Flora and Fiber in the Collection of the Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts

by Keidra Daniels Navaroli

The use and depiction of plants spans millennia and cultures worldwide. These images represent iconographic traditions shaped by societal values and transformed by shifting cultural influences. The Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts at the Florida Institute of Technology connects people to the communicative power of textiles, highlighting the often-neglected stories embedded in the surface of carefully crafted fabrics. My curatorial research is concerned with the complex relationships of global textiles and explores how we contextualize these objects in frameworks that educate and engage audiences.

From their ability to visually inspire iconography to their use as raw material for hand weaving and dyeing, plants have a unique relationship to the creation and adornment of textiles across the globe. This essay features selections from the Center’s permanent collection—focusing on objects from Asia that highlight the influence of modernization and gender politics in the exchange and collection of floral-themed material.

Haori, Japan, c. 1920–30s, cotton exterior, heavy weave, hand painted, dip dyed, silk interior, 40.25” x 47.25”. Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts at Florida Tech, Melbourne, Florida. Gift of Jane Francoeur.
**Going Global**

The industrial age revolutionized almost every aspect of early modern life. Art and design of the period were positioned in direct response to the dynamic changes occurring both within communities and abroad. The Center has explored this connection by presenting textiles that reflect the public and media's fascination with a newly expanding global culture.

The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of momentous change in Japanese society. In the decades following the forced opening of its borders in the mid-nineteenth century, Japan had become a growing presence in the global market, participating in numerous exhibitions and world's fairs and showcasing its country's decorative arts, textiles and skilled artisans. Despite escalating military conflicts, Japan's government was eager to establish the nation as a world leader and global influencer.

Mass media and Western fashion greatly affected Japanese concepts of cultural identity and dress. The Japanese kimono would transcend its utilitarian function as clothing and become symbolic of nationalistic ideals—values marketed to female consumers. This is especially evident during the Taishō period (1912–1926), a time of prolific kimono production in Japan. Stylistic movements such as *Art Nouveau* and *Art Deco*, initially influenced by Asia, became reabsorbed by Japanese women eager to project modernity in their personal style while retaining tradition in their distinctive choice of clothing. Fashion, mass production and traditional techniques were often blended to form unique and boldly patterned kimono. The printed exterior of a *haori* (short kimono jacket) is decorated with abstracted peonies—symbolic of honor and good fortune—while its silk interior is hand painted in a more naturalistic, decorative tradition that dates to the country's Tokugawa era (1603–1868).

Kimono could also show the influence of several design styles. The organic arrangement of floral designs on this garment suggests the influence of Art Nouveau while the contrasting color arrangement reflects the blending of Art Deco. In addition, the surface is treated with traditional yuzen resist-dye application and gold leaf details.

**Women’s Work**

Although the commercial elements of trade and export were male-dominated arenas, a large percentage of the Center's textiles are the product of female labor. Their creation, production and design serve as a canvas for the expression of a unique visual language—one that, in its intended domestic setting, was communicated between loved ones, family and friends. These aspects are an important lens through which one must view even the most controversial objects.

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As their name implies, lotus shoes are tied to floral imagery and symbolism. In China, the lotus is a traditional Buddhist symbol of purity and piety—qualities that were valued in the dutiful wife and mother who embroidered shoes as part of her personal dowry or as gifts. Motifs often included symbols of good fortune, fertility, wealth, or success. The shoes are intricately embroidered with floral imagery including chrysanthemums and lotuses, collectively meant to bestow good fortune, blessing or honor on the wearer. Careful attention has been paid to both the surfaces and soles of the hand-made shoes.

Embroidery was a highly valued skill in Chinese society. Women would pass on coveted techniques, patterns, and design motifs
to their daughters, ensuring that a family’s legacy was also tied to the talent of its female members. As the practice of foot binding was outlawed, the portability of these objects and the appeal of their meticulous surface design led to their purchase and preservation in Western collections.

In Central Asia, the protective qualities of embroidered or embellished clothing and textiles were especially important during rites of passage—when individuals were thought to be more susceptible to malevolent forces. Floral motifs symbolically granted fertility, protection and blessing. The tulip for example, a wildflower that grows excessively in Central Asia, is a common sign of spring and abundance and would be incorporated on chyrpys meant for girls and new wives. Beyond their domestic function, clothing and textiles fulfilled a ritualistic purpose in the social and religious aspects of daily life. Floral iconography stitched onto dowry objects such as decorative suzanis were an important means of expression for young women and brides. Located along trade routes vital to both Europe and East Asia, Central- and South-Asian artisans had a significant impact on the iconography, fashion and textiles traded outside their communities. The portability of suzanis made them especially popular during and after Russia’s occupation of the region.

_Hanging (Suzani)._ Uzbekistan, c. nineteenth century, cotton, embroidered, 55" x 58". Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts at Florida Tech, Melbourne, Florida. Gift of William and Norma Canelas Roth.
Literally meaning “flower work,” a *phulkari* is a type of decorative shawl characterized by its extensive, embroidered surface design and stitching technique. Created by women for use in special occasions, *phulkari* designs may be figurative, floral, abstract or geometric and traditionally featured patterns learned from mothers and/or female elders. The production of phulkaris for domestic use and commercial export flourished from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century in the Punjab region of India and Pakistan.

India secured independence from Britain in 1947 when the country was divided along perceived religious lines into present day Pakistan and India. Political upheaval in the decades that followed critically affected the region’s material culture. By the mid twentieth century, many of these hand-crafted embroideries, traditionally kept as familial heirlooms, were destroyed, abandoned or sold (to collectors and museums), reshaping societal norms and the nature of long-held textile traditions.

**Curatorial Connections**

From a curatorial perspective, it is vital to provide a framework in which the visual stories of textiles can be understood and valued. Our exhibitions have explored the role of colonialism, immigration and marginalization to question divisions and provide a deeper context for art appreciation.

The universal nature of floral iconography reflects humanity’s shared desire to illustrate the world around us—environments that have served as sources of supernatural power and symbolism and as places of industrial and sociopolitical change. Creating appealing exhibitions and programs that offer unique opportunities for experiential learning and discovery in a non-traditional environment remains a goal for professionals like myself fascinated by the ways in which these textiles can decorate, innovate and inspire.

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**Shawl (Phulkari)**, Punjab, India, c. mid-twentieth century, cotton, silk, plain woven, satin stitched, cross stitched, hand sewn, 101" x 54". Ruth Funk Center for Textile Arts at Florida Tech, Melbourne, Florida. Gift of Ruth Funk.