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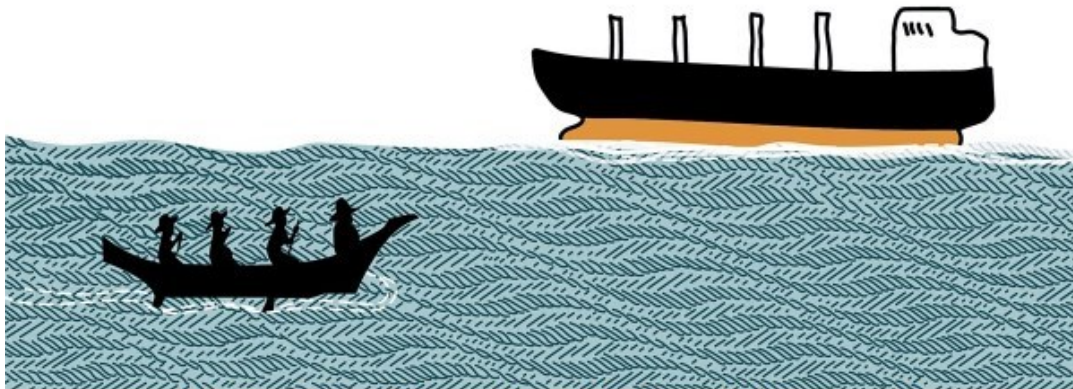
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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global



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Embroidering Paradise: Suzanis As a Place of Creative Agency and Acculturation for Uzbek Women in 19th Century Bukhara

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How can we know about a group who did not produce a written record about themselves? While a number of excellent books on women in Uzbekistan and Uzbek culture in general have been published but primarily focus on the historical account of how women moved from the homesphere into the public sphere under the USSR. Most authors conclude there simply is not enough evidence to say much more about Uzbek women before the turn of the 20th century. We do, however have some work of their hands; several hundred years of the embroidered textiles known as suzanis. By analyzing suzanis, I argue, we can learn something about the place of women in Central Asia from their perspective, and understand how suzanis were a place of creative agency as well as female social formation and education. In the summer of 2018, I conducted a survey reading of twelve suzani created in the khanate of Bukhara between 1850 and 1880 held in collection in the Textile Museum in Washington DC, the Shangri La Institute of Islamic Art and Culture in Honolulu, and the LA County Museum of Art in Los Angeles. This research was funded by the Windgate Contemporary Craft Research Grant which I received through the Arizona State University Art Museum. I set out to see what I could learn about the women who made these suzani from the materials, techniques, and storage and use patterns.

As Dr. Maureen Daly Goggin argues in the introduction to *Women and The Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles*, understanding "just how deeply the needle has pierced social, political, economic, ethnic and cultural facets of humanity render[s] it an extraordinarily valuable tool, and its associated material practices among the most important for human history."¹ Suzani embroidery was a nexus for all of these cultural moments. There are layers of economic and political history in when and how materials are used, and when and how suzanis have reached Western markets. They have become in many ways the cultural face of Uzbekistan, symbolizing an unknown 'exotic' culture to Western owners and users. Here, however, I will focus on what we can know about the women who made them and what their lives might have looked like.

Beyond answers to some small, technical debates about color and use, what I was most interested in when I began this research was what I could learn about the lives of the women embroidering. We have in the thousands of extant suzani from this period a record of how hundreds and probably thousands of young women spent their time. It is not a record of words but a literal record of time as each stitch was set, each throw of the shuttle beaten. I have alluded to this when I talked about time as a material. First of all, we know that the creation of these pieces was worth hundreds and thousands of hours away from other, more directly useful skills. They also show either an expensive financial commitment or the investment of more time into the raising, reeling, and dyeing of silk. Why? What was more important than the feeding and care of a

¹ Maureen Daly Goggin. Introduction to *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles*, edited by Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009), 1.

family, the livestock and bread making? The focus when looking at suzani has been on the meaning and symbolism of each motif and color. It's a fascinating area, but, in this paper I am largely ignoring this area. I will consider it in other papers based on this same research, but, firstly, it requires more space than I have here. Secondly, I hope this paper will serve as an example of the possibilities of knowledge in examination beyond the meaning in pattern.

