could enrich the learning experience (Charles and Eames, 1997). The dominance of Western structures in graphic design education has resulted in a lack of contextualization for indigenous design, leaving students with a superficial understanding of their own cultural identity within the field (Balaram, 2009).

The depth and diversity of Indian design heritage remain largely untapped, overshadowed by Western-centric narratives and definitions (Thapar, 2003). This study aims to rectify this imbalance by documenting examples that complement existing pedagogical frameworks, creating a more practical indigenous grammar for the Indian design language. By incorporating culturally rooted examples, the goal is to empower design students to apply these concepts effectively in their work, fostering a deeper connection to their heritage. There's also potential for a parallel medium of instruction in design curriculum, where the language remains global but the grammar is rooted in the Indian context. Exploring this possibility involves viewing Western concepts through the lens of Indian craft, leading to design experiments that highlight the nuances of Indian art within its own cultural context. By better understanding these differences, the fusion of Western and Indian design elements can take on greater meaning and relevance in contemporary design practice.

Decolonisation of design education

Teal Triggs, design historian and professor at London's Royal College of Art establishes decolonizing design as a crucial movement in the field, distinguishing it from mere diversity initiatives. Decolonization in design challenges the Eurocentric canon that defines "good" design, aiming to eliminate distinctions between traditional craft and modern design. Designers need to rethink their work, disrupt the status quo, and imagine a world beyond the current system. This process involves questioning how design choices might be experienced from different cultural perspectives. Designers must recognize the power and history behind their choices, understanding how colonialism has shaped contemporary design and the power structures that persist in society (Triggs, 2011).

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role of decolonization within the domain of design, it is imperative to establish precise definitions. "Colonization" finds its origins in the experiences of indigenous populations, characterized by the subjugation and confiscation of native resources, alongside the dissemination of Western ideologies into their societies. The term "decolonization" originally denoted the process of a state disengaging from its former colony. However, its contemporary connotation encapsulates a multifaceted array of concepts. The aim needs to be to eliminate the false distinctions between craft and design in order to recognize all culturally important forms of making. Triggs says that publishing the work of emerging researchers is crucial to the development of new design narratives in contemporary design education. "By doing this, there has been a direct impact on our teaching materials, on what is being taught, and how in the design curricula" (ibid., p.13).

Western design education

Design education encompasses fundamental principles that equip students with the skills and knowledge to excel in creative fields. Design students learn to analyze and critique both historical and contemporary design works, fostering a critical eye. They gain proficiency in industry-standard software tools and technologies (Frascara, 2011). Ultimately, design education aims to nurture creativity, problem-solving, and a deep appreciation for aesthetics. It begins with teaching color theory, composition, and spatial awareness through the following core elements of design: point, line, space, shape, color, and texture. Universal appropriateness—the concept of *Auchitya* that pervades our aesthetic heritage—has been a hallmark of Indian design through the ages. The term universal appropriateness, though, is at best a close approximation. According to Jaitly and Bahl (2023), *Auchitya* is a design philosophy that encompasses the nuanced and layered meaning of each human function and the physical and psychological implications of the placement and use of objects, images, and their attendant microfunctions. This phenomenon is demonstrated by ‘*kala*.’

Kala, in turn, is another term in Indian design philosophy that has a deeper, layered meaning. Before the decidedly western imposition of the bifurcation of art and craft—later termed *charukala* and *karukala*—the term “*kala*” represented the holistic concept of aesthetics. This concept encapsulated the pervasiveness of design not merely as the creation of beauty but as a part of daily life. The lines between art and craft became blurred; artisans and craftsmen were usually on an equal footing due to imperial or royal patronage, and painting, carving, weaving, and other processes of art creation occupied the same pedestal, elevated by the mastery of their creators (Vyas, 2000).

Often, these master creators did not restrict themselves to the rarefied field of sole practitioners of the arts. Homemakers, who decorated the walls of their houses with specialized art forms such as Gond art, were not obligated to adhere to the rules set by the masters of their craft. They were at liberty to use the art form as a means of house decoration. *Kantha* is a perfect example of what is now called upcycling—by using frayed or worn old sarees that were cut up and recrafted with hand-stitching and surface ornamentation—it has been an integral and widely practiced part of folk traditions in Bengal. It was not necessary to “learn” or be dictated by esoteric rules; the practice of creating beauty was a way of life (Bahl, 2017).

