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Threads of heritage: Exploring the art, motifs, and cultural significance of phulkari

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Abstract

Phulkari, a traditional embroidery art of Punjab, embodies deep cultural and historical significance, reflecting the emotions, traditions, and everyday lives of Punjabi women. This study explores the origins, techniques, and thematic evolution of Phulkari, tracing its transformation from a domestic craft to an esteemed textile art form. Traditionally, Phulkari was handcrafted for personal and ceremonial use rather than commercial purposes, using untwisted silk threads on hand woven khaddar fabric. Its intricate motifs—ranging from geometric patterns to depictions of flora, fauna, and jewelry—symbolize spiritual beliefs, rural life, and prosperity. Various forms of Phulkari, including Chope, Subhar, Sainchi, and Neelak Phulkari, each possess distinct patterns and cultural meanings. These variations highlight regional influences and the deep-rooted storytelling aspect of the craft. Over time, Phulkari has undergone stylistic and functional transformations, adapting to contemporary textile and fashion trends. However, its essence as a symbol of Punjab's rich heritage and artisanal skill remains intact. This paper delves into the intricate artistry and social narratives embedded in Phulkari, examining how modern adaptations preserve its legacy while making it relevant to current fashion landscapes. By blending tradition with innovation, Phulkari continues to serve as a testament to Punjab's cultural identity, craftsmanship, and evolving artistic expression. It examines how this once-exclusive folk art has adapted to modern fashion trends while preserving its authenticity. By analyzing the artistic and expressive compromises involved in its revival, this paper highlights Phulkari's enduring significance as a living heritage. The fusion of tradition with innovation ensures that Phulkari continues to thrive, not just as an emblem of Punjab's rich cultural identity, but also as a dynamic and evolving textile art that resonates with global audiences today.

Keywords: Phulkari, Punjab embroidery, traditional textiles, cultural heritage

Introduction

Phulkari's origin has not been identified. In Waris Shah's well-known Punjabi folktale Heer Ranjha, a love story, Phulkari is referenced. "Its current form and popularity date back to the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the 15th century." A girl's life is greatly impacted by Phulkari. When a girl is born, her grandmother starts working on making the future bride's trousseau, which she would wear at her wedding ceremony when she walks around the hallowed fire. When a lady gives birth to a male, she is given a Phulkari, which she wears during religious festivals and the first time she goes out after giving birth. Likewise, Phulkari covers a woman's body after she passes away. The origin of this handicraft was purely a home need rather than an artistic one since phulkari was never made for commercial purposes but rather was embroidered by a family for their personal use at all significant events in their community, such as weddings, births, and religious ceremonies. As stated in the Sikh holy text, "Only then will you be considered an accomplished lady when you will yourself, embroider your own blouse," completing a "Phulkari" is a significant step for a girl to become a woman.

The thread used for the needlework was hand-spun, loomed, and dyed with natural colors on khaddar, a plain cotton

cloth. The thread was then linked either before or after the embroidery to create the desired motifs. Khaddar came in a variety of colors, but the most common was red, which was thought to be auspicious and associated with youth, while white was associated with widows or older women. Their lives were merely reflected in the embroidery. Items that people see and notice, such as vegetables they consume and pets they possess, were embroidered.

There are no documented procedures or patterns because she would teach her daughter this skill just like she would any other daily task. Every family has their own designs, patterns, and styles for the same purpose. The rugged, unyielding temperament of Punjabi women is reflected in the embroidery on the coarse, rough material known as "khaddar." The use of various motifs mirrored their observations and imaginations, while the use of vibrant colors depicted the colorful lives. Their heavy-built personality is made more delicate, elegant, and simple by wearing a "Phulkari."

Significance in Punjabi Culture

Phulkari is a traditional embroidery technique that is deeply ingrained in Punjabi culture. It is a representation of the artistic abilities of Punjabi women and a symbol of cultural

pride. It is frequently worn at weddings and other special occasions, and each stitch and design tells a story that reflects the wearer's feelings and life experiences. In other words, Phulkari is more than just an embroidery style; it is a material manifestation of Punjabi identity and values.

