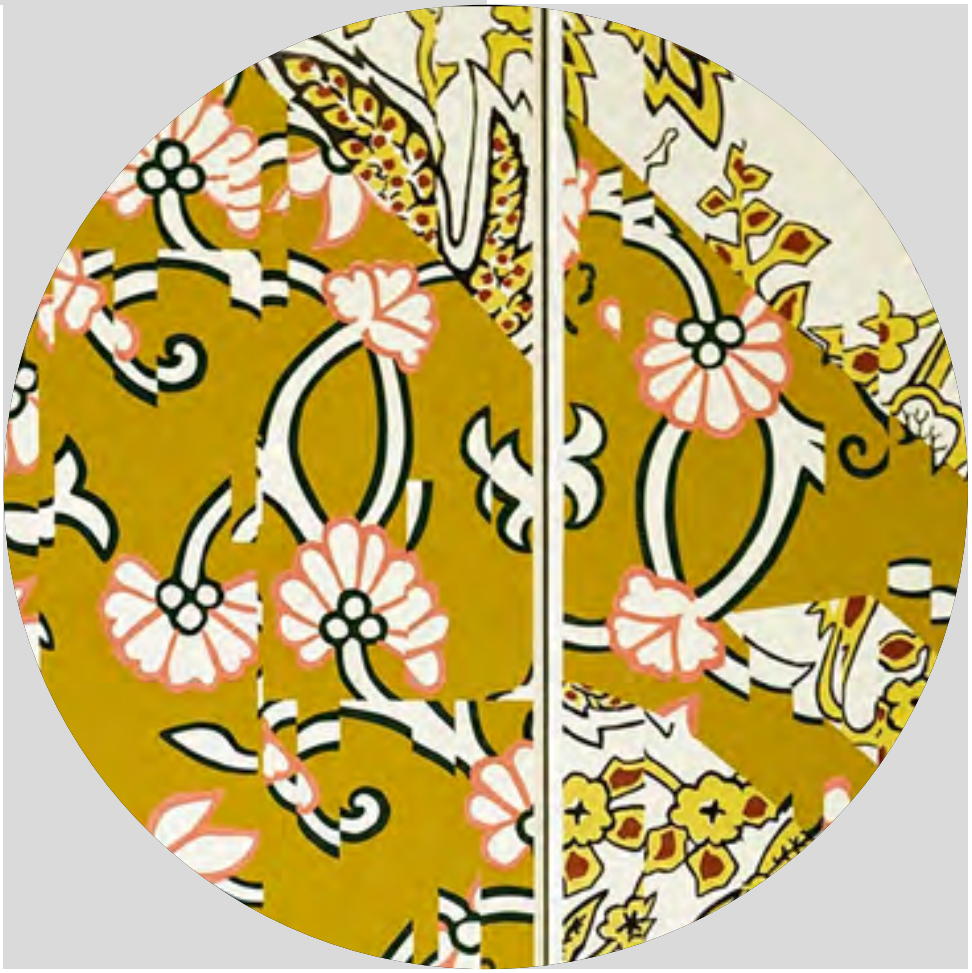

Raisa Kabir
in Conversation with
Hannah Sabapathy

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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

Cover image:
Counterparts: Series Two (detail), 2023, Hannah Sabapathy. Photograph by Donald Milne, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

