

Sarala Sharma

Arts and Crafts of India

In conjunction with the Conference an Exhibition of hand-woven textiles, folk jewellery and old embroideries from the collection of Sarala Sharma was displayed at the Killam Library of Dalhousie University.

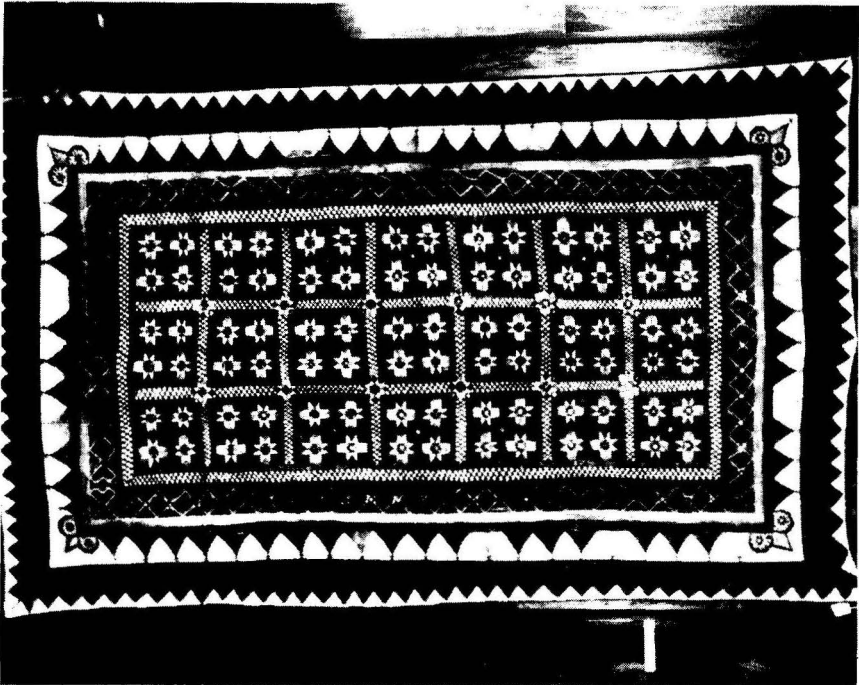
India has a rich tradition of crafts and cultural heritage. I have selected a range of exhibits (according to the availability of space) from three types of crafts which are co-related and have an important impact on the socio-economic life of India.

Hand-woven Textiles

For 2000 years or more, Indian history has been closely bound up with her pre-eminence as a producer of textiles. As early as 200 B.C., the Romans used a Sanskrit word (Latin *carbasina*, from Sanskrit *Karpasa*) and in Nero's reign translucent muslins from India were known by such names as *nebula* and *vente* textiles (woven winds).

Inspired by a rich tradition of myth, symbol and fantastic imagery, the craftsman developed the skill of weaving into a very sophisticated art. It was handed down from generation to generation and weaving centres grew up in many parts of India, each with their particular style of colour, texture and design. The nature of expression was determined by the local culture and the geography and climate of the particular region. In the great desert belt stretching from Rajasthan to Gujarat, the bare stretches of sand and the intolerable heat of the afternoon sun, demanded compensation in the deep glowing colours of the tie-dyed fabrics of this area. Side by side, the rich Gangetic plains with their abundant green fields, gave rise to a textile tradition of more delicate colours, softer textures, greater emphasis on linear patterns and a delicate motif. The lush forests of Bengal further restrained this trend and here the white sari with rich borders was developed. Further south in the hilly tracts of the Deccan, formal patterns grow in importance and colours become darker and more

Textiles from the Collection of Sarala Sharma,
as displayed at the
Killam Library, Dalhousie University.



subdued till we come to Kerala. In this coastal province the lush greenery reappears and here white becomes prominent.

The textile tradition rooted in custom, ritual and function has provided employment, brought prestige and created a unique aesthetic sense. There is no stagnation in the textile craft — although forms are repeated, they are free from imitative intention and each productive act is spontaneously linked to the river of man's life.