Traditional Techniques and Material

After finishing their domestic duties, Punjabi women created the traditional Phulkari of Punjab. Together, they formed a group known as "Trijan," where all of the ladies participated in weaving, dancing, laughing, talking, and stitching. Traditional Phulkari was created from spun cloth, known as "khaddar," that was hand-dyed and hand-woven using premium untwisted silk thread, known as "pat," in vibrant hues including red, green, golden, yellow, pink, and blue. Without the use of any trace, sketching, pattern, or design, it was completed in the darn stitch with a regular needle. An average of 50 to 100 grams of "Pat" is needed to embroider one Phulkari, while 100 to 150 grams are needed for Bagh. The silk thread was dyed at Amritsar and Jammu after arriving from Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Bengal. China was the source of the finest silk thread. More knowledge and experience were required to handle this type of thread. White, red, black, and blue are the four possible hues for the Khaddar cloth. Young married women wore red, while widows and older women wore white. Women were supposed to utilize blue and black on a daily basis. It might take a month to a year to finish a Phulkari, and a year was needed for the unique varieties of "Vari Da Bagh." The design, pattern, and embroiderer's skill all affect how long it takes to create a Phulkari. For instance, it takes ten years to finish a "vari da bagh," in which the base is hidden by the embroidery that covers the entire cloth. It features an intricate design made of silk thread in a golden hue. On an undyed cloth known as a "Thirma," the Bagh and Phulkari are embroidered. The women of eastern Punjab embroidered Phulkaris with human, animal, and plant images in addition to various jewelry patterns. In this type of Phulkari, women trace the contour of the artwork with black ink and then fill it in with the darning stitch. Additionally, the satin stitch, herringbone stitch, cross stitch, chain thread, blanket stitch, back stitch, stem stitch, and running stitch were used in Phulkari embroidery. (Kaur, Phulkari and Bagh folk art of Punjab: a study of changing designs from, 2014)

Motifs of Phulkari & Bagh

Rural Punjabi women drew inspiration from their natural surroundings and everyday objects. Women portrayed these items on the Phulkari and Bagh, using the "darning stitch" for intricate patterns. Along with drawing inspiration from nature, women also used their own imaginations, sentiments, and emotions to create designs.

A. The Geometric Motifs

Punjab's traditional embroidery techniques, Phulkari and Bagh, are distinguished by vivid geometric patterns with profound cultural meaning. These motifs are painstakingly created on hand woven khaddar fabric using a silk floss darning stitch technique. Triangles, squares, rectangles, diamonds, and hexagons are common geometric patterns that are frequently symmetrically placed to produce eye-catching designs. One of the most common motifs is the

diamond, which stands for fertility and prosperity. Chevron and zigzag patterns represent movement and vitality. While Phulkari embroidery keeps a more dispersed arrangement with floral and sporadic geometric motifs, Bagh embroidery, which is renowned for its dense covering, features continuous geometric designs that cover the foundation fabric. In addition to adding to the material's visual appeal, these geometric patterns capture Punjab's artistic legacy by maintaining ancient workmanship while incorporating modern fashion and textile advancements. With names like "dhaniala bagh" (coriander garden) reflecting the inspiration from local flora and fauna, the most common geometric motifs in Punjabi Phulkari and Bagh embroidery are diamonds, squares, triangles, and other repeating patterns, frequently packed closely together to create a "garden" effect. These motifs are typically embroidered with vibrant colors and are a key component of the style. (Rajinder Kaur, 2014)^[5].

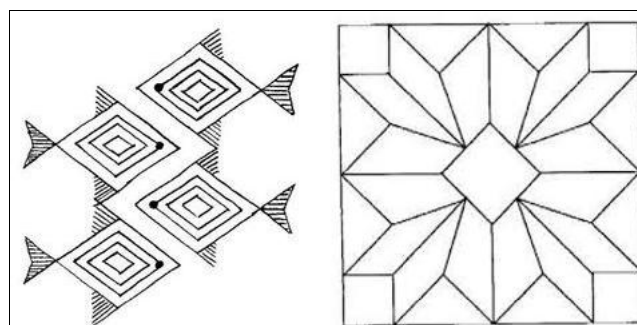


Fig 1: Geometrical motif of phulkari and bagh

B. The vegetables, fruits and floral motifs:

Numerous floral motifs can be found in nature, as illustrated in fig. 2. As the name Phulkari implies "growing flower," women frequently used Genda (marigold), Surajmukhi (sun flower), Motia (jasmine), and Kol (lotus flower) for Phulkari and Bagh. Occasionally, the field of Phulkari was embroidered with tiny patterns known as "Butian." The various fruits that were used as themes for a Phulkari included santaran (orange), anar (pomegranate), nakh (pear), bhut (muskmelon), mango slice, and chhuare (dried dates). Women utilized imitations of gobhi (cauliflower), mirchi (chili), dhaniya (coriander), and karela (bitter guard) among the veggies. In addition to adding to Phulkari and Bagh's visual appeal, the mix of these elements tells tales of rural life, seasonal variations, and traditional beliefs. The spirit of Punjabi embroidery has been preserved while embracing new fashion trends thanks to the adaptation of these designs into modern materials over time.

