

A World  
Guide to  
Traditional  
Patterns

SHEILA PAINE  
**EMBROIDERED  
TEXTILES**

Thames & Hudson



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# EMBROIDERED TEXTILES

*A World Guide to Traditional Patterns*



LINE DRAWINGS BY IMOGEN PAINE



**Thames & Hudson**

with 508 illustrations, 362 in colour

## For Denzil, Rosamund, Morwenna and Imogen

On the cover

Front: Woman's blouse, Slovakia, see p. 193.

Back (background): *Mola*, Kuna Blas Islands, Panama, see p. 135.

Photos Sheila Paine.

All other pictures on the cover can be found inside the book.

p. 1: Bag of Matyó work, Mezökövesd, Hungary.

p. 2: Woman's blouse front, *choli*, Sind, Pakistan.

p. 3: Cloth, *suzani*, Uzbekistan.

This page: Bedding cover, *saye gosha*, Afghanistan.

Opposite: Woman's shawl, *trokhoat*, Siwa oasis, Egypt.

Overleaf (background): Boy's robe, *kurta*, Lucknow, India.



*Special photography by Dudley Moss*

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Embroidery is the embellishment of an existing fabric with accessory threads and sometimes with other materials. Such decorative elements as fishskin, teeth, bones, feathers, horn, shells, beetle wings, tassels, beads, coins, buttons, metal and mirror have all at some time or place been used in this way. Most embroidery, however, is straightforward stitchery. The designs are freely drawn, or worked by counting threads, and are applied with a needle, but occasionally with a hook. The thread used is silk, cotton, linen, wool, gold or silver, but also whatever comes to hand, including sometimes even human hair, moosehair, sinew and quills. A separate technique exists for metal or other precious threads, for non-pliable material such as quills, and for narrow decorative trims, usually cords and braids. These are laid on the fabric and couched down by stitching with another thread, so that none of the decorative material is hidden underneath the cloth.



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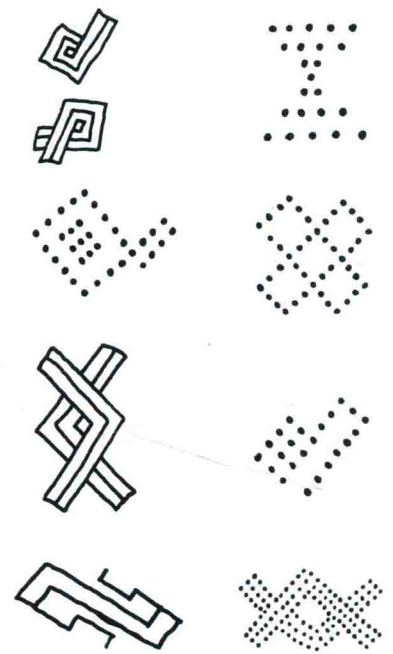
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# INTRODUCTION: TECHNIQUES AND TRADITIONS

'Lonely people, delicate people, people without occupation, perhaps, beyond shelling peas, have found embroidery a distraction', declared an article written in the 1920s. It reflected the generally accepted view, which still persists, of embroidery as a pastime for idle ladies – a pastime which, though much modern work can be considered creative art, is more usually relegated by popular opinion to the homely level of a sentimental sampler on the wall, a needlepoint cushion on the fireside armchair, or a linen teacosy worked with crinoline ladies.

These familiar embroideries belong to the domestic tradition of most of western Europe and of America, where a few elements remain of the original function of embroidery; but here, in the main, the craft has been transformed by fashion, trade and individual choice. Outside the West, on the other hand, embroidery has remained close to its origins.



ABOVE Tattooing decorates and transforms the body. The same patterns are transferred to embroidery, as can be seen, for example, on the textiles of the Kuba people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (see OPPOSITE ABOVE).

