



The Designer/Embroiderer Relationship: A Comparison between Europe and India

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Problem/research question: While conducting interviews in France, Italy, and England on high fashion embroidery in 2013, I was repeatedly told that European embroiderers are losing much of their business to Indian embroiderers (Alexander, 2014). Yet the European embroidery designers that worked with Indian embroidery workshops lamented that they could not obtain the desired quality from their Indian embroiderers. This posed the question, are Indian embroiderers less skilled than European embroiderers? If not, why do European designers have difficulty procuring quality embroidery?

Method: This study is actually a conglomeration of three different studies. The first and second studies had the same basic design: both were qualitative studies that utilized recorded oral interviews oral history methods. The first study took place in London, Milan, Paris, and the Lorraine region of France and the second in Kolkata, India. I interviewed 20 individuals in the European study and 15 individuals in the Indian study. Participants were selected for their association with high fashion hand embroidery. In the European study, these included embroiderers, embroidery designers, and embroidery company executives. The Indian study participants included fashion designers, embroiderers, and assistants. The European study resulted in 16 recorded interviews and the Indian study resulted in 10 recorded interviews.

The recorded interviews from both of these studies were transcribed using the gisted method of transcription (Dempster & Woods, 2011). I used a modified version of the constant comparative method of analysis to develop themes (Fram, 2013).

The final study was a comparative study between the two individual studies. The themes and data from the Europe and India studies were compiled and compared for similarities and differences. Special attention was given to data in the India study that answered questions remaining from the Europe study.

Analysis: As noted, one of the questions that came out of the European study was why was there a difference in quality between the work European embroidery companies executed in-house and the embroidery they contracted from India. Upon comparison of the two studies, much of this question was answered by the designer/embroiderer relationship, as described by the participants in the two regions.

The designer/embroiderer relationship can be broken down into three themes: the embroidery process, the company organization, and the professional/social relationship of the individuals within the hierarchy.

The embroidery process in European high fashion is very similar to the embroidery process in Indian fashion. However, I observed fashion designers in Europe often rely more on the embroidery designers for guidance. In the Indian businesses, the fashion designers took a much stronger role in the embroidery design process, relying less on the creative expertise of the embroidery designer.

The company organization was different between the two regions. In Europe, I interviewed embroidery professionals that worked with or owned embroidery workshops that were not part of a fashion house. In India, the embroiderers were part of a fashion designer's house.

Finally, the embroiderers occupied a lower social status in Indian companies than in European. Indian embroiderers are workers were as in Europe, they are artisans.

Results/Conclusions: The embroidery and embroidery design in the Indian companies were not any lower quality than the embroidery produced in the European workshops. The cheaper labor even enable the embroidery to be more intricate. However, the embroiderers in the companies I visited were constantly supervised by the fashion designer. Even the embroidery designer was under constant scrutiny. This was in part due the company structure of having everything in-house, in part due to the different process that allows less reliance on the autonomy of the embroiderer and, in part due to the different social status of the embroiderers. The different social status of the embroiderers is the primary reason the embroiderers have less autonomy.

The tighter control of Indian fashion designers over their embroiderers' results in finer embroidery than European embroidery designers and fashion designers can obtain from the same Indian embroiderers. European embroidery houses do not have their primary embroidery designer located in India, controlling every action of the embroiderers. The reliance on contracted labor produces different results.

References

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