Guidelines for the Indian design language—the Shilpa Shastra

Shilpa, in the Indian design philosophy, stands for both art and craft in ancient texts. *Shastra*, in its indigenous definition, denotes science. The holistic meaning of *Shilpa*

Shastra, therefore, is the science of art and craft, illustrating again the fluidity of knowledge and its application to the various aspects of learning and creation. The series of treatises outlines the principles and rules that should ideally govern the creation of arts and crafts. (Vatsyayan, 1983). As cited in Milford-Lutzker (1999), the Aitareya Brahmana of the Rig Veda mentions, “Shilpani, works of art made by man, are imitations of divine forms; shilpa artisans, in tune with divine rhythms, produce visual interpretations in spite of the limitations of the human personality” (pp.22-30).

American art historian Stella Kramrisch analyzes that the term “Shilpa” is multifaceted in its connotation. Kramrisch (1958) posits that it encompasses a spectrum of meanings, encompassing “art, skill, craft, labor, ingenuity, rite and ritual, form and creation.” Ancient Indian textual sources assert the boundless nature of artistic expression and categorize it through the utilization of sixty-four “kala,” or techniques, and thirty-two “vidyas,” or fields of knowledge. The concept of “Shilpa” is expounded upon in revered texts such as the Agamas, Puranas, and Vastu Shastra, where it is intricately interwoven with the mythology of Vishvakarma.

Perspectives of art historians on documentation of Indian design

As a first step, there is a need for a more concrete explanation of the lack of cultural context. The work of historians such as Parul Pandaya Dhar exemplifies how the absence of a cultural context hinders the proper delineation and utilization in constructing a unique design language with the Indian design philosophy at its core. In her work, a considered and critical gaze on the historiography of Indian art puts in perspective and lays in clearer relief the scholarly contributions on the circumstances, individuals, initiatives, and methods that have laid the informal framework of the history of Indian arts from colonial times to the present. In her book “Indian Art History,” she discusses the historical context for the study of Indian art. With examples from the late 18th and 19th centuries, she lays bare the fascination and consequent colonial perspective with which Indian antiquity was looked on. She has illustrated how the study of architecture ignored Indian sculpture and painting for not aligning with Western standards of instruction. The architecture was looked at through the decidedly Western tenets of “form” and “style,” ignoring the deeper cultural, spiritual, and philosophical contexts in which it was created (Dhar, 2011). Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Stella Kramrisch, Alice Boner, and others conducted scholarly inspections on this subject. These colonial biases, however, were strong enough for the Indian nationalists to fly the flag of the “Indian-ness” of Indian art, shifting the gaze to the established tenets of symbolism in the historical design tome and accentuating the cultural context that existed and was on glorious display in its oeuvre (Boner, 1993).

During this time, Professor RN Misra also looked into the differences between artists and craftsmen, as well as the terms “art” and “craft.” He illuminated a crucial aspect of ancient Indian design philosophy, previously overlooked due to its explanation in terms of Western culture. This is because the Indian design philosophy did not divide itself into art and craft, but instead, the main idea of *kala* included all the steps of creation in a single, fluid, cross-disciplinary whole (Dhar, 2011). Vyas (2000) had a very illuminating description: “The distinction between art and craft was non-existent at best and blurred at worst. The holistic approach to art and craft was best described with the nuances of *Kala*, the umbrella under which art, sculpture, and literature, among others, flourished in India” (p.33).

The Renaissance, industrial revolutions, and technological advancements forced the western world, including British-ruled India, to prioritize their design philosophy and curriculum, deliberately overshadowing the holistic approach to art and craft that was the cornerstone of Indian design philosophy. The leitmotif of the Indian aesthetic, a more holistic approach that blurred the lines between art and craft, necessitated this change because it did not fit neatly into the current concepts (ibid.).

