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Introduction

To outsiders, Central Asia has always been dark and mysterious, a place to be feared, even by the powerful Chinese and Russians. And for good reason. Central Asians repeatedly defeated the larger countries. The Central Asians themselves fostered this ambience partly as a defensive strategy, and partly because of their fear and distrust of foreigners. In this book we will see how such fears and aggressions affected the design and production of their needlework.

This needlework, commonly known as *suzanis*, is a product solely of Central Asia, despite the region's divisions into several political states today, and historically into numerous city-states and tribal groups.

As Allworth explains, Central Asia has special significance for informed people everywhere, owing to its extraordinary human and cultural qualities. For centuries before the present one Central Asia stood out as a leading civilization, an Islamic heartland, a nexus for international trade. Because of these historical characteristics, it also held and holds great importance for the foreign relations of the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, countries of the Middle East and Southern Asia. In the short term, Central Asia plays that role partly for geopolitical reasons by virtue of its very location between lands west and east, north and south. Also, it remains politically divided into three major segments—Eastern (Chinese) Turkestan, Russian Central Asia, including Kazakhstan (often called Western Turkistan), and Afghanistan. Central Asia may still remain a grand, coherent whole, more viable than the separate fragments of it circumscribed by administrative boundaries applied to

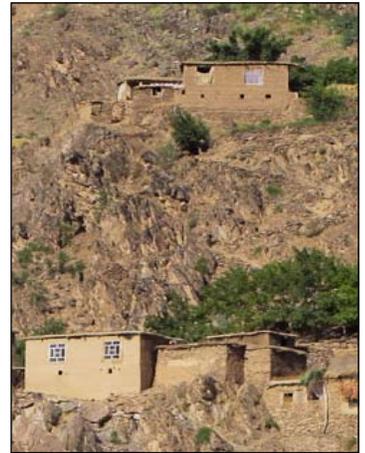
the region under Russian authorities in either Czarist or Soviet times.³ In other words, Allworth suggests that the five Central Asian republics (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan) should be considered a cohesive unit.

Finally, lest we forget why we are interested in *suzanis*, Jack Lenor Larsen, a contemporary textile artist, remarks; "I'd been told by the great Pupil Jayakar that, of course, everything wonderful there is came out of Central Asia. I had reason to believe that. I'd instinctively liked the Uzbek traditions, and whatever came out of those Silk Road metropolises."⁴

Definition of *Suzani* (needlework)

Almost all peoples across the world make embroidery, and have made it, for thousands of years. In particular, embroidery is made in nearby Iran, the Caucasus Mountain region, and India—none of which produce what I would call *suzanis*. So what makes *suzanis* different from all other embroideries?

The word *suzani* (pronounced su-zan-ná, or -né, with the emphasis on the last syllable) is probably derived from the Farsi *suzen* meaning "needle." (Tajiks call their language "Tajik," a dialect of Farsi.) Persian rug dealers who spoke Farsi could make their intentions clear by using the same term, and Central Asian merchants (Uzbeks as well as Tajiks) in Bukhara (currently spelled "Boxoro" in Uzbekistan) and Samarkand found it easy to follow suit. Tajiks are the cultural and also blood descendants



Detail of homes, Panj River. See page 7

Opposite: Detail of image on page 6. The farmer seems to be saying, "Take a look inside. You'll like what you see. I guarantee it."

The village might have served as a workshop for the Tashkent market producing tamasha palaks, commonly assumed to be related to Tashkent oi palaks. Both are usually almost completely covered with embroidery, but the design of Pskent tamasha palaks does not resemble that of Tashkent oi palaks. Equally possible is that Pskent was a marketing center for independent Turkic workshops producing their own designs in the Akhangaran River valley. Cosmic symbols featured on yuldoz palaks and found occasionally on other palaks indicate that ostracized Kuramas, separated from their more powerful neighbors and influenced by the nearby Kipchaks, may have practiced shamanism longer than others. Today, Turkic villages have been replaced by Soviet towns supporting the mining industry.

2 Togora Palak

110 x 91.5 inches (279 x 232 cm)

The overall design concept for this palak is strikingly similar to that of a certain large medallion suzani in the Vok catalog.¹¹⁵ Both pieces have these features.

- A large, somewhat irregular, circular medallion fills the field.
- At the center is a sun with flaming edges in the palak and concentric coronas in the Vok suzani.
- Nine cypress trees radiate from the sun.
- Four corner medallions represent moons in the palak but are palmettes in the Vok suzani.

However, visually, this palak is closer to another Vok palak.¹¹⁶ Despite their obvious stylistic differences:

- Both have saturated, light-fast, golden yellow ground colors found only on other Pskent palaks, and older Jizzak suzani, e.g., cat. no. 3. Could the dyestuff have been extracted from a plant indigenous to the Akhangaran Valley, and/or the result of a dye process known only to a few Kurama families in the valley? The yellow/gold tends to show abrash or a reddish tinge in this piece, or it could be a second dye color.