Before the Soviet Union there was no Uzbek 'state' but a number of powerful city states with surrounding land, cities and areas of influence. Bukhara was a large, bustling diverse city in the time when these suzani were created. As a major city on the Silk Road and an important oasis, the Emirate of Bukhara was a jewel, conquered again and again by the empires that came and went across Central Asia. In the 1860s the area was conquered by the Russian Empire in a series of campaigns which left the emirate of Bukhara a protectorate. It, unlike the khanate of Kokand and areas further east remained semi-autonomous until the 1920s and the formation of the Soviet Union.

I spent several hours closely examining each suzani 'reading' them. The twist of the silk for embroidery, the stains, the direction and size of the stitches all give us insight into the makers; often very specific information. This is a summary of ongoing work. Many of the suzani I looked have never been photographed or published. At the Textile Museum I saw four suzani 1991.44.23, 1980.1.2, 1962.32.1 and 4.10. At Shangri-La, five; 85.41, 85.81, 85.3, 85.27, 85.39. I looked at three suzani at LACMA, numbers 59.78, 64.14 and M.85.197.2. All were listed as silk embroidered on linen, and the dates ran from circa 1840, mid 19th century and third-quarter of the 19th century. The locations also ranged from Samarkand to Bukhara region to Nurata. Almost all of these pieces have very similar visual structure. There is a wide border bracketed by two narrower borders surrounding a large field with one or more large red, circular shapes I am calling a roundel. The outlier is 4.10 at the Textile Museum, which has a more realistic central flower field. In this way it is similar to suzani from Nurata. This set of suzani all have the same border pattern, and similar center patterns. These patterns traveled between the Central Asian emirates, the Mughal empire, Ming and Qing dynasties, Ottoman empire, and beyond. The abstract floral patterns of suzani speak to the Islamic history of the area and the edict against portrayals of images in Islam. This holds through most Central Asian crafts, allowing for creativity in beautiful abstracted floral carvings in doors and columns, the geometric and abstract patterns of the *abra* and filigree of traditional silver work.

While there is some debate about whether the regional attributions of suzani are correct or necessary, I am using the attribution to Bukhara because it has been the standard and because it is useful to delineate the groups. This system has been in place since focused ethnographic research began in the fifties, but even before that, collectors mention buying embroideries with specific locations.

Materials

The areas of materials I looked at include the cotton ground fabric, the silk used for embroidery, dye, and time. The silks and cottons of suzani are both ancient and common to Central Asia. Many of the dyes on the other hand traveled long distances to be used in these pieces. This contrast demonstrates Bukhara's place as a cosmopolitan city and highlights the deep local and pan global relationships of suzani and their makers.

All but one of the suzanis I looked at had a common handwoven ground fabric. The handwoven fabric for suzanis is known as *kasbah*, and it is an indication of the importance of suzanis in Uzbek society that there is a system and a word for the production of fabric specifically for suzanis. It is an unbleached cotton, a single ply handspun with a z twist and hand woven at between 30-40 ends per inch. The pieces are 10-15 inches wide and six to eight feet long, and use the fabric selvedge as the overall piece selvedges. The selvedges are woven with a warp higher count. *Kasbah* is woven on simple two or four harness looms. The exception to the ground fabric is a material with a much higher luster woven in a birds' eye twill or diaper pattern. Eastern suzani producing regions such as Samarkand, Tashkent and Pskent regularly used commercially produced, and sometimes colored fabric at this time. Only Nurata and Bukhara commonly used hand woven fabric. Bukhara had easy access not only to imported, European fabric, but also to an ancient tradition of finely woven, complex weaves such as satin ikat and velvet. I hypothesize that the spinning and weaving of the material was also an important part of the process and education of the girls. I base this hypothesis on the consistency of the material and on the research of Elizabeth Wayland Barber into the marriage tests in Central and Eastern Europe. While the region is very different, it is not too far of stretch to imagine that hand spun, hand woven fabric might exemplify patience, a strong work ethic, and skill level very desirable for wives and daughters in law.

