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Choli and Kanjari

An analysis of items from a small textile collection.



Hilary Hollingworth



This is a detail of a kandjari blouse showing traditional patterns and stitching of Pakka style.

Choli and Kanjari – an analysis of a small textile collection.

A folk art, a spontaneous expression, not fine art made consciously for an elite. (Frater 1995)

This paper begins an investigation into the practical, social, spiritual and protective roles of decorated textiles, in the Choli and Kanjari blouses of Gujarat with a detailed analysis of one item to begin to establish a model for the analysis of the items in collection of more than thirty garments and embroidered garment fragments. The discussion focuses on role of stitch and symbol in the garments worn by the women of various [I] peoples of the craft villages around Bhuj, particularly the nomadic Rabari. The investigation of materials and techniques used in the making of a bodice is recorded and the stitches used are analysed. Patterns and methods used in the construction are included. Examples of the different ways stitches are worked add to the understanding of the decoration. This paper provides an insight into way of life that held stitch and stitching in

high regard. It demonstrates how the practice of making textiles can form an understanding and communication link between people with very different backgrounds and experience of life. This paper is the starting point for an investigation into the changes that have taken place in the last 20 years and is it possible to promote a better understanding of the place of stitched textiles in the modern world.

Albeit that this last point is a constantly recurring question.

Introduction

Surviving clothing provides researchers and collectors with a powerful tool for historical and contemporary socio-cultural investigation.(Taylor 1998)

Personal collections are made for a variety of reasons (Taylor, 2004). This collection of textile artefacts made by the women in villages in the Kutch and Saurashtra regions of Gujarat, North West India, was gathered during two visits made to the region by this researcher during the 1990's. The particular bodices, that are the subject of this research, were gathered as objects of special interest as the collector is an embroiderer and designer excited by the visual impact of the embroideries and felt an affinity with fellow practitioners. The vibrant colour, sophisticated yet idiosyncratic patterns, skilful stitchery and inventive methods of construction all combined to create the distinctive, decorative garments that have meaning beyond that of simply covering the body. The garments are a celebration of stitch. The understanding that comes from shared practice and the non- verbal communication that the common skill make possible are an experience to be treasured.

The garments are part of a wider collection of embroidered objects collected during the visits to the region. The collection consists of a variety of textiles including decorative panels used for a number of domestic purposes, snake charmer and dowry sacks, animal trappings, shawls and toran. There are many linking factors that can be observed in these textiles, similar techniques and materials are used in the making of the objects, the same decorative forms, signs symbols and patterns appear. The same can be said when looking at the decoration on objects made from other materials, the same decorative motifs are to be found in woodcarvings, silverware, printed textiles and plasterwork.

Domestic Embroidery in Gujarat.

In India, adornment serves mankind in innumerable ways: attracting gods, protecting people and communities, identifying ethnic groups or revealing the history and daily life of those groups. Adornment gives men and women a creative outlet that supports society; it grants, those of even the lowest classes a meaningful place in the social structure. Adornment and ornamentation are intricately intertwined with the whole fabric of Indian life, particularly in rural India. (Fisher 1993)

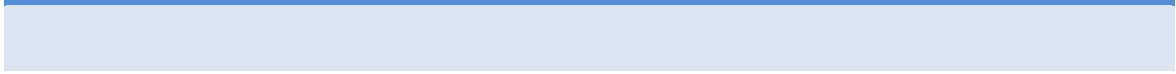
John Gillow (Gillow 1991) states that Gujarat was, through the 17th century the most important place for commercial embroidery in the world. The earliest substantive evidence found by (Edwards 2011) was an account by Marco Polo of embroidery using gold and silver wire on leather. The embroidery was most likely the work of professional embroiderers. This paper is concerned with the embroidery produced by women for their personal and family use, often made for dowry. This work has been undervalued as it was considered a leisure activity, not unlike the view of stitched textiles in Britain today.

Edwards(Edwards 2011) writes:

Made for private use rather than for sale, it was culture not commerce. However the distinction has become blurred in the last fifty years with the development of the of the international trade in dowry embroideries which added another facet to Gujarat's long history of commercial textiles.

The first object to begin the investigation is a Rabari choli blouse and the analysis of this item will be used to develop the model for future research and cataloguing of the collection.