The cultural ethos of the Indian design derives from the philosophical thought embodied in the rituals and traditions of our culture. It highlights the interconnectedness of things, and this seamlessness seemed to have been ruptured by the more rigid definitions of imported modern thought in design education. The separation of *Charukala* and *Karukala* (fine arts and applied arts) from the earlier mentioned fluid thought of *kala* as holistic art became a precursor to the sharper divides in the holistic thinking that were to come. The introduction of Western cultural norms into our educational patterns has made it increasingly challenging for students to naturally and effectively connect with the concepts they are learning. Moreover, practitioners are currently questioning the Western pattern of education’s dependence on referencing as a means of definition (Bahl, 2017).

Exploring the Indian aesthetic language, rich in deep philosophical ideas, and combining it with the established rules of the Western design curriculum is a key way to create a design thought that is both uniquely Indian and applicable globally. There are already a number of treatises available that will facilitate this seamless integration of ideas.

Scope of the Study

This study investigates the intricate and interconnected dimensions of indigenous design, specifically focusing on graphic design education. It acknowledges the diverse

interpretations of crafts across regions, even those founded on similar principles. The research engaged graphic design students in a comprehensive exploration that yielded significant insights into the relevance of Indian crafts in modern design. It also debates the potential of these crafts to inform contemporary design practices, emphasizing their alignment with classical design philosophies and modern applications.

Objective

The objective of this research was to advocate for the inclusive integration of Indian art forms into contemporary curricula and to raise awareness among design students about the relevance of design elements derived from Indian crafts in modern design education, with the goal of creating a visual language that is more deeply rooted in Indian culture.

Research Methodology

The study adopted the classroom action research approach to conduct a pedagogical experiment, where third-year Fashion Communication students of NIFT, Delhi (2021-2025 batch), undertook a two-week module as part of the subject 'Design Strategy and Systems Thinking.' The graphic design experiment involved students studying a selected Indian craft through the lens of design elements, creating combined collateral with the artisan, and conducting research to integrate Indian design elements into specific design collaterals. The study was initiated by meticulously planning a collaborative module with eight artisans from the Dastkari Haat Samiti, who practice Madhubani, Pattachitra, Gond, Sanjhi, Kalighat, Warli, Phad, and Pichwai. The collaborative workshop with the artisans was held at Dilli Haat, INA, New Delhi. The class of forty was divided into eight groups of five students each, assigning one craft and artisan to each group.

From the initial cohort of eight groups, totaling forty students, a focused sample of five students was selected based on their engagement with the traditional Indian craft, Madhubani, from Bihar. The study combined qualitative data collection methods of observation and reflection. The researcher, who also served as the module's faculty guide, gathered data by observing participants during the module and reflecting on the co-created experiment's outcomes through visual analysis. Further, interviews were conducted with the five students to understand their experiences and learning through a unique pedagogical approach.

During the module, students worked in collaboration with artisans to comprehend the craft through various design elements, such as point, line, shape/form, space, and color,

resulting in combined artworks that reflected the craft's aesthetics. The step-by-step methodology involved visits to the engagement site, structured interviews with the artisan, visual documentation of the craft, creation of a thematic sheet, collaborative artwork that documented the artisan's journey, a detailed study of the treatment of the design elements used in the craft, and finally, an analysis to understand how traditional craft elements influence modern design outputs.

The framework for the pedagogical experiment, integrating Indian craft elements into graphic design education, consisted of the following steps:

- **Planning:** The first step involved creating a detailed curriculum module to conduct a collaborative study with eight artisans from the Dastkari Haat Samiti. Eight different crafts, primarily painted styles that emanated a rich visual language, were selected, also keeping in mind the availability of the artisans at Dilli Haat. The student activities envisaged with the artisans were delineated along with methodology, deliverables, and outcomes.
- **Acting:** The second step included a cultural immersion program, that is, the conduct of the collaborative workshop where students and artisans co-created design solutions, blending traditional aesthetics with modern design principles. The students partnered with folk artisans to facilitate a hands-on experience for better understanding of the craft and its design elements.
- **Observing:** The third step involved conducting interviews with the artisan and documenting the craft visually. This process resulted in design collaterals that were inspired by traditional craft techniques and design principles.
- **Reflecting:** The final step involved visual analysis of students' work by comparing it to both traditional craft forms and contemporary design outputs, focusing on innovation and cultural resonance. Interviews with the selected group of five students were conducted to gain insights into their experience and learning.

