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Uzbek Suzanis

by Michael Franses

SUZANI - An Introduction

Terminology

The name suzani is derived from the Farsi word for 'needle'. There are at least two meanings of this term. As used commonly in the West, the word describes a large group of silk embroideries of a particular type, usually on either a cotton or silk ground, made in the old Central Asian Emirates of Bukhara and Kokand between at least as early as 1750 and around 1950. In the area where they were made, the term is used in a more specific way to describe embroidered bed covers of the same general type but within a particular size range, the average being about 180 by 250 cm. However, the terminology of textiles is rarely simple; embroideries made by different tribes and/or in other techniques both in the same region and in other areas of the Middle East such as Iran are not usually known

Prestige Items

During the high period of the art – from around 1750 to 1875 – which is the subject of this essay, suzanis were prestige items. Although they were the most widespread form of household decoration in the region, each embroidery probably originally formed part of a suite made by a bride and her family expressly as dowry weavings to be presented to the groom on the wedding day. Weddings were major events in Central Asian tribal society. They represented the binding together of two people and the fusion of two families, in order that their tribe might continue and increase. Not surprisingly, therefore, the patterns and motifs found on suzanis are symbols of luck, health, long life and, above all, fertility.

in the West as 'suzanis', although they are often so described in their places of origin.



Decline of the Art

The Russian occupation of Central Asia during the past hundred and fifty years resulted in fundamental changes in the circumstances and values of the peoples who made suzanis. Although suzanis continued to be produced well into the middle of the 20th century, the Russian ethnographers who attempted to identify the various symbols found on them were working long after the decline of the art form had begun, at a time when the dreams, hopes and aspirations of the people had changed. The character of the symbols themselves also changed; their meanings evolved and the original ideas behind them were lost.

Literature

At present there is no readily available book on suzanis. There is one work, *Suzani Uzbekistana* by G. L. Chepelevskaya, but this is by no means comprehensive and has only a small number of poor illustrations, mostly in black and white. But Chepelevskaya's information is purported to have been based upon fieldwork, and the illustrations used were drawn from a number of museums with the largest collections of suzanis: the Russian Museum, St. Petersburg; the Russian Museum of Ethnography, St. Petersburg; the Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow; the Museum of the History of the Peoples of Uzbekistan, Tashkent; the Samarkand Museum; the Bukhara Museum; the Museum of the Academy of Sciences of Tadjikistan, Dushanbe; the Tadjik Regional Museum, Dushanbe.





Catalogues

A number of catalogues have covered the subject: although each has its limitations, every publication adds to the corpus of known works, which, taken together, help to give a clearer view of the subject. It must be said, however, that many of these catalogues contain very few suzanis of real artistic merit and their illustrations are thus only of academic interest. An exception to this is the catalogue of suzanis in the Ignazio Vok Collection, which illustrates what are, in my opinion, some of the most beautiful examples

New Discoveries

Each year new discoveries are made. Many fine examples reside in British private collections, having been passed down through the generations of families that once lived in India: most of the best preserved suzanis made before 1850 were taken south in the face of Russian expansion into Central Asia. Occasionally, examples are found that are very different to any encountered before, but for the most part the art of suzanis is a traditional medium and the majority of

extant. It is well produced, with excellent colour illustrations – although we would disagree with portions of the text and the actual attributions. More recently, the selection for an exhibition held in Stuttgart and Berlin clearly leant towards ethnography rather than art. These two criteria need not necessarily be mutually exclusive, and the selection is made even more surprising by the fact that some of the most beautiful suzani in the world are now in German collections.

newly discovered works are more or less closely related to well-known types.





Difficulties in the Attribution of Suzanis

We have proposed attributions and dates for the suzanis in this exhibition, even though there is very little firm information as to where or when any individual suzani was made. The dates and locations given should therefore be treated as reasoned opinion rather than established fact. It is, in any case, unrealistic to expect to comprehend fully the art of an entire country, an art which is the expression of hundreds of thousands of people and has developed over many centuries – especially in the absence of any written records. Since the passing of the high point of the art, society and traditions in the region have evolved so dramatically that we cannot easily comprehend the environment in which these beautiful

of greatest similarity were made either at the same time or in the same region, or both: no two handmade objects are ever completely identical, and the various degrees of similarity may represent suzanis made by the same family, or in the same village, or the same district or region. On this basis, suzanis could be sorted into groups simply by field composition. However, some examples combine more than one composition, and others that share the same basic design can often be quite unrelated in other features. We have consequently concluded that some of these patterns must have been common to more than one region. While we believe, therefore, that this method of grouping is not the most satisfactory, it does

works were created.

Suzanis are a traditional art form and many examples therefore look similar. It has been assumed that works

illustrate the manner in which a particular composition is treated from region to region.