- Borders on three of the medallions in the Vok palak are the same as on this palak.
- They share some of the same star motifs, although in the Vok palak they tend toward floral. The 5-inch border on this palak has cartouches enclosing stars.
- This palak appears to be the older of the two.

Other design influences can be seen in these features:

- Nine rhomboids representing the planets¹¹⁷ are separated by two rings inspired by Tibetan mandalas.¹¹⁸
- Thick vines with stubby leaves are similar to those in Tashkent palaks, and Chinese carpets.

Anthropomorphic figures dancing around the sun, and stars of various configurations twinkling everywhere reinforce the notion that this palak was made for cosmological purposes. It likely was made in a rural village in the Akhangaran Valley away from the corrupting influence of sophisticated Pskent artisans. Widespread abrash in the reds, unusual in embroideries, and large variations in stitch sizes and technique, indicates rural manufacture, probably involving many people. The large size, fine workmanship, and big, bold design suggest it was meant for

Detail of flaming solar medallion with twenty dancing androids from Togora Palak cat. no. 2..





Inner border.

TECHNICAL DATA

GROUND CLOTH: 3 strips of 13", 7", 13".

BACKING CLOTH: None.

EDGING: A ¾" undyed cotton cloth on bias indicates that there was at one time a backing cloth.

STITCHES: (3) Chain, ladder, couching (basma).

YARN: Mostly silk and a small amount of wool (apricot color).

COLORS: (8 or 9) Red (2 or 3), green, apricot, blue, yellow, brown, black.

COVERAGE: 90% not including the mihrab.

CONDITION: Stains in open field.

PUBLISHED: *Images of Paradise in Islamic Art*, no. 40, by Blair Bloom.

EXHIBITED: The Textile Museum, 27 Sept. 1996 to 23 Feb. 1997.
Columbus Museum of Art, Nov. 2005.



Outer border.

27 Fergana (Ura Tyube)

51 x 33 inches (130 x 84 cm)

I call this piece the "Grandma Moses of Suzanis," stitched by a mature artist who was confident in her artistic judgment. She made the roses of differing sizes and in irregular rows and columns. I can imagine her friends saying, "Nafeesa, the roses are supposed to be in straight rows and columns and all the same size. And your borders are sloppy." And Nafeesa replying, "I don't care. It's my keshte and this is the way I like it!" The result is a charming piece. The rosettes have two or three colors of red and are entirely surrounded by a smooth leaf. The rosettes are so densely packed that there is little room for secondary motifs. Twining vine and florets fill the narrow borders. Although it is in a prayer rug format, it may never have been used as such, since the piece, despite its age, has no wear one would expect from such usage.

AGE and USER: Classical period. It was a domestic product not for sale.



Left: Front of a ceremonial, Kirghiz woman's conical headdress called *săukele* by Kazakhs,²⁴⁷ but also worn by Tekkes,²⁴⁸ Karakalpaks, and Uzbeks of the Kipchak steppe. Similar pieces reportedly were used as a wedding headdress since the Middle Ages.²⁴⁹ LoC 1870

Back of a Kirghiz woman's ceremonial headdress. LoC 1870

Location of pocket; the lining is missing.

the Russian Expeditionary force in Goek Teppe in 1881 (see appendix I) opined that the Tekke chirpys would have been a hit in the Paris fashion market.²⁵² Robes have been used throughout history in many cultures, both Eastern and Western.²⁵³

Depending on how you count, there are up to eight design motifs on this chirpy. The back has three stylized trees of life with ten floral motifs along the stem, each with eight rays ending in a small Maltese cross or two hooks. Each tree has nine ascending V-shaped branch pairs and more exotic floral motifs. At the bottom hem are two wavy lines with floral tridents growing from the inner row. The front flaps each have another similar tree of life plus one much larger, but with fewer floral motifs. The front flaps have many trident-shaped forms that might be Turkmen tamgas. On the back, some of the tree branches also end in trident-tamgas as well as a row of tridents along the bottom hem. The tridents are similar to those on an Arabatchi child's shirt.²⁵⁴ The collar has a tree of life growing down from the top with inscribed parallelograms between branches. It extends along a side of the flaps and terminates in a series of trilobite-like floral figures with pointed scales, plus stylized horse heads (see cat. no. 33). Larger trilobites alternating with hooked swastikas fill the space beside



Women rolling felt in an early spring morning on a street in Ishkashim, Gorno-Badakshan Tajikistan (36.7°N, 71.5°E). Like their children watching in the background, their personalities are as varied as their dresses. The rushing mountain stream behind them flows to the Wakhan River. VK 2010



