

Kantha forms and transformations



Niaz Zaman and Cathy Stevulak

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.

With these transformations, the *kantha* can now be found worldwide, not only in museums, but in catalogues and shops, in drawing rooms and boardrooms, and worn by fashion models on runways.

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, rayon, or silk floss threads are also used, especially for commercial *kanthas*.

In most Bengali 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 *sujni* – 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 in India. Others come from 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 Shelaidaha 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 Bengali educationist, writer, and folklorist Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939) 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 *Nakshi 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 Gurusaday Dutta (1882-1941) collected different forms of folk art, including the *kantha*. It was also at this time that the art historian Stella Kramrisch (1896-1993) 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

Fig. 1 (above): Stitches between motifs create a ripple effect, characteristic of the traditional *kantha*. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection, 2009, 2009-250-2 detail. Collection Page: <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/278944.html>

Fig. 2 (right): Photographs of 19th-century *kanthas* such as this inspired Surayia Rahman to design a wall-hanging for the Sonargaon Hotel, Dhaka. Philadelphia Museum of Art: Stella Kramrisch Collection, 1994, 1994-148-684. Collection Page: <https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/88594.html>

Fig. 3 (below): "Nakshi Kantha Tapestry" designed by Surayia Rahman, stitched by artisans of Kumudini. Situated in the Sonargaon Hotel, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Photo: Ruby Ghuznavi.





kanthas, however, are worked with the herringbone stitch, which helps create large areas of colour. This *kantha* work is mainly used to embellish silk saris and is very different from the type of *kantha* made in Bangladesh.

In East Pakistan, growing cultural awareness against cultural domination by West Pakistan arose together with the Language Movement, especially after the police shooting on a peaceful procession demanding Bangla as a state language on 21st February 1952. This also helped promote the survival of the *kantha* craft in Bangladesh. The real revival of the *kanthas* started with the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, when artists such as Quamrul Hassan (1921-1988) and Zainul Abedin (1914-1976) initiated a resurgence of interest in traditional arts and crafts, including the *kantha*.

Kantha revival

In 1971, famine and food shortages ravaged the newly-born nation, and many women were widowed in the preceding war or separated from their families. In an attempt to rehabilitate destitute women, *kantha*-making was promoted as an economic activity, particularly in Jessore, Kushtia, Faridpur, and Rajshahi, parts of Bangladesh with strong *kantha* traditions. Karika, a handicrafts cooperative, was set up and helped promote *kanthas* by using its motifs and embroidery on household goods and garments. Karika was followed by Aarong – the outlet for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and then for the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) – and Kumudini, another NGO. However, the catalyst for the *kantha* revival was, strangely enough, the opening of the Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka, in 1981.

Surayia Rahman (1932-2018), an artist who had earlier worked with the Women's Voluntary Association, was invited by BRAC to design a *kantha* wall-hanging for the new hotel, based on photographs from the Stella Kramrisch Collection in the Philadelphia Museum of Art [Fig.2]. BRAC, which had been working with *kanthas* and had produced a sample wall hanging, was, for various reasons, unable to embroider the large textile artwork for the hotel. As a result, Surayia Rahman's design was embroidered by artisans at Kumudini. [Fig. 3].

Apart from Surayia Rahman, Razia Quadir also designed two pieces, one of them replicating different forms of the lotus motif down its length, the other a marriage scene using the basic running stitch. Razia Quadir's *kantha* with the marriage scene and Surayia Rahman's wall hanging in the Sonargaon Hotel have influenced later *kantha* production in Bangladesh.

Surayia Rahman co-founded the Skill Development for Underprivileged Women (SDUW) organisation in 1982, in cooperation with a Canadian expatriate, Maureen Berlin. Rahman created elaborate story-telling designs for *kantha* wall-hangings. Her refined designs were often on silk rather than on recycled saris or cotton, and she used locally produced bamboo-processed threads. Embroiderers working for the organisation used a hoop to hold the fabric taut as they stitched the designs [Fig. 4], thus creating a distinction from the ripple effect in earlier

Fig. 4 (above): *Kantha* embroidery in process, stitched with a hoop, Bangladesh. Photograph: Kantha Productions LLC and Anil Advani.

