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EMBROIDERY OF URGUT

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1941

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THE SUZANI MUSEUM AND RESEARCH CENTER
2021



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Urgut is one of the regions where the art of embroidery is well developed, and where it is customary to produce not only small-scale embroideries for items of everyday use, but large pieces that may be termed works of decorative art. Among its small-scale embroideries, the production of embroidered skullcaps is very widespread in Urgut; they are extremely distinctive and differ sharply from the embroidered skullcaps in all the other regions of Central Asia. They will be treated in a special study of their own. Other items made there, closely akin to skullcaps, are old-style women's hats called kulyutas.¹ It was not common practice to decorate them with embroidery, and indeed the extent of this practice was evidently limited to one group of Uzbeks living in Urgut. In this connection Urgut Tajiks usually call the residents of one of the suburbs of Urgut _____.

The manufacture of waist sashes is well established, but their decorative ornamentation has evolved in the same way as in Samarkand, in that the old sashes had very good borders, whereas those made in recent years have borders which are narrow and poorly decorated. Tambour embroidery deserves special attention. At the present time this technique is used in Urgut only to make braid for trimming the cap-bands of skullcaps. This braid is often high quality with rich, delicate ornamentation. Tambour technique used to be employed more widely. I acquired an old belt of the type worn by officials – _____ – embroidered in tambour stitch on dark-blue, striped alacha cloth. The embroidery is very good, done in silk colored with natural dyes. The belt, which is unfinished,² is divided along its entire length into 4 rectangles that enclose large shapes with many tiny details inside them, and there are tiny ornamental elements scattered along the borders and across the whole background. Meanwhile the character of the decoration suggests that it was taken over from comparable belts made in Shakhrisabz, executed in cross stitch and half-cross stitch (_____). The high artistic quality of the work testifies to Urgut embroideresses' skill with the tambour in times past. This embroidered piece is all the more valuable for having a precise provenance: according to 55-year-old Rafoat Tokhirova, the belt was embroidered by her grandmother, who before the conquest³ of Urgut lived and worked as an embroideress to the bek.

I was able to confirm the trustworthiness of this provenance. There are analogous, even more tightly embroidered pieces in the collections of Hermitage, but unfortunately their provenances are unknown. They are exhibited alongside the Hermitage's most valuable examples of folk art in its newly opened Central Asian section. The

belt, which the museum has acquired,⁴ is in no way inferior to the other exhibited objects in terms of artistic merit, and has the advantage of a provenance which can serve as a jumping-off point for dating and studying analogous pieces.

In terms of type, the decorative embroidery of Urgut is very close to that of Samarkand. What they have in common is the interrelation between the rosettes and the leafy areas (Urgut rosettes are also relatively large), and a whole series of decorative elements which may differ in details but belong essentially to the same type. Where they differ is that all the elements in Urgut embroidery are much simpler and plainer, less massive than in Samarkand – much less silk is expended on them. Rosettes on the oldest embroideries known to us with white backing cloths, of which there are very few, are made up of a series of concentric circles that either are close to one another and completely filled in with embroidery (like the embroideries from the dowry of Bibi Ovida, dating to the end of the 1890s), or are separate rings spaced a few centimeters apart.

Rosettes are surrounded by rings of leafy decoration. These rings are quite wide and bushy on the embroideries just mentioned of Bibi Ovida (like the Samarkand _____), Illus. 1, but on other pieces they are thin and sparse. That is how they appear, for instance, on the oldest ruyidzho embroidery on mata⁵ that we have, which belonged to a 70-year-old woman and dates to the late 1870s-1880s (Illus. 2). It is far less common to find radial designs inside the rosette here than in Samarkand. We see design elements arranged in this manner on one embroidery belonging to the museum (a dzhoynamaz from the dowry of Bibi Ovida), which is similar to Samarkand _____. They look like flowers seen in profile on thick stalks, on either side of which there are “teeth” pointing downwards, linked together into a garland chain. Running around these ornaments is the outermost ring of the rosette, which defines the rosette’s flower shape. The inner side of this ring, as it passes over the radially-placed elements just mentioned, is shaped like a series of semicircular arches, often encountered in old Samarkand embroideries (Illus. 3).

