

# HAAL

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# SUZANI



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ust six years ago the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park became the home of a major collection of Oriental tribal rugs and textiles, when the noted collectors Caroline and H. McCoy Jones gave more than six hundred excellent examples to the city's Fine Arts Museums.

This gift, conservatively valued in 1980 at more than three million dollars, was only a starting point (see Hali 25). Since then the Joneses have added more than twenty new acquisitions to the collection, including the famous Hartley Clarke 'Adraskand' carpet, a Kurdish reed screen, an embroidered Tekke Turkoman asmalyk, an outstanding Karakalpak carpet and, most recently, six magnificent Uzbek suzani. These have been on display in the Museum's newly dedicated 'Caroline and H. McCoy Jones Gallery', which at last provides a permanent exhibition space for Near Eastern and Central Asian weavings. They confirm the San Francisco Museum's position, under the enthusiastic and dedicated curatorship of Cathryn Cootner, as host to one of the finest and most comprehensive tribal rug and textile collections in the United States.

H. McCoy Jones was one of the first American rug collectors to appreciate suzani—silk embroidered dowry textiles—made by settled Uzbek peoples in the region of Samarkand, Bukhara and Tashkent. Sixteen very good suzani from his collection were included in 'Tent and Town: Rugs and Embroideries from Central Asia' (1982), the Museum's first major exhibition curated by Cathryn Cootner. It is no surprise that McCoy Jones immediately recognised the quality and rarity of these six superlative examples of Central Asian needlework when they came onto the market. He bought them without hesitation and presented them to the Museum in December 1985.

H. McCoy Jones is a wise collector who appreciates full well that a great collection is a dynamic entity which can only be kept alive by the addition of fresh material. His dedication to the San Francisco collection is perhaps best illustrated by his purchase of the yurt included in the 'Tent and Town' exhibition. When asked why, he simply replied 'It belongs in the Museum'. His generosity has not only enhanced the Fine Arts Museums' collections, but also highlighted the importance of rugs and textiles as an art form. It is no coincidence that the de Young will be the most important exhibition venue for the Sixth International Conference on Oriental Carpets, scheduled for San Francisco in 1989.



1. Shakhriyabz Suzani

Southern Uzbekistan, late 18th or early 19th century. Silk embroidery on cotton. More than twenty Shakhriyabz embroideries with this standard quincunx theme are known. In this example small blue flowers sprout from the multi-coloured stem surrounding the floral discs which also contain typical mushroom shaped stamens. The border layout is less disciplined than on comparable examples. Previously published in Bausback's 1977 Mannheim catalogue *Alte Orientalische Flachgewebe*.

1.91 × 2.20 m (6' 5" × 8' 5"). M.H. de Young Museum, Inv.no. L84.166.4.



# GARDENS OF PARADISE

*Cathryn M. Cootner, widely respected as a leading exponent of structural methodology in the analysis of flatwoven rugs and textiles, reviews the aesthetic importance of the rare Uzbek suzanis recently given to the Museums' collection. A version of this essay previously appeared in Triptych, the magazine for members of the Museum Society.*

The six Uzbek suzanis recently given to the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum by Caroline and H. McCoy Jones are unequivocally the very best such embroideries in a Western public collection. Indeed they are only equalled in rarity, quality and range of pattern by a few examples in the Russian Museums and in two private German collections. As with all great works of art they set the standard by which all others are judged.

Suzanis were not only one of the major artistic creations of the settled peoples in Uzbekistan in Central Asia, now a Soviet Socialist Republic, but they had an important domestic function within the household. The most precious item in the dowry was the suzani to be used as the nuptial bedspread and these beautiful textiles also decorated the mosques and Emir's courts in the ancient cities of Bukhara, Tashkent and Samarkand. They were given as royal gifts and were used to drape over the bier as a final tribute to the deceased.

