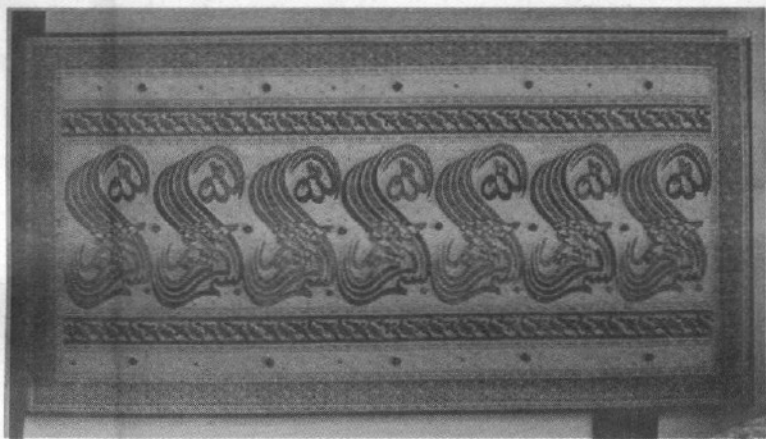
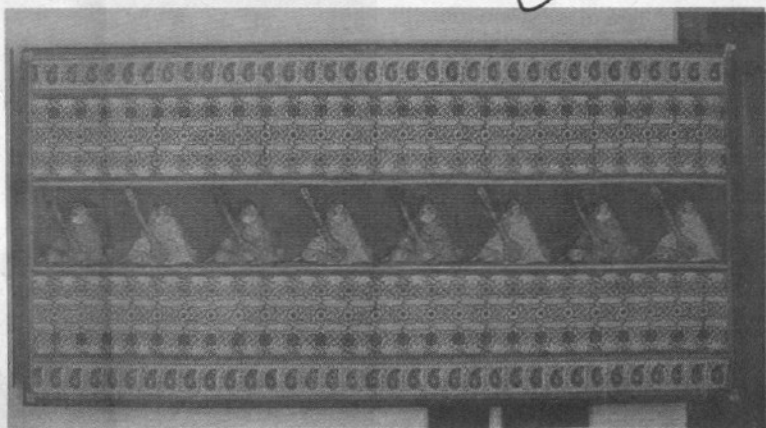


Majmua, the Art Gallery, hosted an exhibition of block print wall hangings conceived by Mohammad Sarfraz Gill on canvas on 21st June. The show will run till July 15, 2003. Block printing is as old as the civilisations of Harappa, Mohenjodaro, and Taxila. The craft ran along the line of Indus Valley. Variegated colours and beautiful patterns are used in hand printing and dyeing until today in all parts of the country. Specially Peshawar and Sindh have kept the craft thriving. Sindh is known for its bandhanu, tie and dye process for dupattas and shirting.

Patterns are generally geometric arrangements of dots, squares or circles in vivid green, yellow or indigo. Elephants, peacocks and dancing figures are some of the other motifs used. Sindh is also famous for its ajrak, which is a multipurpose print, the predominant colours being dark blue and maroon with a sprinkling of white. Ajrak is very popular with tourists as well. In Peshawar the khosi method of printing with wax is used. In Sindh the khari process is used to print patterns with a wooden block using gum or lac. The print is dusted with gold or silver powder before the gum or lac dries.

Collection on display at Majmua is an interesting show of our traditional craft elevated to the level of art aesthetically. Earlier one could rarely see a piece or two of block print wall hangings here and there; but collectively as an art form, it is the first time that a show of artistic craft was held at an art gallery. Credit also goes to Majmua the Art Gallery to provide its walls for the display of the subject.

New aesthetic block printing



Sarfraz Gill, the mind behind the idea, is a man of many talents. He calls his arty craft a teamwork: He being the designer and the team includes block carver, dyes expert and an expert to handprint the material with blocks. Traditionally, many of the motifs are inspired by nature — flowers, leaves, birds, vegetables, fish and seashells. Sarfraz has done his work with

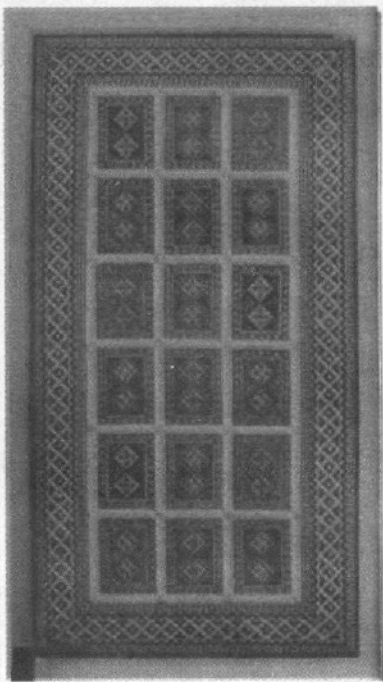
the aesthetics of an artist. He has studied his subject thoroughly. He picked up his vocabulary from Muslim and Mughal designs found in Lahore Fort, Badshahi Mosque and Islamic Calligraphy. He takes full advantage of his computer graphic designing. He makes designs on computer and sees them with various colour combinations and then finally

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by SHAMIM AKHTER



chooses one, keeping in mind that his art should not drift away from our traditional craft. Soft hues indicate that he restricted his palette to the colours traditionally obtained from natural sources.

After finalising the design and colour scheme, Sarfraz hands over the print to the block maker. The craftsman cuts small blocks from hard sheesham wood and carves it with hand tools according to the design, one block for each colour in a design. The printer then dips the wooden block into a custom mixed tray of fresh dye-bath and stamps the cloth down the length with skillful precision. To

print a piece of 90" 180" the printers have to stamp approximately 1400 times with different blocks of as many as five or six colours, to cover the entire surface of the fabric. Sarfraz made sure that printing colours were freshly mixed each day by the dye expert in charge of each print. The dye experts maintained a complete record of the recipes of various colours. Dye experts often amended the recipes to compensate for changes in weather and alterations in the dye lots. Dyes used had mineral, vegetable and non-toxic chemical origins. There still exist families who have kept the art of carving wood blocks and making natural dyes on the pattern of their forefathers.

In good old days, a housewife would buy grey cloth as required and give it to dhobi for whitening and then take it to the block printer who ran his work place in one of the shops at the close-by bazaar.

The lady would select a design from various prints and gave her choice of dyes. The palette did not exceed brown, black, red, blue and green. That was the cheapest way in those days to get decorative bedspreads and tablecloth. With the passage of time block printing could be seen on dresses. In fact, lady designers held special exhibitions of clothes with block printing.

One cannot forget exquisite exhibitions held by Sabiha Ghayasuddin and Shaheena of *Barsat*. Such dresses found their way in boutiques as well. Noorjehan Bilgrami, presently of Indus Valley School of Art held a sales exhibition of household linen and unstitched dresses in block print as early as in early 70s. But no one thought of elevating the craft onto the walls of art galleries. Sarfraz has taken it on himself with a team of workers to fill in the blanks. ■