The coloring of the rosettes is also considerably less elaborate than on old Samarkand pieces, usually just different shades of red or crimson (_____), frequently with touches of the same color used for the leaf ornaments. In rare cases blue is used. The leaf ornaments on old embroideries were done in dark green. When washed, these would turn dark blue since the iron-based coloration,⁶ being less stable, was washed out by _____, which had been mixed with yellow to make green and got left behind. In later embroideries, such as those from Bibi Ovida’s dowry, the leaf ornaments are a different color. On items that have been washed, they acquire greenish-brown tints which I have never seen on new pieces from this period.

On old embroideries, between the rosettes and the rings of leafy decoration, one finds ornamental elements that are also characteristic of old Samarkand pieces – _____ “kitchen knife” and _____ “four-font lamp” – which, as we showed in the material about Samarkand, were magical symbols to drive away evil spirits. There is not enough material yet to say how common they were on old embroideries, but these images, especially _____, appear very often on the limited number of examples I have had access to, and in the designs that we ordered from draftswomen in Urgut. While both of these ornaments differ from their equivalents in Samarkand, their similarities to the latter are impossible to doubt. At the same time, it should be noted that whereas the ornament named “_____” has two forms in Samarkand, I only saw one of them in Urgut – an oval divided by a wavy line into transverse, differently colored areas and surrounded by garlands and tendrils of leaf ornaments (Illus. ____). Elderly Tajik women from Urgut say that the patterns on Urgut embroideries on white backing cloths had a lot of red in them. I managed to view a dzhoynamaz on a white backing belonging to the same dowry as a ruyidzho on red calico (E - - 8), i.e. dating to the 1890s, the decoration of which consisted of small rosettes and leaves bent downwards from the stem, some in the same direction, some in different directions. The entire pattern was embroidered with two shades of red thread. The influence of Samarkand is clearly behind the creation of Urgut embroideries of this type on white backings. In certain instances, it is even difficult to distinguish late Urgut embroideries from Samarkand ones, particularly when they are sewn in bosma stitch instead of the usual Urgut stitch.

However, embroideries that are indistinguishable from Samarkand pieces are exceptions. More commonly, the embroideries have rosettes which, unlike those from Samarkand, have a significant amount of pink in their color scheme. Small-scale embroideries sometimes include green, such as a little bolinpush which I saw at a wedding in 1940. It had an ordinary border around its edge, but along the border’s inner edge there was a chain of linked, green ovals. A relatively recent innovation (20th century, at any rate) which is very common and deserves mentioning, is the image of a teapot, rendered realistically and placed in the center of large rosettes. Its shape most often approximates that of an ordinary, round, local china teapot. In one case it resembled an electric teapot on a stand with a flat base. It turns out that this design idea for the center of a rosette was invented 30 years ago by a 70-year-old drafts-woman, Toshkandi, and then adopted by other draftswomen. It has spread so widely that it is rare to find a late Urgut embroidery without a depiction of a teapot in the center of its rosette.

x x
x

The oldest Urgut embroidery we know on a colored backing cloth is the bolinpush of 80-year-old Kumri Kobilova, which was made for her wedding, i.e. at the beginning of the 1870s. It was sewn on red calico and decorated with a rosette in the center, from which twigs extend to its four corners. Its border is very wide, and contains rather large rosettes with twigs coming off of them. The form of these rosettes (Illus. 6) is very interesting since we can demarcate quite a wide area over which they were distributed, all of it within Samarkand Region. Rosettes of this kind are found on embroideries associated with Katakurgan (the exact location where they were produced is still uncertain). Rosettes of this shape adorn one Nurata embroidery in the collection of the Museum of Art of Uzbekistan and two embroideries in the collection of the Samarkand Regional Museum. One of them was bought in Penjikent, and the second was sold to the museum as being from Urgut, although it differs from Urgut embroideries precisely in those features that make it akin to pieces from Penjikent. Finally, we have seen rosettes of this shape on a Samarkand embroidery on red calico – a suzani from the 1860s where they featured as small, secondary figures, placed among large, major rosettes of a different shape.

