

Satra

Neo Vaishnavite Monasteries of Assam.

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Communication Design



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Introduction

Satras are monastic institutions of the neo-Vaishnavite tradition that serve as socio-religious and cultural centres in Assam. An integral part of Assamese life and culture, satras are repositories of the ancient religious philosophy and artistic expressions attached to it.

They have relentlessly encouraged the arts and crafts, like dance, drama, music, book-illustration and the making of decorative objects for the beautification of the Satra interiors - the Satriya Architecture.

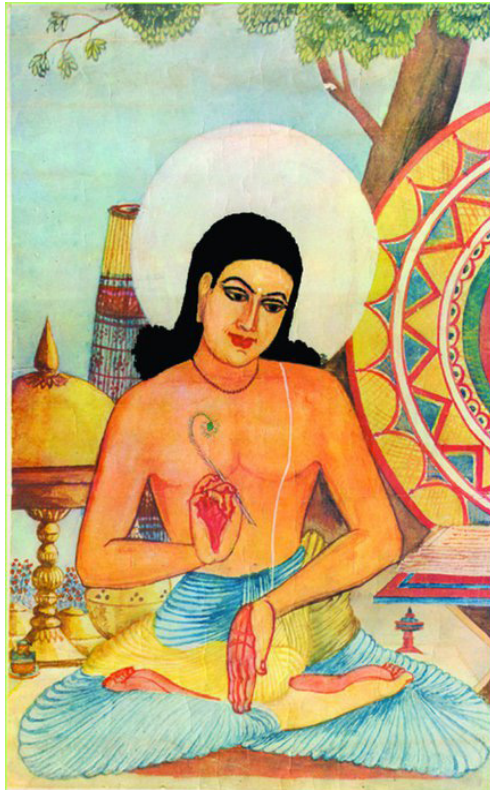
This project is aimed to analyse and document the various traditional art forms associated with the Satra institution such as music, dance and drama alongwith crafts like sculpture and mask making.

The goal is to identify key structural/ recurring visual elements, forms and motifs and later visually modify and represent these graphical elements.

Since satras are numbering in hundreds in Assam and to establish the boundary limits of this project Majuli island was chosen as a region for study.

Majuli is celebrated as the world's biggest river island which nestles in the lap of the mighty Brahmaputra and also is the place of numerous Satra Institutions in which some of the Satra's are celebrated as the most legendary Satras of Assam, carrying the heritage of socio-religious culture and rich traditions of various art and literature.

Case Study



Imaginary portrait of Srimanta Sankardeva by eminent artist Bishnu Prasad Rabha.

Ekasarana Dharma is a panentheistic religion propagated by *Srimanta Sankardeva* in the 15th-16th century in the Indian state of Assam. It rejects vedic ritualism and focuses on pure devotion (*bhakti*) to Krishna consisting primarily in congregational singing (*Kirtan*) and listening (*Sravan*) to his deeds and activities.

This movement was revolutionary because Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam not only impacted on religious faith but also on the way of life of Assamese society. It encompassed the social, cultural and religious spheres of Assamese society. Even, it developed a new kind of philosophy, art and music in the form of '*Borgeets*', '*Ankiya Nats*' or '*Bhaonas*' as well as the '*Satriya Dance*' as modes of conveying the principles of *Ek-Sarana-Nama-Dharma*, based on the devotion to one single God Lord Krishna or Vishnu.

Sankardeva was the greatest spiritual leader of Assam, who simplified the modes of religious practices with great emphasis on '*bhakti*' and he made it accessible to every

members of the society by rendering the Holy Scriptures into the language of people.

Some quite unique practices like congregational prayers, theatre, music, dance, painting and others has been incorporated and developed by Srimanta Sankardeva. After fifteenth century these practices became more significant and achieved the grades of art forms, which prevalently established as the regular practices of the Satras and artisans of the island of Majuli and played a vital role to satisfy the creative and artistic urge of people.

Moreover these art forms developed parallel to the time with various techniques and mediums of visual representations, to gratify and spread the spiritual ideology among the society and succeeded to adjoin the people under cultural and religious harmony.

Sankardeva lived at *Dhuwahata* in Ahom territory in the 15th century, where he planted a Bilva (*bel*) tree and built a *Thaan* or settlement for his followers. Later, such a place, i.e. a Guru's residential settlement, came to be known as Satra. Dhuwahata came to be called *Belguri Satra*. Belguri Satra was part of the land which formed part of the breakaway River island of Majuli. Although the original Satra was washed away by the river, the island of Majuli itself became Holy Land.

Majuli came into the prominence after the fifteenth century due to the Vaisnavite preachers and practitioners who stayed and established Satras here, primarily after the holy arrival of Srimanta Sankardeva.

There are a total of about 30 Satras in Majuli which are located primarily towards the middle of the island. Each Satra represents, within its region, a centre for cultural activities and even acts as a democratic institution to settle local disputes. Most of the villages

associate with their respective Satras, and the villagers take part in the activities of their own Satras during festivals and occasions.

As a result Majuli has cherished the rich socio-religious and cultural life since the medieval periods, serving as a place of active institutes and learning centre of various Assamese Satriya dance, music and art forms which vibrantly nurtured the Assamese culture.

Documentation

Method :

The study was relied on secondary data and was collected from other research work on satras, articles and books.

Images for visual analysis were collected from sites such as Wikimedia, Flickr and blogs with due credits cited. Images were chosen which had a lot of visual variations.

The various domains are :

Satra and its architecture :

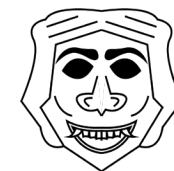
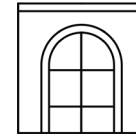
Major Satras of Majuli which were analysed were *Garamur Satra*, *Auniati Satra*, *Dakhinpat Satra*, *Kamalabari Satra*, *Samaguri Satra*. The documentation consisted of the intricate architecture of Satra gateways and doorways and the visual patterns and motifs sculpted or painted on them. The *guru asana* which contains the main object of worship was also analysed for motifs.

Satriya Dance and Ankia Bhaona :

Documentation consisted of various motifs and patterns found in the costumes worn by both male and female performers during performances of *Satriya Nritya* and *Ankia Bhaona*.

Mask Making/Mukha Shilpa :

Documentation consisted of various mask worn during performances of *Ankia Bhaona* based on the plays of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* by the actors.





Gayan Bayan ,a traditional performance of Satriya culture.

Environment :

Majuli, a pilgrimage island of Assam is distinguished for its geography, culture and primarily a place where Vaisnavism has prospered since fifteenth century. The island is about 300–400 kilometres east from the state's largest city Guwahati. It was formed due to course changes by the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries.

The island is a paradise of biodiversity of flora and fauna, which is nurtured by the vast Brahmaputra River. This largest river

island is a home to the pristine cultural heritage of Assam and the Vaisnavite shrines, popularly known as Satras. As such the island has been a place of pilgrimage for the last 400 years.

The population of Majuli comprises the tribal and non tribal communities which have contributed immensely to its rich and colourful cultural heritage. The inhabitants lead simple lives and are always happy to welcome travellers.

Aesthetical architecture and motifs supporting the structure of satra :

The architectural structure of a Satra begins with the huge decorative gateway known as *Batchora* which is laden with with floral motifs, celestial being and hybrid animal sculptures. Inside the satra the duar or door towards the main entrance is named as *mukhaduar* and the ones at the side are the *petduar*. Some duars are seen with carved lion motifs called *Simhaduar* and others have floral motifs known as *phuljalikataduar*.



The Batchora at Dakshin Pat Satra, Majuli.

The institution of namghars or prayer hall is the central structure of a Satra. It is the place where regular hymns and kirtana are held. Inside the *namghar* we find various artistic motifs, beautifully carved doors and windows, huge decorative posts supporting the prayer hall, hybrid animal sculptures, ancient manuscript paintings, and various artefacts.

The second most important feature of a

Sattra is the *manikuta* which houses the valuable properties of a Satra, attached east of the Namghar. It is referred to as the sanctum sanctorum in which the *guruasana*, (a wooden tetradedral structure with four carved lions), is placed containing the main object of worship. It is pyramidal in shape with a square basement firmly standing on four pillars.

There are seven steps in the *guruasana*. At the basement of each pillar there is an elephant on the tortoise. The seven lions on each elephant sum up twenty eight representations of the seven heavens or *Sapta Vaikuntha*.

According to the Holy Scriptures, it is believed there are seven heavens, seven earths, and seven hells, and the each earth is carried on the back of tortoise. The tortoise is represented as the stand of the earth, and the elephant is represented as '*paap*' or evil deeds. The elephant because of its heavy mass considered as one's evil deed, so in order to overcome, purify, and dominate the evil deeds. The lion motif is placed over it as a sign of strength and domination, i.e., good over evil.



A seven tier guruasana .