The art of suzani embroidery is a collective rather than an individual expression. While one can only guess at the prevailing circumstances surrounding the making of a particular embroidery, certain conditions seem to have held true in all localities. Suzani making was a family occupation. Young girls learned the craft from mothers and grandmothers. The designs were drawn onto the cloth either by a family member or a professional local designer. The cloth was divided into several vertical strips, usually between three and five in number, which would be sewn together again after the embroidery was completed. The degree of latitude in any one interpretation is well illustrated in two of the Shakhriyabz suzanis (1, 5), although it is unclear whether the differences reflect familial prerogative or regional stylistic variations.

What makes the McCoy Jones suzanis so special is their greater colour range, their exceptionally fine if not overly complex embroidery stitches and their consummate formal correspondences—the relationship of one colour to another and of one shape to another. The result is a rhythmic balance of elements that by comparison

visual tension between the two primary forces is counterposed by dissonances—the medallion's wavy fringe, curlicue surround, the uneven frame of the field and the obvious join of two strips on the left—and masterfully accentuated by stitches turning this way and that, alternately reflecting and deflecting light.

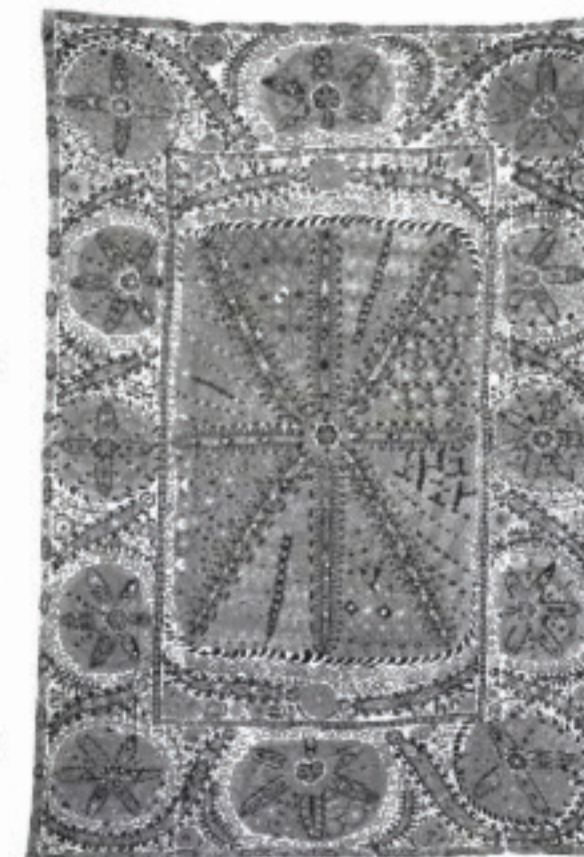
Light is the *sine qua non* of all textiles. In these suzanis it is both an external and an internal force—internal in the sense that the embroiderer is aware of the properties of light and deploys her stitches accordingly.

If words alone could define the essence of a work of art, that work itself would be unnecessary. Apropos of this truism is Henri Matisse's declaration 'He who wants to dedicate himself to painting should start by cutting out his tongue'. Matisse constantly ignored his own wise counsel, and in this instance my own vindication is that the preceding description is meant as a simple guideline.

Equally compelling is the question of the rationale behind the creation of these particular suzanis. Five of the six are attributed to the area of Shakhriyabz, south of Samarkand, and it is generally accepted that suzanis from this region of central Uzbekistan are the most sophisticated and refined. Assuming that the distribution of talent is no more regulated in Uzbekistan than in the rest of the world, skill alone is not the answer. Relevant cultural and economic data has yet to come to light.

The patterns are no less enigmatic. The importance of the idea of the 'Four Gardens of Paradise' in the Muslim religion has prompted many scholars to perceive any form that resembles a flower as a replication of nature's wonders and to consider the textile itself as a symbol of the splendours of Paradise. Such possibilities cannot be ignored. At least two of the suzanis (4, 6) show an obvious debt to identifiable floral forms on 16th and 17th century urban and court textiles from both Persia and India.

