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***Suzani* Vernacular: Technique and Design in the Central Asian Dowry Embroideries**

by

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Introduction

Suzani, (also called Bukhara embroidery) is an embroidered piece of cloth made in the region of Central Asia. The word "*suzan*" comes from Farsi and means needle, and *suzani* means "of the needle." *Suzanis*, which differ in size, pattern, function and types of stitches, were embroidered exclusively by women, Muslim and Jewish, from all social backgrounds. They were an important part of a girl's dowry and were used for decorative purposes in Central Asian households.

Although *suzanis* have been produced since c.1750¹ they are still relatively unexamined by textile scholars. In the late 1980s, preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union, Jewish immigrants from Central Asia packed up their *suzanis* which they had used in their homes or bought for investment purposes, and brought them, with their other valuable possessions, to Israel and America. There are now hundreds of excellent pieces in the homes of Central Asian immigrants in the Bukharian Jewish community in Queens, New York City. These pieces have never been catalogued nor examined, nor have the owners been interviewed.

People from the community have allowed me to study their *suzanis* and to share with me the traditions and heritage connected to these prized possessions. In the following paper I will briefly discuss the art of *suzanis*, and then describe two typical *suzanis* from the private collections in the Bukharian community.

Background

Central Asia was historically an area where a variety of textiles were in evidence over a long period of time because of its position on the Silk Route. The Arab-Islamic conquerors coming at the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth centuries also brought their knowledge of textiles. The Uzbeks conquered and colonized Central Asia in the sixteenth century, later forming three sovereign territories, Emirates of Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand.² There is evidence that there were *suzani* workshops in the court of Bukhara. By the middle of the nineteenth century the Russians moved eastward to open new trade routes, but it was the Soviet Union which annexed all of Central Asia during the 1920s. Despite the Soviet desire to destroy native traditions, and to insist on a common culture for its fifteen republics, *suzanis* have remained an integral part of the life style of Central Asian people. Although the making of them changed in response to twentieth

century machinery, mass production, new materials, *suzanis* are still today prominent in homes in Central Asia.

It is important to mention here the role of the Central Asian Jewish community in making, using and collecting *suzanis*. The Sephardic Jews who lived under Muslim rulers, to some extent, adopted the culture of the host country, and to an equal extent, incorporated their own culture and crafts into the objects of ceremonial and everyday life. Thus, Jewish families of the area adopted Islamic tradition of presenting *suzanis* as dowry pieces, as well as decorating their homes with these embroideries. Through my interviews with people in the Bukharian community I gathered that some Jewish women embroidered *suzanis* also, although it never became part of their tradition. Wealthy families were able to commission *suzanis* from Muslim embroiderers, as it was the case with Mrs. Kalantarov's piece (Ill. 2), which was made by Islamic women for her wealthy grandparents. The *suzanis* were treasured in Jewish homes as much as in Muslim's and became an important part of their family heirlooms.

Previously, mothers passed embroidery skills on to their daughters, but today, they more commonly pass on *suzanis*. Traditionally by the age of 8-10 a girl and her mother had already started working on *suzanis* for the girl's dowry. As the wedding day approached, five to eight female relatives and neighbors joined them to expedite the process. Gatherings like this were called "*chashar*" (meaning people getting together to help each other), and were an old and important tradition of the pre-wedding preparations.

While embroidering, women frequently sang and told each other stories. During the breaks the embroiderers entertained themselves playing musical instruments, dancing, and even painting eyebrows and eyelashes with *usma* (type of plant.) Special rice dishes and soups were prepared for those who joined the *chashar*.³ Winter was an especially appropriate time for young women to work on *suzanis* because they had fun working indoors when outdoor activities were so limited.

It was important that each bride brought to the marriage her own set of embroidered pieces because they reflected her family's wealth and her embroidering skills. The dowry of the daughter of a well-to-do family included about ten embroidered pieces, while children of the less wealthy might only bring four to five embroideries.

Categories of *Suzanis*

Traditionally, in the West, *suzani* refers to the colorfully embroidered pieces on cotton or silk ground, which were made in Central Asia. However, a native of Central Asia uses the word *suzani* to refer only to a large piece of embroidery measuring about 180 cm by 270 cm or larger, and uses other names to indicate embroidered pieces of smaller sizes.