Fig. 5 (right): *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt: Nakshi Kanthar Maath*. "Nakshi Kantha Tapestry" by Surayia Rahman and artisans of Arshi, Bangladesh. Photo: Kantha Productions LLC and Anil Advani.

Fig. 6 (below): Farah Khan in a self-designed *dupatta*, with *kantha*-inspired embroidery. West Bengal, India. Photo: Hafiz Khan.



kanthas, where the fabric was held by hand or stretched with a foot.

Rahman's wall-hangings, created in cooperation with the women artisans who she trained, became known as "nakshi *kantha* tapestries." Though *kantha* traditionalists protested that Rahman's *kantha* wall-hangings were not true *kanthas*, Rahman persisted in creating this refined textile art in the *kantha* tradition. Following four years at SDUW, Rahman formed her own organisation, Arshi, to promote skill development, dignified work, and income generation for hundreds of women. A number of Rahman's pieces are based on Jasimuddin's poems, such as *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt: Nakshi Kanthar Maath* [Fig. 5].



Movement of the revival to West Bengal

In Bangladesh, the *kantha* revival focused first on the traditional craft that could be used in contemporary ways; in West Bengal, India, the *kantha* was more commercialised from the outset. Santiniketan designs, for example, are to be found on inexpensive blouse pieces as well as on expensive silk saris. Bangladeshi saris using *kantha* embroidery are generally more muted. Often, it is only the body of the *sari* that is worked in the running stitch, creating the traditional ripples, with a simple weave-running stitch border and an *anchal* – or *sari* end – with a few traditional *kantha* motifs, such as the *kalka* or paisley.

Crafts Council of West Bengal has worked closely with *kantha* producers. Ruby Palchoudhuri, at present President Emeritus of Crafts Council of West Bengal, sent young designers to different museums to examine the different stitches used in *kanthas*. The Golden Jubilee celebration of the Crafts Council of West Bengal in 2018 focused on *kanthas* and *kantha*-makers. Titled "The Eye of the Needle: *Kantha*, the Quilt Embroidery of Bengal," it exhibited antique pieces as well as contemporary ones.

Tens of thousands of artisans in West and East Bengal now make *kanthas* for income generation. Relatively few develop their own designs for their own use, but replicate popular designs, often designed by specialists. In West Bengal, for example, Farah Khan has been making high-end *dupattas* and saris using the type of *kantha* stitches used for the rural wedding piece designed by Razia Quadir for Hotel Sonargaon and popularised by Banche Shekha, a Jessore-based NGO [Fig. 6].

Artists are also exploring the *kantha* for inspiration. The Bangladeshi artist, Shah Abdus Shakoor (1947-), paints *kantha* stitches on his pictures based on Mymensingh ballads. The late Indian artist, Meera Mukherjee (1923-1998), drew upon the *kantha* for her embroidered pieces, called "stitched paintings," whereby children made the drawings and *kantha* artisans did the embroidery.

Global movement of *kanthas*

Foreigners visiting Bangladesh and India – where antique pieces find purchasers – acquire traditional *kanthas* and newly worked *kantha* wall hangings to take home, raising an awareness of the fineness of the handwork of this region. Exhibitions of *kanthas* have been hosted in prestigious museums, such as the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Japanese collector Hiroko Iwatate has established the Iwatate Folk Textile Museum in Tokyo, which has a large collection of *kanthas*. *Kantha* quilts and *kantha*-embellished garments can be found on the internet, in shops selling handcraft, and in department stores in Bengal and around the world. As the *kantha* becomes appreciated worldwide, with more attention paid to sustainability, slow fashion, and folk arts, it also has the potential to inspire new generations of artists, craftspeople, and designers.

Niaz Zaman is the author of *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, the first book-length study of the *kantha*. At present, she is Advisor, Department of English and Modern Languages, Independent University, Bangladesh. niaz@iub.edu.bd

Cathy Stevulak is a Canadian filmmaker and international programme consultant. Her interest in textiles and the advancement of artisan enterprise, particularly in South Asia, led her to direct and produce the award-winning film, *THREADS*. cathy@kanthathreads.com, www.kanthathreads.com

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