Results

Following the collaborative workshop between students and artisans, data was extracted and analyzed based on the outcomes of the work done by the student group, which interacted with the artisan practicing Madhubani craft from the Mithila region of Bihar, India. This traditional art form is renowned for its vibrant colors, intricate patterns, and deep cultural significance. Folklore and mythology deeply embed the origins of Madhubani in ancient times. Madhubani paintings are characterized by their distinctive

style, featuring complex geometric patterns, bold lines, and vibrant color palettes. The creation process of Madhubani art is meticulous and deeply rooted in tradition.

The workshop started with an interaction with Smt. Ambika Devi (Figure 1), a celebrated Indian artisan specializing in Madhubani painting who hails from Rasidpur village in Bihar's Madhubani district. Her exceptional talent has earned her several prestigious awards, including the National Handicrafts Award in 2009 and recognition from UNESCO. Ambika Ji's work is characterized by intricate patterns and a deep connection to cultural narratives. Her dedication to the craft and her role in empowering other female artisans make her a respected and inspirational figure in the artisan community.



Figure 1: The artisan, Smt. Ambika Devi, practicing Madhubani craft
Source: Student group documentation

The students analyzed the motifs and narratives inherent in the art form, while the artisan clarified their underlying ritualistic connotations, enabling the students to understand the art form in its appropriate context. Visual analysis of the individual design elements used in the craft was conducted.

In the realm of design education, understanding design elements is fundamental. These elements serve as the fundamental building blocks for the creation of visual compositions, making them essential knowledge for both artisans and designers. Institutions such as NIFT integrate the study of design elements and principles into their foundational curriculum, establishing them as a cornerstone of design education. The curriculum typically delves into each element and principle in detail, dedicating significant time to explore their importance individually. The students spend an entire semester focusing on the elements of design, immersing themselves in the nuances of

each element through practical exercises and art-making processes. This comprehensive approach allows students to grasp the essence of design principles and apply them effectively in their creative endeavors. Understanding the elements of design not only cultivates technical skills but also nurtures creativity and visual literacy. It equips students with the tools to create visually compelling compositions, communicate ideas effectively, and engage audiences on a deeper level.

Identification of the elements of design in Madhubani

The students created the working definitions of each element and then observed the same design elements in Madhubani (Figure 2).

- **Dot:** The dot is the starting point of any design, serving as the origin for subsequent elements.

In Madhubani, the origin points of every subsequent character mark the beginning of any texture; a composition of dots creates the most detailed textures and forms.

- **Line:** Basic building blocks that define paths and movement within a composition. Madhubani paintings are characterized by the bold and intricate lines that define the shapes, forms, and patterns throughout the artwork.

- **Shape/Form:** Two-dimensional/three-dimensional areas, defined by boundaries, contribute to the overall structure.

Madhubani art features a wide array of shapes, ranging from geometric patterns to depictions of animals, plants, and other everyday objects.

- **Space:** The area within and around objects that influences the overall balance and harmony.

The paintings make dynamic and decorative use of space, often packing compositions densely with figures, motifs, and patterns.

- **Texture:** Tactile or visual qualities that enhance the surface and add richness to the design.

While it is primarily two-dimensional, artists often create the illusion of texture through intricate line work, stippling, and dotting techniques.

- **Color:** A powerful element that evokes emotions, sets moods, and adds visual interest.

Color plays a vital role in Madhubani art, with vibrant hues and rich pigments adding depth, emotion, and symbolism to the compositions.

The elements and principles of design are fundamental concepts that form the basis of visual art and design. They provide the framework for designers to understand and create visually compelling works. While these concepts are heavily influenced by Western ideals, their origins can also be traced to historic Indian crafts. When examining the elements of design in general, they are clearly identifiable in the craft of Madhubani.