Alternatively, as certain types of suzanis are strongly believed to come from specific places, the attributions

features – we use the term ‘cluster’ rather than ‘group’ because the former implies a more flexible

of these 'key' examples could provide an alternative starting point for grouping related examples. But such a method would have to be based upon an absolute belief in the locations attributed to the key pieces, such as those provided by Chepelevskaya from her fieldwork and research in the museums of the old Soviet Union, and we have become less certain of these fixed points over the years. The variety of styles and individual ornaments used by the thousands of surviving examples suggests that they were made in a great number of different locations spread over a large area, yet Chepelevskaya attributes the fifty or so suzani she illustrates to a mere eight locations.

We have therefore attempted to assemble related works into clusters based not simply on their design or their possible place of origin, but also on detailed examination and comparative analysis of their technical

perimeter to the grouping. We note the basic characteristics of each example as well as any unusual features: the width and assembly of the ground cloths; how the main field compositions might change in small particulars from example to example; the style of drawing of the motifs; the border and guard patterns and the handling of individual ornaments; the colours or shades of colour used; the embroidery techniques; the presence of any braiding, edging or lining fabric. We note the various levels of similarity within each comparison – although such small degrees are very difficult to quantify, and we realise that the relative importance we might place upon any one feature is also highly subjective. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt about the value of painstaking comparative analysis in the process of familiarising oneself with, and gaining a greater understanding of, the subject..





The validity of clusters based on comparative analysis alone would be open to question. But by consideration of all the available factors – similarity of design, some of the more reliable ‘fixed points’ and detailed analysis – we believe it is possible to create meaningful clusters and construct tentative geographical sequences within and between them. For example, although we have not always followed Chepelevskaya’s attributions, comparison of several of our clusters with related suzanis illustrated by her has helped us to establish some reasonably firm

Many unanswered questions remain. For example, some individual examples and small clusters have features which place them ‘in-between’ two larger clusters: one obvious inference would be that they may have been made in a village geographically between two larger centres; an equally plausible alternative explanation is that a bride from one region married into a family from an adjacent region.

Another typical problem encountered is where individual examples are similar to others assumed to

attributions. Other suzanis discussed by her do not fit comfortably into the locations she claims for them when reassessed by our criteria, but include features which lead us to propose alternative attributions. Some of the clusters we have formed are large and others small. There are also examples which appear to be 'unique', although it is more likely that we have so far only come across this single surviving example of that particular cluster and that other similar examples probably do, or did, exist. These single examples often contain features relating them to one or more clusters, yet differ sufficiently for us to conclude that they belong with no others so far identified.

Of course the distinctions are not always clear cut, and we would reiterate that what we are considering here are individual works of art, albeit part of a strong tradition, which cannot necessarily be so simply classified so many years later.

be from two different fixed points: one combination of its features places it in cluster A, but another combination puts it in a different cluster B. For instance, the attribution of some suzanis to Karshi is based upon specific examples with clearly defined features, including the form of the leaf shapes, the positioning of two leaf surrounds (one enclosing the other) around some of the large flower heads, the tones of the colours, and the use of basma or ilmok as the principal stitch. However, further examples have not only some of these features but also others which relate them to suzanis thought to be from the Kermina region. Certainly, much more work needs to be done if the hypothesis of geographical progressions is to gain substance.





One conclusion we can draw from our observations is that the variations from suzani to suzani may not be the result merely of geographical sequences but also of chronological ones. However, as none of the works have dates on them, the dating of examples presented here should be taken simply as our considered opinion. The basis for this has been comparison with examples in public collections with early acquisition dates and with the reported ages of suzanis that came to England from India in the early part of this century, unreliable as that information can be. We know of no suzanis that we believe date from much earlier than the second half of the 18th century. The probable

Naturally, any conclusions as to date and attribution which are based upon such a collage of unsubstantiated premises are at best circumspect, and the interpretation of the multitude of variations observed is a potential minefield, but it seems unlikely that any more detailed information will come to light. Over the years, while our archive has considerably increased and several previously unknown designs been found, the overall picture has become no clearer. Perhaps another visit to the new Central Asian republics may prove of some help, although, with the art 'dead' for more than a century and after seventy years of Soviet rule, it is unlikely that as much could

reason for this is that although silk was traded along the Silk Road for almost two thousand years, it was expensive and the secret of silk production was closely guarded. We have confined our research to what we believe to be the high point of the art, an era of little more than a hundred years from the mid 18th century. The greatest examples probably come from the earlier part of this period.