The forms of art and the architectural representation acted as visual narratives of the Satra. Since, architecture itself a part of art, the unique architectural forms and details of the Satras captivated the mind of the Kings, nobles, and devotees as well. In the art and architectural forms we can see numerous stylish features, unique motifs, highly decorative, precisely arranged compositions, particularized characters, varied ranges of colour, secular and religious themes.



A female satriya dancers costume.

Satriya Nritya and Ankia Bhaona :

The Satriya dance form of Assam has developed in the Neo Vaisnavite monasteries which is characteristically religious in nature and achieved the status of Classical dance in India. To propagate the ideas of Neo-Vaisnavism Sankardeva inscribed the worship songs in the form of Kirtana, Dramas in the form of Bhaona which depicts the events from the classical scriptures Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Bhagawata.

The costume of Satriya dance is primarily of two types: the male costume comprising the *dhoti* and *chadar* and the paguri (turban) and the female costume comprising the *ghuri*, *chadar* and *kanchi* (waist cloth). Traditionally the costumes were of white or raw silk color with use of red, blue and yellow for specific dance numbers. In earlier times velvet and satin materials were mostly used for the costumes.

Pat, a silk produced in Assam which is derived from the mulberry plant and muga silk is also used in preparing the dance costume. Intricate local motifs like *Kingkhap*, *Miri*, *Kalka* are seen.

The geometric and linear designs emphasize technical skills of the weavers. The simplest floral motif found is a small circle or dot with short radiating lines on all sides. Big bold flowers in stylized and geometric forms, which used singly as a unit in the design, are often found in the textiles.

A variety of animal motifs like butterfly, peacocks, elephant, tiger, fish etc. are also adopted in stylized form. Charai (birds) in general, *mora-charai* (peacock), *hanh* (ducks and swan) are common motifs in the textile design. Peacock, duck and swan are regarded as sacred motifs by the Assamese Hindus.

While in the case of Ankia bhaona shimmering white costumes are worn by the large orchestra of musicians. The most striking character is that of the *Sutradhara* or the stage manager who is dressed in a white long-sleeved coat with a full, gathered skirt and also wears a white turban and elaborate ornaments. Leading characters wear colorful costumes and crowns and sometimes masks are used to portray characters like Jatayu, Hanuman, Asuras etc.



Mask making at Kamalabari Satra.

Mask making or *Mukha Shilpa* is an exclusive art practised in a few satras in Majuli. These masks were specifically used during the performances of Ankiya Bhaonas that were based on the plays of Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagwata.

Characters like Hanuman, Raavan, Demons, Deities as well as of various animals were made which were normally difficult to

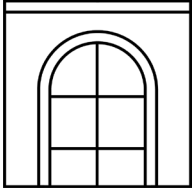
portray using make up and costumes. These traditional masks can be of three types which are *Su Mukha*, *Lutukai Mukha* and *Mukh Mukha*. The process of mask making is a very elaborate process which may take up to two weeks.

Following tradition these masks are made of a woven bamboo frame for the structure and cow dung along with clay for the

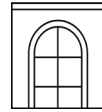
features. The colours used to decorate these masks are obtained from organic sources like plants and minerals.

However, nowadays the artisans have started making masks with other decorative motifs on a commercial basis.

Classification



Satra and its Architecture



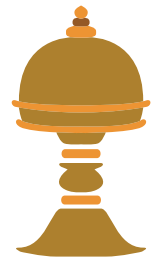
Motifs/symbols :

Xorai



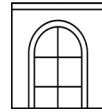
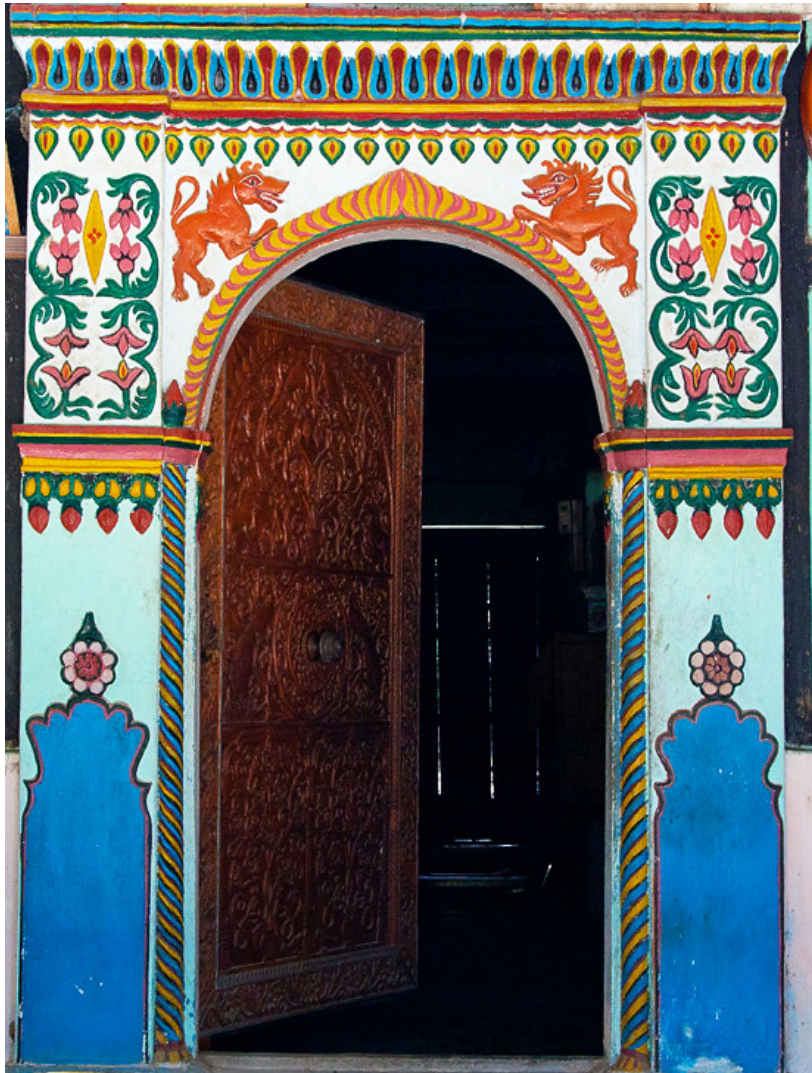
The Xorai is a bell metal product which is a traditional symbol and considered as an article of great respect. It is used as an offering tray for food and other items placed in front of the altar for blessing by the Lord

Patterns



The Satra gateways and doorways are often intricately designed with exquisite door frames or panels with beautifully carved designs, huge decorative posts, painted wall murals and statues bearing various motifs of cultural and religious importance.

Patterns are mostly floral and abstract. The Xorai Motif is realistically rendered.



Motifs/symbols :

Lion



The lion motifs are used here as a celestial, divine character that are represented sometimes as guards of the holy entrance of Satras, Namghars and Manikuts.t

Patterns



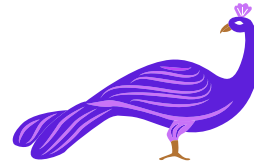
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Patterns are mostly floral and symmetrical in nature.



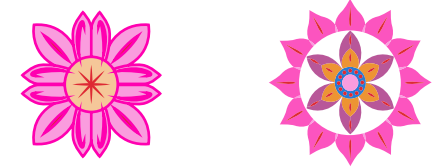
Motifs/symbols :

Peacock.



Peacock or the mora charai is regarded as a very sacred motif by the Assamese hindus. The two moras (peacock) facing each other forming an interesting design is named juria-mora.

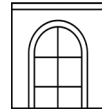
Patterns



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Patterns are mostly floral and symmetrical in nature. Lotus flower (Podum) is seen in a stylized and geometric form.

The pillars are intricately carved with floral patterns.



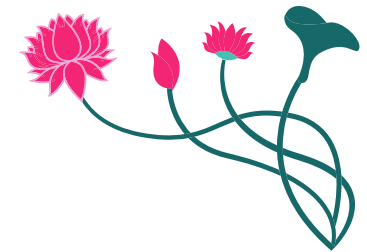
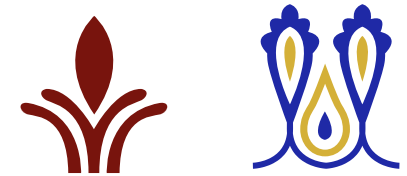
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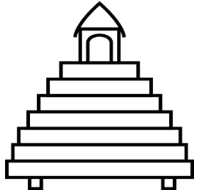


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Patterns are mostly floral and symmetrical in nature.

Wall Murals of the Trimurti or the triple deity (Brahma, Vishnu & Shiva) is seen painted above the arch.The pillars are intricately carved with floral patterns.

