

What's in a Name? The Paisley Pattern in Kashmir Shawls,
November 5, 2004-February 13, 2005

The "paisley" motif, a curved teardrop shape with a bent tip, is a common phenomenon in contemporary design. Eye-popping paisley designs were popular in the 1960s, and small, neat paisley motifs perpetually adorn men's ties.

Where did this motif originate? Why is it called "paisley"?

One theory is that it developed from a wing or leaf form that first appeared in ancient Near Eastern cultures and evolved over time into a cypress tree or tree-of-life motif. Another thought is that it was derived from the image of a simple single flower flanked by leaves, even with a few roots at the base of the stem, established in Persian art by the 17th century. Whatever the case, in India and Persia this motif is called a buta or boteh. Westerners identify its many variants as a cone, cypress, pine, mango, teardrop, or paisley. Whether leaf or flower, it became ever more elaborate as it crossed cultures and became a focus for fashion novelty.

In the mid 18th century, shawls and sashes woven in Kashmir and containing this motif began to be imported into Europe. By the late 1790s, they had become important fashion accessories for women of the elite classes. At the same time, Kashmiri weavers began to emigrate to other regions of northern India, establishing shawl weaving wherever they settled. The technique they used, twill tapestry weave, was exceptionally time-consuming. One complicated shawl might take three years to complete. To meet consumer demand, Europeans began to imitate the shawls using mechanized looms. One of the most important centers for the production of these textiles was the small town of Paisley in southwestern Scotland. Gradually, all shawls of this type, no matter where they were made, became commonly known as Paisley shawls. The shawls went out of fashion beginning in the 1870s, but by the early 20th century, the motif itself had taken on the name.

Design ideas for these shawls flowed freely between India and Europe. The textiles in this exhibition illustrate the transformation of the Indian buta into the European paisley over the course of one hundred years.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Indian
Shawl, ca. 1863
Wool, goat fleece; double-interlocked twill tapestry weave with embroidery
Gift of Elizabeth D. Bugbee 18.186



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Although the paisley shapes in this shawl are rather less complex than is usual for the 1860s, the bright purple color seen in the fringe and the borders did not become popular until 1863. Just as designers sometimes do today, the creator of this shawl looked back to earlier ideas for inspiration.

Indian; Kashmiri
Shawl, 1835-1845
Goat fleece; double-interlocked twill tapestry weave
Museum Collection S1986.014

The long, bent-tip paisley motifs and scrolling tendrils in the end border of this shawl point the way toward the far more ornate paisley designs of the 1860s. The fairly simple paisley shape seen here is made to appear complex through layering and coloration.



Indian; Kashmiri
Shawl, ca. 1815
Goat fleece
Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.331

This shawl shows the interplay between European and Indian design. The field, which in traditional Indian shawls would have been unpatterned, is here filled with a Westernized lattice of flower garlands and ribbons. In contrast, in the border is a row of bent-tip paisley motifs derived from the traditional Eastern single flower with roots seen in the shawl in an adjacent case (acc. no. 55.336). In the border, each motif retains the "roots" and what has been called a "hood."



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Indian; Kashmiri

Shawl, 1870-1880

Wool, goat fleece; twill weave, embroidery

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.324

The only paisleys in this shawl are the corner motifs in the bright yellow central panel. Notice that the large paisley contains smaller motifs within it and around it. In contrast, the shawl's borders show Indian floral and architectural designs, typical of shawl designs from the last period of their 19th-century popularity.

This shawl differs from most of the others in that the patterning has been achieved by embroidering a single piece of yellow cloth with colored yarns. It is very finely worked and completely reversible, with different colors appearing on the face and reverse of the shawl.



Indian; Kashmiri

Shawl, late 1860s

Wool, goat fleece; double-interlocked twill tapestry weave with embroidery

Gift of Mrs. William Frederick Williams in memory of Mrs. Fielding Lewis Williams 28.104

This shawl has many design elements that date it to the 1860s. Its bright reddish-purple color ("magenta") became popular then, as did the use of white outlining bands around the larger motifs and the wide and very elaborate multicolored fringed bands at the ends (a "harlequin" border). Also typical of later shawls is the buta form that resembles a celery stalk, an elongated form with a leafy tip, often split with the ends scrolling in different directions.



Indian; Kashmiri

Shawl, mid 1800s

Wool, goat fleece; double-interlocked twill tapestry weave

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry D. Sharpe 26.202

Shawls from India were highly valued during most of the 19th century. When the plain centers of early shawls wore out, the patterned borders were often pieced together to create a more elaborate—and by mid-century—more fashionable shawl. In this example, the eight large end-border buta and the smaller motifs in rows all have the rounded silhouette and bent tip popular in the 1820s, although the shawl seems to have been altered around 1850.



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Indian

Shawl, 1835-1840

Goat fleece; double-interlocked twill tapestry weave with embroidery
Gift of Mrs. E. M. Smith and Mrs. Peter McBean 78.192.2

Paisley shapes in many sizes are crossed and layered to create the borders and corner motifs for this shawl. Notice, however, that the design also includes scrolling stems of Egyptian lotus flowers and, in the "gallery" (a term for the inner border surrounding the plain central portion), small exotic boat shapes that may indicate a design influence from China.



European; French; Austrian

Shawl, 1860-1876

Wool, silk; compound weave with supplementary weft patterning
Gift of Mrs. William F. Goerner 34.001

In the last years of the shawl's popularity, the paisley took on more exaggerated outlines. In this example, elongated paisleys have bent tips that split into scrolling tendrils, some of which end in leafy palmettes. The colors and designs used in this European-made shawl are practically indistinguishable from those made in India at the same time.



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 paisley motifs around the borders, this shawl also contains the motif often called "the cypress" (a straight tree form) in the corners.

By the mid 19th century, Kashmiri shawl weavers had developed a system for speeding up production. Several weavers made segments of a shawl, which were sewn together by another artisan. This is an extremely fine example of a pieced shawl.



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European

Shawl, ca. 1825 - 1850

Wool; compound weave with supplementary weft patterning

Gift of Henry A. Greene 26.116

Striped shawls were originally woven in India for the Persian market, but they also became popular in the West. In this European-made example, the small paisley motifs are subordinate to the stripes and to the scrolling stems out of which the paisleys grow.



Indian; Kashmiri

Shoulder mantle, ca. 1800

Goat-fleece double-interlocked twill tapestry weave

Bequest of Miss Lucy T. Aldrich 55.336

The small floral motif repeated throughout the field of this shawl - originally woven for the Persian market - is one of the forerunners of the paisley motif. Note the ways in which the individual elements of this single flower head with stems, leaves, and roots are elaborated and exaggerated to create the variety of paisley motifs seen in the rest of the shawls in the gallery.



Arnold Print Works, American, 1861 - 1942

Textile designs, 1890-1910

Gouache on paper

Gift of Jacob Ziskind, the Crescent Corporation 49.369.12

This group of designs for printed textiles comes from the files of an American manufacturer of the late 19th to early 20th century. The designs were used on cotton and woolen fabrics such as lawn for dresses and blouses, challis for dresses and skirts, and flannel for dressing gowns and smoking jackets.

Notice that the paisley designs vary in style. Some directly imitate the patterns on Indian shawls. Others use Indian elements to create more Western-type designs or use Western floral imagery to create the impression of the teardrop buta shape. The paisley motif has become a staple in the Western design vocabulary because it allows such great scope for creativity.