Children of the women rolling felt. Their personalities shine through and are as different as their dresses. VK 2010

move about with their flocks, but city dwellers cannot easily tend to livestock that constantly require new pastures. Suzanis made in the cities use wool sparingly, typically for embroidery highlights in madder-dyed red because silk is difficult to dye with madder. Such wool as urban embroiderers needed could be purchased from itinerant nomads. Likewise, nomads can purchase silk, which they use sparingly, from city merchants. Instead of cotton and silk used in urban work, nomadic embroidery uses far more wool because they can produce it themselves. The few wool

piled rugs and flat weaves from Central Asia tend to be made by tribes, such as Turkmen and Kirghiz, not heavily involved with suzani making. Felt, made from wool, was a necessity for nomads to cover their yurts.

Fabrics

GROUND CLOTHS

Ground cloths are usually plain cotton karboz or silk. "The force required to pull in the wefts on the traditional backstrap loom . . . means that these weavings rarely exceed 18" in width," writes Eric Boudot,²⁹⁹ referring to Southwest China cotton weavings, but this description is also applicable to hand-woven Central Asian cotton karboz.³⁰⁰ For suzanis, the width of karboz is typically about 12 inches (30 cm). An added advantage of narrow widths is that it is easier to embroider than a wide fabric. When silk is used as a ground cloth, it is usually much wider and sometimes is ikat dyed.

BACKING CLOTHS

Backing cloth can be broadly divided into five categories: (1) plain karboz, (2) hand-block-printed karboz, (3) machine-spun and plain-woven cotton cloth, (4) machine-printed on machine-made cotton cloth, and (5) silk. The first two categories and silk fabrics generally are assumed to have been made in Central Asia, while the machine-made cloths were probably made in Russia, because it ruled Central Asia after the Conquest. Machine-made textiles could have come from Persia, India, England, or Europe, but Russia discouraged such trade. In older suzanis, the backing cloth was attached to the ground cloth with long basting stitches in colored yarn. One can see the stitches on the face.

(1) **Karboz** was used on the oldest suzanis.

(2) **Block-printing** is a very old craft, having originated in India at least 2,000 years ago and possibly as much as 5,000 years ago. India exported such textiles most of this period. Bukhara was noted as a center of wax printing of textiles in 1500, although "Bukhara" may be a generic term for "Central Asia." In Central Asia, hand-block-printed karboz

Major General Golovachev, war governor of the Syr Darya Oblast. LoC 1870



Let them enter Khiva! By Vasily Vereshchagin. Internet 1870

The painting below commemorates the capture of Khiva by Russian Imperial troops. In a propaganda piece for public consumption in St. Petersburg, humorous in the details, soldiers with fixed bayonets, but not rifles, follow a leader with saber drawn against an unseen foe who was cowering behind twenty-foot-high crenellated ramparts while a drummer announces the Russian presence. It shows how the brave Russians faced down a well-entrenched enemy a year or two before Khiva fell peacefully. The two-story villas were just mud huts thirty years earlier, according to Joseph Wolff. (See the contemporary photograph on page 263.)

Vereshchagin was a member of a large group of artists enlisted by their governments to illustrate war scenes for home consumption—sometimes called “propaganda.” Among them were Francesco Goya of Spain in the 1810s, Winslow Homer in the American Civil War, Thomas Moore of England, and Bill Mauldin of the United States in World War II.

under General Golovachev attacked the Yomud Turkmens and occupied the Turkmen villages of the Khwarezm oasis.

Khiva was surrounded on three sides by Russian Imperial troops. Von Kaufman assembled an overwhelming force that took Khiva with scarcely any resistance on May 29, aided by a coup d'état in Khiva only a few days earlier. (An American journalist and war correspondent, Januarius MacGahan from Perry County, Ohio, working for *New York Herald* and *London Daily News*,

was the only Western observer. He described his adventures in a popular book.) Ten weeks later the deposed khan, reinstated by von Kaufman, without arguing the conditions imposed by Russia, signed a peace treaty making him a vassal of Russia.

KHWAREZM, URGENCH, KUNGRAT, and KHIVA HISTORY

Khwarezm History

Zoroastrians founded Khwarezm more than 2,000 years ago at the delta of the Amu Darya. Inhabitants spoke an eastern Iranian language called Khwarezmian. It is still known by the same name today but now they speak Turkish. During the height of her political power, Khwarezm produced many poets and scholars, but it is best known now by its prominent cities.

Urgench History

The date Urgench was founded is uncertain, but extant ruins of the Kykmolla fortress have been dated (rather ambitiously) to the Achaemenid period (550-330 BCE). Kunya Urgench (42.3° N, 59.1° E) as the capital of Khwarezm was one of the greatest cities on the trading trails, with ample water for men and camels. The twelfth

