

## KANTHA OF BENGAL

The traditional folk art of Bengal is famous as **Kantha** which means 'Patched Cloth', and the special significance of **kantha** is quilting. The Dacca muslin saris of gray, black or white coloured, are one of the most artistic and beautiful specimens of Handloom textiles, were considered as very valuable by the women folk of Bengal. There are two types of embroideries. In the first type, the old and discarded cotton saris or dothis were piled up on the top of each other, quilted and embroidered. And the other type was quilted by using the discarded cotton bed spreads and the pictorial **embroidery** was done with Tussar silk threads.

**Kantha** stands as a model for skilled certainty. Because this fantastic embroidered piece is revived by utilising the wornout textiles, literally rags that would have been normally thrown away. It is a treasured art of every door where in, the Bengali ladies irrespective of their castes, classes and socio-economic groups, are expertised. The **embroidery** not only depicts the stitches employed but it also expresses the outflow of their creative, resourceful, imaginary, patient craftsmanship.

The size and thickness of **Kantha** varied according to its type. The layers of pieces are sewn together by simple darning stitch in white thread, drawn from the old sari borders. The design is first traced and the filling is done by coloured threads, taken from the coloured borders of saris.

Kanthas were produced in Hugli, Patna, Satagon, Jessore, Faridpur, Khulna and other parts of East and West Bengal. The **Kantha** of each individual is unique by itself. Because its always her own creation, idea, innovation, taste of fancies, and art of executing new fresh forms, designs, figures and motifs. It is the traditional art greatly encouraged by the family and therefore no scope for imitation. Though the ideas, themes, scenes and symbols are almost common as they come from similar ecological background, there is wide variation in the structural and decorative arrangement of the designs, composition of motifs combination of figures and colour scheme, technique and presentation varied from woman to woman. However, some basic traditional designs are commonly seen in each piece of their work.

The Needle work is done by original darning stitch along with satin and loop stitches. There are two modes of working. In the first style, the **embroidery** starts from the centre and ends by outlining the motif or vice versa. However, the **embroidery** gives rich textural effects by adding traditional colours like black, deep blue and red, which symbolise the nature, earth, sky and space respectively.

The motifs used in **kantha embroidery** has a great influence of Portuguese and European traditions. The first factory in India was started at Patna during the year 1920. Dr. Stella Karamrisch writes that **kantha** was first manufactured in 1875. The motifs are composed of heterogeneous objects like various types of lotus flowers, Mandala, Satadala padma, trees, creepers, foliage, floral scrolls, kalkas, animal figures, human figures, spirals, whirls, birds, fish, boats, submarine sceneries, ships, pitcher, mermaids, various sea monsters, comb, mirror, nut cracker, umbrella, chariot, palanquine etc.



The designs of kantha are taken from day to day life, depicting folk stories, epics, mythological background, ritualistic motifs, luxurious vegetation with roaming animals, deer running, dancing peacock, temples, hukkas, jewelleries, various types of costumes and so on. Some kanthas even represent the steeds of Gods like bull, swan lion, elephant, peacock, mouse, cat, eagle, owl, and swan.

The original **kantha** is double faced where the design appeared identical on either sides of the quilt. The great length of stitch is broken into tiny tackings which give almost a dotted appearance on either sides of the quilt like 'Do rukha'. Sometimes the **embroidery** is so finely done that it is very difficult to identify the wrong side.

Most of the Bengali women wear white saris and thus the background of the quilt material is often white. In order to break the monotony of this, and overcome the dullness, a sort of open mesh of cut work effect is produced by drawing the threads, pulling the stitches or piercing the holes, specially in the corners. The main colours used are white, red, deep blue and black.

Bengal is also known for its applique art and is popular because of its very rarity. There are of two styles. The large and bold designs worked on wall hangings, canopies, bedspreads, tents, banners, flags where a lion or lotus motif is cut out in red material and appliqued against white background. The other style is of small patterns worked on personal items and household textiles like pillow covers. This is done by cutting the coloured cloth into narrow strips and stitched as outlines of the design. Applique on quilts earned a large market in the foreign trade during sixteenth century.

