



Phulkari And Kantha: A Study Of Historical Comparison Of The Traditional Domestic Art Practices

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Abstract: In India, phulkari and katha embroidery are renowned for their important traditional and cultural backgrounds. These embroidery designs have equal folk significance and come from two very distinct places. Although Phulkari is believed to have originated in the Punjab region, Kantha flourished in eastern India, specifically in Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, and Bangladesh.

Although embroidery was once primarily thought of as a craft that women pursued to decorate household objects, research has shown that many rural women also used embroidery as a means of releasing suppressed emotions by using it to narrate their innermost thoughts and feelings.

Through the research it is clear that Kantha and Phulkari have this resemblance of using embroidery as a means of self-expression for rural women. According to the literature, the startling similarities between these two practices are due to the fact that they were women-centric and, despite being practiced in two very different regions, shared a common or at least somewhat similar method of expressing their voices, desires, and dreams—things that the male-dominated society would have otherwise dismissed as unimportant. Intricate and exquisite embroidery by the rural women of Punjab and Bengal not only adorned their homes and personal belongings but also served as a lovely means of expressing their unfulfilled dreams.

This research article explores the historical parallels between the Bengali-born Kantha and the Punjabi-born Phulkari, highlighting the ancient art practices of both groups as well as the innately feminine nature of these textile arts. The study examines the development of Kantha and Phulkari within the socio-cultural contexts of Bengal and Punjab, acknowledging the important responsibilities performed by women in creating these complex myths. We investigate the ways in which the feminine essence is woven into the artistic manifestations of Kantha and Phulkari, going beyond simple ornamentation to function as a potent tool for resistance, cultural preservation, and storytelling.

Index Terms: Indian Embroidery, Phulkari, Kantha, self expression, women art, needlework, art, craft practice, folk art, traditional art, domestic

1. INTRODUCTION

The diversity of traditional domestic art forms seen throughout cultures bears witness to the inventiveness, talent, and sense of cultural identity woven throughout human history. Of these, Phulkari from Punjab and Kantha from Bengal are striking examples of creative legacy, each entwined with complex strands of custom, artistry, and social influences. This study compares the historical development of Phulkari and Kantha, exploring the origins of these age-old textile arts, their progression through time, and the cultural stories they represent.

The use of embroidery techniques for enhancing fabrics is a prevalent practice among Phulkari, a tradition from the heartland of Punjab, and Kantha, a tradition from eastern parts of India. Even though these two art forms are geographically distinct from one another, their parallels encourage a closer look at the historical and cultural factors that have influenced them. This study attempts to untangle the interwoven tales of craftsmanship, regional aesthetics, and the domestic circumstances in which these art forms have flourished by delving into the subtleties of Kantha and Phulkari.

We will examine historical documents, creative archives, and first-hand recollections to contextualize our investigation and reveal the socio-cultural relevance of Kantha and Phulkari in the home. By using a comparative approach, we hope to highlight the unique qualities that characterize each creative form while simultaneously highlighting the common themes, methods, and cultural allusions that highlight how interrelated they are.

Our main objective in starting this comparison study is to provide insights into the historical paths of Kantha and Phulkari and add to the larger conversation on traditional textile art. We hope to deepen our awareness of the richness and dynamism found in traditional domestic art practices, which mirror the cultural kaleidoscope that defines the global community, by learning about the shared roots and distinctive trajectories of these two art forms.

Bengali Kantha and Punjabi Phulkari are two of the most colorful forms of traditional domestic art, deeply rooted in culture, history, and femininity. In order to shed light on the development of these traditional textile art forms in the context of their associations with feminine craftsmanship, cultural narratives, and societal roles, this research aims to conduct a nuanced historical comparison of Phulkari and Kantha.

Based in the home, Kantha and Phulkari both attest to the artistic abilities of women whose hands have woven tales, feelings, and cultural identities into the fabric of their creations. This study explores how women's creative endeavors have not only adorned domestic spaces but also served to acknowledge the inherent feminine quality embedded in these art forms.

