

ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series

ART2018-0075

Athens, 1 August 2018

**Contemporary Embroidery of India:
Tradition, Revival, and Globalization**

Punam Madhok

Athens Institute for Education and Research

8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10683 Athens, Greece

ATINER's conference paper proceedings series are circulated to promote dialogue among academic scholars. All papers of this series have been blind reviewed and accepted for presentation at one of ATINER's annual conferences according to its acceptance policies (<http://www.atiner.gr/acceptance>).

© All rights reserved by authors.

ATINER's Conference Paper Proceedings Series

ART2018-0075

Athens, 1 August 2018

ISSN: 2529-167X

Punam Madhok, Associate Professor of Art History, East Carolina University,
USA

**Contemporary Embroidery of India:
Tradition, Revival, and Globalization**

ABSTRACT

Contemporary embroidery of India has largely transformed from a leisure time activity to a source of income generation for destitute women. On the one hand, this has led to a loss of its intrinsic character but on the other hand, it has empowered a multitude of women actively engaged in it. Several organizations in India are attempting to intertwine tradition, revival, and globalization of embroideries such as Chikankari, Rabari, Phulkari, and Kantha. Chikankari is a dainty floral embroidery done on fine cloth. Its lace-like texture resembles European embroideries of the Dresden and Ayrshire styles. Rabari clothing is embroidered with colorful patterns and mirror pieces. It is influenced by needlework from Sindh in Pakistan. Phulkari refers to designs stitched with silk thread on the reverse side of a sturdy fabric. It may have originated from Gulkari embroidery of Iran. Kantha was invented by layering old garments and tacking them with running stitches. A branch of this patchwork embroidery developed into elaborate quilts that have evoked comparison with Sashiko quilts and Boro textiles of Japan as well as African-American quilts and Asian Hmong story-cloths. My paper discusses not only how current day pressures are modifying these indigenous Stitch-Arts of India but also strategies that must be adopted to help them thrive again and attain world renown. I have selected notable examples of India's myriad embroideries.

Keywords: embroideries, empowerment of women, NGOs, quilts and garments, handicrafts.

Introduction

Embroidered cloth was typically a leisure time activity in India. With a repertoire of motifs, decorative and meaningful, embroiderers adorned the cloth and recorded their observations, aspirations, and experiences. Today, efforts are being made to revive the narrative potential of embroidery and to adapt it to prevailing conditions. Marginalized women who are now the main practitioners of needlework depend on it not only to earn a living but also to overcome barriers. They are acquiring skills to avoid being exploited and to instigate change. This applies in varying degrees to the embroideries known as Chikankari, Rabari, Phulkari, and Kantha. Shaped by environmental factors, regional customs, and individual circumstances, each of these embroideries has developed a distinct style and method. Although different, they have commonalities.

Chikankari

Flowery motifs, alluding to fecundity, joy, and abundance, stitched with white thread on fine, white Muslin cloth, is referred to as Chikankari.¹ It is produced today mainly in Lucknow and its environs.² How Chikankari originated is not clear.³ Some historians date it to the Maurya period.⁴ Others believe it was

¹The primary Muslin-weaving centers in India were East Bengal (now Bangladesh), as well as Lucknow and Banaras in current-day Uttar Pradesh. Also known as ‘mal-mal,’ Muslin was one of the first materials of India to be acclaimed in the West. The finest quality of Muslin was referred to by Westerners as ‘woven air,’ ‘crystal spring,’ and ‘morning dew.’ Although well-known as white-on-white embroidery, many beautiful pieces of Chikan embroidery in Lucknow used ‘muga,’ yellow-golden silk threads to accentuate the pattern and to create a subtle variation in tone. Chikan embroidery is called Chikankari in India. ‘Kari’ means ‘work’ in Hindi. It is one of the most subtle and sensitive of India’s innumerable embroidery traditions. The pieces from Lucknow that have survived date to the early nineteenth-century CE. See Gillow, J. (2010), *Textiles of the Islamic World* (p. 237), London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.; Manfredi, P. (2007), “In Search of Perfection: Chikankari of Lucknow,” in L. Tyabji (Ed.), *Threads & Voices, Behind the Indian Textile Tradition* (pp. 18-29: 23), Mumbai: Marg Publications; Manfredi, P. (2004), “Chikankari of Lucknow,” in J. Dhamija (Ed.), *Asian Embroidery* (pp. 263-276: 263), Delhi: Abhinav publications and Crafts Council of India; Kumar, R. (1999), *Costumes and Textiles of Royal India* (pp. 318-19), London: Christie’s Books; Paine, S. (1989), *Chikan Embroidery: The Floral Whitework of India* (pp. 9, 16, 18), Aylesbury, Bucks, UK: Shire Publications Ltd.

²Lucknow is the capital of the state of Oudh (now Uttar Pradesh; Oudh is also spelled as ‘Awadh’). See Crill, R. (1999), *Indian Embroidery* (p. 11), London: Victoria and Albert Publications.

³The Greek diplomat, Megasthenes (c. 350-c. 290 BCE) referred to Chikankari in his writings as ‘White flowered muslin worn by courtiers in the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, which was subtle and rich in texture though colorless.’ The Romans referred to Chikan textiles in the sixth century CE as ‘woven winds,’ because of their diaphanous quality. King Harsha, who ruled in the seventh century CE, is known to have had ‘a great fondness of white embroidered muslin garments...’ that may be Chikankari. Some scholars see remnants of Chikan clothing in the Ajanta cave paintings (around fifth to seventh century CE). It is also believed that Chikan embroidery stemmed from Jamdani weaving that was practiced in Dhaka (today the capital of Bangladesh). Chikankari is a simpler, less expensive version of Jamdani woven decorations that tend to be more stylized. The repairers of Jamdani pieces may have invented Chikan embroidery. After 1850 CE,

introduced to the Mughal court by Nur Jahan, Jahangir's Iranian queen.⁵ Mughal workshops were set up where male embroiderers followed instructions from royal ladies conveyed to them by eunuchs.⁶ After this dynasty crumbled, the Chikankars relocated from Delhi to other towns where they thrived for a while.⁷ It was primarily rulers of Iranian origin in Oudh that kept Chikankari from dying out.⁸ When courts at Oudh declined, the Chikankars had to take up other occupations since there was no demand for their expertise.⁹ Left in the hands of inexperienced workers, the quality of Chikankari plummeted. It is now practiced mainly by sidelined Hindu and Muslim women who embroider articles for a broad populace.¹⁰ Many of them live in villages near Lucknow. Due to insufficient coaching and pay, they lack motivation. Organizations such as SEWA are trying to remedy the situation and elevate this needle-art to its former level of excellence.¹¹

The name of this embroidery may have stemmed from the Iranian word, 'Chikin,' meaning 'a cloth embroidered with flower patterns in gold thread.'¹²

Jamdani weaving was also produced near Lucknow. See Walia, A. (2010), "Moonlight on White: Imperial Embroidery," in K. Vatsyayan (Ed.), *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga, Crossing Boundaries through Needle and Thread* (pp. 4-7: 5), New Delhi: Wisdom Tree [hereafter referred to as *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga*]; Chakravarty, R. (2010), "The Story of Chikan," in *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga* (pp. 28-36: 29-31); Gillow (2010, p. 240); Manfredi (2007, pp. 20, 23-24); Manfredi (2004, pp. 263-64); Mittal, J. (2004), 'Indian Embroidery through the Ages: Some Masterpieces,' in J. Dhamija (Ed.), *Asian Embroidery* (pp. 39-40); Crill (1999, p. 7); Paine (1989, pp. 5, 19, 26); Morrell, A. (1994), *Indian Embroidery* (pp. 68-74: 68), London: B. T. Batsford Ltd.

