

JOHN ROBSHAW PRINTS

TEXTILES, BLOCK PRINTING, GLOBAL INSPIRATION, AND INTERIORS



JOHN ROBshaw *with* ELIZABETH GARNSEY





**JOHN ROBshaw
PRINTS**

*Textiles, Block Printing, Global
Inspiration, and Interiors*



John Robshaw
with Elizabeth Garnsey

常州大学图书馆
藏书章



CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO



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INTRODUCTION

*"Let my studio be hallowed by large
adventurous thoughts; and a feeling of
security and isolation from the banalities
of life; by dreams, and bold imaginings."*

—Charles E. Burchfield, Journals,
Nov. 17, 1933



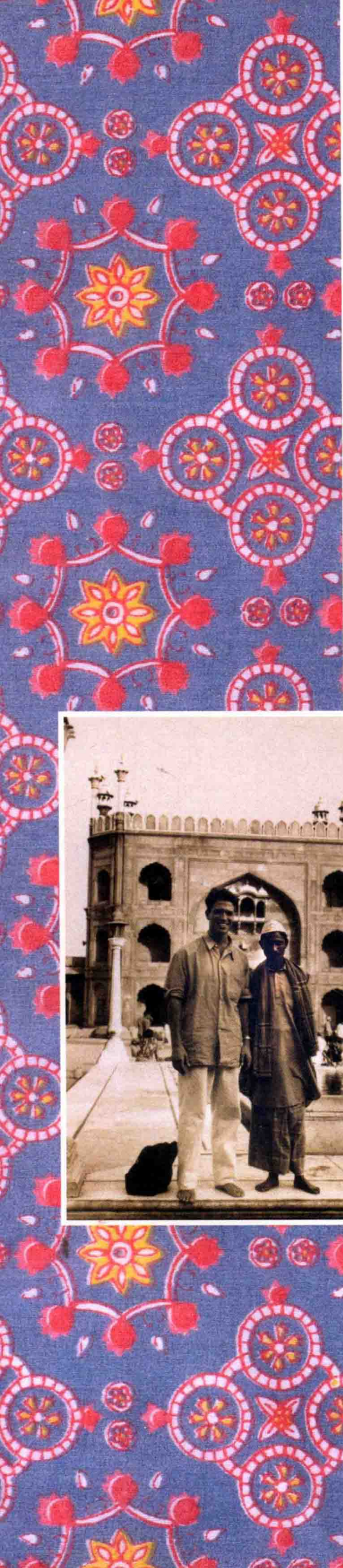


A typical dispatch from one of John Robshaw's travels goes like this: "Dear Dears, Have been run over by boys racing donkeys. Fear it is omen. Watching belly dancers with dinner. Think office should take it up as a hobby. Colleen and Al will excel. Happy Hanukkuh Merry Xmas etc. —John."

This was a postcard from Jordan, addressed to "Robshaw Gang," otherwise known as the staff at John's showroom in New York City's Garment District. Ever the intrepid traveler, John has a knack for seizing a detail and making a whole scene of it. He has a way of bringing others to where he has been, whether through a postcard or through a pillow, but chances are, other people who go to places he's been would never be able to capture a scene quite the way he can.

I first met John in 1999, when I was researching a story for *Travel + Leisure* magazine about globe-trotting designers who work abroad with indigenous artisans. He was just starting out in his textiles business. His hand-block-printed fabrics (some by his own hand) were being sold out of other people's showrooms (Charles Jacobsen in Los Angeles, Kevin Jacobs in New York), and he was a secret source for Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren.

Before I had actually met John face-to-face, I was presented with an eight-inch, rubber band-bound stack of photographs he had taken on his most recent trip to India.

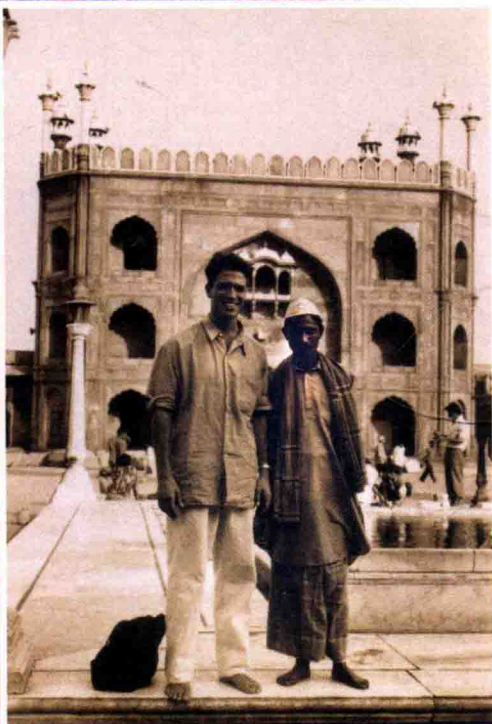


There were pictures of camels all dressed up for festivals, and of yards upon yards of multicolored, freshly dyed fabrics hanging over wooden scaffolds to dry, blowing in the breeze. There were shots of blue-stained hands (indigo dyers) wringing out cotton fabrics and Indians toiling away over boiling vats of dark dye, and someone had wrested the camera to take one of John, sitting in the courtyard of the Hotel Diggi Palace, his home base in Jaipur to this day. In the picture, his bare feet were stretched out in front of him as he sat in a garden chair, and he wore a block-printed button-down shirt (no doubt one he'd printed himself), with pants rolled up at the ankle. The easy smile on his face said he was home, a master of his domain.

