

Phulkari within the Mughal–Persianate Aesthetic

A Folk Embroidery of the Punjab Read Against the Courtly Floral and Garden Tradition

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Abstract

Phulkari, the floss-silk embroidery of the Punjab, is conventionally classed as a women's domestic folk craft rather than a product of the imperial atelier. This paper does not overturn that classification but reframes it, arguing that phulkari is best read as a vernacular refraction of the Indo-Persian — broadly Mughal — floral and garden aesthetic that governed the visual culture of northern India from the sixteenth century onward. Moving from the pre-Mughal roots of the craft and the early-modern trade networks that supplied its materials, through its traditional designs, material culture, regional distribution, and the semiotics of its motifs, the paper situates a rural craft within a courtly aesthetic horizon without overstating any claim of direct imperial patronage.

Keywords: *phulkari, bagh, gulkari, charbagh, Mughal floral art, Punjab textiles, darning stitch, semiotics, folk embroidery.*

1. Introduction

The Punjabi word *phulkari* joins *phul* (“flower”) to *kari* (“work”) and is usually rendered “flower work.” It names at once a technique a counted-thread darning stitch worked in untwisted floss silk on coarse hand-spun cotton and the shawls, veils, and wraps produced by it across the historical Punjab, including present-day Indian Punjab, Haryana, parts of Himachal Pradesh, and the western districts now in Pakistan.¹ Although the name privileges the flower, the surviving corpus reaches well beyond it, embracing geometric medallions, birds, the vegetables of the kitchen garden, and even narrative scenes of village life.²

A word of caution frames the argument that follows. Unlike Mughal court textiles — the figured *jamdani*, the flowering-plant *pashmina*, or the painted and printed cottons produced in royal and commercial workshops *phulkari* was never the product of an imperial *karkhana*. It was domestic, unsigned, and overwhelmingly the work of women preparing garments for their own households and for marriage gifts.³ To call it simply “a Mughal craft” would misstate its social location. What can be argued, and what this paper argues, is that *phulkari* absorbed and re-expressed the floral and garden

¹Anu H. Gupta and Shalina Mehta, *Phulkari from Punjab: Embroidery in Transition* New Delhi:, 2019, p. 24.

²Krishna Lal, *Phulkari: From the Realm of Women's Creativity — A Tradition of Handmade Embroidery of Punjab and Haryana* New Delhi, 2013, p. 14.

³Michelle Maskiell, “Embroidering the Past: Phulkari Textiles and Gendered Work as ‘Tradition’ and ‘Heritage’ in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 2 1999,, p. 361.

aesthetic the Mughals and their Persianate predecessors had made the dominant decorative language of the subcontinent — folk in its making, Persianate in much of its imagery.

2. Review of Literature

The scholarship on *phulkari* falls into three broad streams. The first is archival and institutional. The earliest sustained documentary notice is Flora Annie Steel's short article of 1888, which described the embroidery of the Punjab and noted that finer pieces were commissioned to order rather than made only for the home.⁴ Museum cataloguing supplies the empirical backbone: Devayani Mitra Dutta's catalogue of the Indian Museum's holdings records yarn counts, base-cloth weights, and the mechanics of the darning stitch on dated specimens,⁵ while Krishna Lal's catalogue of fifty-two rare pieces from the IGNC archive is the convenient guide to regional variation across undivided Punjab and Haryana.⁶

A second stream is textual and historical, working against the "archival silence" of the Mughal court by reading vernacular literature and trade history. Jasleen Dhamija's essays trace the floral-garden imagination of the *bagh* and the movement of untwisted silk floss into the Punjab along early-modern trade routes,⁷ and a case study by Mittal and Kaur examines the etymology of the craft and its embedding in Punjabi lifecycle ritual and apprenticeship.⁸ Michelle Maskiell's influential study supplies the necessary corrective, showing that the very categories of "tradition" and "heritage" attached to *phulkari* were themselves shaped by colonial commerce and later nation-building.⁹

A third stream is socio-spatial and semiotic. Gundeve and Karolia read *phulkari* as a sign-system in which mentally mapped designs carry social and spiritual codes,¹⁰ while the long fieldwork of Gupta and Mehta documents the craft's passage from home-spun *khaddar* to boutique production and the consequent loosening of its geometric discipline.¹¹ The exhibition catalogue of Mason and Sethi consolidates the art-historical study of the textiles and reads them as windows into women's lives.¹² What this literature does not, on the whole, foreground is the relation of the folk idiom to the courtly Mughal aesthetic the gap this paper occupies.