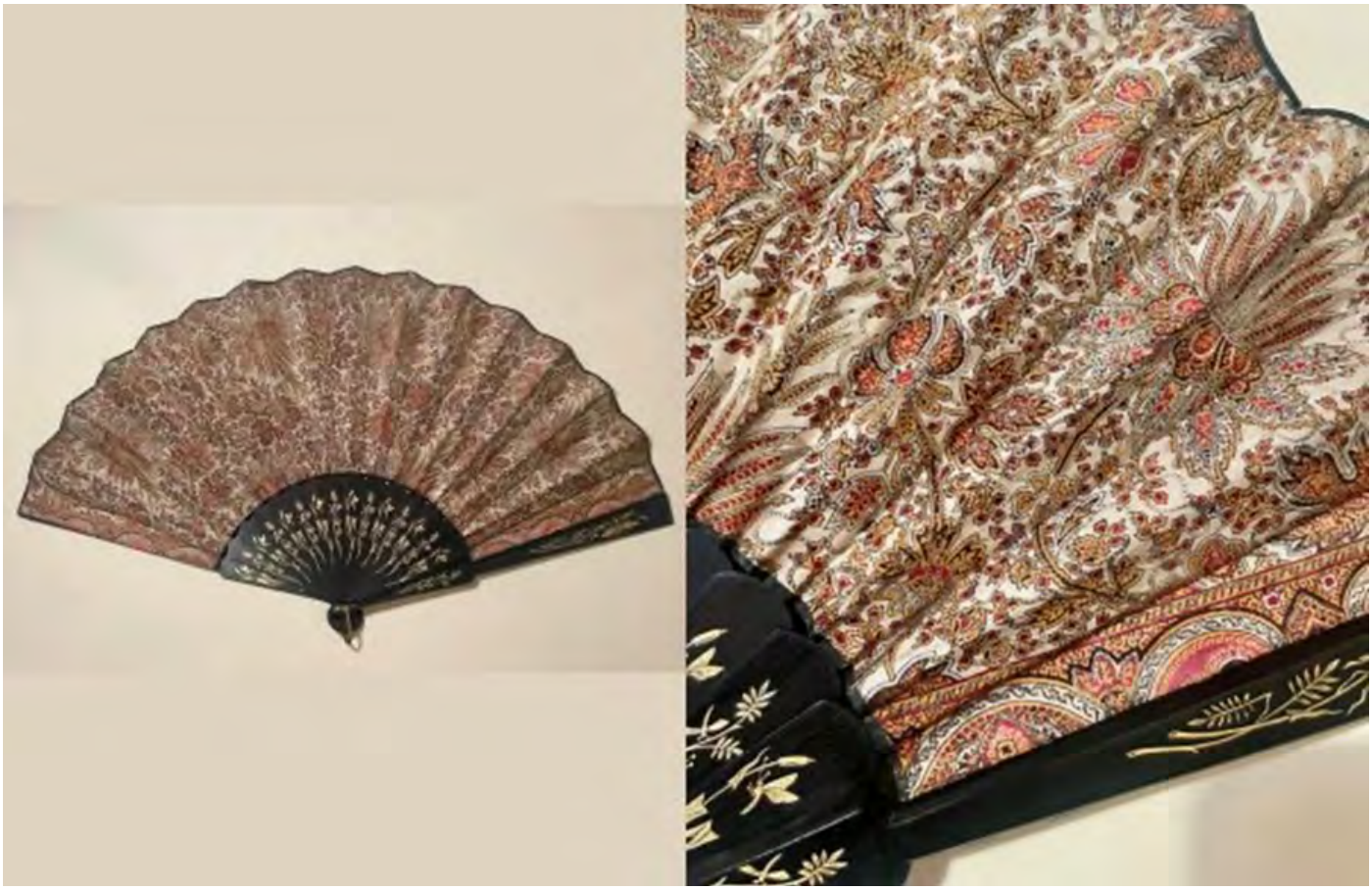
Hannah Sabapathy and Raisa Kabir met in October 2023 to discuss common threads across their work relating to identity and heritage, extraction, appropriation and hybridity. The conversations were recorded and transcribed. This is an edited transcription highlighting the research and work that Hannah Sabapathy developed in the course of her 20/20 residency at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery in 2023–24.

Raisa Kabir: For your research at the Harris Museum and Gallery in Preston for the 20/20 residency, you looked at 'The Textile Manufactures of India' volumes, which were first published in 1866 by John Forbes Watson, who was Director of the India Museum. This colonial collection of South Asian textiles comprises 700 samples. The textiles were cut and mounted into 18 volumes, with 20 sets made in total. They were essentially market research books for textiles.

They map the techniques, materials, colours and designs from nearly every region in unpartitioned South Asia and were gifted to British centres of manufacturing, with seven sets sent to South Asia for reference there. The aim was for the substituted indigenous designs to be sold back to South Asian market in the 19th century. The Harris Museum has a full set.

I know you've been researching samples in these books, responding to patterns, and exploring their influence on British design. You've been exploring the contentious practice of copying South Asian and Indian designs and the books' role in the collating and categorising of design practices in 19th-century Britain.

