



Textile
Heirlooms
from the
Indus Valley

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

Textile Heirlooms *from the Indus Valley*

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Throughout the ethnographically complex Indus River Valley region, domestic textiles are essential for both auspicious occasions and daily life. Women may live in the snowy mountains, in parched deserts, amid green pastures, or in high hill country; in each environment they infuse heart and creative spirit into weaving and embroidering textiles. Ranging from tunics and shawls to bags and covers, the textiles are created for festivals, important family events, such as weddings and births, to show suitability as a prospective wife, and for dowries.

Collaborative needlework projects strengthen family bonds and friendships. Likewise the language of stitches, lively patterns and talismanic motifs imbue ordinary existence with vibrancy and a sense of protection. Migratory groups often meet and influence each other in this semi-arid, nomadic part of the world. Nevertheless characteristic combinations of vivid colors, motifs, and materials have traditionally conveyed the origin, tribal affiliation, religion, status, and identity of the women who created the works.



Small Bag, Sindh Province (Pakistan), first half of 20th century; cotton piecework and cotton lining quilted with silk, pom-poms, cotton string

The exhibition reflects the astonishing variety of textiles from the provinces of Pakistan: Sindh, Balochistan, the Northwest Frontier Province, Punjab, and the Northern Areas; many works date from before Pakistan's partition from India in 1947. Included are also works from western India and the provinces of Ghazni and Nuristan in eastern Afghanistan.

All textiles featured in this brochure are from the collection of Ambassador & Mrs. Thomas W. Simons, Jr.



Small Bags, Balochistan Province (Pakistan), first half of 20th century; cotton embroidered with silk, tassels, braided cord, plastic beads, cowrie shells, metal-wrapped thread



Small Bag, Ghazni Province (Afghanistan), first half of 20th century; cotton embroidered with silk, metal-wrapped thread, metal discs, mirrors, beads, cowrie shells, cloves, beaded tassels



The Indus Valley Region

The Indus River, at 1,800 miles in length, is one of the world's longest and mightiest rivers. Civilization flourished along its banks as early as 2600 B.C.; the Mohenjodaro and Harappa sites testify to great, and still mysterious, urban cultures from that early time. To this day the Indus is the lifeline of millions of people as it cascades from icy peaks in Tibet down the Himalayan foothills, fed by glacial streams and major tributaries that water the semi-arid plains of Pakistan, before spreading into a delta at the Arabian Sea.

The peoples who live along the Indus River, in Pakistan and its Northern Areas and in neighboring Afghanistan and western India, enrich the world with an astounding variety of cultures, religions, languages and artistic expressions. Nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes—Kohistani, Waziristani, Nuristani, Pashtun and Baloch—live in the region's upper reaches, in the isolated mountain valleys of northern and western Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan; they practice pastoral herding and/or agriculture. In the well-watered, fertile plains of the more densely populated Punjab and Sindh Provinces, groups belonging to Hindu or Muslim castes specialize in cattle and camel breeding, carpentry, farming, commerce or other occupations, while nomads roam the drier areas.

Embroidery Techniques and Stitches

There is no dominant, unifying stylistic expression among the numerous cultures of the Indus Valley. However, they all share a profound appreciation of colorful, intricately worked textiles and many patterns are geometric and usually non-figurative. The designs display inventive, distinctive uses of universal stitches and fascinating special techniques and styles, including the ones illustrated below.

Soof (lit. “triangle”, see right) is a technique counted out from the back of the fabric. Geometrical, whimsical variations of traditional motifs, including stylized flowers and figures, convey wishes of fertility and prosperity for the newlyweds. The designs are created with surface-satin stitches of varying lengths that allow most of the valuable silk to be visible on the front.

Hurmitch (see top of detail below) is a detached interlaced herringbone technique: a double-herringbone stitch foundation, interwoven by two layers of interlaced darning stitches. Worked either diagonally, or horizontally and vertically, four interlaced herringbone units can respectively be linked at adjacent corners or edges in order to form larger diamond or square shapes.

Kharek (lit. “fruit of the date palm”, see lower left of detail below) first requires creating a design outlined in black with the double-running stitch, and then filling this design with bars of even, short and closely worked satin stitches.



Dowry Cloth (detail), Sindh Province (Pakistan), first half of 20th century; cotton embroidered with silk, beads, sequins, tassels, mirrors



Rifle Cover (detail), embroidered by women of the cattle-breeding Mahar groups, northern Sindh Province (Pakistan), first half of 20th century; cotton embroidered with silk, cotton and metal-wrapped threads, mirrors

Pbulkari (lit. “flower work”) is a technique of surface darning and satin stitching that requires counting the threads on the reverse side of the fabric. By taking up a single thread with the needle, only the smallest amount of silk shows on the reverse, while a “float” of shimmering handspun silk floss (*pat*) is left on the front. Nuances are created by changing the direction of the stitches.

Hindu and Muslim communities in Punjab Province and the Hazara Region have traditionally created *pbulkari* shawls for important family occasions, especially weddings. Those from Hazara are traditionally made of joined panels of coarse, hand-woven white cotton (*kaddar*) and embellished with geometric patterns in dark pinkish-red silk floss.



pbulkari front



pbulkari reverse

Woman's Pbulkari Shawl (details of front and reverse), Hazara Region, North-West Frontier Province (Pakistan), first half of 20th century; hand-woven cotton embroidered with silk

Mirrors (*shisha*) are extensively used in the embroidery of Sindh and Balochistan. The silvered glass is attached to the fabric by means of stitched so-called “Indian Mirror” frameworks and encircling borders. By reflecting sunlight, mirrors protect the wearer from negative energies and evil glances. Roman stitch designs fill the areas between bands of mirror work. Each Roman stitch is sewn with a long stitch from left to right and a short crossing stitch at the center of the long stitch to tie it down.



