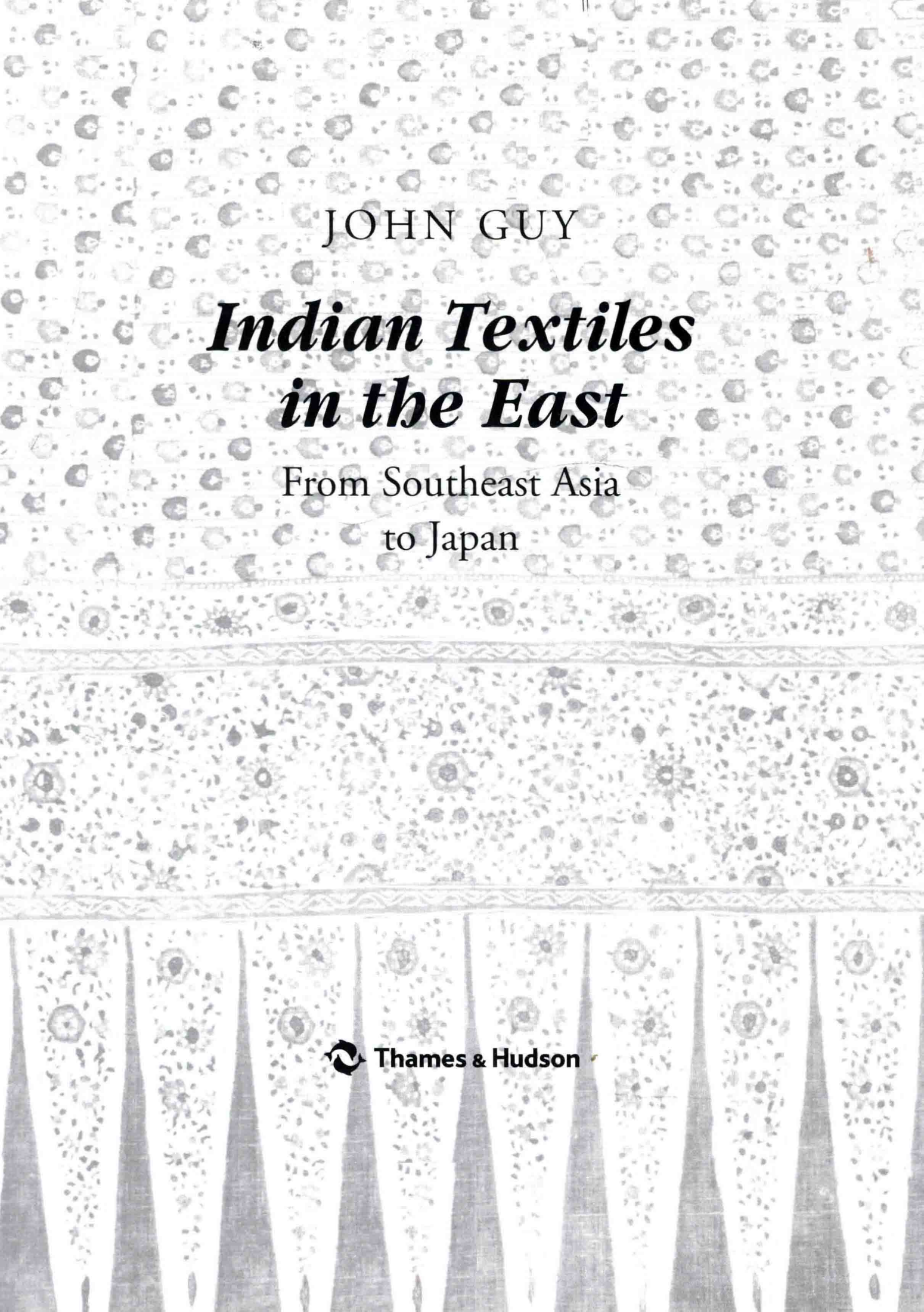
From
Southeast
Asia
to Japan

John Guy

Indian Textiles in the East

Thames & Hudson



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To the memory of John Irwin (1917–97)
Keeper of the Indian Department, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1960–77, and a pioneer in the study of Indian trade textiles

ON PAGE 1 Hanging scroll depicting a scene with a south Indian woman and two Portuguese men. Fragment of an early seventeenth-century Indian mordant-dyed cotton cloth in a scroll mount, bordered with Indian cotton and Japanese stencilled cotton. Kobe City Museum. (See p. 171.)

