



Beauty, Form and Function in Typography

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Typecraft: Handcrafted beauty in a functional typeface Can decorative ornateness and functionality coexist?

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Abstract

What is beauty? From where does the concept of beauty originate? Is beauty universal or does it vary culturally?

Does the inclusion of ornamentation (and hence intricacy and detail) make something beautiful? Can beauty exist without ornamentation? Do ornament and beauty work in opposition to functionality?

Fig. 1.1 (left) Rabari embroidery covering every square inch of surface | Fig. 1.2 (right): a “jugaad” tractor entirely covered with decoration



Why is ornamentation such an intrinsic part of Indian culture (Fig. 1.1 and 1.2) – from the ‘*solah shringaar*’ rituals to the way in which trucks are decorated across the country? Should ornamentation be encouraged in Indic type design?

I believe that beauty and ornamentation are intricately linked in our culture. All that seems like mere decoration isn’t always so. In many situations, ornamentation also has a meaning and a function – whether ritualistic, social or economic.

Beauty is ultimately about desire. If something isn’t appealing, it isn’t desirable. Desire is important for reproduction and continuation of the species. Being desirable and seeking an appealing person is important to the cycle of creation.

Shringaar or ornamentation is used by a woman to attract a male suitor. Indeed, the embroideries in Kutch are, in fact, a type of *shringaar* where women from a young age start embroidering their bridal trousseau. It is said that the most beautiful clothing will attract the most handsome suitor. The embroideries not only create a unique identity for each community but also help signify social structures related to rites of passage. For instance, the variation of pattern, density of embroidery and colour are used to differentiate between an unmarried, married and widowed woman. Thus, ornamentation isn’t just about beauty but it also about functionality and maintaining social norms.

Essay

However, since the dawn of the 20th century, Art and Design in the Modern era have been about the rejection of the ornament and decoration in favor of the aesthetically minimal and sparse.

Deemed bourgeois, ornamentation was considered passé and a representation of royalty, as it was patronized by them. This rejection came out of the numerous revolutions against the ideology of the monarchy and what it stood for, as well as for the promotion of a political system based on Equality, Freedom and Democracy. Minimalism has then been deemed tantamount to beauty and utility. This started with the French Revolution, and spread across Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Functionality, rather than formal beauty, began to be emphasized with the famous maxim, ‘Form follows Function’, by Louis Sullivan, which epitomizes the zeitgeist of the time. Simultaneously, the birth of the Industrial Revolution and mature global markets under colonial rule meant metrication, simplification and universalisation.

This posed a death-knell to William Morris’s Arts & Crafts movement of the mid-19th century and led to the avant-garde Modernist and ‘rationalist’ era of the early 20th century, with movements such as Futurism and Dada that extolled the machine aesthetic in favour of the handmade. The latter was rejected as it represented imperfection, and paradoxically luxury and class. Type design under first the Bauhaus

and then the Swiss International Style reached a zenith under the guise of simplicity, functionality and rationality.

While all of this made sense from a Western, Eurocentric and Modernist viewpoint, what does this mean for Indian aesthetic sensibilities today? While most European countries have moved away from Modernist viewpoints, Indian design education, and thus mainstream design sensibility in the country is still stuck in the Modernist paradigm. However, the reality on the ground – in both urban and rural India – is quite the opposite to the minimal design aesthetic being taught in the country.

It is time to rethink what Indian design and type design should be about and take inspiration from. It is also time to re-evaluate the outmoded precepts of design that are blindly being followed in the country in favour of a sensibility that is sensitized to the way we Indians behave, dress, travel, create and live.

Is ornament, which is such an important aspect of the idea of beauty in the Indian milieu – an oxymoron for type design? Or can ornament and typography coexist? What are the boundaries that make something too ornamental and less functional versus too functional and not ornamental enough?

To understand beauty, form and function in typography in relation to type design, in India, one must question what beauty means in the Indian context.

Beauty from the Indian perspective as seen in craft is about using every square inch of space for surface decoration and ornamentation. We Indians value something more, if it's intricate, detailed and ornate – as that implies greater workmanship and more value. Since it is of greater value and appreciation, and hence of more beauty.