3. Historicity: Pre-Mughal Roots and Mughal Trade Networks

3.1 Pre-Mughal Roots

⁴Flora Annie Steel, "Phulkari Work in the Punjab," *Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, Vol. 2 1888, pp. 71–72.

⁵Devayani Mitra Dutta, *A Catalogue on Phulkari Textiles in the Collection of the Indian Museum Calcutta*, 1985), p. 15.

⁶ Krishna Lal, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁷Jasleen Dhamija, "Embroidered Gardens of Flowers: Bagh and Phulkari of Punjab," *Marg*, Vol. 58, No. 4 2007, p. 14.

⁸Ashima Mittal and Navjit Kaur, *Narrativizing Phulkari: Changing Notions of Work Ethic and Apprenticeship — A Case Study of Punjabi Embroiderers* (New Delhi, 2016), p. 7.

⁹Maskiell, *op. cit.*, p. 366.

¹⁰Gurvinder Kaur Gundeve and Anjali Karolia, "Threads of Tradition: Unraveling the Shifting Semiotics of Phulkari Embroidery from Past to Present," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* .2024, p. 3.

¹¹Gupta and Mehta, *Embroidery in Transition*, p. 112.

¹²Danielle Mason and Cristin McKnight Sethi, *Phulkari: The Embroidered Textiles of Punjab from the Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection*, Philadelphia, 2017, p. 19.

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The origin of *phulkari* is genuinely contested. Three hypotheses recur: that the embroidery was carried into the Punjab by Jat communities migrating from Central Asia in the late medieval period; that it descends from the Persian *gulkari* (“flower work”), an embroidery of comparable name and floral emphasis; and that it is indigenous to the Punjab, a survival of a needlework once more widely practised across northern India.¹³ Several writers push the antecedents of such floral needlework back into early Sanskrit literature, and the craft is alluded to in the compositions of Guru Nanak who used the embroidered bodice as a figure for a woman’s accomplishment and in Waris Shah’s *Heer* of 1766; the continuity of these references with *phulkari* proper, however, is inferential rather than documented.¹⁴

3.2 Mughal Trade Networks and the Courtly Aesthetic

If the deep origin is uncertain, the early-modern setting is clearer. The defining thread of *phulkari*, the untwisted floss silk called *pat*, was not local: it was imported into the Punjab from Kashmir, Bengal, Afghanistan, and China along the very trade networks that the Mughal peace had widened and secured.¹⁵ The craft thus drew its raw material from an interregional economy that the empire underwrote, even as the stitching itself remained domestic.

Three features tie the imagery to the Mughal aesthetic. The first is the *garden*. The densest and most prized variety is the *bagh* literally “garden” in which embroidery covers the ground so completely that the base cloth disappears, and several named *baghs* cite Mughal monuments outright: the *Shalimar* and *Chaurasi* *baghs* recall the great imperial gardens, and the *Dilli Darwaza* *phulkari* names the Delhi Gate.¹⁶ The conceit of a textile that is a walled garden is precisely that of the Mughal *charbagh*, the four-quartered paradise garden central to the dynasty’s self-image. The second feature is the flowering-plant motif itself, which Mughal art of the seventeenth century raised into a signature of imperial taste and which reappears, freer and counted rather than drawn, scattered across the field of a *phulkari* proper. The third is the recurrence of Persianate devices such as the *saru* or cypress, a stock emblem of the Mughal garden.¹⁷

None of this makes *phulkari* a court product; the social evidence is against it, for the textiles circulated as heirlooms and dowry rather than as commissioned luxury, at least before the colonial market intervened.¹⁸ They show, rather, a folk craft saturated with the imagery of the Mughal garden and the Persianate flower – an aesthetic inheritance rather than an institutional one.

¹³Shailaja D. Naik, *Traditional Embroidery of India* (New Delhi: A.P.H. Publishing Corporation, 1996), p. 86.

¹⁴Dhamija, “*Embroidered Gardens of Flowers*,” *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁵John Gillow and Nicholas Barnard, *Traditional Indian Textiles* London: 1991, p. 124.

¹⁶Lal, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁷Rosemary Crill, *Indian Embroidery* London:, 1999, p. 88.

¹⁸Prakash Tandon, *Punjabi Century, 1857–1947* Berkeley, 1968, p. 65.