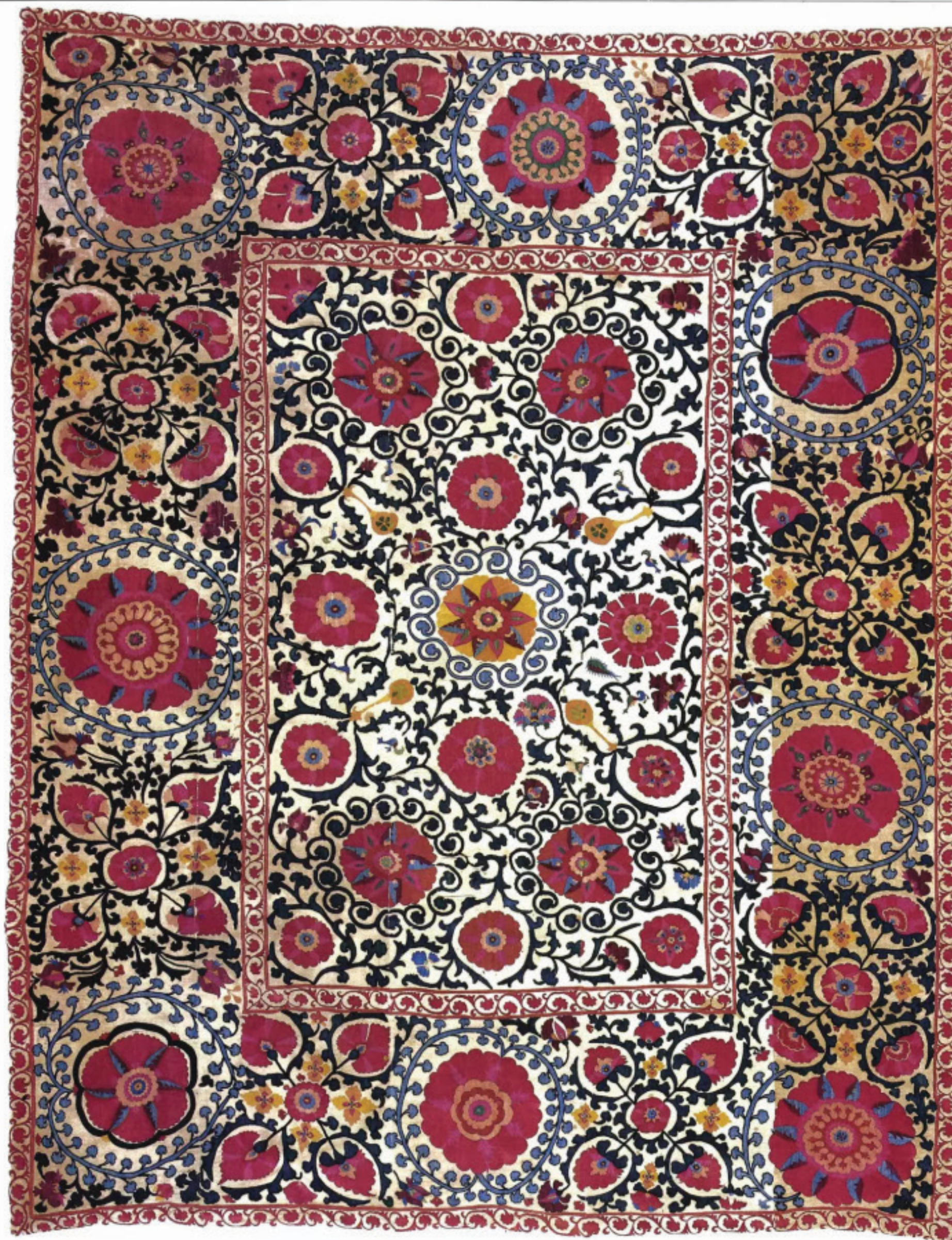
Nevertheless, the art of the towns in which the suzanis were made was both eclectic and fashion-orientated. Thus the 2-1-2 or 4-1 alignment of motifs in four of the five Shakhriyabz embroideries could represent the cosmos as portrayed in some Tantrist and Buddhist mandalas. Many messages, handed down over centuries, may be contained in these textiles. Only some of them are intelligible to today's embroiderers, and fewer still are decipherable by outside observers like us. From another point of view the persistent ambiguity, the pull between the real and the imagined, is a further dimension of these wonderful creations. They remind me of an old anonymous verse: 'Don't ever try to go there, It's to dream of not to find, Things like that are almost Always mostly in the mind.'