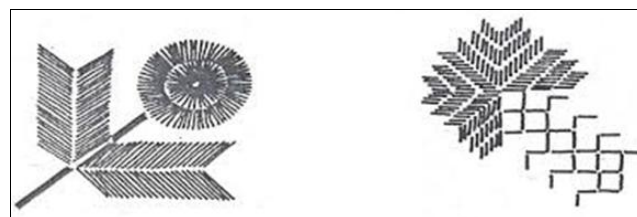


Fig 2: Floral Motifs used in Phulkari

C. The birds and animal motifs

Phulkari was also decorated with animal and bird patterns.

Figure 3 illustrates how human, animal, and bird forms were employed in a "sainchi phulkari." Cows, buffalo, goats, camels, horses, elephants, snakes, fish, tortoises, pigs, rabbits, frogs, cats, donkeys, squirrels, and lions are among the most frequently seen animal motifs. The most common bird motifs were the hen, pigeon, sparrow, crow, owl, peacock, and parrot. (Rajinder Kaur, 2014) ^[5] The rich cultural and spiritual legacy of Punjab, where the bond between people and nature is highly valued, is reflected in these motifs, which are more than just ornamental. Additionally, the motifs promote community cohesion, wealth, and safety.

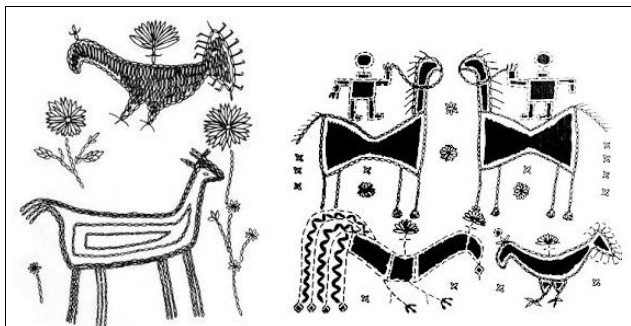


Fig 3: The birds and animal motifs used in Phulkari

D. Jewelry motifs

Cultural heritage with a contemporary touch, jewelry motifs can give Phulkari's classic beauty a new perspective. As seen in fig. 4, Punjabi women frequently embroidered Phulkari using jewelry items as motifs. The necklace, Kangan, Karanphool, and Jhumka, as well as various earrings, gulubands, bracelets, nose rings, Tikka, Shingar Patti, Phools, and Rani Har with a pendant, were among the goods they utilized. To demonstrate that they were made of gold, all of these items were embroidered with yellow thread.

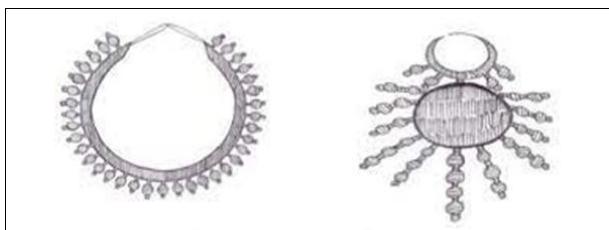


Fig 4: The jewelry motifs used in Phulkari

Different type of Phulkari & Its design

A. Chope and subhar

Brides wear the two types of chope and subhar. The cloth has the chope stitched on both sides. Traditionally, chope are embroidered on red and yellow. Two panels of fabric with matching embroidery designs on each ends are linked. Only a sequence of triangles with their bases facing inward and toward the selvage is embroidered on both selvages. Small squares are used in a step-ladder method to create the design. The only areas of the cloth with delicate stitching are the borders and the four edges. The subhar features four motifs on the corners in addition to a central pattern. (Naik, 2015) ^[4, 9].



B. Sainchi Phulkari

The sainchi phulkari, a kind of phulkari that presents human and animal forms, frequently in a narrative style, gets its name from the Punjabi word sainchi, which means "authentic," because the embroidered stories are either didactic folk tales or actual events, and the imagery is more realistic than in other phulkaris.

Since the stitching frequently reflects the reality of the craftspeople, the images in sainchi phulkaris are representative of rural Punjabi life. Frequently used motifs include livestock, birds, crops, and home objects including cooking utensils, mirrors, and combs. Jewelry stitched in gold thread is used to adorn human figures; silver is not used. Games, dances, wrestling, and agricultural activities are all depicted in narrative passages. Though they are somewhat rare, contemporary imagery such as trains and movie scenes can nevertheless be discovered.

There is a lotus pattern in the center and, less frequently, in each corner of the more symmetrically designed sainchi phulkaris. There is disagreement among experts over the lotus's meaning; some believe it to be a generally auspicious emblem, while others propose that it symbolizes Sanjhi devi, a Hindu mother goddess revered in northern India and honored by potential brides. The fabric's base color ranges from deep red to brown to blue, but the embroidery itself is usually done in tones of red and yellow thread. Typically, the borders consist of bands with geometric designs. The borders on the shorter sides of rectangular wraps are widened.

