



Fig 1: An old phulkari used in a modern punjabi wedding (Photo courtesy of Mattu Sandhu Sibia)

PHULKARI - Ancient Textile of Punjab

Frederic Rond - Indian Heritage Gallery - March 2010

www.indianheritage.biz

Phulkari, a rural tradition of handmade embroidery, literally meaning "flower work", was perpetuated by the women of Punjab (North-west India & Pakistan) during the 19th century and till the beginning of the 20th century.

Even though the textile industry today, is imitating this art with the help of machines, phulkari work has almost disappeared in its original form, due to the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, which had a dramatic impact on the divided Punjab, as well as the obvious socio-economical reasons (schooling, lack of interest for manual work, profitability, industrialization...).

Probably brought to the Indian Subcontinent by the migrant Jat people of Central Asia in ancient times, phulkari was a part of every important moment of local life (weddings, birth, religious functions...).

Generally fabricated by a family for its own use, the fact of having completed a phulkari signified an important step for a girl on her way to becoming a woman.

Techniques and patterns were not documented but transmitted by word of mouth. Hence, each regional group was identifiable by its unique embroidery work.

The word phulkari usually indicates the shawl that was loomed and embroidered to cover women's heads or to be displayed in a gurudwara (Sikh temple).

This tradition was often associated with the Sikh heritage but as it was also shared with Hindus and Muslims, it happens to be more geographically specific than religiously specific.



Fig.2: Group of Punjabi Ladies - Circa 1905 (Clifton and Co., Bombay)



Fig.3: A "Tawayif" (Courtesan) Named "Ilahijan" - Circa 1900 (Patiala, East Punjab (now India))

Threads

Embroidery work was invariably made on a plain cotton fabric (khaddar) whose thread was manually spun, loomed and dyed with natural pigments.

Its quality was evaluated according to the fineness and regularity of its surface.

Khaddar could be of four colours, white being given to mature women or widows while red was associated with youth and was by far the most widespread tone. It is noteworthy that the most ancient fragments of red dyed (using madder) cotton fabric were found in Punjab and would date back to Harappa Civilization (Age of Bronze).

Black and blue colours were kept for everyday worn shawls as they prevented from revealing stains and dirt.

The complete khaddar was always made of two or three stripes which were approximately 50cm wide. Depending on the region, these stripes were sewed before or after the embroidery work.

It seems that, in West Punjab (Pakistan), the joining was done afterwards. This explains the slightly distorted designs that can be found at times on some pieces of this origin.

It is important to notice that Punjab, known for its cotton cultivations, was a very appropriate area for a local production of khaddar.



Fig. 4: Panchranga (West Punjab)
The kaddhar was stitched after the embroidery work was achieved



Fig. 5: Phulkari (East Punjab)
The kaddhar was stitched before the embroidery work was achieved

The embroidery was made on the wrong side of the khaddar with a thread of floss silk called pat.

Most of the time brought from Afghanistan, Bengal or China by itinerant dealers who were selling it by weight, this silk was quite costly and, for this reason, it has pushed the Punjabi women to embellish the fabric on its visible side only in order to save as much silk as possible.

Rural life was regulated by its agriculture and, periodically, men were going the markets of big cities to sell their crops. It is only when they had earned enough money to buy the essential products for their family that they were allowing themselves to get, for a high price, few skeins of pat that they would offer to their wives.

Pat was red-coloured to symbolize passion, white for purity, golden or yellow for desire and abundance, green for nature and fertility, blue for serenity, purple for a symbiosis between red's energy and blue's calm, orange for a mix of desire and divine energy. However, even if symbolism was playing an important role, these colourful harmonies were also composed according to the embroiderer's taste.



Fig. 6: Wheat design on a phulkari from West Punjab



Fig. 7: Weavers in Himachal Pradesh (Indian state sharing a border with Punjab)

Embroidery

A phulkari was at times made by one woman and at times by several ones who could even work simultaneously on different parts or stripes of khaddar.

As written before, these pieces were usually made by the family of the bride. However, as in the rich families a dowry could include several dozens of phulkari, some professional embroiderers were occasionally employed.

The choice of patterns was partly driven by the social class of the bride.

For instance, some flowers designs in cluster stitch were only worn by the low class families while the high class would prefer flowers made with darning stitch.

