

Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru



written and illustrated by
Lee FullARTon

Woodblocks carved by Ranu and Sajid Khan Bagru India 2019

sustaining and reinvigorating artisansh

Expose Author: Associate Professor Louise Gwenneth Phillips, Faculty of Education, Southern Cross University <https://louptales.education>



Artisan **making** is not readily visible on the streets of our towns. But if you go to Bagru in Rajasthan, India you can see wood block carvers and printers practicing a more than 400-year-old tradition of block printing on textiles by the Chhipa clan. The word 'Chhipa' is believed to have originated from the Gujarati word chhapa, which means **to print** and the Nepal Bhasa words: 'chhi' ("to dye") and 'pa' ("to leave something to bask in sun")¹. Wood block carvers perch on their haunches for a day or two, to craft a design by carefully chipping away on teak or Indian rosewood with varying sized chisels tapped by a hammer. *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru* tells the story of a woodblock carver, through prints from wood blocks carved in Bagru, crafted into a handmade artist picture book by artist Lee FullARTon. This book and accompanying exhibition offer a rich submersion and celebration of artisanship in **woodblock carving**, in **printmaking**, in **storytelling** and in **book-as-art-making**.

FullARTon first came to experience the chhipa tradition in Bagru through a Drawn to India Residency in 2011. There she observed woodcarvers and met the Khan Family. Inspired by the Bagru community, rich in woodcarving artisanship ancestry and tradition, and the grief of the woodblock carving craft becoming an endangered practice, the idea of creating a children's picture book story of the woodblock artisans sparked in FullARTon's creative mind. Over the next ten years, FullARTon percolated the story and illustrations and fostered collaboration with textile designer Kamlesh Vyas and the Khan family of wood block carvers. The story is informed by FullARTon's sensorially attuned observations from her 2011 trip to Bagru, along with another two visits in 2014 and 2019 to work closely with Kamlesh Vyas and Salim, Ranu and Shahid Khan in the crafting of the wood blocks. The collective crafting of *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru*, forged mutually appreciative friendships between FullARTon, Kamlesh Vyas and the Khan family woven together through intercultural, craft and resource exchanges.

The story and imagery of *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru* is an invitation into the sensorially bountiful and wondrous chhipa landscape of Mr Chippa's Bagru village. Readers are **visually**

tickled by wood curls, crooked shelves and a three-legged table, and **aromatically aroused** by spicy chai, perfume, rose petals, marigolds, mangoes and coconuts as we accompany Mr Chippa on his quest to craft a special wood block design that is 'round like the moon'. After much wandering and wondering, Mr Chippa crafts a circular wood block carving composed of layers of enticing features of his village to illustrate "the story of their unique village for all to see". The circular design draws inspiration from the traditional Hindu women's folk art of rangoli, of creating colourful ephemeral circular patterns on the floor with powder, rice, and/or flowers as welcomes to deities.² FullARTon observed profound beauty in the meditative repetitive bending in the making of rangolis through the gentle placing of colour in doorways by mothers and daughters in her travels in India.

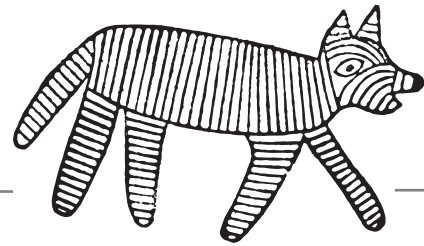
Through the story of *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru*, FullARTon provides us with a beautiful provocation: **What are the resonant motifs of your neighbourhood** that tell the story of your neighbourhood? Through the COVID-19 lockdowns and travel restrictions many of us have spent more time getting to know our local neighbourhoods. When we walk with presence and wonder, the relational and corporeal qualities of walking are foregrounded, nurturing embodied connection to matter and space. By walking with curiosity as FullARTon and Mr Chippa do; we can encounter everything as if for the first time – "sensing its pulse, marvelling at its beauty, and wondering how such a world is possible"³. In your neighbourhood wanderings, what has prompted you to pause and ponder?

FullARTon's story of *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru* offers a rich catalyst for teaching and learning, inviting opportunities for **intercultural understanding, symbolism**, and reflections on personal **connections to place** and **artisanship**. For two half days, students and teachers of Blair State School were treated to a residency with FullARTon, in which she told her story of crafting *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru* inspired by her travels to India, then they explored and experimented with wood block print-making and FullARTon's practice of print collage. FullARTon

¹ See Lancy, J., & Lancy, L.K. (n.d). Maker profile: Bagru textiles, *The Kindcraft Magazine*. <https://thekindcraft.com/bagru/>

² See https://swastikrangoli.com/rangoli_history.html

³ Ingold, T. (2011). *Being alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Abingdon, OX: Routledge. (p. 64)



then asked "If Mr Chippa took a walk through our village of Ipswich what would inspire him?" inviting children to notice the small urban wonders of Ipswich to collectively compose a wall size collage of the 'village' of Ipswich, that adorns walls of the exhibition.

The *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru* exhibition is an invitation of submersion in print culture: re-appreciation of traditional print-making both for imagery and the written word at a time when digital technologies have provoked debates on the death of print. Both the book and exhibition are an explicit act of "post-digital print culture ... to be pragmatic, open and socially responsible"⁴ to **take notice of how things are made**, and the resources, labour and time required. Every component has been crafted by hand: the story, the illustrations, the wood blocks, the printed image and text, the paper, and the stitching of the book. The labour of which is more visible and felt as you look to –

each **chosen word**,

each **drawn design**,

each **chiselled chip**,

the form of each **printed** letter

of each word of each sentence,

the **meshed fibres** of each page,

the precisions of **even tone** for each print, and

each **knot and bind** of the coptic binding stitches.