[fig 1] *The Rabari choli blouse investigated.*

The Rabari Embroiderers

Produced as part as the life on going within Rabari culture, embroidery and dress contain very accurate information which, when interpreted, can broaden our understanding of Rabari people and a process that operates in their society. (Frater 1995)

The Rabaris are pastoral nomads (Randhawa 1996; Edwards 2011). The style of their highly embellished traditional dress is a fundamental part of their identity. Though, as with all communities, developments in communication, technology, climate, the availability of resources; the social and political environment as in fact, all the natural changes and progression that act as agents for change. This natural progression is necessary for human survival and, though past tradition may have charm, it is important to recognise that change rooted in tradition can be as unique and individual as that which preceded the new order. A visit to a museum of fashion and costume anywhere in the world will show the progress and changes in garment styles through time, the same has to be the case for traditional dress the garments should move with the changing times. Change happens as inevitable consequence of life and we can't hold on to the past, preventing others moving on, just because we happen to enjoy something. Edwards writes:

Since the turn of the century, eastern Saurashtra subgroups have so wholeheartedly adopted regional styles for household embroideries that these are indistinguishable from those of non-Rabari neighbours. (Edwards 2011)

The collection

The embroidery tradition of the Indian subcontinent is one of the most richly diverse and masterly in the world.(Paine 1990)

The embroidered piece chosen for detailed analysis was selected because it demonstrates the different techniques and designs used by one of the Rabari sub- groups. Frater writes:

While people concur that they can read dress to determine identity, their definition of critical elements of Rabari dress varies widely. In fact, it is rarely one particular feature of dress that definitively identifies a Rabari; it is the combination of fabric

colour, cut and decoration- the total effect.

For each subgroup, the combination of elements recognized locally as 'Rabari' is unique. Together all of the subgroups distinctive styles of dress form a discernibly coherent whole, having evolved through the process of cultural adjustment. As Rabaris of each subgroup migrated into new environments, they retained some elements of the dress of the group from which they separated, thus maintaining and expressing community identity, and they adapted others.

(Frater 1995)

The style of dress worn within the Rabari subgroups comprises of a ghaghra (skirt) a tube like single seamed garment with a waist band providing a channel for a draw string to pass through; a choli or kanjara [II] backless blouse with tight sleeves or dropped shoulder fastening with ties at the back, the front and side backs usually cut from a rectangular pieces of fabric with a slot creating the neckline and gussets at the underarm creating the shaping necessary to allow for movement: an odhanu [III] (veil/ stole) worn tucked into the skirt covering the head and back.

The women embroider garments for their own and family use and sometimes the work of different hands can be seen in one garment.

The fabrics used are mashru, [IV] a satin weave warp faced fabric woven with a silk warp and a cotton weft, silks and cottons of varying counts though, sometimes, synthetic fabrics are used.

A Rabari Choli

The link between Rabari embroidery and embroiderer is fundamental. (Frater 1995)

This choli from Eastern Kutch possibly Vaghadia caste was purchased in 1995 from Mr Wazir, a guide and collector of textiles from Bhuj, an ancient walled city [V] positioned almost in the centre of Kutch, was made by the embroiderer for personal use. [Fig.1] The garment is made from pieced and patched using appliqué the fabric is skilfully assembled by cutting out the shapes, folding under the edges and slip stitching onto the backing fabric. In this blouse the pieces are also secured in some places by running stitch approximately 1.5 centimetres from the folded edge and in other places by tiny backstitches that have the appearance of being made by machines.

The pieces and embellishment are manipulated to add shaping to the garment. The main parts of this blouse are made on a background fabric the of dark green cotton turban cloth which is pieced together with similar cotton fabric printed with a floral pattern for the lower back side panels with a patch of red cotton in the area of the left shoulder and a piece of black mashru fabric cotton side up on the upper left side. The surface fabrics are purple, orange and dark green mashru for the decorated parts and a brown loose weave cotton for the sleeve backs and the extensions for the back neck and the tie fastenings.

There is black cotton binding around the neckline and the side backs are bound in red cotton down the length and around the hem to the point that meets the front bodice. The bindings are stitched down with white cotton thread and visible stitches using a backstitch that has the appearance of a slightly uneven machine stitch. The binding is secured on the inside of the bodice using hemstitch and random colours of thread with some of the underside of the stitches coming through to the right side.

The garment ties are made by rolling the fabric using an overcast stitch to hold them together and the button fastens at the back neck into a loop of twisted thread.