ON PAGES 2–3 Detail of fig. 29.

ABOVE *Patolu,* ceremonial cloth with two pairs of caparisoned elephants. Gujarat, for the Indonesian market; nineteenth century. Silk, double ikat, 480 x 100 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (See p. 88.)

Maps appear on pp. 15, 27, and 70.

Measurements Where a complete cloth is illustrated, both dimensions are given in the caption; where only the weft or width is shown entire, that dimension is given. For the size of cloths of which only details are illustrated, see Illustrations: Credits and Notes, p. 188.

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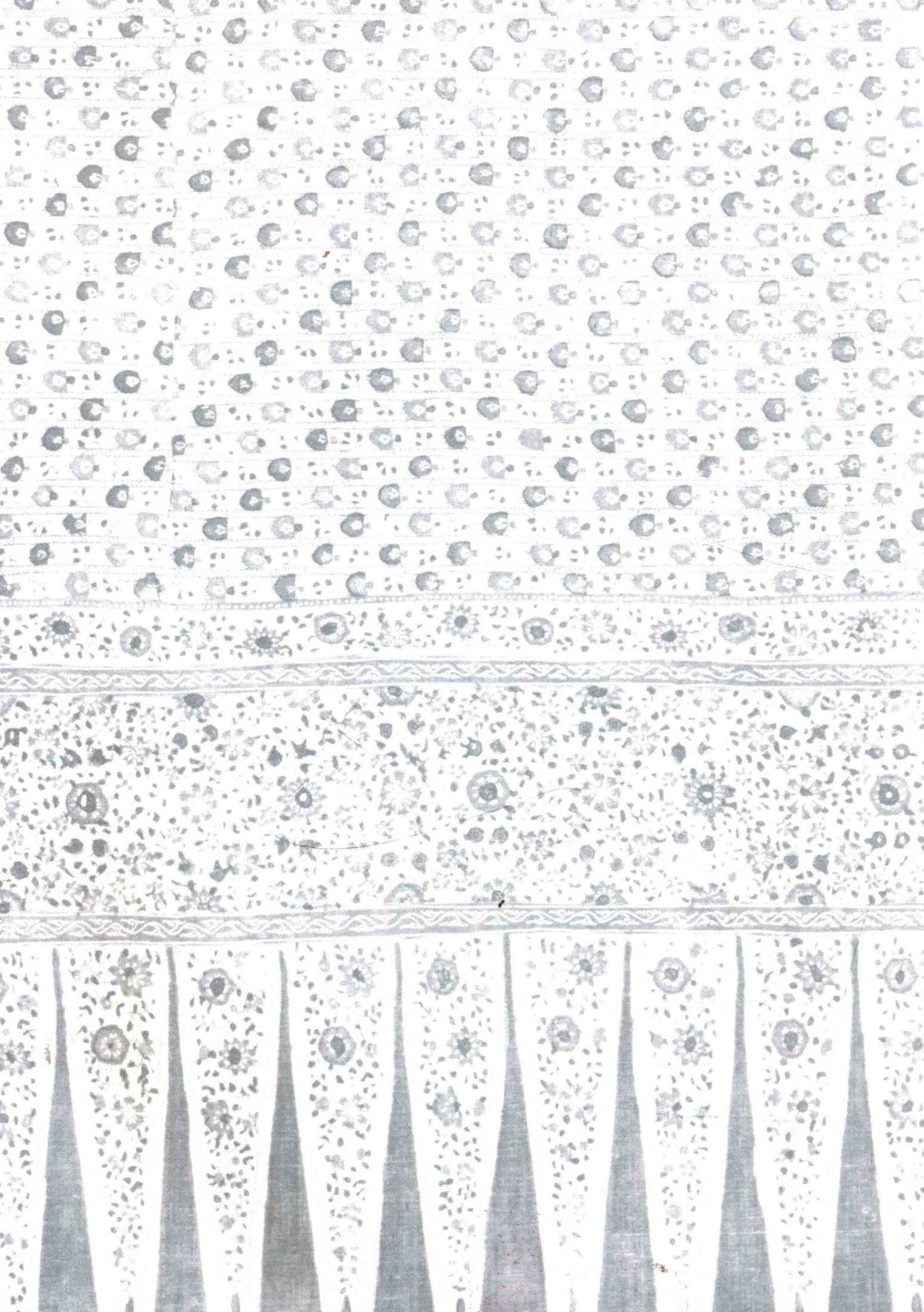