Hannah Sabapathy: The work that I developed in response to my research consists of 2 sets of 7 vitreous enamel panels, echoing the seven sets sent to South Asia, each sized 65 x 40 centimetres, the dimensions of the open volumes. They are screen printed, with vitreous enamel powders that are mixed with linseed to make a printing paste. The two sets feature two patterns juxtaposed with the individual patterns disrupted as if they have been cut up and pasted back onto themselves. The panels will be hung on the wall and collage together patterns copied from fabrics from Series 1 and 2 of the volumes alongside one registered British design from the National Archives and another from a fan in The Harris collection.



Fan featuring imitation chintz and Japanese motifs, mass produced possibly of French origin for the British market with imitation ebony sticks of dyed wood ca. 1890.
Source: The Harris Museum Archive.

The fan in the Harris collection is an interesting object. It's European, maybe French and possibly made for the British market. The handle looks like a Japanese design, but the fan leaf itself features a South-Asian-influenced pattern, and the sticks are made to look like ebony, but they are dyed wood. It's quite a confusing object; a weird composite of different influences and imitations.

The British textile is from a registered design in the National Archives from 1888. I collaged the British patterns onto South Asians ones which forces them into the same space but doesn't blend them. At first glance, it looks like a pattern that makes sense, but when you look at it more closely, it doesn't. The excessive cuts create confusion with disruptions and misalignments.

I was drawn not only to the Forbes Watson books, but also to some samples of Kashmiri textiles at the University of Leeds International Textile Collection. They're not dated but they're probably 19th century. They are both woven and embroidered but their provenance is unknown. The samples often feel as if they have been cut to fit the page. There was something really striking about these images that I kept coming back to: these cut-through shapes. There's something beautiful, nice and horrible at the same time about that.

RK: It's like they've been through a kind of violence. They've been severed, but there are new formations that have been created through this process. They are sort of compelling collages.

HS: Yes, they've been severed, but when you look at the fabrics themselves, they're beautiful. There's something about the way they've been hacked into. Some pattern books are quite uniform in their formatting, but these are done in strange shapes. There are so many pattern books, and a lot of South Asian textiles, so I'm thinking about all these books that are out there in these archives, the connections between them and this practice of collating and collaging fabrics. There is a kind of violence to that as well.

RK: It always brings me back to the violence of the archive, in general. The volumes were made for design espionage, to give access to designs to be copied. There's real intent there. I don't know if 'malice' is the right word, but there's no 'care' for these works. They're obviously highly regarded for their design or commercial value, but not as pieces of artwork or beautiful craftsmanship. They've literally been hacked at.

HS: That kind of cutting up and collaging is a kind of extractive process: what can we gain from these textiles? What can we learn from them? It's a kind of dissection of material knowledge, histories and craftsmanship.

RK: What was your experience and first encounter with these books? Were you aware of them before the 20/20 residency?

HS: I was aware of the books before, and I applied for the 20/20 project with the Harris Museum specifically with the volumes in mind. I'd seen two of them at the Victoria and Albert Museum, so I had an idea of their scope. Back then, I didn't know about my own family's connections to textiles.

My great-grandfather, on my dad's side, was born into a family of textile merchants. He did his secondary education in a missionary school and converted to Christianity. Then his family were told they either had to disown him and hold a funeral for him, or the whole family had to leave the village. So, he left. After that, he was supported by the missionaries and eventually became a doctor. Later, he worked as the in house-doctor for Buckingham and Carnatic Mills in Chennai, which was a British-owned textile mill. He did have some dealings with his family around the Second World War, as he helped them source cloth when there was a textile shortage.