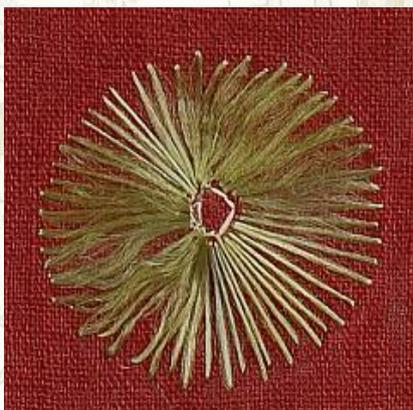


Fig. 8: A low class flower Embroidered in "cluster stitch"



Fig. 9: High class flowers Embroidered in "darning stitch"

Most of the time, patterns to be embroidered were not drawn on the fabric beforehand, the embroiderer had to count each thread of the khaddar with meticulous care to build her designs.

It is important to realise that a shift of one thread in the counting would have a visible impact on the final result...

As it was easier to count the threads of a light coloured khaddar than of a dark one, it happened sometimes that the fabric was dyed only after the embroidery work was achieved, thanks to certain preparations that would colour cotton but not silk.



Fig. 10: A "chope" phulkari on beige khaddar, probably before the embroidered piece got dyed



Fig. 11: A "chope" phulkari on red khaddar, probably after the embroidered piece got dyed

If the fact of using floss silk was providing beauty to these pieces, it was also a heavy complication added to the artists' task as this brittle and inhomogeneous material was not easy to lead through the khaddar without creating clusters and knots.

As in most of the oriental countries, the embroidery work was always done pointing the needle's tip to the opposite of the embroiderer. This gesture, as well as the energy that was injected into the work, had to come from the heart and go towards others.

Darning stitch was the most commonly used technique to make phulkari and the quality of a piece could be measured according to the width of this stitch. The narrowest was the stitch, the finest was the piece.

In order to create an unusual design or to border the khaddar, some other stitches like the herringbone stitch, running stitch, Holbein stitch or button hole stitch were occasionally used.



Fig. 12: Several kind of stitches used in phulkari embroidery

Bagh, "the garden"

When the embroidery work was covering the whole surface of the khaddar the phulkari was called a bagh ("garden").

The making of a bagh was requiring so much talent and patience (sometimes more than a year) that it was kept for very special occasions.

Furthermore, the quantity of pat needed to achieve such a piece was implying big expenses and thus was a way for families to display their wealth.

From a historical point of view, it seems that bagh only appeared after the time people became passionate for phulkari in the second half of the 19th century.

Bagh could be considered as a technical culmination in the art of phulkari fabrication.

Pat's most commonly used colours in the making of bagh were gold and silvery-white, these tones being a reminiscence of Punjab's wild flowers and cereal fields but also of the jewels women were wearing under their bagh.



Fig. 13 & 14: A red "thirma" (on white khaddar) bagh from West Punjab

Some major types of Phulkari & Bagh

Thirma

This phulkari from the north of Punjab, shared by Hindu and Sikh traditions and very appreciated by collectors is identified by its white khaddar called thirma, symbol of purity.

As a symbol of purity, thirma was often worn by elder women and widows but, at times, this choice of white coloured khaddar was also made for esthetical reasons.

The pat was generally chosen in a range of bright pink to deep red tones.

Cluster stitched flowers, wide triangles covering the forehead as well as chevron darning stitch surfaces were very common thirma patterns.