Classification

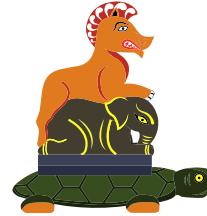


Guru Asana



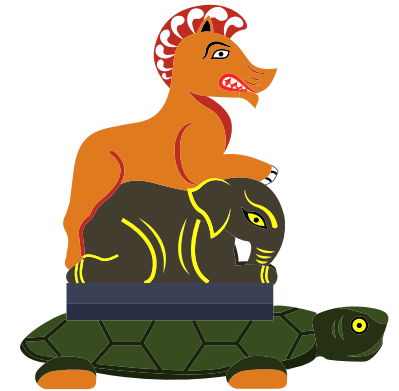
Motifs/symbols :

Lion, Elephant & Tortoise



The tortoise is represented as the stand of the earth, and the elephant is represented as 'paap' or evil deeds. The lion motif is placed over it as a sign of strength and domination, i.e., good over evil.

Patterns



A miniature model of the Guru Asana having three tiers instead of the original seven tiers. The peak of the asana holds the sacred book.

Patterns are mostly floral and are symmetrical in nature.

The tiers are made out of wood while the lion, elephant and tortoise figures are carved out from wood itself and later painted on with synthetic paints.





Seven Tier Guru Asana with a richly woven piece of textile draped over it called the Gohain kapor.

The Gohain Kapor is a cotton/silk textile where the patterns are mostly floral and are symmetrical in nature.

The tiers are made out of wood while the lion, elephant and tortoise figures are carved out from wood itself and later painted on with synthetic paints.



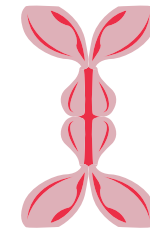
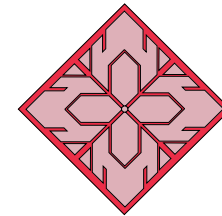
Motifs/symbols :

Lion, Elephant



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Patterns



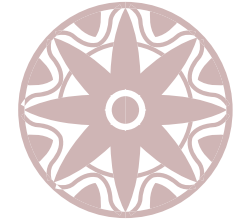


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Patterns



Seven Tier Guru Asana with a richly woven piece of textile draped over it called the Gohain kapor.

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Seven Tier Guru Asana with a richly woven piece of textile draped over it called the gohain kapor.

The Gohain Kapor is a cotton/silk textile where the patterns are mostly floral and are symmetrical in nature.

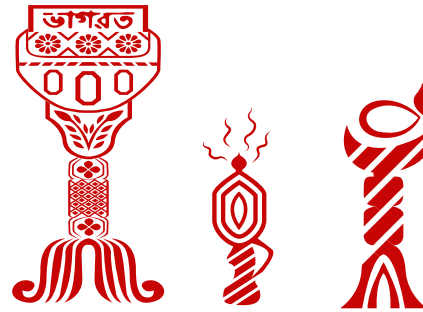
Use of typography in the textile can be seen with the use of assamese script.

The tiers are made out of wood while the lion, elephant and tortoise figures are carved out from wood itself and later painted on with synthetic paints.



Motifs/symbols :

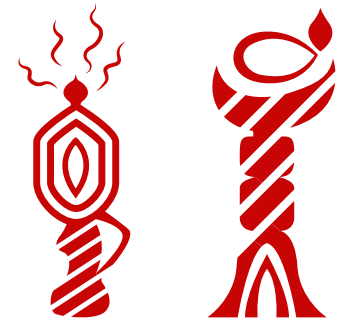
Xorai, Saki & DhunaDani



This particular Xorai motif has a bhagawat Gita placed on it. The xorai is used as an offering tray for food and other items placed in front of the altar for blessing by the Lord.

It is also accompanied by a saki (lamp) and a dhunadani which is a vessel to burn resin during prayer.

Patterns



Classification



Satriya Nritya & Ankia Bhaona



Motifs/symbols :

Miri

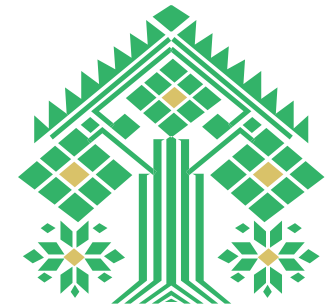
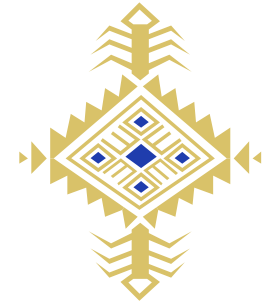


Miri Motif is seen which is angular and geometric in design. It resembles a tree (gach) laden with five big flowers.



Phool Buta which is the simplest motif with a circle in the center and radiating petals.

Patterns



A female satriya dancers costume consist of the Ghuri, Kanchi and Chadar which is intricately designed with floral and geometric motifs.

The textile is hand woven with the use of Pat/Muga Silk.

The motifs are taken mostly from nature which are abstract and geometric.

A geometric and liner design can be seen in the pari (borderwork)



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Motifs/symbols :

Japi



Japi is a traditional Headgear worn by farmers to protect them from rain and sun which is offered as a sign of respect in ceremonies and is also used as a decorative item.

Phool Buta

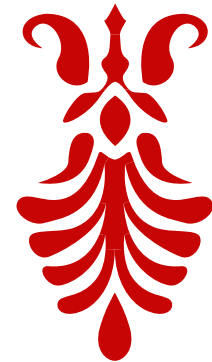


Phool Buta which is the simplest motif with a circle in the center and radiating petals.

Barfi (Diamond)



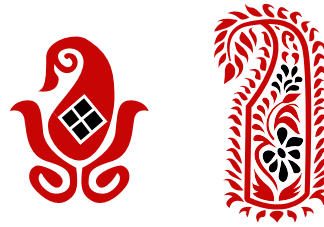
Patterns





Motifs/symbols :

Kalka



Two variants of Kalka Motif is seen. One which is simpler and the other with intricate flowers and ferns inside it.

Satbhoni



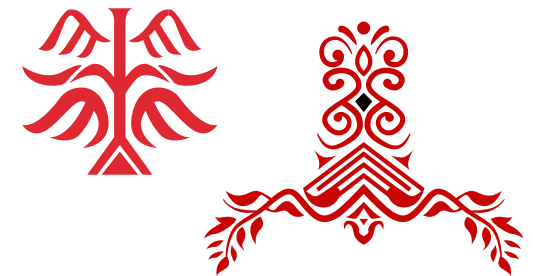
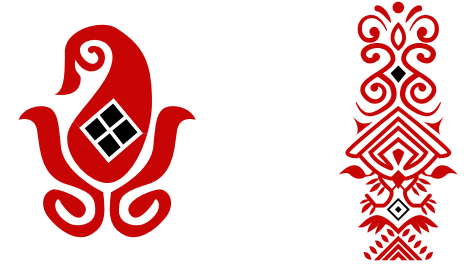
It resembles the seven sisters of the northeast

Loka Paro



Pair of birds facing each other.

Patterns



A female satriya dancers costume consist of the *Ghuri*, *Kanchi* and *Chadar* which is intricately designed with floral and geometric motifs.

The textile is hand woven with the use of Pat/Muga Silk.

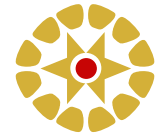
The motifs are taken mostly from nature which are abstract and geometric.



Motifs/symbols :

Patterns

Kingkhap



Two variants of the kingkhap motif is seen. One having peacocks and lion facing each other and the other with floral patterns.



Gol Buta



A female satriya dancers costume consist of the Ghuri,Kanchi and Chadar which is intricately designed with floral and geometric motifs.

The textile is hand woven with the use of Pat/Muga Silk.

The motifs are taken mostly from nature which are abstract and geometric.

Classification



t



Ravana Mask used during the anka bhaonas based on Ramayana
It is a mukh mukha specifically designed only for the face.

Materials : Bamboo, Cow dung, Clay, Organic Natural Colours.



Hanuman Mask used during anka bhaonas based on ramayana.
Mukh Mukha specifically designed for the face.

Materials : Bamboo,Cow dung, Clay, Organic Natural Colours.



