

The Flower, The Labor, and The Sea

September 27, 2025 - June 28, 2026

The Flower For many centuries, opium poppies were grown in small amounts around the world for use as medicine. In the early 1700s, Europeans introduced the practice of smoking opium, enhancing the drug's effects and setting in motion a global cycle of trade and addiction whose disastrous consequences reverberate today.

The Labor Realizing the potential to use opium as a way to capture the elusive Chinese market, rich with tea, porcelain, and elaborately embroidered silks, Britain began forcing Indian laborers to cultivate large amounts of opium for trade with China. Because the drug was illegal, they then enlisted private merchants to trade it. Among these merchants were Englishmen, Americans, and members of India's Parsi community—descendants of Zoroastrian religious exiles originally from Persia.

The Sea By the late 1700s, the ships of Parsi merchants began returning from China to India with their recently emptied opium chests now filled with embroidered Chinese silks as gifts for their wives. These textiles were quickly embraced by other Indians, ultimately becoming an iconic type of saree known as the *Parsi gara*.

Could it have been the residue of the opium that made the *Parsi gara* so intoxicating? While these unique embroidered garments continue to be valued and celebrated today, painful histories of exploitation are hidden within their folds.

This exhibition deconstructs the "high" of the *Parsi gara* to shed light on the colonial oppression and the vicious opium trade with which it is entangled. On the walls are historical textiles made by Chinese artisans for the Parsi market. The center case holds a new work commissioned by the RISD Museum.

Guest curated by Bhasha Chakrabarti with Kate Irvin, curator of costume and textiles

RISD Museum is supported by a grant from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, through an appropriation by the Rhode Island General Assembly and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and with the generous partnership of the Rhode Island School of Design, its Board of Trustees, and Museum Governors.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market

Jhabla (Tunic), ca. 1875–1910

Silk alternating plain and gauze weave with silk satin-stitch embroidery

Bequest of Isaac C. Bates **13.2311**



Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market

Saree Border, ca. 1875–1900

Silk plain weave with silk satin-stitch embroidery

Gift of the estate of Lucy Truman Aldrich **56.075.1**



The Chinese embroidery that decorated *Parsi gara* borders like the one in this case was also applied to Parsi blouses, loose pants, hats, and children's tunics. The first examples of these garments were made from other embroidered textiles brought back from China, including shawls, bedcovers, and wall hangings. Later on, Chinese workshops produced uncut embroidered panels that could be tailored back home.

Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Jhabla (Tunic), ca. 1800–1900
Silk plain weave with silk satin-stitch embroidery
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **55.279**



Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Saree Border, ca. 1800–1900
Silk gauze weave with silk satin-stitch embroidery
Gift of the estate of Lucy Truman Aldrich **56.075.7**



This *jhabla* presents a seemingly random mix of “oriental” elements, none of which are motifs you would find on traditional Chinese garments. It demonstrates how the embroidery workshops of Guangzhou (Canton) often adapted to foreign tastes and expectations of what Chinese embroidery should look like. It is likely that a client, whether Indian, American, or European, selected these motifs from a book of patterns that were developed especially for the export market. Many of the same motifs are found on both European dresses and Parsi garments produced in China during this period.

Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Jhabla (Tunic), ca. 1875 - 1900
 Silk plain weave with silk knot-stitch embroidery
 Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **55.284**

Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Saree Border, ca. 1875 - 1900
 Silk compound weave with silk knot-stitch embroidery
 Gift from the Estate of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **56.075.8**



Embroidery stitches sometimes provide hints about where a Parsi garment was produced. This tunic and border feature *tuan chen*, or knot stitch, a specialty of workshops in China. Chinese embroiderers were also famous for satin stitching so fine that it was impossible to tell the difference between the front and back of an embroidered piece. Embroidery produced in India reveals more variety, using popular and more economical techniques, including top-facing satin stitch, chain stitch, and cross stitch.

Kor ni sarees have a plain body and an embroidered border (*kor*). These became the more common and affordable alternative to the classic *akha garas*, which were embroidered all over. Borders were sometimes embroidered directly onto the saree fabric, or more likely—as in this example—they were made as separate pieces to be stitched on later. This way, if the body of a saree was stained or damaged, the border could easily be removed and transferred onto a different plain textile, creating a new saree.

Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Jhabla (Tunic), ca. 1800–1825
 Silk alternating plain and gauze weave with silk satin-stitch embroidery
 Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **55.280**



Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Jhabla (Tunic), ca. 1800–1825
 Silk alternating plain and gauze weave with silk-knot and satin-stitch embroidery
 Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **55.282**



Consider these stylized scenes of Chinese life, with couples romancing in pleasure gardens and farmers going about their daily chores. Embroiderers in Guangzhou (then known to the British as Canton) were famous for their depictions of the human figure. Referred to by Indians as *cheena-cheeni*, this was one of the most sought-after Chinese embroidery styles, coveted both for its exotic charm and its technical quality, which was unmatched by Indian artisans.

Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Jhabla (Tunic), ca. 1875–1910
 Silk satin weave with satin-stitch embroidery
 Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **55.281**



Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Border for a Jhabla (Tunic) or Choli (Blouse), ca. 1875–1900
 Silk gauze weave with satin-stitch embroidery
 Gift of the estate of Lucy Truman Aldrich **56.075.3**



Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Jhabla (Tunic), ca. 1840–1900
 Silk satin weave with knot-stitch embroidery
 Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **55.283**



Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Border for a Jhabla (Tunic) or Choli (Blouse), ca. 1875–1900
 Silk satin weave with knot-stitch embroidery
 Gift from the Estate of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich **56.075.2**



Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Jhabla (Tunic), ca. 1875–1925
 Silk satin weave with silk satin-stitch embroidery
 Gift of the Estate of William E. Brigham **63.011.138**



Probably Chinese makers for the Parsi market
Saree Border, ca. 1875–1900
 Silk plain weave with silk satin-stitch embroidery
 Gift of the estate of Lucy Truman Aldrich **56.075.4**



In addition to *cheena-cheeni* figurative scenes, other pattern styles popularly adorned *Parsi gara* and other garments, often referred to by rhymed names. Seen here is one of the most common patterns, *chakla-chakli*, its name taken from the Gujarati word for sparrow. These works show pairs of birds perched atop flowering tree branches. Look for other *gara* designs—such as the polka-dot-like *kanda-papeta* (onions and potatoes) and the abstracted pinwheels of the *karolia* (spider) pattern—in the large work in the central case.

Bhasha Chakrabarti

b. 1991; from Honolulu, Hawaii; works in New Haven,
Connecticut

Ashdeen, design studio

2012–present; New Delhi, India. Founded by Ashdeen Lilaowala,
b. 1980

*The Intoxication of the Flower, the Exhaustion of the Labor, the
Circulation of the Seas, and the Seduction of the Stitch*, 2023–
2025

Silk thread, handloomed raw silk, and reactive dye

Museum purchase: gift of Frances Middendorf and Elizabeth T.
and Dorothy N. Casey Fund **2025.38**



Made as a garment, map, historical archive, and embroidery
sampler, this saree tells the story of *Parsi gara*, a type of attire
that emerged in the 1700s. While the *gara* and its distinct Indo-
Chinese style of embroidery remains popular today, its
cosmopolitan origins and entanglement in the opium trade are
rarely discussed.

This new work, commissioned by the RISD Museum, references
trade routes, colonial paintings, family photographs, and a wide
range of patterns from *gara* embroidery—including those found
on historical examples displayed on the surrounding walls.

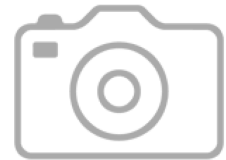
Bhasha Chakrabarti

b. 1991; from Honolulu, Hawaii; works in New Haven, Connecticut

The Intoxication of the Flower, 2023

Parsi gara embroidery samples; antique maps of trade routes between London, India, and China; 19th-century botanical illustrations of *papaver somniferum*; image transfers; and thread on linen paper

Courtesy of the artist



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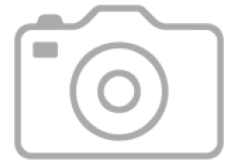
Bhasha Chakrabarti

b. 1991; from Honolulu, Hawaii; works in New Haven, Connecticut

The Seduction of the Sea, 2023

Antique *Parsi gara* embroidery border, *Parsi gara* embroidery sample, oil on found photograph, image transfers, and thread on linen paper

Courtesy of the artist



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Bhasha Chakrabarti

b. 1991; from Honolulu, Hawaii; works in New Haven, Connecticut

The Exhaustion of the Labor, 2023

Dried opium poppy (*papaver somniferum*), *Parsi gara* embroidery samples, illustrations of opium production in colonial India on *habutai* silk, illustrations of opium smokers in 19th-century China printed on silk organza, image transfers, and thread on linen paper

Courtesy of the artist

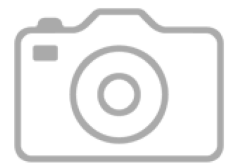


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The earliest *Parsi garas*, dating back to the late 1700s, were made by cutting, rearranging, and joining traditional Chinese narrow-width embroidered silks, shawls, throws, furnishing textiles, and wall hangings. Parsi merchants carried these textiles from Guangzhou (then known to the British as Canton) back to their wives in Mumbai (Bombay). Given the aesthetic, monetary, and cultural significance of *gara*, it is common practice both then and now to transfer portions from older pieces onto fresh yardage to create new sarees or refashion them into tops, trousers, and other accessories.

This triptych of stitched collages draws on this history of repurposing existing material. Using archival maps, paintings, drawings, and samplers as both research and raw material, these works piece together histories of colonial botanical sciences, forced agricultural labor, and politically strategized modes of spreading addiction in both India and China to highlight the circumstances and contexts that converge in the embroidery we see in *Parsi garas*.

Bhasha Chakrabarti
b. 1991; from Honolulu, Hawaii; works in New Haven,
Connecticut
(How) to Wear a Gara, Nivi Drape
HD video; 2:20 min.
Courtesy of the artist



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AVAILABLE

This video offers an alternative way to “read” the work in the center case: the viewer is invited to follow the geographies, patterns, borders, and trade routes now wrapped, tied, pleated, and draped on the body, reminding us of the intimate relationship between the *Parsi gara* and the human form.

Even if well intentioned, the museum display of a garment—especially one belonging to a marginalized or minority culture—can easily perpetuate a violent cycle of objectification. Museums distance objects from their embedded practices, often prioritizing the physicality of a work over the embodied realities of its makers and users. Showing the exhibited piece as it would be worn provides crucial context for knowing the *gara*, and situates the adorned body itself in a complex sociopolitical history.