The state of Gujurat, located in the northwest region of India, is justly famous for intricate and varied styles of embroidery. Two principal areas, Kutch and Saurashtra, continue the time honored traditions of cottage production in embroidered items for home use, as well as for the marketplace.

A major portion of the area known as Kutch is arid desert with few towns and many isolated villages. This isolation has contributed to the continuing difference and variety in the embroidered surfaces produced there. A characteristic feature, however, of all Kutchi embroidery is the brilliant palette of color which contrasts with the complete lack of color in the surrounding countryside.

The people who reside in this area are farmers or herders, practicing a nomadic way of life involving constant movement from well to well in search of fodder and water for their cattle. The women in these communities embroider items for three purposes: household use, personal apparel or animal trappings. Eight distinct groups or communities are noted for their embroidery techniques in Kutch and Saurashtra: the Mochi, Jat, Lohanas, Khavada, Matuwas, Kanbis, Mahajan, and Ahir. Each group will be considered separately.

**Embroidery from Kutch:**

**Mochi:** A small, walled city known as Bhuj in central Kutch, is the home of the Mochi people who embroider with a needle known as an “aar”. The resulting cloth is sometimes called “aari bharat”, “Kutchi bharat”, or “Mochi bharat”. Traditionally cobbler or leatherworkers by trade, the Mochis became professional silk embroiderers for the ladies of the court at Bhuj. According to an 1880 account, the Mochi people learned their craft from a “Musselman fakir who came from Sind two hundred and fifty years ago”. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, embroidery from this region of India was exported to England and the craft prospered.
Mochi embroidery is accomplished with the use of an awl-like tool called an “arhi”. The surface materials are silk, mashru (a woven cloth of one pick cotton and one pick silk), broadcloth, satin (known as gaji), or canvas. The actual embroidery is accomplished without prior design and follows the format of leaves, foliage, flowers, fruits, animals, and human figures in a chain stitch variation. The silk thread referred to as “basarai heer” and “chinai resham” is imported from China or from the west.

Items such as the ghagara (skirt), choli (bodice), and caps were and are often embroidered. Home furnishings include the coverlet (chakla), and door panels (toran and sthapana). Many of the design motifs indicate a Persian or Mughal influence (butas and peacocks) but when the Mochis immigrated to other regions, they readily adopted the prevailing design iconography of the new area.

**Jat:** Generations ago, the Jat peoples migrated to Kutch from Baluchistan, bringing with them a background in geometric design shapes. They quickly assimilated the Kutchi repertoire into their own embroidery and incorporated tiny pieces of mirror into their work. Myth and legend indicates that these tiny mirrors ward off evil spirits. Their traditional costume (abas) dress and ankle length trousers (salwar) are both intricately embroidered at the neck, sleeves, and hem. One distinctive feature is an elaborately stitched, pointed yoke panel in the bodice of the dress.

**Lohana:** The Lohanas of Khawada immigrated to Kutch from Sind. Their work is heavily influenced by the Sindi embroidery: dominant octagonal medallions composed of a variety of floral motifs and inset with myriad pieces of glass. Chain stitched on dark maroon colored khaddar (cotton), the silk floss of golden yellow, deep red, dark blue, and deep orange, creates a striking color pattern on coverlets and skirts.

**Mahajan:** The Mahajan embroidery of Kutch is created by the Oswal Banias who reside chiefly in the Wagad tract, Bhuj, and Mandvi. Design motifs similar to the Saurashtran Mahajan work, are diamond forms created in a darning stitch. The work is considered coarse in comparison to the Saurashtran counterpart.
Kanbi: The Kanbi, like the Mahajan, have close ties with their kinsmen in Saurashtra. Their embroidery, however, is created exclusively in chain stitch while the Saurashtran work employs the darning stitch. Kanbi motifs in Kutch also use octagonal flowers and design elements strikingly different from the Saurashtran.

Ahirs: Myth and legend indicate that the Ahirs immigrated to Girnar from Mathura with the god Krishna and later settled in Kutch. A pastoral people, the Ahirs employ expressionistic images of birds and flowers in their embroidery. Khaddar (cotton) of deep maroon or black is the background for heavily encrusted embroidery in mirror work and thread. Both women and children wear embroidered clothing; skirts, trousers, and cholis (blouses or bodices). One of the most interesting aspects of this type of embroidery is the varied shapes of the mirrors – almond, circular, square, and triangular.

