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# Mehndi, Democratized Media, and the Indian American Experience

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Mehndi, Democratized Media, and the Indian American Experience

Tara Gupta

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the  
Prerequisite for Honors  
in Media Arts & Sciences

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## Historical Background of Mehndi

Mehndi is an ancient Indian art form that dates back to Hindu Vedic texts. Mehndi is a paste made up of crushed henna leaves and turmeric. It is applied on women's hands as a paste, the paste dries, and when the dry paste comes off, it leaves a deep red dye on skin. Mehndi artists use a cone full of the paste and squeeze it out steadily to draw on women's hands and feet. The deep red lasts 1-2 weeks; it is akin to a temporary tattoo. Mehndi designs are based on Vedic customs that represent shapes of the sun and flowers. The designs have elements of circles, horizons, sunrays, leaves, and flowers. It is placed on the hands and feet to represent awakening of inner light and good vibes; sun rays and light emanate (figuratively) from women's hands and feet. For the last hundred or so years, mehndi is only applied on special occasions, like weddings. However, women are seen wearing mehndi in paintings from ancient to modern times. It takes about two hours to complete a set of hands and feet; the designs are intricate, but vast. See below, [1] a 17th century Pahari painting, and [2] a 16th century Rajasthani painting; the women's hands and feet are colored with mehndi.

[1]



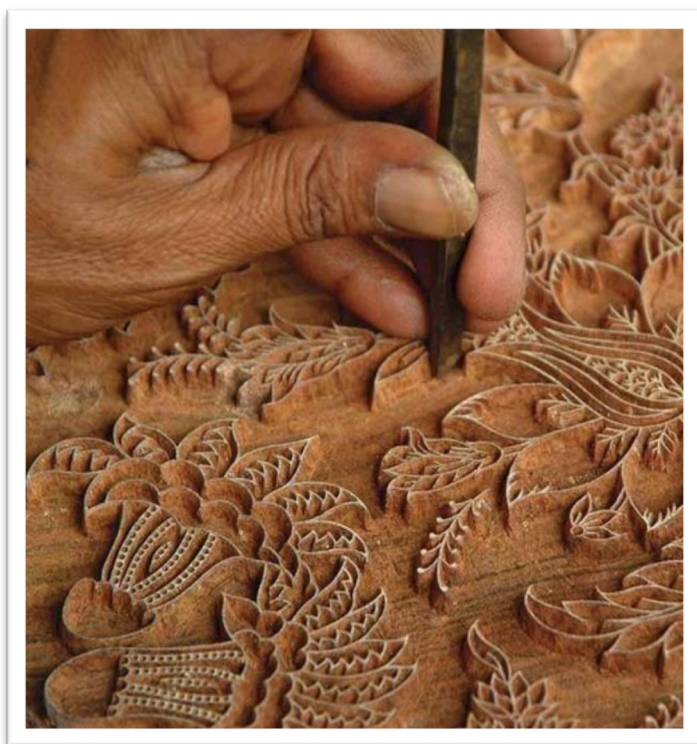


[2]



Another way mehndi was applied was by using wooden printing blocks that had hard-carved designs in them. These wood blocks were cut out of various types of wood, particularly shesham and black wood. Indians used wood blocks to print patterns on fabric, clay, and skin. [See images 3-4 below.]

[3]



[4]

Below is mehndi I drew on a cousin's hands [image 5].



[5]



### Shapes and Design

The shapes of mehndi represent sun, light, and flowers, significant parts of Vedic traditions and Indian culture. Hindus regularly worship a solar deity, Surya, who rules the other planets (astrology is another important component in Hinduism) (Gupta). Yogis might recognize the term ‘sun salutations’; since ancient times, Hindus have quite literally saluted and bowed to the sun. As for the significance of flowers, Gupta adds, “we offer what ever comes from god back to god, hence flowers.” These same shapes can be found in Indian architecture, furniture, and textiles. Below is [6] the Bhitargaon Temple in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, built in the 5th

century by the Gupta Empire in which arches were used to represent the sun and its infinite rays;  
[7] more literal suns and flowers are visible in this textile, from 19th century Hyderabad; [8] a  
3000 year old tapestry from Andhra Pradesh.

[6]



[7]



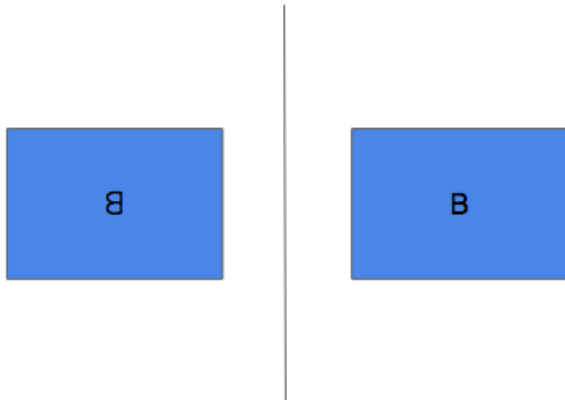


[8]