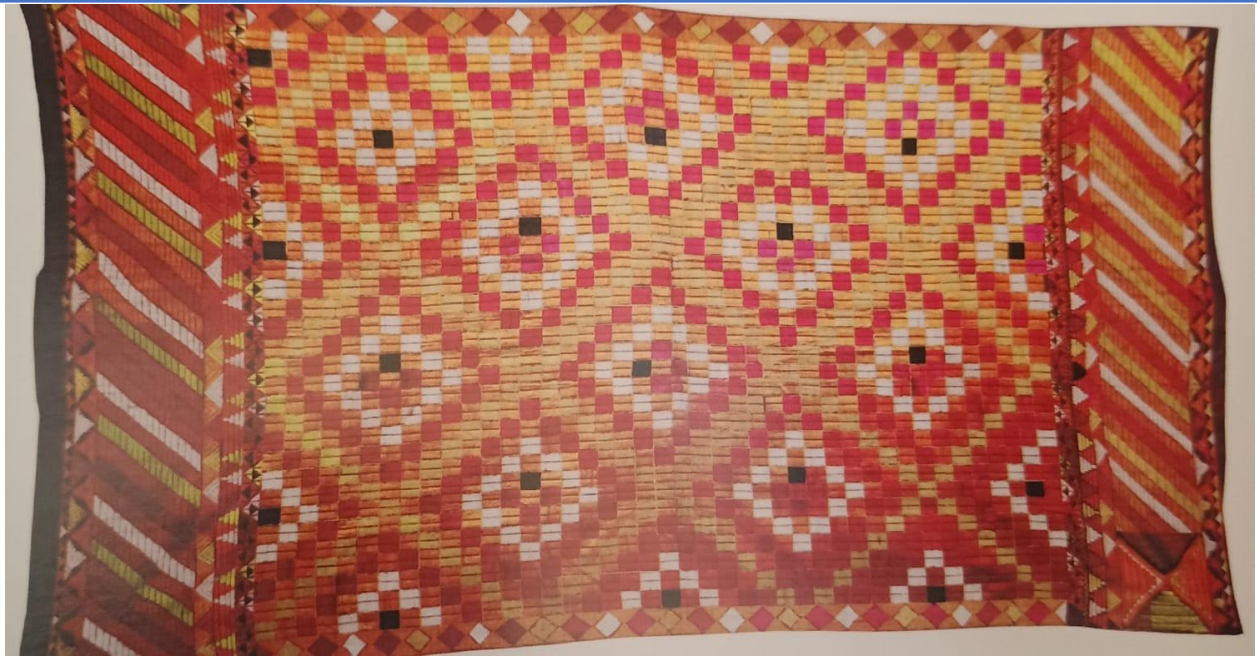


Fig. 1. A bagh phulkari, with dense embroidery covers the ground entirely

4. Traditional Designs

The tradition distinguishes broadly between the *phulkari* proper, in which discrete motifs are scattered and the ground stays visible; the *bagh*, in which the surface is wholly covered; and the *chope*, worked along the borders in a reversible double-darning stitch and presented to a bride by her maternal grandmother.¹⁹ Within these, the named varieties are numerous (see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3), and Hitkari's typology remains the standard guide to them.²⁰

Many varieties are defined by ground colour and life-stage rather than by motif. The *thirma*, on a white ground, was associated with older women and widows; the *nilak* used a dark blue or black base embroidered in red and yellow; the *sainchi* of the Bathinda and Faridkot districts is the narrative phulkari, crowded with farmers, animals, trains, and wrestlers; the *vari da bagh*, in red ground with golden lozenges, was begun for a household event such as a birth; and the *darshan dwar* was offered at a shrine in fulfillment of a vow.²¹

¹⁹Mason and Sethi, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

²⁰S. S. Hitkari, *Phulkari: The Folk Art of Punjab* New Delhi, 1980, p. 17.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 29.



Fig. 2. A *sainchi phulkari* — the narrative type, depicting human and animal figures and scenes of rural Punjabi life.



Fig. 3. A *chope*, worked along the borders in a reversible double-darning stitch and gifted by the maternal grandmother.

