

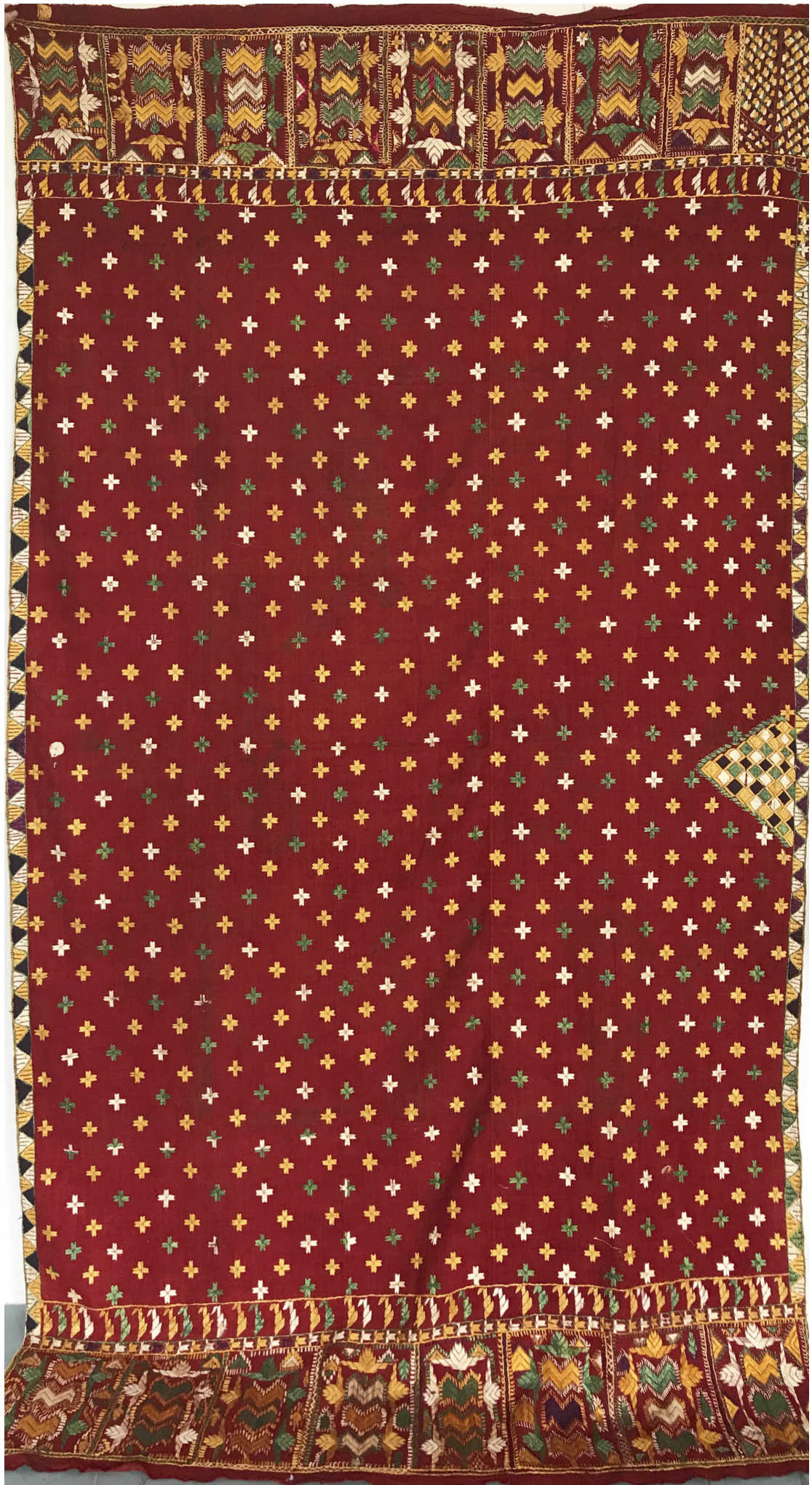
THE SOUL OF THE PHULKARI

When beholding any antique textile, it is the art that strikes us first. The aesthetic that has been honed by many generations of artists speaks to our eyes. After our eyes have had their fill, we begin to notice the craft that went into creating it - the weaving, the dyes, the joints etc. Exploring the techniques of the craft satisfies our mind. These two visible layers – the art and the craft – are usually sufficient to quench our thirst for beauty.

But in many textiles from Asia, beneath these lies one more layer of the palimpsest: the cultural paradigm and it is this embedded layer that speaks to the soul!

The Phulkari textile of Punjab is one of the classic examples of such a textile that appeals to the eye, the mind and the soul of the beholder!

‘Phulkari’ literally means ‘embroidered flowers’ and is the term used for the silk embroidered cotton shawls used in Punjab.