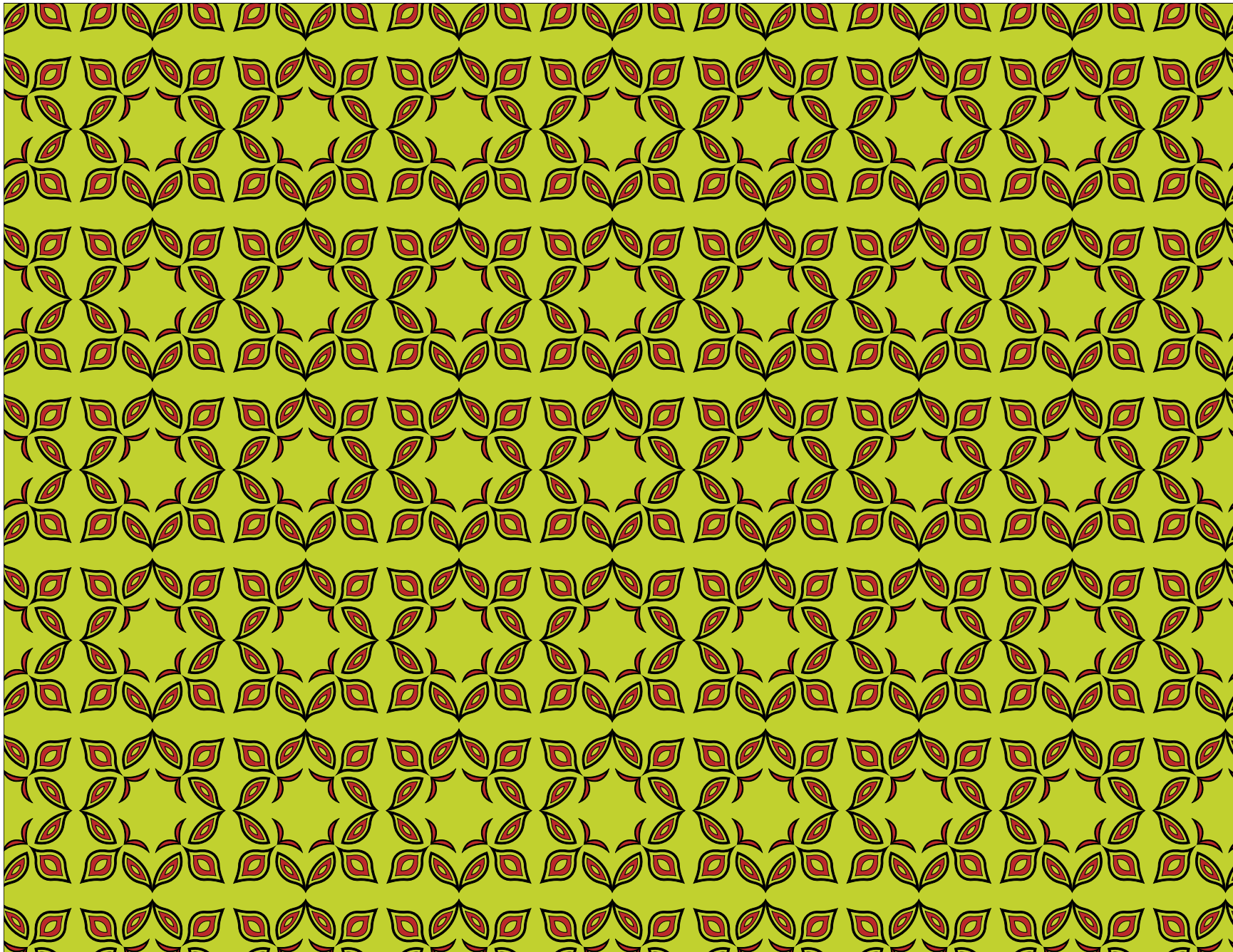
Mukha of a deity used during Ankia Bhaona. It is a mukh mukha specifically designed for the face.

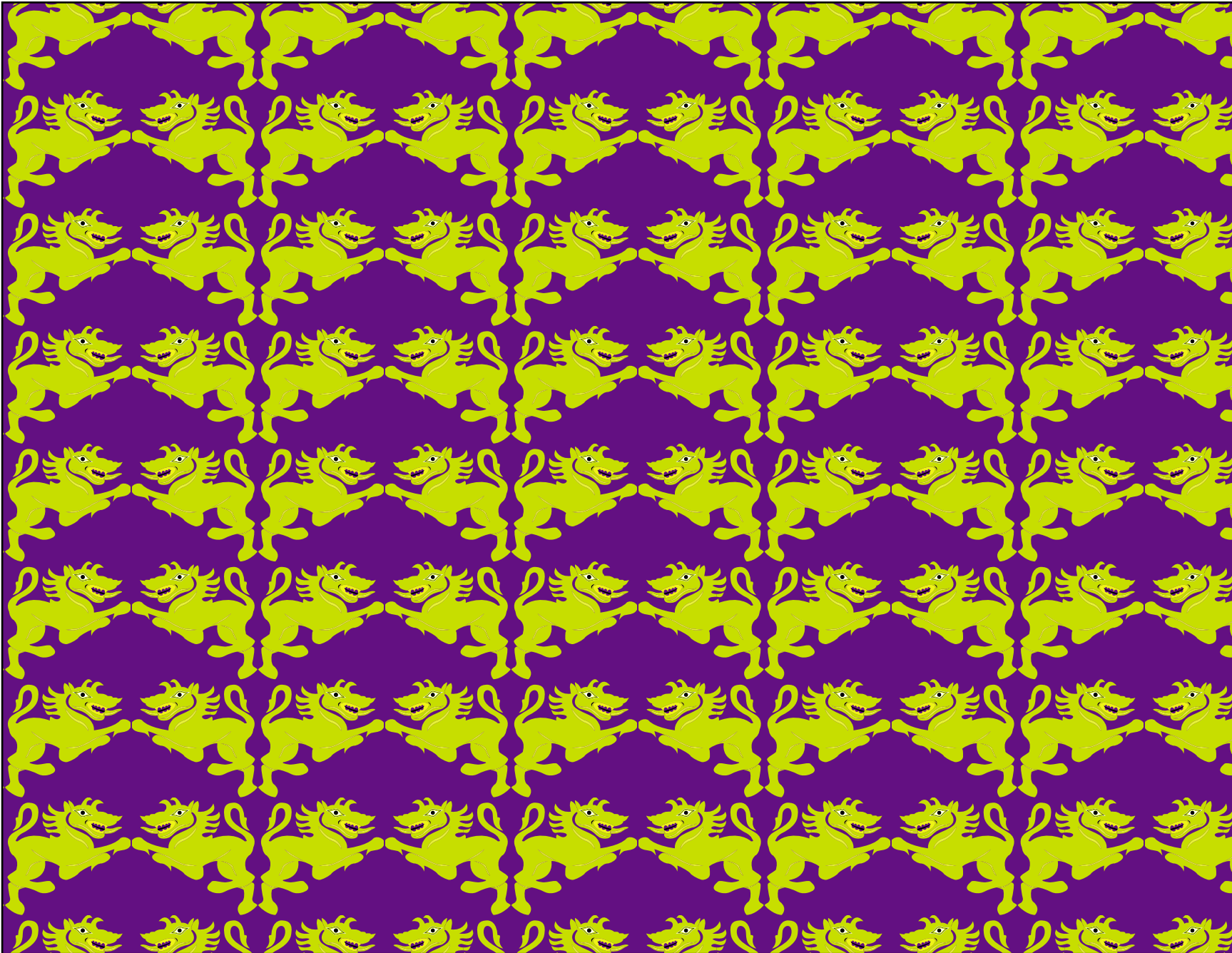
Materials : Bamboo,Cow dung, Clay, Organic Natural Colours.

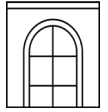
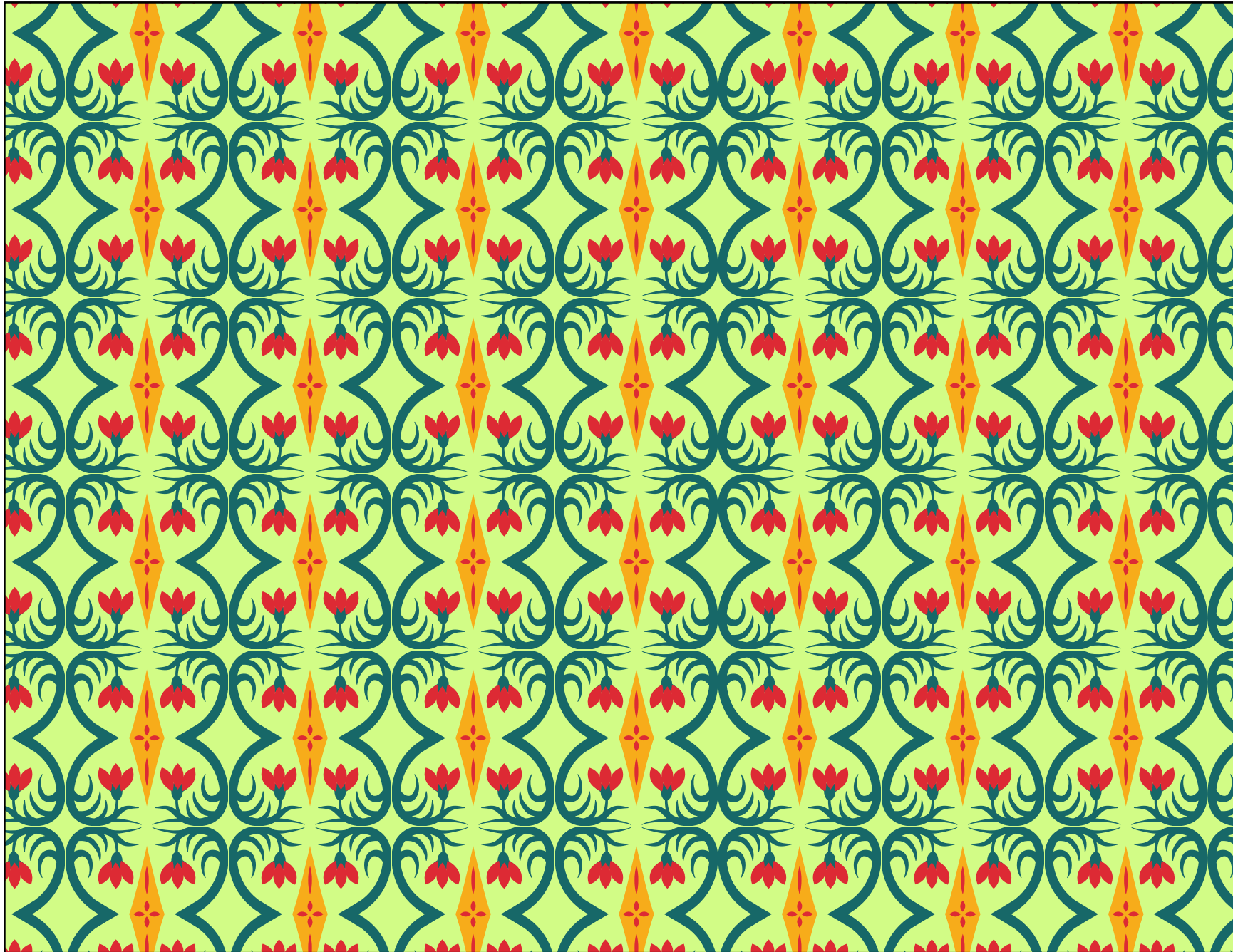
Exploration

