

Proposed Elective Title: Family Heirlooms: Indian Woodblock Printing

Brief Description: This elective will explore Indian woodblock printing as a creative, historical, and intergenerational practice through the use of family heirloom woodblocks passed down from my great maternal grandmother. I will study the history of Indian textile traditions, conduct oral interviews with family members, and create block-printed textile pieces. Central themes of this project include slow crafting, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and the role of creative practices in identity formation.

Purpose and Rationale: Sewing and textile work has been my most consistent creative endeavor since the age of nine, when my paternal grandfather taught me how to use a sewing machine. Just this year, receiving family heirloom wood blocks that have been passed down for generations has created an opportunity to intentionally engage with my family history, Indian heritage, and the craft traditions that have shaped my identity. This project highlights several humanistic dimensions of medicine, including identity (cultural, diasporic, and artistic), creativity, and communication across generations and cultures. Personally, this elective provides the opportunity for sustained creative practice during my medical training. Professionally, it allows me to explore how creative practices can support wellbeing and identity reflection in medicine. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding what my own story brings to a patient encounter, particularly in the field of Psychiatry where psychotherapy and developing strong therapeutic alliances are central to care.

Short essay on historical research


Analyze the historical development of Indian woodblock printing (origins of the practice, common motifs, techniques, regional differences).

Woodblock printing likely originated first in China as early as the 3rd century¹. The technique spread across the region beginning around the 8th century to countries including Japan, Egypt, and India. Block printed fabrics found in Egypt have been dated back to the 9th century². It is thought that the access to natural dyes, mordants, and India's varied climate allowed artisans to expand and refine the use of blockprinting.

The Indian Mughal Empire (1526-1857) brought increased interest in value in blockprinted textiles, particularly intricate floral and paisley designs¹. The decline of the Mughal empire coincided with the rise of British colonial control. European countries including the Netherlands, France, Portugal, and the UK took great interest in Indian cotton blockprinted textiles (referred to as "calico" and "chintz"), making them central to the global textile trade of the 17th and 18th centuries³. Given the high costs of imported goods, European manufacturers replicated Indian designs on a mass scale with newer printing technologies. This led to European dominance in textile production and marginalization of traditional Indian blockprinted textiles from global markets. Heavy taxes led to an increase in synthetic dyes, reduced quality mill-printed cotton and a local devaluation of the block printing art¹.

The 1960s-70s brought a revival through the Western "bohemian aesthetic" and growing interest in Eastern spirituality which led to renewed appreciation for blockprinted designs¹. Today, companies like Anthropologie and West Elm sell products highlighting blockprinted designs year round in their storefronts, reflecting the continued demand for Indian-inspired textile aesthetics. Though the inclusion of traditional motifs in contemporary designs sustains interest, it also raises questions around cultural appropriation and fair labor practices.

While blockprinting shares a common technical foundation (discussed in the next section), designs can take many different forms depending on the region. Along with the designs, there are often different colors or communities associated with the style that make them uniquely distinguishable. Below are some common styles along with additional details on the method, region, colors, community affiliation, and cultural practices associated with each.

