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Catching the Light, Catching the Waves:
The Suzani Collection of Doris Duke at Shangri La in Honolulu, Hawai’i

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Introduction: Doris Duke’s Shangri La and Her Suzani Collection

In 1935 tobacco heiress Doris Duke married James H. R. Cromwell and together they embarked on a year-long voyage around the world for their honeymoon. Returning home eastwards, their last port of call was Honolulu before they were to establish themselves in West Palm Beach, Florida. They found they enjoyed Honolulu, so they stayed much longer than planned. They bought a spot of land on Black Point, east of Diamond Head, and ultimately never settled in Florida.

Figure 1. Distant view of Shangri La. Photo by Carol Bier.

Here, in the next couple of years, they built a house they soon dubbed Shangri La (Fig. 1), which upon Miss Duke’s death in 1993 became a museum according to the terms of her will under the administration of the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, an operating foundation of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. At the time of her death, it was not known among historians of Islamic art that Doris Duke had been a major collector of Islamic art for six decades, beginning with purchases made on her honeymoon (Fig. 2).1

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1 S. Littlefield, Doris Duke’s Shangri La (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts and Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, 2002) provides an overview of house and collections.
Among the many honeymoon purchases were several textiles identified as “sujnee” on Bombay merchants’ invoices, on shipping invoices from Calcutta, and among her carefully kept lists of expenses, now in the Archives of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation housed at Duke Farms in Hillsborough, New Jersey. To judge from the informal descriptions of the objects in the archival documents from her honeymoon in comparison with objects in her collections at Shangri La, several of the “sujnee” acquired on her honeymoon are likely what are called suzani today in the West, after the Persian and Tajik word for needle, suzan, in its adjectival form, suzani (“of the needle”), meaning “needlework.” With particular styles of floral embroidery and color palette, such textiles today are attributed to urban centers in Uzbekistan (Bukhara, Tashkent, Samarqand, Shahrisyabz, Nurata).2

In spite of the thousands of objects Miss Duke acquired in the ensuing years, it may well be that she did not consider herself a collector (Fig. 3). Rather, she lived with her art which some might not even call art, and she chose to surround herself throughout this most private of her residences with artistic, if eccentric, displays and installations, in which she herself had a hand in designing and creating. In figure 3 (left) four suzanis from the collection may be identified. The large suzani that hangs behind Miss Duke and Sam Kahanamoku (Fig. 3 left and Fig. 4, left) exhibits a style and color range that suggests a Bukharan attribution of the late 19th century. The very large

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suzani upon which the couple is seated (Fig. 3 left, Fig. 3 right and Fig. 4, right) serves as a draped cover and may be attributed to Tashkent, early 20th century. Two smaller suzanis (Fig. 3 left, Fig. 5, left; Fig. 5, right) had been loosely sewn to cover bolsters or cushions. Typically, Miss Duke would flexibly change the uses and functions of these objects in her Hawaii home, to suit current impulses. Figure 3 (right) shows one of these suzanis hung for display in the courtyard.
Of the large embroideries Miss Duke acquired on her honeymoon, nine would today be classified as suzanis. Her interest in these materials thus long preceded the more popular late twentieth century acquisitions of suzani by European and American rug collectors and museums. Duke continued to purchase suzanis; at the time of her death in 1993, she had fifteen diverse examples, representing differences in style, colors, motifs and layout.

Figure 5 (left). Suzani, Bukhara region; bast fiber (linen?) warp and weft, balanced twill weave ground dyed orange; silk embroidery (chain stitch), 85.64.

Figure 5 (right). Suzani, Bukhara region, cotton warp and weft, dyed red; silk embroidery (Roumanian couching and Roumanian stitch; chain stitch), 85.61.

Photos by A. Perlman, courtesy of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Archives.

What are called suzanis in Western collections today seem to represent a distinctly urban embroidery tradition of the nineteenth century and perhaps earlier; they were worked by young women of Bukhara and neighboring regions, both before and after Russian imperial presence; the tradition is currently being revitalized.

Historical suzanis of the nineteenth century tend to be bright and colorful and they are large – monumental in contrast to most traditional domestic embroidery work. They were used as hangings and covers, often initially for the household of a bride. How did Doris Duke use and enjoy these textiles?