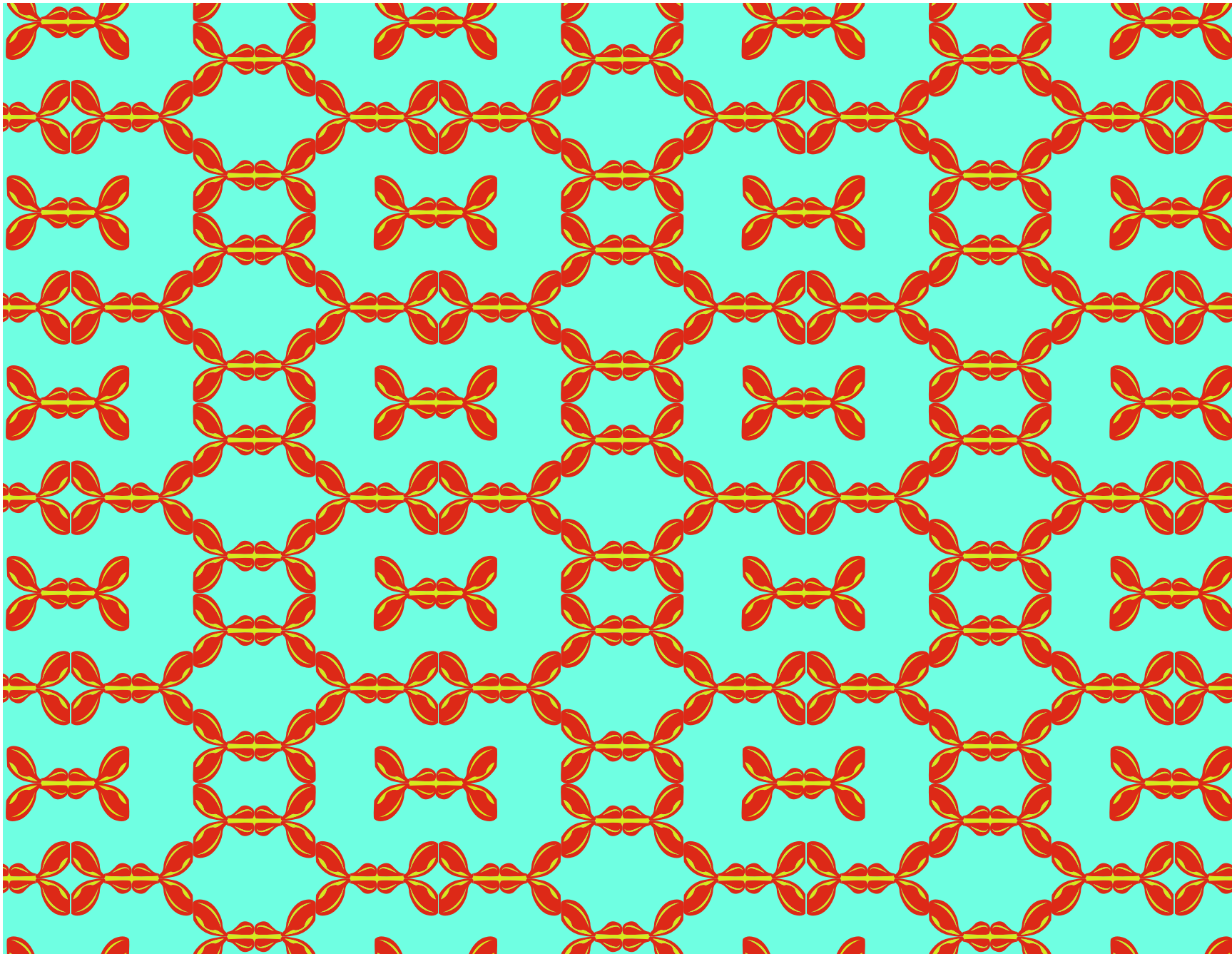
Patterns are created using the various graphical units and patterns obtained during the analysis.