Styles	Samples	Method
<i>Ajrakh</i>	 A vibrant piece of Ajrakh fabric featuring intricate geometric patterns in red, black, and white on a blue background.	<p><u>Motifs</u>: geometric, stars, symmetry <u>Method</u>: Resist printing w/ multiple blocks <u>Region</u>: Gujarat <u>Colors</u>: Black, red <u>Community</u>: Herder/pastoral communities (Maldhari, Rabari)⁴</p>
<i>Dabu</i>	 Two images: on the left, a blue fabric with white floral motifs; on the right, a person's hands are shown applying a resist paste to a fabric on a wooden surface.	<p><u>Motifs</u>: floral, leaves. Not for fine details. <u>Method</u>: Mud resist with clay from the local riverbank. <u>Region</u>: Rajasthan (Bagru, Akola) <u>Colors</u>: Indigo, black, maroon, yellow <u>Community</u>: Chhipa community.⁴</p>
<i>Bagh</i>	 Two images: on the left, a fabric with red and black paisley motifs; on the right, a fabric with black and white floral motifs.	<p><u>Motifs</u>: floral, geometric, paisley <u>Method</u>: Wash in Bagh river (calcium deposits thought to brighten reds). <u>Region</u>: Madhya Pradesh <u>Colors</u>: Red, black, white <u>Community</u>: Khatri community.⁴</p>
<i>Bagru</i>	 Two images: on the left, a yellow fabric with green and white floral motifs; on the right, a blue and red geometric patterned fabric.	<p><u>Motifs</u>: floral, geometric, paisley <u>Method</u>: Direct block printing. <u>Region</u>: Bagru (Jaipur, Rajasthan) <u>Colors</u>: Blue/red, green/yellow, yellow/red; black/red. <u>Community</u>: 16 designs, each associated with a different community. Color combinations specific to different farming communities who bought from Bagru printers until the 1960s.⁵</p>
<i>Kalamkari</i>	 Two images: on the left, a colorful fabric with a scene of a woman and a bull; on the right, a hand is shown drawing a design on a fabric with a pen.	<p><u>Motifs</u>: mythological scenes, Hindu epics, gods, animals, Persian-inspired. <u>Method</u>: Hand drawing w/ pens + block printing. <u>Region</u>: Andhra Pradesh, Telangana <u>Colors</u>: Red, black, indigo, yellow <u>Additional information</u>: UNESCO-recognized.⁴</p>
<i>Sanganeri</i>	 Two images: on the left, a fabric with fine floral motifs in red, blue, and yellow on a white background; on the right, a blue fabric with white and yellow floral motifs.	<p><u>Motifs</u>: fine florals, often repeated. <u>Method</u>: Fine block printing. <u>Region</u>: Sanganer (Rajasthan) <u>Colors</u>: Red, blue, yellow on white background <u>Community</u>: Chhipa community. <u>Additional information</u>: Influenced by Mughal aesthetics.⁶</p>

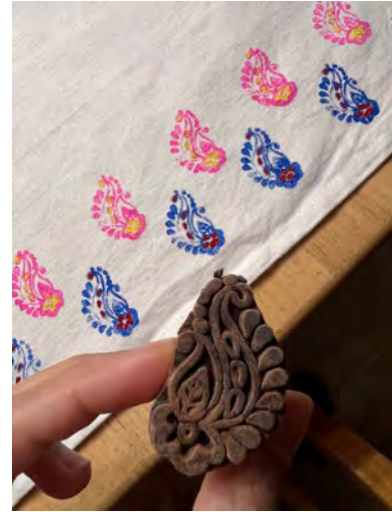
Reflective/analytic essay on conversations with my mother and Naniji (+ photos)

Perform family interviews and the stories related to the use and transmission of heirloom wood blocks across generations.

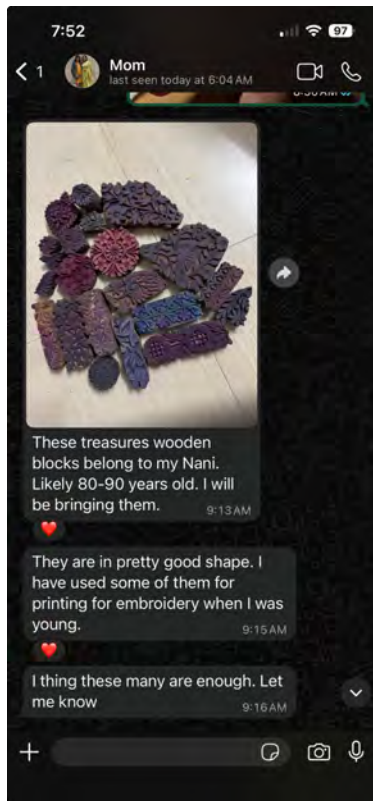
During my global health elective in 2023 between M1 and M2 year, I visited the state of Kerala in India and bought a few wood patterned blocks from a street vendor. A few months after I returned, my mother and I block-printed a few tea towels to adorn our respective kitchens.



July 30, 2023- Kerala, India



*January 13, 2024- Coralville, Iowa City
A snowy day activity for my 27th birthday.*



In March 2025, my mother visited India and I asked if she could purchase a few more wooden blocks for me. She surprised me by bringing home over 20 unique and intricate wooden blocks that had belonged to my great maternal grandmother. My mother and grandmother, Naniji, had both grown up using these blocks in various crafts, often as stencils for embroidery projects. I consider these blocks my first official family heirloom.

