2. Ersari germech, 89 x 32 cm. *Courtesy Moritz Hildebrand, Hildesheim.*

3. Ersari germech, 104 x 29 cm. *Courtesy Julian Homer, Cheltenham.*

ivory mixed
wefts: wool, Z2, lightly twisted, light brown, 2 shoots

pile: wool, Z2, asymmetric knot open to the right, 32 H x 33 V = 1056/dm²
ends: upper, 3cm plainweave with sewn on blue/red-brown plaited suspension cord (original); lower, 7cm wool plainweave, red with two narrow blue stripes, weft-twining of the end wefts above the fringe (brown/ivory)
sides: wool selvage, brown, wrapped around 3 pairs of warps
colours: (8) madder red (towards yellow), orange, dark blue, light blue, yellow, dark brown, mid brown, ivory

The example shown in fig. 3, is in the collection of Mr. Julian Homer of Cheltenham. The structure details are as follows:
size: 104 x 29cm
warps: wool, Z2S, dark ivory with some light and medium blue
wefts: wool, Z, dark ivory, 2 shoots
pile: wool, Z2, 5mm high. Asymmetric knot open to the right. No depression, 31 H x 59 V = 1829/dm²
ends: upper, 4cm (3.2 red/brown, 0.8 dark ivory) balanced plainweave, Z2. Across first 4 rows countered weft-twining over 4 warps in red and light turquoise. At both sides weft-twining changes to 4-parts plaite, 20cm long; lower, 1cm dark brown balanced plainweave, Z. Across first 1 row weft-twining in red/brown and ochre over 4 warps
sides: wool selvage, cord of 3 warps, red/brown extra binding
colours: (8) red/brown, red (synthetic), ochre, dark blue, dark turquoise, light turquoise (weft-twining), dark brown, ivory

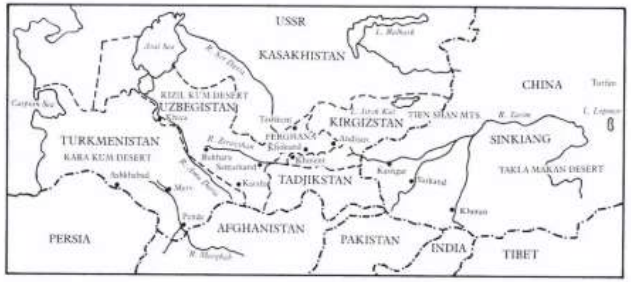
Unravelling Central Asian Embroidery

*Y. Levinsteyn**

One thinks of Central Asia as a land as remote as the moon: a land of legend, little known and hardly understood. This sense of mystery and isolation also applies to the art of the region and unfortunately many misconceptions obscure its appreciation in both the West and in the Soviet Union. As the Central Asian Republics have closed their doors to western scholars, the only information the latter have managed to obtain has come from Uzbek, Kirghiz and Turkoman exiles, who are today residents of Afghanistan, Iran and various other countries. Their information is sometimes unreliable, and even wrong, because of their long years in isolation from their motherland and its traditions. Moreover many of the local traditions have now been destroyed with the advent of westernization and industrialization in Central Asian society. Only a few Russian scholars have devoted the time and energy for a serious and systematic study of the arts of Central Asia, and whilst more recently there have been some serious attempts to gather and study material from these areas much has already disappeared with the passing of those who preserved it in their memories.

Before the Russians came to Central Asia, this vast territory was inhabited by various peoples of diverse origins who lived very much like one large family despite their historical, cultural and ethnic differences. The majority are Turkic-speaking while the Tajiks and some tribes of the Pamirs speak Farsi. Interestingly enough, some of the elderly speak both languages.

Samarkand and Bokhara were the largest commercial centers of Turkestan, to which merchants and craftsmen came from all over to sell their goods. This explains why these



names were given to the rugs sold, but not necessarily woven there. Indeed, even though the two towns are situated in present day Uzbekistan, rugs of these names were never woven by the Uzbeks, as one might be led to believe.

The indiscriminate division of Central Asia into five republics following the Revolution of 1917 led to an even greater ethnic confusion. In assigning passports to the various peoples, the new Soviet Government gave no consideration to place of origin, but only to place of residence which they were not allowed to leave. Whereas most of the Central Asian population was nomadic, the Tajiks and Uzbeks led sedentary lives. Thus many Tajiks found themselves in Uzbekistan, while the Uzbeks were now living in what was considered to be Tajikistan. Inevitably, this artificial settlement contributed to the deterioration of these peoples' historical and cultural traditions and folk art.