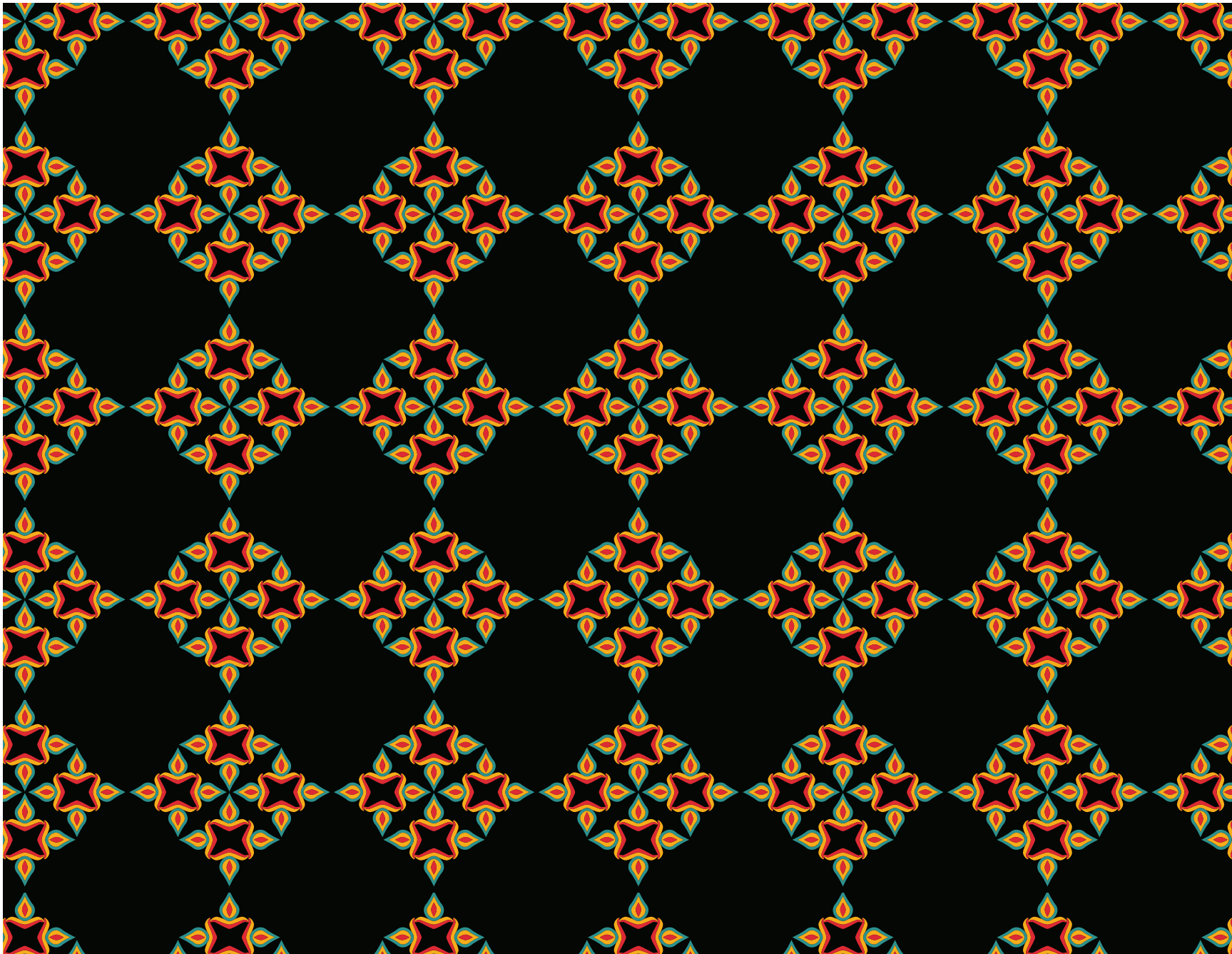


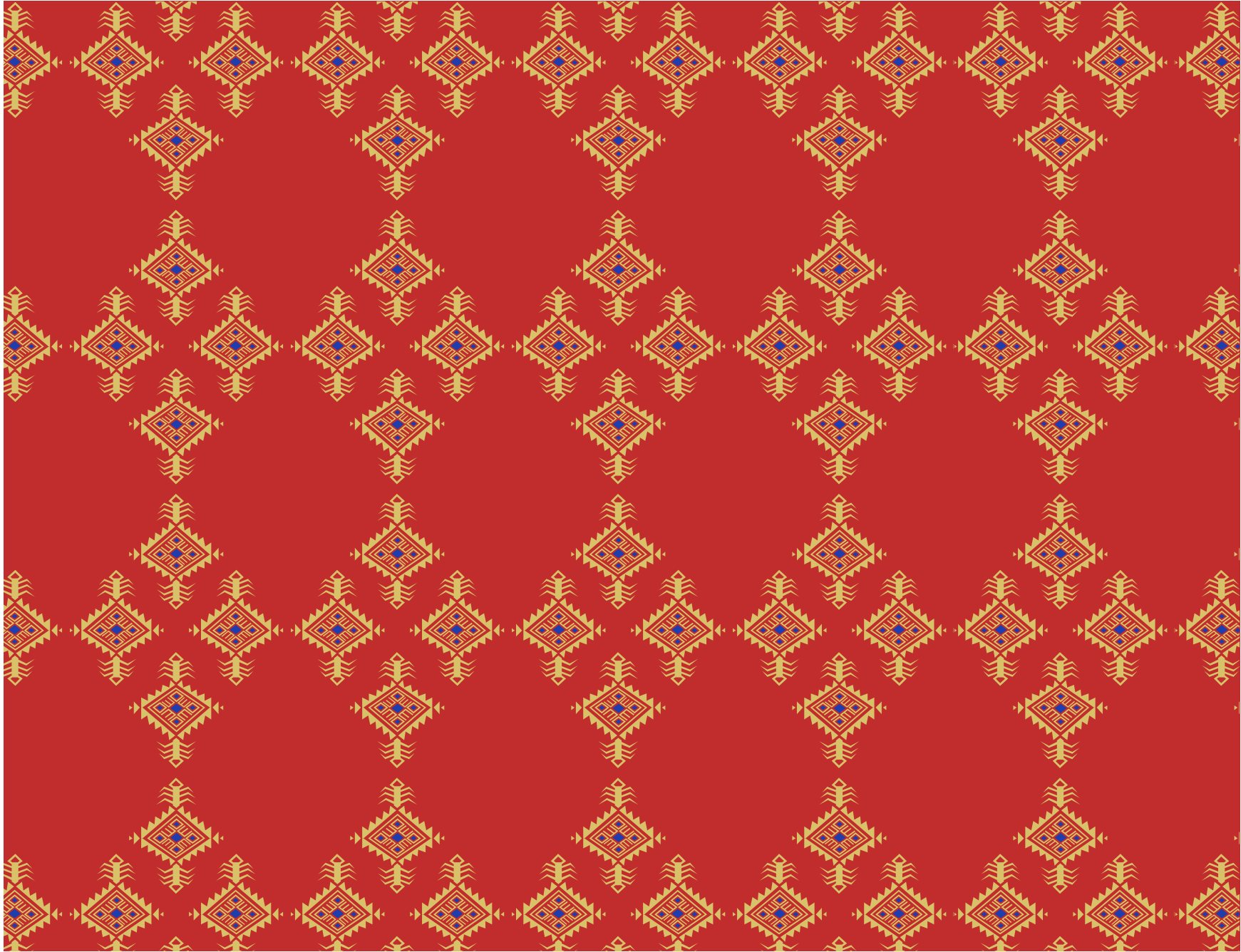


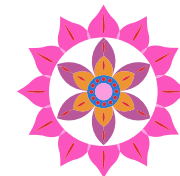
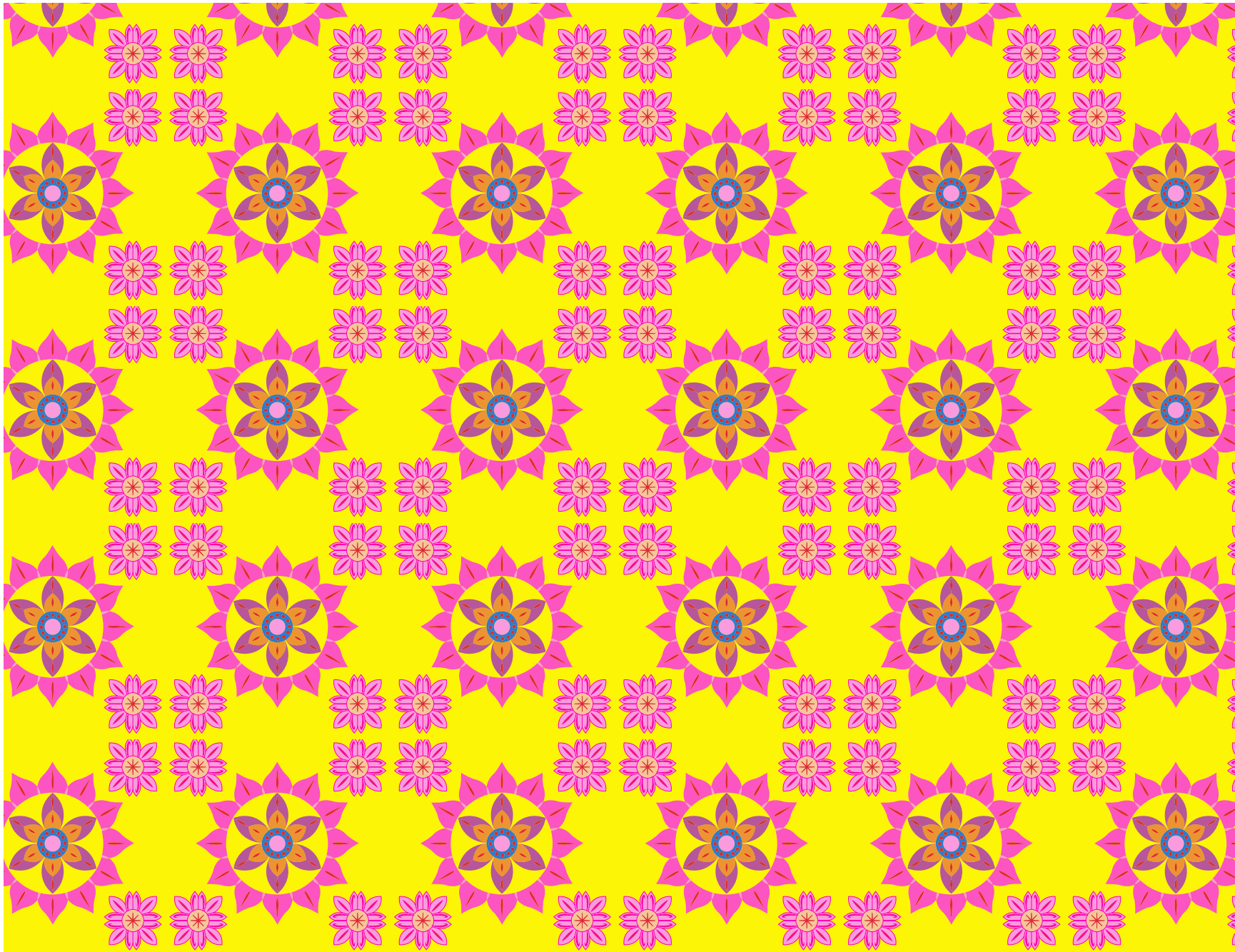