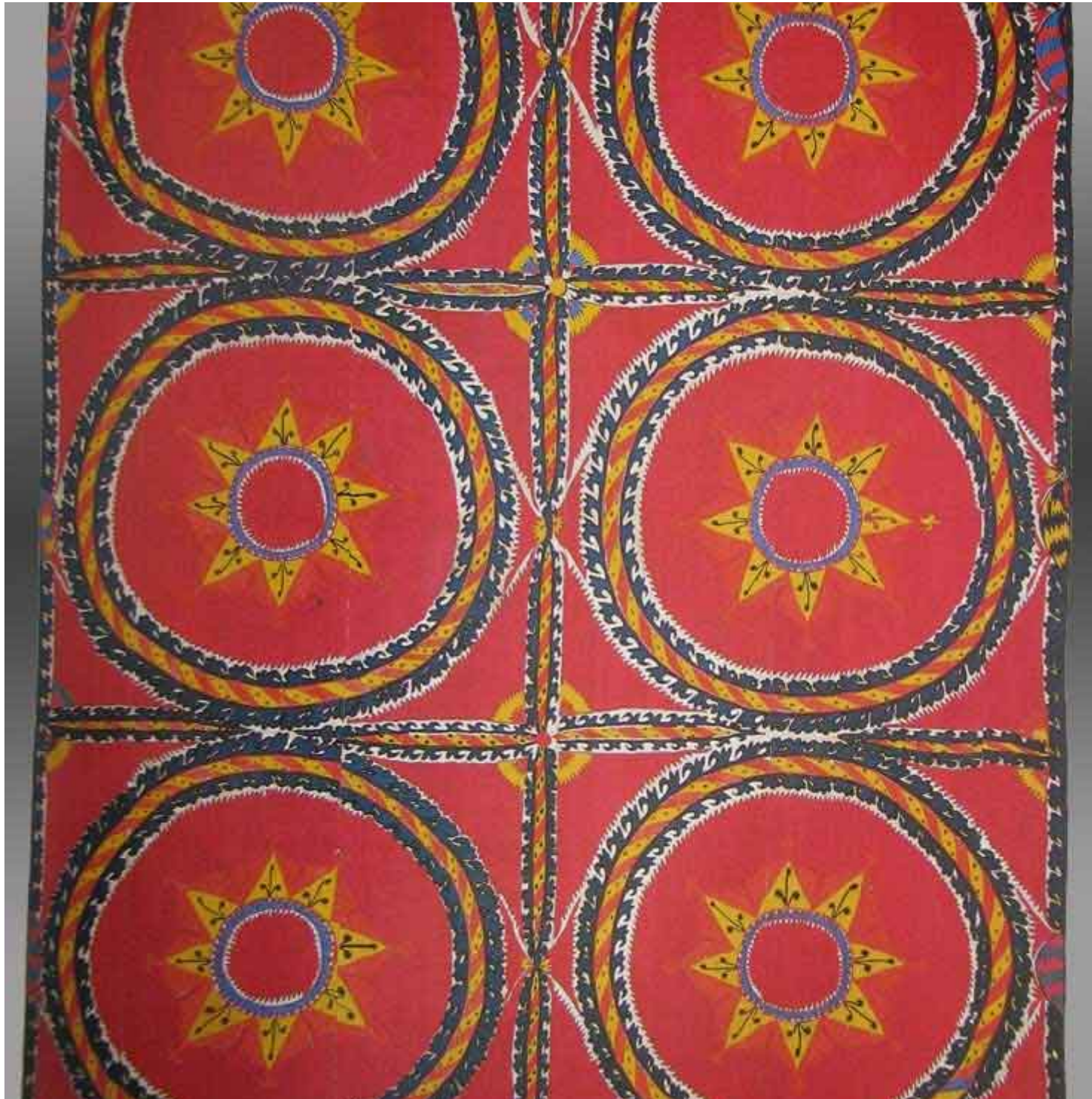
be discovered there as was found by Chepelevskaya in the 1950s.

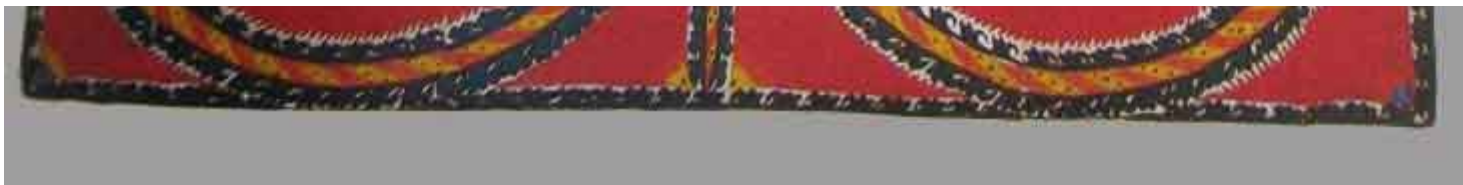
FIELD DESIGNS

Astrological/Moon Circles

For the purposes of identification and labelling, suzanis are often categorised by their basic field compositions. A similar exercise could also be carried out for the design schemes of the primary and secondary borders. However, such a detailed study is beyond the realms of this text and would be more suited to a book on the subject that drew examples from a far wider range of embroideries and was thus able to present a clearer view of the art of the suzani. Most of the known compositions appear on suzanis from almost all the different regions of production, and there are many examples that combine more than one of them. By comparing the way similar field compositions are executed in different regions, and noting matching ornaments, it is possible to gain an insight into the numerous eccentricities of style that occur from region to region.