In the old times this large piece was displayed at the wedding and then used to drape the walls of the bride's new home. It was always placed on the wall opposite the entrance door, so that the guests saw the most dramatic piece (of size, color and design) as soon as they entered the house.⁴ This tradition was passed on into the twentieth century, although these valuable possessions were now used to decorate the walls only during the first year of marriage, or until the first child was born. After that they were put away and used only for

special occasions – high holidays, weddings and as funeral shrouds.

Large *suzani* designs usually consisted of a big central rosette, or a combination of six, eight, twelve or sixteen rosettes, framed in narrow borders, and were typical of the Samarkand school. The rosettes were known as *lola* (tulip), and were arranged in symmetrical order. An example of this type is a late nineteenth century *suzani* in the collection of Mrs. Yelezarova (Ill. 1), who acquired this piece from an old woman in Samarkand. (It will be discussed later.) Another variation was *palak* (“sky”) motif, where geometric shapes represented the stars, moon and sun. *Suzanis* of this type were characteristic of the Tashkent and Pskent areas. The central composition was usually framed in a narrow border or simply left to stand on its own. The embroiderers used surprisingly dramatic contrasts of colors such as black, white, red and yellow, for the *lola* and *palak* motifs.

Different from the *lola* and *palak* motifs, but extraordinary in their depiction of the Central Asian gardens, were the large *suzanis* decorated with floral motifs. These embroideries frequently have a central field with either a single motif in the middle, or an overall design arranged in rows. Often the central decoration consists of lattice compartments with single or multiple floral motifs. The composition was always finished with a series of elaborately decorated borders. Another important group was *Large Medallion suzanis* from the southwest region of Uzbekistan, distinguished by its red central medallion almost the size of the cloth.⁵

Central Asians named smaller embroideries according to the size and function of the pieces. *Nim-suzani*, or half-sized *suzani* (Ill. 2) which used a variety of designs, functioned as a wall hanging or bed cover. The embroiderers depicted flowers in styles which varied from the naturalistic to the naïve, and sometimes combined the flowers with birds, animals or geometric elements. *Bolinpush* (about 150 cm x 150 cm) embroideries were designed around a large floral or geometric motif with elements radiating to the four corners, and were used to cover the bride’s head or held above her as a canopy.

The ornamentation of *djoinamoz* (a place for prayer) embroideries was often similar to *suzanis*, although much more delicately executed. Used as a prayer rug, it had a pointed niche, *mihrab*, its arch usually decorated with floral motifs and arabesque forms, leaving the central field either empty or with a single motif at the top of the niche. Often elements of fertility, such as pomegranates, worms, or snakes would be included in the design.

Ruidjo, an important piece in a bride’s dowry, was used to cover the bride’s bed. In the daytime it covered the folded stacks of bed *kurpacha* (quilts.) Similar to *djoinamoz* design, *ruidjo* consisted of an arch except that the pointed top gave way to a squared one. *Gavropush* (cradle cover) was used to cover cradles and measured about 170 cm x 150 cm. *Sandalipush* was a small square piece of embroidery used to cover a table or wrap small things. Similarly embroidered dresses for the bride and scarves for the groom, such as *rumol*, worn around the waist, were also part of the girl’s dowry.

Materials and Preparations

The material used for *suzanis* was mostly coarse undyed cotton, c. 25-40 cm wide, produced by the local weavers or women themselves. Often the cloth was soaked in a prepared tea leaf or onion skin solution to achieve a desired shade of light brown. Around 1880 *suzani* embroiderers began to use machine-woven cotton imported from Russia,⁶ which was occasionally dyed in rich shades of red, blue, yellow and green. Sometimes silk fabric was used instead of cotton. Most of the *suzanis* had linings to give them substance and they were always edged with a piece of bias-cut black cotton fabric or strips of ikat material. The patterns were usually embroidered in domestically produced silk, and colored with natural dyes by Jewish craftsmen, *rangborchi* (dyers.)⁷

The length of a cloth was cut into several strips, which were then stitched loosely together to create the desired size *suzani*. An older woman in the family or a professional draughts-woman would draw designs in black ink on the sewn strips. These special artists were called *kalamkash* (*kalam* – “pencil”), and they were trained to draw freehand, as well as use a bowl or plate for circular shapes.⁸ The skills of *kalamkash* were passed on in the family from mother to daughter after a special ritual. After the design was drawn on the cloth, the loose stitches were undone and each strip of fabric was embroidered separately. This allowed several women to work simultaneously.