To uncover the stories held by the blocks, I sat in on my mother’s weekly Saturday morning call with Naniji. She speaks entirely in Hindi so my “Hin-english” wasn’t going to cut it. My mom translated my questions and her responses back and forth, adding details to the translations at times.

I learned that these blocks may have come from a market in Katni, Jabalpur which is where my Naniji’s mother (“Great Naniji”) lived. Naniji’s sister used the blocks more often than my Naniji. Naniji’s sister would print a design using red or green ink and then “Great Naniji” would embroider over it, decorating pillow covers, bedsheets, and sarees. These projects using the blocks are likely lost or have been thrown away from Naniji’s knowledge. Naniji did not use the blocks as much as her sister, but my mother did so I turned the microphone to her.

Since her childhood, my mother has enjoyed staying busy with projects for the home and family members. Once her school finished around April or May, she had 2-3 months of vacation. The moment her final exam was finished, she would come home and immediately start crafting. The youngest of four siblings, she could “never sit around”. She would find her mother, my Naniji, to look for projects to do whether it was learning how to make rotis in the 4th grade (“before her older sister!”), practicing mehndi designs, or knitting for house staff. Her hobbies were always done alongside someone else, whether that was Naniji, Naniji’s older sister, or other aunties in the colony (neighborhood) so that she had someone to ask when she ran into challenges during her work. In working with the wood blocks, similar to her aunt, she used them as outlines for embroidery projects since the colors she had would wash away. She recalls the ink colors being green, red, and black. She most often decorated home goods such as pillow covers and tablecloths as well as clothing such as corners of kurtas (tunic) and dupattas (scarf). These projects were often for family members or to adorn the family home. She recalls sitting outside in the sun during the winter to work on these projects alongside her mother.



During a few points in the conversation and in the following days, my mother began to connect her creative spirit in her childhood to her scientific curiosity as an adult. She did most of her projects prior to getting married and starting her PhD at age 24. Her dissertation was on plant genetics so days of embroidering clothes and crocheting turned into sorting seeds and studying plant structures under the microscope. My mother recalls that she made lots of clothes for her nieces and nephews but was never able to do the same for my brother and me. Until now, she did not consider the blocks to be of particular value as she last used them when she was young and “didn’t think of these things”. Now, she feels “very good” that the blocks are going to be used again. She herself wants to see what she can do for home projects and “see what comes back” and wants future generations to carry on this craft practice.

Methods

Traditional crafting

Before synthetic dyes, the most common colors used were blue (indigo plant), red (madder plant), black (iron), and white (unprinted fabric) which is why these colors are most commonly seen in older prints. Synthetic dyes are more common today but those who use natural dyes have an in-depth understanding of the science behind producing bold colors that will last including tannins (prepare fibers for dye) and mordants (help dye become insoluble)⁴.

Before dye can be applied, there are several steps that must occur. Wood carvers are distinct individuals from the printers and have a unique skill set in intricate carving. For multicolor designs, multiple blocks are used to layer over one another with the “outline block” being the most challenging to carve. Blocks are usually 5-8 square inches but can be up to 14 inches. They will sit in mustard oil for several days prior to applying any paint in order to prevent warping of the wood¹.



Artisan carving wood



Dyed and printed fabric being washed in the Bagru:

successful textile printing”⁵. After the fabric has dried in the sun, it will be gently stretched and pinned to a padded table to allow for a smooth surface for printing. Printing usually begins with creating the border and moving from the outside to inside. In place of rulers, registration marks are used to create evenly spaced markings¹.

Following printing, textiles will be hung outside on large terraces for a few days to sit in the sun and fix the pigments. The initial washing process following printing and drying has specific steps that washing facilities follow to maintain the quality of the color¹.