Lotus is the most common and important motif widely used in **Kantha**. An all over pattern of lotus may have the petals of red alternating with black petals. Black thread is used to give either outline for the design or sometimes filled with the stitches of the same colour. A couple of tantric motifs like 'Vajra', the thunder bolt, 'swastik' were used along with the spiral whirl, representing the eternal life cycle. Kalka is another important motif, a cone or mango shaped, embroidered in association with spiral whirls, broad band of circles, lotus or heart shaped foliage.

There are different kinds of kanthas named according to its utility. According to Jasleen Dhamija, there are seven types of kanthas used as wrappers in winter, for books, valuables, mirrors, combs, wallets, pillows and bed spreads.

Arshilata is used as cover or wrap for mirror, comb and other such toilet articles. It is a narrow rectangular piece of eight inch wide and twelve inch length. It has a wide border and the central motif is taken from the scenes of Krishna leela or Radha-Krishna raas. The lotus, trees, creepers, spirals, inverted triangles, zig-zag lines, scrolls are also some of the commonly used motifs.

Bayton, a three feet square piece serves as a wrap for books and other similar valuables. It has a central motif, usually the lotus with hundred petals called 'Satadala Padma'. This motif with hundred petals is simply a figure, which does not signify anything precisely. The traditional and folk design of oldest style in Bayton is the Mandala which symbolises the unity of all manifestations of life. The core has Satadala Padma with two or three borders on the sides. The other motifs commonly seen are water pots, conch shells, kalkas, trees, foliage, flowers, birds, elephants, chariot, human figures etc. Sometimes the figure of lord Ganesha and Goddess Saraswati with their steeds are also observed. Special motifs on Bayton are worked with swan, as a book wrapper. In other words the designs often are elaborate and this colourful **embroidery** is made with yellow, green blue and red coloured threads. This kantha is often carried while travelling and also presented as gift to their kith and kins.



Durjani (Durfani) is also known as Thalia. It is a square piece **kantha**, covers the wallet, has a central lotus motif with an elaborated border. The three corners of this piece are drawn together inward to make the tips to touch at the centre and are sewn together like an envelop. It will have another open flap to which a string, tussle or a decorated thread is either stitched or mechanically fixed, which can be wound and tied up when rolled. The other motifs used are various types of foliages, snakes and other objects taken from the natural surroundings.

Lep **kantha** is relatively a thick quilted wrap padder by more number of sari layers, placed on top of each other, to provide warmth during winter season. Lep is also popular as 'desired covering'. Simple geometrical designs are worked with running stitch using coloured threads. The entire Lep piece is been given a wavy rippled appearance by working simple embroideries.

Oar (oosar), the katha serves as a pillow cover. It is a rectangular piece whose size is about two feet by one and a half feet. Usually simple designs like trees, foliages, creepers, birds or a liner design with longitudinal border constitutes the ground base and decorative border is stitched around its four sides.

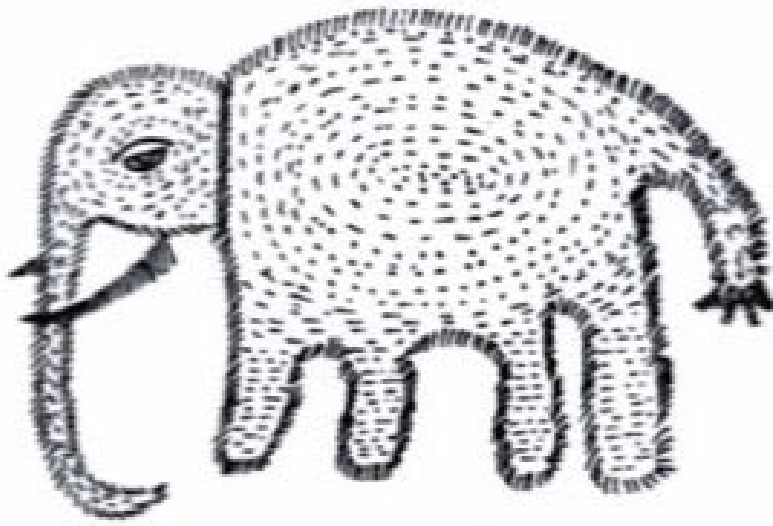
The most popular and striking **kantha** is the Sujani (Sujni), generally large rectangular piece of three feet by six feet, used as a spread during ceremonial occasion. Its size has provided full scope for the workers to express and exhibit her imaginary, self created designs. The rectangular piece is divided into nine equal parts and the motifs are distributed in these equal sized rectangular block. The lotus motif with a whirl in the center is the commonly used motif in Sujani. The other motifs observed are the scenes from Ramayana, Mahabharat, folk tales dancing gal. men riding, birds pecking the fruits, prancing movement of the animals, bees sucking the nectar, procession in motion etc. A moderately thick, light weighed Sujani has either two or more borders at the edge to strengthen the layers and to prevent further tearing. The border stitched at the edge of the rectangular piece has geometrical patterns in single colour, while the other is more ornamental and colourful. The cover sometimes has large kalka laid horizontally and separated by Vajra, the thunder bolt or a broad band of circles, lotus in each circle and heart shaped foliage between the circles. Sarfani is also a quilt used during ceremonies or functions as a cover or wrap.