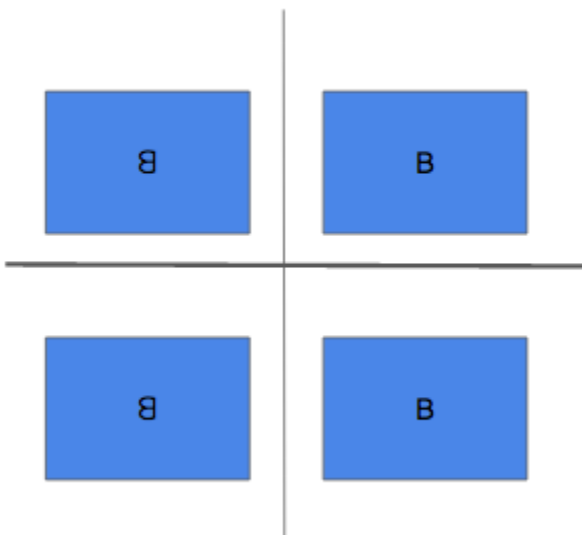


The shapes used in mehndi are fairly simple, just iterated in different patterns of symmetry. Mehndi printing blocks made repetition and printing on skin even easier (though carving the wood by hand took hours). Below are basic symmetrical patterns from which most all mehndi designs can be derived: [9] basic symmetry, [10] quadrilateral symmetry, and [11] radial symmetry.

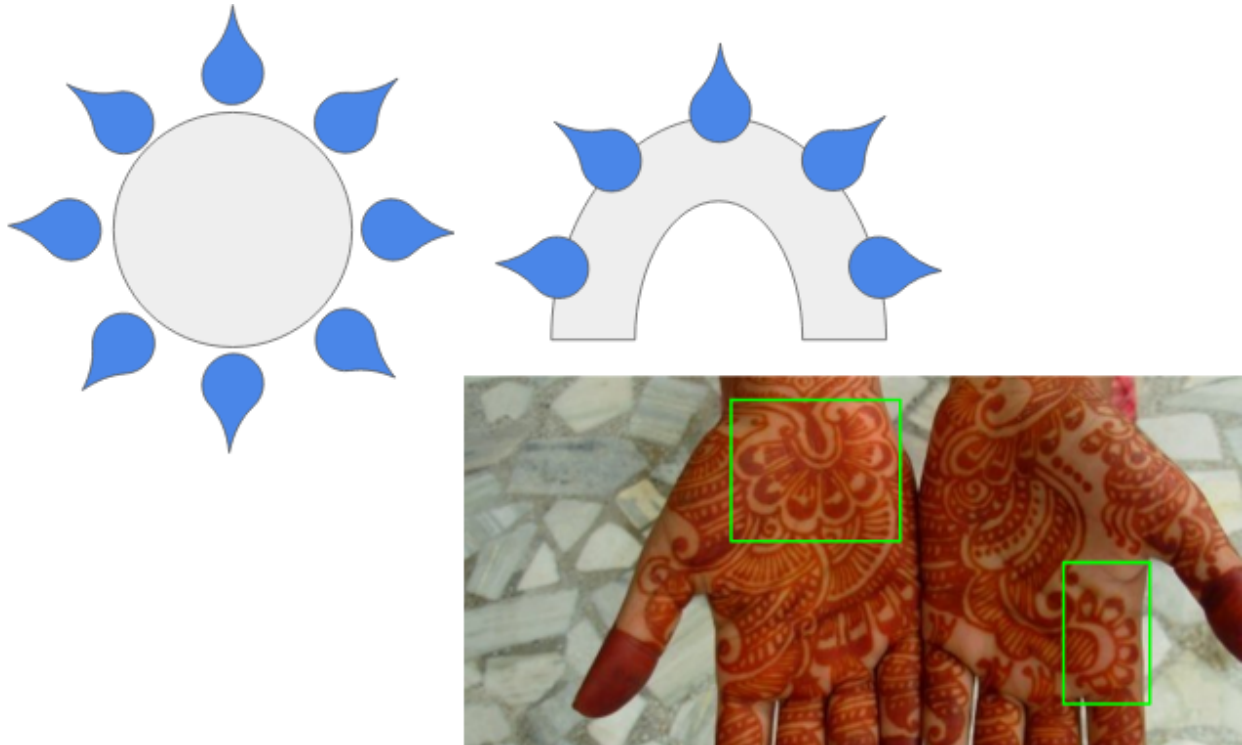
[9]



[10]



[11]



### Indian and Hindu Art and Design's Transition to the U.S.

The legacy of mehndi and its designs are seen far and wide in India today: the country is rich with art, architecture, and textiles that carry this tradition. Across the Atlantic in the U.S., mehndi and mehndi designs are harder to find. So, how do we see mehndi and Indian and Hindu traditions in American contexts? An 1853 issue of *Knickerboxer Magazine* gives us a taste:

