

Legacy of the Silk Road: Domestic Embroideries from the Caucasus and Central Asia,
February 17, 2006-May 28, 2006

For centuries, caravans of merchants traversed the perilous land routes between China and the Middle East to bring luxurious silks to eager customers. Silk was an important commodity itself, but it also inspired new textile arts along the traders' way. This is particularly evident in the silk-on-cotton embroideries shown here, which were done in the home by women and girls primarily for personal or household use. These examples were made in the 18th and 19th centuries in the central Caucasus, the southern Caucasus (Azerbaijan and the province of Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran), and the oasis towns of central Asia, such as Bukhara (present-day Uzbekistan). In each of these regions silk yarns were available locally, possibly even produced from silkworms cultivated by the women and girls who worked the embroidery.

The dark colors and medallion patterns used in the central Caucasus are reminiscent of rug designs from the same area. The Azerbaijani embroideries show light colors with geometric and stylized floral patterning, also found in rugs from surrounding areas of the Caucasus and Iran. The central Asian works have brightly colored floral imagery. The embroideries display only a very few stitches: cross-stitch, running stitch, chain stitch, and couching. Embroiderers in the central and southern Caucasus counted the threads of the ground cloth to help them build their stylized patterns, using cross-stitch or closely worked rows of running stitches ("pattern darning"). The central Asian embroiderers drew naturalistic designs and worked them freely over the surface in chain stitch and couching without using the woven grid of the ground fabric to define the design.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Persian

Rug fragment, ca. 1850

Cotton, wool; plain weave, knotted pile

Gift of Mrs. Arthur Pope 11.759

Embroideries of this type have only recently begun to be studied and researched. It is currently thought that they were made during the 17th and 18th centuries in the Azerbaijani regions of the southern Caucasus and northwestern Iran.

The colors used are similar to 17th and 18th-century Turkish embroideries, while the patterns are common to many aspects of Islamic art, including some types of Persian rugs, such as the 19th-century example in this case. Note the correspondence between the ornate floral medallion in the rug fragment and the stylized forms that populate the embroideries here and in other southern Caucasus pieces in this gallery.



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Persian
Textile fragment, 1500s
Silk; linen
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 15.115



Persian
Rug, 1500s
Silk; cotton
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 15.116



Azerbaijani
Textile fragment, 1500s
Silk; linen
Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 15.117

Areas of the ground fabric in this cover were originally embroidered with black silk to create a triple-diamond pattern. This pattern element has disappeared in many areas, however, and a later hand has added black embroidery without understanding or trying to maintain the original design.



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Near Eastern

Textile fragments (pieced), 1600s-1700s

Cotton plain weave with silk embroidery, pieced

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 15.118

Several fragments of one cover have been sewn together to form this piece. The diagonal bands of open work were created by drawing together groups of threads in the ground fabric and holding them in place with a single stitch of white silk. The drawnwork in this piece and the adjacent cover may indicate an earlier date of manufacture or a regional design variation.



Turkmen; Turcoman

Bag face (chuval), 1800s

Wool; plain weave, knotted pile

Anonymous gift 1986.223.5

As opposed to the underlying lattice structure that guides the eye in the pieces displayed at left, in this case the medallions are freed to form a new design language. In the bag face, the name for the quartered, octagonal motif (*gul*) translates as "flower" and indicates the particular Turkmen tribe to which the weaver belongs. In the adjacent Southern Caucasus cover, the repeating designs, although also derived from floral imagery, show an abstracted approach that favors experimentation and movement.



Despite their being made on opposite sides of the Caspian Sea, both pieces share a common design influence: the roundels on woven silk fabrics made and traded by Persian Sasanians, Central Asian Sogdians, Byzantines, and the Chinese.

Turkish

Furnishing Fabric (Suzani), 1800s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, chain stitch

Gift of John Davis Hatch in honor of Olivia Eggleston Phelps Stokes
1991.013.37

A heavily embroidered *suzani* such as this one might well have taken over two years to make. With such an investment of time and energy, it should not surprise that the embroiderer used a colorful warp *ikat* textile as the facing for this piece, another valuable cloth made in the urban centers of Central Asia as a collaborative effort by craftsmen of different religions and cultures. An added layer of cross-cultural



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exchange can be found in the Russian printed cotton that lines the back of this and many other *suzanis*.