Woman's Dress Pocket (detail), Balochistan Province (Pakistan), first half of 20th century; cotton with silk, metal-wrapped thread, mirrors

Chain stitch designs often embellish the textiles made by Pashtun women of the Katawaz Basin of the Paktika and Ghazni Provinces. The ones from Ghazni Province tend to include stylized, radiating floral and sun shapes embroidered with orange-colored thread.



Cover (detail), Ghazni Province (Afghanistan), mid-20th century, silk lined with cotton and embroidered with silk

The Collectors



THOMAS W. SIMONS, JR. completed a 35-year U.S. Foreign Service career by serving as American Ambassador to Pakistan (1996-98). Ambassador Simons and his wife Peggy had developed an interest in textiles during previous tours of duty in Poland, a country known for its pioneers in contemporary fiber arts. While living in Pakistan, they became fascinated by the beauty of traditional textiles made by women in the Indus River Valley and its adjacent areas. The Simons recall that “it was a joy to sit with dealers and other collectors and to learn about colorful hand-woven or intricately embroidered pieces from places such as the Pamir foothills of the north, the fertile plains of Punjab, the deserts of Sindh and Rajasthan, and the high plateaux of Balochistan, with Afghanistan to its west.”

Traveling around the country, the Simons came to share a deep appreciation for Pakistan’s impressive cultural and artistic diversity. However they were also stunned and saddened by the realization that the once thriving and widespread embroidery tradition is now becoming a vanishing art. In alternating peaceful and turbulent times, the Indus Valley region continues to urbanize and

modernize, and the lifestyles of its peoples are changing. Not so long ago, creatively—and laboriously—embellished textiles were considered essential for dowries, for important family events, and for daily household use. Today, as their importance is disappearing even among nomadic tribes, handcrafted textiles are replaced by factory-made, machine-stitched garments, as well as by synthetic fabrics and containers.

The Simons first displayed their textiles on the walls of the American Embassy Residence in Islamabad. Since leaving Pakistan, they have lent textiles to museum exhibitions in Madison, WI, Portland, OR, and Pasadena, CA. By exhibiting some of their finest, regionally most characteristic works at the Worcester Art Museum, the Simons join a handful of other scholars and collectors dedicated to preserving and introducing the stunning textile heritage of anonymous women in Pakistan, eastern Afghanistan and western India. Research still needs to be done, but pioneering textile historians, museum curators and independent scholars (including Nasreen Askari, Rosemary Crill, Noorjehan Bilgrami, Mary Ann Fitzgerald, Sheila Paine, Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, Patricia Ormsby Stoddard and Judy Frater) are laying the groundwork and pointing the way. The Simons hope that this exhibit will also help honor and explore the textile arts of the Indus Valley.

Ambassador Simons has taught modern and contemporary Islamic history at Stanford; served as Director of the Program on Eurasia in Transition at Harvard University’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies; and lectured on Post-Communist Islam in Harvard’s Government Department. His most recent book, *Islam in a Globalizing World*, was published by Stanford University Press in 2003. Both Ambassador and Mrs. Simons remain active in learning and promoting the textiles of the Indus Valley, an abundantly rich, but little known part of the world’s cultural heritage.

Select Costumes of the Region

Sindhi Lohana Woman's Wedding Tunic

The wedding tunics made by the women of Lohana Hindu enclaves in Sindh are encrusted with geometric and floral designs, mostly in chain and double-button-hole stitches. The knee-length tunics are worn with trousers and a head covering. During the wedding ceremony the bride wears the neck-slit to the back, after the ceremony, to the front. The upper corners of the neck-slit are filled with sand from the bride's native village or a sacred site.



Woman's Wedding Tunic (side with neck-slit and detail of other side), Sindh Province (Pakistan), first half of 20th century, satin-weave silk lined with cotton, embroidered with silk and cotton and metal-wrapped thread

Nuristani Man's Tunic

Nuristani tunics, embellished with pre-Islamic patterns, are composed of two layers of hand-woven cream-colored cotton: the finer layer on the inside is joined with the coarser one on the outside by means of counted-thread embroidery—mostly double-back, square chain and running stitches—executed from the front with black thread.



Man's Tunic (front and detail), Nuristan Province (Afghanistan), mid-20th century, hand-woven cotton embroidered with cotton



Balochi Woman's Dress

Muslim Balochi women from Balochistan Province (Pakistan) and Afghanistan wear dresses (*pashk*) decorated with a front yoke, sleeve cuffs, and a deep front pocket (*pudo*) ending in an inverted V-shape at the waist. The geometric, talismanic designs are embroidered with minute stitches (e.g., Roman, chain, square chain, two-needle chain, surface satin, herringbone, knot, detached interlacing, couching, cross, running, button-hole and Indian mirror).



Woman's Dress (front and detail), Balochistan Province (Pakistan), first half of 20th century; silk and cotton cloth, embroidered with silk, metal-wrapped thread, mirrors

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