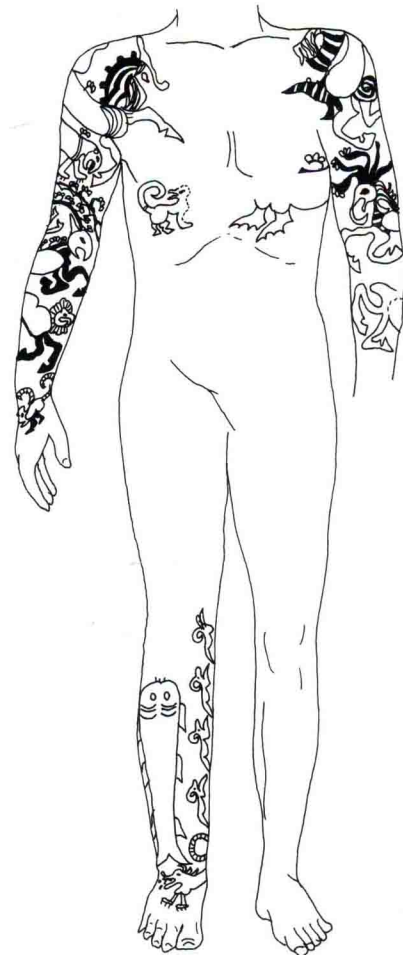
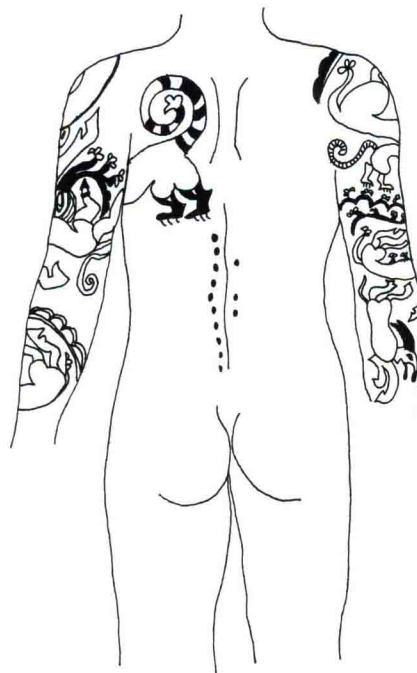
LEFT Woman's dress, aba, Kutch, India. The sexual area was often protected by embroidery, in Europe usually by a decorative apron. The Seyhud of Kutch choose an extremely finely worked five-petalled pendant.





## THE FUNCTION OF EMBROIDERY

The primary function of embroidery was to decorate, to embellish textiles already created to meet man's basic needs, and the purpose of such decoration was rooted in ancient beliefs and superstitions. In primitive societies the mysteries of cosmic creation and the human life-cycle were harnessed by mythology: disease and disaster, the causes of which were not understood, were explained by a mythical otherworld of pagan gods, of the evil eye, of good and bad spirits to be praised or appeased. Man could emulate them or protect himself from them by tattooing his body or decorating his clothing with symbols of their powers. Tattooed patterns of peoples as diverse as the Bulgarians, the Tunisians and the Kuba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire) are transferred from the body to costume in the form of embroidery. Marco Polo called tattooing 'flesh embroidery' and indeed embroidery is much more closely related to tattooing than to weaving, felting or knitting. Both employed symbolism expressed in pattern. Both had magical associations.



ABOVE AND RIGHT *The traditional disposition of embroidery on Romanian blouses recalls the tattooing of a man found in one of the frozen tombs of Siberia at Pazyryk.*





### SYMBOLISM IN EMBROIDERY

The shamanistic world of animals and the hunt was one primitive cult at the source of symbolic pattern, as was the earth goddess. Worship of the sun and of trees was also part of the mythology of many pagan societies. The belief in spirits, both evil and benevolent, dwelling in such places as streams and wells, doors and caves, rocks and trees was universal, and in some societies the power of the evil eye is still feared today.

Most patterns, and the selection of many materials, such as red fabrics and blue beads, derive from the superstitions and symbolism of such cults. The linen towels of Russia are not embroidered with designs of local wildlife – the wolves, wild boars and bears of the region – but with the ancient griffins and peacocks of Iranian art, or with human-headed birds from pre-Christian legend; the blouses of Salamanca in Spain do not depict the domestic animals familiar in everyday life, but the hunted beasts with twisted heads found in palaeolithic rock paintings and in the art of the Scythians, steppeland horsemen who rose into eminence in the seventh century BC. In Japan the appliqué work of the ancient Caucasoid Ainu people, which the Chilkat woven blankets of Alaska vividly recall, is strongly symbolic and a potent protection against the evil eye. It bears no relation to the subtle artistry of commercial Japanese silk and goldwork. Chinese embroidery is generally appreciated for its exquisite workmanship and silken delicacy, but it is riddled with symbolism and played a central role in social hierarchy.

ABOVE LEFT The patterns on the blanket capes of the Chilkat band of Tlingit Native Americans living in Alaska have the same totemic quality as those on the clothing of the Ainu, aboriginal hunters of Japan. The Ainu garments (as ABOVE) are of fabric woven from tree fibres, with the patterns appliquéd and embroidered by couching and chain stitch. The Chilkat garments (as BELOW) are fingerwoven in goatshair.

ABOVE Woman's jacket, Moknine, Tunisia. In the Islamic world the hand of Fatima, khomsa, and the fish are considered powerful talismans against the evil eye. Gold plate, tall, with touches of floss silk on red and green velvet is typical of Tunisian work.