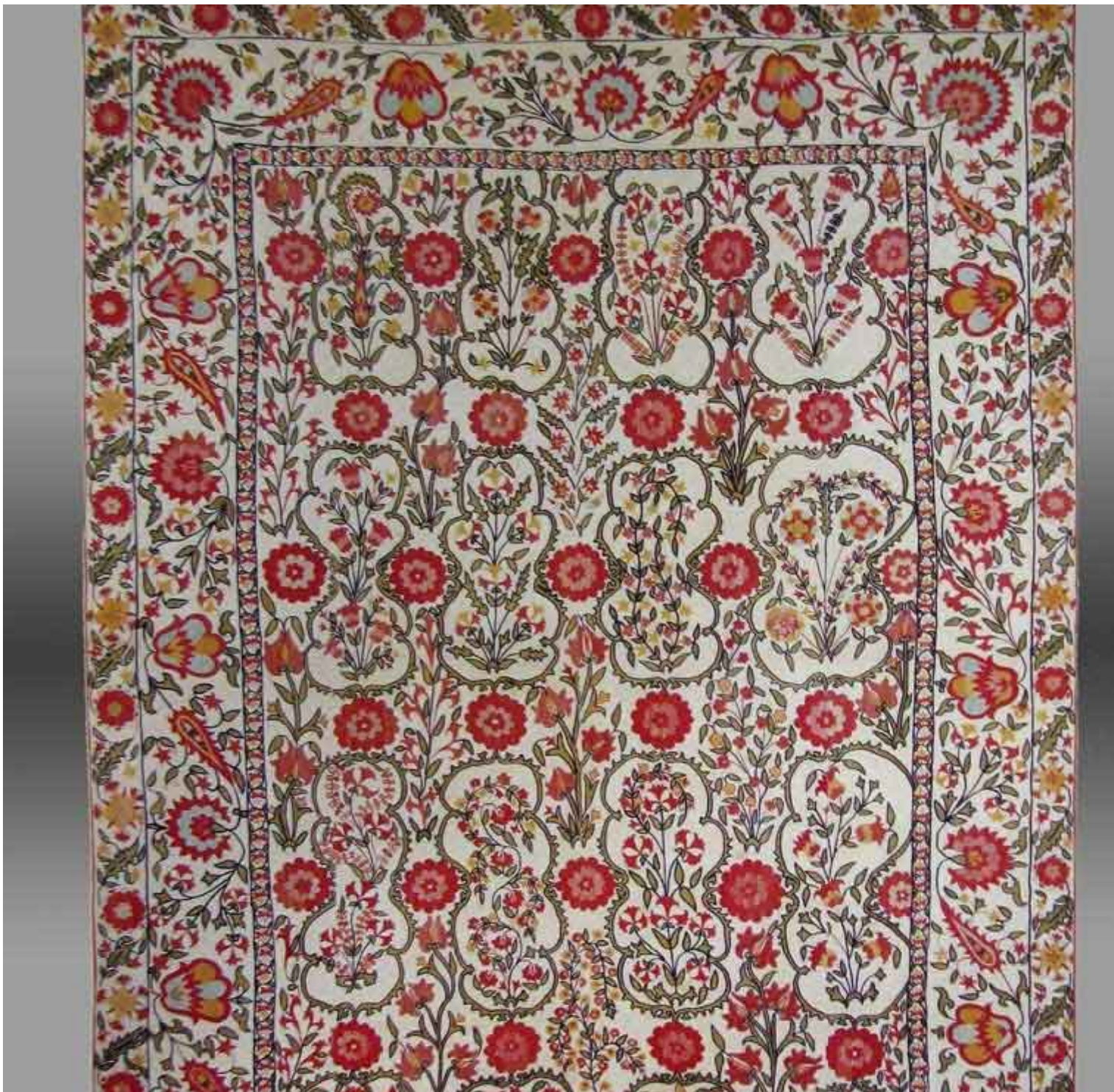
Flowers

The flowers depicted on suzanis clearly represent indigenous flora, and each species was undoubtedly of great symbolic significance. Sadly, however, following over a century of Russian hegemony in the area and the arrival of industrialisation, the ancient folklore of Central Asia has now either disappeared or evolved and its symbols have taken on new meanings more relevant to the contemporary needs of the people. For this exhibition, we have been very fortunate to call on the expertise of the noted botanist Dr Martyn Rix, who has travelled extensively in Central Asia. He has been able to identify many of the flowers depicted on the fifty textiles shown here with some certainty, and also provide the colourful illustrations of the geography and flora of the region. Hopefully, further avenues of research - including in Uzbekistan itself - will reveal more information, and possibly shed light on the original symbolic meanings that many of the flowers might have had for the weavers of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Bouquets of Flowers

The abundance of suzanis depicting bouquets of flowers and the variety of flora displayed further demonstrate the prestige and importance given in this region to the art of the garden. Examples embroidered with floral sprays have almost always been erroneously attributed to the Nurata region, even though such motifs were clearly used throughout the western suzani-making region, in Kermina, Bukhara Samarkand, Shakhriyabz, Ura-Tube and Tashkent. The composition is drawn in a more simplistic manner in examples we believe come from the lower end of the Zarafshan Valley, north of Bukhara and the Nurata Mountains. Some of the earliest examples attributable to the Samarkand region further up the Zarafshan River, in common with those from the Shakhriyabz area, appear not only to be more complex in their drawing, but also to have a greater range of colours; in addition, they employ a greater number of embroidery techniques. Suzanis believed to originate from the Nurata Mountains are relatively subdued and use a smaller range of colours. Some versions from the Bukhara region tend to be bold and often rather rustic in design, while others have a delicacy of drawing and complexity of composition not often associated with this location. Those from Tashkent flowers rotating around central medallion are called gulgulp.