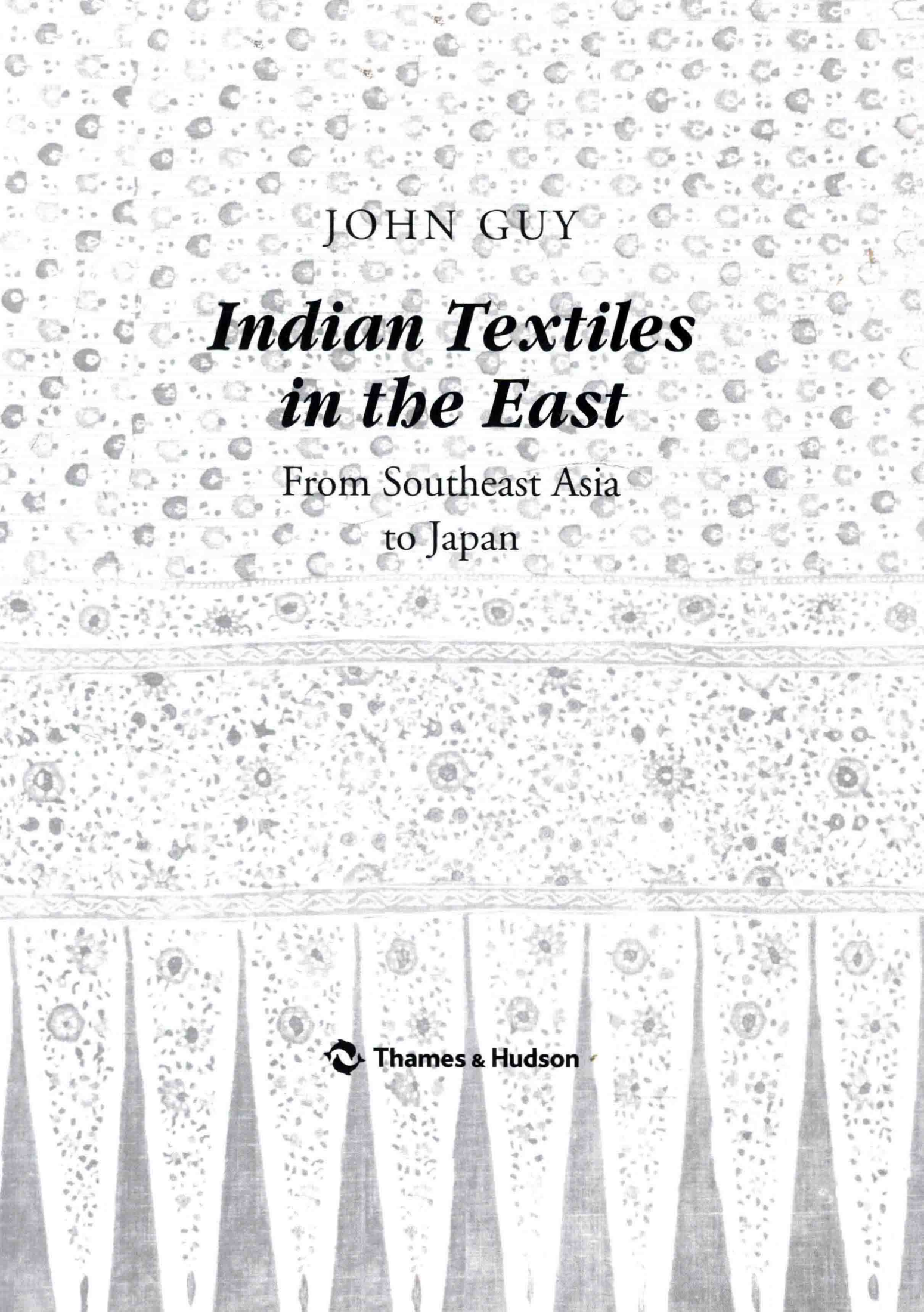

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I

TEXTILES, CULTURE AND SPICES

The Indian subcontinent has been renowned throughout history as a centre for cotton weaving. India was also a great entrepot for early international trade, the axial point through which the East–West commerce in aromatics, spices and other luxuries passed. It is these two themes, textiles and trade, which form the subject of this book. Textiles were a principal commodity in the trade of the pre-industrial age and India's were in demand from China to the Mediterranean. Indian cottons were prized for their fineness of weave, brilliance of colour, rich variety of designs, and a dyeing technology which achieved a fastness of colour unrivalled in the world.

The most comprehensive collection of Indian textiles in existence is that of in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. A much admired and studied aspect of these holdings is the European-market chintz collection, published by John Irwin and Kathrine Brett in their *Origins of Chintz* (1970). This work broke new ground in drawing heavily on English East India Company records to construct a comprehensive account of the production of and trade in high-quality chintzes to the West. Since then an impressive series of regional studies have been published revealing a wealth of information on the commercial operations of the European trading companies in the East.[1] A recurring feature is the pivotal role played by Indian cloth. This book seeks to present the story of chintz in the broader sense in which the word '*chint*' is used in those records, denoting not only fine but also coarse painted and printed dyed cottons. These were the cloths which, together with *patola*, the famous double-ikat silk cloth of Gujarat, which we will also consider, dominated the textile markets of Asia.

And whereas the orientation of most chintz studies to date has been to the West, here the focus will be on the East [1]. The European chintz market, which began as a by-product of the eastern spice trade, was initially characterized by high-quality, low-quantity trade. India's cotton exports to the East present a different story: they extended across the full gamut of quality, and were widely used as a favoured medium of exchange. The sheer volume and variety of the Indian textile trade to the East meant that it was a far more complex and significant phenomenon than its better-known western counterpart. Estimates of its scale are problematic, as only European records survive, and there is abundant evidence to suggest that the greater volume was carried by Asian merchants in Asian vessels. Nonetheless, a sense of the magnitude of the trade is suggested by the fact that in the mid-eighteenth century the Dutch East India Company – Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC – warehouses in Batavia (now Jakarta) stocked between 500,000 and 1,000,000 items of cloth, the vast majority of which was of Indian origin.[2]

