

Typography Day 2014: Innovative applications of Typography and Culture

Typecraft: Creating Contemporary Typefaces from Traditional Culture

AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT

Problem Statement:

Typography and graphic design in India is highly influenced by western trends. Unlike countries such as Holland or Japan, we in India don't really have our own unique typographic language.

Motivation:

The motivation for this self-initiated project is to change this, and make our typography and design rooted in Indian culture and tradition. Craft is one avenue to connect with our ancestry and our traditional visual language which was rooted in India. Combining design with craft can make typography come alive with both meaning and form. It is uniquely Indian and yet speaks to a global world.

Approach:

The purpose of this project is not only to raise awareness about the beauty of Indian handicrafts, but also to use this as a method to sustain income to the artisan and allow us to work on further projects with them. By using the Latin script, the craft is universalized — anyone across the world can use it — to communicate or to create art. They can relate to the craft in a more direct and contemporary, while appreciating its beauty and form. In this way, not only is the craft being innovated to make the typeface, but it is also being archived for use by future generations.

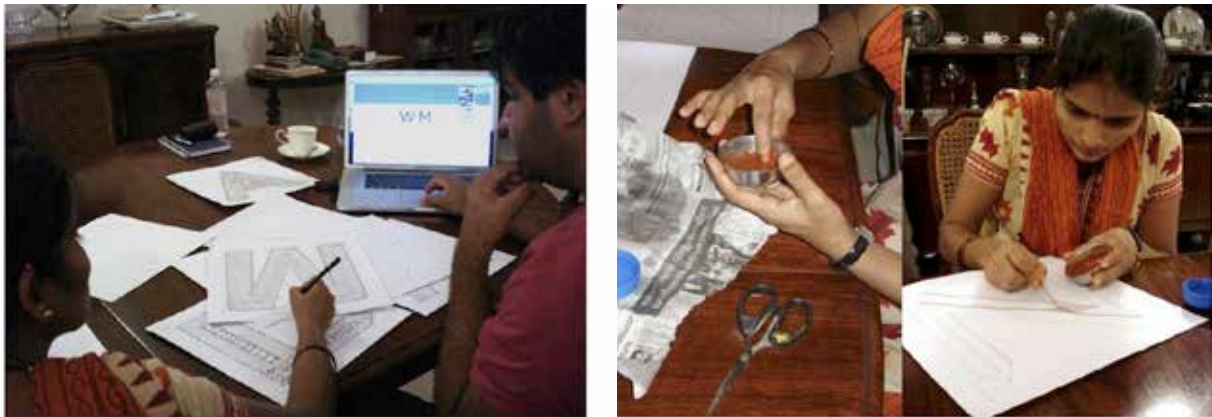


Figure 1. Workshop on typography with Radha Sullur, to create the Chittara Typecraft.

The methodology for this project is to first understand a craft — the tools, how its made, why it's made and any restrictions such as shapes or colors found in the craft. The next step is to think of how letters would work within the restriction of the craft if any and work with the artisan to get their understanding into the process. Its important that artisans aren't mere "implementers" but instead, are collaborators for the project.

We hope to scale this project and working in all the 28 states of India, creating 28 unique typefaces, which when digitized and sold, while help the artisans and also take the project further and give them a more sustained income than a one-off project would. This project is on hold, till we get funding.

Keywords

typography, craft, design, vernacular, typecraft, art, tribal, traditional, tradition, handmade, pigment, embroidery, textile, heritage, contemporary, India, Indian Graphic Language, graphic design, digital.

Introduction

What is Indian graphic design? What is Indian typography? These are some questions that I have been trying to answer since my return to India a few years back. I found most of the design work done in India to be very “western looking”.

Unlike India, graphic and typographic design in countries such as Japan, America or Holland have a style that goes beyond the language and script in use in that country. They have a unique cultural aspect in their typography and design work — one knows immediately that a certain design belongs to, say, Holland just by looking at it. Unlike those countries, India, is struggling to create its own unique typographic identity. This is perhaps caused by both colonisation and globalization. On one end is the rich Indian visual culture that predates modern graphic design and on the other end a powerful visual culture that globalization is bringing to the everyday Indian from the west.