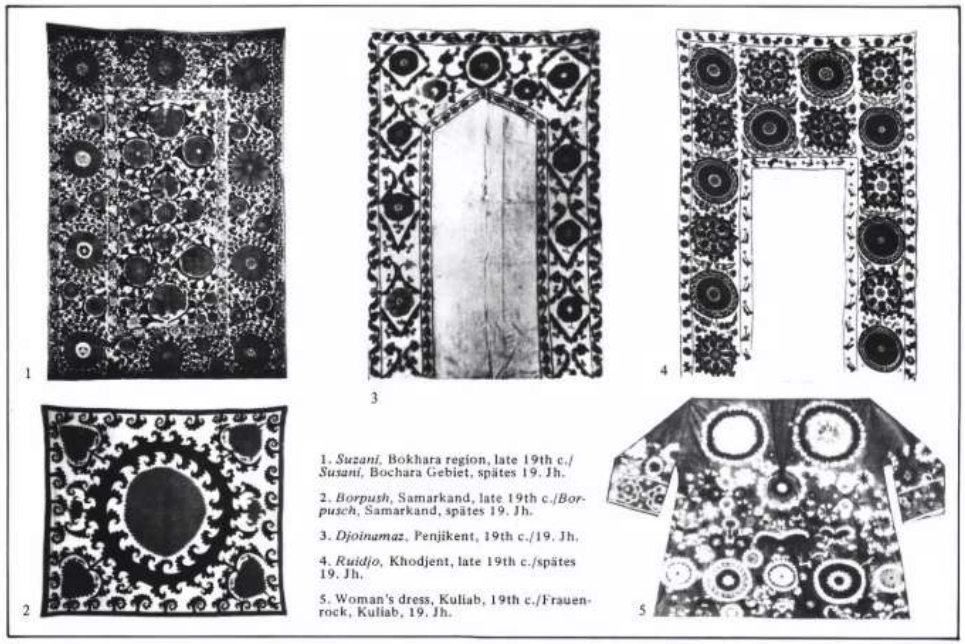
Although the controversies concerning the differentiation of Turcoman rugs have now been largely settled, those regarding their embroideries are still very much alive. Of the books written on the rugs and embroidery of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, only a few are works of merit.[1] However, important questions concerning these regions' ceramics, jewelry, and feltwork have received little attention and the art of the Kirghiz, Kazakhs and Uighurs are not even considered. Even when the subject of Central Asian embroidery appears to have been adequately treated, on second glance, one discovers clear instances of inconsistencies and confusion. For example, in one book dealing with Tajik embroidery there are illustrations labelled 'Tajik' that have appeared in another work on Uzbek textiles, labelled 'Uzbek'.

The truth has begun to emerge only after years of travel, expeditions and research conducted in Central Asia which involved interviews with local people and a comparative analysis of the materials. Unfortunately, more often than not, much of what is heard is fantasy or legend and, as one says jokingly in the Soviet Union, one must 'divide by sixteen to get just a glimmer of the truth'.

However, my research in this field has led me to conclude that these embroideries are largely of Tajik origin. Indeed, the influence of the Tajiks on Uzbek culture is apparent in its language as well as in all of its art forms, such as architecture, ceramics, and embroidery. Tajik embroideries, which include *suzani, ruidjo, djoinamaz,* and *borpush,* are broadly characterized by their wide borders and their finely detailed floral motifs (such as palmettes and rosettes) inset in rectangular medallions that are reminiscent of those encountered in Persian hand-printed fabrics. Embroideries of Uzbek origin, on the other hand, can be distinguished from the Tajik by their purely geometric motifs and composition.

The only exclusively Uzbek phenomenon is the *palak* which has been wrongly identified in the past as *suzani.* Very popular in the regions of Pskent and Taskent, *palaks* are usually large (3 x 4m or 4 x 5m) and are completely embroidered in *basma* stitches – small, parallel, and flat stitches which outline the designs. Most frequently encountered is the *ulduz* or 'star' *palak,* typically embroidered with a large star in the center of the field and smaller stars inset in triangles situated in the corners. Another type of *palak,* the *oy palak,* is embroidered with nine to twelve circles arranged in groups of three on three to four lines and inset in a stem-like design. Even the *palak* betrays the Tajik influence, which is seen in the frequent depiction of small floral motifs that are less perfectly executed and developed than in their Tajik counterparts.