Rumal is nothing but a hand kerchief and is the smallest among all the kanthas. A square piece having a size about one square foot. Lotus is the core and other motifs embroidered around it. Sometimes plant and animal motifs are also embroidered but invariably has a well decorated border.

The bed cover and wall hanging of kanthas were famous world wide. The women picked up the motifs from the epics and mythological scenes and the nature. It represents their traditional beliefs, individual skills, art and passions towards religion. It does depict the folk art. The ritual designs are worked only on festive occasion to fulfil their vows. The special characteristic of kanthas was, it never became a replica of other folk art but remained unique by itself. **Kantha** work is a model with inspired romance, philosophy, sentiment and holyness.

The simple running stitch was earlier used to join all the layers of cotton materials together. Later other stitches were used to enhance the surface enrichment. During the sixteenth and seventeenth century chain stitch was worked along with running stitch. Later few more stitches like, back stitch, satin and herring bone were introduced.

**Kantha** exists even today in the rural areas of West Bengal, exclusively a hand made work of women folk there at. It is now produced on commercial scale. At present few centers in Bengal have been set up to revive this folk art on commercial scale.



ELEPHANT



FISH

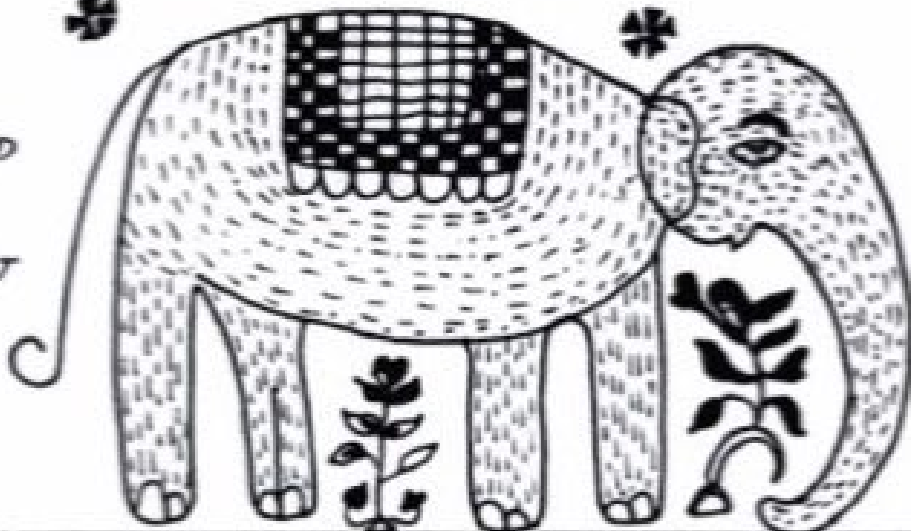


HORSE



STYLISTED

ELEPHANT





FISH



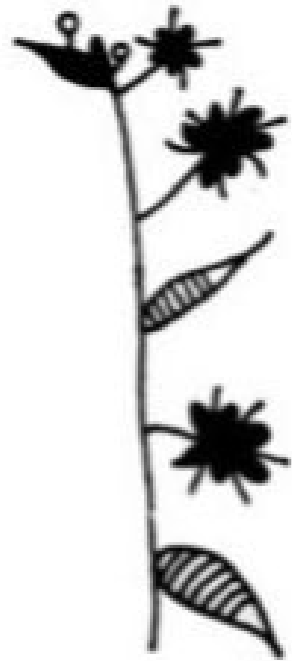
LOTUS



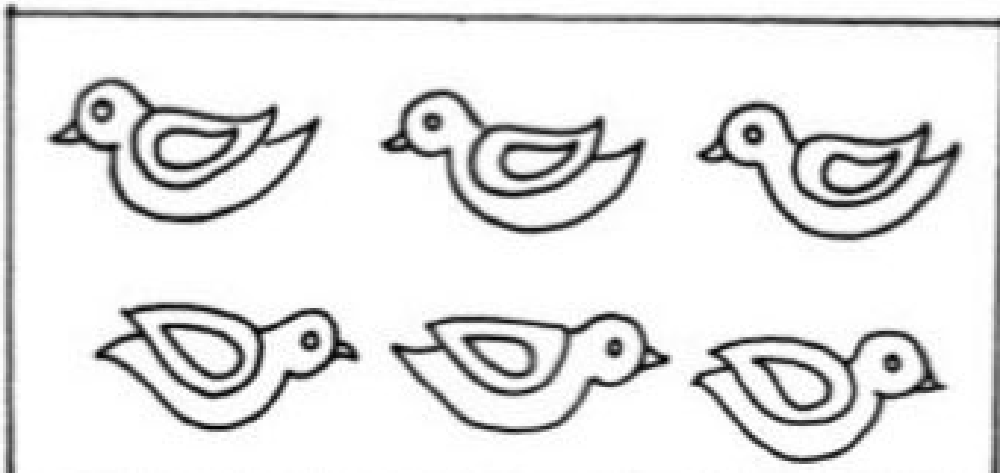
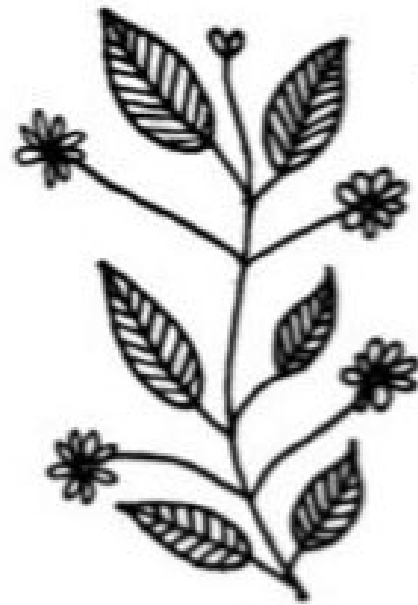