Four-and-One

'Four-and-one' compositions are one of the most common of all suzani designs. The device is simply a central motif surrounded either on its horizontal and vertical axes (17844, 16067) or in the diagonal corners (16019) by four similar, often slightly smaller motifs. This arrangement may be reproduced many times over, or fused together (17639). The ornaments are usually flower viewed from either the top or the side, although full floral sprays are also used (17864). As well as a central composition, the device can also be seen as a smaller motif within a lattice (16067). In other examples, it is used as part of the primary border design (17639). As a field composition, the four-and-one design is used to its fullest extent in the most 'classical' of the suzanis from Shakhrisyabz (17238). The centre of these suzanis always has a large top-view flower, attached to which are four side-view flowers, fully or partly enclosed by a leaf stem. The flowers point diagonally towards the corners. On the horizontal and vertical axes of the central medallion are four small top-view flowers. Two large top-view flowers protrude diagonally from the flowers at the top and bottom of the medallion into each of the corners of the suzani. These corner flowers are almost completely surrounded by a stem with leaves; they are of nearly equal weight to the central medallion, with which they form the principal four-and-one

Double Field

A number of suzanis from the Zarafshan Valley have what appears to be a second level of design overlaid on the field composition. There are no examples in this exhibition.

Medallions

It has often been suggested that Near and Middle Eastern medallion designs derive from the arts of book binding and illumination. However, while many features on suzanis are distinctly Persian in origin and it is possible to observe similar medallions, particularly with star designs, on book covers and illuminated pages, there is no firm evidence that their appearance in the art of the book preceded that in the art of textiles. It is possible to divide medallion compositions into two groups: where the whole of the pattern is contained within the field, making it a truly centralised composition (17219, 17632); and where the medallion forms part of an endlessly repeating design, often with quartered medallions in the corners, giving the impression that the pattern extends beyond the confines of the borders (16224).

Rows of Ornaments

The composition of similar ornaments repeating in a single vertical column or in a number of columns is found on suzanis made in all the various locations (15006, 17165).

composition. Such suzanis have a variety of borders, the most commonly used being a design of top-view flowers alternating with a four-and-one composition (17238). Another typical version has a leaf stem that meanders around the border, with flowers protruding inwards and outwards.





Prayer or Niche

Suzanis with prayer or niche designs can be divided into several types, according to size. The largest are called ruijos, and these can often be found in sizes greater than those of the largest suzani. They tend to have a plain centre, usually with only the borders embroidered, but occasionally with a few motifs at the edge of the field. Often the lower border is left plain and the embroidery on the sides finishes abruptly. It is for this reason that they are thought to have been made to be placed behind a bed, the unfinished areas being hidden by cushions. This might, however, have been a secondary function. Many examples are heavily stained in the plain areas, which suggests initial usage as sheets for the marriage bed. Occasionally one finds nim-suzanis inserted into the plain fields of the larger ruijos. On other examples the plain area has been cut

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Lattice

There are more suzani with the lattice field composition than with any other scheme. This might be complex in its rendering (17053); or a simple diamond trellis made up of leaf stems (17723) or fine stems (12705). Within the lattices might be ascending side-view flowers (16593, 12705); top-view flowers (15431, 17845); or a combination of the two (17745, 17689). Other compositions may combine a centralised design with an endless repeat by

away to form a door surround, although we believe this was done later, in the West (**17982**).

A variety of small, single-niche suzani prayer mats were also made, and we have found examples of these from all the regions (**16721, 17878**). Multi-niche versions are fairly rare, although we have seen examples of later pieces from Tashkent and Fergana. In photographs of homes in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan they can be seen displayed as wall hangings, although we suspect they might have been used as family prayer mats.