Beauty in the form of shringaar is intrinsically related to functionality. This can be seen in the numerous embroideries of Kutch.

The idea of 'packing', intricacy and density is really a key aspect of the Indian aesthetic sense. The embroideries of Kutch for instance, are known as '*bhārat kaam*' or filling work. The more intricate and detailed the embroidery, the higher the chance of a girl finding a handsome groom. This is the saying in most Kutchi communities where girls start embroidering their own trousseau at a young age. Here beauty and ornament becomes associated with pride and achievement. After marriage, the women embroider the cloths of their children, ornaments and coverings for the camel and other cattle. The embroidery of each community (there are over twenty communities associated with embroidery in Kutch) is unique, and one can identify a group just by looking at their clothing. The style, density, motif and color of the embroidery is unique to each group. As such, these embroideries have a strong functional aspect to them in terms of being a marker of the communal identity

and its distinct relationship to other communities. The embroideries also vary according to whether a girl is married, unmarried or widowed. Thus, the ornamental beauty functions in terms of creating a certain social structure. Today, many women in Kutch make their livelihood by doing embroidery for their customers. Embroidery has become a way of life and survival in an age where the barter system has replaced the monetary economic system.

One sees it even on modern machinery such as trucks that are decorated with stickers and all sorts of embellishments, to personalize the vehicle. Most Indian shops are also just packed with goods from floor to ceiling – in this case – not for decoration or delight but to make use of every bit of space, to be able to stock more goods with less space. You see it also on the roads and highways of India – vans, jeeps, and two-wheelers – just ‘*bhara hua*’, or packed with people or objects to be taken to a market for sale. Much more is being packed in than that is what one usually expected. (Fig. 2.1 and 2.2)



Fig. 2.1 (left): A man transporting metal pots is almost entirely covered by them | Fig. 2.2 (right): a man travelling outside an “auto” as there’s no room left inside!

The Typecraft Initiative

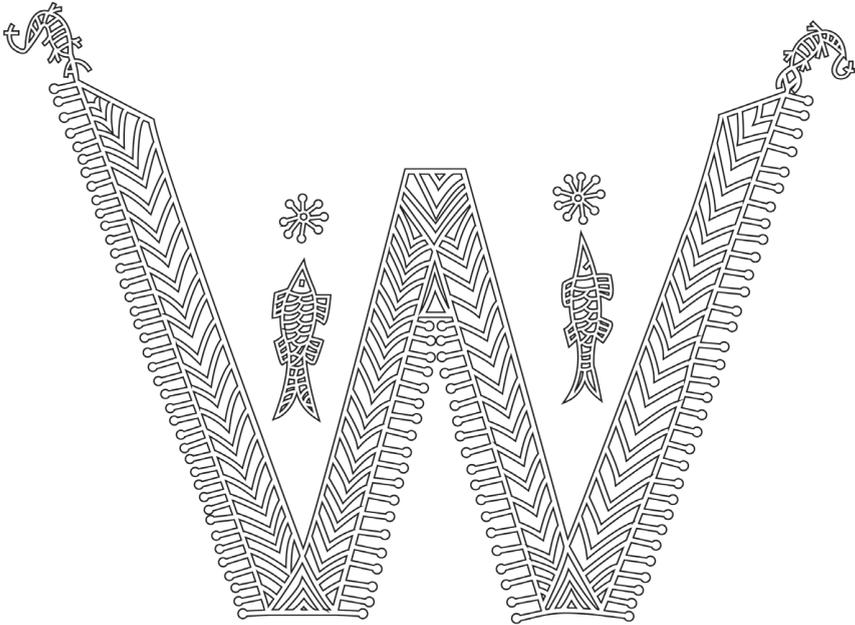
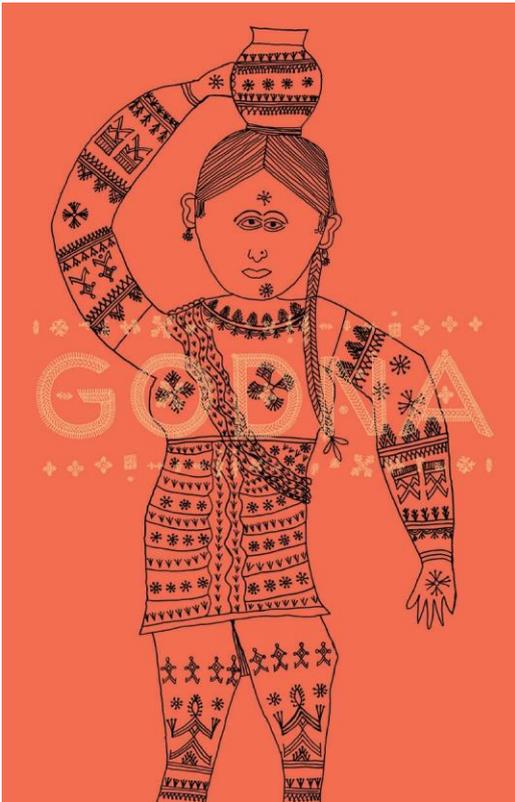
Through the display typefaces we create, we examine the relationship between beauty, especially that of the ornament as seen in craft and tribal art – and functionality in terms of type as a tool of communication and language.