The feminine quality in Kantha and Phulkari extends beyond the aesthetic realm, intertwining with the socio-cultural roles of women in Bengal and Punjab. This research seeks to unravel the ways in which these art forms have been shaped by and have, in turn, shaped the lives of women within their respective regions. Through a historical lens, we aim to explore the intersectionality of domesticity, craftsmanship, and the feminine experience, highlighting the agency and creativity of women as contributors to the cultural heritage of Bengal and Punjab.

Ultimately, this comparative analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between craftsmanship, culture, and the feminine within the global context of traditional textile heritage. By unraveling the stories intricately stitched into Kantha and Phulkari, this research seeks to enrich our appreciation of these art forms as dynamic expressions of feminine creativity and cultural identity.

2. ORIGIN AND STYLE

2.1 Phulkari

The traditional embroidery technique known as phulkari has its roots in the Punjab region, which includes portions of modern-day India and Pakistan. Three Punjabi words are used to form the word "Phulkari": "phul," which means flower, and "kari," which means work or craft. Phulkari is a distinctive and culturally significant textile tradition that is typified by vivid floral patterns and intricate stitching, as the name suggests. The Punjabi needlework, Phulkari, is exceptionally magnificent. Phulkari, which means "flowering," does produce a surface that is flowery. Its unique stitch is how simple it is; darning, like damask, is worked from the back, either by counting the threads or using the thread line as guidance. This is a very delicate operation, as one mistake can ruin the entire pattern.

Phulkari has a long history; evidence points to several centuries of its existence in the Punjab region. Historical texts and artifacts contain early references to similar embroidery techniques. Phulkari has deep connections to Punjabi farming communities and rural life. Its historical prevalence among women in rural communities is indicative of the diverse cultural landscape of this agrarian society. In Punjab, Phulkari has great cultural significance. Punjabi weddings, festivals, and other joyous occasions have always included it. Women wear Phulkari garments as a sign of celebration and happiness.

In Phulkari, the embroidery designs are frequently unique to particular areas or groups in Punjab. The styles and motifs of various districts or villages may differ, making Phulkari a potent means of expressing local and communal identity.

The "running stitch" or "darn stitch," which is the main method utilized in Phulkari, is what produces the elaborate patterns. The cloth is completely covered in colourful thread work, giving the impression that it is densely embroidered. Phulkari's colour scheme is renowned for being vivid and striking. The use of contrasting colours enhances the artwork's visual appeal and adds to its joyous atmosphere. Intricate patterns, stylized flowers, and geometric shapes are typical Phulkari motifs. Every motif may have distinct meanings or cultural connotations, which adds to the embroidery's storytelling quality.

2.2. Kantha

The Indian subcontinent, specifically the Bengal region, which includes portions of modern-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal, is home to the traditional craft of kantha embroidery. The term "throat" (kantha) in Sanskrit describes the basic running stitch that is used in this type of embroidery. The history of kantha embroidery is extensive and closely linked to Bengali women's domestic lives. It also dates back to the pre-Vedic era. Ancient Sanskrit texts and literature contain references to comparable embroidery techniques, indicating a long-standing tradition. Kantha was traditionally a craft connected mainly to rural Bengal. Women in the villages practiced it, and it was very important to household domestic life there. Originally, Kantha embroidery was used for practical purposes. Women made quilts and blankets out of discarded, worn-out materials like saris and dhotis by layering and sewing them together.

Textiles could be preserved thanks to this technique, and useful objects could be made. The stitching technique used in Kantha embroidery is simple yet intricate. The "running stitch," also referred to as the "straight stitch" or "kantha stitch," is the main stitch that is used.

Kantha embroidery is traditionally done on discarded or old fabric, like saris and dhotis. Reusing old textiles not only fits with the sustainable concept, but it also gives the embroidered item a historical touch. For Kantha embroidery, cotton threads are frequently utilized. The colours of the thread are selected to produce patterns that are vivid and striking. The colours red, blue, green, and yellow are considered traditional. The layering of several different fabrics is one characteristic that sets Kantha apart. Old cloth would be stacked by women, who would then sew the layers together to make covers, blankets, or quilts. The layers were held together by the stitching, which also created beautiful patterns. A vast variety of motifs and patterns can be found in

kantha embroidery. Typical motifs include geometric shapes, animals, birds, and flowers. These motifs often carry symbolic meanings and tell stories.