Stitches

Different stitches were used to execute *suzanis*. The most common one was *basma* stitch (Ill. 3) – a long thread secured by short couching stitches in the opposite direction (the back side reveals small stitches of the couching thread and nothing of the laid thread, Ill. 4). The *basma* stitch was widely used to fill in large areas because it was the fastest embroidering technique. Similar to the *basma* stitch was *kanda khayol* where the couching stitches were almost parallel to the laid ones and it gives the effect of the loosely twisted yarn laid in a satin stitch.⁹ Both *basma* and *kanda khayol* are better known as Bukhara stitch. Using the same color thread, the embroiderer would change the angle of the stitching to create an illusion of a different shade of the same color because of the way the embroidered surface catches the light.

Other popular stitches were buttonhole stitch (*ilmok*) and chain stitch (*tambur*, Ill. 5). The latter one was mostly used to outline motifs such as leaves and stems, but rarely large floral patterns. Variations of the buttonhole and chain stitches are double buttonhole (*ilmok dytaraf*, Ill. 6) and open or closed *tambur* stitches.

Embroidering

Once the design was applied on the cloth and each strip of fabric was separated, the embroidering began. Unlike the European way of embroidering where the fabric needed to be stretched in the embroidering frame, Central Asian *suzanis* were executed in the hands of an embroiderer. I know of two ways Central Asians embroidered. Jakob Taube, in *Vok Collection Suzani*, 1994, says that a woman would sit with a fabric pinned to her dress

while the fabric was spread over her bent left leg. She would then press the hem of the dress against the floor with her left foot, pulling the fabric tight with her left hand at the same time.¹⁰ The embroidered part of the large piece was wrapped to protect it from getting dirty. Taube also mentioned an embroidering frame, which probably came into use in the twentieth century.

During my interviews in the Bukharian Community in Queens I met a fifty years old Uzbek woman, Rano Bakaeva, from Samarkand, who was visiting friends in New York. She remembers her family and friends working on *suzanis* and shared her memories with me. She says that before embroidering, the strip of cloth was accordion-pleated and stitched with thick thread to keep the design from smudging and the fabric from the dirt. Then the layered cloth was put into a cotton bag. The embroiderer would take out a small part of the cloth and begin to embroider. According to Rano this small part was pinned to a quilt (*kurpacha*) which was approximately 40 cm x 60 cm. Mrs. Bakaeva did not recall the embroiderers using embroidering frames.

Samarkand and Kermina Embroideries

The following two pieces are in the collection of Mrs. Yelezarova and Mrs. Kalantarova. The Yelezarova's *suzani* is purchased from an old woman in Samarkand, and is a late nineteenth century piece, measuring 320 cm x 220 cm. It is designed around eight red rosettes surrounded by solid leafy stalks and framed by a narrow border. Each of the rosettes is different, and the smaller circles within each create the illusion of perspective and reflect the yellow and red palette of the insides of tulips. The rosettes are arranged symmetrically in two rows, which is typical of Samarkand *suzanis*. The embroidery is done on four 50 cm cotton panels in silk and wool in *basma* stitch. The embroiderer used a limited color palette that consists of shades of red, yellow and black. The *suzani* is finished in black cotton trimming cut on bias and has no lining. The large monumental rosettes, surrounded by the leafy stalks, give the piece the feeling of nature in motion.

The *nim-suzani* (Ill.2), in the collection of Lilia Kalantarova, was passed on in her family from a grandmother, who was originally from Kermina, formerly one of the towns of the Emirate of Bukhara, and who inherited the piece from her parents as part of the wedding present. Judging from the information above and the delicacy of the drawing and embroidery, this *nim-suzani* was probably made in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It measures 240 cm x 200 cm and is made of five 40 cm panels of cotton cloth which are probably tinted yellow in a tea solution. The composition is balanced with a border of flower heads alternating with leafy branches and the central field is covered with many figured floral rosettes arranged in a diagonal order. The dominant color is blue in six different shades with red and yellow accents. The embroidery has rich texture achieved by a combination of *basma*, *tambur* and *ilmok dytaraf* stitches. The *nim-suzani* is finished with bias-cut *ikat* trimming and an Indian block printed cotton lining (Ill. 2A). The superb quality of embroidery, clarity and consistency of the motif and richness of colors prove that the piece was commissioned and made for the prosperous merchants of the Kalantarov's family.