We launched The Typecraft Initiative in 2012, with the aim to unite type design, livelihood creation and the preservation of Indian crafts and tribal arts. The latter tend to be highly ornamental in nature. But rather than suppress this, we have embraced this aspect in the creation of the digital typefaces. Care has also been taken to ensure the typefaces remain functional as display typefaces, while being true to the original art-form.

The project is meant as a way for craftspeople and tribal artists to think in new ways in a world where they are no longer able to sustain themselves solely through time-honored networks and systems. The traditional way of life is changing very quickly – the beauty and authenticity of their work – however intricate and detailed, – doesn’t have the value that it once had.

By innovating their craft into a new visual language with a different function (typography and communication), while keeping its original sanctity of the craft intact – we hope to find new audiences for these crafts that hitherto were not even aware about the craft or the people involved with it.

Clockwise from (below left), Fig 3.1: The vectorized “W” of the Godna typeface is highly ornate and detailed with more than hundred nodes. | Fig 3.2: Godna or tattoo is applied to the entire body by the Godharin women from the Gond tribe in Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh | Fig. 3.3: The completed Godna typeface in use on the computer as a display typeface.



The initiative aims to raise funds for those artists and craftspeople involved in the collaborations. The wider goals are to inspire, create awareness and generate further interest in the history, context, work and life of the people we collaborate with. Whether the typefaces created end up making money or not, the craftspeople are always paid in advance, with the funds raised are used to cover costs and initiate new projects with other tribal and craft artists groups.



Fig. 4: Chittara Latin display typeface from Karnataka in collaboration with Radha Sullur

We are currently in the process of expanding the initiative to involve the creation of Indic typefaces by working with regional scripts and regional crafts and tribal arts. For instance, we have started the creation of a Gujarati typeface based on Pakko embroidery from Kutch (See Fig. 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3). We are working with local NGOs to see if the process of the creation of the Gujarati embroidery based typeface can also be used as a literacy tool especially for local children and adults living in the homes where these embroideries are created.

We believe that working with regional crafts, languages and scripts is a natural progression for the typecraft initiative, to make this a movement that supports not only local communities and the handmade, but also local languages and customs, and helps increase regional language literacy through the process of the creation of a typeface which becomes an object of cultural importance and hopefully manages to support and revitalize the invaluable skills and the beauty of the communities that survive on those skills.

Ultimately, the beauty of these letter-forms (and hopefully the final digital typeface) is not just in the intrinsic quality of the embroideries but also the beauty of the people, the communities and the tradition behind these crafts.

Through this platform, we have created two digital Latin typefaces – Godna (See Fig. 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3) (in collaboration with Gond tribal tattoo artists – Ram Keli, Sumitra and Sunita) and Chittara (with Radha Sullur from Karnataka). (See Fig. 4)

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Clockwise from top left, Fig 5.1, 5.2, 5.3: Chandu ba, one of the five women we engaged with from the Sodha Rajput community embroidering the “u” ch glyph in Gujarati using Pakko embroidery. Fig 5.4: the glyph “a” in the process of being embroidered by Mancha ba.