Historical photographs of Shangri La provide early evidence for the decorative uses to which Doris Duke put these suzanis in her recently built home (see Fig. 3). She surrounded herself with color and texture, using them to cover walls, sitting areas, and bolsters; she displayed them in the courtyard and in sitting rooms. She treated these materials not as works of art but as furnishing fabrics with which to live a rich and relaxed life. Her assemblage of suzanis is comparable to that of her other extensive holdings of Islamic art, all of which she seems to have gathered to suit personal tastes and visual pleasure (Fig. 6).
Some textiles are hung for display and others are used as furnishings, working together to create an ambience and contributing to a sense of opulence that served as a backdrop for Doris Duke’s life at Shangri La.

**Shangri La Suzani Research Project**

In January 2005 I was engaged by Deborah Pope, Executive Director of Shangri La, and Sharon Littlefield, Curator, to undertake documentation of Doris Duke’s suzani collection, initiating The Shangri La Suzani Research Project. Working with Ann Svenson Perlman, textile conservator on contract, and Sahra Indio, technical assistant on site, we began to document embroidery stitches, ground fabrics, colors, motifs and patterns with symmetry and symmetry-breaking. My role as project director informed the course of inquiry and structured the processes of our documentary, analytical, and interpretive research. Ann undertook macro- and micro-photography; Sahra worked with us to analyze ground materials and weave structure, identify stitches and prepare a stitch glossary. Ann also extracted samples of fibers for examination and identification using a binocular microscope and substantiated the analysis of embroidery stitches. In spite of divisions of labor that evolved as the project developed, our working methods, intellectual engagement, and interactive interpretive discussions have resulted in what can only be described as a collaborative endeavor.

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5 Sharon Littlefield, curator, and Keelan Loftin, assistant, provided historical information derived from their perusal of archival records and photographs at Shangri La and at Duke Farms, as well as from collection records on site. Maja Clark, objects technician, helped formulate further questions, pertinent to the final report.
Recognizing the historical significance of the collection, and the quality of individual specimens, we sought to document each of the fifteen suzanis and nine related textiles in Doris Duke’s collection. Through visual examination, narrative descriptions, macro- and micro-photographic documentation, and analyses of weave structure, yarn preparation, and stitches, we came to new and unexpected understandings of these materials.

Figure 7 (left). Suzani, Bukhara region (Nurata?), 18th century or earlier; cotton warp and weft, balanced plain weave ground, embroidered (chain stitch, metallic wrapped cotton); silk embroidery (chain stitch and variations; Bukhara couching, Bukharan stitch, simple couching, satin stitch), 85.1. Photo by A. Perlman.

Figure 7 (right). Suzani, Bukhara region (Nurata?), 85.1, on display in foyer. Photo by Carol Bier.
Photographs, courtesy of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Archives.

Initially, we sought to undertake full analysis of these embroidered textiles, providing narrative descriptions, structural analysis of ground weaves and patterning techniques, analyses of fibers and their preparation. For example, for the suzani illustrated in figures 7-9, we anticipated that it would be sufficient to document a plain weave ground embroidered in chain stitch using a cotton yarn plied with a metallic wrapped strip (see Fig. 8a-b), with embroidered motifs using ten distinct colors of silk (Fig. 9). But we began to recognize that some of the colors were variegated, and that the same types of stitches were used in different ways (figs. 8c, 9). The chain stitch of the ground might be arranged in parallel rows, or in concentric contouring, and arranged in the same direction or opposing directions (figs. 8c, 9); stitches used for the motifs might serve
as fillers, creating color fields, or for outlines in a linear fashion (Fig. 9). Or color might be used to highlight. In each variation, the three-dimensional structure of the stitch would catch light in a different way, contributing both to a sense that many more colors were present, and to overall visual interest.

![Figure 9 (left). Detail, 85.1: chain stitch of ground and Bukharan couching of motifs.](image1)

![Figure 9 (right). Detail, 85.1: chain stitch of ground and Bukharan couching of motifs.](image2)

Photos by A. Perlman, courtesy of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Archives.

As we attempted to document ground fabric, yarns, stitches, designs, colors, and symmetries, we realized that with three sets of trained eyes, we observed differently, and we startled ourselves sharing what we saw.

Through discussion and shared observation, our analysis yielded a collective understanding that transformed our collective vision, leading to a body of data and analysis that distinguishes our work from that of others who preceded us in the study of suzanis. From the standard categories of materials, stitches, motifs, and colors, each treated discretely, we began to recognize that variations in stitch type, size, placement, orientation and density, combined with materials to affect the play of light on our perception of color. We came to understand that catching the light is clearly an intention of the design and construction of these suzanis.