Few people realise that four-fifths of our population lives in over half a million villages. Gandhiji's insights into the economic needs of village India generated a new thrust in handloom production. The coming together of a contemporary vision with traditional skill created an interaction of perception. Marketing and design development led to handloom textiles being recognized in the world textile trade. Its major strength is the unique skill of the weaver, his comprehension of colour, texture and function, his capacity for adoption and production of small yardage in a variety of designs. In a recent experiment weavers evolved 650 textures of grey cloth. No other technology, but the handloom could produce it in the required lengths and quantities. The handloom craft today is a small industry in terms of tools and technology, but a vast industry in terms of its employment potential. There are 10 million weavers and in 1984-85 310 million metres of handloom cloth was produced. In fact, next to agriculture, handloom industry employs the largest number of people in the country.

The Sari, the national costume of the Indian woman, is one of the most ancient styles of dress, but it continues to dominate the Indian scene. It is 6 yds. long and 45" wide, with a few exceptions, and is draped in one piece. Styles of draping and favourite weaves and designs vary from province to province.

Folk Jewellery

In India since the Vedic period of the third millennium, a woman's jewellery was considered as wealth, comprising her inheritance from her father and a gift from her husband. To her it is also the most important item of personal adornment and social status. But the Indians do not look upon jewellery merely as a means of adornment. It means much more to them. It is regarded as a kind of treasure, a valuable investment, that touches the life of the people at many points. With its beatifying and decorative aspect, jewellery influences the cultural and socio-economic life of the country in an appreciable manner. Apart from its intrinsic charm and its economic value, it has meanings not only of sentiment but of religious import. The gods are depicted on it. It is invested with symbolic significance, and this aspect

is often found in the form of amulets inscribed with prayers which are supposed to ward off evil and protect the wearer. The devotion displayed in the craftsmanship is equivalent to offering Puja to the gods themselves.

India's heritage of jewellery in terms of design, craftsmanship, and the range of materials used is rich indeed. In design, there is hardly any element in nature, flowers and foliage, birds and animals, which the jeweller has not used to make his imagination bloom. On top of these forms from Nature is a symbolic repertoire of Hindu deities and celestial beings.

In terms of materials used, the range has included gold, silver, copper, brass, precious and semi-precious stones and pearls and combinations of these elements in varying degrees. The variety perhaps has no parallel. The very wide range of patterns, styles and composition is beyond enumeration. The famous spiderweb silver filigree work of Orissa in the east, enamel and kundan work of Delhi and Rajasthan in the north, folk glass and bead work of Kutch and Saurashtra in the west, and gold and ruby encrusted ornaments of Madras in the south — are superb examples of the living tradition of Indian jewellery. In it one sees the instinctive feeling for beauty of the craftsman, his monumental patience and delight in his creation. In fact, many centuries have influenced and contributed towards the fine craftsmanship of Indian ornaments and each design is indigenous to the region of its creation.

It is interesting to observe that there exists a similarity in our present day designs and the jewellery of the Sumerians, the Etruscans and early Greeks. The similarity is particularly evident in the traditional jewellery of Kutch and Saurashtra. This influence may be due to the well-known fact that trade channels existed in the prehistoric times.

The variety of designs in folk jewellery has evolved over the years — it has bold motifs, is robust in character, heavy in weight and its style and design varies from region to region. The material used is mainly silver and sometimes beads and glass are encrusted for their colour and decorative aspect. It is difficult to decide as to whether it is folk jewellery which has influenced city jewellery or vice versa. There is no doubt, however, that many forms originally developed in folk jewellery have been adopted by city jewellers who refined them by their sensitive handling.

Old Embroidery

Embroidery is acknowledged to be of oriental origin and India is said to be one of its original homes. The reference to embroidery in the

Vedas and later in the Epics prove its antiquity. The Mohanjodaro excavations revealed bronze needles used for embroidery back to C. 2300-1500 B.C.