The stitches and techniques used in this choli are a small backstitch worked so evenly that it could be mistaken for machine work, buttonhole filing stitch, interwoven herringbone, square chain stitch and mirror work. Square chain is a stitch much used in Rabari embroidery, when women and girls were observed working this stitch they were working the stitch away from the body a different method than most western stitchers.

The front of this bodice are covered with geometric motifs stitched in predominately yellow, gold, maroon and white cotton thread highlighted by shades of green, purple, orange and black.

The roundels creating shaping for the breasts are repeated on the shoulders of the garment. To shape the blouse form fit motifs are made by embroidering around, and into triangle shaped segments in purple and dark green mashru fabric that has been applied to the background fabric in the relevant places. This way of suppressing fullness becomes an integral part of the decoration and is sophisticated way of dealing with the problem of fitting a garment to a female frame. But these roundels are not simply a means of creating a good fit this form of decoration is also protection for the breasts as they are the source of life for a newborn. (Paine 1990).

There are several different border motifs used in the garment identified by (Frater 1995)

bandhu kanch- has a ladder like appearance with mirrors enclosed by lines of square chain stitch.

Makoliyo- zigzag.

Mokare- interlaced herringbone stitch.

Popti- parrot like

On the sleeves are bajubandh, upper armbands.

The gathering in the breast section of the bodice is an indication of the married status of the wearer.



A detail from the choli blouse investigated showing the circular 'cups' of the bodice and the mirrors at the centre.

Practitioner as researcher

Like a precious emblem, embroidery is close to self. Embroidery style identifies its user. (Frater 1995)

Through detailed investigation of garments by researchers who are also practitioners in embellishment or construction can help to extend the understanding of influences and techniques by relating them to the strictures and possibilities created by the processes. This does not in anyway question the

work of the research conducted by non -practitioners who can observe and investigate from a theoretical standpoint. An example of where this understanding provides an insight is when observing someone stitch, the actions and rhythms made when stitching can be broken down, analysed, compared, performed and recorded by a practitioner. Though a theoretical approach to the analysis of stitch techniques would not provide the same depth of understanding.



This choli is an example of how fragments are used and re-used as the midriff area of this garment is clearly of a later date and different in skill of execution than that of the breast part. Though the symbols in both are matched.(Morrell 1994)



A detail from a choli blouse with figurative design.

Conclusion

Embroidery is the embellishment of fabric, enriching it with needle and thread. Gaining understanding of the overall historical development of embroidery is not an easy task, but understanding the origins perhaps makes it easier to see why there are many and varied techniques which come under the general heading of 'embroidery'. (Morrell 1994)

In conclusion this paper is a beginning, the start of a study that has a long way to go before this small collection is fully explored. It is the start of a project to record and analyse the most important items in this collection with a view to sharing the collection. As with much research the knowledge and understanding gained present more questions to answer and many directions to take look to for any answers. Though even with the greater acceptance of the value of the study of embroidered textile objects that can provide an insight into the inevitable changes a society and culture being a valid area of study research in this area is still largely confined by categorisation as woman's work for the family and home. This attitude still pervades many aspects of research into garment making throughout history in western culture and colours the view of some academics that it is not a legitimate area of study. This is an attitude that can be broken down by building a body of research to give increasing prominence to the debate.

End notes

- I. Described as tribes by Tejinder Singh Randhawain his book "The last Wanderers: Nomads and Gypsies of India. Published by Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., (1996).
- II. There are a variety of names for these blouses the terms used in this paper are taken used by B.S. Goswamy (1993).
- III. There are a variety of names for these garments the terms used in this paper are taken used by Sheila Paine (2004).

- IV. Mashru fabric was made to allow people to wear silk without it touching the skin. Thus keeping the religious law of not wearing silk. (Edwards, 2011).
- V. Bhuj was devastated by the 2001 earthquake. When many people were killed and ancient, landmark, buildings destroyed.

Glossary

Chola – Backless bodice or blouse which forms part of the woman’s costume in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Shindh.(Paine, Embroidered Textiles 1990)

Kanjari – Blouse- like garment, worn a little long in front and generally backless, held together with tie cords with no shaped parts like cups.(Goswamy 1993)

Odhanu – one of the words used for the veil in Gujarat.

Toran - embroidered frieze usually with a pointed edge that is hung over the lintel of a door.

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