⁴The Maurya dynasty was in power from the fourth to third century BCE.

⁵Jahangir (1569-1627) ruled the Mughal Empire from 1607-27; his title means 'the World-Seizer.' Nur Jahan (1577-1645), meaning 'Light of the World,' was Jahangir's twentieth and last legal wife. Iran was formerly known as Persia. See Sethi, R. (2010), "Embroidery Matters," in *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga* (pp. xv-xx: xv-xvi); Chakravarty (2010, p. 30); Brijbhushan (1990, p. 42).

⁶See Walia (2010, p. 6).

⁷Chikankars migrated to Oudh/Awadh (now Uttar Pradesh), Madras (now Chennai), and Bhopal in India as well as to Dacca (now Dhaka in Bangladesh), Quetta and Peshawar (these two cities are now in Pakistan). See Chakravarty (2010, pp. 29-30).

⁸The Chikankars that moved to the northern state of Oudh or Uttar Pradesh settled in the refined courts of Burhan ul Mulk's successors. Mulk was a Persian/Iranian nobleman. Bahadur Shah, the last Emperor to rule the Mughal dynasty, appointed Mulk as Governor of Oudh. In Oudh, Chikankari began to flourish again from the late 18th century CE onward. Chikankari was always a market-based craft produced for refined, wealthy clients. These fine Chikan Muslins became exportable items for the British after they took control of Oudh. See Chakravarty (2010, p. 30); Manfredi (2007, p. 24); Manfredi (2004, p. 270).

⁹See Chakravarty (2010, p. 33); Manfredi (2007, p. 27).

¹⁰See Chakravarty (2010, p. 34); See Manfredi (2007, pp. 27-28).

¹¹SEWA (meaning "service"), stands for Self Employed Woman's Association. It was established in 1984. With over two million participating women, SEWA is the largest organization of informal workers in the world and the largest non-profit organization in India. It promotes the rights of low-income, independently-employed female workers. See Chakravarty (2010, p. 35); Manfredi (2007, p. 28); Manfredi (2004, pp. 273-275).

¹²Unlike Chikan embroidery of India, where threads are teased apart, and motifs are curvilinear, Chikin embroidery of Persia/Iran is based on drawn threads and geometric motifs. Hence, some scholars do not see a connection between them. The word, chikan, could also have come from the Bengali word, *chikon*, meaning "very fine thing." Calcutta (now Kolkata, capital of West

It has also been linked to the Turkish word ‘chikh,’ meaning trelliswork. Mughal women would embroider behind netted partitions called ‘chiks’ that provided shade and privacy. Many Chikan motifs stem from designs of Mughal inspiration. They are stamped on the Muslin cloth with wooden blocks.¹³

The most challenging stitch used is jaali or meshwork; here the warp and weft threads are gently separated.¹⁴ Chikankari has been likened to eighteenth-century European whitework of the Dresden and Ayrshire styles.¹⁵ While handstitched white-work embroidery has become nearly obsolete in Europe today, Chikankari is still a hand-embroidered art in India. Another of Chikankari’s distinct features is shadow work, created with herringbone stitch on the fabric’s reverse side.¹⁶

Bengal) and Dacca (now Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh), both Bengali-speaking cities, were the main exporters of chikon fabrics in the nineteenth century. When this export market declined in the late nineteenth century, the production center shifted to Lucknow. It continues to thrive there till today and caters to markets especially in India and the Middle East. See Walia (2010, p. 5); Chakravarty (2010, pp. 30-31); Manfredi (2007, p. 23); Bean, S. S. (2006), “Bengali Goods for America in the Nineteenth Century,” in R. Crill (Ed.), *Textiles from India, The Global Trade* (pp. 217-232: 227-28), New York: Seagull Books; Manfredi (2004, p. 264).

¹³Embroidering the Chikan garment is left primarily to women. Men are mainly in charge of processes such as designing and carving the wood block for printing as well as styling and stitching the garment. After the embroidered cloth is tailored, it is carefully washed. See Chakravarty (2010, p. 35); Morrell (1994, p. 69); Brijbhushan (1990, p. 42).

¹⁴Multiple techniques are used for producing textural contrasts in monochrome Chikankari. Its stitches can be categorized as flat, embossed, and trellis-making. Densely embroidered motifs are balanced by dainty trelliswork and trailing stems. Expert Chikankars claim to know as many as 75 stitches. Not all stitches are systematically named. Some of them are shared with other embroideries, some are unique to Chikan work. Most Chikan pieces are stitched collaboratively; each participant excels at a different stitch. Many kinds of needles are used for stitching; for example, a wide, blunt needle is used for making holes in the delicate cotton fabric. See Chakravarty (2010, pp. 31-32); Manfredi (2007, pp. 25-26); Manfredi (2004, pp. 268, 270); Morrell (1994, p. 69); Brijbhushan (1990, p. 43). According to Paine, the discipline required for Chikankari is shared by no other type of embroidery in the world. See Paine (1989, p. 8).

¹⁵To learn more about the comparison between Chikankari and eighteenth-century European white-work embroideries, like those from Dresden in Germany and Ayrshire in Scotland, see Paine (1989, pp. 9-11, 22-23). Paine mentions that the English women who settled in India, primarily at Calcutta/Kolkata in the late eighteenth-century, would hire local Indian tailors to make copies of the white-work embroideries that they brought with them. Indian tailors may have absorbed characteristics of these European white-works and incorporated them into their floral Chikan embroidery. Manfredi points out that in the eighteenth-century white-work embroidery was being produced on fine Muslin cloth in many parts of Europe, including France and Italy. There is evidence that fine Muslin cloth from India as well as Muslin embroidered with white flowers from Bengal were being exported to Europe since the seventeenth century. Due to scanty documentation, it is not always possible to determine the extent of intercultural influences that may have taken place at that time. See Manfredi (2007, pp. 24, 27). Also see Gillow (2010, p. 240); Kumar (1999, p. 318).