We frame ourselves a deep azure sky, and a languid, alluring atmosphere; associate luxurious ease with the coffee-rooms and flowering gardens of the Seraglio at Constantinople; with the tapering minarets and gold crescents of Cairo; with the fountains within and the kiosks without Damascus -- settings of silver in circlets of gold. We see grave and reverend turbans sitting cross-legged on Persian carpets in baths and harems, under palm trees or acacias, either quaffing the cool sherbet of roses or the aromatic Mocha coffee... we see the smoke of the Latakia -- the mild sweet tobacco of Syria -- whiffed lazily from the bubbling water-pipe, while the devotee of backgammon listlessly rattles the dice; we hear the musical periods of the storyteller relating the thousand and one tales to the over-curious crowd... and this we call Orientalism. This is

Orientalism, not as it is, but as it swims before the sensuous imagination. It is too unreal to be defined. (Edwards 18)

This issue of *Knickerboxer Magazine* spoke romantically about Orientalism, though the word's connotations of course are negative now. Orientalism is the idea that the West views the East with patronizing, colonial overtones. This thinking creates a dichotomy between East and West that paints the East as mystical and even primitive. I start this section with this quote because I contend that the understanding and representations of Indian art and culture has not moved far from this 163 years later. There are two notable areas in which Indian art and design are abundant: art museums and clothing.

Technology and transportation allowed Indian art to travel into museums across America over the last few hundred years. Ancient Indian art and furniture are easy to find in art and history museums. Most art museums have a hefty ancient India or ancient Asia section. For example, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Massachusetts, arguably the most prominent art museum in Massachusetts, contains an 'Asias' and 'Ancient' collection, which together feature about fifty art pieces from pre-19th century South Asia.

The ability to travel, watch movies, and share photographs permeated Indian attire and design throughout the U.S. Mehndi designs can be seen in popular culture as well. Especially in clothing, but even more in hippie culture, rave culture, and other counterculture movements. The beginnings of Indian-inspired American clothing came during the 1960s and 70s:

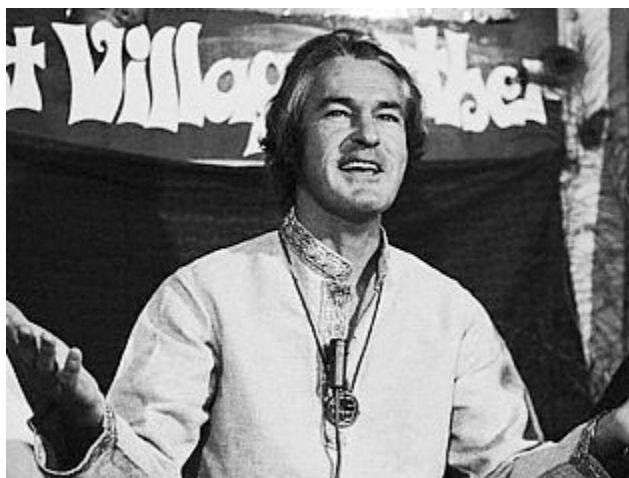
Travellers' experiences, ideas and attitudes reached a wide audience.... Afghan coats, Tibetan prayer beads, Nepalese scarves and batik t-shirts the height of fashion across Europe, North America and Australia in the early 1970s. It also underpinned the rising popularity of Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as other putatively "Eastern" spiritual practices. But perhaps its greatest influence was on the culture of "alternative" tourism in Asia.<sup>22</sup> Those on the Hippie Trail developed a strong and binding travel culture that shaped where travellers



went, what they saw, how they dressed, and with whom they interacted. This subculture was based around the ideal of an “authentic” travel experience. Once on the road, travellers signalled their belonging to the in-group through a range of performances that signalled their “authenticity.” These included travelling on a tight budget, dressing in scruffy clothes (preferably picked up along the way), not carrying a camera, taking drugs, and staying in popular guesthouses or “crash pads” rather than tourist-grade hotels. These behaviours were motivated by status and fashion as well as philosophy: many were determined to assume a higher position in the travellers’ status economy... The complex system of social rules that bound conduct in the West was contrasted to the “simple life and uncomplicated pleasures” that Asians were imagined to enjoy, and the West’s greyness and dullness were juxtaposed to the colour and chaos of the imagined East. (Sobocinska)

Orientalism of the 1900s remained in the culture of the 1960s, and, as mentioned earlier, in museums and culture today. The mysticism of the east was at the center of this counterculture: being free and doing drugs, in other words, reaching altered states of mind fit well with the mystical faraway east. Cropped shirts, kurtas, flower crowns, and floral print all had roots in Indian religious custom and traditional clothing. The Hindu om and Chinese yin and yang were seen on posters, art, and clothing from the time as well. Below is Timothy Leary [12], advocate for psychedelic drugs and important figure in cinematic writing in the 1960s) in a kurta.

