

***Miniature Costumes and Quilts:  
Geeta Khandelwal's Labor of Love***

International Quilt Museum, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

Curated by Marin Hanson

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Walking into the exhibition *Miniature Costumes and Quilts: Geeta Khandelwal's Labor of Love* at the International Quilt Museum (IQM) on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's East Campus was like stepping into a tiny, exquisitely embellished world where the rich tapestry of Indian history and culture unfolded in miniature form. Geeta Khandelwal, a globally recognized quiltermaker from Mumbai, crafted a mesmerizing collection of over fifty miniature costumes that paid homage to the opulent attire worn by the ancient maharajas (kings) of northern India between the 1750s and the 1950s. The International Quilt Museum, located at the heart of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's East Campus, is renowned for housing the largest publicly held quilt collection in the world. As diversity and

inclusion are central to the university's and the IQM's mission, all visitors are encouraged to experience works that represent quilts and quilt-making traditions from around the world and throughout history. With objects from more than sixty-five countries and dating from the 1600s to today, the IQM served as a fitting stage for an exhibition that artfully celebrated the multifaceted richness of Indian culture.

The exhibition showcased Khandelwal's meticulous re-creation of traditional royal garments, reduced to approximately six inches tall, or one-eighth of their original size. While traveling through many of India's diverse regions, she was able to collect local textiles, which she used in the construction of her miniature garments created over the course of three years. The level of detail in

each miniature robe was impressive, capturing the grandeur and intricacy of the original garments worn by the maharajas. From vibrant silks to elaborate embroidery, Khandelwal's dedication to authenticity was evident in every stitch. Each miniature costume was a testament to her deep understanding of the historical and cultural attributes that shaped India over the centuries. Beyond the royal realm, the exhibition offered a glimpse into various facets of Indian life.

A standout feature of the exhibition involved the presentation of Khandelwal's miniature garments alongside doll quilts from her private collection. Each miniature quilt was paired with an Indian garment or quilt sourced from the International Quilt Museum's collection, illustrating the rich spectrum of the country's cultural heritage. The incorporation of full-sized pieces from the IQM permanent collection alongside their miniature counterparts introduced textiles originating from marginalized Indian communities, emphasizing the diversity within India's cultural tapestry. Each pairing created a harmonious dialogue between the miniature pieces and full-size works, making the interconnectedness of India's textile traditions evident throughout the entire show.

Khandelwal's "labor of love" extended beyond the aesthetic appeal of her creations. It was a celebration of Indian craftsmanship and a journey through time that encapsulated the essence of a bygone era. The exhibition showcased her exceptional sewing skills while also inviting visitors to explore both the complex details of Indian history and the evolution of its textile artistry. Each miniature costume thus became a window into a different facet of Indian society and offered insights into the historical and cultural features that have shaped the nation over the centuries. This exhibition was not only one of artistic mastery but also a powerful educational platform that brought the rich mastery of Indian workmanship to the heart of Midwest America in a manner that was both accessible and visually captivating.

The thoughtful curation and arrangement of the exhibit contributed to its overall success. The open exhibition space complemented the sumptuous beauty of Khandelwal's creations by providing a neutral setting that allowed the vibrant colors and detailed patterns of the miniature costumes and quilts to shine. The space served as a carefully considered canvas that not only mitigated visual overstimulation but also ensured ease of access for all visitors,

accommodating diverse needs. First and foremost, the open layout of the exhibition space provided visitors with ample room to move freely and explore at their own pace. This deliberate design choice prevented the feeling of overcrowding, minimized the risk of visual overload, and allowed visitors to focus their attention on each minute detail of the miniature costumes and quilts without feeling overwhelmed by a chaotic environment.

Additionally, wide pathways and clear sightlines ensured unobstructed movement throughout the exhibit, accommodating individuals using mobility aids such as wheelchairs or walkers. Moreover, the absence of large physical barriers within the space promoted inclusivity and allowed all visitors to engage with the objects equitably, regardless of their physical abilities. The open exhibition space enabled flexible viewing perspectives, catering to the diverse preferences and needs of visitors. Those who preferred to take in the entire exhibit at once could do so from a central vantage point, while others could choose to approach individual displays more closely to examine the embroidery and quilting in detail. This versatility in viewing options empowered visitors to tailor their experiences to their own interests and comfort

levels, contributing to more enriching and personalized visits.

Consistent lighting levels across the exhibition space eliminated any unevenness or dark spots and guaranteed that every visitor could clearly see the fine details of each piece from any vantage point. The lighting worked to illuminate the overall elegant features of the miniatures, quilts, and full-size mounted garments, allowing visitors to appreciate the craftsmanship up close. Moreover, specialized spotlighting was employed to accentuate specific areas of interest within the exhibit, such as ornate appliqué and meticulously constructed seams. By selectively illuminating these details, the lighting design allowed visitors to marvel at the talent inherent in Khandelwal's own creations and the works from IQM's permanent collection.

The informative text, presented both on the wall and in panels, provided context and made the exhibition approachable to textile enthusiasts as well as experts on Indian culture. Specifically, the object labels themselves stood out as beacons of guidance amid the displays of ornate miniature garments and quilts. Strategically colored in bright yellow, they served as vital signposts, effortlessly drawing the visitor's attention without overshadowing the exquisite artistry of

the showcased pieces. These labels emerged as subtle yet effective tools for conveying essential information regarding each object. Their vibrant hue contrasted with the surrounding pieces, ensuring they remained noticeable without creating visual clutter. They were carefully positioned alongside the garments and quilts, providing helpful insights into the historical significance, regional influences, and key details of each work of art. By seamlessly integrating with the displays, the labels became continuous extensions of the storytelling process, enriching the visitor's journey through the diverse landscapes of Indian culture and history.

*Miniature Costumes and Quilts: Geeta Khandelwal's Labor of Love* was a testament to the power of art transcending time and space. By juxtaposing the delicate miniatures against the full-sized quilts, the exhibition provided a visually striking contrast that drew the viewer's attention and invited them to explore the nuances of both art forms. Showcasing both Indian miniature costumes and quilts side by side underlined the universality of textile traditions and underscored the interconnectedness of global artistic expression. As the visitor explored the space, it became apparent that all were welcome at the International

Quilt Museum, where diversity and inclusion enrich the community of learning, discovery, and outreach. Geeta Khandelwal's dedication to her craft, coupled with the show's meticulous attention to detail, resulted in an enchanting exhibition that invited all who visited to embark on a captivating journey through India's rich cultural and historical tapestry. It is this "labor of love" that resonates with the essence of the textile world, leaving a lasting impression on all who had the privilege to experience it.