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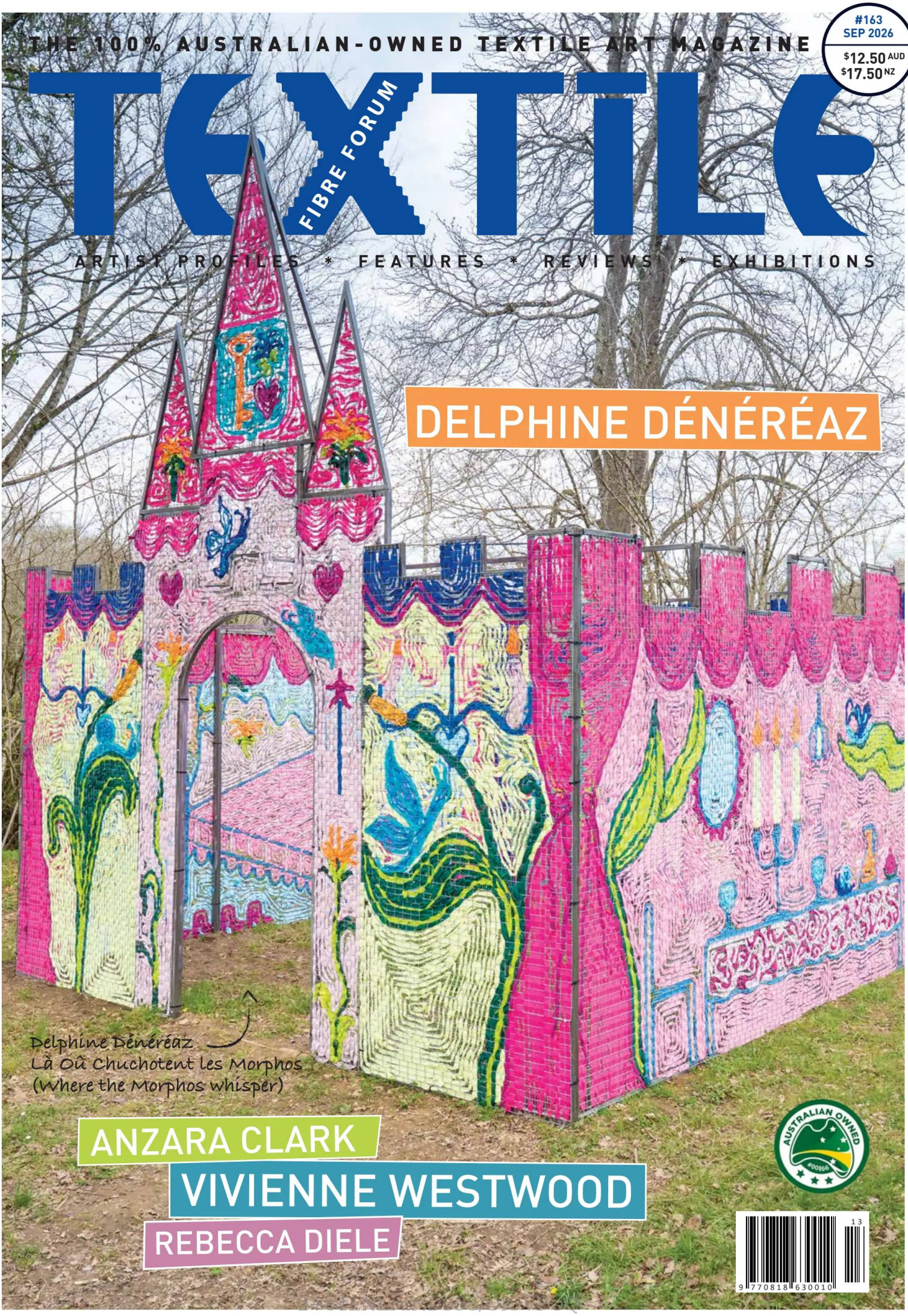
THE 100% AUSTRALIAN-OWNED TEXTILE ART MAGAZINE

TEXTILE

FIBRE FORUM

ARTIST PROFILES * FEATURES * REVIEWS * EXHIBITIONS

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Delphine Dénéréaz
Là Où Chuchotent les Morphos
(Where the Morphos whisper)

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Chandigarh



If you ever have the opportunity to attend a Hindu wedding in India, you absolutely must. I truly cannot overstate this. Earlier this year, I was lucky enough to travel to the incredible subcontinent for just such an occasion – the wedding of my cousin and her now husband, whose family is from Chandigarh, in the state of Punjab. It gave me occasion to learn about Indian textiles, which really, is an education in the history of textiles itself.