The exception piece is Shangri La 85.3. It is dated to the late 19th century and is completely stitched in chain stitch with the common three floral borders and center roundels and vines. The ground fabric is a twill and seems to be a linen fabric. It has badly worn, and many areas are loose. It was cut into pieces to be embroidered, but unfortunately is lined so it is impossible to know how the borders were reassembled. The unusual material and pattern lead me to wonder whether it was an imported table cloth, and its size, one and half meters by two and a half, and the fact that it seems to have a woven border, could support that. It's an intriguing anomaly which bears more research.

The material used for embroidery varied much more than that for the ground fabric. Some appeared to be unspoken, hand reeled silk, while others had a much more even, slightly twisted or even plied surface. The few exemptions to the silk are a plied worsted wool, and what appears to be a twisted cotton on several of the suzani. This wool appeared on all the suzani I looked at from Bukhara and has been dated by to a wool exported from British India between 1850-1880.² It is exciting to be able to date the suzanis so specifically. Presumably the red wool was used for its bright color. Dyed with cinnabar, it is similar in tone to the madder dyed red silk, but very different in how it reflects the light. Another intriguing find on 59.78 at LACMA is a thin greyish brown cord-like material. It looks like modern cotton kitchen string. It only appears in a few small areas and may be a mending addition. It is clear through the difference in the silk that some was professionally reeled and spun, while some was done at home. This points most likely to a urban vs. rural contrast. What is especially interesting is that the patterns are the same between rural and urban so there were connections and ties, but a difference in economic status and resources.

² Dombrowski, Gisela. "Suzanis: Embroideries from Central Asia." *Uzbekistan: Heirs to the Silk Road*. Johannes Kaleter and Margareta Pavaloi, eds. (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997).

While it is possible that less even, professional silk was reeled at home in the city, there is also a correlation in the dyes. In the emirate cities such as Bukhara and Kokand there were thriving silk industries where guilds of dyers prepared silk and cotton for the fabulous ikats known as *abra*. Women in these cities would have had access, through male buyers, to some of these materials. Many if not most families had several mulberry trees in their *hovla* or compound and the raising of silk worms and spinning of their thread was a spring activity. Women could sell surplus silk to neighbours for embroidery and their very finest silk thread to weavers for some money, not unlike the American idea of 'egg money.'

The rural and urban separation is also tied to the fact that the materials of some suzani have faded dramatically. It is clear that the silk was originally part of the specific color canon; red, fuschia, blue, black, green, yellow. The disparity most likely comes from the fact that it could be dyed both in professional workshops or at home. Along with mulberry trees and bushes would be other plants and trees for food, but also for dye materials. Materials for dyeing are freely available from common plants in Uzbekistan; pomegranate skins for black and for mordanting, turmeric, onion skins, mulberry bark. Certainly the predominance of warm reds, yellows and blacks point to materials that were easier to obtain. The black in many pieces has bled and stained the fabric and in some cases worn holes in it. This points to a high tannin iron dye that was probably not washed out of the silk completely. The black dye would have most likely been made with a mixture of iron, pomegranate skins and mulberry bark, which is effective for getting a strong black but can also can bleed quite strongly. The red was probably from cochineal, the small scale insect native to North America. The dyeing points to someone familiar with natural dyes and how to get variations of colour but also to someone working in small batches. The shades vary quite widely across the suzani, so we know that not all the silk was dyed at the same time. This brings an image to mind of a family reeling and dyeing silk together, and the inevitable frustration as that one colour you need runs out. The recurrence of pomegranates in making different colours demonstrates their usefulness as a dyestuff, and they were, of course also delicious to eat and had cultural significance as symbols of fertility.