5. Material Culture: Tools, Materials, and Techniques

Three material features set *phulkari* apart. First, the base is *khaddar*, a coarse hand-spun, handwoven cotton, usually pieced from narrow loom-widths and most often dyed deep red with vegetable dyes from *palash* flowers, madder root, or acacia bark, though white, blue, and black

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grounds occur for particular varieties. Its regular, countable weave is essential, for it is the grid against which the embroiderer measures her stitches.²²

Second, the thread is *pat*, a soft untwisted floss silk dyed in strong yellows, oranges, reds, and whites, with blue used only rarely; its lustre depends on the floss catching the light across the long floats of the stitch.²³ Third, and most characteristic, is the counted-thread darning stitch carried in long and short floats along the grain of the cloth and worked from the *reverse* of the fabric, the embroiderer counting threads on the back so that the pattern emerges, fully formed, on the face she cannot directly see (see Fig. 4).²⁴ Although darning predominates, surviving pieces also employ running, herringbone, buttonhole, Cretan, stem, and split stitches where the design demands.

The tool-kit is correspondingly spare: a needle, the floss silk, the khaddar ground, and scissors. No frame or hoop was traditionally used, and in the classical practice no stencil or tracing was employed at all — the design was held in memory and counted directly onto the weave, transmitted orally from mother and grandmother to daughter.²⁵ Only in later, commercial practice did wooden printing-blocks come to be used to trace patterns onto the cloth, a shortcut that older embroiderers regarded as a decline from the counted work.²⁶



Fig. 4. Detail of the darning stitch worked from the reverse of the khaddar — long and short silk floats counted against the weave.

6. Spatial Distribution: Regional Styles of the Undivided Punjab

Phulkari was never uniform across the region. In the western districts now in Pakistan (Hazara, Rawalpindi, Sialkot, and Jhelum) the floss and the base cloth tended to be finer and the designs more

²²Gillow and Barnard, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

²³Dutta, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

²⁴Anne Morrell, *The Techniques of Indian Embroidery* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1994), p. 33.

²⁵Gundev and Karolia, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²⁶Hitkari, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

strictly geometric and non-figurative, a restraint often linked to the prevailing aesthetic of the area; the most professionally executed baghs are associated with these centres.²⁷ In the eastern Punjab — the Malwa, Majha, and Doaba tracts — the palette ran bolder and the work admitted more figuration, the narrative *sainchi* belonging especially to the Bathinda and Faridkot belt, while Haryana to the south developed its own variants such as the mirror-set *shishedar*.²⁸

7. The Semiotics of Design

Beyond ornament, *phulkari* functioned as a sign-system — a visual autobiography stitched by women whose own voices the written record rarely preserved. Motifs carried legible meaning: a pair of peacocks could register the state of a marriage, a drooping plumage reading as estrangement and a blooming one as contentment, and a deliberate flaw or *nazar-buti* was set into the field to avert the evil eye.²⁹ Because the craft was learned and practiced collectively, the repertoire also encoded transmission itself, each family carrying a recognizable hand passed from grandmother to granddaughter.³⁰

The motif vocabulary draws three streams together. The everyday and agricultural supplies the *belan* (rolling-pin), *mirchi* (chilli), *gobhi* (cauliflower), and *karela* (bitter-gourd) baghs, in which the objects of a woman's labour are raised to ornament.³¹ The symbolic supplies the peacock, parrot, lotus, and sun. And the courtly-Persianate supplies the flowering plant, the cypress, and the named Mughal gardens — so that, read semiotically, the Shalimar or charbagh bagh is not merely decorative but a folk citation of the imperial paradise-garden, the grandest of gardens reproduced in silk on a domestic veil.³²

8. Conclusion

Phulkari resists the tidy label of “Mughal craft” in the institutional sense, and it should: it was made by women, in courtyards, for kin and ceremony, not by salaried artisans in an imperial workshop. Yet to stop there is to miss how thoroughly the folk craft is suffused with the courtly aesthetic of the Mughal and Persianate world — in the flowering plant of the scattered *phulkari*, in the very idea of the *bagh* as a textile garden, and in the cypress and named imperial gardens stitched into the densest pieces. The most defensible reading treats *phulkari* as a vernacular embodiment of that aesthetic: a rural, female, and largely unrecorded tradition that received the floral and garden imagination of the Mughal centuries and remade it in floss silk on red khaddar. That “tradition” is itself partly a later construction does not weaken the point; it sharpens it, reminding us that the meeting of an imperial aesthetic and a folk practice on a single cloth is a historical achievement, not a timeless given.³³

²⁷Maskiell, *op. cit.*, p. 372.

²⁸Lal, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

²⁹Gundev and Karolia, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁰Gupta and Mehta, *Embroidery in Transition*, p. 143.

³¹Hitkari, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

³²Dhamija, “*Embroidered Gardens of Flowers*,” *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³³Maskiell, *op. cit.*, p. 385.