

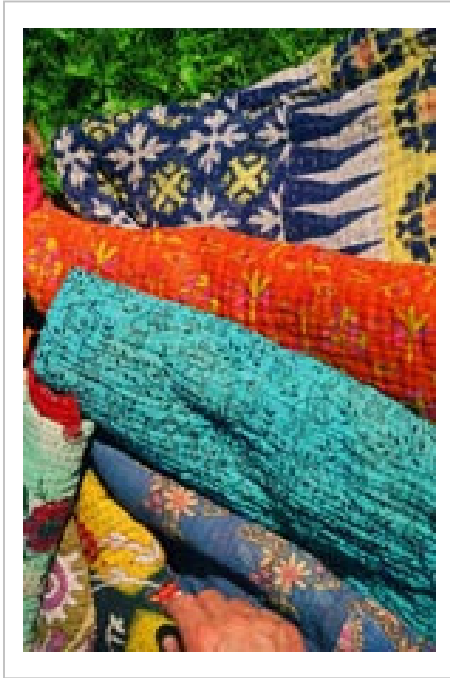
## **If not now, when? – Calcutta, Kantha and a new Career for Jeanette Farrier**

In 2003, costume designer Jeanette Farrier was looking for a new purpose, her home life had radically altered and she was reaching a certain birthday. It was the invitation to visit a friend in Calcutta that was to prove the serendipitous event that led to a new career. As any textile lover will tell you, wherever they are in the world they will always find their attention being caught by some sort of fabric or costume and for Jeanette it was the vibrantly coloured cotton blankets made by the traditional quilting process called 'Kantha'. These items belonged to the poorer members of society, could be found airing over balconies and railings across the city and were prime examples of the inventiveness of the needy to create what they require through recycling what they had.



Kantha are traditionally produced from old saris (mostly cotton) being hand sewn together, layer upon layer, with a straight running stitch in close proximity to the next to create a 'new' fabric that has a softly rippled surface. It was the juxtaposition of the different saris, generally put together because of their availability rather than any aesthetic considerations that created the dazzling displays of colour and pattern. While the examples Jeanette saw were often very patched and ragged, she realised that here was an opportunity to produce something beautiful and precious for a western market, while helping to provide an income for some of the poorest women and girls of the city. It would require her skills as a designer, advice from local charities and a lot of perseverance but here was a new, worthwhile and exciting purpose and possible career!

She purchased a number of saris with the encouragement of her friend and using her consummate skill as designer carefully chose which colours and patterns should be placed together to make the most pleasing arrangements. These combinations were then made up locally into 150 Kantha blankets and shipped back to her home in London. Jeanette had decided that the important issue both from a personal perspective as well as a monetary one was that these items should be 'high-end' products. The textiles were to be treated as precious objects with an appreciation of the skill and workmanship. Kantha may embody the concept of thrift within India, but for a Western audience the fact that the items were made from recycled saris was to be celebrated because of their unique qualities and individuality. These textiles were not to be part of that sadly modern economic trend 'the race to the bottom' where companies and indeed countries compete to see who can produce the cheapest made items, with each savagely undercutting each other in an attempt to gain business. Jeanette's Kantha blankets were to be a desirable item, worthy of being purposely collected and treasured.



The first 150 Kantha blankets were featured in the gorgeous (and very exclusive) home style magazine *The World Of Interiors*. This was in January 2004 and they were an instant hit, with them all selling. Jeanette was encouraged by this to return to India in the April of the same year to really begin to organise this fledgling pursuit into a business. Obviously what were required were people with inside knowledge of the country - people who actually lived and worked in India. Jeanette found that she was given an amazing amount of help and support from a variety of Christians, despite the fact that she made it completely clear that she herself was not a Christian. Her friend Sarah Wedderburn, noted that 'almost everyone who has helped construct the delicate chain of seamstresses and supervisors, of packing and storage arrangements on which she [Jeanette] depends, has some sort of Christian background'.

What makes the Kantha that Jeanette Farrier sells so special is her attention to detail. Traditionally in India, Kantha is sewn with quite closely spaced stitches, often in brightly coloured blocks of pattern. This work often denotes specific symbols and produces a rippled effect upon the fabric. Jeanette had specific ideas about what she wanted for her Kantha so that it would appeal to a more Western taste. The choices of coloured thread were minimised, so that the effect was more in harmony with the fabric colour and pattern of the specific Kantha. The stitches themselves, were also pared down to a more minimalist approach, with there being fewer in number and the general direction being constructed in more straight and widely spaced lines. However, the overall feel and concept of the Kantha is still very apparent. The items are very soft to the touch and makes the perspective customers (and eventual owner!) want to caress and stroke the fabric. It also part of Jeanette's wish to make the eventual owner think about the maker of such an item. The Kantha items are labelled and sold as 'Fair Trade', which is an important selling point and does indeed make the customer think about the person who has made the item. For me, what really appeals is the little idiosyncratic elements of a design that make all the difference. The Kantha throw that I purchased (well, I would have to have one wouldn't I!) is a beautiful item, with a simple dark grey and cream swirling pattern of leaves and vines on one side and a pale green and soft red floral on the other. What really makes it for me is that it has a small oblong grey/blue patch on towards one corner of the dark grey side. The stitching on this area follows the shape of the patch around and into its centre rather than the following the straight lines of the rest of the quilt. It was not a piece of fabric that Jeanette had given the maker to include with the design, so it may well have been something that she had had to hand and thought was required on that area – maybe a hole had appeared or she thought it was simply too worn and required extra padding. We will never now but it is this sort of inclusion that really makes me consider and indeed appreciate the maker as well as the beauty of the object.

On the streets of Calcutta, the Kantha work that Jeanette originally saw was used to make anything from blankets, nappies, shawls and even mattresses to sleep upon. Jeanette, not only has her Kantha made up into beautiful throws, but has started to embark on producing coats (to be worn indoors or out) and slippers. The fabrics have also appeared in the film 'Pirates of the Caribbean' – something to look out for next time you see the film and in the BBC's recent production of The Virgin Queen. I first met Jeanette at Design Interiors NEC Birmingham in January 2006 and was completely transfixed by the beauty of her stand – one throw may be beautiful but a whole pile of them is gorgeous! No wonder that she won the 'Best New Product' at the Show. From talking to her I found out that not only are Kantha traditionally examples of thrift amongst the poor of India, I discovered that old cloth also has a magical purpose in that it helps to ward off the 'evil eye' and supposedly protects the wearer from harm. It reflects the desire of the needlewoman and the wearer for happiness and prosperity. This is a factor that is shared by makers (especially women) the world over. Dolly Parton once sang about 'A Coat of Many Colours', that was made up from a box of rags that someone gave her family and that her mother lovingly sewed into a winter coat for her as a child – "Sewing every stitch with love...and bless[ing] it with a kiss". It is not simply what something is made from that is important but what it means to the person who made it and to you as the owner. Jeanette Farrier's Kantha items are by no means inexpensive but reflect the real value of the items in ways more than simple monetary cost.

Something to remember the next time you see advertisements for clothes that cost you the prospective customer practically pennies....

