The kantha, or, as it is increasingly referred to as the nakshi kantha, is an important aspect of Bengali women’s domestic arts and crafts. Kanthas are made in most parts of Bangladesh as well as in West Bengal. The kantha has taken many forms: from simple quilts made at home for personal, domestic, or ritual use to elaborate story-telling wall hangings for public view. Kanthas are used for traditional garments, such as saris and shawls, as well as for Western garments, such as jackets and stoles. Made initially from old garments like cotton saris, lungis, and dhotis, the kantha is now made with new cloth, either cotton or silk.

The kantha or nakshi kantha can now be found worldwide, not only in museums, but also in catalogues and shops, in drawing rooms and boardrooms, and worn by fashion models on runways.

Kantha forms and transformations

Niaz Zaman and Cathy Stevulak

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How kanthas are made

Traditionally, layers of old saris, lungis, or dhotis were put together and reconstituted into objects of functional, ritual, or ceremonial use. Borders and motifs were embroidered in variations of the running stitch with coloured thread, traditionally drawn from the borders of old saris. The empty spaces were stitched with white yarn to create a ripple effect [Fig. 1]. At least five to seven saris were needed to make a full-length kantha – the number of layers depending on the thickness required. Ceremonial kanthas, such as those spread for guests and to accommodate the bride or groom would have fewer layers and finer embroidery. Thicker kanthas, to be used as winter quilts, would have more layers of cloth. At the beginning of the process, women would spread layers of the cloth on the packed-earth ground of the courtyard. The edges would be pinned to the ground with thorns from date trees. The cloths would then be folded in and stitched. Long running stitches at intervals down the length of the cloth would be worked to keep the layers together. The kantha could then be folded and put away to be further worked and embroidered when convenient. Typically, a large lotus would be worked in the centre. Following this, corner motifs and then numerous other motifs or scenes would be added, depending on the time and artistic ability of the kantha artist. Some very fine 19th-century kanthas relate scenes from the story of Radha and Krishna. Decorative kanthas are stitched through the layers of cotton or through a surface layer of silk and lower layers of cotton. Embroidery yarn in the past was taken from the borders of saris and would be generally blue, red, or black.

Today, old saris are replaced by new cotton fabrics. As this material is normally thicker, two layers of cloth may be sufficient for a kantha. Most of the stitching and embroidery yarns today are purchased separately and are available in multiple colours. While cotton yarn is still in general use, nowadays bamboo, ragon, or silk thread are also used, especially for commercial kanthas.

In most Bengal families, small kanthas made of soft, old cloth, are used to wrap babies. Husbands or sons who leave home to work almost always carry with them a kantha made by their wives or mothers. The kantha symbolises the affection of the maker for the recipient and, being made of rags, is also believed to grant protection from the evil eye. Kanthas also form part of the dowry of brides in certain parts of Bangladesh and West Bengal.

Brief history

Quilts made of multiple layers of cloth are common all over the South Asian subcontinent. However, the kantha, with its running stitch embroidery, seems to have its roots in Bengal. Known sometimes as sugar – from the word for stitch or needle – it is also related in form to the suzanis of Central Asia. The finest 19th-century kanthas come from the Jessore, Faridpur, and Khulna regions of Bangladesh, bordering what is now the State of West Bengal. Others are available in Rajshahi and Kushtia, where they are generally thicker than the others. A kantha from Kushtia presented as a gift to the renowned poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), who lived in Shaladisha between 1891 and 1901, is preserved in Santiniketan.

The early years of the twentieth century saw the rise of the swadeshi movement for independence from Britain. It also saw an interest in recovering the past traditions of Bengal. The Bengal educationist, writer, and folklorist Dinesh Chandra Sen (1886-1939) collected ballads and kanthas from the region – work in which he was aided by a young Jasimuddin (1903-1976), who would later write the poem Naaksi Kanthar Maath, translated as The Field of the Embroidered Quilt. The term nakshi kantha derives from this poem. The Bengali civil servant, folklorist and writer Gunossuday Dutta (1882-1941) collected different forms of folk art, including the kantha. It was also at this time that the art historian Walter Crumlin (1895-1953) started collecting kanthas and writing about them.

The partition of India in 1947 led to many Hindu families leaving East Pakistan for India, taking with them kantha skills. At Santiniketan, in India, a special form of kantha was developed – along with batik and leather work – to provide work for women. Santiniketan
kanthas, however, are worked with the herringbone stitch, which helps create the traditional ripples, with a simple weave-running stitch border and an anchal. The kantha, where the fabric was held by hand or stretched with a foot, was followed by Aarong – the outlet for the Bangladesh Volunteer Association, was invited by BRAC – the organisation that was set up and helped promote the survival of the kantha craft in Bangladesh. The revival of the kanthas started with the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, when artists such as Quamrul Hassan (1921-1998) and Zainul Abedin (1914-1976) initiated the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, when artists such as Quamrul Hassan (1921-1998) and Zainul Abedin (1914-1976) initiated the Language Movement, especially after the awareness against cultural domination made in Bangladesh.

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