[12]



While the counterculture's image of Asia reversed some of the value assumptions inherent to Orientalism by conceiving of disorder and irrationality as positive rather than negative, it nonetheless continued to imagine the East through binary oppositions to the West...[we] liked to think that Hippie Trail travellers had moved beyond the racist assumptions of mainstream Western society by seeking out the Asian Other. Yet, the counterculture's imagined "East" was in fact a reinterpretation of established Orientalist tropes for a new generation. (Sobocinska)

These 'Orientalist tropes' seem to remain today, at a time when there is no counterculture movement to 'justify' it. Today, we see Indian-inspired clothes at stores like Urban Outfitters, which is a mainstream clothing store serving predominantly 14-30-year-old men and women. Over the last few years, Urban Outfitters and other retailers receive negative flack for cultural appropriation. Urban Outfitters came under negative internet flack over Ganesh imagery [see images 13-14 below]). In a response to these Ganesh socks, *Brown Girl Magazine* wrote, "Urban Outfitters' faults are two-fold: (1) The duvet is clearly disrespectful on the aforementioned religious grounds. The feet of others touching the image of Lord Ganesha is offensive for the majority of devout practicing Hindus. Beyond these specific religious reasons, the duvet has a larger impact on the use of Indian culture and images by non-Indians and non-Indian companies. 2) The image of Lord Ganesha is part of a larger context of cultural appropriation in which Western corporations and consumers can, with ease, borrow certain symbols and images from another culture and make them their own and give them their own meanings" (Bhutani).

[13]

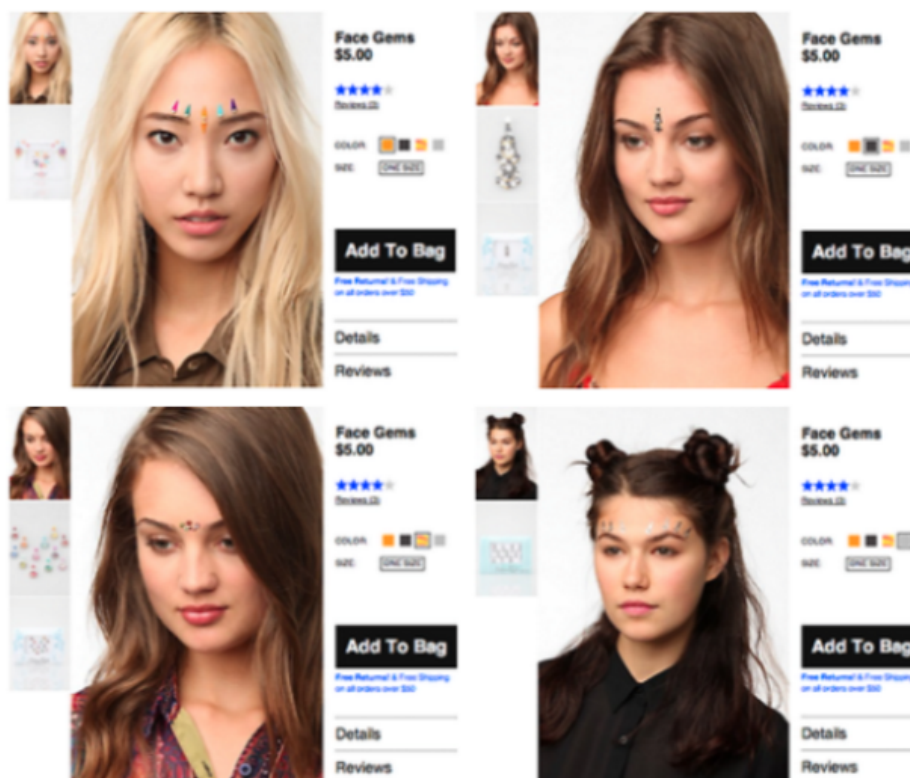


[14]



Other mainstream stores sell bindis and flower crowns and necklaces, other integral parts of the way women practice Hindu religion and Indian culture [see image 15 below]. Bindis represent the circle of life (reincarnation), the cosmos, and the Third Eye for Hindu women. Amongst non-Hindus, bindis are sported at music festivals, where mind-altering drugs are commonplace.

[15]



Thus, technology and transportation were able to bring mehndi design and Indian culture to America, but I argue that these representations of Indian culture reify Orientalist understandings of Indian art.

The art in museums is old, reifying the distance of the culture and art to the viewer. It is rare to find contemporary Indian art in museums, although artists have been producing tons of it. This reifies the mysticism and antiquity of Indian culture without regard for modern implications or changes in culture and history. Rarely is art in museums attributed to any individual artist; usually the artist is unknown because of the antiquity of the piece or perhaps because Indian antique art is not considered high art, unlike the work of, say, painters commissioned by European royalty throughout the centuries. The MFA first showed work of a contemporary South

Asian artist this April in an exhibition called ‘Megacities Asia’ (which arguably reifies the stark contrast between east and west).