To judge by the fact that we usually see old motifs in the secondary rosettes or the rosettes along the borders, pushed out from the prime positions by new motifs, we can surmise that this form of rosette was to some degree native to an old Samarkand embroidery tradition which has not survived to our day and whose existence we can only infer by indirect means. At any rate, we note that this form of rosette can be sourced specifically to a few areas in Samarkand Region. Two other, relatively old (1880s-1890s) Urgut embroideries on colored backings have rosettes that are very close in form to those on Samarkand embroideries sewn on red calico. Either these rosettes are constructed from rows of triangles with their bases pointing up, strung together in small garlands (in Samarkand this form is called rachcha- _____) or they consist of an entire flower blossom, inside which there are radial decorations embroidered in a different color (similar to Samarkand _____), with slits through which the backing cloth is visible (illus. 7, 8). Shrubs with usually vertical stems are a common decoration on late Urgut embroideries done on colored backings. These are very close to their corresponding motifs in Samarkand. On one piece I have seen a curved stem of the same type as the Samarkand motif “_____” (curly willow). Illegible writing, frequently a very free imitation of Arabic script, is placed sometimes among the shrubs.

A second type of decoration found on late Urgut embroideries on colored backings characteristically includes geometrical shapes, squares or triangles, around and inside of which are groupings of vegetative ornaments and stylized writing. Many of the decorative elements drawn by the draftswoman Toshkandi for the Samarkand Muse-

um are of this nature.

We should note the animal motifs that appear in the decoration of Urgut embroideries, although they are rare in Central Asian ornamentation, especially on embroideries of the Samarkand type. I saw two variants of a scorpion design in Urgut, one on an embroidery dating to the 1890s, and the other on a later piece from the revolutionary period; I also saw a design called “frog” derived, probably, from a picture of a tadpole. All three designs were rendered in a totally ornamental manner: they were far from being realistic depictions yet successfully communicated a general impression of the animals they were named after (illus. _____).

The color scheme of embroidery patterns on colored backings, both in old and new pieces, is also very close to the situation in Samarkand. First, it is multicolored, with a preponderance of light blue and grey on the red background, yellow for the floral elements, and green for the leaves. Second, we can observe the same transition towards a less pictorial, non-multicolored scheme: thus, black and dark blue usually appear on a yellow background, sometimes with a little bit of red; two shades of yellow on an (electric) blue background; black and white with a little purple on a red background; white, yellow and purple on a burgundy background. I have not seen any monochromatic embroideries, such as those characteristic of 20th-century Samarkand; evidently their course of development has not reached that point yet. Based on the sample of embroideries I have seen, the favorite color for backing cloth seems to be yellow – the largest number of late Urgut embroideries on colored backings that I have encountered had yellow backgrounds. The sorts of embroideries found in Urgut are the same as in Samarkand with the exception of the so-called _____ that appeared 25-35 years ago. These are small, almost square embroideries (with sides no bigger than 75-100 cm) used to curtain off small niches regularly found in Central Asian architecture. Usually several of them would be included in a dowry. Other embroideries – suzani, ruyidzho, bolinpush, dzhoynamaz – were exactly the same in form and composition as those in Samarkand. One technical point concerning ruyidzhos should be noted: like other embroideries, ruyidzhos have a lining and consequently are trimmed with a bias binding (_____) which has to be sewn in between the face of the embroidery and the lining. Ruyidzhos in Samarkand, meanwhile, never have either a lining or a _____.

