

Print works

BRIGITTE SINGH LIVES AND WORKS IN IMPRESSIVE SURROUNDINGS

Nestled in Narad ka Bagh, on the outskirts of the rose pink city of Jaipur, is the home of Brigitte Singh. Hidden behind bougainvillea this haveli-style house is the perfect refuge for this gifted textile designer.









Brigitte's tale is one of two cities. As a Parisian fine art student she came to India in 1980 to study miniature painting under the distinguished scholar and collector Kumar Sangram Singh. She married her mentor's son, discovered Sanganer, the hand-block printing hub of Jaipur and stayed here to revive textile printing traditions. Today, her fabrics are widely recognised as being amongst the finest hand-block prints in the world.

Brigitte is fascinated by Indian chintzes and their influence on 17th-century French Provençal prints and explains that, "In the south of France, printing traditions trace their roots to India. French printing, especially Toile de Jouy, was inspired by Indian and Oriental designs, just as lots of prints in India were French, there was a lot of coming and going. So I continued to consciously add to the confusion. It is just a continuation, a weaving of textile stories."

Naturally her design elements are drawn from the storehouse of Indian design. Her prints are both inspired by and taken directly from the stylised motifs of the Mughal Empire. So being married to a family of great collectors was fortuitous. "Mughal prints are so fine that I started with the tiny old bootis before I fell in love with the large beautiful designs. I started my story without knowing I was making one." Her *Poppy on Cream*, a print that can be viewed at the V&A Museum launched her range of textiles in the 1980s and the red poppy has become her emblem.

Each new design story is eagerly anticipated as few are created, perhaps only one each year. This summer's print is *Mughal Rose*, "My excitement begins when I find a story. It climbs as I sample colours, trying the block on cloth, readjusting them. The true pleasure comes from the fusion of these two moments." These 'stories' are told in her home, a building based on a traditional haveli, where all the rooms look inwards towards a secluded courtyard. It's a vernacular style in tune with the climate, offering sunshine and shade in equal measure. The tailors and seamstresses work quietly at their crafts on the ground floor, while Brigitte's living space is arranged on the middle floors, so the dining room with its chevron floor

tiles, opens onto a central balcony that overlooks the courtyard.

The cool interior shows the subtle interplay of cross-cultural references fusing French and Indian furniture, vintage and antique textiles. Her sharp eye for colour gives sudden pangs of pleasure. The white-washed walls make her prints sing with colour. Poppies as red as garnets and indigenous florals in grassy greens are made into cushions and scattered informally throughout her house. In her bedroom the Red Lotus and Pavot Poppy with its ruff-like petals are mixed with Persian textiles, while in the sitting room the Pink Peony is used with a traditional blue and white striped dhurrie.



As well as interior textiles, fabrics are made into traditional quilted clothes such as Atamsukh, Ottoman and Chogha coats as well as little jackets, kimono-style dressing gowns, dresses and traditional kurtas – Carolyn Cowan's London boutique Devotion is one of a select handful of places where Brigitte's clothes can be found.

Beside the haveli and flower-strewn garden is Brigitte's workshop. Here, the fabrics are created using traditional block print methods. A 12 metre length of cloth can take up to a day to produce. It is a skilled process with separate blocks being used for each colour, the correct positioning of the block is judged by eye. The *Pise*, *Provençal* and *Jungli* prints each have around ten blocks each and are incredibly intricate. *Pavot* shows her technique of creating extra depth by overprinting in contrasting colours whilst dyes are still wet. Once printed the fabric is strung on washing lines to dry and the dyes are cured in the hot sun.

Cotton or the traditional chanderi voile are the chosen cloths for printing. Brigitte knows there is nothing like fine white cotton to show off her vibrant designs that glow like bright red lipstick on kabuki-pale skin. Brigitte Singh plans to continue to research museum archives, as well as using her own collection of historical textiles to seek new inspiration. Her home and workplace offer a rare glimpse of a vanishing world. ♦♦♦ Elizabeth Machin