

## The Gift of Giving:

### Gift Exchange as the Foundation of Early Modern Cross-Cultural Consumption

Eighteenth-century Indian and European consumer societies were dependent on the maintenance of their global mercantile connections. Trade negotiations were inevitably accompanied by the exchange of gifts. This paper will focus on a small, though significant, example of artefacts, which were exchanged between early modern merchants and royals in the process of negotiating trade, and which thus sustained the consumption of exotic goods. The rituals, by which consumption was facilitated, are best considered through the *Tranquebar Palampore*, a large, figural trade textile produced in South India and displayed in Denmark in the 1740s.

By 1735, the Danes had maintained a trade factory known as Tranquebar (now Tarangambadi) on the Coromandel Coast by permission of the Indian rulers of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu for more than a century. This diplomatic agreement was maintained by both parties through the exchange of diplomatic gifts and rental payments in the form of regular tribute. By the early 1700s, the introduction of absolute monarchy and the resultant disintegration of the aristocratic elite in Denmark had necessitated the practice of reciprocal 'gifts' (money for honour) at court. This contrasted with, but did not eradicate or even come into contact with the Indian practice of gift giving (honour for honour/ *Dāna*), except in the case of the abovementioned diplomatic gifts and tribute.

This paper considers the question of how the gifts that enabled the core transaction of trade were perceived. The *Tranquebar Palampore* offers unique insight into these processes, because first, it was designed and offered as a diplomatic gift and second, it depicts the presentation of gifts to the South Indian ruler Ekoji II. The images on the textile challenge the universalizing emphasis on the importance of reciprocity for the giver and receiver in the gift transaction initially proposed by Marcel Mauss. Rather than stressing the 'debt' created by the gift, the palampore creates and cements links. Once it reached Denmark, it was displayed in a context that accentuated the cultural commensurability of the two courts and played down the commercial transactions that sustained their continued contact.

The seemingly non-mercantile exchange of aestheticized luxury artefacts created a space in which the consumption of luxury in both Eastern and Western courts could continue. This transaction of simultaneously consuming and gifting could be represented, because artisans recognized the commensurability of intricate, amusing artefacts. This paper will provide a glance into the consumer culture and the resultant circulation of images and practices in the world of diplomatic relations between Europe and India in the early eighteenth century.