Conclusion

Above I have briefly described two typical examples of the Central Asian *suzanis*. I hope this will serve as a starting point for a thorough study of *suzanis*. Although there are few books and articles published on this subject, a more exhaustive investigation of these embroideries needs to be done to pinpoint the areas where *suzanis* were made and families who had them, and by doing so, to reveal the history of two cultures, Islamic and Jewish, so as to better understand how they have interacted with each other. Even though *suzanis* are categorized as folk art pieces, which were produced to fulfill a practical purpose, many of the practitioners were able to create an art form that compares favorably with other types of textiles prized by museums and private collectors.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Franses, Michael and Jacqueline, The Textile Gallery. An exhibition of works for sale presented on the internet, *SUZANI: Embroidered Flowers of Central Asia. The Textile Art of Uzbekistan 1750 to 1850*. November 1997 to April 1998.

² Taube, Jakob and Vok, Ignazio, *SUZANI, A Textile Art from Central Asia*. Munich, 1994, p.8.

³ Ishankulov, X.G., *Brak e Svadba u naselenia Khodjenta v Novoe Vremia*. Dushanbe, 1972, p.50.

⁴ Nurdjanov, N.X., *Ttadjikskai Vishivka*. Moscow, 1979, p.7.

⁵ For more information on Large Medallion *suzanis* see Franses, M. and Pinner, R., "Large Medallion Suzani from South-West Uzbekistan." *Hali*, 1978, p.128-133.

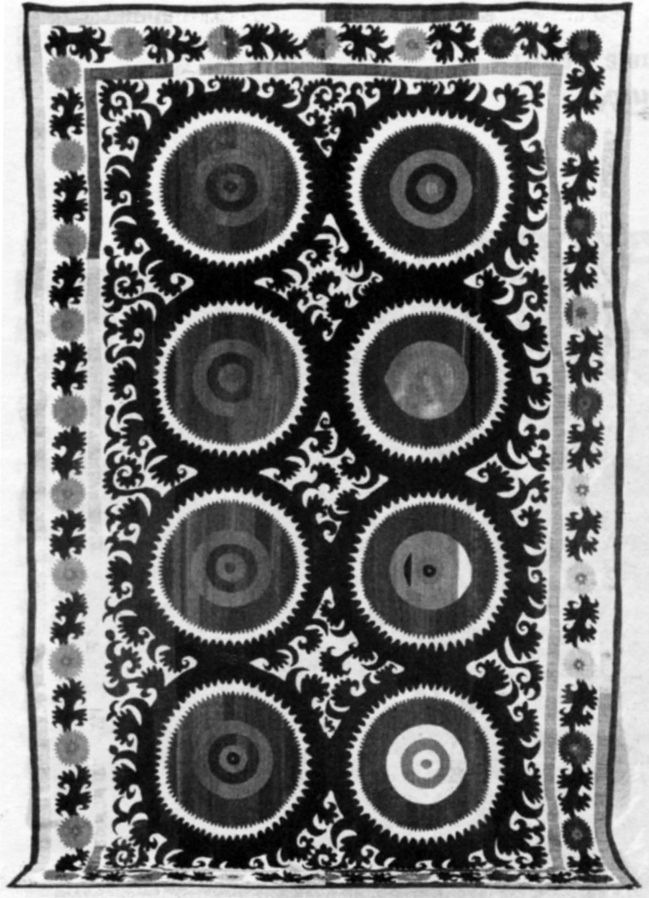
⁶ Kalter, J. and Pavaloi, M., eds., with contribution by Dombrowski, G., *Heirs to the Silk Road Uzbekistan*. Londodn, 1997, p.263.

⁷ For more information see Kalter, J. and Pavaloi, M., eds., 1997, p.263.