The thread used for the embroidery until the mid-1900s was untwisted silk floss called *patt* that is no longer available. The base was hand woven hand spun cotton cloth. The stitches were worked from the wrong side of the cloth in a way such that the thread was hardly visibly on the back.



The visual impact of a Phulkari was created by varying the colour, the angle of the stitch, the density of embroidery, the overall layout, and the motifs. Based on the creative choices made, visually descriptive names were assigned to the subcategories.

For example, when the base is completely covered up with embroidery, it is called a *Bagh* or garden Phulkari. An example of a motif-based name is the *Mor* or Peacock Bagh. *Bawan* means '52' – so naturally the *Bawan Bagh* is one that has 52 motifs.



But even though the names of the Phulkari types are descriptive, they fail to capture the essence of these textiles.

To get to the soul of the art we need to ask 'What was the purpose of its creation?'

Most Phulkaris were made for the purpose of serving the wedding traditions of the region. So to understand the soul of the Phulkari, we must travel to the Punjab of the late 1800s – an era when traditions directed the conduct of one's life.

The Punjab is a rich fertile land that lies just beyond the Himalayas. As a result of its geography, it became the entry point for all land invasions and the people there were constantly challenged to wars.

This dominating vulnerability moulded the social norms that were adopted there.

As we know women are often the first casualties of war. So protecting women became a priority and customs that evolved addressed this need. The dress code for instance, was designed to deflect attention away from the wearer rather than attract it. Women wore covers loosely wrapped over the tunic so that the physical form was undefined. These were roughly the size of a bed sheet - 2.5 m x 1.25 m - and were called Chadars or Odhanas meaning 'cover'.

Marriages were arranged early as the honor of the family depended on the purity of the daughters. The wedding took place over a series of ceremonies that ended when the bride attained puberty and went to live with her husband & his family. The gifts that she took to her new home comprised her dowry and included jewelry, clothes and most importantly some Phulkaris.

Traditional wedding songs narrate that a bride was considered fortunate if her dowry consisted of Phulkaris that were *handmade at her own home* by her mother & grandmother rather than pieces procured from the market. For, only in such Phulkaris could the treasure chest of memories of her childhood be found.

It is said that the day a girl child is born, the grandmother picks up a needle and begins work on the Phulkari that will be used at the child's wedding. In the afternoons after the chores are done, the women of the joint family sit around the inner courtyard, singing or sharing stories of life while they work on the Phulkari. The little girl plays around them with her siblings, watching, listening, learning life lessons and building the memories of her childhood.

The transformation of the cloth from the plain base to the stunning work of art is analogous to the transformation of the girl from a playful child to a young bride ready for the responsibilities of marriage. And both transformations take the same amount of time!

As the wedding day approaches the ceremonies begin. For each ceremony a special type of Phulkari is used. Here are a few examples:

- In one pre-wedding ceremony - the *haldi* - the bride is anointed with turmeric and sandalwood paste by all the married women present. After the ritual bath that follows she is draped in a special Phulkari called the *Chope*.



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- The wedding takes place at the temple where the groom and his family arrive first. The bride is then walked to the altar by her brothers. She has been the source of their honor and they, the source of her strength. The four brothers hold the four corners of a Phulkari over her head as a protective canopy, shielding her from the evil eye as she walks to the altar.
- The main wedding ceremony consisting of the Pheras - is then conducted with the bride draped in a special Phulkari called the *Subhar*
- The bride receives the *Vari da Bagh* from the groom's family – a finely worked Bagh made principally by the groom's grandmother



- When a man died leaving behind a wife, it was customary for his younger brother to marry the widow. This was partly done to ensure that agricultural lands did not get subdivided. The ceremony in such a wedding was kept simple. In the presence of elders, the brother puts a *chadar* or cover - usually a Phulkari - over the woman, signifying that he would now be the provider of her security and protector of her honor. With this act the wedding was deemed to have taken place and was recognised by society.

A century ago, the Phulkari played a central role in traditions. It announced the woman's marital status and was worn with pride. It was so important that rituals were allowed to begin only after the senior-most woman of the family had draped her Phulkari!

Today these Phulkari textile traditions are all but extinct. The lines of the country's partition of 1947 drawn throughout the state of Punjab, resulted in intense turmoil. The lives of the people were ravaged as livelihoods and lifestyles were destroyed. In those hard times, families are known to have exchanged dozens of their heirloom Phulkaris for a few kilos of rice. Eventually the strong resilient people of Punjab went on to make successful lives elsewhere. But perhaps the heartbreak never quite healed completely. And the traditional production of handmade Phulkaris died out. Today, machine embroidered Phulkaris are back in fashion and some groups are trying to revive handmade Phulkaris.

But will the golden era of the Phulkari ever return?

All Phulkaris are from the WOVENSOULS collection.

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