## MOTIFS IN EMBROIDERY

Just as pagan festivals were taken over by formal religions and assimilated into their calendar, so pagan symbolism was often similarly absorbed. Anthropomorphic figures, triangles, pomegranates, carnations and tulips; circles, squares, whorls, swastikas, spirals, 8-pointed stars and birds; diamonds, hooks, dots and waves, zigzags and indentations, columns, plants and crosses, hands and fish – all stem originally from primitive

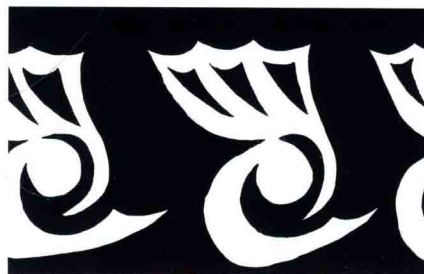
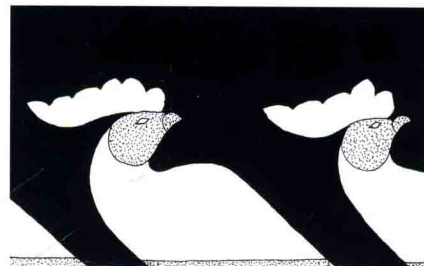
symbolism; and in addition, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity imposed their own symbols from more sophisticated concepts. But it is the common fate of patterns over centuries to be simplified and then abstracted and the symbolism lost. The magic power of horned animals is now concealed in a line of hooks, cockscombs become a row of crests and the sun a simple circle.

The embroideress is normally unaware of their origins: she claims they are just the patterns her mother taught her or that she found in her head. Sometimes, indeed, they are. She also gives them names, such as 'wheels' or 'railway lines', but it is important to remember that these are the names of what the patterns resemble, not what they represent.

This ancient repertoire of pattern is not confined only to embroidery but permeates also all decorative arts, in particular carpets, pottery, woodcarving and what is generally termed 'folk art'; and, most of all, jewelry, which played a magic and religious role as well. There is a certain rigidity in patterns deriving from a cult source, as they are traditionally only used in certain places and in a certain way. Once some freedom in design is apparent, the object is already moving towards the individual interpretation that is an element of personalized art.

LEFT Detail of a marriage canopy, Saurashtra, Gujarat, India. The lotus is both a Buddhist and a sun symbol. It forms the centre medallion of canopies hung in courtyards at marriages.

Other astrological patterns are added, some quilted in blue thread.



ABOVE Stylization of pattern was already apparent in the textiles of Pazyryk, dating from about the seventh to the second century BC.

FAR LEFT Woman's headdress, kakoshnik, Russia. Hair, particularly women's, was universally regarded as magical and covered with a headdress at marriage. These were handed down from mother to daughter. Pearls are typical of Russian embroidery and come from the rivers of the north.

BELOW Modern embroidery, by Jacky Russell, based on the rusting hulks of the fishing boats marooned in the dried-up Aral Sea in northern Uzbekistan.





BELOW LEFT Man's 'killing shawl', Nagaland, north-eastern India. Headhunting was a deeply symbolic practice to the Naga people, which even the British during the Raj were unable to stamp out. To go on headhunting expeditions the men wore these shawls decorated with moon and anthropomorphic motifs in cowrie shells, with squares of red dog's hair.

BELOW RIGHT Woman's sarong, tapis, Abung people, southern Sumatra. The ceremonial sarongs of the women of southern Sumatra are worn at all rites of passage and are often among the textiles buried with the dead. Embroidery is an unusual technique in the textiles of Indonesia and may have been brought by early Chinese traders. Many of the patterns resemble those on Bronze Age gongs.

### SOCIAL INDICATORS OF EMBROIDERY

Pattern was not only rooted in belief, but also in the part it played in people's lives and social traditions. The Western concept of embroidery as an individual decorative art or leisure occupation was entirely absent: the item itself, its pattern and colour, were evolved communally. Embroidery therefore came to serve, amongst other things, as a means of identification. On a woman's dress it indicates to an informed observer the village from which she comes, and the colour and disposition of the patterns announce her status as a young girl, married woman or widow. Conventions of decoration establish place in the hierarchy, as in the Chinese court, where embroidered insignia of animals identify the rank of military courtiers and birds that of civil courtiers.

Special occasions are celebrated with embroidery. At all rites of passage, when people are considered most vulnerable to spirits, embroidery plays a symbolic role. In ancient societies death was the most important; more recently, marriage. In Romania embroideries are hung outside the house of a marriageable girl; in Turkey the fineness of embroidery on the towels a young girl takes to the public baths announces her quality as a prospective daughter-in-law. Dowry and trousseau embroideries are placed on display in most countries as wedding presents are in the West. At childbirth the passage of forty days is marked with protective embroidery for mother and baby, and at death the embroideries worn at marriage serve as a shroud.