Embroidery from Saurashtra:

Kathi: The Kathi peoples are a land owning community and consist of three clans:

1. the Wala, who are concentrated in Jetpur, Bilkha, Wadia, Chrala, Babra, and a number of villages in the Amreli district;

2. the Kuhmn, who are concentrated in Vanda, Shena, Bhamodara and several villages in the Babriawad area;

3. the Khacharas, who are found primarily in Jasdan, Than, Chotila, Gadhara and Paliad.

Kathi embroidery is used primarily on household articles and consists of an elongated darning stitch (adiya-fatiya), a chain stitch, and an interlacing stitch. It is combined with glass pieces and worked with silk floss onto a cotton surface.

One of the most renowned examples of Kathi embroidery is the “bhitiya” which is a wall hanging consisting of three to five square pieces called chakalas. These chakalas are either suspended in sequence from a top panel called a “pacchitpati” or are dovetailed together with diamond shaped cloth pieces. The chakala, used singly, is
also employed to carry the bride's dowry to her new home where it is later hung on a wall.

A second article called a "toran" or door panel is equally unique among the Kathis. Architecturally, the Kathi home consists of a gateway leading to a courtyard and two main rooms. One room is used for living and the other for display and storage of the household furnishings. The embroidered hangings are usually stored in chests and used only during festivals and other auspicious occasions.

Many of these pieces depict scenes of deities, especially the god Krishna, and scenes of wedding or festival processions. There are, in many instances, striking similarities to the stone carved scenes sculpted on the walls of Hindu and Jain temples. Episodes from the Ramayana and Puranic legends are also common themes. Both geometric and figurative imagery abound on these surfaces.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Kathi community began to employ Mochi embroiderers who introduced the "ari" or awl stitched chain into the work. The Mochi also modified the Kathi imagery with the introduction of their pastoral motifs and designs.

Mahajan: In Saurashtra, the Mahajan community are business and commercial people. Their embroidery is distinguished by austere geometric ornamentation worked in monochromatic shades of red and violet. Long, darning stitches cover the surface of the silk which is enhanced by the addition of glass pieces on the main border and at the intersections of the various motifs.

Kanbi: The Kanbi group is composed of two communities: the Kadwas who live in central Saurashtra and western Sorath, and the Lewas, who are concentrated in Bhavnagar, Gariadhar, and Kundla.

Animal trappings are one of the principal forms of embroidery. The "jhum" is the covering for the back of the animal, the tasseled "shingadiyas" or "shingrotiyas" covers the horns, the "lalavati", "mathavati", or "matharotiyam" adorns the forehead, the "khobra" is the face covering, and the muzzle is called the "makhiyala".

The elephant headed god, Ganesh, is honored by a wall hanging called the Ganesh Sthapana. Yellow or deep orange colored cotton
forms the background for these pieces. The embroidery, worked in both darning and herringbone stitch, depicts primarily birds, flowers, and creepers or vines and tendrils.

Although the craft of hand embroidery can be found throughout the Indian sub-continent, the work accomplished in Gujurat and, to a certain extent, in the neighboring state of Rajasthan, remains some of the finest embroidery accomplished anywhere in the world. It is also a continuing tradition despite the advances of twentieth-century technology and the subsequent rapid transformation of much of India's rural and urban life styles.

References


Carol D. Westfall
Associate Professor
Fine Arts Department
Montclair State College
Upper Montclair, N.J. 07043
U.S.A.

Dipti Desai
Art Department
Teachers' College
Columbia University
New York, N.Y.
U.S.A.
Detail of the interior of a Saurashtran home with the embroidered and appliqued quilts and coverings stacked in the corner.
Photo 2

Mochi embroiderer using the awl to stitch through the surface of leather.
Mochi embroiderer working on the surface of satin.
Photo 4

Details of embroidered ghagra (skirt) showing floral, peacock, and dancing girl motifs.
Photo 5

Tiny mirror work (shisha) embroidery on the surface of a yoke for a choli (blouse).
Photo 6

Indian woman in the city of Bhuj, embroidering a quilt surface.
Pillow surface showing the floral and geometric motifs in shisha (mirror) embroidery.
Detail of geometric patterned shisha (mirror) embroidery.