Textiles are an important medium in cultural studies because of their universality and mobility. They circulate within specific cultural milieus and also serve as a vehicle for the transmission of ideas between cultures. They play a central role in the ceremonial and ritual life of most Asian societies, as signifiers of rank and as bearers of other social messages, and as the recipients of influences from the process of trade and exchange. Textiles lie at the heart of the

1 A wedding in Lampung, south Sumatra, at which the substantial dowry paid to the bride's family is publicly displayed. A rich variety of cloths is to be seen, along with matting, baskets and other items suspended from bamboo poles. The opulence of the display indicates the high rank of the bride and groom, seen enthroned as 'king and queen for a day'. Photograph by A. W. Nieuwenhuis, 1913 (detail). Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Leiden.

exchange mechanisms of many societies. These processes are not only economic: many social, political and spiritual contracts are sealed through the giving and receiving of cloths. Gift exchange is a widely practised means of ensuring the circulation of commodities in Southeast Asian societies.

The cloths which are the focus of this study add a new dimension to our understanding both of the history of Indian textiles and of their role in Southeast Asia and Japan. Yet they remain little-known in India: as commercial commodities produced to the requirements of a foreign consumer, they never entered Indian princely or noble collections and remain today almost entirely unrepresented in Indian textile collections; a few pieces acquired by the Calico Museum, Ahmedabad, are the only examples in the subcontinent, apart from isolated and late survivors in royal libraries (preserved in bookbindings), museums and schools of art where their true identity is not generally recognized. Outside India, the only substantial pre-twentieth-century collections are the legacy of colonial acquisition policies, as seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum and a number of Dutch institutions.[3] In recent decades, however, significant holdings of Indian textiles for the Asian markets have been built up in Europe, Japan, the United States of America and Australia, of which those of the Victoria and Albert Museum are among the richest.