▲ Grace Sandles wearing a *lehenga choli* at the Reception, Day 2. Photo: Sunny Dhiman Photography

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◀ Left: Grace Sandles (at left) wearing a sari, bride Clare Bisley wears a *lehenga choli* at Sangeet, Day 1.
Photo: Sunny Dhiman Photography



▲ A selection of heavily embroidered formal outfits in a New Delhi store.
Photo: Maggie Sandles

Last year, I had the good fortune of interviewing the incredible Italian textile artist Isabella Ducrot for a different magazine, whose own practice begins with the antique textiles she collected on her own travels to India. She told me, "visiting and travelling around India has been my 'academia'. I learned little by little a way of living that was nearer to my wishes, and my Western mental attitudes changed. For instance, I understood that I was obsessed by categories and that my language left less space for possibilities. Also, Indian art enjoys a kind of splendid freedom. And not only India – all the Eastern countries I travelled to gave me the feeling of being returned to home." I reread this piece before my trip – accidentally, actually, but it felt like I was meant to. *I was going to that very same place that affected her so profoundly.*

Not only that, but I was going to get to experience the country's traditions intimately, and in celebration. In particular, we were invited to immerse ourselves fully in a wedding, though a small one by normal standards for a Hindu wedding, down to our dress. We were lucky enough that the Indian family loaned our Australian contingent a great many beautiful outfits, but also took us around New Delhi to go shopping for some final looks. I wore two saris during the wedding, a yellow and pink one for the application of our Mehendi, or henna as it's also called, and the Haldi (a name for turmeric) purifying ceremony in which the guests paint a yellow paste onto the bride and groom, and a sky blue one for the pre-wedding party called Sangeet. At various points throughout the day, members of the Indian side of the family kindly helped me re-pin myself when the intense, euphoric dancing knocked a pleat loose.

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▲ (L-R) Australian para-triathlete Maggie Sandles, bride Clare Bisley, and Grace Sandles at Haldi, Day 1. Photo: Sunny Dhiman Photography



▲ A textiles stall at a Rajasthani market. Photo: Maggie Sandles

AUTHOR: Grace Sandles

WE WERE LUCKY ENOUGH THAT THE INDIAN FAMILY LOANED OUR AUSTRALIAN CONTINGENT A GREAT MANY BEAUTIFUL OUTFITS, BUT ALSO TOOK US AROUND NEW DELHI TO GO SHOPPING FOR SOME FINAL LOOKS.

The sari, in simple terms, is a long, unstitched stretch of fabric that is worn draped over the body. In reality, there is a very specific procedure for the elegantly effortless-seeming drapery, that involves pleating and pinning so that it falls *just so*, without, well, falling. As an ancient garment dating back to the Indus Valley civilisation, it makes sense that techniques for sari drapery number in the thousands – but most people are probably familiar with the Nivi style, characterised by front pleats and the end of the sari, called the 'pallu,' hanging over the left shoulder. Generally, you wear a petticoat and a fitted bodice, known as a choli, underneath.

On the second day of the wedding, I switched from the sari and wore a *lehenga choli* for each event: the ceremony and reception. A *lehenga choli* is a three-piece ensemble often referred to as simply a 'lehenga,' which technically refers to the floor-length skirt. Then there's the choli, and finally, the dupatta, an embroidered scarf which can be draped in many ways according to the wearer's preference. My favourite look of mine over the entire wedding weekend was my reception *lehenga choli*, an enormous, heavily-sequined floral number. Dark brown punctuated with jewel-toned red, blues and greens, it embodied dark romance, and felt like wearing a Dutch still life painting.

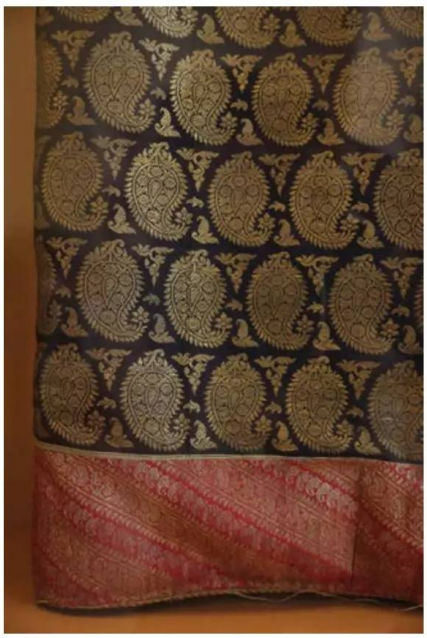
Of course, we visited the Taj Mahal and Agra Fort during our trip. In and of themselves, they are testaments to the artisanal specialty and influence of the Indian nation throughout history. Agra is the gateway to the northern regions of India, which include Chandigarh and Punjab, and in which we spent all of our trip; the former Mughal capital, and the Utter Pradesh state's corner of the tourist 'Golden Triangle', which also consists of Delhi and Rajasthan's Jaipur.

Aside from bestowing on the world some spectacular architectural monuments, the Mughals, an empire lasting from 1526-1858 are deeply significant in the development of textiles. Cloth was a particularly important diplomatic gift during their dynasty. Patrons of the arts with strong tastes and massive wealth, they claimed descendancy from the Mongols and spoke Persian in their courts. They popularised brocade, and through their deep fascination with natural motifs were part of the proliferation of the ancient *boteh* symbol, which evolved into modern Paisley.

