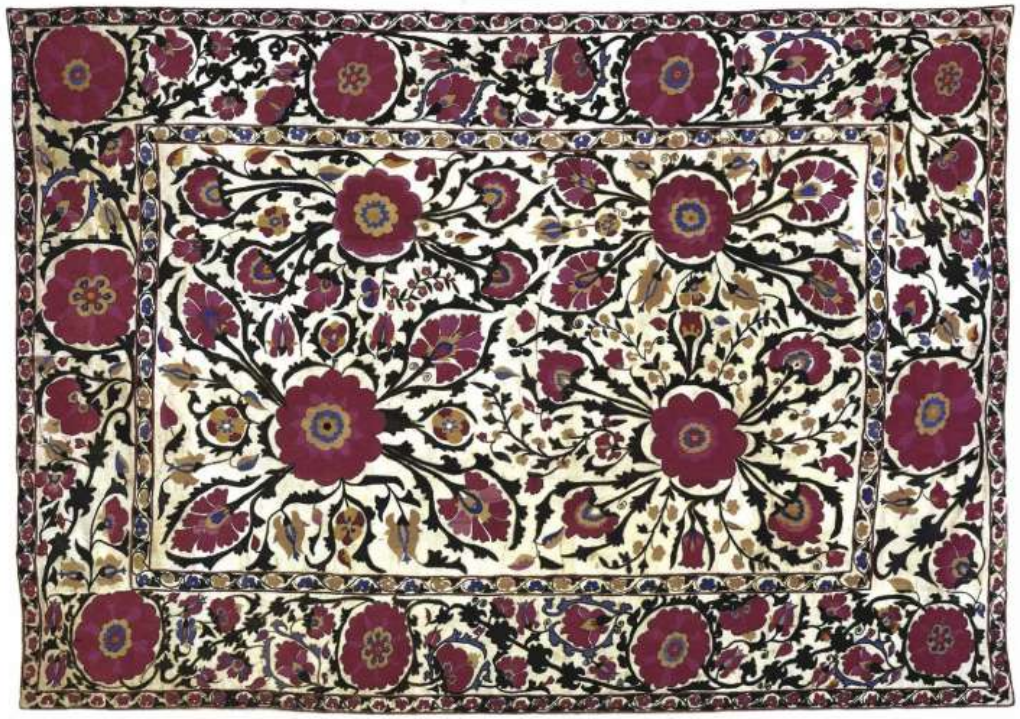

HISTORY & TECHNIQUE

Hali's Assistant Editor, Daniel Shaffer, summarises the very limited published information on the history and technique of embroidered textiles from Uzbekistan.

The Turkic speaking people of Uzbekistan take their name from Uzbeg Khan, a warrior chieftain of the Mongol 'Golden Horde' who, with his followers, was converted to Islam in the early 14th century. In succeeding centuries, their warlike descendants migrated steadily westwards, by turns conquering and intermingling with the indigenous tribes living in the wide desert lands and oasis towns north and east of the Amu Darya river.

By the 19th century the population of the ancient cities and towns of Central Asia was thoroughly mixed in origin—Uzbeks, Tadjiks, Sarts, Turkoman, Kirghiz, Kazakhs, Jews, Armenians and Arabs. The textiles and other artefacts produced there reflect this very diverse composition, showing elements of Turkic-Mongolian, Indian, Chinese and the even more ancient Sasanian traditions of the Persian speaking Tadjik tribes, who inhabited much of today's Uzbekistan before the arrival of the Turkic tribes.

The name suzani is derived from the Persian word for 'needle'. It is sometimes applied to all Central Asian embroideries, and more specifically to the larger examples. The area in which they have traditionally been made corresponds roughly to the modern boundaries of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, with the main centres of production being in the towns of Bukhara, Samarkand, Kermina, Karshi, Tashkent and Shakhrisyabz in the south and west, and Nurata, Dzhizak, Khodjent, Ura-Tyube and Pskent in the north and east.

Classification of suzanis is usually based on the names of those towns known to be centres of the craft, a method not without its problems. In the chapter devoted to suzanis in Knorr and Lindahl's charming little book *Uzbek* (1975), which together with their article on 'Large Medallion Suzanis' in *Hali vol.1. no.2*, remain the only significant studies published in English, Robert Pinner and Michael Franses have suggested that a broader division into eastern and western groups is more useful.

In the most general terms the six suzanis recently given by Caroline and H. McCoy Jones to the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco are large embroidered panels which were intended for use either as bed covers, curtains or decorative hangings. Suzani embroidering was a family occupation, with all the womenfolk in a bride's family participating in the production of these important dowry textiles. The chosen design was first drawn onto narrow vertical cotton panels, usually between three and six in number, either by an experienced embroideress within the family, or by a professional local designer, known as the *Kalamkash*, although occasionally one finds a suzani, such as the charmingly naive example (**6**) included in the San Francisco six, that is clearly drawn by an untutored hand. The fabric was then divided among the various embroideresses, and when the work was complete, strips would be sewn together to form the complete textile. It is this division among several hands that accounts for the occasional poor alignment of designs and variations of technique that can be seen on even the most accomplished suzanis.