Retailers sell clothes that encourage misunderstanding and distance from Indian culture while penalizing those tied to the culture: “Western culture invites and, at times, demands assimilation. ‘Ethnic’ clothes and hairstyles are still stigmatized as unprofessional...people of all cultures wear business suits and collared shirts to survive. But when one is of the dominant culture, adopting the clothing, food, or slang of other cultures has nothing to do with survival” (Uwujaren). Festival-goers and shoppers recognize the mysticism of Indian culture and its relation to counterculture movements of the past and use these heinous representations sartorially.

Transportation and (bureaucracy around) museum curation and clothing design brought Indian culture to America for American audience, but, the question remains: how are Indian Americans pursuing ancient traditions like mehndi today? At the beginning of this thesis project, given the above historical context, I set out to find mehndi artists who practice mehndi in the US.

### Mehndi Artists in the U.S.

I remembered the first time I got mehndi: I was at a wedding in New York City in 2003. During one day of the wedding, a few quiet women who spoke little English put mehndi on all the women involved in the wedding. Someone paid them in cash, and they left after their work was done.

At the beginning of my thesis project, I searched online to try to find bridal mehndi services, but I couldn’t find any that were owned and/or operated by South Asians. Set on finding the source of the mehndi artists from that wedding in 2003, I spoke to several New York City Indian American women, getting contacts through family and friends. I was able to track

down the supposed first woman to start practicing mehndi as a business in the U.S. She chose to remain anonymous because of her immigration status; I will refer to her as Auntie Shruti. Auntie Shruti is Bengali, about 75-years-old, and lives in a predominantly Bengali neighborhood in Queens, New York. Queens boasts the largest Bengali American community in the U.S.; their immigration history dates back to the 1800s (Bald). Many immigrants, including Auntie Shruti, come as undocumented immigrants, creating identities and communities upon arrival in the states (Bald). Auntie Shruti and her small army of mehndi artists practice their mehndi business underground. They do not publicize their business anywhere online or otherwise; they can only be found through word-of-mouth (it took me over twenty calls to family and friends to find these mehndi artists).

I headed to Queens to chat with Auntie Shruti and the women that work with her. Auntie Shruti's living room, where we sat, was part of a four-room home, furnished with a few plastic tables, a television, an old Macintosh computer with dial-up Internet, and an overwhelming amount of flowers and Indian textiles (for saris). When I asked how she and the other women learned mehndi, she explained: they learned from Google image searches and YouTube tutorials, or took inspiration from sari fabrics. They bought their mehndi cones from Indian grocery stores in Queens.

Initially, I sought to bring the stories of these forgotten women to viewers of my final installation piece. I wanted to give some identity and ownership to these forgotten queens, seeking to give them their due credit. They were, in fact, artists whose work was rich in history and demanding in skill. As an Indian American art student, I thought that these women were artists whose work was unfairly left out of museums and dominant art theory. My heart hurt every time I saw another culturally insensitive transgression in clothing stores and online, and I

wanted to represent my culture's art respectfully and authentically. I was upset when Auntie Shruti and the other women's privacy concerns didn't allow me to do so, but what I realized was that the importance of their art did not lie in their ownership of it. Unlike much non-eastern art (in museums, particularly), their work's importance is about spreading the tradition of giving women light and good vibes to other women. The end goal of mehndi is not to end up in a museum and priced at thousands of dollars; in fact, the dye itself fades after a couple weeks and is never seen again (and mehndi artists rarely repeat designs). Indeed, tons of more casual mehndi artists share their work on public websites (like the ones where Auntie Shruti and company find inspiration) and even teach others how to practice mehndi.

The similarities between the way Auntie Shruti and I learned mehndi were uncanny. I always loved the designs on my mom's saris and on our furniture at home. My mom bought me mehndi cones from our Minnesota Indian grocery store to play with after I got my mehndi done at the wedding in 2003. I watched YouTube tutorials, searched 'mehndi' on Tumblr, and then practiced until my whole body was covered in red dye.

This is not to say that I learned all my mehndi designs and artistic inclinations this way. Like my non-Indian, American counterparts, I too learned a lot about Indian culture from museum art and pop culture (in addition to, of course, learning at home). These cultural educational experiences, however, reified in me the mystic and Oriental nature of my own culture; the ancient and untitled pieces created distance between my Indian American experience and my understanding of India. As I mentioned earlier, I grew up confused and even hurt when I saw non-Hindus appropriating the culture. Meanwhile, practicing mehndi felt organic, even if I was learning it from Internet media. Internet media, unlike carefully curated museum pieces, are democratized forms of media. Mehndi's intent is to spread good vibes and energy amongst