The existence of these textiles has been known from the beginning of trading records, but what they actually looked like has largely remained a mystery. It is only with the recent discovery of cloths preserved in Southeast Asia and Japan that their identity and distinctive character has begun to emerge. Their provenances, most notably in Indonesia and Thailand, reveal that regional style preferences were operating in these markets. The biggest concentrations have emerged from Sumatra, Sulawesi (the Celebes), Buton, Maluku (the Moluccas) and Timor. Significantly, these regions correspond with the historical centres of the spice trade, underscoring the key role of Indian textiles in the procurement of spices.

The circumstances of the survival of trade cloths in Southeast Asia vary dramatically. In insular Southeast Asia they were typically preserved by upland communities as treasured heirloom objects, often stored in rattan baskets high in the rafters of ancestral houses and only brought out for use as part of the regalia of office. In Thailand members of the nobility received these prestigious cloths as signifiers of rank, and families retain high-quality Indian cloths even today, a legacy of a dress etiquette which required their use on ceremonial and state occasions. In Japan they are preserved as garment linings and as wrapping cloths for prized objects. Samples were also included in albums assembled in the Edo period by textile connoisseurs.

When provenanced examples are studied, a picture begins to emerge of the types of cloth used in the spice trade, classifiable according to their specific regional markets. Sometimes it is possible to link them with the textile names that appear in dry lists filling the records of the European trading companies and abound in European travellers' accounts, but the brevity of the descriptions and the use of terms no longer current have made it exceedingly difficult to establish a detailed concordance. After John Saris led the first English expedition to Maluku in 1613 he reported that twenty-one varieties of Cambay (i.e. Gujarati) and Coromandel cotton cloths could be profitably bartered for cloves. A typical entry in the VOC *Daghregister* (daybook) records only the cloth's name, measurement, and its cost, expressed either in florins or, more commonly, in weight of pepper or cloves. Occasionally a reference to the dominant

2, 3 *Francis Xavier resurrecting the chief of a caste in Ceylon in 1541* (ABOVE), and detail of *Francis Xavier preaching in Goa* (BELOW), by André Reinoso. Oil on canvas, 1619. Sacristy of São Roque, Lisbon.

These paintings, commissioned by the Jesuits of São Roque to enhance Francis Xavier's reputation prior to canonization, provide a rare dated context for textile patterns from south India at the beginning of the seventeenth century. They are also highly indicative of how garments were worn. Women are shown in sari (above, at left and right), lungi *– skirt-cloths – and blouses (left), and shawls; men in* lungi, *coats, and turbans.*

colour would be added, but the design was assumed to be understood from the name attached. As these names ceased to be used, so knowledge of the designs was lost. Glossaries of textile types have been constructed from the historic records, but the problem of specific identifications largely remains.[4]

There are surprisingly few reliable depictions of Indian textiles as dress among the innumerable engraved images prepared to illustrate the European travel literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most of the patterns depicted are generalized beyond recognition, and the costumes have come to resemble Roman togas rather than saris and *dhotis*. A rare exception is a series of twenty paintings commissioned by the Society of Jesus in Lisbon in 1619 to mark the beatification of Francis Xavier. The paintings, by the Portuguese artist André Reinoso, relate episodes from the life of the saint, including his missionary activities in India, Maluku and Japan. Several show Indian crowd scenes in which the local population are dressed in textiles the designs of which are consistent with known south Indian types [2, 3]. The specific nature of the designs, and the number of different varieties that are distinguished, strongly suggest that the artist was given actual examples to copy. Interestingly, Reinoso is also reasonably accurate in recording the manner in which the cloths were worn, a remarkable achievement for his time. All this points to a range of south Indian textiles being sent to Lisbon in the early seventeenth century. Their presence in Portugal is not in itself exceptional (see pp. 166), but the fact that these were sari and *lungi* cloths in the Indian manner, rather than to European taste, is. Records are early as 1508 record the presence of vestments and accessories made of Cambay and Calicut (coastal western India) cloth in church inventories in Lisbon, though they were probably not widespread at this time.[5] A century later the situation had changed dramatically: painted cottons (*pintados*) and embroidered silks in Western taste and adapted to European domestic needs were in wide circulation as wall hangings and bedcovers. Why Indian textiles intended for Indian domestic use were sent to Lisbon remains a mystery unless it was expressly to serve as models in these paintings. They include what appear to be cotton black-and-white check *lungis*, white robes and turbans, silk and gold-thread silk saris, and floral-pattern painted cottons.