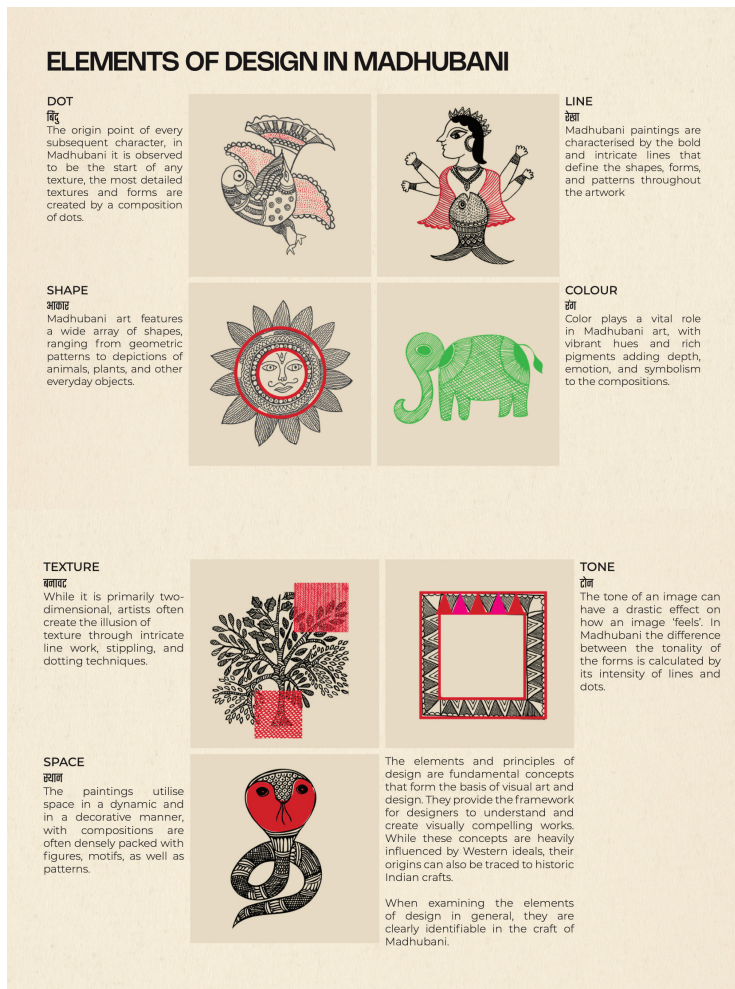


Figure 2: A visual language study through elements of design used in the Madhubani craft

Source: Student group documentation

In the next phase, the students learned the basics of Madhubani art, such as textures, dots, and lines, and how to use these elements to create natural forms. They experimented with creating different textures using pencils, pens, and brushes to understand how textures add depth to designs. They then practiced various types of lines and dots to enhance their control and precision. These skills were then applied to the previously traced natural forms, integrating basic elements into recognizable shapes (Figure 3). The assessment focused on evaluating the ability to create diverse textures, dots, and lines and their application on natural forms.



Figure 3: Exploring lines through textures

Source: Student group documentation

The students meticulously studied the design process to create a diverse range of forms and shapes, laying a rich foundation for the visual language of the craft and its resulting visual identity. The lines carved out within the forms introduced a tactile and visual texture. This nuanced approach not only characterizes this craft but also lays the groundwork for the detailed elements that will later define the brand's visual identity. Repetition of patterns was also used to create varied textures. The use of simple bold colors and the interplay of positive and negative space in the crafting process resonates with the foundational principles of design. The creation of these solid color blocks serves as a metaphor for the shaping of brand identity within a specified space. A distinctive feature of this craft is the artful use of lines of varying thickness to create patterns and shapes. This nuanced exploration of lines becomes a pivotal element in shaping the visual language, as evidenced by the student's creation of a brand identity.

In the final phase, the students used the observed details and techniques to compose original Madhubani designs. Brainstorming sessions encouraged them with new

ideas, promoting originality and personal expression. Concepts for new designs were developed, including preliminary sketches and planning, to teach the importance of planning and conceptualizing before execution. Final compositions were created on paper, applying all elements to synthesize knowledge and skills into original artworks (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Exploration of the craft, seamlessly intertwining the timeless craft with the principles of design

Source: Student group documentation

This action research emphasized a participatory approach where students explored and adapted the traditional craft within modern design frameworks, enriching their understanding and appreciation of indigenous design elements (Figures 5). The students collaborated with the artisan to create a collaborative artwork, documenting the artisan's journey and conducting a detailed study of the treatment of design elements used in the art forms (Figure 6).

