

Kantha: A Tapestry of West Bengal's Cultural Heritage

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ABSTRACT

Kantha, a traditional embroidery art form from Bengal, India, represents a rich blend of cultural heritage and skilled craftsmanship. This intricate art is distinguished by its unique stitching techniques applied to old sarees and dhotis. Historically practiced by women, Kantha serves as a medium for creative expression and a narrative tool that conveys the personal and communal stories of rural life. The designs found in Kantha are heavily influenced by the local natural environment, incorporating motifs inspired by flora, fauna, and regional folklore. Over time, Kantha has evolved from practical quilts, originally designed for warmth, into an art form in its own right. The double-faced quilts, featuring identical embroidery on both sides, highlight the meticulous skill involved in their creation.

INTRODUCTION

Kantha, a traditional embroidery technique from Bengal, India, stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of craftsmanship and storytelling. This ancient art form involves the meticulous stitching of intricate patterns onto fabric using simple running stitches. Typically, the base material

for Kantha consists of a patchwork of old sarees or dhotis, carefully layered and stitched together with white thread to create a unified surface. More than just a piece of fabric, Kantha embodies a narrative woven from threads of history, culture and personal experiences. Historically, this embroidery was

predominantly practiced by women as a leisure activity and a form of creative expression. The patterns, inspired by nature, mythology and everyday life, are stitched into the fabric with a sense of reverence and passion. The use of recycled textiles reflects the resourceful lifestyle of rural communities while adding depth and meaning to the embroidered pieces. The flourishing rural landscape of Bengal, with its vibrant villages, serene rivers, and rich greenery, has served as a significant source of inspiration for Kantha artisans. The natural motifs, such as flowers, birds, and animals that embellish Kantha creations often celebrate the beauty and abundance of the surrounding environment. Furthermore, the intricate patterns and symbolic designs found in Kantha embroidery frequently reference the agricultural practices, spiritual beliefs, and folklore of rural life (Dasgupta, 2010; Mukherjee, 2015; Sen, 2007).

Over the years, Kantha has transformed from a practical craft into a renowned art form. Its elaborate designs, striking colors, and meaningful motifs have captured the attention of audiences around the globe. Today, Kantha is celebrated not only for its visual appeal but also for its cultural importance and its ability to connect people to their heritage (Mukherjee, 2015).

The original Kantha quilts are recognized for their distinctive double-faced design, featuring identical embroidery on both sides of the fabric. This unique aspect is achieved through a series of long running stitches that create small tacks, resulting in a dotted appearance on the quilt's surface. This technique is reminiscent of the Bengali term "do-rukha," meaning "two-faced." The size and thickness of Kantha quilts can vary widely based on their intended use and type, ranging from lightweight throws to heavier bedcovers. Crafting a Kantha quilt is a labor-intensive endeavor, often taking up to six months to complete, which reflects the artisans'

dedication and skill. Traditionally, Kantha has been produced in various regions, including Hugli, Patna, Satagon, Faridpur, and Khulna, as well as across other areas of East and West Bengal. Each region showcases its own unique style and techniques, shaped by local culture and the materials available (Dasgupta, 2010).

1. Types of embroidery

Over time, Kantha embroidery evolved into two distinct styles:

1.1 Quilted Bedspreads: These bedspreads often made from yellow Tussar silk, feature pictorial

designs that reflect the cultural and historical influences of



the region. The Portuguese, during their colonial presence in Hugli, introduced new motifs and techniques that were subsequently incorporated into Kantha embroidery (Dasgupta, 2010).

1.2 Embroidered Muslin Piece Goods:

Originating from Dacca, these pieces were made from fine muslin fabric and adorned with intricate embroidery. The



delicate nature of muslin and the precision required for the embroidery techniques suggest a high level of craftsmanship and artistic skill (Dasgupta, 2010).

2. Threads and Materials

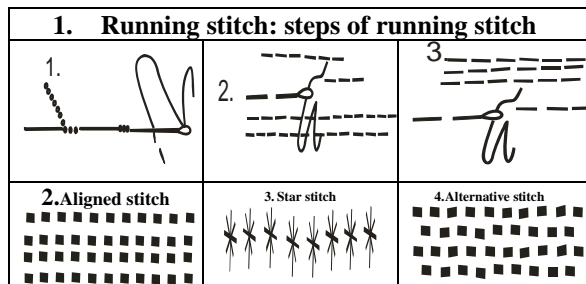
The threads used for Kantha embroidery are sourced from the borders of discarded sarees, which are used as foundational elements for the designs. The color of the threads for Kantha embroidery is vibrant and diverse

shades of blue, green, yellow, red, and black. These colors are carefully chosen to enhance the visual impact of the motifs and to evoke various emotions and meanings associated with each hue (Mukherjee, 2015).

3. Design and stitching techniques

The stitching techniques employed in this art form include darning, satin, and loop stitches. Each stitch type contributes uniquely to the texture and detail of the design. For the borders, stem stitches are commonly used, providing a clean and defined outline that frames the artwork beautifully. However, the most prevalent and characteristic stitch in these creations is the small darning stitch, which produces delicate dotted lines. This technique adds a subtle yet intricate detail to the motifs, enhancing their visual complexity while maintaining an overall sense of harmony.