Besides the types of embroideries mentioned above, one also sees embroideries quite often in Urgut which in Samarkand are called _____ (their name in Urgut, and when they started appearing, are still undetermined.) The _____ is a long thin textile, usually of the same width as the fabric when it came off the loom in the factory.⁷ Its decoration consists of a straight, vertical trunk with a row of branches

arranged in arrow-shaped _____ – a composition seen commonly on Samarkand zebi-takhmons as well. The compositions on all the other embroideries also exactly match their equivalents in Samarkand. They are decorated with rows of periodically repeating rosettes, strewn among which are leafy motifs or periodically repeating shrubs. One special feature of the compositions of Urgut embroideries worth noting – a design found on practically all the old Urgut embroideries on colored backings that we know of – is the combination of a rosette with a branch extending from it in one direction, while adorning the branch are (usually three) flowers, shown in profile and drooping downwards (illus. ____).

The structure of these branches is reminiscent of an analogous motif found on Bukharan embroideries; it does not exist at all in Samarkand. The interrelation between the pattern and the border, though, corresponds to the Samarkand design. Here, too, the border is very narrow and serves only to frame and accentuate the embroidery; it has none of the stand-alone significance and importance for the total design of the piece that we see in Bukhara and Nurata. All these embroideries, whose basic role is purely utilitarian – to cover the bed – and which are partly used for this purpose, have a decorative function as well. During a wedding they are hung, just like in Samarkand, on the walls of the wedding room, first in the home of the bride, then in the home of the groom where she is brought after the marriage is concluded. They are kept on the walls for a considerable amount of time. Some embroideries like a zebi takhmon and a tokchapush (whose purpose is purely decorative), and certain others like a suzani and a bolinpush, are not taken down for several years, as long as the young woman is still regarded as a young bride.

Where embroidery technique is concerned, Samarkand and Urgut differ significantly. The manufacture and dyeing of textiles and threads is no different than in Samarkand but the stitch technique is completely separate. In Urgut the “_____” stitch is used, but neither rosettes nor leaf ornaments are edged in tambour stitch, as they regularly are on embroideries in almost all other areas. Even a Penjikent embroidery (purchased in Penjikent bazaar, district where it was made not precisely located), extraordinarily similar by type to an Urgut embroidery, and also sewn in _____ stitch, is distinguished from the Urgut piece by the tambour-stitch edgings around all the ornaments except the rosettes. Bosma stitch, used in most areas including Samarkand, is found sometimes in Urgut as well, primarily on new embroideries (bosma was used, for example, to embroider a suzani on white fabric – a late Samarkand-type piece, though made in Urgut – which I saw at a wedding in 1941). It is possible that this stitch was adopted from Samarkand along with late Samarkand-type embroidery, but we still do not have enough material to decide this question with reasonable assurance.

Summing up the results of the study of Urgut embroidery which I conducted over the course of two years in 1939-40 but in very short visits (see report), the following results achieved during this period may be noted: established Urgut embroidery's typology and the character of its decoration and color scheme, outlined common features between Urgut and Samarkand embroidery, outlined the stylistic changes undergone by Urgut embroidery. Worked, but far from enough, on the interpretation of decorations. Dates of the appearance and disappearance of different patterns still not worked out, i.e. a precise chronology of changes in style of the decorations of Urgut embroideries has not been established.

Also unresolved is the question of what forms of ideology were reflected in the semantics of decorative motifs. In particular, special work needs to be done on researching the magic protection which, by analogy with embroidery in Samarkand, must have played the major role in formulating the decoration on old Urgut embroideries. The question of how embroideries are produced, the connection between their manufacture and the market, etc., has not been addressed at all. As a result of the work conducted so far, it has only been established that there exists a special type of embroidery particular to Urgut, and the first steps in this field of research have been taken.

The work needs to be continued, since the study of Urgut embroidery is one of the important links in revealing the distribution of Samarkand-type embroidery. At the same time, it is of course important not only to reveal the outward manifestations of its stylistic features but the whole complex of ideas that were and are connected with it.

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