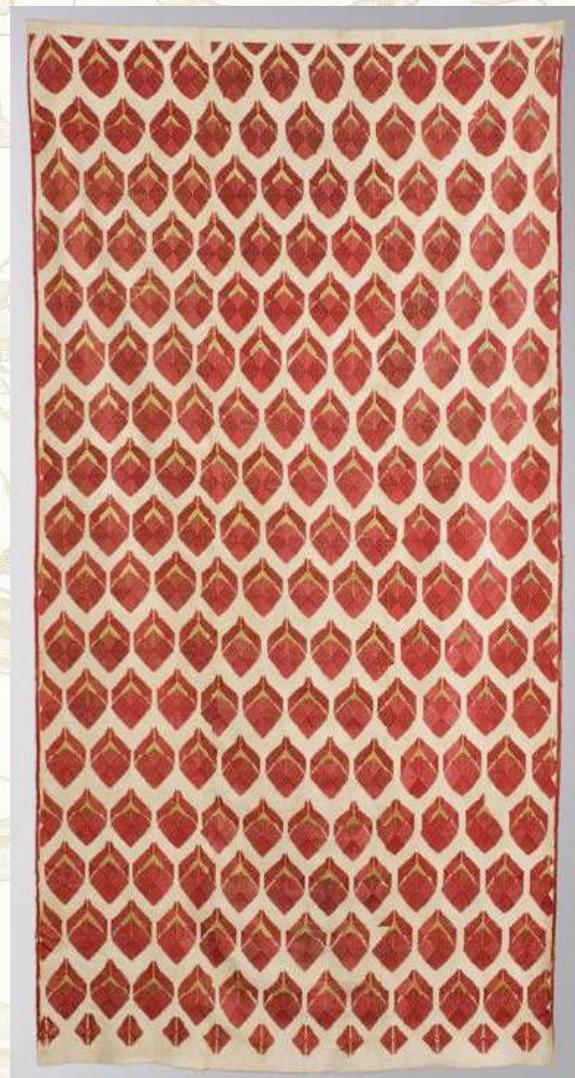


Fig. 15 & 16: Two thirma from West Punjab

Darshan Dwar

Darshan Dwar, that can be translated as "the gate through which God can be seen", unlike other phulkari was not made for a person but for a temple as an offering to thank the gods after a wish had been fulfilled.

For this reason, while a dowry could contain dozens of phulkari, darshan dwar has never been made in big quantities.

Like other figurative pieces (e.g. Sainchi phulkari, see the next paragraph) this particular kind of phulkari was made in east Punjab, a mostly non-Islamic area which allowed the development of a broad variety of human and animal representations.



Fig. 17 & 18: A darshan dwar given to the temple after the wish of this couple was fulfilled: a baby was born

Sainchi Phulkari

Sainchi phulkari are figurative pieces narrating the life in the villages of south east Punjab. Local animals (goats, cows, elephants, big cats, scorpions, peacocks,...) are represented moving among wrestlers, farmers, weavers, etc.

Train is also often displayed on sainchi phulkari, this means of transportation, brought by the British in the second half of the 19th century, having had a big impact on local populations' life.

Beyond their aesthetic value, sainchi phulkari can be compared to our nowadays media as they depict the ways of life, interests and environment of the old time rural people of Punjab.

In addition, they were produced in a relatively small area (Ferozpur and Bhatinda districts) and required high embroidery skills. These are all the reasons why they became so appreciated by collectors and occupy a very unique position among the different varieties of phulkari.



Fig. 19 & 20: Two 19th century sainchi



Fig. 21 & 22: A punjabi girl (circa 1900) and a detail of fig.20 showing similar jewellery.

Vari-da-bagh

("Vari": gift offered to the bride by her in-laws)

This bagh was gifted to the bride by her in-laws when she was entering their house, her new home, on the wedding day.

It is an exceptional fact as all the other phulkari were part of her dowry and, thus, were provided by her own family.

Vari-da-bagh is always made on an orange-reddish khaddar and, except for its border and sometimes a small decoration, it is always embroidered on its whole surface with a single golden or orange coloured pat.

This bagh's main pattern is a group of three or four small concentric lozenges of growing size included in each other. Despite the fact that only one colour of pat is used, these lozenges are easily revealed by the reflections of light. The outer one symbolizes the Earth, the next one the city and the third one the familial house. It happens that this last lozenge is split into four smaller ones probably symbolizing the parents of the groom and the newly married couple.

The bride was wrapped in this bagh by her mother in law when she was receiving the keys of her new house, thereby meaning that the bride was becoming responsible for the maintenance of the house.



Fig. 23 & 24: A vari-da-bagh from West Punjab

Bawan Bagh (or Bawan Phulkari)

"Bawan" means "fifty-two" in Punjabi and refers to the mosaic of fifty-two different patterns which decorate this piece (the number of patterns can be at times more or less than 52). Bawan bagh (or phulkari) was in fact a display of samples used by professional embroiderers to show their skills and the patterns they could provide to their clients. This explains why bawan bagh (or phulkari) is the rarest of all the bagh and phulkari.