Reinoso's paintings provide the earliest reliable depiction of textiles from coastal south India at the beginning of the seventeenth century known to date. We can now see that changes to the designs occurred through time, as over-all repeat patterns gradually gave way in the eighteenth century to cloths organized to a more regular formula, consisting of a large centrefield, narrow side borders and elaborate end-borders with a series of registers typically featuring a saw-tooth pattern (Malay *tumpal*). This configuration does not have direct Indian prototypes and appears to have been generated in response to Southeast Asian models. Visual sources for textile designs are preserved in south India in the form of sculpture and paintings [24, 33]; they provide a rich vocabulary of patterns but tell us little about the materials, weaving and decorating techniques employed. It is only from surviving cloths that we can begin to reconstruct the early history of India's textile trade.

Meanings and uses

An Indian export textile acquired an acculturated Southeast Asian meaning quite distinct from that intended by the producer. The cultural boundaries in

which it operated were very often localized and specific. The importance of the non-utilitarian uses to which Indian textiles were put in Southeast Asian societies is underscored by the sheer volume of the trade, which far exceeded the needs of the region, given that much of the clothing of the people was provided by inexpensive locally woven goods. The demand for imports manifested itself as a two-tier market: high-quality cloths which the élite enjoyed as a means of setting themselves apart from the rest of society, and coarser cloths affordable to the broader population. Both markets were driven by a demand for exotic textiles which could meet specific social, ceremonial and ritual needs.

These cloths were, by virtue of their importation and high value, exotic and desirable. They were clearly understood indicators of rank and therefore served as signifiers of prestige and status. They were used both to enhance the separateness of the ruler from his subjects and to secure loyalty through a system of patronage and rewards. They indicated a ruler's authority and power to attract highly valued commodities from beyond his realm. In Thailand, for example, the restricted distribution of imported Indian cloth played a central role both in the sumptuary laws enforced at court and in the monarch's patronage of members of the nobility [5, 12].

Beyond this role as social barometers of rank, the textiles assumed a spiritual importance unimagined by their makers, as in Indonesia where they entered the realm of sacred heirloom objects (*pusaka*), the very embodiment of a ruler's supernatural authority. Intrinsic to a cloth's value was its particular life history: its power (and hence value) was enhanced by its previous ownership and associations with important people and events, not unlike sacred objects in medieval Europe.[6] Such precious goods were high on the list of booty in traditional Southeast Asian warfare.

In Islamic communities in Southeast Asia textiles were often ascribed protective and healing properties. These talismanic powers were seen as intrinsic to the cloths and were understood to have a transformative effect on the wearer. Thus a green robe (the holy colour of Mohammed) might be worn by a warrior, while the turban of a revered Islamic teacher was believed to transmit his authority.[7] The dissemination of cloths imbued with the spirituality of their owner was seen as a way of sharing in that person's holiness: shrouds from the tombs of Muslim holy men were cut up and distributed with this intent.

Textiles were a central element in the performance of rites of passage ceremonies, such as those surrounding birth, marriage and death [1, 4]. They served as canopies, backdrops, awnings, floor coverings, swaddling cloths for the new-born, robes and head covers for initiates, and shrouds for the dead. When Indian textiles became too expensive for the local economy to bear or were otherwise in short supply, their use was not, as might be expected, abandoned. Rather, such was their established efficacy in the ritual lives of the peoples of Southeast Asia that their motifs and designs were systematically integrated into the pattern repertoire of locally woven cloths, typically using tie-dyeing (*ikat*) or resist-dyeing (*batik*) processes. Indeed, there is a body of evidence to suggest that the technique of batik, and many of its designs, are the result of the stimulus provided by the presence of imported Indian textiles [cf. 6]. The acceptability of local cloths to consumers may thus have been shaped by the belief that the authority of the imported cloths could be appropriated by the imitation of their appearance.[8]

