

## **Indian Embroidery**

**ULITA Exhibition May – December 2015**

### **Panel text**

**© ULITA – an Archive of International Textiles**

### **Indian Embroidered Textiles in ULITA**

The majority of the Indian textiles in the ULITA Collection were transferred from the West Riding Educational Resource Service, Bretton Hall, which took museum objects into schools during the 1970s-80s. These included contemporary costume. The museum already held a collection of Kashmiri shawls and embroidered shawl fragments, many collected by Sir Michael Sadler (a former Vice-Chancellor of the University).

Several recent donations are exhibited, include two phulkari and this Gujarati boys smock.

### **Indian Embroidery**

In gaining an understanding of Indian embroidery it is important to consider India's position in relation to other countries, and its past trade, invasions and migration patterns.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century this would have involved the whole subcontinent, but this has now been divided into the countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. The movement of peoples though the subcontinent meant that similar embroidery can be found throughout these countries despite boundaries.

India also lies along the trade routes of Asia, resulting in influences from both West (Persia) and East (China). Its extensive coastline has also

enabled trade to flourish, with many countries, particularly the Europeans, several later becoming invaders.

Various ethnic groups make up the population of India today. As in the past, specific techniques still generally relate to particular regions. Each still has its own identity, based on religion, patterns, cultural traditions and market requirements.

In India, textiles are everywhere: on clothes, adorning animals, in temples and in homes. These items form part of the traditional way of life.

### **Techniques**

The embroidery design is often created on the fabric by a variety of methods. Sometimes an outline design is produced by block-printing; the pattern can also be created by tracing with a pencil. Stencilling on to the cloth with coal dust is also used, in which charcoal is rubbed through perforated paper or foil.

Most embroideries are worked in the hand, with the worker sitting on the floor. Some embroidery has to be worked on a tight fabric stretched on a frame. This enables the embroiderers to sit close to the frame so that both hands can work above and below the frame with ease.

### **Stitches**

Embroidery stitches may differ between distinct communities, but the same stitch may also be adapted in different ways to produce individual motifs. With improved mobility communities borrow or assimilate motifs and stitches from each other, as well as those introduced by invaders and settlers. For example, chain stitch and satin stitch may have come from China.

Stitches fall generally into the following groups: herringbone (and interlaced), feather, fly, cretan, buttonhole, chain, straight, couching, stem,

running and back, cross, edgings and filling stitches. Often very ordinary stitches are used to great effect, and in combination with other techniques.

The approach to embroidery stitches in India is rather different from that in Europe. Many stitches are worked with the reverse of the work facing the embroiderer, and the embroidery therefore becomes reversible.

In her publication '**The Migration of stitches and the practice of stitch as movement**' Professor Anne Morrell details the three movements of stitching: up and down, wrapping and looping.

Samples from her publication can be seen here, including the movement from satin stitch to tent stitch via couching and the movement from chain stitch to herringbone via feather, buttonhole and cretan.

### **Counted-thread work**

There are different kinds of counted-thread work in various parts of India. One of the major types is generally known as **Phulkari**, meaning 'flowering work'.

It was worked by women, often in groups, produced in Northern India, especially in the Punjab, and used predominantly for weddings and festivals, and after as wall hangings or bed covers.

These large pieces are usually made from two or three strips sewn together; with mainly geometric patterning in floss silk on an even weave cotton. Some are very simple and sparsely embroidered, whilst other are heavily worked.

There are several categories of Phulkari: **Bagh** has very little background showing, with stitching covering the whole surface. With **Chope** the embroidery is worked at the sides of the length, while **Sainchi** work has figures included, and **Shishadar** or **sheesh bagh** uses shisha (mirrors).

Phulkari are usually worked in darning stitch, worked with the reverse of the cloth facing the embroiderer. The stitches change direction, and this, combined with the use of an untwisted floss silk thread, reflects the light, giving a shiny appearance. The traditional colours include white, gold, orange, green and crimson.

There are other examples of counted-thread work which are not phulkari. This includes cross stitch, worked on close-weave fabrics, and **Suf** embroidery, worked freehand from the reverse side in geometric designs, predominantly using triangle motifs.

### **Whitework**

Whitework is worked with various combinations of embroidery stitches, including patterns produced by pulled work, eyelets and shadow work with double back stitch and appliqué. Some techniques can only be worked on semi-transparent fabrics. The best known type is called **Chikan** (meaning embroidery), usually worked on white and pastel shaded cotton or muslin.

Today it is usually produced by women, often as embellishment for garments and sari lengths, and made quickly and on a large scale, unfortunately diminishing the quality.

Several items displayed here are from the 'Central Cottage Industries Emporium', which was set up in the 1950s by the Indian Government to preserve and share traditional Indian craftsmanship.

### **Rumals**

Square and oblong embroidered covers (**Rumals**) are used as offering covers and decorative pieces. They are thought to have originated in Chambra (Himachal Pradesh, North India), influenced by artworks of the Mughal courts, where wall paintings had similar compositions and floral borders.

The subject matter is usually taken from epics and poetry, often from the legends of Radha and Krishna. Both sides are often the same, so it can be seen both opened out or folded. There are usually few stitch types present, predominantly satin stitch and running stitch.

## **Quilting**

Quilting is an embroidery technique in which two or three materials are sewn together to make a warm, often decorative, fabric. In India they are often made from recycling fabrics, unless they are for the tourist market.

The layers are usually held together with the embroidered design, which can be geometric or figurative. This is often in running stitch, although other stitches such as herringbone and chain may be used.