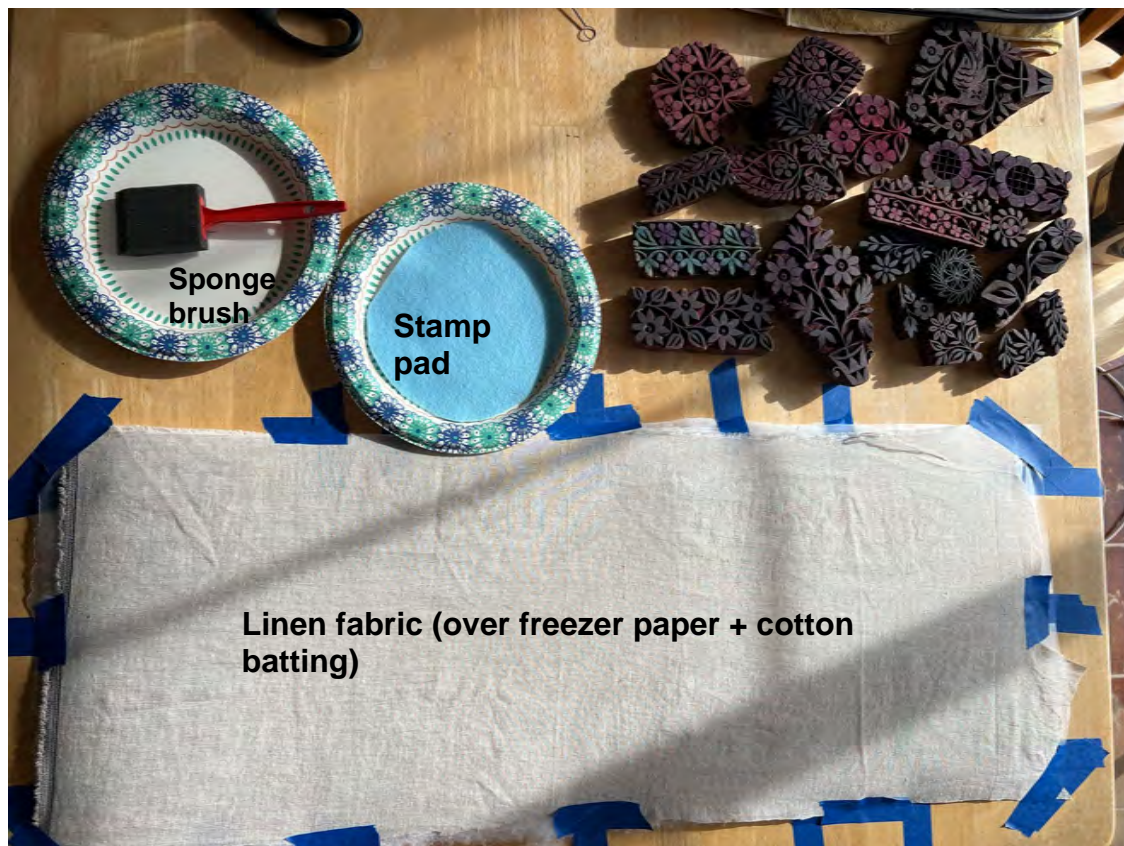
The fabric must be bleached and dyed prior to being printed on. For this reason, many “hubs” of block printing are historically located near rivers. In Bagru, the Sanjaria River is a major draw for print business as the “abundant flowing water for washing, and sandy beds for drying, is critical for

My project

For my personal project, I needed to adapt the traditional block printing methods and materials to my setting- my mother's home kitchen table. The cold Iowa climate meant that I would be doing my work inside and my limited budget called for a DIY set up inspired by a blog post⁹. My "print pad" was made of 2 layers of cotton batting I found in my fabric remnants bin covered with a layer of freezer paper, both taped down with painters tape. I had a stack of paper plates, sponge brushes, and pieces of felt to try using a stamp pad.

I used solely natural fibers such as cotton and linen as they contain cellulose which readily accepts and absorbs dye. All fabrics were prewashed and dried in the washing machine and dryer. I used more painter's tape to secure the fabric to the padded surface. I decided to use Speedball Fabric Block Printing Ink after scouring google, Reddit posts, and Youtube videos. It apparently did not require any heat setting and rather recommended waiting for >7 days before washing the fabric.

Following creating block printed fabric, I planned to use my sewing machine to create items for the home such as pillow covers and placemats. I searched the internet and Pinterest for ideas and then used Google Slides to plan my designs.



