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EXHIBITION REVIEW: THE SIX YARDS SISTERHOOD:
DECONSTRUCTING THE SARI IN AOTEAROA

Beautiful Science Gallery,
Tūhura Otago Museum, Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand
Open to the public: 1 November 2024 – 23 February 2025

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INTRODUCTION

The Six Yards Sisterhood: deconstructing the Sari in Aotearoa was an exhibition that showed a reinterpretation of the traditional Indian sari through the lens of its curator, Rekha Shailaj.

Saris are unstitched rectangular lengths of fabric (on average approximately six yards (5.5 metres) long), that are worn wrapped around the body, with the potential to be draped and pleated in a great variety of ways. The sari ensemble of petticoat, blouse (used by Shailaj as a consistent term for the garment worn on the models' upper body) and sari cloth is strongly identified with Indian women – in South Asia and in diaspora communities around the world.

The exhibition showcased “a collection of saris embodying India’s vibrant heritage and the influences of New Zealand-Aotearoa”. (Shailaj, 2025) The initial and dominant visual impact in the gallery was of the colourful and diverse beauty of the woven and embellished saris. In addition, Shailaj designed the blouse component of each ensemble in line with her interest in positioning saris in a fashion discourse, and in issues of sustainability, thus blending traditional Indian aesthetics with modern design.

Visitors were told in the gallery introduction that Shailaj is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Design at Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin and a PhD candidate at the College of Creative Arts, Massey University, whose doctoral studies on deconstructing the sari informed the exhibition.

Happily, gallery scheduling allowed for the exhibition opening to coincide with 2024's Diwali celebrations.

ENTERING THE GALLERY

The gallery's physical entrance initially conceals its display area behind a partial wall. This visual barrier provided an ideal space to display the exhibition poster and allowed visitors a sensory pause to transition from the first-floor atrium of the Museum.

ENTERING THE GALLERY, ONE WAS IMMERSSED IN A BURST OF COLOUR, GLITTER, AND MUSIC.

Near the back of the gallery, a single red and gold, handloom-woven, ikat-patterned sari with parrot and elephant design motifs was suspended from near the ceiling, showing its full length. This allowed identification of the three structural elements common to all saris – the longitudinal (side) borders, the central body or field, and the more intensely decorated pallu - the lower border and loose end. This is the part that is often draped over a shoulder and left to hang. Mounted near groups of mannequins displaying styled saris, this piece also emphasised the role of each human wearer in transforming sari cloth into clothing.

Four large black bases each supported three mannequins that were dressed with styled saris and blouses, accessorised with footwear and jewellery. Each figure had an extended text label mounted beside it. The bases were a practical requirement to facilitate the use of the gallery space for evening events if necessary. They determined the exhibition's display structure, and complicated but did not obscure viewers' access to the ensembles.

The long side walls of the gallery were used to project rotating sets of floor-to-ceiling images showing front, back and detail shots of saris worn (in the main) by Shailaj's friends and family – “the sisterhood”. Spot-the-Dunedin-location-in-the-background was a fun exercise.

The far end wall was used to show a variety of static, split screen and film footage imagery that included Shailaj working in her studio, saris worn in motion, and the documented results of Shailaj inviting Otago Polytechnic fashion design alumni, Sidney North, to drape and don the garments in any way she imagined.

The one lidded case held small, wooden manikin figures with experimental blouse toiles, embroidery samples and a working notebook. It was positioned below fourteen large poster-like printed images showing models wearing styled saris, with both model and stylist attributed, and an Instagram link.

A touch screen offered eight ‘chapters’ of transcribed audio guide content from Shailaj addressing various aspects of her project. These could have been helpfully edited, rather than merely transcribed, when the audio option didn't eventuate. Topics included ‘Sari as a lived experience’, ‘Composing the design of a sari’, ‘Selecting which saris to display’, ‘The hybrid



Figure 1. Beautiful Science Gallery entrance.
Photograph: Shanaya Cunningham.



Figure 2. Full length display of hand-woven, ikat patterned sari. Photograph: Shanaya Cunningham.



Figure 3. Gallery view looking back towards the entrance, showing one set of side wall projections.
Photograph by Shanaya Cunningham.



Figure 4. Gallery view showing film footage of Rekha Sailaj working in her studio on the far wall.
Photograph: Shanaya Cunningham.



Figure 5. The case of toiles, notebook and embroidery samples.
Photograph: Shanaya Cunningham.

design of blouses', and 'Zero-waste design'. Zero-waste is "a design technique that aims to eliminate textile waste at the design stage." (Mindful Fashion NZ).

There was a public comments box near the exit, and A5 stapled exhibition guide booklets placed in the gallery were available for visitors to use and keep. These included a section documenting the saris on display with their gallery label text, another with images of the projected saris, and an essay by Shailaj.

STARTING WITH THE PAST

Shailaj has been collecting precious, intricate preloved saris, almost all hand-woven, for years. Elsewhere she has noted that she collects them "in order to study in detail traditional clothing from India... I study motifs, scale, colour, material, style and techniques." (Shailaj, 2021, p.58) Thirteen saris from her collection were physically on display in this exhibition (12 on mannequins); 33 in total, when the projected saris are added to the tally.