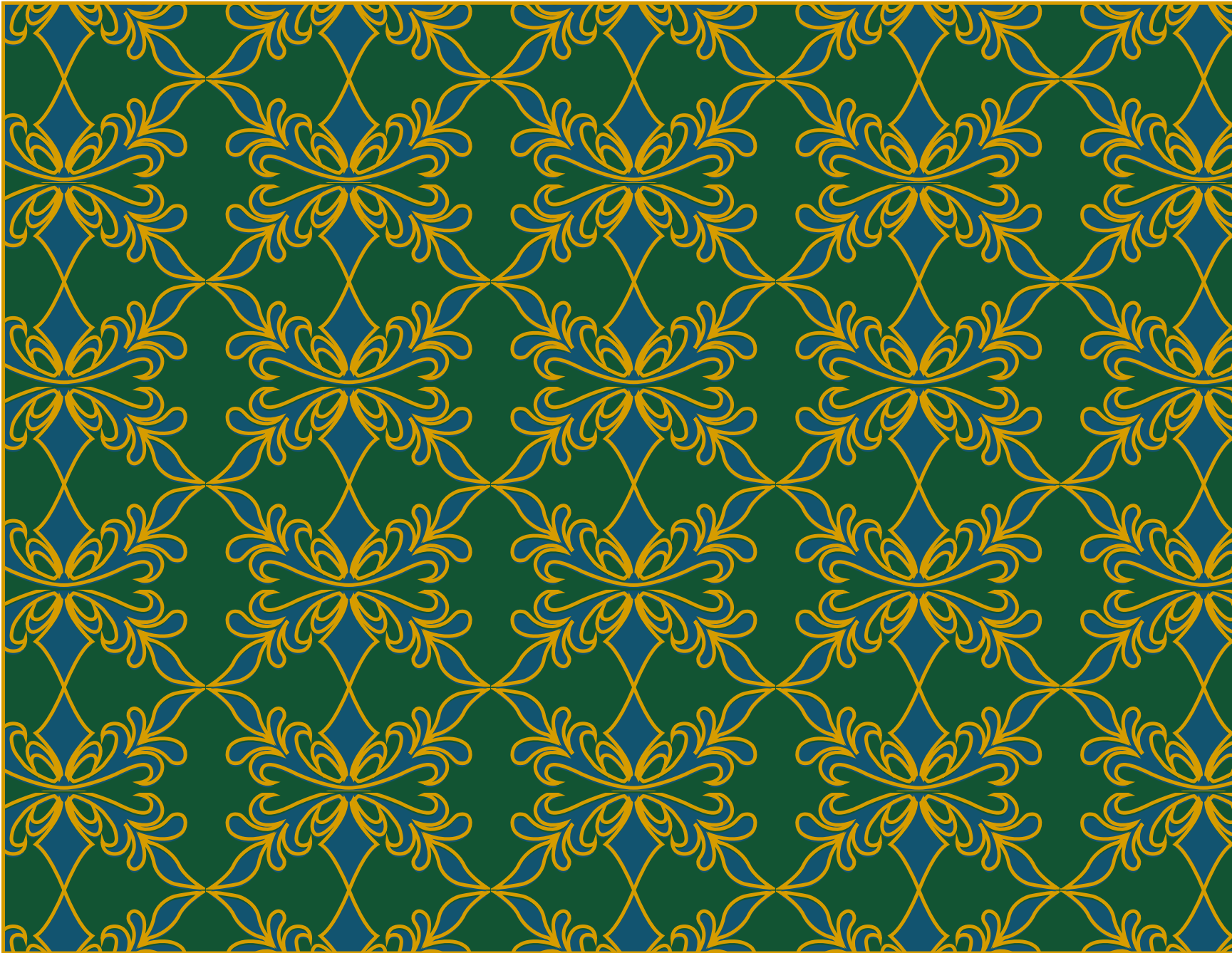


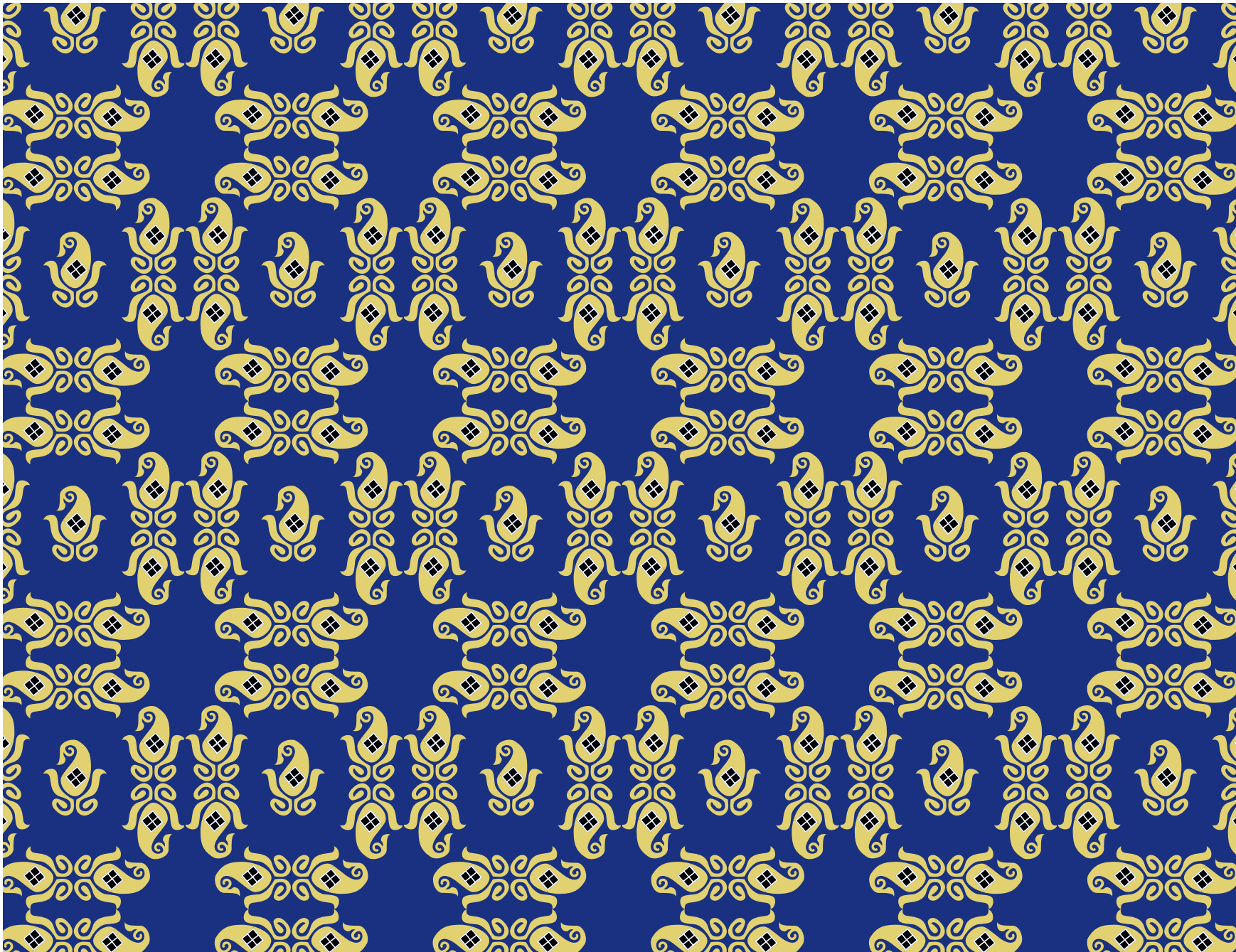


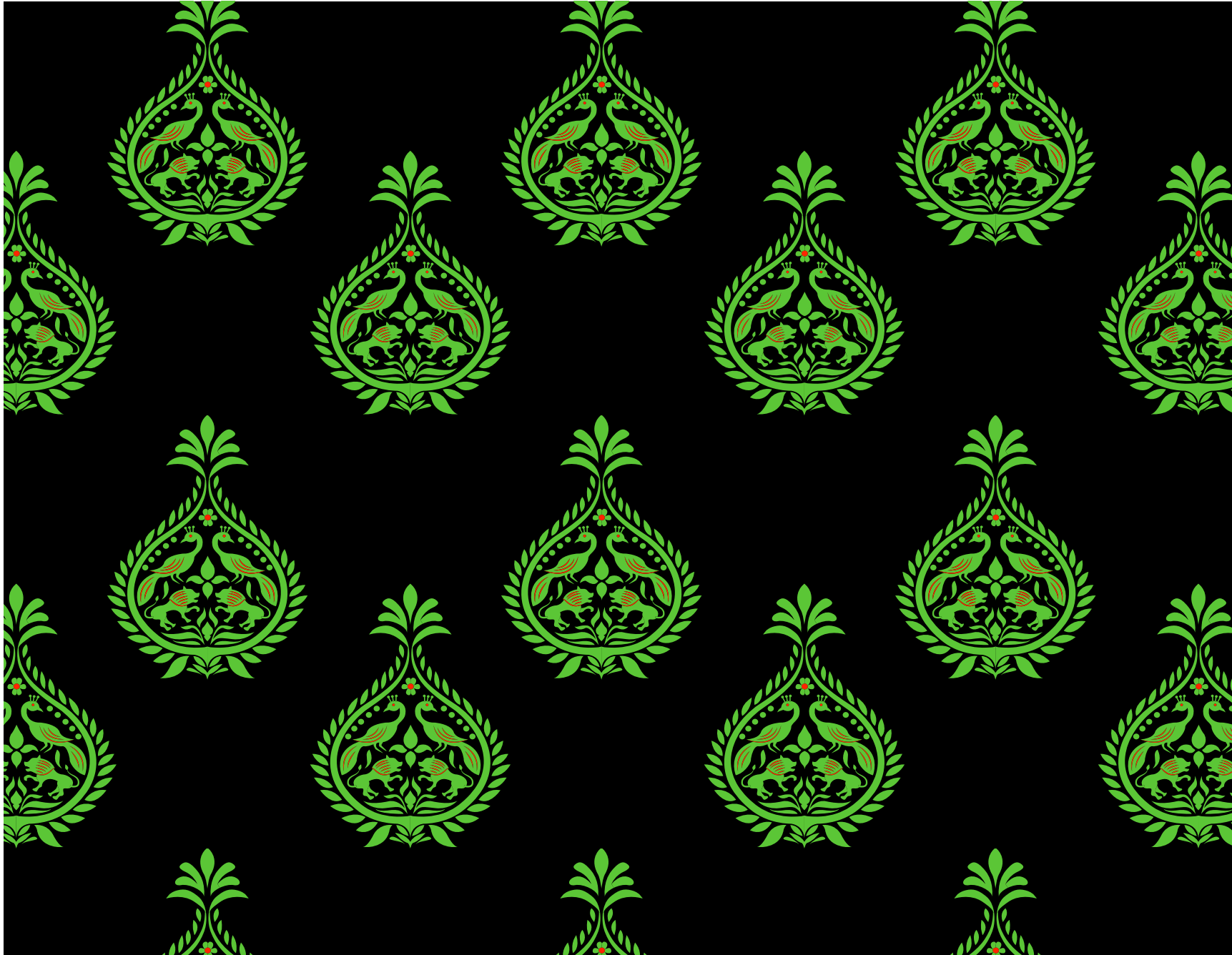




