

Hands That Speak – A Tale of Silent Stories

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Keywords: Embroidery, Laser Cutting, Surface Texture, Cultural Narrative.

Introduction/Concept/Context: “Hands That Speak” is grounded in interdisciplinary scholarship that frames textiles as vessels of memory, identity, and cultural knowledge. Trivedi (2007) positions cloth as a political and cultural tool, capable of conveying social histories and power dynamics. Rab (2019) expands on this by describing vernacular Indian textiles as embodied archive objects that retain generational memory through material, technique, and use. Adamson (2013) theorises craft as a site of embodied knowledge, in which the physical act of making extends lived experience. Baker (2014) further identifies embroidery as a narrative form that voices the experiences of marginalised makers, particularly women, within South Asian textile traditions. However, despite this growing recognition of the meaning of textiles, artisans, the very individuals whose labour brings these objects to life, are often overlooked. As Scrase (2003) argues, artisan labour is celebrated for its cultural value but remains economically and socially precarious. Jain (2007) notes that in contemporary design discourse, handcrafted objects are frequently aestheticised, thereby erasing the identities and realities of their makers. This project addresses that critical oversight by shifting attention to the artisan’s body, specifically their hands, as a living archive of labour, resilience, and cultural continuity. *Hands That Speak* translates the visual and tactile textures of work-worn hands, wrinkled, stained, and scarred, into material form, using wearable design to honour the dignity, identity, and stories embedded in the physical traces of making.

Aesthetics: The aesthetic foundation of this garment lies in the lived experience of Indian artisans, whose hands silently narrate stories of labour, identity, and survival. Drawing from the textured, scarred, and stained hands shaped by years of craft, the garment transforms these physical imprints into a visual language. Digitally embroidered Hindi script on hand-dyed silk organza layers embeds native expressions into the fabric, turning everyday language into poetic textile forms. An earthy palette, echoing the colours of turmeric, indigo, and madder, reinforces ties to traditional dye practices and the material residue of labour. As Trivedi (2007) notes, textiles are sites of cultural memory shaped by touch and labour. (Rab, 2019) emphasises that vernacular textiles in India serve as embodied archives, preserving identity and memory through their material form.

Methods: Process, Technique, and Execution: The creation of this garment combines laser cutting and stitching techniques to represent the individuality of artisan fingerprints in textile form. The halter top was initially sketched and then digitally developed in Adobe Illustrator to

map fingerprint-like contours. These files guided the laser cutting of soft cotton twill into concentric, irregular strips that mimicked the worn ridges of fingertips (Fig. 1). The strips were stitched together with cotton cords, adding both structure and symbolism by echoing the strength and precision of hand labor. The skirt was constructed from silk organza for its translucency and ability to hold layered colour. It was hand-dyed in earthy tones inspired by stains left by turmeric, madder, and indigo. Machine embroidery in Hindi script was digitised and applied across the surface, embedding artisan voices into the garment, reflecting Baker's (2014) view of embroidery as a narrative tool for expressing lived experiences in South Asian textile culture. The design process began with on-site observations and photographs of working hands, emphasising wrinkles, lines, and stains as visual motifs. These were translated into vector artwork, forming the foundation of the halter top's fingerprint design. Silk organza was selected after material tests for movement, translucency, and dye absorption. Multiple trials refined both the natural-dye layers and the embroidery placement. Key challenges included managing the curling of laser-cut cotton strips and maintaining clean finishes, which were addressed through reinforced stitching. Embroidering on delicate organza also required adjustments to thread tension and precise handling. This integration of digital fabrication, tactile craft, and linguistic storytelling aligns with Adamson's (2013) view of craft as a site of embodied cultural knowledge.

Cohesion: "Hands That Speak" demonstrates strong cohesion by unifying content, concept, aesthetics, and technique into a compelling narrative about artisan labor and identity. The abstract clearly articulates how the design process, rooted in observation, laser cutting, natural dyeing, and machine embroidery, was used to translate the physical and emotional textures of artisan hands into wearable form. It effectively connects conceptual goals with material choices and techniques. The artifact images visually reinforce these ideas, clearly showing the fingerprint-inspired halter top, layered hand-dyed skirt, and embroidered Hindi text. These visual elements support the abstract's themes of cultural memory, resilience, and embodied knowledge, making the design a cohesive and meaningful whole.

Design Contribution: "Hands That Speak" transforms artisan labour into a form of wearable storytelling by integrating fingerprint-inspired laser cutting, native-language embroidery, and natural dyeing techniques. This design emerges from direct observation and engagement with craft communities, drawing on the tacit knowledge embedded in artisans' gestures, marks, and languages. By merging traditional cultural memory with digital fabrication processes, the piece proposes a novel approach to embedding narratives of labour, identity, and dignity into contemporary fashion. It offers a thoughtful model for ethical and collaborative design that honours the lived experiences of makers while opening pathways for future exploration in socially engaged and culturally grounded design practices.

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