In older examples, the foundation was either of locally produced and woven cotton, or much more rarely silk, while in later years factory produced cotton imported from either Russia or India was used. Silk was the normal embroidery yarn, again either locally produced, or imported from China and India along the various branches of the 'Silk Road' which converge on the oasis crossroads of Central Asia. The silk, whatever its origin, was purchased ready dyed from the Jewish communities in the major cities, who enjoyed a traditional monopoly of the craft. Indeed, one of the identifying characteristics of the Jews from Samarkand and Bukhara was their hands, deeply stained from the dye vats.

Dating suzanis presents problems similar to those encountered dating Central Asian carpets. In *Suzani Uzbekistana* (Tashkent 1961), G.L. Chepelevskaya dates no suzani earlier than the 19th century on the dubious grounds that sericulture was not revived in Uzbekistan until the 1770's when Shah Murad forced the silk growers of Merv to move to the Zarafshan valley north of Bukhara. There is however little doubt that Bukhara has been an important producer of silk textiles since at least the 7th century, and there are references to silk embroideries from the area between the 13th to the 18th centuries. As silk was produced in neighbouring regions both east and west of Uzbekistan, and as it lies at the hub of the complex routes of the 'Silk Road', there is little reason to suppose that silk was ever unavailable. Furthermore, it is unlikely that so highly developed and widespread a craft, deeply embedded in marriage, childbirth and funerary customs, had appeared and acquired a level of considerable sophistication within such a limited period of time, as suggested by Chepelevskaya. It is more probable that as in Anatolia, Persia and India, there was, by the 19th century, a centuries old almost unbroken tradition of embroidery.

6. Shakhrisyabz Suzani. Left
Southern Uzbekistan, early 19th century. Silk embroidery on cotton. This attractive, unique suzani is dramatically different from the other embroideries from Shakhrisyabz in that the field design employs an asymmetrical, informal pattern more usually found in borders, somewhat expanded and given a 'free hand' treatment. It is unlikely that the drawing in this example was by an experienced embroideress or a local professional designer. In addition, the design seems to work better when viewed horizontally rather than vertically.
1.83 × 2.57 m (6'0" × 8'5")
M.H.de Young Museum, Gift of Caroline & H. McCoy Jones, Inv.no. 1.84.166.5.

Most suzanis found today can be attributed to the 19th century, although examples do exist which may be be earlier. In the Leningrad museums there are several embroideries, admittedly in poor condition, acquired in the mid 19th century, by which time they were already at least 50 years old. By the same token, at least some of the San Francisco examples could be from the late 18th century. Within the period from the late 18th to the early 20th century it is however feasible to date suzanis as early, middle or late relative to one another. As with all Oriental textiles, the introduction of synthetic dyes in the late 19th century, and the deterioration not only of colour but also of drawing and technique that almost inevitably accompanied it, provides a benchmark.

In early examples, the red silks are usually dyed with cochineal or a related insect derived dye rather than madder, while the blues are invariably indigo. To date there has been no analysis of the various shades of yellow used. In splendid old suzanis such as the Shakhrisyabz and Bukhara large medallion pieces illustrated here, the apparently large number of colours is in fact achieved through the careful use of multiple shades of a very limited basic palette. A few, rare, early Samarkand and northeast Uzbekistan suzanis are embroidered with wool rather than silk, the reds invariably dyed with madder.

Four main embroidery stitches are found in suzanis. The most common is known as *basma*, from the Tadjik word for 'caught'. It is a laid and couched stitch used on most suzanis. A similar stitch, the *kanda khayöl*, employs couching diagonal to the laid stitches. It is extensively used on Shakhrisyabz embroideries and occasionally for details on early examples of Samarkand and Ura-Tyube suzanis. The third type, *tambur*, is a chain stitch mainly used on suzanis from the region east of Bukhara and in the Kermina area for outlines, while the fourth, *ilmok*, is also used for outlines and very rarely for complete embroideries. It is a double button-hole stitch, as seen on the large medallion embroideries.

Within Central Asia, each region has its individual style distinguished by the manner of drawing, use of colour, techniques and motifs used, although they must be seen as shades of difference along a continuum rather than as clear cut distinctions. Thus from Shakhrisyabz came finely embroidered suzanis with sophisticated designs and strong, vibrant colours, while Samarkand suzanis show coarser interpretations of a similar theme, more fluid in design. Bukhara emroideries have looser, more relaxed designs with meandering vines, rustic in concept, with great strength and vitality.

Suzanis from all areas rely very heavily on floral motifs, although the specific flowers depicted have not been conclusively identified. It is reasonable to suppose that poppies and carnations, from among the many varieties of flowering plants common in Central Asia, are a major source of inspiration, both in the rosettes and palmettes of the large medallion suzanis and in the field and border designs of the Shakhrisyabz examples.

Medallion designs also appear on suzanis from all areas, although with the exception of the *oi-paliak*, moon suzanis, from Tashkent and Pskent and the very rare large medallion embroideries from Bukhara, the medallion design is subordinate to the total composition.

By the last quarter of the 19th century, the dowry suzanis of Uzbekistan were becoming articles of trade, and it was inevitable that the demands of the market influenced their manufacture and the development of design. This, allied to the introduction of synthetic dyestuffs, produced a deterioration of quality which clearly distinguishes the early suzanis from their 20th century successors. It is fortunate that exquisite examples such as the six featured here have survived, and are now accessible to the public in a museum collection. □