Project log

January 20th, 2026

I was excited to have my work space be in my favorite room of my home, by my mother's house plants and our prayer area. The dining table is the first and only table we have had since we immigrated to the U.S. in 1997 and has followed us from our first home in Indianapolis to the Iowa City area where we have resided since 2005. The sunlight is absolutely stunning throughout the day thanks to several large south-facing windows. This is important given the windchill was -21 degrees Fahrenheit.

My first task was to test all of the blocks to see how the block appeared versus printed. I used black paint on a beige linen fabric to create contrast. Immediately following my first print, I was giddy with excitement at how well it had turned out and texted my mother. To apply paint, I initially tried the "stamp pad" method but quickly found it to utilize more paint while creating a faint print. I stuck to gently using the sponge brush to dab paint onto the block surface, as recommended by a video by *The Indian Block Print Co*¹⁰. While I observed different paint application methods among online resources, the emphasis on tapping the block in several places with your hand was repeated. I, too, found that designs appeared to be more vibrant and clean when I was diligent and consistent with applying pressure to the block. Additionally, applying one thin coat, doing a "test stamp" followed by the another thin coat of paint created the strongest print.

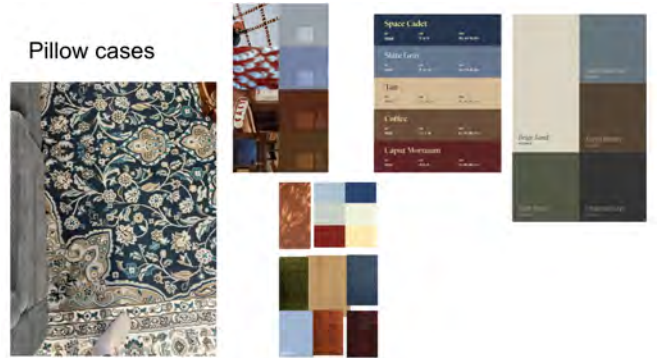
Overall, I was impressed by how well the designs turned out and that all of the blocks were in pretty good shape. Some had missing corners or lines which, in my opinion, added character. In my mother's words, these blocks were "decades old, still better than newer ones" and I couldn't agree more. I've included additional notes and labels from this printing session below. Once I filled the space with prints from each block, it was time to wash up. I felt stressed at the idea of using water on wood and ruining the blocks forever so I quickly began googling. I was relieved to learn that simple dish soap and water followed by drying the blocks upside down would work fine. As I began washing the blocks, I noticed the water began running magenta after the black paint had washed out. The last person to use these blocks must have loved the color magenta.



Late January 2026

Before purchasing more paints and fabrics, I wanted to see how the paint held up after being washed which would require me to wait one week. During this time, I began brainstorming designs and a color scheme for my final project. I had initially planned to make placemats for myself, but after seeing my mother's excitement over the blocks, I decided to pivot and work on a project for her home first that she had been asking me to do for years- sewing pillow covers for the living room couches. She also insisted on getting involved with this project.

I started a Google Slides document, my idea of a creative canvas, and started with thinking about colors. I took a photo of our living room rug and found color palettes that included those colors, with the goal of finding one additional accent color. From my research, I got excited about the idea of a rust red color.



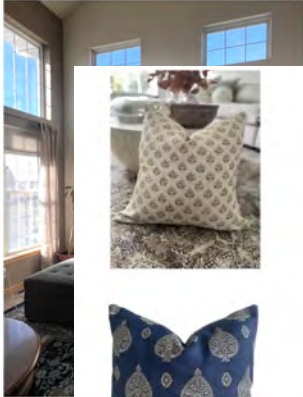
I took a photo of our current pillow set up and began applying different colors and combinations.



I reviewed the combinations with my mother, who chuckled at my meticulous methods in deciding which color fabrics to pick. We both agreed on the combination that appears to the left.

She wanted to ensure the background on the largest pillow was a lighter color so that the blockprinting ink and any embellishments would “pop”.

From previous experience making a pillow cover for my own apartment years ago, I knew that a simple cotton fabric would look plain, at least for my taste. I wanted to incorporate embellishments such as ruffles, ribbon, panels, and upholstery fabric in addition to the blockprinted cotton fabric. Once again, I probed the web and Pinterest for pillow silhouettes and design ideas and organized them throughout my Google doc.