In Jaipur, we visited the Murabak Mahal (City Palace) Textile Gallery. It was here that we got a taste of the intricate process of Rajasthani block printing. Immensely precise, repetitive patterns are carved into teak wood blocks by hand, then stamped onto fabric hundreds of times to transfer the natural dyes. Unsurprisingly, given that Maharaja Sawai Padmanabh Singh, the current head of the former Jaipur State whose family still resides in the City Palace, is an elite polo player, there is a section of the gallery dedicated to the evolution of polo uniforms. Notably, the modern equestrian trousers known as jodhpurs are based on the traditional

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▲ L-R: India, *Choga*, 1870, *detail*. India, *Quilt cover,* 19th century, *detail*. India, *Odhani*, 19th century, *detail*. Photos: courtesy Murabak Mahal (City Palace) Textiles Gallery, Jaipur.

IN JAIPUR, WE VISITED THE MURABAK MAHAL (CITY PALACE) TEXTILE GALLERY. IT WAS HERE THAT WE GOT A TASTE OF THE INTRICATE PROCESS OF RAJASTHANI BLOCK PRINTING. IMMENSELY PRECISE, REPETITIVE PATTERNS ARE CARVED INTO TEAK WOOD BLOCKS BY HAND, THEN STAMPED ONTO FABRIC HUNDREDS OF TIMES TO TRANSFER THE NATURAL DYES.

Indian churidar trousers, forever tied to the Jodhpur region nominally. Jodhpur is one of the oldest homes of the game, where the British cavalry picked it up. The pant style, invented by Jodhpur's then-Maharaja, Sir Pratap Singh (1845-1922), in 1890 for polo, was then adopted by the British years later when their team wore them during Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. Polo in particular, and equestrian in general, are associated with luxury and class in the Western world to this day, and both owe much to Jodhpur.

On the topic of westernised textile icons of luxury, while silk and cotton are commonly considered India's most significant fabric exports, establishing them as a major player on the trade routes that the Silk Road came to facilitate, cashmere is worth noting briefly. Though associated mostly with China and Mongolia in the modern day, the specialised goats from which the rare fibre comes originated in the cold climates around the contested Himalayan region. The modern Kashmir, from which the name derives due to the greater region being the home of the artisans who cultivated the traditional weaving process, is currently administered by India as per the "Line of Control".

It forms part of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, alongside modern Jammu and Ladakh – associated



◀ Huemn, New Delhi (est. 2012), Pranav Kirti Misra and Shyma Shetty, designers, *Quilted Sari,* 2017, embroidered parachute nylon fabric; worn with long-sleeved crop top. Photo: Inga Walton

▶ Diksha Khanna, Mumbai (est. 2014), Diksha Khanna, designer, *Hand-distressed Denim Sari*, 2018, hand-distressed scrap denim; worn with accompanying cotton blouse. (background) Rashmi Varma, designer, *2x1 Sari,* 2017. Photo: Inga Walton

with the even more specific, exclusive, and finer cashmere fibre of pashmina, which is sourced from a single one of the broader cashmere goat breeds, the Changthangi, or Changra, breed (the term is synonymous with a type of shawl that was popularised as a way of wearing the fibre in the 15th century) – and Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan.

My impressions as set forth here are, frankly, barely a ripple relative to how deep and vast the history of Indian textiles and their influence are. On future visits (and, hopefully, family weddings!) I hope to fill out this education more and more. For now, I at least have a thorough appreciation, and an understanding of what Isabella Ducrot meant when she called India her 'academia.'
In the modern day, local and traditional production and process in the textile industry are a hallmark of the

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▲ Raw Mango, New Delhi (est. 2008), Sanjay Garg, designer; Runa Banerjee and Self-Employed Women's Organisation (SEWA), Lucknow, creators, *Mahejabi Chikankari Sari,* 2017, hand-woven cotton, *chikankari* embroidery. Photo: Inga Walton.



▲ Sabyasachi, Kolkata (est. 1999), Sabyasachi Mukherjee, designer, *Yellow Floral Sari,* 2018, block-printed silk; worn with accompanying blouse, petticoat and belt. Photo: Inga Walton

◀ Tarun Tahiliani, New Delhi (est. 1994), Tarun Tahiliani, designer, *Concept Sari gown*, 2013, crinkle tulle, rhinestones; worn with accompanying crinkle tulle blouse. Photo: Inga Walton





▶ ▼ Anamika Khanna, Mumbai (est. 2004), Anamika Khanna, designer, *Distressed pre-stitched sari*, 2018, silk organza with patchwork embroidery, silk dupion with embroidery, lycra; worn with accompanying blouse and trousers; *detail*. Photos: Inga Walton





nation's hard-won independence.

This doesn't preclude contemporary designers from reinterpreting and reinventing the look of tradition though, and truly, it's a dynamic and deeply exciting ground for creativity. Beyond fashion, the legacy of Indian textiles influences many fine artists from the nation. As *The Offbeat Sari* continues to Liverpool Powerhouse in November, audiences will also get the chance to view other works by Indian designers during this year's *NGV Triennial* (13 December, 2026-11 April, 2027), such as Chinar Farooqui, and the design firm Rooshad Shroff based in Mumbai.

Grace Sandles

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