## **Embroidery with a hook (chain stitch)**

Chain stitch can be produced with a needle or a hook, but greater speed is possible with the latter. The hook is called an **Ari** in India.

In Kashmir, all kinds of furnishing fabrics were traditionally made using chain stitch, whilst in Kutch, Gujarat, hook work may have developed from the cobbler's awl, used to decorate shoe leather, saddles, bags and other leather goods.

Chain stitch can be worked on a frame or in the hand. **Tambour work**, named after the frame used, is mainly worked by men, and is worked with a hook, with the size of the hook relating to the fineness of the work. Techniques and base materials vary between geographical areas, but the work is carried out with the face of the fabric upwards.

## **Torans**

**Torans** (from the Kutch and Saurashtra regions) are distinctively shaped door hangings which symbolise welcome. They are used for festive

occasions and ceremonies, and have a central, often symmetrical, banner and hanging pennants. Often they are embroidered with chain stitch, and can have brocade silk pennants.

The **Ari** is similar to the tambour hook, and may have developed from the cobbler's awl. The method is to pierce the fabric with the ari, loop the thread onto the hook from below, draw through to the face, repeating with each chain being held by the last. Beads and sequins can be applied individually to the front. Now chain stitch can be worked with a basic sewing machine.

### **Mirror Work**

This embroidery technique is particular to India. Mirror work, also called **Shisha** (glass) work, is thought to have been developed by the wife of Shah Jahan, who built the Taj Mahal in her honour.

The use of shisha is associated with Gujarat women (Kutch and Saurashtra areas), but is also used by Nomads travelling through Rajasthan and the Deccan.

Very often mirror work is used with combinations of bright colours, and a variety of other stitches. They can be used as part of pictorial designs, e.g. eyes of birds or the centre of flower.

Shisha mirrors are seen particularly on **Chakla**, ceremonial square hangings hung on the wall of the bride's new home, and other dowry pieces.

They are also found on decorative animal covers, on toran hangings, and on densely embroidered herders' festival costume from Kutch, such as **Choli** blouses, jackets and hats.

Blown glass is silvered and broken into small pieces then cut and trimmed into circles. In Gujarat, mica (a silicate mineral) may well have been used for decorative purposes before mirrors were developed.

The mirrors have no holes with which to sew them down, so they must be held by the surrounding threads, usually with a form of herringbone stitch. It is normally first held in place with vertical and horizontal base threads, which get pulled to the mirror edges by the top stitching. The appearance of the stitch can be greatly altered by the tension. A method which is becoming increasingly popular uses a ring, covered with thread, which is put on top of a mirror and slip-stitched into place, to produce a similar effect to the traditional technique.

### **Metal Work**

Gold, silver and other metals have been used to enrich embroideries in all parts of India for many years. Originally the gold and silver threads used were drawn metals or metal foil wrapped over a core of silk or cotton. Today the look is imitated using other metals, including metallic ribbons.

Gold and silver embroidery was traditionally used for garments in religious ceremonies, with the most luxurious and best-crafted work carried out during the reign of the Moghals.

Depending on its size, metal work is carried out by one or more embroiderers on small or large frames, kept taut so that both hands are free to embroider.

Stitch types can include couching with a sewing thread, and the use of metal thread coiled into a thin spiral, called **Purl**, which can be couched between the spirals or threaded through the centre.

Sequins have also been made from many other materials than metals, including recent plastics. Beetle wings have even been used as a form of sequin to create small shiny areas.

Other objects such as cowrie shells, coins, buttons and fabric tassels are incorporated into decorative pieces. Beadwork techniques have revived around the Sauashtra area of Gujarat, with the skill of the work lying with the grading of the beads. Beaded pieces are usually then attached to a fabric background.

### **Kashmir shawl embroidery**

Over 200 fragments form a significant part of the Kashmir Shawl Collection, of which many have embroidered embellishment. These have been attributed to the Sadler donation.

Traditionally, it is thought that Kashmir embroidery developed when the menders of woven shawls, who recreated worn parts by joining pieces invisibly, were asked to stitch the entire shawl. These embroidered shawls, often called **Amlī**, copied the texture and twill weave of the originals. It is said that they were more popular in the early- 19th century after Western traders commissioned them to escape government duties on woven goods.

### **Appliqué**

The main areas in which these techniques are used are Gujarat, Rajasthan, Orissa and Delhi. Appliqué fabrics are used for banners, canopies and bags for religious purposes in festivals. They are also used in the home for hangings, long friezes and quilts.

Appliqué is the technique of applying one piece of fabric to another by means of stitchery around the edges. Shapes and motifs can be held down with an ordinary stitch or by some type of embroidery which is both functional and decorative. Sometimes mirror work is added. Often repeated designs are constructed through fold-and-cut methods, and the shapes created are then appliquéd to the cloth. Ruched circles and flowers can also be added by drawing up a running stitch to create a raised motif.

Appliqué can be seen around the borders of other types of embroidered work, for example the large piece of satin stitch embroidery in the Mirror Work cabinet.

The text and selected images for this exhibition derives from the publications of Professor Anne Morrell: **'The Techniques of Indian Embroidery'** (1994), **'Indian Embroideries Volume 2 Part 2'** (2013) and **'The migration of stitches & the practice of stitch as movement'** (2007).

Professor Morrell was Professor of Textiles at Manchester Metropolitan University, and is a consultant at the Calico Museum of Textiles, Ahmedabad, India. She has published widely on Indian embroidery and embroidery stitches, and has used the ULITA Collection as part of her research.