¹⁶The herringbone stitch creates an opaque effect on the surface of the fine cloth as well as an outline of the motifs with minute stitches resembling back stitch. See Kumar (1999, p. 318); Morrell (1994, p. 73); Brijbhushan (1990, p. 43); Chattopadhyay, K. (1977), *Indian Embroidery* (pp. 39, 41), New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Limited.

Internationally acclaimed, Chikan embroidery today embellishes colored clothing as well.¹⁷

Rabari

Rabari are nomadic pastoralists who migrated from Rajasthan to the Kutch region.¹⁸ Their clothing is embellished with colorful motifs and mirror pieces. The light that reflects from these mirror pieces is believed to be talismanic.¹⁹ It is at midday that Rabari women sit together to stitch. Daughters begin by learning how to make stable outlines with even-sized chain stitch.²⁰ Next they learn to attach mirror pieces with interlocking stitches.²¹ Motifs are stitched spontaneously with cotton or silk threads of bright, contrasting hues.²² They

¹⁷Besides Muslin, fabrics such as Chiffon, Organza, Silk, and Georgette are also embroidered with Chikankari today. Chikan work is not confined to garments; it adorns items such as bedspreads and table wear as well. See Walia (2010, p. 7); Chakravarty (2010, pp. 32-33); Brijbhushan (1990, p. 43).

¹⁸Rabari or "Rahabari" means "one who goes out of the path." Rabaris are Hindus. Initially they were camel-herders but now breed other animals as well, such as cows, buffalos, goats, and sheep. There are many subgroups of Rabaris that live in various parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan in India. See Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater, J. (2007), "Picasso Gets a Sewing Machine," in *Threads & Voices, Behind the Indian Textile Tradition* (pp. 4-17: 5-6), Mumbai: Marg Publications; Frater, J. (1993), "Rabari Dress, Adornment that Tells of Tradition," in G. Dange (Ed.), *Mud, Mirror and Thread, Folk Traditions of Rural India* (pp. 110-135), Middletown, NJ: Grantha Corporation.

¹⁹The use of mirror glass in western Indian embroidery most likely stemmed from the mica prevalent in deserts of this region. Now mirror glass is produced especially for this embroidery and has become its distinguishing feature. Large globes of blown glass are silvered on the inside, broken into small pieces, and then cut into square, rectangular, triangular, diamond, conical, and round shapes. The light that reflects from these mirror pieces is believed to have divine properties. Dazzling objects like mirrors, together with bright, contrasting colors and asymmetrical patterns of embroidery, are believed to dispel evil spirits. The placement of mirror glass is symbolic. For example, Rabari women adorn blouses (cholis) with mirror pieces and motifs to accentuate as well as shield their breasts. With the commercialization of this embroidery, the use of mirror pieces has become mainly decorative. See Frater, J. (2010), "In the Artisan's Mind: Concepts of Design in Traditional Rabari Embroidery," in *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga* (pp. 84-93: 87); Paine, S. (2008), *Embroidered Textiles, A World Guide to Traditional Patterns* (pp. 188, 208), London: Thames & Hudson; Edwards, E. (2003), "Marriage and Dowry Customs of the Rabari of Kutch: Evolving Traditions," in H. B. Foster and D. C. Johnson (Eds.), *Wedding Dress across Cultures* (pp. 67-84: 76-77), New York: Berg; Crill (1999, p. 12); Morrell (1994, pp. 75-95: 75).

²⁰See Frater (2010, pp. 86-87). In the best embroidered pieces, chain stitch completely covers the fabric (silk, cotton, polyester or acrylic). See Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater, J. (2007, pp. 6-7, 12). The Rabari adopted the chain stitch used by the Mochi or cobblers and leather workers of Kutch and neighboring Saurashtra. The latter had developed this stitch with an ari, a fine awl-like needle, while embroidering leather products like shoes, bags, and belts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Soon they began to embroider garments for the royal courts. When the courts declined, mochi embroidery lost its patronage. See Edwards (2003, p. 76); Kumar (1999, p. 319).

²¹Morrell discusses in detail the many ways in which cut mirror pieces can be attached to the cloth. See Morrell (1994, pp. 75-95).

²²See Frater (2010, pp. 85-88); Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater, J. (2007, p. 8).

include abstractions of nature and reflect communal beliefs.²³ Rabari women take pride in stitching their trousseaux, daily attire, and utility items. Since they embroider for personal satisfaction, they consider their pieces works of art. Deteriorating economy and restrictions on dowry embroidery forced them to begin sewing for wages.²⁴ That meant balancing time-honored conventions with commercial dictate. Motifs are now not always composed by the embroiderer and machine embroidery has mostly replaced hand-stitching. Complicated stitches are either simplified or eliminated.²⁵ This is lamentable. However, the younger generation are discovering ways of designing motifs with computers.²⁶ An organization called Kala Raksha has opened a school to teach Kutch embroiderers technological skills.²⁷ This has equipped them to participate in international workshops. Another organization called KMVS arranged an overseas exhibition of Kutch embroidery at the Vancouver Museum in Canada.²⁸ Besides Rabari,

²³The geometric, stylized representations of nature in Rabari embroidery, studded with mirror pieces, reflect their close contact with Muslim herders in Kutch. See Edwards (2003, pp. 76-77); Kumar (1999, p. 319).

²⁴After marriage, Rabari brides display garments they have embroidered for their dowries in their husbands' villages and in their parents' villages to be critiqued by other women. Eager to surpass other brides, they put their heart and soul into embroidering exceptional dowry pieces. However, in 1995, elders in the Kutch community (known as Nath) banned labor-intensive, time-consuming embroidery. It delayed a newly-wed bride from joining her husband and his family until she was in her thirties because she had not embroidered enough pieces for her dowry. See Sethi (2010, p. xviii); Frater (2010, pp. 89-93); Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater, J. (2007, pp. 9-10, 12, 15); Frater, J. (2004), "Rabari Embroidery--Chronicle of Tradition and Identity in Changing World" in J. Dhamija (Ed.), *Asian Embroidery* (pp. 143-58: 151).

²⁵For example, the chain stitch is replaced by a jig-jag machine-made stitch. Creating pieces speedily for sale has led to work of low quality. See Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater, J. (2007, pp. 10-11, 16-17).

²⁶See Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater, J. (2007, pp. 14-16); Frater (2004, pp. 149, 155).