Caucasian

Cover, 1700s

Plain weave, cotton; embroidery, silk, running stitch (pattern darning)

Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke 20.425

A central field containing hooked medallions surrounded by a stylized floral border is typical of designs found in both pile carpets and flatweaves in the Caucasus region. It is possible that embroideries such as this and also the two Central Caucasian fragments on the far side of this room provided design inspiration for carpets from the area, such as the Kazakh rug shown in the case to the left.



Persian

Cover, 1500s

Silk, metallic-wrapped yam; compound weave

Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 28.041



Chinese

Chair cover, 1800s

Silk; compound weave

Gift of Marshall H. Gould 46.193A



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Central Asian

Hanging or cover (suzani), 1800s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, couching and chain stitch

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.210

These large embroideries, known as *suzani* (see also two similar pieces in the cases across the room), were made by girls in the oasis towns of Central Asia as part of their dowries. They were used as wall hangings or bed covers. The particular form of couching stitch used in many of these embroideries is often called Bukhara couching.



Despite the specific identification of the *suzani* motifs and stitches with Uzbekistan, foreign influences and adaptations are quite visible here when compared with the pieces from Persia and China.

Stretching from one end of the Silk Road to the other, the continuity of lattice patterning with leaf and rosette motifs is striking, even as scale and color variations tie these textiles to the specific localities in which they were made.

Central Asian

Hanging or cover (suzani), 1800s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, couching and chain stitch

Bequest of Miss Lucy Truman Aldrich 55.211

The layout of this piece, which deviates from that of the other two *suzanis* in this room, indicates that it was made in the Nurata region of Uzbekistan. Although it shares with other *suzanis* the bold, rounded floral motifs and characteristic Bukhara couching stitch, the foliate arrangements reaching inward from the corners distinguish this type as a Nurata creation and reference the Indo-Persian influence of flowering buta (a basic paisley element). Note also the inked guidelines, likely drawn by a professional designer, now visible in some areas of the cotton.



Azerbaijani

Cover, 1600s-1700s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, running stitch (pattern darning), double running stitch

Bequest of Miss Lucy Truman Aldrich 55.522

The vertical and horizontal alignment of the repeated star and lozenge shapes, together with the dark and light color choices,



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creates a complex geometry in this cover that allows the pattern to be read in both the positive and negative.

Azerbaijani

Cover, 1600s-1700s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, running stitch (pattern darning), drawnwork
Bequest of Miss Lucy Truman Aldrich 55.523

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Azerbaijani

Cover, 1600s-1700s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, running stitch (pattern darning), double running stitch

Bequest of Miss Lucy Truman Aldrich 55.524



Azerbaijani

Cover, 1700s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, running stitch (pattern darning), double running stitch

Bequest of Miss Lucy Truman Aldrich 55.525

Many of these covers from the Southern Caucasus and northwest Iran have been lovingly repaired with great skill. It is likely that the black and dark-blue areas in this embroidery replaced worn or stained parts of the original work.



Azerbaijani

Cover, 1600s-1700s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, running stitch (pattern darning), double running stitch

Bequest of Miss Lucy Truman Aldrich 55.526



Azerbaijani

Cover, 1600s - 1700s

Cotton, plain weave; silk, running stitch (pattern darning)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Winthrop W. Aldrich 64.095

The pattern and format in each of these pieces relate to those seen in tiles made under Safavid rule in Iran. In fact, the smaller cover here might be seen as a blown-up version of one of the "tiles" arranged in a grid-like structure in the larger piece. Both tile and textile in these manifestations serve as displays of an endless repeat, and thus are understood by some as symbolizing eternity.



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Caucasian; Kazakh

Rug, ca. 1880

Wool; plain weave, knotted pile

INV2004.481