The quality of the stitches does not necessarily align with the quality of the dye; 1962.32.1 at the Textile Museum is dramatically is discolored but very finely stitched. This seems to be a separation from professional dyers in the city and women in villages dyeing their own material. Originally the colors would have been the same but probably the mordants were not adequate. Different families and ethnic groups specialized in different colours and preparations, for instance, the ancient Jewish community were known for indigo. Aniline dyes came to the area fairly quickly after their discovery in Europe in the mid 19th century. By the 1900s they are as common as natural dyes and under the USSR almost completely did away with natural dyeing. The Textile Museum suzani 1991.44.23 is a *rujillo*, or wedding bed sheet, so the pattern is embroidered in an arch around a blank center. It features a mix of natural and aniline dyes, so it must be a later piece, but includes the red wool. The large red border roundels are naturally dyed with the same madder cochineal patterns of the other pieces, but with additions in synthetic shades that would not be available until much later. Possibly worn areas were replaced, or empty areas filled in. The new colors are not consistent, and the majority of the piece is naturally dyed. Hopefully someday chemical tests and dating may tell us when these additions were added and another puzzle piece will be unlocked.

The fourth material is time. The scale of the embroidery, the fact that there were multiple pieces, all indicate the importance placed on these pieces. I am a competent embroiderer and have studied with professional suzani makers in Uzbekistan. They tell me that working full time on a smaller suzani it can be completed in two months, but the larger, more complex pieces take two years. This aligns with my calculations, of the suzani taking between 100 and 600 hours. This is time that is not spent in household work, in childcare or food raising, but in the evidently more important role of promoting the marriageability of the girl for and by whom the textiles are being made. The expense of buying or making the materials makes the suzani even more expensive and makes clear the social importance the suzani held, but beyond this it shows the importance of the social connections that marriage represented. The suzani represented the girl to prospective relatives. The men would not see her, but they might see her work. In relationally based society like Bukhara is, and evidently was, deepening or building new connections through marriage provided major social capital and resources to the families. It seems it was worth it to spend hundreds of hours in creating work to show case oneself and one's family.

Techniques

Pre-Soviet times, Suzanis were primarily created by women in the home. There are some accounts of suzanis being bought for a particularly extensive dowry, especially in the families of the emirs of Bukhara and Kokand but there is no documentation to indicate that these were bought from professional suzani workshops run by men and I would argue that they were more likely made by women for money in a home workshop situation. The crafts of Central Asia tend to be created along highly gendered lines and it seems unlikely that a product tied so closely to women and women's experience of marriage and the home would have been created by men. The word 'suzani' comes from the Persian word for needle and the term describes the genre of textiles embroidered as part of a dowry for Uzbek women that were used throughout the home. But as Parker points out, it is "important to distinguish between the construction of femininity, lived femininity, the feminine ideal and the feminine stereotype."³ As with many other highly stratified patriarchal societies, there existed, and to some extent still exists, a women's culture that operated within the overall culture. There are similar accounts of such women's worlds existing in pre-communist China and still in some highly Islamic cultures today. *Guests of the Sheikh: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village*, by Elizabeth Wanlock Fernea, is one of the few ethnographic accounts by a woman living within the women's sphere. Fernea accompanied her husband to do his doctoral study of an Iraqi village in the 1950s and gives the reader the account of how women and men led often separate lives, in concentric shapes which touched only at points. By focusing on the rhetoric of women's embroidery, we are acknowledging the existence of this sphere and ending the myth that all that matters in a culture is what the men do.

Suzanis were an important part of the upbringing and preparation for marriage. Christina Sumner notes that preparations for a daughter's dowry started when she was born.⁴ Suzanis were the most public objects of women's construction, in so far as they were seen by extended family and

³ Roszika Parker, *Subversive Stitch* (New York: IB Tauris and Co., 2010), 4.

