

The Indian Boteh Motif, January 27, 2017-July 30, 2017

The *boteh*—a stylized floral motif that over several centuries developed into a teardrop-shaped mass of swirling vegetation with a dramatically bent tip—features in contemporary design across the world. This design is often referred to as “paisley,” after the small Scottish town of Paisley, an important 19th-century European center for the production of woolen textiles bearing this motif. The history of the *boteh*, however, stretches much further back, and much farther afield.

Some scholars theorize that the *boteh* developed in ancient Near Eastern cultures from a wing or leaf form, evolving into a cypress tree or tree of life. Others track its beginning to the image of a single flower flanked by leaves, established in Persian art by the 1600s and soon after blossoming in textiles produced in northern India under the patronage of Mughal emperors. In this display, the evolution of the design is shown in Indian pieces spanning 200 years. Whether originating in leaf or flower, the *boteh* became more elaborate as it crossed cultures.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

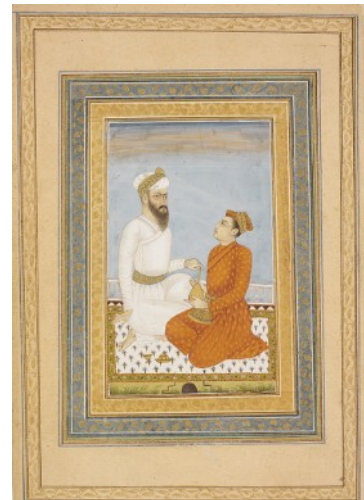
Indian

Two Men Conversing on a Balcony, 1700s

Ink and color on paper, mounted as an album page

Anonymous gift 17.495

In this painting, singular floral sprays decorate the red robe worn by the man at right and the mat on which both figures sit. The verdant, flowering world in the picture is much like that suggested in the shoulder mantle and head covering in this case, and indicates how the profusion of vegetal motifs created an immersive environment in the painted—as well as the real—world.



Indian

Woman's Head Covering (Ohdani), 1800-1850

Silk and metallic-wrapped-thread discontinuous supplementary-weft patterning

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.271

The singular floral sprays dancing across this woman's head covering are similar to those on the man's shoulder mantle at right. For centuries, weavers in the northern Indian city of Varanasi produced sumptuous silk and gold fabrics for wealthy patrons, including Mughal royalty. Iconic Indian patterns such as the repeated flowering tree (*boteh*) reveal the powerful influence of Mughal aesthetics across



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northern India. The tree-of-life motif migrated during the 16th century from Persia to India, as did the emphasis given to the motif by weaving it in gold-wrapped thread.

Indian

Man's Sash (Patka), late 1600s

Cotton plain weave with silk chain-stitch embroidery

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.276



The primary decoration in these waist sashes lies at the ends (*pallu*), in rows of delicate floral sprays. The bottom two embroidered examples feature naturalistic renderings of flowering trees very much in the style of Indian Mughal court aesthetics, which were influenced by Persian art and European botanical paintings and drawings. The designs illustrate the fluid exchange between Mughal and Persian court cultures that extended well into the 1800s.

In these depictions, the plant leans slightly to one side at the top, a style that became the primary way of drawing the *boteh* beginning in the 1800s. The topmost golden woven sash shows an even more exaggerated bent top, as well as a nod to the Persian cypress (or tree-of-life symbol), evident in the green leaf-like shape that supports the pink flowers.

Indian

Shoulder mantle, mid 1800s

Wool and goat-fleece double-interlocked twill tapestry weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.325



Both of these shawls feature repeating *boteh* motifs in arrangements and colors that appealed in particular to the Persian market. All-over patterns of vines heavy with *boteh*, as seen on this yellow shoulder mantle, were also popular for men's and women's robes. The square red shawl, known as a "moon" shawl because of its round central medallion, may have been used as a head covering or a floor spread.

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Indian; Kashmiri
Shawl, mid 1800s

Wool and goat-fleece double-interlocked twill tapestry weave; pieced and embroidered

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.326

In addition to the curved, bent-tip, and split-tip *boteh* motifs found around its borders, this shawl contains in its corners a straight tree form known as a cypress.

By the mid-19th century, Kashmiri shawl weavers had developed a system to speed up production and better compete with European manufacturers: several weavers made segments that were then sewn together by another artisan. This is an extremely fine example of a pieced shawl. The seams are virtually invisible, and the weaving is so intricate that it is hard to believe that the pattern is not painted.



Indian; Kashmiri

Shoulder mantle, ca. 1800

Goat-fleece double-interlocked twill tapestry weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.336

Produced to appeal to the tastes of elite clients of the Persian court (located in present-day Iran), this subtle yet luxurious mantle is scattered with flower heads drawn with stems, leaves, and roots, in the tradition of the sashes at the front of this case.



This piece was woven in Kashmir, a contested area north of India that has long been celebrated for its textiles. Using thread spun from the exceptionally fine undercoat of the Tibetan mountain goat, the weaver worked with such precision it almost looks as if the *boteh* motifs were painted with thread.

Indian

Man's Sash (Patka), 1750-1800

Silk and metallic-wrapped-thread compound weave with discontinuous-weft patterning

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.527

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Indian

Man's Sash (Patka), late 1600s

Cotton plain weave with silk chain-stitch embroidery

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.528



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Indian

Shoulder Mantle, 1750-1825

Wool and goat-fleece double-interlocked twill tapestry weave

Gift of Nelson A., Laurance S. and David Rockefeller, from the Estate of their late aunt, Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 56.069



For centuries, textiles made in Kashmir were highly valued and traded across the world. When areas of these textiles wore out, they were often pieced together to create a more fashionable garment. In this example, end and side borders were added to the earlier textile in the center.

Large carnation-like flowers in the center field are topped by vines curling downward, creating the classic shape that we call "paisley" today. In the end borders, elongated teardrop shapes packed with vegetation point the way toward more ornate designs that will predominate later in the 1800s.

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Indian

Chandar (Moon Shawl), ca. 1825

Wool and goat-fleece double-interlocked twill tapestry weave

Gift of Nelson A., Laurance S. and David Rockefeller, from the Estate of their late aunt, Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 56.070

Both of these shawls feature repeating boteh motifs in arrangements and colors that appealed in particular to the Persian market. All over patterns of vines heavy with *boteh*, as seen on this yellow shoulder mantle, were also popular for men's and women's robes. The square red shawl, known as a "moon" shawl because of its round central medallion, may have been used as a head covering or a floor spread.



American

Woman's Coat, ca. 1920

Wool and goat-fleece double-interlocked twill tapestry weave with fur trim

Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth 63.070.3

In about 1920, this coat was cut and pieced into a fashionable silhouette from a luxurious Kashmiri shawl made earlier. When the shawl was woven—around 1870—the Kashmir textile industry was on the verge of collapse, due in large part to intense competition from European manufacturers. The *boteh* design is visible in this highly stylized version, although it is almost subsumed by the density of pattern upon floral pattern—a far cry from the simple earlier examples in the case at right.



Indian

Bhairavi Ragini, late 1700s

Opaque watercolor on paper, mounted as an album page

Gift of Richard Brown Baker 82.294.5

Under Mughal patronage, Persian miniature painting styles fused with older Indian traditions. The expressive depiction of the trees at top of this painting and the delicate flowering plants at the bottom relate to the boteh on the sashes on the right. The man at the center of the painting wears a sash wrapped around his waist in a way that highlights the *boteh* border decoration, while the women wear head coverings in the manner that the one in the back of this case would have been worn.