Colors used in Kantha embroidery are known for being vivid and contrasting. The embroidery piece's intended use and regional preferences influence the color selection. Certain colors may occasionally have symbolic or cultural connotations. Red, for instance, may represent joyous occasions and celebrations. Kantha is frequently used to make covers and quilts that have both decorative and practical uses. In addition to providing warmth, the detailed embroidery enhances the items' visual appeal. Kantha is not just used for quilts; it's also used to adorn sarees, dupattas, and even bags and other accessories. These embroidered items take on a distinctive and customized quality.

3. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

3.1 Phulkari

Because Phulkari work is time-consuming and laborious, it should only be done during leisure time. However, due to its significance in society and rituals, it is pursued with intense passion and devotion. Because it is a significant component of the bride's trousseau, the girl begins working on it at a young age, and the number of patterns she can complete, each of which must be completed according to a specific formula, serves as a gauge of her skill in needlework. It used to also determine whether she could become a bride. The Phulkari, which has a very unique design on it, is also worn at a particular wedding ceremony known as the phera.

In the past, Phulkari was considered a status symbol, and the wealthier gentry used embroidery to create elaborate designs, particularly for the bagh variety. The back's smoothness, which results from evenly spaced stitches, serves as a barometer for the quality of the workmanship.

The custom of the original Phulkari was more like diapering than flowering. It appears that Bagh was a later invention, replacing cotton thread with silk floss. In Punjab, extremely ornate quilts known as gudris are crafted from discarded pieces of cloth that are worn as winter wraps.

Phulkari serves as a distinctive symbol of regional identity within Punjab. Different areas and communities have developed unique styles and patterns, allowing Phulkari to act as a visual marker of one's origin. Phulkari is an integral part of traditional Punjabi attire, especially during weddings and festive occasions. Women wear Phulkari-embroidered garments, such as dupattas (scarves) and shawls, as a symbol of joy and celebration. Phulkari is a part of religious rituals and celebrations. When attending gurdwaras (Sikh places of worship) or taking part in religious ceremonies, women are permitted to wear Phulkari clothing. Phulkari's rich patterns and brilliant colors may have spiritual meaning. Certain pieces might have symbols from religion or astrology as motifs.

3.2 Kantha

Bengali Kantha embroidery evolved in a variety of regional styles, each with unique motifs and patterns. Certain regions' cultural identities are shaped in part by these regional differences.

Kantha embroidery is a perfect example of how resilient Bengali culture is. Bengali culture holds great significance for women. In rural Bengal, during the final stages of pregnancy, women were expected to create exquisite Kantha embroidery pieces. This was thought to bestow good fortune upon their families and shield the unborn child from harm. Kanthas were also made to cover or embellish various household objects. Bengali households have traditionally used the Kantha pieces in a variety of ways for a very long time. Even with shifting social mores and financial difficulties, Kantha has remained a beloved custom. Kantha pieces were traditionally used in Bengali households for many purposes over a long period of time. Depending on their size, they were mostly used as bags, shawls, or bedcovers. When Bengali women were masters at needlework, regardless of their castes, classes, or social standing, the craft was a treasure in every home. The majority of the time, the ladies who created the stunning kantha pieces remained anonymous, saves from the fact that they had made them for a close friend or relative. Most of the time, they were not signed; instead, they merely

stated the creator's relationship to the intended recipient. In tradition, these items have always had various uses. Like many other traditional embroidery techniques in India, kantha embroidery was long utilized in Hindu wedding ceremonies and celebrations. The women made distinctive Kantha pieces with particular meanings and symbolic references for every occasion. Kantha quilts are used for more than just rituals; they are also wrapped valuables in homes and given as gifts.