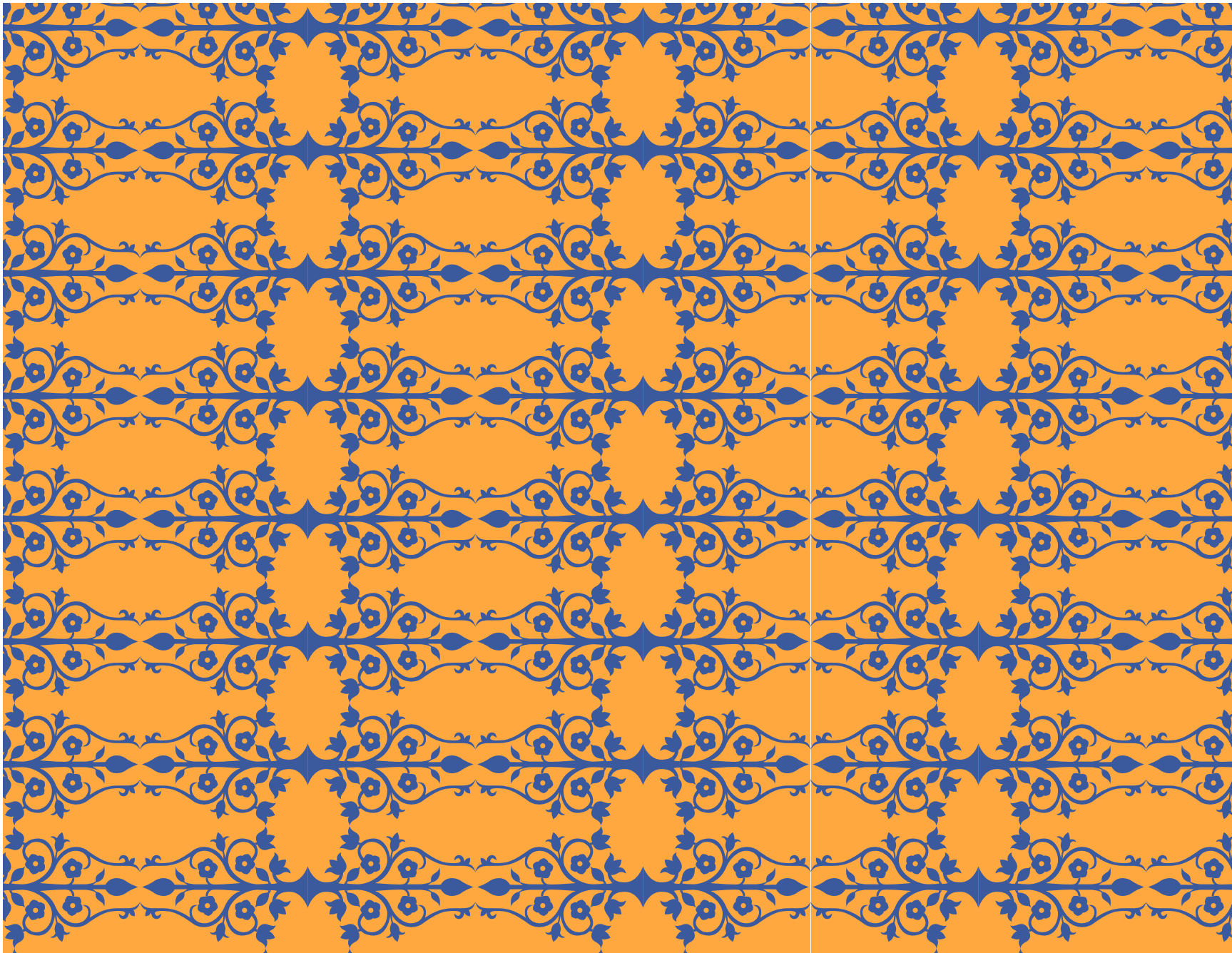


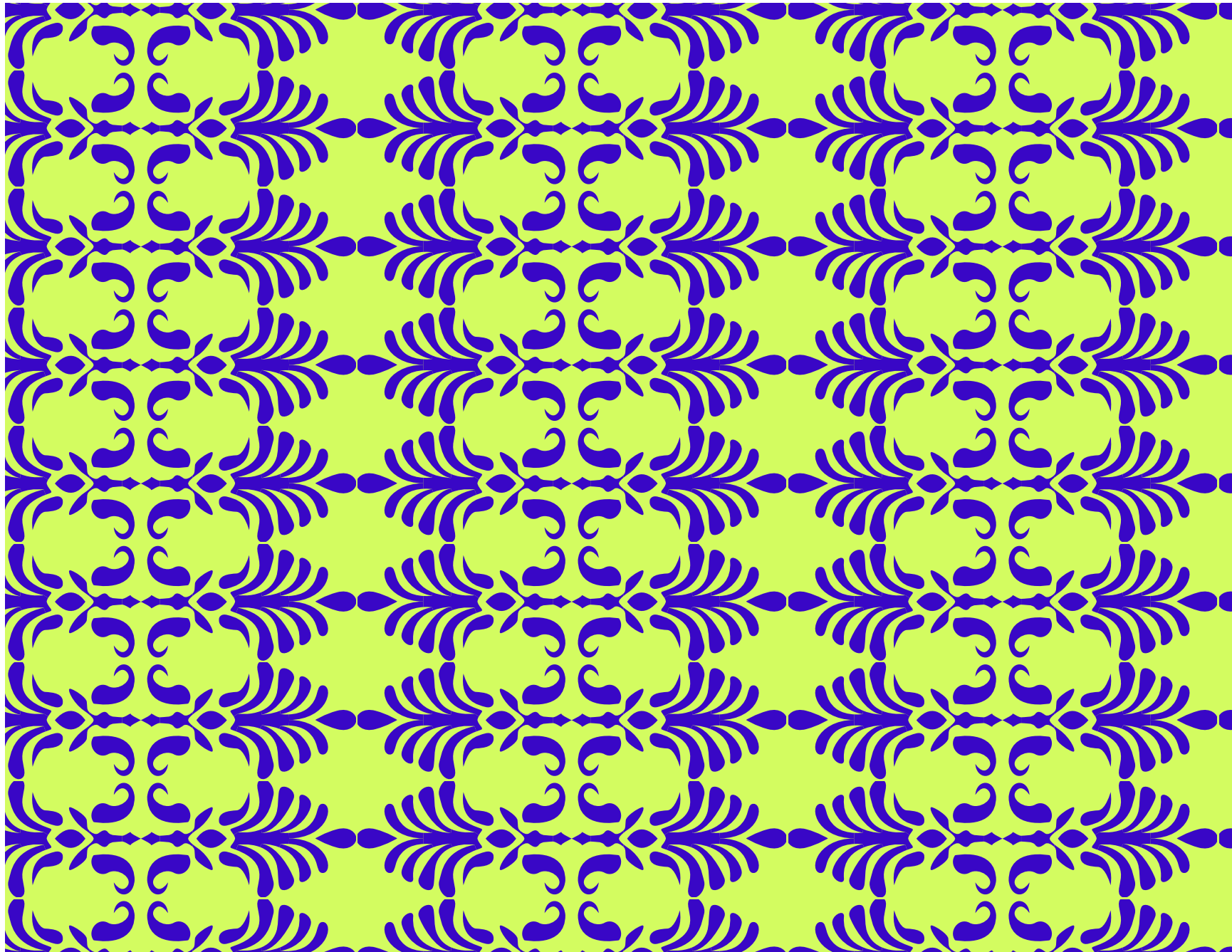












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