In thousands of villages in India the art of embroidery is nourished by the loving hands of the folk women and fed by their passion for colour and integral form and is thus kept alive. Moreover, these creations are meant for themselves, and not for the market. They were created for the joy of creation, to bring splendour into their otherwise lowly life of struggle and privation. The artistic quality, utility and strength bear ample proof of this.

The great characteristic value of Indian embroidery is that the aesthetic sense is always merged with the symbolic meaning. As in the traditional dances, where every gesture is equivalent to a word or concept of myth or faith, every colour, or pattern has significance. Some mark the great incidents of life, birth, growing-up, death — in short, one text book of history. Others prophesy the future, or reveal man's dreams of the other world, suggest the wonders and possibilities of love, and take us to a never-never land populated by splendid animals, heroic men and lovely girls. In fact, embroidery like any other art is the outcome of the desire latent in human beings for beauty, for introducing grace and elegance into the ordinary objects of everyday use through a vast palette of colour and form.

The embroidery of Gujarat, the peasant and tribal in particular, conjure up a world that throbs with life and a spontaneous liveliness unknown in the slick prodigality of the professionals. The folk expressions of their embroidery, which border on the primitive, and for that matter are bold and more vigorous, even at some moments uncanny, meet a ready approbation of the modern mind. The language it utters is inaudible, but not inarticulate; abstract, but not disturbing, it emanates from and is a reflection of the deep seated psychic forces.

The most well known source of embroidery in Gujarat are the areas of Kutch and Saurashtra with their own schools of embroidery — such as the Lohana, Kathi, Rubari, Ahir, Mochi, Mahajan, Charan, etc. Gujarat embroidery was a flourishing trade in the 16th and 17th century and embroideries were exported to England.

In the Kutch embroidery, motifs are restricted to rustic subjects, for one finds them lifted out of pageantry — like gaily tapestried elephants, canopies, fans, dancing peacocks and many parrots. Besides this, there are riders on a horse and an elephant, women churning the butter, may be it is “navnit priya” Krishna himself. A “Chanderva” is embroidered for decorating the wall, a “Toran” is prepared for the doorway, and a “Chakla” is used as a prayer mat.

Saurashtra embroidery is lavish and decorative in the extreme — the mirror work is prominent. The small mirrors freely used in the embroideries reflecting pinpoints of light give an effect of shimmering sunlight. Many such embroideries were hung on the walls of inner shrines and temples.

Punjab's characteristic embroidery is known as Phulkari. The origins of this embroidery seem to go back to the early settlement of Central Asian tribes in this region. One conjecture is that the art was brought by Gujarat nomads from Central Asia. It could also have, perhaps, some links with the "Gulkari" done by some tribes in Iran.

The warm colouring, boldness and richness of design and the patient hard work which go into the embroidery of the Phulkari make it symbolic of the peasant women of Punjab and Haryana. It is an intimate part of their life — and traditionally no ceremony could be completed without the wearing of a Phulkari shawl. This not only added colour and richness, but was considered auspicious. After the birth of a baby, the grandmother and the aunts would assemble and initiate the preparation of the Phulkari shawl, that would be used, in due course, at marriage. Every inch of the surface was covered with embroidery, broken only in a corner by an embroidered black spot, as it were, to ward off the evil eye.

The Phulkari of the Punjab has a strict symmetry and geometrical pattern, where as the Phulkari of Haryana has more imaginative motifs, which include the everyday life around these peasant women — men and women at work, cattle, wild animals, rivers, houses, temples, etc.

The embroideries of the Frontier Provinces are elaborately decorated in geometrical patterns in shades of pink and dark red. The workmanship is extremely fine and delicate. It is done with silk and the effect is that of gorgeous richness. The motifs and composition are reminiscent of the costumes seen in the Moghul miniatures.