²⁷Kala Raksha (meaning, 'Preservation of Traditional Arts) started as a grassroots effort. It was officially established in 1993 as a registered society and trust by co-founders Judy Frater and Prakash Bhanani. Kala Raksha aims to preserve the traditional arts of the region by making them culturally and economically viable. It has well established links with leading design institutions in India, including the National Institution of Design (NID), the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, and the Indian Institute of Crafts & Design (IICD). Faculty from the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, and the Rhode Island School of Design in the US helped develop the basic curriculum for Kala Raksha Vidhyalaya (KRV), an Institution of Design for Traditional Artisans. See Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater, J. (2007, pp. 8, 10, 12, 15); Frater (2004, p. 150). Another not-for-profit organization in India, dedicated to promoting Kutch embroidery through sales and exhibitions inland and overseas since 1969, is called Shrujan ('Creativity'). Situated in Ajrakhpur, Kutch, in India, Shrujan employs over 3,000 needlewomen. It has opened a Living and Learning Centre (LLDC) to train its members. See D. Cohen (Ed.), (1996), *A Day in the Life of India* (p. 31), San Francisco: Collins Publishers.

²⁸This exhibition, titled, 'Eye of a Needle,' was held in 2002 by the co-operative, Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangham (KMVS) that has been working since 1989 in India to improve the situation of Kutch embroiderers. They were assisted by Maiwa Handprints, a store founded in 1986 and run by Charlotte Kwon at Vancouver, Canada. It deals in handcrafted, fair-trade clothing and is one of the largest importers of Kutch embroidery. The staff of the Maiwa store not only market Kutch embroidered clothing, they also make their customers aware of its noteworthy

embroideries by other tribes in Kutch, namely, Mutwa, Jat, Meghwar, and Sodha were also included.²⁹

Mutwas are a Muslim clan that migrated from Sindh in Pakistan to Kutch. Their women are known for stitching assiduously with tiny mirrors. To quote a Mutwa woman: “Our embroidery is in our eyes and in our hands – that is our skill.” Joining KMVS not only brought adequate pay, it also reduced control on their movement outside the isolated villages.³⁰ Jats are also Muslims from Pakistan who settled in Kutch. Jat women started selling their riveting embroidery to survive droughts. Membership in KMVS resulted in recognition and prosperity.

Meghwars are a Hindu tribe of weavers and leather workers who relocated from Rajasthan to Kutch. They are regarded as unclean by the orthodox Hindus because they process leather. Therefore, they prefer to interact with their Muslim neighbors. This has resulted in an amalgamation of embroidery skills. Meghwar women are expert needle workers. In their own words: “Just as you learn to write each letter before making a word, we learn each stitch to make a pattern. We follow our mothers and we learn our designs slowly...slowly.” Before becoming members of KMVS, they were misused. KMVS helped them earn a decent income and maintain the high caliber of their work.³¹ Sodha women brought with them from Sindh a fresh vocabulary of stitches that impacted other embroiderers in Kutch.³² Since their livelihood is dependent on needlework, enrolling in KMVS was a boon. It opened doors to a wider clientele. As a Sodha woman said: “We like that our embroidery is going to a place far away and that people there will know who a Sodha is. The large pieces that take us four to six months to complete bring us an income normally earned over one year. Doing them is like having a savings account. Every stitch we do is a deposit and when we finish we get such a large amount of money that we can do something important. When this piece is finished for the museum I will be paid enough to send my child to a good school.”³³ Likewise, KMVS unlocked challenging avenues for the Rabari women. Embroidering for exhibitions abroad gave them the freedom to experiment with colors and patterns that they would not have on their own apparel.³⁴

characteristics and the initiatives taken by KMVS to preserve them. See Kwon, C. and Raste, M. (2003), *Through the Eye of a Needle, Stories from an Indian Desert* (pp. 8, 28-32, 35-38), Vancouver: Maiwa Handprints Ltd.

²⁹Affected by the separation of India and Pakistan in 1947 and the war between these two countries in 1971, many Hindu and a few Muslim inhabitants from Sindh, the southernmost province of Pakistan, relocated to the Kutch region of Gujarat in west India. The Mutwas, Jats, Meghwars, Sodhas, and the Rabari are their descendants. See Gillow (2010, p. 247); Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 13).

³⁰See Kwon and Raste (2003, pp. 65-69).

³¹See Kwon and Raste (2003, pp. 62, 73).

³²Sodhas are a subgroup of the larger Hindu Rajput community who migrated to Kutch from the Sindh district of Pakistan in 1971, following the India-Pakistan war. See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 78).

³³See Kwon and Raste (2003, p. 77).

³⁴See Raja, L. and Soma, P. in conversation with Frater, J. (2007, p. 12); Kwon and Raste (2003, pp. 46, 81).

Phulkari

Phulkari was the achievement of pre-Partition Punjab.³⁵ It means ‘flower motifs on a plain ground’ and refers loosely to all types of embroidery from Punjab.³⁶ A wrap with a few motifs is accurately called Phulkari. The profusely embroidered wrap is known as Bagh or garden.³⁷ They were stitched on the reverse side of a sturdy, hand-woven cotton called Khaddar. Its rough texture enabled needlework based on counting of threads. Darning stitches with one colored silk thread created a velvet like sheen.³⁸ Phulkari and Bagh were stitched by Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh³⁹ ladies for diversion and need.⁴⁰ Ornamental and

³⁵This area currently includes the Punjab region in Pakistan as well as the states of Punjab, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh in India. Punjab means ‘the land of five rivers,’ namely Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas--tributaries of River Indus. See Sethi, C. M. (2017), “The Many Meanings of Punjabi Phulkaris,” in D. Mason (Ed.), *Phulkari, The Embroidered Textiles of Punjab from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection* (pp. 13-35: 15), New Haven and London: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press; Singh, T. G. (2010), “A Wrap of Blessings,” in *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga* (pp. 8-19: 10-11); Dhamija, J. (2007), “Embroidered Gardens of Flowers: Bagh and Phulkari of Punjab,” in L. Tyabji (Ed.), *Threads & Voices, Behind the Indian Textile Tradition* (pp. 44-53: 45, 53), Mumbai: Marg Publications; Brijbhushan, J. (1990), *Indian Embroidery* (p. 29), New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

³⁶Phulkari at one time meant any embroidery of Punjab but later became restricted to an embroidered shawl or wrap for covering the head and shoulders. These wraps are around four to five feet by eight to ten feet in size. Phulkari embroidery is also done on wall hangings, blankets, and furniture covers. See Sethi (2017, pp. 15, 19); Gupta, C. S. (2010), “Picturesque Frame of Non-Cognitive Expression: Phulkari,” in *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga* (pp. 48-54: 49); Crill (1999, p. 13); Dhamija, J. (1964), “Bagh and Phulkari,” *Marg*, 17, 2, pp. 14-19: 16.

³⁷At first Phulkaris were embroidered with scanty motifs because silk threads were costly and not easily available in rural Punjab. As Phulkaris came to be cherished by the wealthy, they developed into Baghs that are stitched with silk threads of several hues. No section of the ground cloth is left unembroidered in Baghs. See Sethi (2017, pp. 16, 20-21); Singh (2010, p. 11); Graham, J. (2004), “Phulkari and Bagh: The Embroidery Shawls of the Punjab,” in J. Dhamija (Ed.), *Asian Embroidery* (pp. 113-24: 119, 121); Brijbhushan (1990, pp. 31-32).