Although there are countless Tajik embroidery types in Central Asia, the scope of this article only allows for the description of the most frequently encountered: *suzani, borpush, djoinamaz* and *ruidjo.* Technically, these make use of five or six types of stitch, including *basma* and chain stitches, the choice of which depends on the individual village and town, although only one or two kinds of stitch are generally used on a single piece. The fabrics used for these embroidery types were different grades of cotton, which varied from one village to another, and occasionally hand-woven silk.



1. *Suzani,* Bokhara region, late 19th c./*Susani,* Bochara Gebiet, spätes 19. Jh.

2. *Borpush,* Samarkand, late 19th c./*Borpusch,* Samarkand, spätes 19. Jh.

3. *Djoinamaz,* Penjikent, 19th c./19. Jh.

4. *Ruidjo,* Khodjent, late 19th c./spätes 19. Jh.

5. Woman's dress, Kuliab, 19th c./Frauenrock, Kuliab, 19. Jh.

Terminology

It would be far more preferable and less confusing if the following Central Asian terminology could be applied in Western literature:

Suzani (fig. 1) has been misleadingly used to designate all Central Asian embroidery types whereas in fact in only applies to one kind. It is the largest of the Tajik embroideries (2 x 3m, 3 x 4m or 4 x 5m) and is usually lined. The field and borders are embroidered with floral designs.

Borpush (fig. 2) is another embroidery type, basically similar to the suzani in terms of technique and design, but smaller in size (2 x 2m, 2 x 3m, 1 x 2m).

A *djoinamaz* (fig. 3) is a Tajik embroidery designed for Moslem prayer. Easily recognizable with its *mihrab,* it was particularly popular among travelers who found it much more convenient to transport and easier to afford than a pile rug.

A *ruidjo* (fig. 4) is a wedding bedspread that is characterized by its *pi*-shaped (π) format and measures approximately 1.7 x 1.2m. Of vital importance to the family's honor and pride, it is the testament of the bride's virtue and purity.

Embroidery plays a vital role in many aspects of Central Asian life. Its role is primarily as a decorative wall hanging, since there is little furniture. Embroidery is also the ultimate test of a young bride's artistic ability and of her devotion to the bridegroom. The young girl's trousseau, prepared years before her wedding day together with female relatives and neighbors, included *suzanis,* skull caps, and sashes embroidered for the future bridegroom. The bedspreads are particularly interesting because of their symbolic motifs, including snakes, worms, and leeches (which represent prosperity and happiness), pomegranates (fertility), and pairs of peacocks (the bride and groom) facing each other, that hark back to pre-Islamic times. All these works of art are judged on the wedding day in the bride's home where they are displayed on the walls.

The embroidery of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan differs between that of the plains and the mountains. The former is broadly characterized by the use of floral designs which reflect the luxuriant vegetation of the region. Each district in the plains would resort to its own particular design, composition, and colors. Embroiderers of the mountainous regions, on the other hand, would depict their stern landscape with geometric designs. Even when the subject of the composition is floral, it is always inset in very ornamental medallions. Although embroidery itself is more popular among the inhabitants of the plains, their clothes are far simpler than those worn by the mountain folk and are only rarely decorated with embroidery. However, the everyday dress of the Pamirs is colorfully and brightly embroidered. Particularly noteworthy are the loosely cut women's dresses with embroidered collars or sleeves which are sometimes entirely embroidered with floral motifs (fig. 5).

Of equal interest are the skull caps that are constantly worn by both men and women. The men's caps are rectangular in shape, black or green, and feature the *bodom* or 'almond' motif, embroidered with white silk or cotton. The women's caps may be rectangular or round and are embroidered with beads, floral motifs, and even gold thread in various techniques such as the cross and flat stitch.

It is my hope that the serious efforts already underway at the State Oriental Art Museum in Moscow and at the Institute of Ethnography in Leningrad will divulge many of the secrets that have thus far obscured the understanding of this important art form.

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[1] For example: Moshkova, V.G., *Kovr Narodov Srednei Asii,* Tashkent 1970