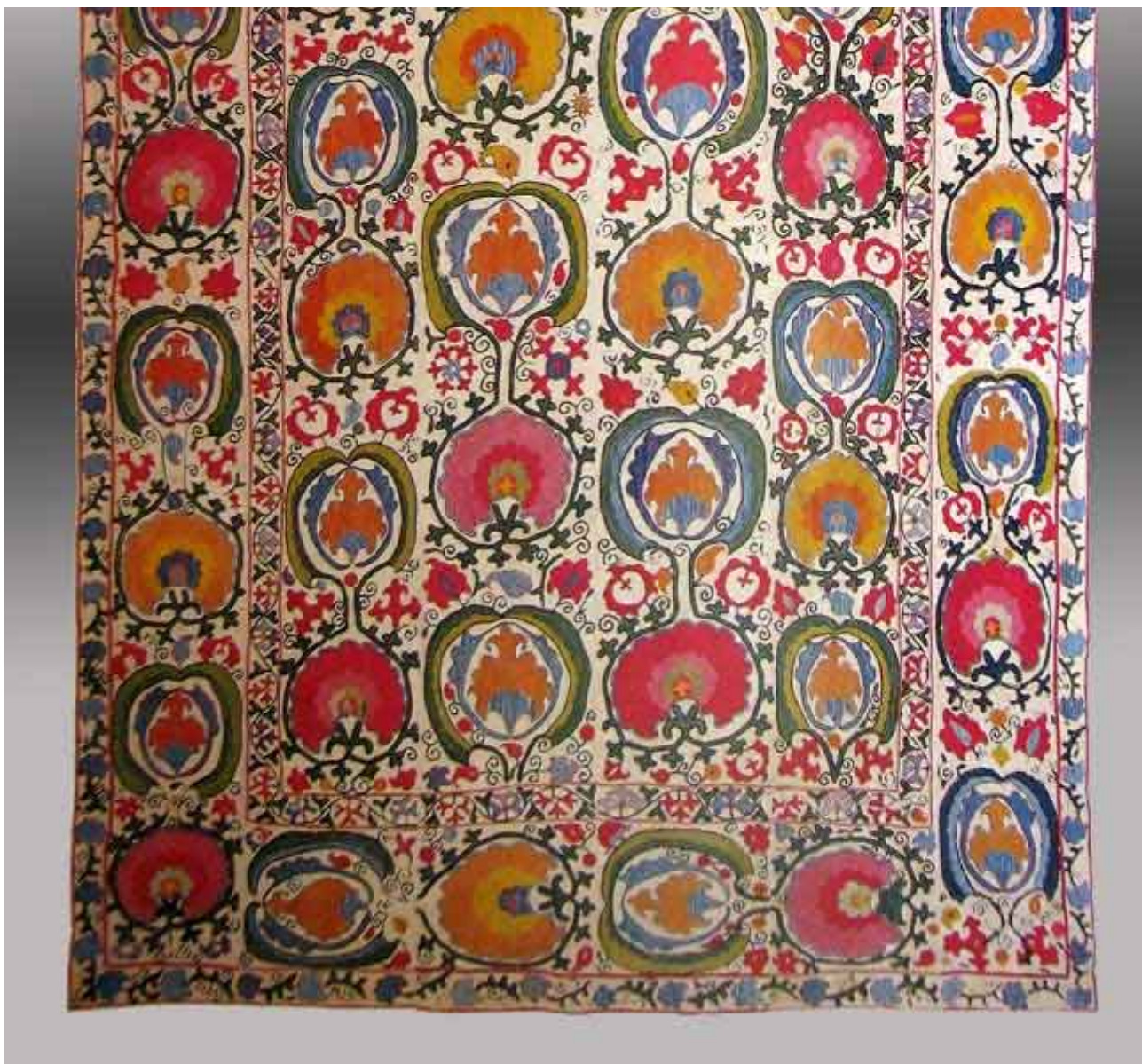
Ascending Tree

The variety of flowers, stems, buds and leaves depicted in the textile art of this region must have evolved from a fascination for the flora in the fertile valleys surrounded by arid deserts and mountains.

alternating or enlarging the in-fill motifs (**15956**).

Many possible derivations of these compositions have been proposed, including tile and metalwork decoration. There is undoubtedly a connection between some of the lattice compositions and certain patterns found on 17th century embroideries from Mughal India. These designs might have emerged independently in the two regions: the Mughal rulers were descended from the Mongols and, prior to taking control of India, inhabited Transoxania and western Persia. Or, because of the trade links – especially in textiles – between Bukhara and India in the 18th and 19th centuries, ‘Indian’ designs may at this time have influenced suzanis. Surely one of the earliest and most beautiful suzanis from Ura-Tube (**16936**) is one that bears the greatest relationship to 17th century Mughal art.





The Fish Pond

Until recently, there was only one known example with the 'fish pond' design, in the Vok Collection. It is typical of suzanis attributed to Kermina and unusual

The Black Dot Group

A small group of suzanis survive that have scrolling black tendrils terminating in large black dots in the field. This feature appears to be indicative of a particular workshop or village. We know of seven

for its predominantly blue colouring. However, over the past three years, three others have appeared on the market. The example shown here (**16224**) not only has some features that are typical of Bukhara but also has others that are associated with suzanis from the town of Karshi. In the Vok example the fish are clearly drawn; on the others they have taken the form of long leaves. Each of these suzanis has a medallion: here it possibly represents a pond from which the fish jump out in all directions, with other 'pond' medallions repeated in the corners.