Ways of wearing saris have varied in any time period. They have changed in the past, (see Kawlra, 2014 for a discussion of the impact of the call for independence) and are still changing as each population adjusts this iconic garment to their own requirements. In the Indian subcontinent there are regional differences in the form, weave, structure, decoration and usage of saris. Added to this is the potential for each wearer to personalise the presentation of their own sari. "You re-create it for yourself, for this day and age, for this moment in time, and for who you are at this moment in time." (Sharma, 2019)

The use of historic saris introduced gallery visitors to some of the huge variability concealed by our use of a single garment name. Many publications, such as Chishti's (2010) irresistible *Saris – tradition and beyond*, are structured around geographical regions and documenting the special features of the saris in each area. This wasn't an option in *The Six Yards Sisterhood* where so many of the pre-loved textiles lacked full provenance. Instead, Shailaj chose her groupings on essentially aesthetic grounds; while contributing what information she knew or could surmise about the history of their making, decoration or wearing styles.

Shailaj's choice of draping options, however, was not restricted to the historic or traditional. One sari, worn short, played with ideas of the qualities of a kilt. Another, with Badla wire embroidery, covered the mannequin's head in a reference to parts of northern India where women practice facial veiling.

Each ensemble physically in the gallery had an extended label printed on a colour-toned background, which offered historical information about the particular style of the sari, its geographical connections, details of its weave, embroidery technique, or other points of interest.

THE BLOUSES

Each sari was shown with a blouse that Shailaj designed and constructed herself specifically to complement the sari with which it was shown. In some instances, she was able to purchase fabric to make the blouse in India, with the sari in hand to match; others used recycled fabric.

The blouses were where Shailaj incorporated her personal commentaries on light or weighty issues that ranged from fashions-past to textile re-use to colonial history. Some picked up on an element of the decorative technique in the sari; some referenced its colour palette; one played with the idea of the puffer jacket; another, shown with a Paithani sari draped to hint at a bifurcated style, referenced elements of sportswear through the application of striped trims.

Shailaj experimented with rectangular and circular shapes when designing the blouses, making circular and rectangular cuts into those shapes. Circles are not associated with sari cloth so, although not visible as such, they also represented for her the world where saris are largely absent. The gallery labels provided additional descriptive details about that process.

As a group, the blouses constituted a notably contemporary and innovative element, in their composition, shape or stimulus, from the use of untraditional toggle fittings, to loose and unfamiliar silhouettes, or the inclusion of embroidered (broken) roses or lotus flowers, paying tribute to the natural flora of England and of India.

Some of them, I suspect, might pose a challenge to wear modestly when in motion (if that was a concern) and the gallery booklets had at least one example where the sari was photographed out-of-doors with a different blouse. The exhibition was not, however, a forum for reducing imaginable potential to the strictly practical, although the need to make the blouses visible must have had an impact on the sari draping options.



Figure 6. The Zardozi-ite bodice to the left is embellished with silver metallic ribbon, and the Kantha-ite bodice on the right, features deconstructed puffer squares. The Gotta-ite bodice in the centre is made from upcycled silk Tanchoi-weave fabric. Photograph: Shanaya Cunningham.

ISSUES OF SUSTAINABILITY

Shailaj has a long history of interest in zero-waste textile design or near-zero wastage (for example, Shailaj 2017; Shailaj, 2019). While it was an underlying aspect of all the ensembles on display, it was not particularly stressed in the gallery, other than in Chapter Seven of the touchscreen. As Shailaj pointed out there, saris are quintessential zero-waste garments, with the whole of the woven cloth, uncut, being used when it is worn. She also mentioned her mother's lifelong habits of textile conservation, and stated that she had worked with zero waste in her designs.

INTO THE FUTURE

Western fashion narratives have long tended to view traditional dress from other areas of the world as unchanging, but Shailaj's current work is one, among others, that looks at integrating the two; part of undermining this dated perspective. Shailaj described her own experience of wearing saris daily when she lived in India, in a variety of contexts, but then feeling "too different" wearing them in public in New Zealand. That became an essentially private experience for her here and led to an interest in ways of integrating saris into Western fashion traditions, whilst retaining their capacity to act as a symbol of cultural identity. In this, she is part of an international cohort looking at ideas associated with reinventing the sari.

The digital content of the exhibition allowed her to touch lightly on some aspects of contemporary sari changes. An image of a young Dunedin woman wearing a sari on a skateboard acknowledged the development that sees saris in contexts that empower women. A touch screen essay acknowledged that some men, too, are now wearing saris.

It is interesting to compare *The Six Yards Sisterhood* to some other recent exhibitions that also aimed to expand our view of the sari. While, for instance, the Design Museum's 2023 *The offbeat sari* stressed radical contemporary examples, including a sari with ruffles made from heat pleated plastic polymers, a sari made from air pollution, and one made from steel (The Design Museum, 2025), in contrast, Shailaj's exhibition of styled preloved saris teemed with her own blouse designs, offers a more personal exploration. Having stated that the primary objective of the exhibition was "to reinvigorate the contemporary significance of this traditional attire" (Shailaj, 2025), in *The Six Yards Sisterhood* she took creative steps towards that ambitious goal.

Acknowledgments

Rekha Shailaj gave two well-attended public talks and took two embroidery workshops during the time the exhibition was on display. Craig Scott, Head of Creative Services Exhibition, Tūhura Otago Museum worked with Rekha Shailaj on the gallery and graphic design for the exhibition. Otago Polytechnic lent a number of the mannequins used in the exhibition.

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