**3. Bukhara Suzani**  
Southwest Uzbekistan, probably late 18th century. The large medallion suzanis usually attributed to Bukhara are thought to be the earliest Central Asian embroideries and undoubtedly have the most archaic, powerful designs. (See front cover and contents page caption).  
1.96 × 2.84 m (6'5" × 9'4")  
M.H. de Young Museum,  
Inv.no. L84.166.6.

renders most other suzanis prosaic.

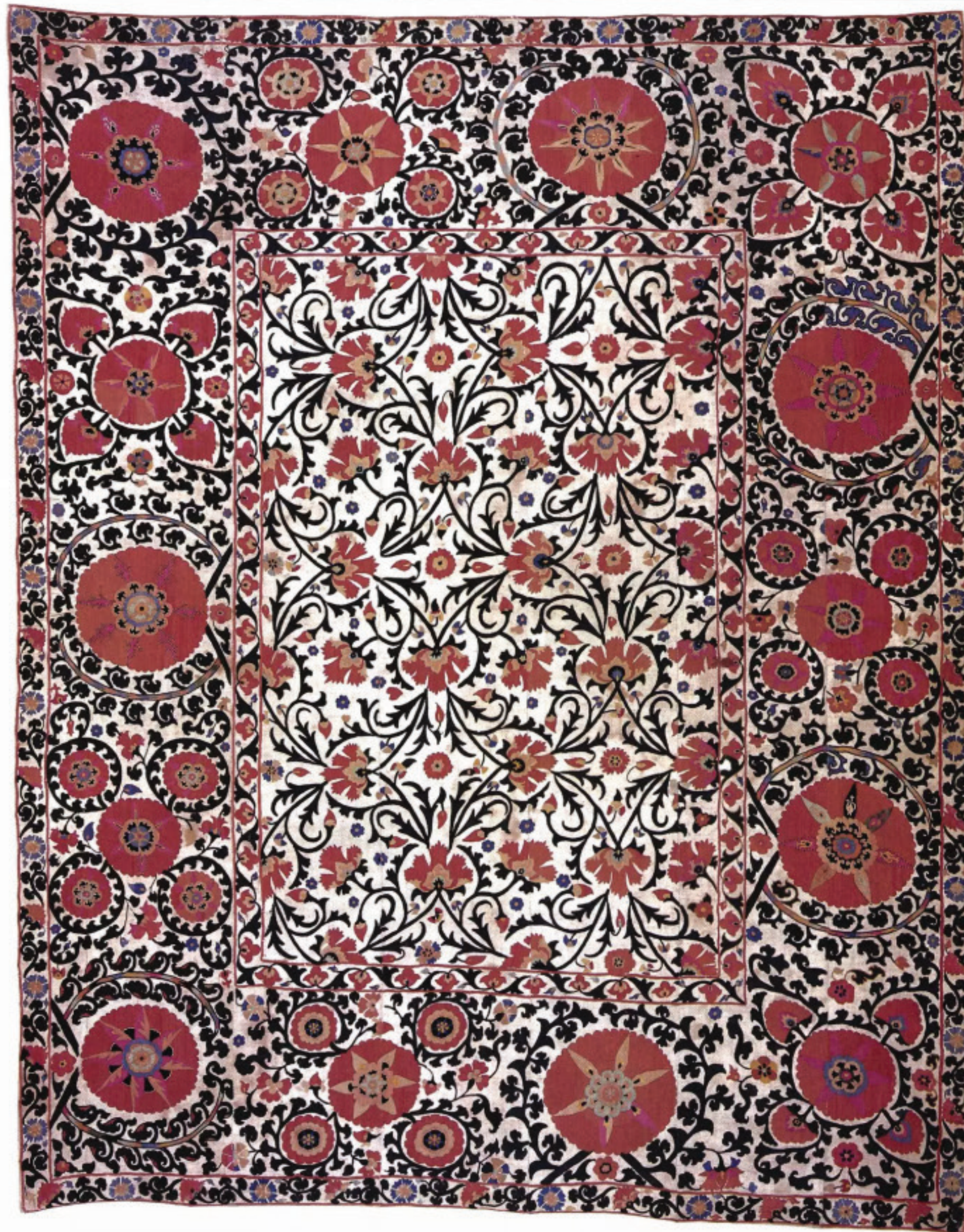
The single Bukhara suzani in the group (3), the most outstanding of just over a dozen known 'large medallion' examples, is an excellent case in point. The large roundels in the border are similar, yet each is imaginatively different, contracting or expanding according to its own internal laws of motion. Interior motifs are spawned, multiplied and changed in autogenetic fashion. The central medallion, an enlarged rectangular version of a border roundel commanding the centre field, is a marvellous magnification of the same spontaneous generation of form and colour. Different 'magnetic fields' erupt as centrifugal and centripetal forces strain against one another. The