Textiles in Southeast Asian societies have traditionally made up a significant portion of the goods employed in gift exchange, a mechanism used to establish

4 A body lying in state, Singaraja, north Bali, *c.* 1900. A mix of local and imported cloths shroud the coffin: a *patolu* and a painted cotton with an Indian floral design are visible, and another floral cloth, possibly also Indian, serves as a screen, enclosing the space of the dead. Textiles have always played a central role in funerary rites in Southeast Asia, both for wrapping the dead and for shrouding the coffin. The value and prestige of Indian imported cloths meant that they were favoured. Many had acquired heirloom status and they were often regarded as imbued with magical properties, which made them effective objects in mediating with the spirit world. Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen, Amsterdam.

5 RIGHT The presentation of the young crown prince Chulalongkorn (the future Rama V) to his father, King Mongkut, at the Royal Palace, Bangkok, possibly on the occasion of the prince's tonsure ceremony, held in 1866. Richly decorated textiles, probably gold brocade, hang from the pillars of the royal pavilion [cf. 195]. Photograph by John Thomson, *c.* 1866. Private collection.

and consolidate social relations and allegiances. At the state level, they formed an integral part of diplomatic and court protocol, most clearly seen in Thailand and the Malay world. Central to their effective use in the political realm was their scarcity: it was only through restricted circulation that their elite status could be protected. The Dutch regulation of the flow of Gujarati silk *patola* cloth to the local rulers of eastern Indonesia is a case in point [7].

At the family level textiles were used widely in securing marriage contracts, forming an important part of the gift exchange process. Here their accumulation was seen as a way of enhancing the status not only of an individual but also of the group. Intrinsic to the ownership of imported cloths was the necessity, even duty, to display them on occasions of importance to the whole community. At such events the benefits of display were collective [10].

Textiles were also a recognized means of storing wealth, a readily convertible form of wealth which could be used in the settlement of business or social debts. This is a feature of Southeast Asian societies in which cloth was a major trade commodity – durable, portable, and above all universally valued. This practice contrasts with that in the Indian subcontinent, where domestic surplus income was traditionally stored in the form of gold and silver jewelry. For most of their history in Southeast Asia, Indian textiles were exchanged through a bartering system, even after monetarization was well-established. This reflected confidence in cloth as a universally accepted medium of exchange.

6 OPPOSITE, ABOVE *Kain sembagi*, skirt- or shoulder-cloth. Coromandel Coast, for the south Sumatran market; eighteenth century. Cotton, block-printed and painted mordant-dyed and resist-dyed; 170 x 85 cm. Private collection, London.

7 OPPOSITE, BELOW LEFT *Selendang*, ceremonial shoulder cloth, of *patola* (detail). Gujarat, probably Patan, for the Indonesian market; nineteenth century. Silk, double ikat. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

8 OPPOSITE, BELOW RIGHT Ceremonial cloth, imitating *patola* (detail). Gujarat, for the Indonesian market; late eighteenth century. The cloth bears a VOC stamp on the reverse. Cotton, block-printed mordant-dyed and resist-dyed. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; gift of Michael and Mary Abbott, 1985.

9 RIGHT *Geringsing pepare*, ritual cloth (detail). Tenganan, Bali; early twentieth century. Cotton, double ikat, in a technique known locally as *geringsing*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. ◆ The ancestry of Balinese *geringsing* is far from clear, and although some cloths display the unmistakable influence of *patola* [125], others, such as this example, seem to be overlaid with more complex messages. Here intersecting circles and four-pointed stars provide the basic pattern, which is related to *patola* in its elements but not in its structure. Closely similar Indian versions are known [10], all to date found in south Sumatra.

10 BELOW Ceremonial cloth. Coromandel Coast, for the Indonesian market, found in south Sumatra; eighteenth century. Cotton, block-printed mordant-dyed and resist-dyed. Collection Diane Daniel, Los Angeles.