⁴ Christina Sumner and Guy Petherbridge, *Bright Flowers: Textiles And Ceramics of Central Asia* (London: Lund Humphries, 2004), 22.

friends on a regular basis, and by wedding and funeral guests at those points. Beautifully made suzanis were a statement of being for women who the world would otherwise not see. The women of the extended family would contribute to the daughter's dowry, but when it came time for the negotiations with the family of the groom and decorations for the wedding, everyone would pretend the work was all that of the bride. Her ability to embroider and make the suzanis for her dowry was a point of great honor for the family. In recent years there has been much writing on the rhetorical space girls and women occupied in embroidering. Roszika Parker in her landmark book, *Subversive Stitch*, notes that English women embroidering were being physically shaped to be compliant and obedient, important traits for Uzbek brides as well. But in this experience of embroidering was also a time of expression, which allowed for private thought and reflection while performing a cultural accepted act. Embroidering at its most basic level requires thousands of hand actions, or in other words, thousands of decisions. The embroiderer watches the fabric and decides in each instance where to bring the needle up, where to put it back down. This repetition and decisions, allows the embroiderer a sense of agency over their lives which, in situations in which the embroiderer as little decision making ability in their general life, must be incredibly precious.

The most exciting discovery is how the suzanis were embroidered. There is a specific, limited range of stitches used, almost all variations on couching and chain stitch with a small amount of button hole stitch. There are two main varieties of couching stitch, often referred to in English as Romanian and Bukharan. The other main varieties are chain stitch and a modified button hole stitch. More than one hand is visible in each piece observed; at least one skilled hand and one amateur. I say at least because several pieces seem to feature either several skilled hands taught by the same person, or one skilled embroiderer whose style changed slightly day to day. It is clear that a skilled embroiderer worked the large roundels which feature so prominently in every suzani I looked at. The stitches are small and tight, embroidered with fine thread, and moreover, consistent. The lines that make up the outline, on the other hand, are looser, irregular, and with thicker silk. These outlining chain stitches often run over the top of the finer filled areas. Therefore, it is evident that the finely embroidered roundels were done first, and then someone less skilled worked over the area with the outline. It is also clear in each suzani I examined that one area of leaves and other decoration was also done by a skilled embroiderer, and that the pattern was then taken up and spreads out around the design clockwise, or from left to right. It became clear to me as I looked at suzani after suzani that an experience embroiderer began each piece and then handed it over to a novice. This novice began at the corner where the master had worked and worked outward. By the return they were a skilled embroiderer. Because this was such a consistent find it became apparent also that these were all pieces done by different families, though the differing silks and dyes used support this.

The pattern was drawn on with an ink, but this varies from a much more splotchy line to a fine, consistent line like that produced by a fountain pen. There is a variety of ink as well, from a line still black and dark to both greyish and brownish remnants. Most of the time women did not draw their own patterns. In common with the hierarchical nature of Uzbek society, one woman would be designated as the one who drew the designs, and often would not embroider herself. Being the *Kalamkash* or design-drawer was a prestigious position in women's society. However it is clear from these pieces that the *kalamkash* only drew the outline of the larger figures and that the color and smaller details were placed by the embroiderer.

Use & Wear

The make-up of a girl's trousseau including which kinds of suzani and how many varied widely from region to region. Ten are the large show case pieces called suzani, where we take the general name from, which refers to large wall or bed hangings which are completely covered with embroidery. The other two suzani are what is called called a *joipush* or *ruijio*. It would be embroidered around three sides in the shape of a mihrab or niche for the direction of prayer, with the middle space left blank, and was used as the sheet on the bridal bed. This was used to prove the bride's virginity, and if there was insufficient proof the marriage could be canceled. It must have been a bittersweet to embroider something with and for your daughter that would so visibly prove her value and virtue to the community.