It turns out that, in a real way, he was. As we have become friends over the years in New York, I see John first and foremost as a traveler, a seeker, a happy foreigner who is at his most restless in his native land.

With John, the challenge of piecing together my short *Travel + Leisure* article was to zero in on just one of his many experiences of traveling to work with local artists. He had worked alongside textile makers in Peru, Bolivia, Zimbabwe, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, India, and beyond. He had gone often as a consultant with Aid to Artisans, an organization that sends established designers and artists to various countries where they help people develop their indigenous crafts from cottage industries into viable businesses that can grow to support whole populations.

John has the kind of outlook that made him a perfect fit for such missions. He is fearless, open to any kind of adventure, hungry to learn from others, and completely at ease in strange places where he may not be able to speak the language, digest the food, or outrun the donkeys. Some words the poet and essayist Kenneth Rexroth penned about Marco Polo could be applied to John Robshaw as well: "What is most impressive about Marco Polo is not that he finds men in distant lands strange and their ways outlandish, but that he does not." Both men have the "tolerance that comes from thinking of one



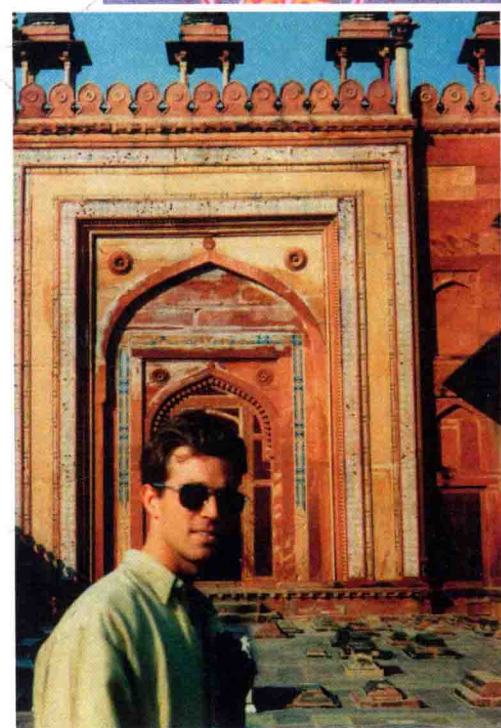
Fatehpur Sikri, the 1571 Mughal Empire's capital city.

world linked together by caravan journeys and sea voyages, three years or more long; the tremendous civilizing force of business as business in the face of the most anomalous customs."

In spite of the many obstacles to doing business in places like India or Thailand or Indonesia—monsoons and camel festivals, harvests and typhoid attacks—John has figured out how to go with the flow when the "flow" may be more like a spewing fire hydrant, or an empty well. He has spent years cultivating a sense of camaraderie among the people he has met and worked with. Unfazed by cultural divides, John makes friends with locals in these far-flung places he loves, earning their trust—and appealing to their sense of humor—by coming alongside them first as their apprentice, to watch, learn, mess up, try new things, and then developing as an artist by blending their shared expertise with his own original ideas.

Finally choosing to base his production in India, John persisted through years of trial and error to find the most skilled artisans to work with among the sea of choices in a country where seemingly everyone is an artisan and textile making is the national pastime. But his sharp eye for beauty and originality helped John come upon just the right block carvers, dye masters, and printers, whom he convinced to apply their ancient heritage and traditional skills to making his unfamiliar prints and modernized art-meets-textile creations. These artisans had to be highly skilled and at the same time willing to let the process show. In other words, they had to set aside block printing's typically rigid, perfectionistic standards and be a little more like John: willing to try new things, free and fluid, open to the random missteps and surprises that make life so much more interesting.

In this book, John explores his commitment as an artist to the process behind his product. He shares the extraordinary path, from Buffalo to Beijing, from Java to Jaipur, that has shaped and formed him as the insatiable wandering seeker of an artist that he is. In a variety of ways when he's on the road,



TOP: Egypt's White Desert. BOTTOM: An ancient Indian fort.



John reminds himself “that life is a sloppy, chaotic patchwork that amazingly comes together.” In a letter home from Calcutta, he says he had this thought “while dodging traffic, narrowly avoiding being slammed by a taxi just after reading the headline ‘Kaziranga Tiger Shot Dead While Feeding on Forest Dweller.’”

Nothing much rattles the cage of this fellow, whose escapades range from the momentous to the absurd. As an art student in China in 1989, John had a brush with destiny, getting kicked out of Tiananmen Square when the violent government crackdowns began. He has narrowly escaped an attack by a camel in heat while horseback riding to a festival in Pushkar, India. He has been advised by a sidewalk seer’s fortune-telling rabbit, “Hey you! Inventor! A very important action going to change your life! You must be careful and part!”

Never precious or pretentious, never snobby or cynical, John maintains a child’s sense of wonder and adventure. He thrills at continuing to discover the best of the world’s most beautiful textile-making traditions, and reveres the human hands that carry them forward. And John will take his design inspirations from everywhere: spinning prayer wheels in Tibet, Jain temple pilgrims mounting miles of marble steps in bare feet, Kathmandu juggernauts bearing statues of deities with beer issuing from their mouths, intricate carvings in the stone walls of a monastery, bright blue peacocks squawking in a hotel garden, the stripes of an unraveled turban, stories of leopards creeping into villages to pounce on goats. All of these images, and more, weave their way into the weft and warp of John Robshaw Textiles, as this book so beautifully illustrates. In the words of the artist himself, “Please enjoy the festival.”

—ELIZABETH GARNSEY

OPPOSITE: Wedding musicians trumpet a new line.