3.1 Types of stitch



3.2. Motifs of Kantha embroidery

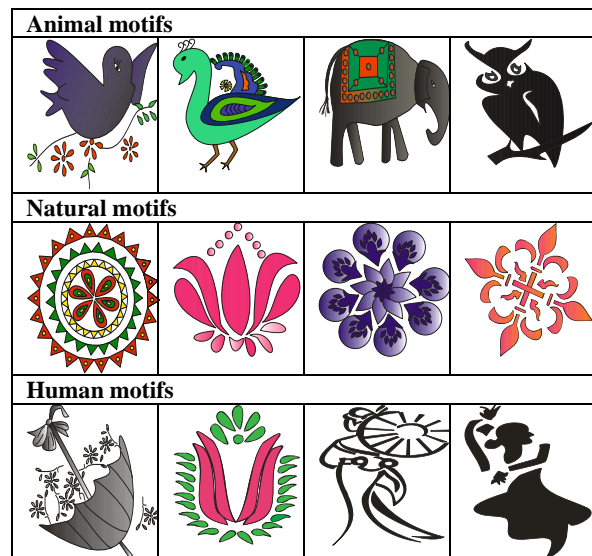
The motifs found in Kantha embroidery encompass a wide range of subjects, including:

- 1. Animal Figures:** Birds, animals, and mythical creatures like owl, peacocks, and swans are frequently featured in Kantha designs.
- 2. Natural Elements:** Floral and foliage symbols, such as trees, creepers, and lotus flowers, are often incorporated into Kantha patterns.

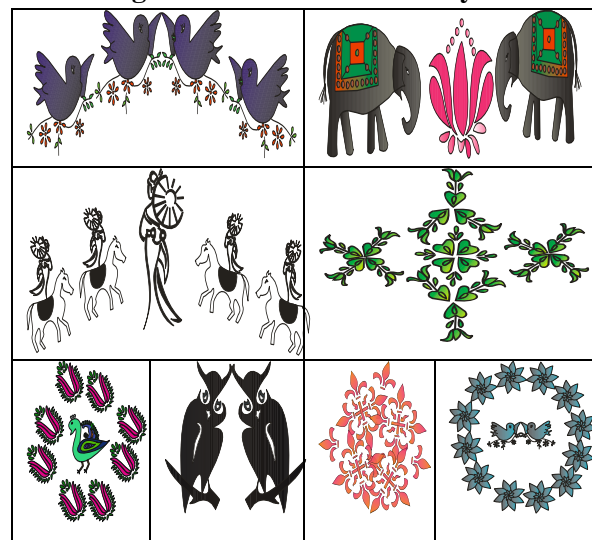
3. Human Figures: Depictions of humans, often representing gods, goddesses, or mythological characters, are common in Kantha.

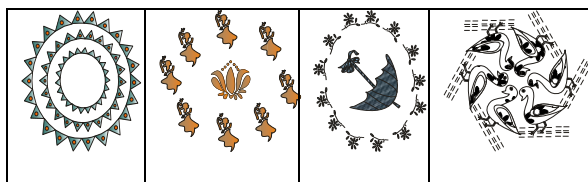
4. Aquatic Scenes: Fish, submarine sceneries, and other aquatic motifs are also popular in Kantha embroidery.

Many of the motifs used in Kantha are inspired by Hindu mythology and religious beliefs. The steeds of gods, such as the swan, lion, elephant, mouse and peacock, are often depicted in Kantha designs. These motifs symbolize power, wisdom and devotion (Sen, 2007).



3.3. Designs for Kantha embroidery





4. Types of Kantha

1. **Lep:** A thick quilted wrap primarily used in winter for warmth. Its designs are geometric and created using running stitches.
2. **Sarfni:** Similar to the Lep, this quilted wrap is used for ceremonial purposes.
3. **Bayton:** This square piece features a central motif surrounded by two to three wide borders adorned with human and animal figures. Measuring three feet, it is typically used to wrap books and other valuables.
4. **Oar:** Rectangular in shape, this piece is designed for use as pillow covers. The motifs commonly featured are trees and birds, or it may have linear patterns.
5. **Arsilata:** This item serves as a wrap for mirrors and combs.
6. **Durjani:** Also known as Thalia, this square piece is intended to function as a wallet cover.
7. **Rumal:** A handkerchief measuring twelve inches square.
8. **Sujani:** Typically, large and rectangular, with dimensions of three feet by six feet, this bedspread has a lighter thickness and is used as a covering during ceremonial events.



CONCLUSION

Kantha embroidery, a captivating blend of art and tradition, continues to captivate audiences worldwide. Its intricate designs, vibrant colors, and symbolic motifs offer a glimpse into the rich cultural heritage of Bengal, India. From its humble beginnings as a utilitarian craft to its current status as a celebrated art form, Kantha has endured the test of time, serving as a testament to the enduring spirit of craftsmanship and storytelling. As we admire the beauty and complexity of Kantha, we also honor the women who have dedicated their lives to this art form, preserving a precious cultural legacy for generations to come.

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