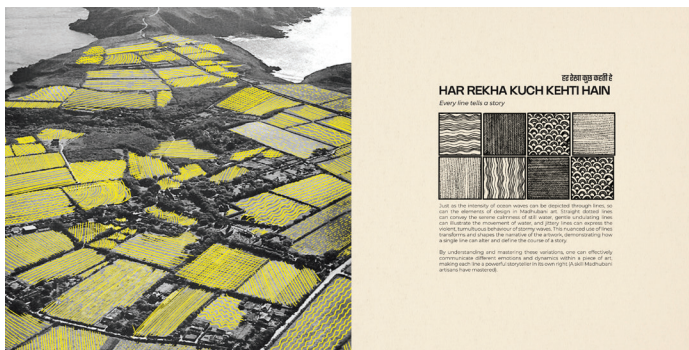


Figure 5: Exploration sheet to observe a picture through the lens of Madhubani craft

Source: Student group documentation



Figure 6: Collaborative artwork documenting the artisan’s journey
 Source: Student group documentation

Development of the brand identity and collaterals for the artisan

Branding Ambika Ji’s Madhubani craft was not merely about creating a recognizable identity; it was a move to establish a strong visual presence in the global market while fostering an art movement around the craft itself. Recognizing the need to give the craft a distinct identity, the creation of a logo emerged as a crucial step. The logo, designed to symbolize the fish motif, which Ambika Ji frequently uses, and the lotus, which symbolizes prosperity, encapsulates the essence of her craft (Figure 7). By combining these elements and retaining the intricate details of the craft, the logo served as a powerful representation of Ambika Ji’s authenticity of Madhubani Paintings. The decision to hand-draw the motif underscored the importance of authenticity and uniqueness, reinforcing the artisan’s commitment to preserving traditional craftsmanship alive in a contemporary context.

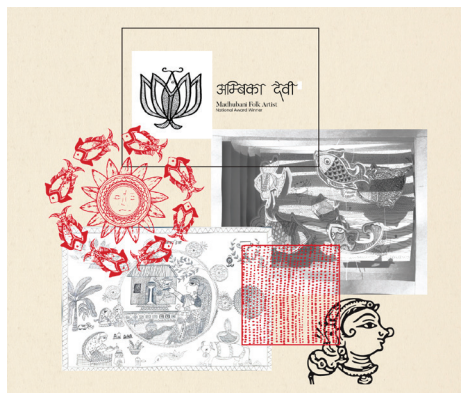


Figure 7: Exploration board leading to creation of logo for the artisan, Ambika ji
 Source: Student group documentation

The same identity also inspired the creation of several collaterals, such as wrapping paper, envelopes with personalized branding using various motifs, and visiting cards. As a part of exploring Madhubani, several souvenirs were also designed, including a scarf, a Madhubani nib holder, a ceramic plate, a notebook, and an enamel pin. Keeping in mind the visual language of the branding, the packaging for these souvenirs was made (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Branding and packaging exploration for the artisan

Source: Student group documentation

The students did a comprehensive analysis specifically dedicated to the craft, elucidating its intricacies, design aesthetics, and contextual relevance. It is imperative to underscore that a similar methodological approach was systematically applied in the examination, definition, and documentation of the remaining crafts integral to shaping the broader framework of the Indian design language.

Students' reflections

The responses received from the interviews conducted with the five students provided insight into their experiences and learning from the collaborative module. In response to the question about how the experience shaped their understanding of the cultural significance of craft design, student A responded, "I learned that every symbol and pattern in Madhubani art carries specific cultural significance, connecting art to daily life and spiritual beliefs. This experience reshaped my approach to design, emphasizing the importance of context". Student B expressed, "This experience helped me to get a better understanding as to why a craft was initially started and how it is being passed down as a legacy, but also how different crafts have differing styles of being made and

each one is unique to its style.” Student C added, “This experience has deepened my appreciation for the cultural significance of craft design. I realized that each technique and pattern embodies historical stories and community values. Observing the artisan’s passion deepened my understanding of craft as a vital expression of cultural heritage, connecting past and present while fostering a sense of belonging. Student D expressed, “This experience provided a real-time glimpse into artisans’ lives and experiences, fostering a closer connection with their culture and folk art.”