³⁸Khaddar cloth is also called Khadi. Besides the most frequently used darning satin stitch, placed in horizontal, vertical, and diagonal directions, other stitches are also used in Phulkari embroidery, namely stem, chain, herringbone, and buttonhole. Silk threads were brought into this region by peddlers from Afghanistan. In addition to silk, cotton thread or wool yarn was occasionally used. Like cross-stitch, Phulkari is based on counting of threads; but it is much more intricate than cross-stitch. Phulkari is a difficult and time-consuming art. See Sethi (2017, pp. 15, 44-45); Gupta (2010, p. 51); Singh (2010, pp. 11-12); Dhamija (2007, pp. 45, 47); Kumar (1999, p. 319); Morrell (1994, pp. 55-67: 55); Das, S. (1992), *Fabric Art, Heritage of India* (pp. 94-108: 100-102), New Delhi: Abhinav Publications; Irwin, J. & Hall, M. (1973), *Indian Embroideries* (p.161), Ahmedabad: Calico Museum of Textiles.

³⁹“Sikh” is derived from *sikhna* that means ‘to learn.’ It implies that the followers of Sikhism have studied the teachings of their ten gurus or spiritual guides. This religion originated from the teachings of Guru Nanak (1469-1539), the first of the ten gurus. See Sethi (2017, p. 33, end note 2).

⁴⁰Members of these different faiths coexisted harmoniously in late nineteenth-century Punjab. See Sethi (2017, pp. 13-14).

spiritually protective, this needlework was passed down by the women folk.⁴¹ They shared ideas and strove to outdo one another while embroidering folklore and life around, their feelings and blessings.⁴² Geometric patterns that possibly had magical power were frequently used. It took years to learn their formulae. A single slip or false stitch could spoil the symmetry.⁴³ To deflect evil spirits a deliberate error would be made because perfectly stitched wraps were considered susceptible to envy. A sudden change in the embroidery's design or color scheme could also mark a life-altering event.⁴⁴

How Phulkari originated is not certain. The common assumption is that it was introduced by nomads from Central Asia or it stemmed from the Iranian stitch-craft, Gulkari.⁴⁵ Similarities have also been noted between Phulkari patterns and those of textiles from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Indo-China on the one hand, and Kasuti embroidery of Karnataka in India on the other. It cannot be determined if this is coincidence or due to cross-cultural influences.⁴⁶ With a change of life-style in the twentieth century, Phulkari wraps began to lose their significance and were stitched mainly for sale.⁴⁷ Organizations are now striving to promote Phulkari through training programs, museums are acquiring samples of it, and markets are converting it into consumer products.⁴⁸

⁴¹Young girls learned Phulkari from older female relatives and friends. It was also taught at school. Some Phulkaris were stitched collaboratively by a group of women working together. See Sethi (2017, pp. 14, 19, and 33, n. 6); Gupta (2010, p. 50); Dhamija (2007, p. 48); Das (1992, pp. 96-97); Hitkari, S. S. (1980), *Phulkari: The Folk Art of Punjab* (p. 48), New Delhi: Phulkari Publications; Irwin & Hall (1973, p. 161); Dhamija (1964, p. 16).

⁴²See Singh (2010, pp. 12-13, 16); Gupta (2010, pp. 53-54); Morrell (1994, p. 57); Irwin & Hall (1973, p.165).

⁴³See Gillow (2010, p. 8); Das (1992, p. 101).

⁴⁴A disruption in the color scheme or pattern in Phulkari embroidery symbolized protect against the evil eye (known as 'drishti' in Sanskrit and 'nazar' in Urdu) or it marked an important event like birth, marriage, or reunion with a relative or friend. A small black dot ('nazar buti') or 'Om' (symbol of the Absolute; its utterance is believed to redeem all errors) were sometimes stitched in one corner to counteract the envious eye. See Sethi (2017, p. 23); Singh (2010, pp. 12-14); Dhamija (2007, p. 52); Graham (2004, p. 124); Das (1992, pp. 97, 101); Brijbhusan (1990, p. 32).

⁴⁵Surviving Phulkaris date to the early 19th century but oral history, folk songs, and literary sources indicate that this form of embroidery was practiced centuries ago. See Das (1992, p. 96). According to some scholars, an embroidery called "Gulkari," was practiced in Persia/Iran ("gul" means flower in Persian or Farsi). As this embroidery spread to the Punjab region, it came to be known as "Phulkari." See Sethi (2017, pp. 14-15, 20); Singh (2010, p. 10); Morrell (1994, p. 55). Sukla Das mentions that Persian/Iranian immigrants introduced Gulkari embroidery to Kashmir when they settled there. But Phulkari shares little in common with Kashmiri-Persian embroidery.

⁴⁶Due to insufficient data, it cannot be proven if or how patterns were exchanged between Punjab and other regions within and beyond India. See Das (1992, pp. 94-95); Dongerkery, K. S. (1951), "Phulkari of the Punjab," in *The Romance of Indian Embroidery* (pp. 25-28: 25), Bombay: Thacker & Co., Ltd.

⁴⁷See Mason, D. (2017), "Identity and Transformation: The Politics of Embroidery in South Asia," in *Phulkari, The Embroidered Textiles of Punjab from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection* (pp. 77-93: 80-85), New Haven and London: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press; Sethi (2017, p. 32); Graham (2004, p. 124); Brijbhusan (1990, p. 33); Irwin & Hall (1973, p.162).

⁴⁸See Mason (2017, p. 87).

Drawn to its vibrant colors, Manish Malhotra, one of India's leading fabric designers, has adorned his high-fashion costumes with Phulkari embroidery.⁴⁹

Kantha

Kantha, meaning 'patched cloth,' was invented by frugal Bengali women who layered old garments and tacked them with running stitches to make items for everyday use.⁵⁰ A branch of this patchwork embroidery developed into elaborate quilts and seating mats.⁵¹ Their rich imagery indicates that they were embroidered by cultured women.⁵² At times, work on a quilt was started by a

⁴⁹Manish Malhotra (born 1965) was invited by the Philadelphia Museum of Art on April 28, 2017 to speak on Phulkari embroidery. According to him, Phulkari can be readily adapted to the wardrobe of today. He aspires to bring global recognition to Phulkari of India through his creations. See Mason (2017, p. 88).