We began to recognize that what seemed to be conceptually discrete categories were interrelated in ways we had not anticipated. Although documentable as separate entities – materials, stitches, motifs, and colors are, in fact, relational. They do not function independent of one another, but rather they are interdependent upon one another in ways that affect our perception. Color, stitch, and motif interact with one another and work together to define the visual appearance of the whole, affecting one another in ways that resist easy classification. This seemingly simple, even obvious, observation was quite startling to each of us.
From our work it became clear that the notation of a single stitch type with variations, as is mentioned in several publications on suzanis, does not begin to convey the extraordinary ways by which a stitch type can be manipulated to affect motif and color by catching the light in different ways, changing the visual qualities of the object in different circumstances and throughout the day. In the fifteen suzanis of Doris Duke’s collection, we identified only three stitch types – chain stitch (which is a looped stitch), satin stitch, and couching (Fig. 11). Although the stitch types are few, the range of variation is vast.

Each stitch type had many variations in form. Furthermore, stitches can be grouped together in different ways to affect design and our perception of color (Fig. 10). Chain stitch or Bukharan couching, for example, can be used as a filler stitch; that is, to fill a shape, creating a color field, or it might be used to outline a motif containing a color field or fields, or it could be used for borders, to contain multiple motifs within another shape, to provide for the overall organization of space. The actual journey of the needle, while structurally identifiable as a chain stitch, might show many possible variations. For chain stitch, the journey of the needle on the face of the fabric and its return might be in the same puncture, which is possibly indicative of tambour work for which an embroidery frame is used, or it might be narrow, as for a standard chain stitch, or wide, as for an open chain or ladder stitch. The stitches used as fillers could be arranged in rows, or in concentric circles (moving in either clockwise or counter-clockwise directions, or both), or in contours. Contouring, for example, might bring out an illusion of three-dimensionality in the
form of a petal or leaf. Placing stitches in different directions, and grouping them in various ways catches the light differently.

For satin stitch, we observed a straight satin stitch (in long and short forms), a slanted satin stitch (grouped to form a row, each stitch oblique in relation to the ground weave), encroaching satin stitch (in which the yarn of one stitch is penetrated by the needle carrying the yarn of the next stitch), and a double running stitch (resulting in a reversible appearance. In one large suzani, although there is only satin stitch and the overall appearance is uniform from a distance, all of these variations are present (Fig. 12).
In brief summary, we observed that what we perceive as color in embroidery is not equivalent to the number of colors of embroidery yarn used to make the stitches. A single color yarn could be used to create various color effects, depending not only on the color and visibility of ground, but also on the orientation of the stitch, its placement and grouping, make-up of the yarn, and variations in the form of the stitch. In each of the suzanis we examined, even those in which only one stitch type is evident, embroiderers seemed to use these techniques for different effects, with the intention of changing our perception of color, creating the perception of much greater polychromy than we might anticipated merely from a count of colors of embroidery yarn. The creative variations in the use of stitches involved many decisions on the part of the embroiderer as to stitch placement, direction, and sequence. The technical variety and skill of the embroiderer is used to create various and complex effects such as perceived depth of a third dimension, a sense of flow, rhythm, and movement.

**Conclusion**

Once we had identified the relational aspects of fiber, stitch, motif and color, our eyes were continually drawn to the playfulness in catching the light. Doris Duke seemed to respond especially to this aspect of playfulness in her choice of how and where to place suzanis throughout her home.

The data we collected is analytical and documentary; there is far more time needed for its thorough interpretation and synthesis to comprehend what we have observed. The data needs to be shared and examined, and to be pored over by others. Traditionally this is handled through publication and scholarship, efforts that rely upon patronage for funding to support collaborative work and preparation for publication. We need to sit together and share what we have done, examine more carefully the macro- and micro-photographs, and verbally explain to each other what they document so that we individually, and others, may understand what we have attempted to elicit and capture. Each of the textiles we studied is a monument unto itself, a virtuoso performance of stitchery and understanding on the part of the women who embroidered these objects. Through our research we can push the boundaries of how we understand these extraordinary embroidered textiles as products of human skill and ingenuity working with simple materials in creative ways.