**2. Shakhriyabz Suzani**

Southern Uzbekistan, late 18th or early 19th century. Silk embroidery on cotton. This superb quality, densely embroidered suzani is distinguished by the most unusual monochromatic treatment of the minor borders which is known on only four other examples, including one in the stores of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, executed in a single shade of red throughout. A second notable feature is the rarely seen arrangement of the leaf surrounds in the central field into a spiral form rather than the better known protruding stems of other examples. It is similar to an example in the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art, illustrated in Chepelevskaya's *Suzani Uzbekistana*.  
1.83 × 2.39 m (6'0" × 7'10") M.H. de Young Museum, Inv.no. L84.166.3.





#### 4. Shakhriyabz Suzani

Southern Uzbekistan, early 19th century. Silk embroidery on cotton. The complex spiral pattern seen in this embroidery is found on only ten known suzanis, nine of which can be firmly attributed to Shakhriyabz. Even in this very different treatment, the 4 and 1 theme is evident as a major design principle. Related examples can be seen in Bausback's 1981 Mannheim catalogue *Suzani Stickereien aus Mittelasien*, and in Knorr and Lindahl's *Uzbek*, the 1975 catalogue to an exhibition held at Lausanne's Musée des Arts Décoratifs.  
2.11 × 2.64 m (6'11" × 8'8"). M.H.de Young Museum, Inv.no. L84.166.7.



#### 5. Shakhriyabz Suzani

Southern Uzbekistan, late 18th or early 19th century. Silk embroidery on cotton. The most frequently used design on the finely executed embroideries from Shakhriyabz, south of Samarkand, consists of a never-ending play on the 4 and 1 theme, where a central motif is surrounded by four subsidiary motifs. This superb example with its typical border arrangement is considered to be one of the most outstanding. An almost identical embroidery in the Moscow Museum of Oriental Art is illustrated in Chepelevskaya's *Suzani Uzbekistana*. Previously published in Knorr and Lindahl's catalogue *Uzbek*.  
2.08 × 2.64 m (6'10" × 8'8"). M.H.de Young Museum, Inv.no. L84.166.8.