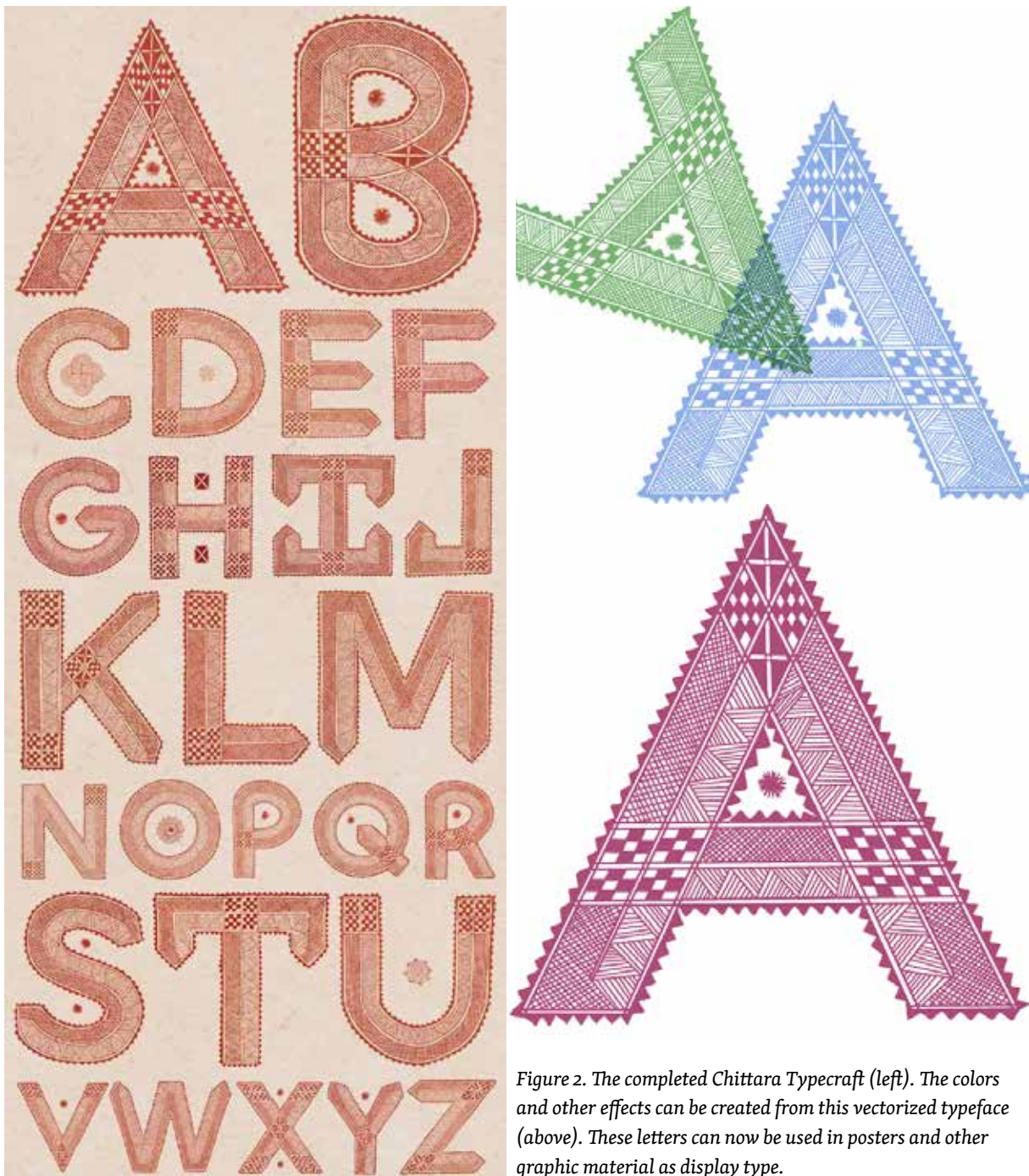


Figure 2. The completed Chittara Typecraft (left). The colors and other effects can be created from this vectorized typeface (above). These letters can now be used in posters and other graphic material as display type.

Ours is an oral tradition and seldom in the history of Indian visual art and culture have text and images been combined together, say, in the form of books. Even when they have combined, attention to the stylization of the letters, as in medieval Europe, were not looked at beyond the particular hand writing of the scribe.

Story-telling and narrative devices, such as the *kaavad* or palm-leaf art are devoid of text. Perhaps, the only time text and images have been used together in the subcontinent, is on sculptures in temples. Additionally, the form of the letters have been determined by the tools used to create the script — thus letter forms look pretty similar within a medium and usually no innovative styles were deemed necessary.

However, typography is becoming an important part of today's visual culture in India. Two current trends are extending the boundaries of type even further — the creation an ever greater number of typefaces especially in non-Latin based scripts and a simultaneous movement that explores handmade typography to new heights. At Ishan Khosla Design, we are working on exploring the latter.

In an effort to understand our culture and tradition, we have started working on projects where Indian art and craft are combined with contemporary typography — typecraft or typography inspired by craft. This results in typographic forms and designs are rooted in our own culture and hence are unique to us.