Spiral Arabesque

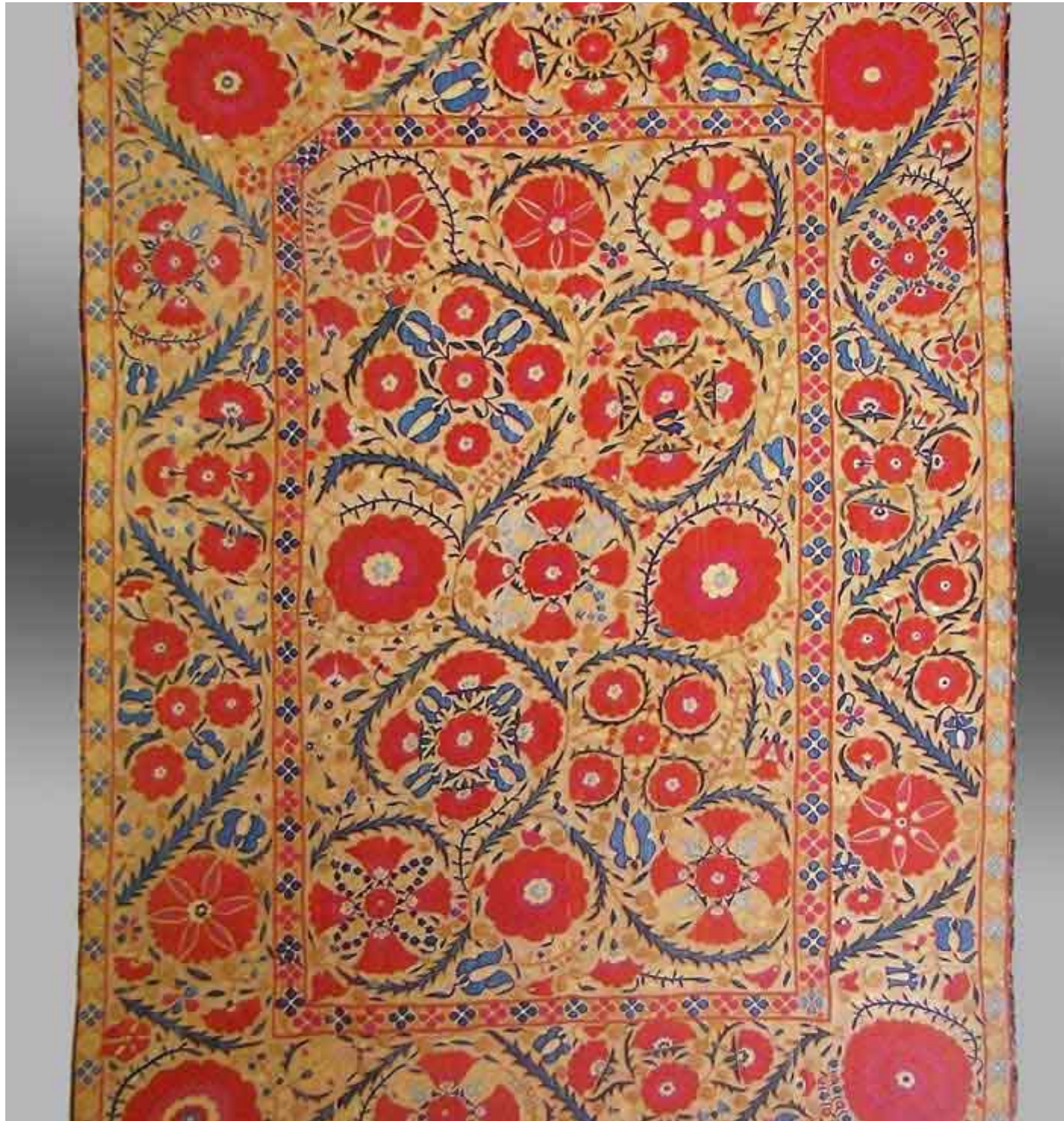
One of the most sophisticated compositions found on suzanis can best be described as a 'spiral arabesque'. The scheme is well known in oriental carpet design - variations of the concept can be seen in the 'Herati' design from Persia and the so-called 'Lotto' or 'arabesque' rugs from western Anatolia. The pattern basically involves a series of inward- and outward-pointing palmettes - rendered on suzanis as side-view flower heads - connected to a stem, which forms a series of circles and diamonds.

There are suzanis with spiral arabesque compositions from the Bukhara and Nurata regions as well as from other centres along the Zarafshan Valley. However, this design is seen at its best on a magnificent group of suzanis from Shakhrisyabz (**16144**, **16542**). The latter are clearly the most refined and articulated, and great attention is given to the minutest of details. They tend to have a large range of colours as well as a precision of drawing not seen on other suzanis.

examples, one of which is illustrated here (**15956**). All are embroidered in the ilmok technique and the embroidery follows the outline of the pattern; they use a particular shade of brick red that we would normally associate with madder-dyeing, but in this case it is insect-dyed. These suzanis share similarities with examples from Bukhara, Karshi and Shakhrisyabz; but, as the ilmok technique is also used on Turkoman wedding coats, this possibly indicates that they come from the south west of the Bukharan Emirate.