Contrary to the invisibilisation of the labours of image and story production with digital technologies in cyberspace⁵.

FullARTon through her global collaboration crafted a book-as-object-of-art with many hands. As a book-artist, FullARTon has painstakingly⁶ curated and crafted the illustrations and text of *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru* on pages, along with its design, production, binding and covering over many years in her Ipswich

studio. Further, for the exhibition, FullARTon sets the scene with painted landscapes from her travel journal accompanied by hand stitched and vibrantly patterned and painted dolls inspired by her time spent with the Rajasthani Kathputli (wooden dolls/puppets) artisans. These dolls redolently symbolise the vibrancy of Bagru chhipa village life and like other small curious fictitious beings (e.g., fairies, pixies and elves), they invite us to **imagine and wonder**... in this case what Mr Chippa might be thinking and knowing, not just with his mind, but also much more so with his hands.

The artisanship of making is experiencing a rich revival, sustaining long held ways of constructing aesthetic, meaning, and culture from whatever is at hand.⁷ Through FullARTon's travels she has been gifted stories, culture, art practices and friendships from India that have inspired and significantly influenced her art practice. FullARTon internalises these experiences and reconstructs them in a contemporary way. Her residency at Sanskriti Kendra, New Delhi, India with artisans and academics fostered the idea that for tradition to be sustained it must be reinvented and reinvigorated.

FullARTon embodies the long-standing practice of the artisan in construction of aesthetic, meaning and culture from what is at hand leading a significant contribution to sustaining chhipa craft in new forms through transcultural book art. Her intercultural exchange in artisanship of making enlivens our understanding of what it means to be human, not just cognitively, but rather sensorially, emotively and embodyly. Her tacit knowledge with cultural artefacts raises consciousness, and creates wider conversations with broader audiences inviting all ages with diverse abilities, and cultures to wonder.

What does Mr Chippa invite you to do?

⁴Robertson, F., (2018). Post-print culture. In R. Melzer-Montada (Ed.) *Perspectives on contemporary print-making: Critical writing since 1986*, Manchester University Press. p. 40.

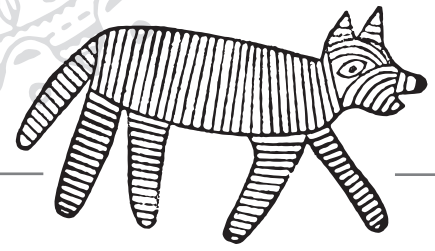
⁵ See Markley, R., (Ed.) (1996). *Virtual Realities and Their Discontents*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁶ Ask Craig who lived and breathed the creation of *Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru* with Lee across the last ten years.

⁷ Fitzpatrick, E., & Reilly, R.C. (2019). Editorial for special issue: Making as method: Reimagining traditional and indigenous notions of "craft" in research practice. *Art/Research/International: A transdisciplinary journal*, (4)1, i-xvi.

Mr Chippa The Woodblock Carver of Bagru

by Lee FullARTon



Lee FullARTon

Lee FullARTon is a practicing and Teaching Artist from Queensland Australia. After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts from Queensland College of Art in 1986, she undertook postgraduate studies that combined aspects of her arts practice with art therapy and art education for children. This led to a career that, combined with her practice, is deeply connected to a commitment to making art with and for children.

Since 1991 Lee has undertaken regular and extensive travels across Asia, the influences and connections are significant in her work. In 2011 Lee travelled with Catherine Parker and six Australian Artists to India, and it was on this journey she met Kamlesh Vyas, the Khan Family and was introduced to the woodblock carvers of Bagru. In 2014 Lee was

awarded the Arts Queensland Individual Artist Grant and undertook an extended Artist in Residence at Sanskriti Kendra New Delhi India.

Her culminating works of this residency was exhibited in solo shows "Sampūrṇatā: Completeness Lee FullARTon at Sanskriti Kendra" at Ipswich Art Gallery (2015) and Logan Art Gallery (2018).

Lee has developed and delivered many arts programs and workshops for both children and adults in schools, galleries and museums, practiced art with children, undertaken and managed complex community arts projects, and contributed to writing and research in the Arts in Australia and India.

Lee is the recipient of several awards recognising her contributions to art, education and culture in Queensland.

Acknowledgements

The exhibition of Mr Chippa the Woodblock Carver of Bagru

is a feature of Story Arts Festival Ipswich 2021 - 2022

Ipswich Community Gallery Ipswich Queensland.

Expose Author: Associate Professor Louise Gwenneth, Phillips University of Southern Cross Queensland

Jenny Stubbs, SAFI Festival Director

Ipswich City Council, Arts Queensland RADF

Ipswich District Teacher Librarian Network

Sara Butcher, Print Mentor

Sue Hammond, Photographer

Blair State School Artist in Residence Year 4, Megan Gaynor and Lozz Kennedy

My sincerest gratitude and special acknowledgement to:

Mr Ranu Khan and Mr Shahid Khan for crafting the woodblocks with dedication and pride.

Mr Salim Khan, Master Woodblock Craftsman for his generosity and wise woodblock guidance.

Mr Kamlesh Vyas, Dearest friend, textile designer and guide who made everything and anything possible.

Dearest Friends, fellow artists, observers, listeners, mentors, assistants, travellers, motivators, guides, editors, dancers, volunteers, those with kind words and those that made hot cups of chai.

Craig, Lyndon and Mia, my family and friends both in India and Australia, all who have encouraged and supported me to create, share and celebrate the story of the Woodblock Carvers of Bagru.

Thank you