Leaf border → grid. Fill w/ flowers.



Use lighter version of paint color for fabric



Different fabrics for border/center



Layered: pale pattern + bold pattern



4 corner design



Stripes of border designs



Circular design (have similar blocks)



Painting with fabric dye

These were my original designs.



I made a material list for each pillow including the cotton fabrics and yardage, upholstery fabrics, furnishings (trims, pom-poms), lining fabrics and paint colors.

January 31st, 2026

In the spirit of my mother and Naniji, I wanted to attempt to thrift at least some of the materials to be more sustainable. Most of their projects involved cutting up clothes that no longer fit any of the four kids and old worn sarees to give the fabrics a new life. I tried out a new shop I had never been to before called The Create Exchange in Cedar Rapids that is essentially a thrift store of craft supplies (and my new favorite craft store). Fabrics were organized by fiber content which made for a streamlined process. There was a table nearby that customers are encouraged to use to cut their own yardage. Prices are \$2-3 per yard which is a steal. Admittedly, the cotton section was limited so I focused on satin linings and found a red upholstery fabric as well which came out to a total of \$7. I planned to get the rest of the materials from fabric and craft stores around Iowa City such as Home Ec and, against my will, Hobby Lobby.

February 1st, 2026

Over one week had passed since my initial block printing so it was time to try washing the fabric. My mother insisted on handwashing it so I did this in my bathroom sink. To my relief, I noticed most of the color stayed but would slightly smudge if I rubbed it hard enough. This made me nervous given the fact that the pillows were in a “high traffic” area.

I went to my mother with this concern who agreed that the paint would be appropriate for an art piece hung on the wall or even a table runner used on special occasions, rather than the pillow cases. While I was stumped, she suggested we make a slight pivot to adding embroidery to the designs to make them more durable. I was open to the idea but this change in plans meant a) I needed to simplify my designs because of how time consuming embroidery would be, and b) I needed to learn how to embroider. Contrary to my mild frustration with this change, I sensed my mother’s excitement. She disappeared for a moment and re-emerged with a square piece of



Before

After

cream cotton fabric. Scattered all over it were different stitches and colorful unfinished designs, a surface she had used to brainstorm and practice embroidery techniques when she was younger.



She began sharing the types and thickness of threads she used, how complex certain stitches were, and which she thought would be reasonable for this project. She emphasized focusing on designs that were central to the pillow and using cotton fabric of an appropriate weight- thick enough so it wouldn't wrinkle but not so thick it would be difficult to feel the needle during fine needlework.

While I felt a bit overwhelmed, I also recognized this felt like a “full-circle” moment. Similar to my mother and Naniji, I didn't have the appropriate resources or materials to produce a “purely blockprinted” product that would *also* be durable and stand the test of time.

February 2nd, 2026

I wanted to try out blockprinting with a light color on darker fabric. I bought white paint and found some remnant red linen and got to work. Recalling how long it took to wash all of the blocks during my first printing session, I opted to focus on a few that I was particularly interested in using for projects. I also wanted to attempt doing multiple border pieces in a row, partially painting a block, and creating a corner. Similar to the first printing session, the second print was stronger than the initial print. My mother and I both really loved the look of the white and red as it's a classical color combination in block printed fabrics.



February 3rd, 2026

After “studying” my mom’s practice embroidery cloth, I wanted to give it a shot. I used the first blockprinted fabric and stitched over one of the designs in different ways and utilizing different numbers of embroidery floss. Having minimal experience with embroidery, I primarily utilized a straight running stitch, long and short stitch, fishbone, and “chain stitch”. I began thinking the thread adds a nice dimension to the otherwise ‘flat’ printed designs. I sent this photo to my mother. She replied “I’ll teach you some tricks”.



Mid-February through early March

I got to work measuring out fabric pieces and ensuring straight lines for all of my cuts. Given the added embroidery component (read: time consuming), I simplified the designs to ensure I could finish these pillowcases for my mother before moving for residency.