All twelve pieces showed signs of wear. All feature signs of mending and careful stitch repair. Most also show signs of folding in the patterns of discoloration. These were household pieces, used, stored and mended. Some of the pieces have been backed including all of the pieces at Shangri-La. While most of the backing seems to be a 20th century addition, LACMA 59.78 has the interesting addition of what seems to be an original *chit* (block printed) cotton. LACMA 64.14 also had a border, but of Russian print cloth.

These pieces represented the makers in the marriage mart, but continued to be used in the home. Traditional Uzbek homes feature little furniture. The floor is used for sleeping and sitting to eat, and storage areas are built into the adobe of the walls. Suzanis provided definition to the space as bedding, table cloths and room dividers. They hung over wall niches and door ways. They truly functioned as a trousseau, creating a household out of blank space. There are fold lines where pieces were stored and became discoloured, then washed, refolded and stored again. They were worn through in areas and then patched and re-embroidered. We see that these pieces were used, worn through and mended before they entered the market as artefacts. They not only played key roles in the education and marriage of the girls, but in their married lives to come.

Education

When I proposed this research I was wondering whether a connection between the direction of the embroidery and the literacy of the women working would be visible. There is a debate about the level of education available to Uzbek women during this time. It seems that in cities some pre-pubescent boys and girls were taught in neighbourhood schools run by women, similar in style to British and American 'dame schools,' which taught some basic math and reading skills and some about the Koran. I was curious to see whether there would be a correlation between suzani that seemed to be linked to the city through spun and professionally dyed silk and those embroidered right to left, as Arabic, the script at the time, would be read and written.

Despite frequent assumptions to the contrary, girls in urban areas could and did attend school. Some went to local schools or *maktabs* which were run in connection to the mosque but were not *madrassahs* or religious schools. Others studied in what equates to the English idea of a 'dame' school where a woman with some education taught children in her home, and both the teacher and the schools were called *Otins*. Both *maktabs* and *otins* could be gender-mixed; it was not until girls started to veil that they were separated and would stay home. Both kinds of education would include learning the Q'oran and correct behaviour, and sometimes reading, depending on the education level of the teacher. Boys could continue on in *maktabs* or *madrassahs* for further

education while girls would learn to take care of a house at home. Almost all of the textile-focused accounts of women's lives in Central Asia before the Soviet union, if they mention the subject at all, claim women had no access to education. However, this is simply not true. The oversight seems to lie in the fact that the *otin* schools were not registered with the Russian Colonial or Soviet governments and because the kind of education girls were receiving is not what early Soviet writers about the importance of education were talking about. They, and contemporary authors, were considering a literacy based education that included arithmetic and geography, while what children were receiving was a life based education.

What was important for the girls to learn was enough Q'oran and hadiths to be able to be a good wife and daughter; when they stopped going to school around ten or eleven they received their real education in embroidery. I was reminded of this when, unfortunately, I did not find any correlation between the left to right reading pattern of the Arabic script and the suzani. The suzani were consistently embroidered in the same direction. If we can assume that the piece was meant to be hung so that the balance is with the larger motifs on the bottom so that it feels balanced, than the lines move left to right. This is an assumption in how the suzani were used, but images of suzani from the 19th and 20th centuries show pieces hanging horizontally with the larger side downward.

Conclusion

This way of reading suzani, of asking the materials and stitches to tell us about the women who made them open a new door to women's lives. How did women learn to embroider? Did they work together? Could they read? What was the role of the suzani in these women's lives after the wedding? These were all questions that I have asked myself about the women who made the historic suzani I have marveled at, but thought I would never know the answer. It has been thrilling to begin to find some answers. This research started as an experiment. Drawing on my awareness of how much of myself I put into my artistic practice and work and coming across Dr. Goggin's work, I wondered how much I would be able to learn about women from another time and culture through reading their textiles. There is much to be done, but this is a beginning.

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