⁵⁰Sages in ancient India, including Shakyamuni of Buddhism, wore patchwork robes. Henceforth old garments are believed to ward off destructive forces, alongside being economical. Pieces of cloth were also tied at holy shrines for blessings and wish fulfillment. See Umberger, L. (2013), "Kantha: the Birth and Rebirth of a Native Art," and "Kantha – a stitch in time" in G. Basu and I. Mital (Eds.), *Through the Eye of a Needle – A Tribute to SHE*, (this book has no page numbers), Kolkata: Eastern Zonal Cultural Centre [hereafter referred to as *Through the Eye of a Needle*]; Zaman, N. (2010), "Representations of the Feminine in Kaantha," in *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga*, (pp. 20-26: 21); Padmaja, K. (2010), "The Several Layers of Kaantha," in *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga* (pp. 70-83: 78); Zaman, N. (2009), "Women's Words/Women's Voices in the Kantha," in D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (pp. 115-137: 115, 127), Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press; Ghosh, P. (2009), "From Rags to Riches: Valuing Kantha in Bengali Households," in D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (pp. 31-57: 55, n. 31); Ghuznavi, R. (2004), "The Tradition of Kantha and Contemporary Trends," in J. Dhamija (Ed.), *Asian Embroidery* (pp. 131-42: 132); Das (1992, pp. 109-133: 109, 113); Kramrisch, S. (1968), *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (p. 67), Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art.

⁵¹These quilts and mats were stitched without frames or hoops mainly on layers of hand-woven cotton cloth (besides old cloth, new, factory-made cloth was also used). Quilts, called Sujni, were rectangular (around six to seven feet by four to five feet) and served as winter wraps and bed spreads while mats, known as Ashan, were square (each side around thirty to thirty-five inches) and seated guests during ceremonial or religious occasions. Although Kantha embroidery is synonymous with the simple running stitch used in ingenious ways, over the years, other stitches were also used. Some stitches, impromptu inventions of these skillful needlewomen, have no names. Colored threads drawn from old sari borders were formerly used to embroider these quilts. Later, purchased threads were used as well. See Padmaja (2010, pp. 72, 77, 78-79); Mason, D. (2009), "Background Textures: Lives and Landscapes of Bengal's Embroidered Quilts," in D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (pp. 1-29: 1-2, 19, 23); Zaman (2009, pp. 116, 120, 123-24); Peranteau, A. (2009), "A Many-Splendored Thing: Kantha Technique and Design," in D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (pp. 139-54: 140-41, 145, 148-49, 150-51, 153); Ghuznavi (2004, pp. 133-34); Brijbhushan (1990, p. 39).

⁵²Kantha was practiced by women of different social status. Those from well-to-do households would use better materials to embroider quilts for special occasions; those from poor homes would layer rags to make simple wraps. See Zaman (2009, p. 117); Ghosh, P. (2009), "Embroidering Bengal: Kantha Imagery and Regional Identity," in D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (pp. 81-113); Das (1992, pp. 109-133: 113).

mother, continued by her daughter, and completed by her granddaughter.⁵³ Some of them record the maker's name; others, the recipient's name and kinship to the maker.⁵⁴ Although surviving Kantha quilts date only to the nineteenth-century, they were stitched much earlier.⁵⁵ The sixteenth century Indo-Portuguese quilts of Bengal borrowed from Kantha embroidery and in turn influence it.⁵⁶ Kantha mats and quilts also share an affinity with floor patterns called 'Alpana,' drawn in liminal places to overcome perils. As in the Alpana, designs based on the sacred lotus form the center of many Kantha mats and quilts.⁵⁷ The surface of a Kantha mat or quilt was treated as consecrated space. It can be equated to the inner cell of a Hindu temple, with the lotus in

⁵³Kantha quilts could take six months to three generations to embroider. See Umberger (2013), "Kantha – a stitch in time" in *Through the Eye of a Needle*; Kramrisch, S. (2009), "Kantha," in D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (pp. 169-83: 169); Ghosh (2009, "From Rags to Riches," p. 55, n. 38).

⁵⁴ Kantha quilts were often given as gifts to cherished ones. The social event for which they were stitched and the relationship between the needle-worker and the recipient determined their pictorial vocabulary. Very few of them record the maker's name or the date of their making. At times the completion date of the quilt and the embroiderer's village appeared on the quilt. The men that received these Kantha products as gifts treasured them as much as the women who stitched them. Cherished Kantha pieces were preserved and handed down from one generation to the next. See Zaman (2010, pp. 21-22); Mason (2009, p. 21); Ghosh (2009, "From Rags to Riches," pp. 33, 37, 40, 46-47); Ghosh (2009, "Embroidering Bengal," p. 86); Zaman (2009, pp. 117-18, 120, 122); Ghuznavi (2004, p. 138); Mittal (2004, p. 40).

⁵⁵According to some scholars, Kantha embroidery can be traced to ancient times of India. See Umberger (2013), *Through the Eye of a Needle*; Padmaja (2010, pp. 77-78); Mittal (2004, p. 41); Das (1992, pp. 109-133: 110, 112).

⁵⁶In 1536 a few Portuguese from Goa (a sea post in south-western India) migrated to Satgaon (a port on River Hoogly), around twenty-three miles north of current day Kolkata in West Bengal, India. Soon Indo-Portuguese quilts called Colchas (about two and a half by two meters in size) from Satgaon, embroidered in chain or back stitch, were being exported to Europe for the Portuguese market. These quilts, representing classical mythology, biblical stories, allegorical figures, scenes of daily episodes, and ornate designs, attained international fame. See Karl, B. (2016), *Embroidered Histories, Indian Textiles for the Portuguese Market during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (pp. 79-80, 112-21), Köln/Wien: Böhlau Verlag; Gillow (2010, p. 263); Padmaja (2010, pp. 78-79); Mason (2009, p. 3); Peranteau (2009, pp. 140-41); Zaman (2009, p. 122); Paine (2008, pp. 28, 116); Mittal (2004, pp. 40-41); Crill (1999, pp. 8-9); Das (1992, pp. 109-133: 112-113); Irwin & Hall (1973, pp. 35-37).

⁵⁷A lotus medallion or mandala is known by a different name in each state of India. In West Bengal, it is known as Alpana. Lotus is equated with the sun and is symbolic of many qualities in all of Asia. The opening and closing of its petals is interpreted as renaissance and immortality. Its upright, sturdy stem represents the center of equilibrium. While embroidering Kantha quilts, embroiderers began with the lotus medallions in the center, proceeded to the corner motifs, and then stitched motifs in the areas in between them. These motifs were sketched with the needle or stitched spontaneously on the fabric. Akin to drawing the mandala, embroidering mats and quilts with Kantha work was regarded as a meditative act. See Zaman (2010, pp. 24, 26); Padmaja (2010, p. 75); Mason (2009, pp. 6-8); Zaman (2009, pp. 130-31); Ghosh (2009, "From Rags to Riches," p. 44); Ghosh (2009, "Embroidering Bengal," p. 84); Paine (2008, pp. 175-76); Mittal (2004, p. 40); Ghuznavi (2004, pp. 132-33, 136-38); Datta, S. (1993), *Folk Paintings of Bengal* (p. 20), New Delhi: Khama Publishers; Irwin & Hall (1973, pp. 171-72).

the middle like the deity and trees in the corners like guardians.⁵⁸ It can also be compared to a Muslim tomb-shrine with a dome-canopy and four towers.

