INNOVATIONS IN TRADITIONAL EMBROIDERY OF THE FERGANA VALLEY AND CUSTOMS ASSOCIATED WITH EMBROIDERY

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the artistic characteristics of traditional embroidery in the Fergana Valley (Fergana, Namangan, and Andijan regions), the customs and rituals associated with the craft, and the innovative processes currently observed in the field. It highlights the role of embroidery in dowries, weddings, and family ceremonies, as well as the symbolic meaning of patterns and the impact of innovations—such as new materials, computer technologies, modern design, and digital commerce—on traditional embroidery.

Keywords: Fergana Valley, embroidery, suzani, skullcap (do‘ppi), Chust skullcap, dowry, customs, pattern symbolism, innovation, modern design, craftsmanship.

Embroidery is one of the most widespread and rich forms of Uzbek folk applied art. Alongside the schools of Bukhara, Samarkand, Shahrisabz, and Tashkent, the embroidery of the Fergana Valley possesses a distinctive style, shaped by the lifestyle, religious and moral views, and aesthetic tastes of the region's inhabitants. Embroidery has long been a craft practiced by women in the valley, with girls learning its secrets from their mothers and grandmothers from a young age.

The artistic qualities of the valley's embroidery are primarily evident in its elegance and the intricate, dense arrangement of patterns. Items such as *suzani* (wall hangings), *ruijo* (bridal bed sheets), *choyshab* (bedspreads), *zardevor* (frieze-like wall borders), *dorpech* (curtain valances), *bolinpo‘sh* (pillow covers), *joynamoz* (prayer rugs), *belbog‘* (waist sashes), and *ro‘mol* (headscarves) were traditionally decorated with embroidery. The art of *do‘ppi* (skullcap) making flourished particularly well in the valley; the Chust *do‘ppi*—featuring four "pepper" motifs stitched in white thread against a black background—has become a symbol of Uzbekistan today. Techniques such as *yorma*, *bosma*, *iroqi*, *chinda xayol*, *kandaxayol*, and *piltado‘zi* are widely used, while the decorative motifs predominantly feature pomegranates, almonds, peppers, flowers, branches, and *tumor* (amulet) shapes.

Embroidery is inextricably linked to the customs and rituals of the people of the valley. One of the most important traditions is the preparation of a bride’s dowry. From the moment a girl was born, her mother and female relatives would begin crafting items for her dowry, such as *suzanas* (large embroidered wall hangings), *ruijos* (embroidered bedspreads), prayer mats, skullcaps, and other embroidered goods. The quantity and quality of the embroidery in the dowry served as a testament to the girl’s craftsmanship and her family’s prestige and prosperity. During the "sep yoyar" (dowry display) ceremony held before the wedding, the dowry was exhibited to relatives and neighbors, and the embroidery was admired and praised by the women present.

The act of beginning the embroidery was also marked by a special ritual. According to tradition, the stitching of a large *suzana* would commence with the first stitch made by a respected, blessed elderly woman of the family. Large-scale *suzanas* were often created through a collective community effort (*hashar*) involving neighbors and female relatives, a practice that strengthened the bonds of solidarity among the women of the *mahalla* (neighborhood). Folk belief dictated that a small portion of the embroidery be intentionally left unfinished—a gesture symbolizing the wish to ward off the "evil eye" and representing the continuity of life. The patterns themselves held symbolic meaning: the pomegranate signified prosperity and fertility; almond and chili pepper motifs offered protection against the evil eye; and flowers and branches symbolized life and vitality. Embroidered items also held a special place in family ceremonies. The bride’s chamber was adorned with *suzani* and *zardevor* (decorative wall hangings); the bride wore an embroidered outfit and headscarf during the "kelin salom" (bridal greeting) ceremony; and embroidered sheets and covers were prepared for the cradle during the *beshik tuyi* (cradle ceremony). The *doppi* (skullcap), meanwhile, was one of the most cherished

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gifts presented to the groom, in-laws, and honored guests. Thus, embroidery accompanied people through every significant stage of life, from birth to old age.

The master-apprentice tradition holds a special place in the embroidery of the Fergana Valley. Renowned local embroiderers would gather neighborhood girls in their homes to teach them—starting with basic stitches and progressing to the secrets of pattern sketching and color selection. Women who sketched the patterns onto the fabric were held in high regard, as the artistic value of the embroidery depended largely on the composition of the design. A young woman would show her first independently completed piece to her mentor and receive her blessing. This tradition demonstrates that embroidery served not merely as a craft but also as a school of character building; through it, girls learned patience, diligence, neatness, and an appreciation for beauty.

Today, significant innovative changes are taking place in the region's embroidery traditions. First, there have been shifts in materials: synthetic threads and new types of fabrics are widely used in place of natural silk and dyes, although some artisans are enhancing the value of their products by returning to natural dyes. Second, computerized embroidery machines and pattern-designing software have been introduced. While accelerating production and lowering costs, these developments have also highlighted the importance of preserving the artistic value of hand-stitched embroidery. Thirdly, traditional embroidery patterns are now being applied to modern clothing, bags, footwear, interior décor items, and accessories. Young designers are creating fashion collections that blend national embroidery styles with fabrics such as *atlas* and *adras*, as well as modern textiles.

Fourthly, sales and promotional methods have evolved. Embroiderers are connecting directly with customers through social media, online stores, and messaging apps. Events such as the International Handicrafts Festival—held in Kokand since 2019—along with regional and national exhibitions, have become vital platforms for showcasing the work of embroiderers from the Fergana Valley to a broad audience. Furthermore, state-provided incentives for artisans (under Decree No. PF-5242), support for the "master-apprentice" tradition, and programs promoting home-based work are enabling many women to earn an income through embroidery.

At the same time, innovations bring certain risks: the displacement of hand embroidery by machine embroidery, the simplification of patterns and the loss of their symbolic meaning, and the waning tradition of preparing dowries among the youth are among these challenges. In our view, it is essential to maintain a balance between tradition and innovation in the development of embroidery in the Fergana Valley. To achieve this, it is advisable to scientifically document traditional patterns and stitches to create a digital archive, introduce quality certification for hand embroidery, expand embroidery design programs in vocational and higher education institutions, and study and promote embroidery-related customs as intangible cultural heritage.

In conclusion, the traditional embroidery of the Fergana Valley is a vivid expression of the people's rich spiritual heritage, customs, and aesthetic values. Modern innovations are breathing new life into this art form, introducing it to the worlds of commerce and fashion. However, it is crucial not to forget that the true value of embroidery lies in its symbolic significance and craftsmanship; innovation must be introduced while preserving tradition.

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