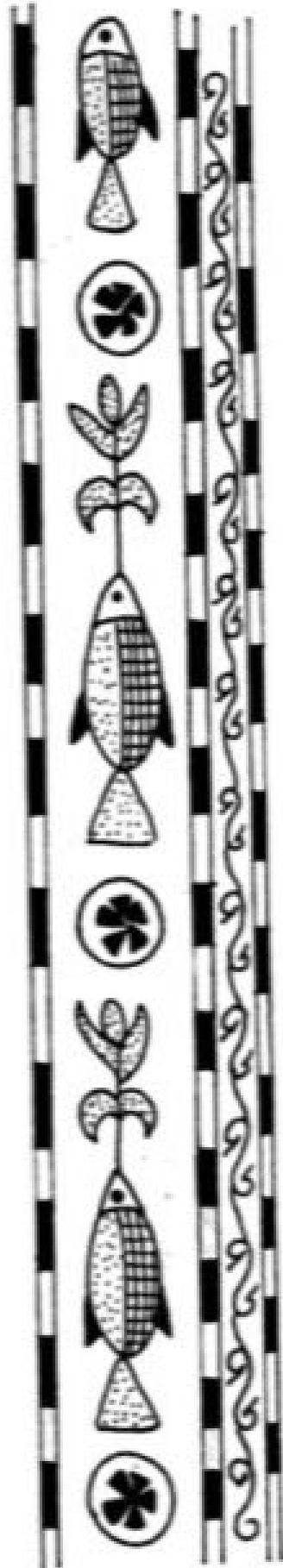
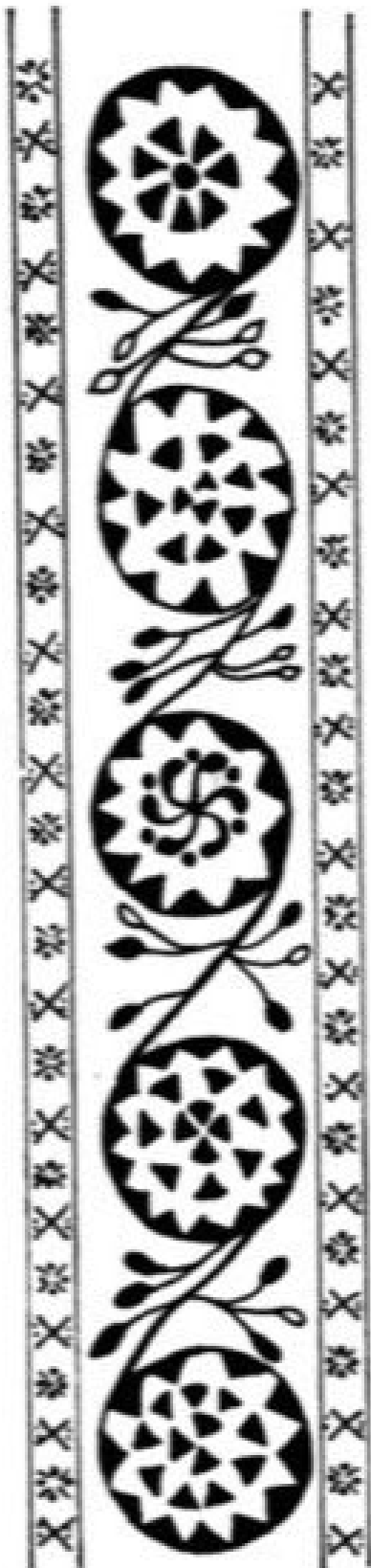
STYLISTED  
FLORAL,  
HUMAN  
BIRD  
MOTIFS.





*STYLISTED FLORAL AND BIRD MOTIFS*





STYLISTED FLORAL AND FISH MOTIFS IN BORDERS





*LOTUS AS CENTRAL MOTIF*



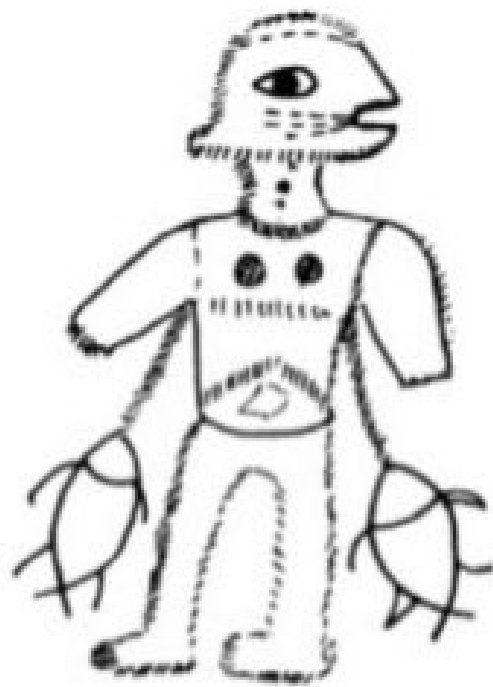
*LOTUS AS CORNER MOTIF*



CENTRAL LOTUS SURROUNDED BY FLORAL ANIMAL & HUMAN MOTIFS



STYLED FLOWERING TREE



*STYLED HUMAN, LOTUS, BIRD AND FISH MOTIFS.*