For Kantha makers, religion was part of daily life. Hence motifs like peacocks and fish appear frequently on their mats and quilts.⁵⁹ A peacock is associated with the Hindu god Krishna, whose crown is adorned with its plume. In Islam, peacocks grace the entrance to paradise and Prophet Muhammad's flying steed Buraq has a peacock tail.⁶⁰ Fish is favored by both Hindus and Muslims of Bengal.⁶¹ One Kantha mat depicts Rama, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, shooting arrows at the ten-headed demon Ravana.⁶² On this mat is also stitched in Arabic script the words, "Ya Allah," god of the Muslims. Next to it is embroidered a crescent-shaped symbol that represents the Muslim faith as well as the Hindu god Shiva. This makes it difficult to fathom the Kantha maker's religious inclination. The co-existence of Hindu-Muslim motifs on Kantha mats and quilts indicates an accord between these two religious communities in pre-partition Bengal.⁶³ Aspects of the changing life-style appear on Kantha quilts as well. Besides old means of transportation like palanquins, new inventions like trains are included. They point to the rail network introduced by the British.⁶⁴ Criticism of the hypocritical society of British-Calcutta surface on Kantha quilts through images like sheepish men being thrashed by women and a docile man taking care of his wife and daughter while ill-treating his old mother.⁶⁵ Appalled by the immoral behavior of anglicized Bengali men, these needle women humiliated them in scenes of domestic disorder.⁶⁶

⁵⁸Some trees are stylized; others are realistically portrayed like the Kadamba tree, considered sacred because the Hindu god Krishna danced under it with his beloved Radha. Stylized leaves or fruits of hallowed plants, known as kalka or paisley, are sometimes placed in the corners, around the central lotus, or along the edges of the Kantha quilt. See Zaman (2010, p. 25); Padmaja (2010, p. 75); Mason (2009, pp. 8-9); Zaman (2009, pp. 127, 131-32).

⁵⁹For examples of a Kantha mat (31 x 31 in.) with peacocks and a Kantha quilt (65 ½ x 44 in.) with fish, see D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (p. 214, pl. 32; p. 277, pl. 77).

⁶⁰Peacock feathers do not decay with time. Hence, they are symbols of immortality. See Sethi (2017, p. 22); Zaman (2010, p. 25); Mason (2009, p. 10).

⁶¹Fish symbolizes fertility, intelligence, and protection; it is consumed daily in Bengali households. See Mason (2009, pp. 9-10); Paine (2008, pp. 139, 181).

⁶²This mat (33 ½ x 33 ½ in.) is represented in D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (p. 187, pl. 3).

⁶³See Mason (2009, p. 15); Ghosh (2009, "Embroidering Bengal," pp. 94-95); Ghuznavi (2004, p. 132).

⁶⁴The first rail way of India, established by the British in Bengal, dates to 1854. See Mason (2009, pp. 4, 10, 17). For examples of Kantha quilts (68 x 42 in. and 64 ¼ x 41 ¾ in.) with trains, see D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (p. 262, pl. 62; p. 284, p. 84).

⁶⁵For examples of these Kantha quilts (65 x 40 ¼ in. and 65 x 45 in.), see D. Mason (Ed.), *Kantha: The Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (pp. 188-89, pls. 4, 5).

⁶⁶Images of social criticism in Kantha quilts were influenced by Kalighat paintings (c. 1800-1930 CE) that flourished around the temple of the Hindu goddess Kali in South Calcutta (now Kolkata). When the British moved to Bengal, they anglicized the name Kalighat to Calcutta. From 1870 onward, Kalighat painters began recording their impressions of the increasing moral corruption in the hypocritical society of British-Calcutta. Their shop-studios became pictorial-news-centers. See Umberger (2013), *Through the Eye of a Needle*; Mason (2009, pp. 16-17, 66-67, 188); Ghosh (2009, "Embroidering Bengal," pp. 88, 94-95, 105-06, 113, n. 96);

The turbulence following the breakup of Bengal in 1947 disrupted the storytelling aspect of Kantha imagery.⁶⁷ Since then, organizations such as Karma Kutir⁶⁸ and SHE⁶⁹ have tried to rejuvenate this classic handicraft by transforming it to meet current needs. Kantha embroidery now provides sustenance to destitute women tutored by these organizations.⁷⁰ It has also drawn the attention of curators, scholars, and the affluent society.⁷¹ An organization called ADITHI

Madhok, P. (2000), "Kalighat Painting: A Unique Folk Art of Nineteenth Century Calcutta," *The International Third World Studies Journal & Review*, 11, October, pp. 37-43; Jain, J. (1999), *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World*, Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.; Khanna, B. (1993), *Kalighat: Indian Popular Painting 1800-1930*, Boston: Shambhala Publications; Das (1992, pp. 109-133: 126).

⁶⁷In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Kantha textiles with narrative themes involving figures were stitched by women of both Hindu and Muslim faith. See Mason (2009, pp. 14-15).

⁶⁸Karma Kutir (meaning, 'a place of work') was founded in 1961 at Kolkata, West Bengal, by a group of social activists under the leadership of Dr. Phulrenu Guha (1911-2006), a freedom fighter, philanthropist, and legislator. Its mission was to provide economic rehabilitation to displaced women refugees from Bangladesh after the partition of Bengal in 1947. In 1962, it evolved into a voluntary social welfare organization with a holistic mission of empowering destitute women. Karma Kutir focuses on providing needy women with skills like Kantha embroidery. Training centers are set up in district libraries around Kolkata, where 15-20 women meet regularly to learn and practice Kantha. Their products are sold at Karma Kutir's showroom, at exhibitions in Kolkata, and at national markets, with all proceeds returning to the needle women. They also receive instruction in literacy, business management, health and nutrition, and personal safety. After attaining proficiency, they either join Karma Kutir's Self Employment Center or form their own production units. See Padmaja (2010, pp. 80-81).