Two of the black dot suzanis have an overall design of rows of large top-view flowers each surrounded by a stem with leaves and a wide band decorated in two colours. A number of typical Bukhara suzanis exist with this same composition, although these are embroidered in basma, and they have neither the black dots nor the decorated surrounding band. Three suzanis of the black dot group have a large central top-view flower flanked each side by a large suisoidal meander line, and two others have a diamond-like lattice and large top-view flowers in the centre.







Large Medallion Bukhara

Of all suzanis, those with a large central floral medallion which are attributed to Bukhara are perhaps the most immediately impressive. They have become the most famous, highly regarded and avidly discussed among students and collectors of Central Asia embroideries. At the time of Robert Pinner and Michael Franses's article on this group in a 1978 issue of *Hali* magazine, only eight examples were known. By 1991, twenty-three had been recorded. Since then the number has risen to forty-four: forty with large medallions in the field; and four others which have identical borders to these forty, but with lattice designs in the field. Given that there are so many more examples to work with today, it is interesting to note what new information has emerged during the intervening period. Eight Large Medallion suzanis are now in a single private collection, the Vok Collection, to which we will therefore refer several times. The Vok Collection of suzanis is published in a single volume, with forty-eight beautifully printed colour plates, and copies can be obtained directly through us, [see publications](#).

Basma is the principal stitch used for most Large Medallion suzanis, but ilmok is also used for the outlines of motifs on most of them that we have examined. Occasionally an ornament is worked in tambur, and one of the forty-four examples is completely embroidered in that technique. We remarked in 1978 that suzanis of this design type

In general, these comments still hold true. Large Medallion suzanis have either a traditional primary border of alternating top-view and side-view flowers and a meandering leaf and gold scrollwork, or a narrow band with protruding leaves. Surprisingly, in view of the comparatively large number of newly documented examples, very few new patterns have been observed. The majority of the recent discoveries have designs which are closely related to the six illustrated in 1978. But today we would probably divide the Large Medallion suzanis (excluding two for which we have no photographs) into ten separate design types:

- type 1: hexagonal medallion and narrow band border, 15 known examples (see 15376).
- type 2: rectangular medallion and narrow band border, 3 known examples (see 17294).
- type 3: rectangular medallion and traditional primary border, 2 known examples.
- type 4: rectangular medallion in the form of a hexagon with filled-in corners and wide traditional primary border, 2 known examples (see 17532).
- type 5: hexagon medallion and wide traditional primary border, 2 known examples.
- type 6: nim-suzani with hexagon medallion and traditional primary border, 3 known examples.

“typically, have three reds, of which two are towards orange and one is pink, two blues, two shades of green (of which one may be turquoise), two yellows (one a distinct golden colour), a brown-yellow which may be ochre or beige and, sometimes, an additional aubergine colour”, that “all the examples examined had eleven or twelve colours” and that “the impression of a rich colour palette is created in this group by the juxtaposition of different shades of the same colour – for example, two or three different reds – without the use of separating outlines”. We might also have commented that the weaver would often change the angle of stitching when using one colour, giving the impression of different shades because of the way the light strikes the surface. We also remarked that we had not encountered synthetic dyes on any of the Large Medallion suzanis we had examined, nor had we found any wool being used; these latter observations remain true.

In terms of design, we noted that “the medallions are oval..., rectangular...or hexagonal... and have a small rosette at the centre. Radial, irregularly drawn ‘spokes’ extend to the periphery of the medallion, separated by areas decorated with a variety of geometric ornaments and, sometimes, with small ewers, birds or human figures”. We suggested that “the Large Medallion group relate to suzanis of the Bukhara family. However, here we find a more rustic concept; ... the patterns are so complex and intricate that the total impression is of strength and importance”.

- type 7: round or oval medallion and traditional primary border, 8 known examples (see 15354).

- type 8: small medallion and huge traditional primary border, 1 known example (Vok Collection, pl. 43).

- type 9: two large medallions, one top-view and one side-view, enclosed by wide traditional primary border, 2 known examples.

- type 10: border designs typical of the Large Medallion group, but with characteristic Bukhara lattice patterns in the field, 4 known examples (including: 17669; Vok Collection, pl. 11).

In 1978 we were reluctant to make a firm attribution to the town of Bukhara. We would not be so hesitant now. All the features, designs, styles and colours are the same as those of later suzanis that are more firmly attributed to Bukhara. Indeed, the Large Medallion design group seem to be amongst the oldest surviving suzanis from there. The attribution is further strengthened by the appearance of the type 10 examples. These share the same colours, style and archaic qualities of those with large medallions, and at least two of them incorporate tiny ornamental features worked in tambur, which can also be seen on some of the examples with a large medallion.

The suzanis with the largest medallions seem to evoke the greatest response from viewers. Some hate them, considering them crude, overbearing and lacking the elegance and charm of the more usual suzanis. Others admire them for their powerful, even barbaric, qualities, and consider them to be the greatest examples of this branch of the textile arts.







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