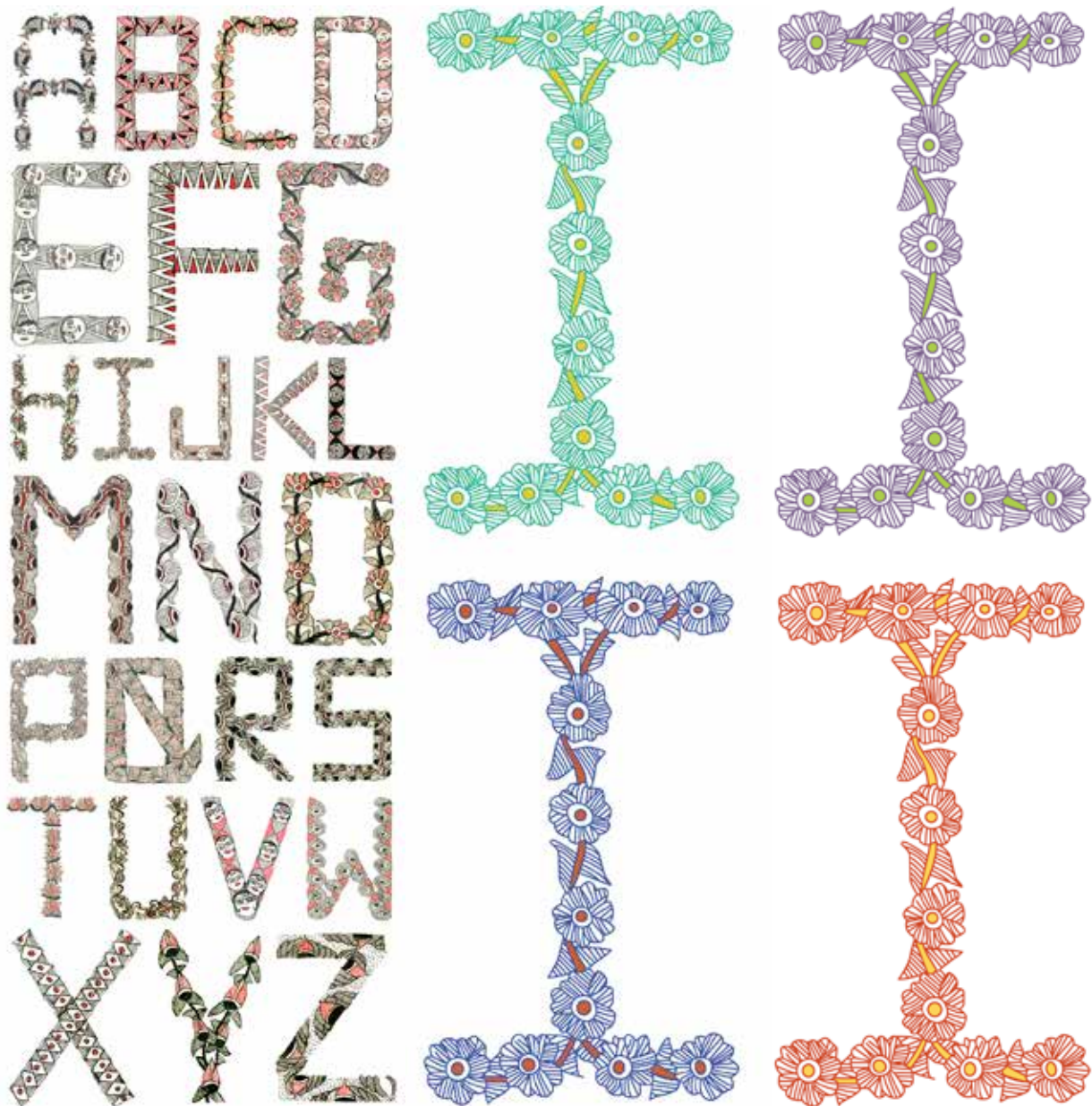


Figure 3. Mithila Typecraft and vectors created from it in various colors.



Figure 4. Skin Ink. Typography done with Henna (mehndi)

Typecraft is based on the symbiosis between typographic language, meaning and the medium in which its being created. It is the coming together of the designer and artist, urban and rural, and, the computer and the hand. The explorations have been done on a range of materials — paper, textile, palm leaf, skin and wood. The various crafts we have worked in to date, include *Chittara* (Figure 1 and 2), *Mithila Painting* (Figure 3), *Naga Pottery* (Figure 7), *Kachchhi Appliqué* (Figure 5), *Leheriya*, *Mehndi* (Figure 4), *Chitra Pothi* (Figure 8) and *Rabari Embroidery* (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Digitally rendered typography inspired from Soof, Kharek embroideries and Patchwork.