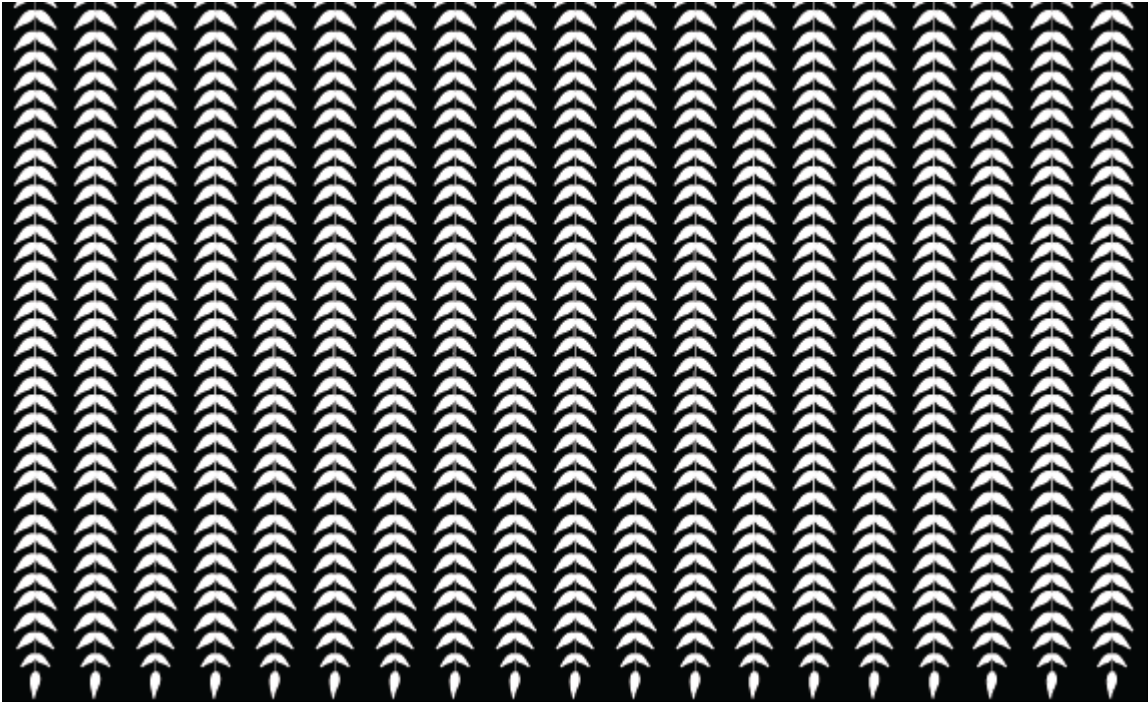


women, and, in fact, that is exactly what Instagram and YouTube users were doing! In museums, art curators choose old Indian art that intensifies cultural distance and mysticism around the culture. It is rare to see contemporary Indian (and other Asian/Middle Eastern art) in museums, even in contemporary art museums, despite the huge amount of art currently produced by people of South Asian descent. Contemporary Indian art, based in the ancient tradition of mehndi, is prospering in democratized forms of media: YouTube, Google, Instagram, Tumblr, etc. Indeed, women like Auntie Shruti who came to the US don't have access to art museums and the like; they carry on ancient traditions through family ties/home, fabric patterns, and the Internet. Instagram has become a popular medium for women to post photos of their hair, makeup, nails, and clothing. It has also become a popular medium amongst mehndi artists, amateur and professional, to share designs. Searching '#mehndi' on Instagram fills the feed with beautiful designs made by people of South Asian descent (meanwhile the Anglicized '#henna' produces a lot of temporary tattoos from carnivals and street kiosks).

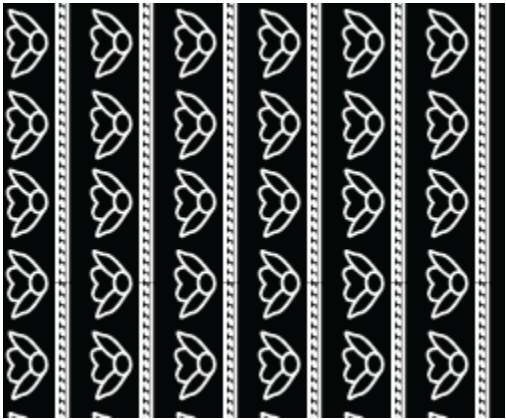
### My Installation

Taking democratized forms of media one step further, I was able to use computer science, namely algorithmic modelling techniques, to recreate mehndi designs and printing blocks. Following the same patterns of symmetry and even creating new ones, I could harness the power of technology to make endless designs using Adobe Illustrator, carrying on tradition using new tools [see images 16-19 below].

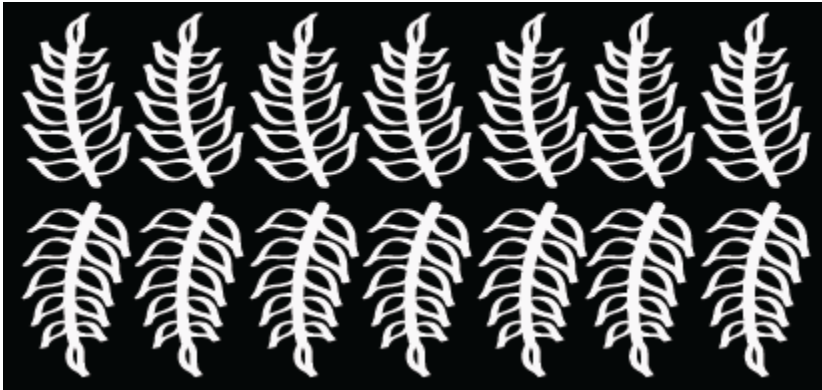
[16]