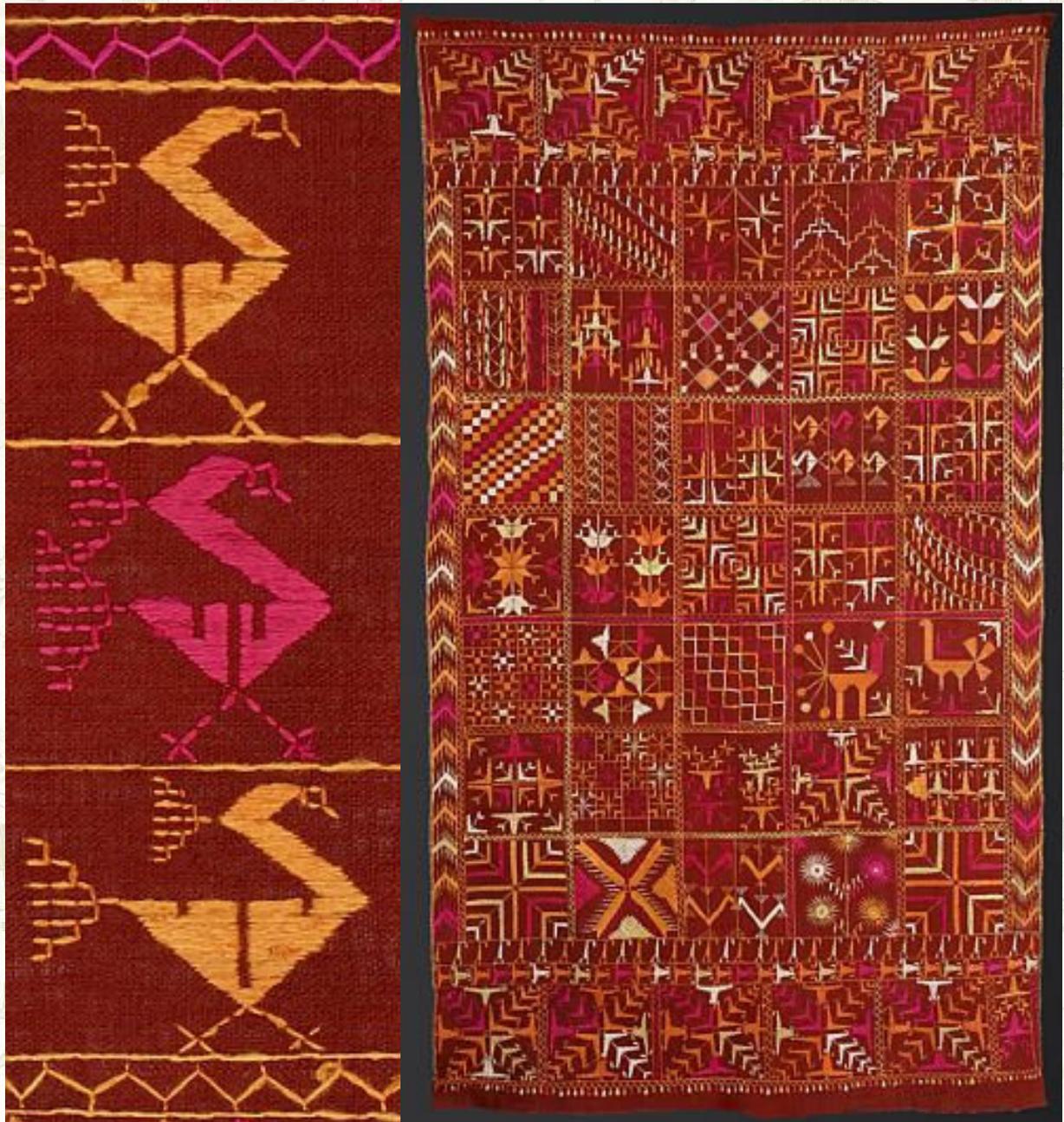


Fig. 25 & 26: A bawan phulkari from East Punjab

Chope

The bride's maternal grandmother (Nani) was starting chope's embroidery as soon as her granddaughter was born. Instead of the common darning stitch, she was using the Holbein stitch which has the specificity of creating the same design on both the sides of the khaddar. This can be interpreted as the grandmother's wish to make her granddaughter equally happy in her life and after her death, on the two sides of her existence.