When we worked on the visual identity for Sangam, a three-year dialogue on craft and design, we started by looking at the various forms of Kachchhi embroidery such as *Soof*, *Kharek*, *Ari* and even *Patchwork* (Figure 5).

We honed in on *Dhebaria Rabari* embroidery since it was non-geometrical and allowed for more possibilities in typecraft creations. Once we created a digital version of the letters, that were based on the visual form of the embroidery, we worked with *Sajanu-ben*, an artisan in Kachchh, to help physically create the form in cloth. Of course, we could have just ended the process on the computer, but the idea of creating the typecraft on cloth with embroidery and appliqué seemed to complete the circle of this symbiosis. In this way typecraft, helps artisans to innovate and give them enough income to sustain their livelihood.

The key for creating a good typecraft is to first understand the craft and its properties.

Using the language of the craft, one should then start rendering the typographic forms. This rule works better in crafts that have a well-defined structure, such as embroidery and *tal patra*, and less so in any painted craft.



Figure 6. Computer-generated Sangam (top) and the version done by hand by Sajnu-ben (above). Dhebaria Rabari.

There are two kinds of typecrafts:

1. Where the shape of the letters are derived from existing typefaces. This is the case in Samaanata, Sangam — where Rabari embroidery was used, and Skin Ink where henna was used.
2. Where the shape of the letters themselves are unique and not based on any existing typeface, and instead, are derivative of the craft itself. For instance, Chittara and Mithila typecraft.

A corollary of Typecraft of course is typography inspired from craft and not created with the help of an artisan. But it is still considered Typecraft. (Fig 3).

So far the explorations have been in the Latin script only, but we hope to make it region specific with the craft and script perhaps belonging to the same region. The goal is to create 28 typefaces from all the states of India, initially in the Latin script and later in the local scripts funds permitting.



Figure 7. Identity of Samaanata, created from Naga Pottery with black clay and cane. Collaboration with Apam.

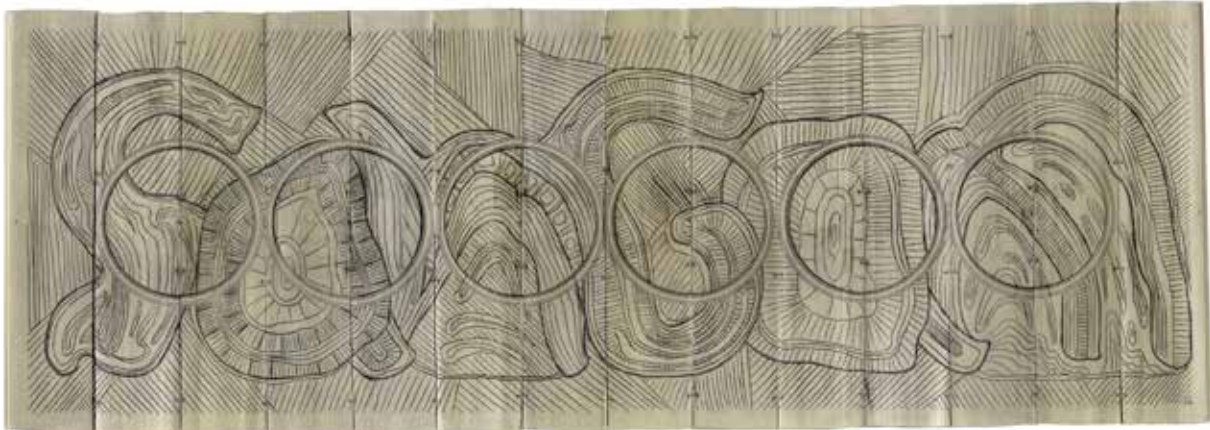


Figure 8. Tal Patra Chittra or Chitra Pothi from Odisha, by Bijay Kumar

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the vast heritage of Indian traditional visual arts and crafts where a vocabulary has been created over millennia, it is very challenging to improvise this into contemporary typographic language. But, the search for roots and identity doesn't imply reproducing the original, indigenous tradition but instead, transforming it through a contemporary design perspective. Through a bold new movement, designers across India, are collaborating with artisans, and merging traditional and contemporary, Indian and International, Art and Design. The movement towards typecraft is transforming Indian typography, design and craft, by making it unique to its own roots and culture. And yet, it remains accessible to a wider global audience through the use of the Latin alphabet. The designs are rich in meaning, form and application.