[17]

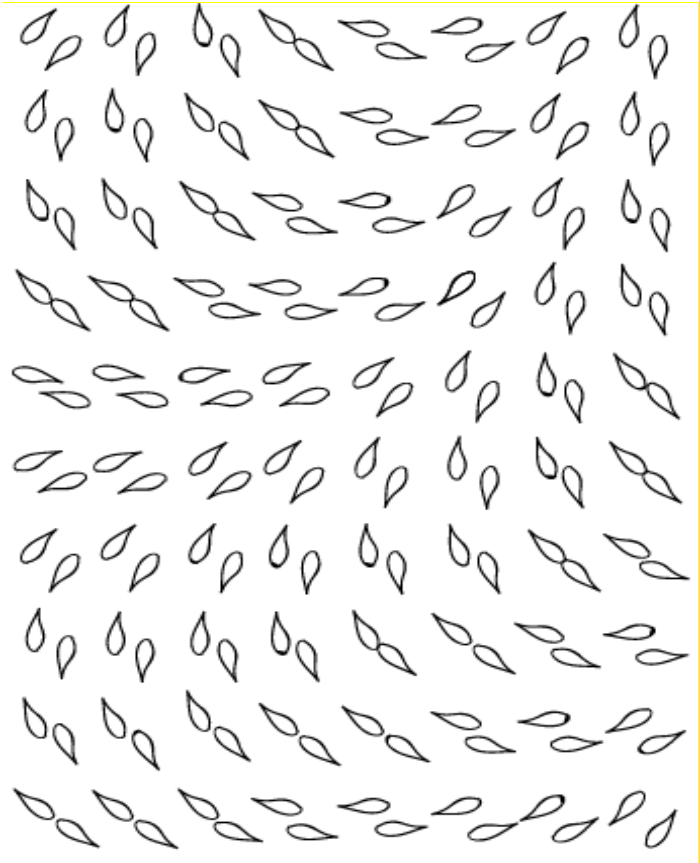


[18]



Something I explored was algorithmically programming new patterns of symmetry using open source code for Grasshopper, an algorithmic modelling plugin to the 3D modelling software Rhino. I was able to create patterns of symmetry I have never seen [image 19].

[19]



I was even able to recreate an ancient wooden printing block using Adobe Illustrator [image 20].

[20]



My final installation (*untitled*) piece contains two main parts: 1) three wood cut prints prompting viewers to try using mehndi with simple instructions on how to find out how to use mehndi using democratized media, and 2) a 4x3' table made of woodcut recreations of the above black wood block with mehndi cones on top for viewers to use. In addition, there is a piece of Indian fabric for viewers to sit on and use as inspiration for their mehndi designs. [See images 21-29 below; please note, the first draft of the written thesis is due before the actual installation

of these pieces on April 27th, 2016. Installation photos will replace these photos for the final thesis draft.]

[21]

