



Uzbek wedding night bedsheet (ruijo; joipush) 30.16

This would be used once on the wedding night. The central panel has been removed for modesty reasons (pre-Burrell). The bottom of the embroidery is incomplete by tradition, as this is the beginning of a new life. The marks (design) of the kalamkash, an older woman who acted as the local designer.

Suzani is the Persian word for needle and it is aptly applied to this textile tradition which showcases bold and colorful embroidery. Female family and friends of a young girl joined together to help her make textiles furnishings that would become part of her dowry and the décor of her home upon marriage. Suzani may be used as walls hangings, bedding, table covers, and curtains among other décor and so come in different sizes and shapes. The resulting domestic aesthetic is one of colorful flowers and rhythmic patterns, an exuberance that is pleasing to the eyes and the soul. Uzbek homes, like many Islamic domiciles, present a simple, unadorned façade to passersby on the street. Inside, however, the home is as ornate as a family can afford. Wealthier homes may have a garden courtyard full of flowers, or brightly-painted ceilings and columns in the interior rooms. But all homes have floral Suzani to enliven domestic spaces. In a family's reception room, the finest Suzani are hung on walls to delight and impress guests. In the family's private rooms, small Suzani are used as blankets and wedding-bed sheets. Traditionally, Suzani were both women's art and a domestic art. Under Soviet rule, an industry was born whereby men working in factories churned out Suzani using chain stitch sewing machines. Today, in independent Uzbekistan, suzani-making is a highly successful cottage industry that supports both male and female artisans. These modern artisans are returning to traditional methods including hand-dyeing threads and hand embroidery.

Making a suzani

Each suzani is unique in design. To be a suzani designer was, and continues to be, the prerogative of specialists. Traditionally, the skill passed from mother to daughter and certain families became renowned within their communities for their patterns and symbols. Though the end product is distinctive, most suzani designs derive from the same compositional scheme; a central field surrounded by borders on all four sides. This scheme has a long tradition in the arts of central Asia, and in Islamic art in general. Traditionally, Suzani were made entirely by hand and could take around 18 months to complete. Cotton was the most common ground cloth, woven into long strips about 12" wide. Anywhere from three to six strips were tacked together to create a large piece of cloth. Using black ink, a designer would draw, often freehand, a pattern on the cloth. Once the color scheme was agreed upon, the stripes were separated so that different women could work on the embroidery simultaneously. When the embroidery was complete, the strips were sewn together again. Sometimes the embroidered motifs and colors did not align precisely when the strips were rejoined. Such inconsistencies were not flaws, but simply by-products of the process. Suzani are particularly valued for the fineness of their embroidery and the skillful use of contrasting colors that result in bold, vibrant designs. Variations of chain stitch and couching are the most common stitches.

By changing the direction of the stitch, changing stitch length and color, a woman gave texture and energy to a motif.

Meaning

Flowers and leaves are the most common motifs found in suzani designs, not surprising in a region where agriculture is the major economy and many homes have courtyard gardens. Some flowers such as tulips, irises, and carnations, are discernable while other flowers are abstract. Many people believe the floral motifs, as well as paisley and pomegranate motifs, are symbols of fertility and prosperity. Motifs such as chili peppers, lamps, and the distinctive central Asian kitchen knife are thought to have protective powers. It is not always easy to identify what motif the designer intended, for many motifs are quite abstract. If not the motifs individually, than certainly the suzani as a whole, likely conveyed prosperity, health, fertility and protection upon the bridal couple.