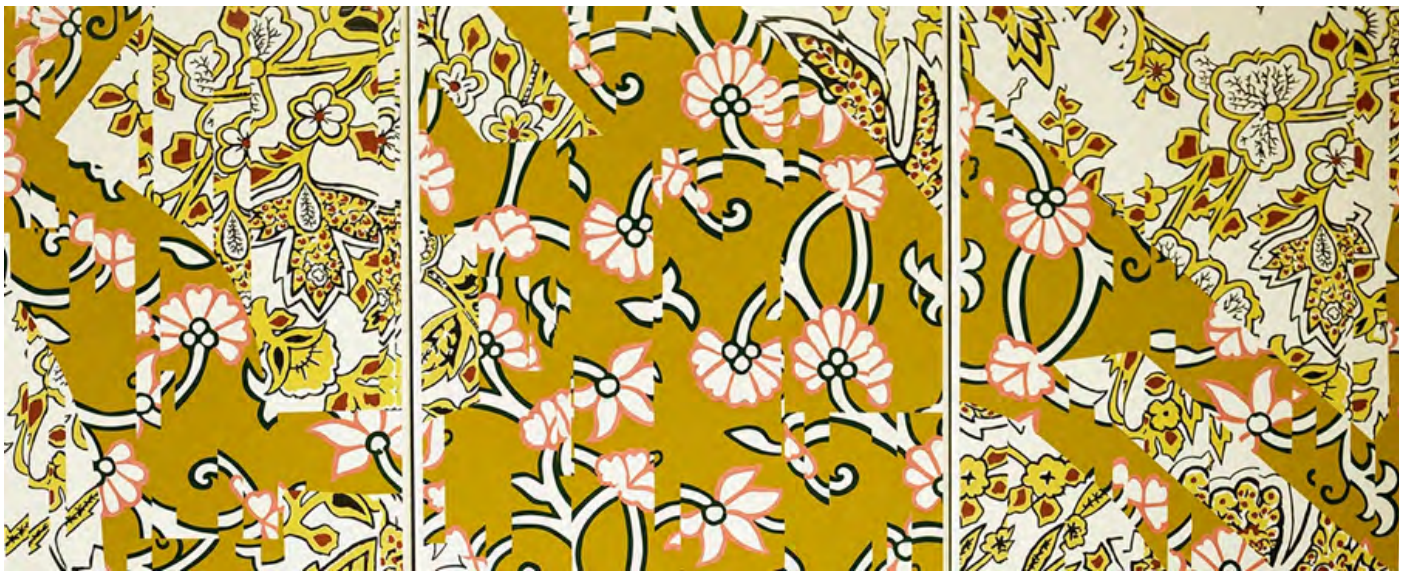
I feel like that familial historical backdrop is entwined with colonialism and the British presence in India. It was interesting to discover that it was all linked together. Looking at the volumes and seeing place names pop up, where my Grandma and Dad were born or lived and knowing about a family textile link too – it deepens the connections.

RK: And how did it feel to work with The Harris Museum?

HS: My experience of working with The Harris has been great. They've been most engaged in digitising the volumes and are now beginning to grapple with the full scope and scale of the books' premise: there were spurious motives behind the scale of production and categorisation of the John Forbes Watson volumes. The books are due to have a prominent dedicated display in the reopened galleries and special collections at the Harris in 2025. Other institutions have the volumes, but they are in the archives, out of sight.

RK: That's good to know. I imagine this 20/20 commission is going to take a prominent place within that recontextualising.

HS: Yes, my work is going to be displayed permanently. There will be seven panels on each side of the entrance to the special collections. And inside there will be a cabinet with a display of my research and work in progress.



Counterparts: Series Two (detail), 2023, Hannah Sabapathy.
Photograph by Donald Milne, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.

RK: You mentioned that you were encountering examples from Chennai, and you were relating these examples back to your own personal history. This history is held in museums, but the objects are not really connected to the makers.

Do you feel like there was any sense of recognition in these volumes that led you to examine your own design practice? Could you talk a little bit about the journey went on in regard to the research that you did and the work that you made?

HS: I suppose it's part of a wider personal journey. I grew up in Birmingham, my mum is from near Newcastle, my dad is from Chennai. My grandma lived with us until I was 13, so Tamil was spoken at home, but I never learnt it. There were certain aspects in my upbringing that represented my Indian heritage, but there was a lot of assimilation. I have been examining the part of me that doesn't feel 'just' British; that meeting place or tension of two cultures and what it means for me.

I studied textile design in London and when we covered design history, we touched on muslin and chintz from India, but it was talked about in terms of taste. These were part of a resource that was exploited by the empire, but it was presented in my degree as just 'really beautiful textiles that the British really liked'. Often, I think the copying, imitation or appropriation is framed as 'inspiration'. I'm

hoping that's changed now in the textile design curriculum. But I think it still goes on today and what responsibilities do we have as designers and artists to not repeat that extraction? Then this research began during residency at Hospitalfield in Scotland, where I was looking at garment patterns in Indian miniature paintings and recreating them. I was working with brass and cold enamel and producing small samples.