Before I could ask, my mother offered to assist with the embroidery. For the beige pillowcase, I would do the flowers while she would do the vine and leaves. The first flower I did (the closest to the top in the image to the right) was clearly my work when compared to the clean and even stitches done by my mother (anything green). It also somehow took me two hours to complete. She reminded me that I was still learning, perfection did not need to be the goal, and to focus on enjoying the process.



Anticipating the amount of time it would take to complete

just a single pillowcase, I decided to take my project on the go. I packed a mini embroidery hoop and embroidery supplies on my trip to Italy and passed the time creating flowers while listening to audiobooks. My personal favorite spot was a cliffside wine bar in Cinque Terre overlooking the Ligurian Sea.



Reflective essay on crafting process, heirlooms, and intergenerational + intercultural knowledge transfer

Coming into this project, I knew it would evolve, but I still felt a sense of “control” in its structure and outcome. Machine sewing being my craft of choice, I had a clear goal to create block-printed fabric that I could later use to sew, rather than use it as a stencil for embroidery as my mother did. However, after noticing smudging and fading paint after a single wash, I began to reconsider this plan. Just as the women in my family had done, I decided to use embroidery to reinforce and augment the printed patterns. This felt like a “full circle” moment and, unsurprisingly, made my mother more eager to get involved.

Her early involvement shifted the direction of the project and transformed it into a collaborative and intergenerational endeavor. The dynamic seemed to mirror the one she had shared with her own mother: of me trying something independently, encountering an obstacle, and then seeking her guidance. In contrast with machine sewing in which I was largely self-taught through blog posts and Youtube tutorials, this process felt more relational. I looked forward to her coming home every evening from the lab to show her my progress and discuss the hurdles I ran into that day. I appreciated this efficient and personalized feedback process. This exchange served the additional purpose of softening our mother-daughter relationship that had felt strained during a stressful year.

Through both formal interviews and ongoing conversations during this project, I began to learn more about my mother’s identity before she became a parent. Hearing her describe how she “could never sit still” and was always working on a creative project, I saw parallels in myself. Growing up, I was often praised for my work ethic, yet just as frequently noted to be daydreaming and easily distracted. While expressed in slightly different ways, I found comfort in these shared traits across generations.

As a “1.5 generation” immigrant, I often perseverate on the differences between my generation and that of my parents and grandparents. This project created a point of connection. Growing up across the world from my extended family, I most often learned of major milestones such as weddings, graduations, and births. In discussing the blocks and crafting with my mother, I gained insight into what everyday life was like for her and how her creative practices changed with the various identities she held. During this project, the wooden blocks began to shift in meaning from worn crafting tools to heirlooms carrying family history and memories. I now see these blocks as items to use, preserve, and pass down to family and community members to continue imprinting stories.

As I worked toward “completing” this project, I also reflected on the slow, often frustratingly so, nature of the process. I am no stranger to projects taking longer than anticipated, and this one was no exception. The incorporation of hand embroidery necessitated guidance from my mother and dozens of extra laboring hours than I had not initially accounted for. This was humbling and brought up feelings of angst. If I could not complete the project efficiently or “perfectly”, was it worth continuing to work on it? This mindset contributed to a period of avoidance and mild resentment towards the project.

Some time away from the project to reflect and a conversation with Dr. Weinstein helped me confront how deeply I had internalized productivity as a measure of “success”. Despite acknowledging the act of slow crafting as a form of resistance in today’s world, I still found myself prioritizing completion over the process. As I have come to terms with the scope and realistic timeline of this project, I have started to re-engage with the project in a more meaningful way rather than focusing solely on the finished product.

Another reflection I had was on the parallels between traditional craft apprenticeships and medical training. Both require observation, active learning through practice, and mentorship. Much of developing creative or clinical “gestalt” is passed down through individuals rather than taught by formal instruction. This project highlighted the value in this model of learning, as it fosters connection and encourages deep engagement.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have pursued this elective, as it renewed my engagement with textile work and deepened my understanding of how creativity, identity, and relationships intersect. I was reminded that investing in my creative identity is integral to my development as a physician, as it grounds

me and enhances my ability to connect with others. I hope to carry this awareness forward in my training, as I listen to the stories patients bring while noticing how my own story shapes how I listen.

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