



EMBROIDERED OASES

The Art of the Central Asian Suzani

Look again at the richly patterned surfaces of suzanis, they offer vital clues to the testimonies of individual lives that might otherwise be forgotten

In Central Asia, the quality and beauty of a woman's textile handiwork was thought to embody and display her worth both as a wife and as a breadwinner. Textiles however also provided women with an often much needed avenue of creative expression. Nowhere is this better seen than in the embroidered textiles of Central Asia known as suzanis.

The word, deriving from the Persian word for needle or *suzan*, refers to the colourful silk embroideries traditionally made by women for their dowries. If the term is often used for a variety of items bearing striking floral and abstract allover designs – cushion covers, bedspreads, wrapping cloths of all kinds, and prayer mats – it specifically denotes large wall hangings measuring on average 160cm by 220cm.

Suzanis constitute visual letters or testimonies of individual lives that we might otherwise have overlooked, ignored or, even worse, forgotten. They were and remain to a certain extent profoundly related to the different stages of a girl's and woman's life. Mothers would start making suzanis as soon as

a baby girl was born, and the same child, the moment she was old enough, would begin embroidering suzanis herself until the day of her wedding, not long after which perhaps, the whole process or cycle would begin anew.

Motifs were passed down from mother to daughter and if many were drawn from the luxury Persian, Ottoman and Mughal textiles that once travelled up and down the Silk Road; others stem from indigenous pre-Islamic essentially shamanistic traditions. Specific designs like the triangle, serrated knife, or cruciform leitmotif were believed to ward off evil but, in fact, embroidered dowry textiles as a whole were considered to have an almost magical function helping to ensure health, fidelity, fertility, and protection from harm.

The first stage in the making of a suzani consists of drawing the pattern in ink onto the cotton ground cloth, which had been previously cut into long strips and then loosely tacked together. Every woman could do this herself although she would often call upon the local *kalamkash*, a woman reputed for her draughtsmanship and design skills.



From left: **Detail of Suzani, Nurata (1850-1880)**

This suzani clearly reveals the greater complexity of 19th-century suzanis as well as the refinement of Nurata embroidery. Silk on cotton. Textile Museum of Canada T2005.14.1

Suzani, Tashkent (1880-1930)

The celestial 'moon' motifs (which can number from six to 40 on a single suzani) hearken back to pre-Islamic beliefs.

266 x 192cm. Silk on cotton. Textile Museum of Canada T2006.23.5

Suzani, Uzbek but from Northern Afghanistan (1970-1980)

194cm x 156cm. Silk on cotton Textile Museum of Canada T02.44.5

The respected office of the *kalamkash*, a word derived from the Arabic word for pen or *kalam*, was also often transmitted from mother to daughter, and we know that at some point *kalamkash* organised themselves into guild-like organisations. After the design was executed, largely in free hand, the cloth would be again disassembled into strips and each section would be embroidered separately in silk thread by one or several women.

Once all the sections were complete, they would be sewn together and a suzani was born. Although some suzanis are solely embroidered in a fine chain stitch (*yurma*) with a tambour hook, the most common stitch used is known as *basma* or Bukhara couching which facilitates the filling of large areas and motifs and the building up of a weave-like appearance and texture. Long strands of silk thread are laid down and are then couched with diagonal short stitches.

Suzanis have always displayed regional characteristics according to the city or area in which they were made

To further articulate these blossoms, leaves and palmettes rendered in *basma* stitch, the motifs are then outlined in a fine and taut chain stitch.

If the heart of suzani production lies largely within the parameters of what is today Uzbekistan, suzanis have always displayed regional characteristics according to the city or area in which they were made. The embroideries from the town of Nurata to the northeast of Bukhara are renowned for their delicate floral sprays rendered in shades of orange, red, and pink. The Nurata suzani often bears a central star motif surrounded by blossoming bouquets and bushes and consciously uses the void of the ground as an integral part of the overall design. However, another type of design resembling Persian garden carpets also appears in which a diagonal grid is created by leaves and filled with flowers but also sometimes butterflies or birds. In the one reproduced here, the craftswoman has

inserted two ewers and a vase into her design. The ewers symbolise both the life-giving force of water and religious ritual purity. The motif of the vase or 'rose water sprinkler' is said to signify hospitality, joy, and prosperity.

All suzanis were once all classified as Bukhara embroidery and effectively Bukhara is the city most associated with these colourful cloths. Bukhara was of course a major city on the famous Silk Road where many textiles, including suzanis from all regions, were avidly bought by European travellers and collectors in the 19th century and no doubt even earlier. The suzanis from Bukhara proper show the greatest variety of styles due perhaps to its multi-ethnic population and to the myriad influences that once travelled up and down the famous trade route. Nonetheless, one can put forth that they are characterised by stylised, often bold, rosettes with seemingly endless meandering slender stems. The border surrounding the central panel also tends to be quite large.

The fabled city of Samarkand also held a privileged position on important trade routes and yet the embroidery

practiced there is visibly less influenced by urban textile traditions and more so by neighbouring tribal art forms. The suzanis of Samarkand are recognisable by their large geometric roundels encircled by heavily stylised leafy forms and by their restricted palette.

The suzanis, however, that evince the most pronounced nomadic aesthetic are those from Tashkent. Situated on the border with Kazakhstan, it is one of the oldest cities of Central

Asia. Tashkent suzanis, known as *oi palak* or 'lunar sky' and systematically composed of rows of large embroidered pink roundels, either empty or enclosing stars, are

indeed thought to stem from pre-Islamic beliefs or worship of heavenly bodies, although here as elsewhere, meanings are lost over time and locals today might claim that the pink circular forms simply imitate the shape of local bread loaves or giant blossoms.

The oldest surviving suzani dates from the 1730s but in light of the rich textile traditions of the region, suzanis undoubtedly possess a much longer history. The best and

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Below, left to right: **Suzani, Samarkand c1960**
163.5 x 113cm. Cotton. Textile Museum of Canada T00.45.205

Suzani, Nurata (Tajik), late 19th to early 20th century
211 x 149cm. Silk on cotton Textile Museum of Canada T94.2023

Wall hanging, Bukhara, early 20th century
This embroidered wall hanging shows the stylization associated with Bukhara. Several leaves in the main field recall the ancient *boteh* or paisley motif, a symbol of abundance.
157.5 x 118.5cm. Silk on cotton. Textile Museum of Canada T98.0058

Wall hanging or prayer mat, mid 20th century (1930-1950)
189 x 115cm. Textile Museum of Canada T94.2005



most beautiful of these labours of love come from the period of the Emirate of Bukhara established in 1750 but becoming a Russian protectorate from 1868 to 1917. After three short years of regained independence, the Emirate was lost to the Russian Bolsheviks. The quality and style of suzanis were of course influenced by these complex political developments. European collectors noted that the quality of suzanis had, with some exceptions, greatly dropped by the 1930s: the motifs were less complex and refined, the cloth and thread were low-cost, and the colours sometimes drab. Russia, or what was then the Soviet Union, soon realised the economic benefits of reviving the 'folk art' and thus began to support rather than repress the making of suzanis.

The real renaissance of these embroidered oases however only truly began after the independence of the Central Asian states in the 1990s, and ever since the contemporary Uzbek and Tajik women of Uzbekistan are once again, like their ancestors, earning a living with their suzan. By depicting their inner gardens, they are creating veritable works of embroidered art. ©

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Right: Prayer mat, Bukhara
early 20th century
128 x 82cm
Silk on cotton
Textile Museum of Canada
T88.0284