I started thinking about Indian textiles, which were very present in my home. My grandma only ever wore saris, and she would always come back from India with a suitcase full of textiles, and my dad wears lunghis. The material culture was very familiar, but I'd never examined it through a design history lens, in terms of how colonialism and empire had impacted or altered the way they were designed and produced or who came to own the designs.

When I came across John Forbes Watson's books, I couldn't believe it. It seems so outrageous to openly copy designs, especially with copyright laws put in place in 1839 to protect British registered designs.

A part of what's so problematic is that the practice of copying by the British is dismissed in design history as common practice. I think it's also hard to pinpoint exact copies and so the argument can get watered down. Unless you can pinpoint a copy and original it does not seem to count. As I've mentioned the argument becomes about 'inspiration' which diminishes the power structures behind copying and imitation.

RK: You can see it from the British Great Exhibition in 1851. Indian and South Asian design was lauded at that time. People like Thomas Wardle and William Morris were recognising it as great design. British textile and pattern design is built on composition and scale principles of Indian and Islamic pattern design. It's the underpinning architecture of British textile design.

HS: You can see the influence in the structure and the colour composition as well. I think what's interesting is that William Morris and companies like Liberty have come to define what's quintessentially British, yet their heritage and origins rest on appropriation of South Asian, Indian and Islamic design.

RK: Chintz is claimed as British but it stems from ‘kalamkari’ hand-painted designs from the Coromandel Coast. When you look at the Indian textiles that were made for the British market in the 18th century, they’ve become thought of as characteristically British. The same happened with Paisley and Madras checks. How does your work reveal these connections and create new ways of communicating the politics of pattern design?

HS: I love pattern and colour, but I’ve always wanted to push my work into a more critical and reflective direction. This weekend, I was in Birmingham recording my dad, asking him lots of things about our family. It’s about understanding all those connected wider histories, in part so I can pass it on to my children. I started to learn Tamil. I think it’s easy to become subsumed and lose important aspects of yourself. I’ve begun to realise that I have to fight against that.

I feel like I’m just beginning to scratch the surface. This project led me to think that this is what I want to do for the foreseeable future. I started a PhD, so I will be researching these ideas. I’m approaching it with my own copying practice, which is quite strange as a textile designer. It’s highlighting what went on and what is altered in that process of copying. I’m also beginning to think about copying within craft. It’s not necessarily a negative thing, maybe because it’s about passing down tradition, passing down knowledge.I’m interested in what happens when you make a copy, and then a copy of that. When does it morph into something else? That’s the argument used in defence of these objects: you move so far away from the original that it’s no longer the original. But if you’re taking the essence of these designs, it’s still extraction. I think perhaps there is a by-passing of labour involved, your designs rest on the labour of others.

RK: Is there anything else that you would like to say about the project that we haven’t covered?

HS: I’d like to say a bit about colour, and about the process. I was thinking about colour a lot: what colours were there, what kinds of industrial processes, dyeing and chemistry around that period.

Obviously, part of the big attraction of Indian or South Asian textiles was the colours being fast, washable. In Europe, they just didn’t have the vibrancy and the range of colours that they had in India. It was interesting to think about colour, to colour-match and decide on certain shades and tones. I was working with an industrial process that had its own limitations. One thing about vitreous enamel is that purple and magenta tones are hard to get, so there had to be a shift when it came to sampling and trying the colours.

I tried to retain a copying process echoing Britain's shift in colour and textile manufacturing and tastes. I didn't want to make something that was just wholly pleasant. That's manifested through that cut-up element, but also through the colours. There is something a bit 'off' about them. The notion of the cut is an area I'm still exploring and ideas of cutting from or into the archive.

I also had to figure out which patterns to work with. I did lots of drawings, cutting up, layering and collaging, physically and digitally, to test things out. The series of panels was based on pairs that echo each other. I wanted to have an impactful piece that almost spoke aloud. It was always about mixing the hand with the digital. The images are hand-drawn, traced digitally, screen printed but then the South Asian patterns have one colour that was hand painted in. So, I've reinserted the hand and my physical labour.

RK: Thank you so much for sharing all your wonderful work with me. I am so excited to see the final pieces.

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