Today, a number of private and public collections, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection, contain examples of sainchi phulkaris.



C. Neelak Phulkari

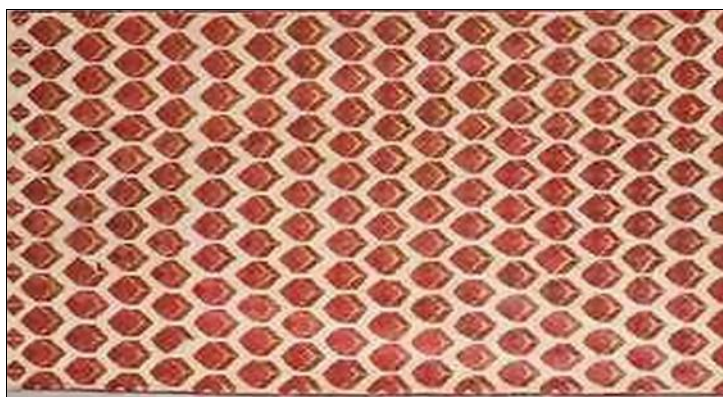
As the name suggests, nilak is a kind of blue. Although dazzling, the yellow and crimson pat stitching used in this phulkari on blue khaddar creates a lovely contrast of colors. Black khaddar is also used occasionally. This phulkari features themes such as flowers, fans, umbrellas, and

combs. (Bukhari W. N.)



D. Thirma Phulkari

This phulkari is embroidered on exquisitely woven white khaddar. This gives thirma (white) phulkari their common moniker, and older women tend to wear them. The spikey or hazy imperfections in the phulkari's design, which are caused by the threads being dyed and then weaved together to produce the pattern (instead of the pattern being dyed onto finished material), are evocative of the ikat weaving process. This thirma phulkari's technique, color, and pattern suggest that it originated in Pakistan's western Punjab. (Thirma Phulkari, 19th century)



E. Bagh Phulkari

Bagh embroidery is a textile tradition that is practiced in Haryana, the Punjab region of India and Pakistan, and is used to adorn textiles like chaddars and odhnis, also known as baghs. It is ritually significant. Because of the dense layer of embroidery and the image of massive gardens on some baghs, the phrase comes from the Hindi bagh, which means "garden."

Phulkaris and baghs are comparable in that they both have historical centers of production, employ silk embroidery thread, the darning stitch, and a similar color scheme. Baghs are typically built to commemorate events like weddings and births, just as phulkaris. However, the foundation material is nearly entirely covered with bagh needlework, leaving only faint lines in the design. A finer variation of the red cotton base fabric used in phulkaris, chaunsa khaddar, is frequently used as the base fabric. Baghs come in a variety of forms and are frequently called after significant facets of Punjabi culture and daily life. Sar pallu, gunghat bagh, and vari da bagh are among those utilized in wedding ceremonies. Baghs are often named after their motifs: the

belan bagh depicts rolling pins, a crucial tool of north Indian domestic life; the chandrama bagh, which uses moon motifs, is worn during Karva Chauth rituals; the leheriya and darya baghs feature water motifs; and the tota bagh features parrot motifs. Given Punjab's long history as an agrarian state, several baghs, including the karela (bitter gourd), mirchi (chilli), gobi (cauliflower), dhaniya (coriander), and kakri (cucumber) baghs, feature designs of significant vegetable crops. The flowers that are employed as motifs are the reason behind the names of the genda, chameli, and surajmukhi baghs. Some baghs, like the Chamasia and Shalimar baghs, get their names from the historical gardens they portray or the overall design of a Mughal garden, like the char bagh.

The process of bagh embroidery takes a long time, ranging from several months to a year. They are now usually purchased from retail establishments or have been supplanted with heirloom baghs for ceremonial usage, rather than being produced by families as was the case in the past. The collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art contain examples of historic baghs.



F. Vari Da Bagh

("Vari": a present her in-laws gave the bride) On the day of the wedding, as the bride entered her new home, her in-laws gave her this bagh. This is a unique circumstance because her own family supplied all of the other phulkari as part of her dowry. With the exception of the border and maybe a little embellishment, vari-da-bagh is always fashioned on an orange-reddish khaddar and is entirely embroidered with a single orange or golden pat. The primary design of this bagh consists of three or four tiny, concentric lozenges that are progressively larger than one another. These lozenges are readily visible through light reflections, even though only one color of material is utilized.

The Earth is represented by the outer one, the city by the next, and the family home by the third. This final lozenge is really divided into four smaller pieces, which most likely represent the groom's and the newlyweds' parents. When the bride received the keys to her new home, her mother-in-law wrapped her in this bagh, signifying that she would now be in charge of the house's upkeep. (Soni)



Revival of Phulkari Art

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