When asked to describe the collaboration experience between artisans and design students, Student A stated, “This collaboration deepened our appreciation for each other’s cultural and design backgrounds by highlighting the unique strengths and perspectives we each brought to the table. Working closely allowed us to understand the cultural significance embedded in traditional techniques and symbolism while also sharing contemporary design approaches. This mutual exchange fostered respect for each other’s heritage and creativity, blending old and new influences to produce something meaningful and fresh. Student B mentioned, “The collaboration was mutually enriching for us and the artisans because we all had something to learn from each other.” Student D mentioned, “I learned how you can develop your skills to break down complex shapes into simple lines and still show their details.” Student E said, “It was a very innovative and, in my opinion, an important experience. Understanding their craft and culture helped us see the way we design things today.” Students also felt they could share their design and technology knowledge with artisans, which was extremely helpful.

Conclusion

Integrating traditional Indian crafts into graphic design education not only fostered creative innovation but also strengthened students’ cultural identities. Through direct engagement with artisans and immersion in craft traditions, the students stated that they began to view design as a culturally informed practice rather than a solely aesthetic one. The findings derived from the interviews with the students after the workshop’s completion suggest that the students inculcated a deeper connection to their heritage, which in turn enhanced their ability to create original and culturally relevant design solutions.

Students systematically explored various crafts to assimilate design principles, focusing on nuanced examinations of diverse craft forms. Their analyses revealed discernible patterns, emphasizing departure from replication. Creative synthesis ensued, producing

a contemporary visual language anchored in craft-inspired insights. This approach showcased students transcending imitation, cultivating a distinctive design ethos.

The timely endeavor to decolonize design education in India seeks an alternative to the entrenched colonial legacy. It mandates a redefinition of core design education principles, incorporating diverse voices, traditions, and experiences with the Indian design philosophy as the axis. The NEP 2020 promotes the integration of indigenous knowledge systems to cultivate culturally grounded education. This shift involves moving from Eurocentric frameworks to a pluralistic approach respecting India's cultural heritage. To achieve this, the design curricula must integrate indigenous knowledge, local craftsmanship, and traditional design practices. Emphasis on regional aesthetics, sustainability, and community engagement enriches the discourse, fostering pride and cultural appreciation. Collaboration with indigenous artists and design communities bridges theory and practice, ensuring that design education is rooted in India's diverse fabric.

Apart from initiating a revised discussion on cultural resonance, it also offers the artisans a platform to showcase their skills and cultural heritage, fostering recognition, pride, and the preservation of indigenous knowledge for future generations. Integrating Indian craft into the design language is actualized through craft cluster initiatives, bringing cultural sensibilities, defining social norms, and fostering awareness and pride for traditional Indian aesthetics in design.

Acknowledgement

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About the author

Dimple Bahl is an academician and practicing graphic designer who specializes in visual brand strategy, publication design, and Indian folk media. With over two decades of teaching experience at NIFT, New Delhi, she has also completed a PhD exploring ancient Indian grid systems as a foundation for modern design language. Co-author of *Inspirations for Graphic Design from India* with Ms. Jaya Jaitly, Dimple bridges graphic design and craft to foster a uniquely Indigenous design vocabulary. She was instrumental in the design and conceptualization of the Shilpa Deergha at the new Parliament House of India, a project Dastkari Haat Samiti commissioned and executed. She is currently nurturing the concept of Kala Manthan, a craft design experiment between students of NIFT Delhi and artisans from Dastkari Haat Samiti. Using the methodology of reverse mentoring, the attempt is to co-create a new definition of design elements to bridge the knowledge gap between the largely undocumented yet celebrated craft traditions and modern graphic design frameworks.

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