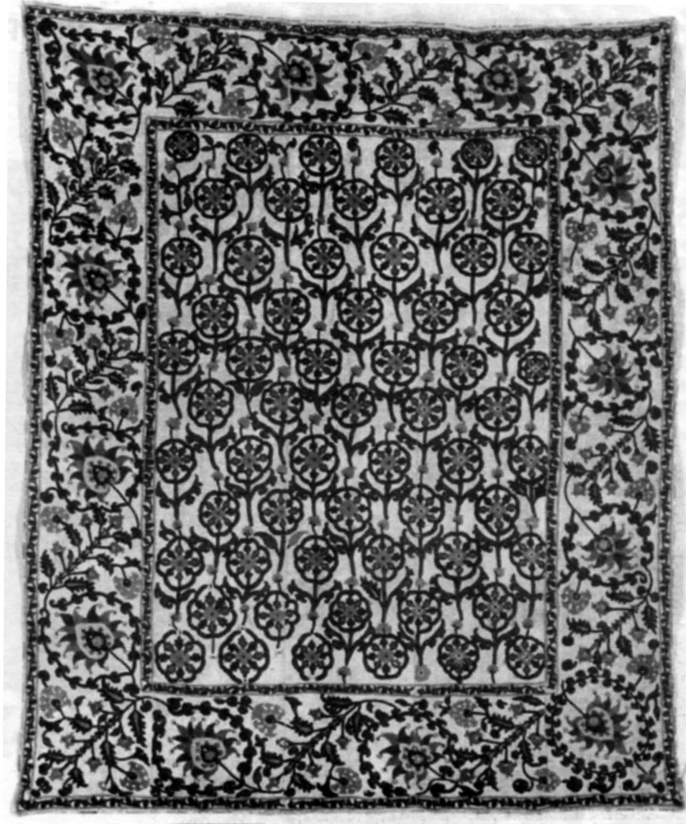
⁸ *Ibid.*, p.263.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.266.

¹⁰ Taube, Jakob and Vok, Ignazio, 1994, p.10.



III. 1
Suzani
Samarkand, late 19th century
Rena Yelezarova Collection, New York.



III. 2
Nim-suzani
First quarter of 19th century
Lilia Kalantarov Collection, New York



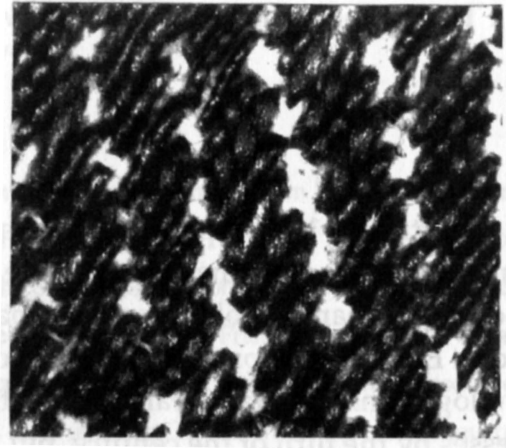
III. 2A

Nim-suzani (lining, detail)

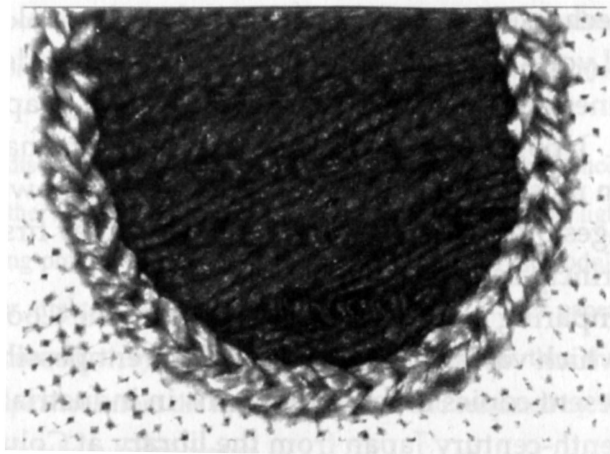
Lilia Kalantarov Collection, New York



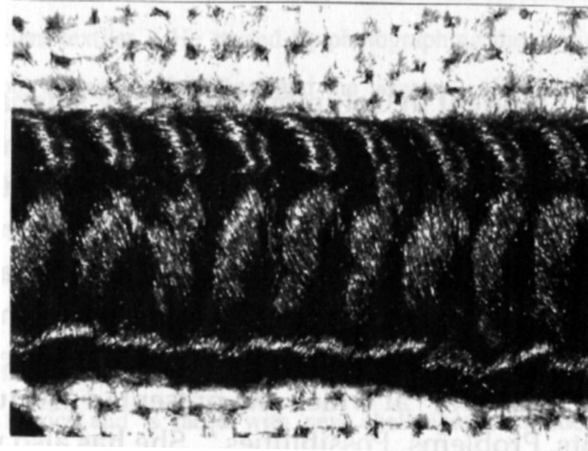
III. 3
Basma stitch, embroidered with 2-ply thread



III.4
Basma stitch, back side



III. 5
Tambur stitch, outlining a circular-shape motif



III. 6
Ilmok dytaraf stitch