⁶⁹SHE (or Self-Help Enterprise) was established around 1998-99 in Kolkata by Shamlu Kripalani Dudeja (b. 1938) to support Kantha artisans and to increase appreciation of Kantha embroidery domestically and internationally. It was at a local fair in Kolkata that Dudeja came across village women from the Santiniketan area selling Kantha embroidery. She urged them to join her organization and started marketing Kantha embroidered garments produced by artisans of 'SHE.' Strict quality control of SHE items guaranteed their uniqueness, and the first exhibition in Kolkata was very successful. This was followed by exhibitions in other cities of India and abroad such as London, Paris, Tokyo, Yokohama, Melbourne, Washington, and Santa Fe. Over one thousand women artisans now work for this organization. See *Through the Eye of a Needle* (2013). I have studied both Karma Kutir and SHE as well as several other handicraft-based organizations engaged in promoting Kantha embroidery in Kolkata. I am grateful to Dr. Bindu Madhok for this endeavor. Thanks to the grant she received from Albion College to study NGOs in Kolkata dedicated to empowerment of women, we could hire a car and driver and visit these organizations located in various parts of Kolkata and its environs.

⁷⁰Ruby Ghuznavi adequately discusses the challenges and compromises involved in the evolution of Kantha embroidery. See Ghuznavi (2004, pp. 140-42). Niaz Zaman points out that unlike yesterday, when Kantha motifs were composed by the needle women, today they are mostly designed by men and embroidered by women working for NGOs. See Zaman (2009, pp. 115-17, 132-33). Also see *Through the Eye of a Needle* (2013); Padmaja (2010, pp. 80-83); Mason (2009, p. 19).

⁷¹Kantha embroidered clothing is now worn with pride by the wealthy. In addition, utility items such as bags and table-covers with Kantha embroidery are sold all over India and beyond. See Mason (2017, p. 88); Ghosh (2009, "From Rags to Riches," p. 53). Some of the museums in which examples of Kantha embroidery can be seen today are Gurusaday Dutt Museum, Ashutosh Museum, and Indian Museum in Kolkata, India, The Museum of Ancient Art in Lisbon, Portugal, Victoria and Albert Museum in London, UK, and Philadelphia Museum of Art in the US. See Yoho (2013), "Foreword" and "Kantha – a stitch in time" in *Through the Eye of a Needle*; Mason (2009, pp. 19-21); Mittal (2004, p. 41); Das (1992, pp. 109-133: 113).

in Bihar, has given a modern twist to these quilts.⁷² Combining running stitches with appliqué work, Hindu and Muslim women embroider quilts to raise awareness of issues such as illiteracy, poor health care, AIDs, and abortion of female fetuses. What these women once hesitated to tell male relatives, they are now disclosing to the world through their embroidery. Outside of India, Kantha has evoked comparison with Sashiko, the Japanese quilting embroidery that uses the running stitch to create a patterned background, and the Japanese Boro textiles, sewn from rags and patches of indigo-dyed cotton. Kantha quilts also resemble African American quilts made from remnant fabrics and Asian Hmong story-cloths, stitched by women to depict folk tales and life-affecting episodes. Like them, Kantha values thrift and seeks beauty in the ordinary.⁷³

Conclusion

Embroideries of India can no longer be practiced as their historical antecedents.⁷⁴ Regeneration is imperative to align with modern usage and the world marketplace. Well-versed supervisors are mandatory to train the growing, semiskilled workforce.⁷⁵ Revival and innovation can and should coexist.⁷⁶ A

⁷²ADITHI is a private, nonprofit organization (NGO) in Patna, capital of Bihar (near West Bengal). It was established in 1988. The quilts embroidered by its women members have become an outlet for socio-political comment. Kantha is known as Sujani in Bihar. Su means 'facilitating' and jani means 'birth.' Sujani quilts were stitched for new born babies with pieces of old clothing. Encouraged by ADITHI, the women artisans of Patna and Bhusura (a village close by) began to embroider issues affecting their lives on these sujani and khatwa quilts (appliqué work is known as khatwa in Bihar). The main woman storyteller draws the outlines. Then a group of women stitch the quilt, adding observations of their own. An exhibition of these quilts held at the Textile Museum of Canada was very well received. Sujani narrative quilts have inspired textile artists in Canada, North America, and Australia to represent stories and dreams through their embroidery. See Sethi (2010, p. xix); Chakravarty (2010, p. xix); Morrison, S. (2007), "Sujani of Bihar: Stitching Women's Lives" in L. Tyabji (Ed.), *Threads & Voices, Behind the Indian Textile Tradition* (pp. 98-107), Mumbai: Marg Publications; Gunning, S. (2000), "Re-Crafting Contemporary Female Voices: The Revival of Quilt-Making among Rural Hindu Women of Eastern India," *Feminist Studies*, 26 (3), pp. 719-726; Caldwell, D. and Morrison, S. (2000), *Stitching Women's Lives: Sujani and Khatwa from Bihar, India*, Toronto: The Museum for Textiles; Aitken, M. E. (1999), *The Narrative Thread: Women's Embroidery from Rural India* (pp. 1-12), Washington, D. C.: The National Museum of Women in the Arts; Brijbhushan (1990, p. 41).

⁷³Sashiko quilting is an important needlework technique of Japan. White cotton is used for the stitches and the background fabric is often of patched recycled pieces. Sashiko on indigo clothing is used by peasant workers. See Umberger (2013), *Through the Eye of a Needle*; Paine (2008, p. 22); Padmaja (2010, pp. 76-77); Peterson, S. (1988), "Translating Experience and the Reading of a Story Cloth," *Journal of American Folklore*, 101, no. 399, January-March, pp. 6-22.

⁷⁴See Das (1992, pp. 109-133: 109).

⁷⁵About 500,000 of India's populace today earns its livelihood through hand-embroidered textiles. See Friesen, H. L. (2014), *India* (p. 15), New York: AV2, Weigl.

⁷⁶Scholars have stressed the need for current day needle workers in India to be knowledgeable about traditional Indian embroideries. Only then can they be adequately appropriated to meet

number of contemporary artists in India, namely, Rakhi Peswani, Lavanya Mani, Mithu Sen, and Lipika Bhargava are learning the techniques of traditional Indian embroideries and applying unique renditions of them to their artworks.⁷⁷ To continue exploring new possibilities, embroideries must be taught in art schools.⁷⁸ A kaleidoscope of knots and threads, Stitch-Art requires as much know-how as other branches of the visual arts. With sewing needles as their tools of creative intellect, artists can preserve India's cultural heritage as well as compete on the global stage.

the needs of today. See Padmaja (2010, pp. 81-83); Sethi (2010, p. xx); Manfredi (2007, p. 29). Judy Frater points out that traditions are not static. See Frater (2004, p. 144).

⁷⁷Mukherji, P. D. (2009), "...growing from the middle...Recent Works by Rakhi Peswani," in *Intertwinings* (pp. 4-11), exhibition catalog, New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery. I am grateful to Dr. Parul Dave-Mukherji for her helpful suggestions on reading my manuscript.

⁷⁸Vatsyayan points out that embroidery has for years been considered a craft rather than an art; hence it has not been included in the curriculum of art schools. See Vatsyayan, K. (2010), "Introduction" in *Embroidery in Asia: Sui Dhaga* (pp. ix-xiii: xiii).