Chope was made to wrap and dry the bride after the ritual bath she was having before her wedding, for this practical reason chope is bigger than other phulkari.

Its khaddar was invariably dyed in red or orange colour, symbol of passion and happiness. It is worth noticing that chope was never bordered so that this happiness could be unlimited...

Pat was always chosen in golden tones to express desire and wealth.

The Patterns were big triangles symmetrically distributed on the two sides of the chope's longitudinal axis. They were maybe symbolizing male and female principles separated by a distance expressing the fact that the wedding's night had not taken place yet and, thus, that the bride and groom had not had physical intimacy. On another hand these triangles could also represent stylized peacocks.

As well as in other phulkari, some mistakes were voluntarily introduced into the embroidery work in order to protect the bride from the evil eye ("nazar"). Indeed a perfect piece could have attracted others' jealousy.

This principle of keeping others' envy away showing imperfections is found in many oriental traditions. In India, for instance, some black round spots are often drawn on babies faces for this purpose.

Sometimes, chope was also used to cover and hide the bride's dowry, making it invisible to jealous minds and thus keeping the nazar away.



Fig. 27 & 28: A chope phulkari

Surajmukhi

Surajmukhi, the sunflower, refers to the main pattern of this phulkari. From a technical point of view this type of phulkari is unique as it is the only one that mixes in comparable proportions Holbein stitch (used to make chope phulkari) and the regular darning stitch.



Fig. 29 and Fig. 30: Details of two surajmukhi phulkari from West Punjab

Kaudi Bagh

Among their patterns, these bagh include chains of small white squares representing stylized cowries. Used as currency in the old times these shells have now lost all of their value and using them as ornaments has thus become a sign of humility.

From another point of view, the shape of these shells can remind of female genitals and make them become symbols of fertility. Kaudi phulkari were often worn by women wanting to increase their chance to become pregnant.



Fig. 31: A punjabi woman Wearing dress ornaments made of cowries



Fig. 32: Dress ornaments made of cowries



Fig. 33: Detail of a kaudi bagh from East Punjab

Panchranga Bagh

Meaning "Five colours", this bagh is decorated with chevrons of five different colours. In the same way, similar pieces like satranga ("Seven colours") bagh are also available.



Fig. 34 & 35: A panchranga bagh

Meenakari Bagh (or "Ikka Bagh")

This bagh, often made of gold and white coloured pat, is decorated with small multicoloured lozenges referring to enamel work (meenakari) or to "diamond" playing cards' suit.