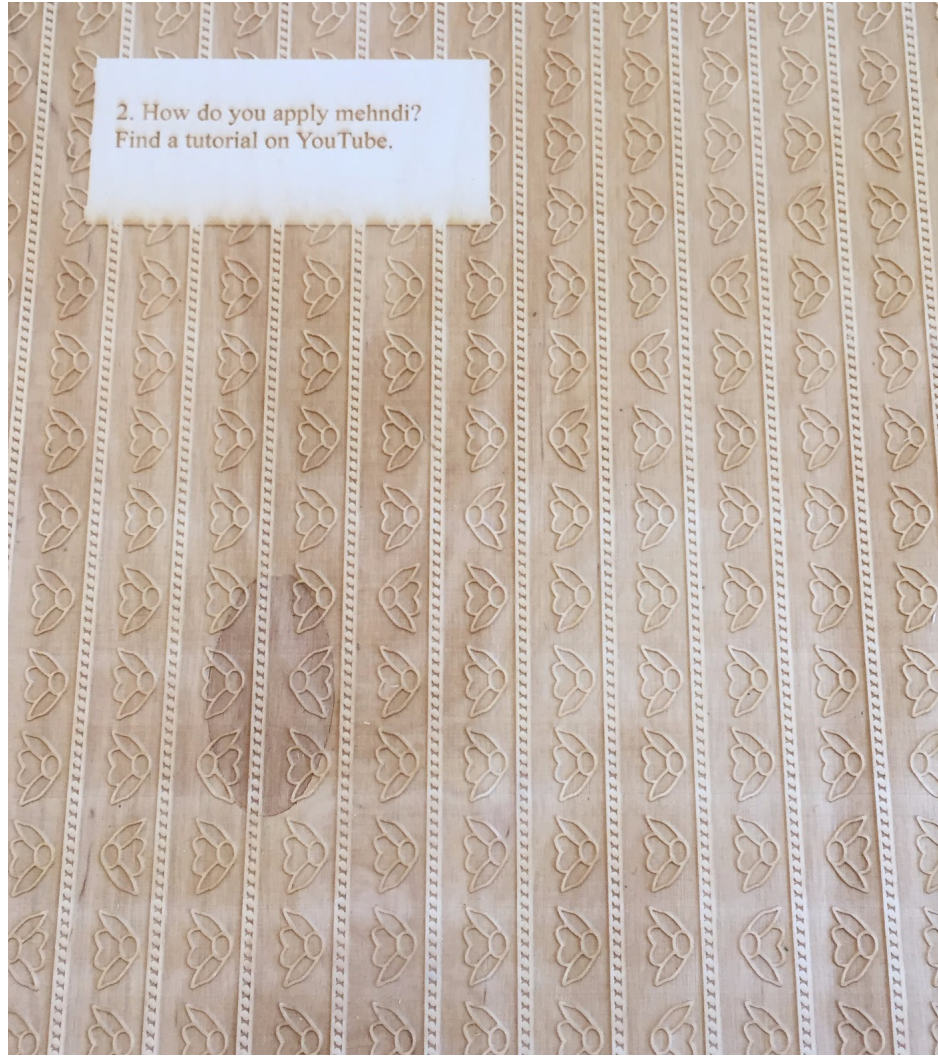




[22]



[23]





[24]





[25]



[26]





[27]





[28]





[29]



In my installation piece, I encourage viewers to use democratized media sources to learn about mehndi and try it out. I want to take away the mysticism of Indian tradition, allowing viewers to feel comfortable trying out mehndi on the table, using the fabric and table as inspiration in addition to what they find on Google and YouTube. This mimics the way that Auntie Shruti and I learned how to do mehndi; it is an authentically Indian American cultural experience. Using democratized media is the up-to-date version of passing culture and tradition down orally. In fact, many art museums have phone guides that explain works to viewers. Further, I hope that viewers spread their creations via Instagram or other media with a universal and simple hashtag: #mehndi. This will spread the good vibes and inner light to their followers and bigger populations of Instagram/Twitter/Tumblr users.

I decided against using my original designs and new patterns of symmetry. Instead, I chose to use elements of the old wooden printing block. I remove my authorship from the piece as mehndi artists like Auntie Shruti do. Whether or not anyone or myself considers mehndi art or not, one thing is clear: ownership and authorship isn't the end goal of mehndi. The significance of mehndi is to spread light and good vibes to other women. Mehndi on display alone seems inauthentic; mehndi is not museum art unless it involves the actual application of mehndi on bodies. In addition, the old wooden printing block pays homage to the rich history of this art form and the many generations of my family who passed the block down to me.

Of course, much of my installation is based in new technology, but I want to keep the element of the rich history of Indian art and craftsmanship. Hence, the design is the digitized and reprinted wood blocks. The wood block used to be a tool to recreate and reprint mehndi. In the same vein, the table and boards are made with the same idea, just using new technology.

It is commonplace for art museums to have phone-run guides to explain works to viewers. In my piece, I want viewers themselves to be part of the process. This is more authentic to the Indian American experience. I seek to create contemporary Indian art that takes advantage of the gap of knowledge and fills that gap without losing the historical touch of Indian immigration.

I chose to leave out the stories of Auntie Shruti and her artists to respect their privacy, but also to avoid bringing out Oriental or degrading views of them given the status quo's hostile sentiments toward undocumented immigrants. I am particularly excited to install this piece at Wellesley because mostly women will interact with the piece.

#### Further Investigations

There is much more to explore regarding Indian American identity, women, mehndi, and technology. Next steps could include reaching out to prominent mehndi artists on Instagram and tutorial creators on YouTube to find out how they learned mehndi and what inspires them to publicize their work. The class differences and immigration status of mehndi artists in Queens compared with the brides in Manhattan for whom they paint mehndi is another point of interest. Mehndi is also transitioning into other art spaces, namely, digital animation (particularly in rave culture) and permanent tattooing, which fundamentally changes the impermanent nature of mehndi.

My work over the course of year brought forward several substantial questions that could each make up a thesis of their own: what do Indians and Indian Americans consider art? Mehndi is an ancient art form made up of basic patterns of symmetry and radial shapes; is any of it original anymore? Is mehndi art if it's not represented as its own art form in museums? Do Indians and Indian Americans regard museum art highly? Is mehndi more highly regarded than

other religious and cultural art forms like music or painting? When I spoke with self-proclaimed patron of the arts and biologist, Dr. Kalpna Gupta, she told me, “mehndi is something greater than what I can call art. The term ‘art’ cannot begin to capture the depth of traditions like mehndi.” There is a lot to unpack in her statement: what does art mean in South Asian religious contexts? Is mehndi art even though the work is anonymous? Is mehndi art even though it disappears? Perhaps the art is in the performance of applying mehndi on other women. I hope to continue exploring these questions and see how the Wellesley community interacts with the installation.



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