4. FEMININE EXPRESSION AND CREATIVITY

4.1 Phulkari

Within families, the art of Phulkari is frequently passed down from generation to generation. The craft is passed down to younger family members by elders, especially women, who also ensure that this cultural tradition is preserved. In the past, Phulkari gave women a creative outlet while taking care of the home. The art form gave women the confidence to express themselves creatively and enhanced their sense of self and autonomy. For women, it became a way to express their artistic side in the home. Women express their creativity through color selection, pattern making, and motif selection, adding to the community's cultural aesthetics. Stories, feelings, and cultural narratives are expressed through the stitches used in phulkari, a type of narrative embroidery. Every piece could be significant to the maker personally or in their family, acting as a visual record of their experiences. Animals, flowers, trees, and folklore were recurring themes in Phulkari embroidery, signifying a common culture. Even though this embroidery has distinct qualities, each family's Phulkari had a distinctive and individualistic style that served as a representation of the emotions, aspirations, and feelings of the women. A specific emotion was represented by each Phulkari's component parts. They developed into a poetic language that enabled women to use them to communicate their inner wisdom and sentiments.

4.2 Kantha

Kantha is a storytelling art form that involves more than just stitching. The running stitch was a tool used by women to express cultural and personal narratives through patterns and motifs.

Every piece turned into a visual documentation of the creator's insights and experiences. Similar to Phulkari, Kantha embroidery is a generational tradition passed down from mothers to daughters. Young girls learned the art from their elders, ensuring the continuity of skills and techniques within families. Kantha became a powerful medium for women to express themselves creatively within the domestic sphere. The running stitch allowed for artistic expression while also serving practical purposes. Though the themes and symbols were generally the same, each Kantha made by the women of rural Bengal is considered to be an example of the embroiderer's own creation; however, the composition, including color schemes, techniques, and presentation, differs from woman to woman. The rural women's imaginations were free to run wild during the entire process of making exquisite kanthas. The social and private lives of the artists were depicted in these embroidery pieces, along with their aspirations and narratives of daily existence. The women were able to express themselves through this embroidery. Even though the themes of Kantha were strikingly similar to traditional embroidery from other regions, they added vibrancy to these women's lives.

5. CONCLUSION

Similarities between Phulkari and Kantha embroidery can be seen in their feminine expression, which emphasizes the contribution of women to the making of these textile arts and the ways in which embroidery is used to express one's identity and culture. Women have historically performed both Kantha and Phulkari in the context of the home. Because needlework is typically done at home, it is an essential aspect of women's daily lives. Women have historically expressed themselves artistically within the home through the creation of Phulkari and Kantha pieces.

Mothers usually teach their daughters the methods and abilities of Phulkari and Kantha. The transmission of knowledge across generations guarantees the conservation of women's handicrafts and cultural legacy. These

embroidery pieces function as a conduit for connecting generations of women. The women in the family benefit from the act of passing down these skills because it creates a sense of continuity and shared identity. Women express their personal creativity on canvases such as Phulkari and Kantha. The woman who created the piece exhibited her individuality and artistic expression through her choice of colors, motifs, and stitching patterns. In addition to aesthetic beauty, the stitches in Phulkari and Kantha portray narratives and emotions. These textile arts are used by women as a means of narrative, emotional expression, and life capture. Storytelling with stitches is a technique used in both Phulkari and Kantha embroidery. The motifs and patterns may allude to symbolic meanings, cultural narratives, or individual experiences. Both Phulkari and Kantha employ motifs that have cultural significance and are used to convey particular ideas or express cultural identity. Phulkari and Kantha pieces are frequently made by women for important life events, particularly weddings.

These embroidered objects, which represent happiness and celebration, are incorporated into the ceremonial clothing. Specifically, Phulkari and Kantha are essential elements of customary bridal wear, exhibiting the richness of these textiles in terms of culture and femininity at weddings. Phulkari and Kantha are often created through social gatherings of women. These get-togethers give people a place to connect socially, share knowledge, and share cultural customs. In addition to sharing artistic abilities, women who embroider Phulkari and Kantha share a sense of camaraderie that strengthens the bonds between women in a cultural and familial setting.

Personalized items like shawls and quilts are frequently made by women, who imbue them with an artistic quality that elevates these commonplace objects into distinctive manifestations of feminine inventiveness. The main similarity between Phulkari and Kantha embroidery is that they are both strong forms of feminine expression that let women express their creativity, feelings, and sense of cultural identity through the motifs and stitches of these age-old textile crafts. The act of embroidering becomes a language through which women communicate and contribute to the cultural richness of their communities.

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