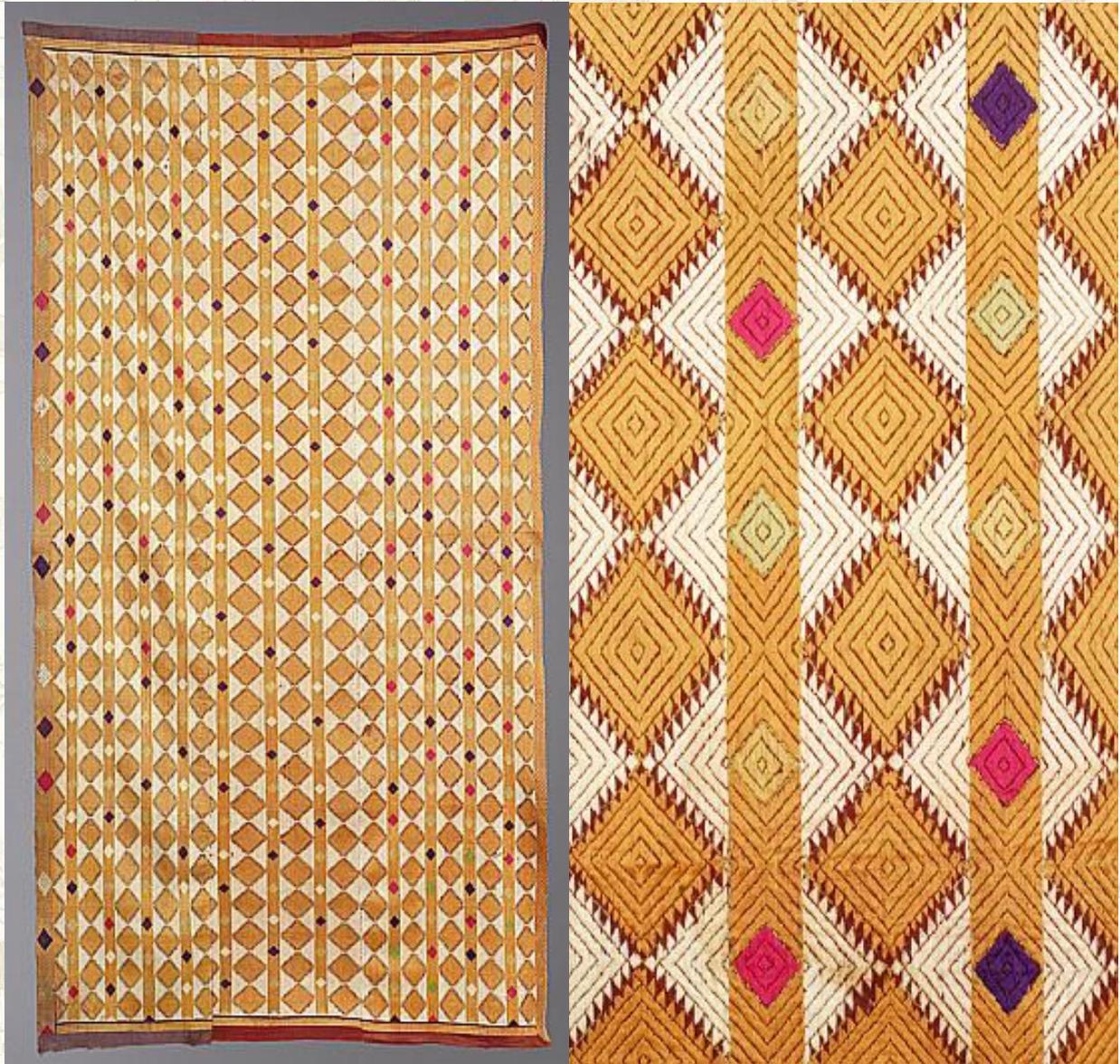


Fig. 36 & 37: A meenakari (or ikka) bagh

Phulkari today

Phulkari and bagh displayed in collections are mostly 50 to 150 years old. They had been bought for a few rupees or exchanged against kitchen utensils in villages of Punjab, years back, by local intermediaries and then sold to dealers in big cities like Delhi or Peshawar.

Some associations have been trying hard to keep this art alive but nowadays phulkari are almost exclusively industrially made. They are available in cloth markets of Punjab's big cities (Patiala, Amritsar...) along with embroidered kurtas and cushions.

The fact that this tradition in its original form is now almost over, that Punjab's villages have been washed out of their best pieces and that the information on phulkari's value in the occidental market is now easily available all over the World through the Internet, has increased the prices of fine phulkari and bagh in very big proportions.

These pieces have now almost totally moved from villages to collectors and museums like Quai Branly or V&A.



Fig. 38 & 39: A wedding shawl from Kohistan (North Pakistan) embroidered in darning stitch like a phulkari

"Ih Phulkari Meri Maan Ne Kadhi, Is noo Ghut Ghut Japhiyan Paawan"

("This phulkari has been embroidered by my dear mother, I affectionately embrace it again and again")

(Traditional punjabi song (Quoted from S.S.Hitkari: Design and Patterns in Phulkari))

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Acknowledgement

My parents Chris and Gerard for their help and encouragement
Surjeet Husain for having shared with me her deep knowledge of embroidery work
Ludovic Bollo for the phulkari photos
Tulika Srivastava for her patience in correcting my mistakes in English
Navjit S.Aulakh and Mattu Sandhu Sibia for the wedding photos
Arun, Madho Bhai, Sanjay and Deepak for their expertise
François Pannier and Patrick Grimaud for their encouragement
Bhupinder Grewal for the information she gave me

All the phulkari displayed in this article are part of the Indian Heritage collection.



Fig. 40 & 41: Mattu Sandhu Sibia's wedding (Photo courtesy of Mattu Sandhu Sibia)

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