

**Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices**  
**Dr. Rajarshi Sengupta**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IITK)**  
**Week – 05**  
**Lecture – 21**

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in week 5 of our course *Threads of Visual Exploration*. This week we will be talking about Embroidered Narratives and that means that this week's focus will remain on Embroidery and then what does embroidery mean, how it is different from the other kind of textiles we have studied. After this week we will slowly get into the thematics will slightly change, it will not remain on the material focused but it will be more kind of like I mean understanding that what happened at particular point in time. Then how those techniques and then .... practices [how] they became .... document for particular point in time. .... how do we understand that their larger .... relevance in the society, culture and as well as in contemporary art. So, this week will be almost the last week for our discussion on the technique based or sort of like I mean particular focus based studies which pre-date the colonial period. So, of course we have a lot of material which perhaps come from contemporary times or like from the colonial period but we are not specifically looking at the colonial history as such.

☰ Lecture 21 : Characteristic Features of Embroidery

**Week 5**

**Embroidered Narratives**

Embroidery on textiles as a way of narrating and overwriting stories

Kashmir shawls, rumals of Chamba and kantha quilts of Bengal and their allied practices

Needle of embroidery as a tool for drawing and writing

Workmanship, domesticity and textiles



Source: <https://www.phila.gov> between motifs create a ripple effect, characteristic of the traditional *Kantha*. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection. 2019. Image: <https://bit.ly/3xogAnM>

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So, let us come back to the topic that we are going to discuss in this week and that is the embroidered narrative. So, embroidered narrative is something in which like we will be covering a number of subtopics and the subtopics will start with embroidery on textile as a way of narrating and overwriting stories. Now it might be interesting that to just to note that I mean what do I mean by a narrative in this case? or if there is a way of narrating stories then what do I mean by that? So, in terms of embroidery that there are certain things we find that to be essential and that would be one thing would be a needle. So, needle can be anything it can be a minute needle, it can be a super fine one, it can also be something that is much more broader, and then like I mean a thick one, and so it kind of like we can see that I mean there are many kinds of needles which are involved and then with those things different kind of purposes are fulfilled from different kind of visual effects are achieved. So, with that, what we see here in this case that I mean when I say that building a narrative is something by that I mean that there is already a surface or there is already a base and on the top of that one is using needle and yarn or thread to sort of like I mean make the embroidery and making narrative on the top of it. So, this is and this is something we can also see that I mean how this might come slightly closer to the other kind of exercises. So, for example, in terms of writing, in terms of drawing and painting in which we see that I mean there is already a surface on the top of that one is adding the layers on the top of it. By layers I mean that I mean that can be writing that can be any kind of visual exploration, that can be collage and everything else. So, similarly in terms of embroidery we do see that I mean there is already a surface and that is the fabric or there can be multiple layers of fabric and on the top of that one is ....using a needle and thread for sort of like I mean piercing through this surface and making those linear forms through which like the narratives are created. Now in this case, narrative can be something that is not just depicting a particular kind of story. We have also gone through certain kind of ideas that how narrative can mean something that is not just figurative narration but any kind of motifs and a constellation of different motifs is also a narrative. Whether that is geometric, whether that is floral, vegetal or figurative. So, those kind of aspects we can also see very well in the case of embroidery as well.

So, in what are the other things we find in this case that, for embroidery we have that I

mean there are this trust to narrative is something that we find that sometimes it can be related to individual exploration, sometimes it can also be related to much more sort of a community focused work, and all those things are very much possible. So, for example, in the last week when we spoke about the Kalamkari making technique, so in Kalamkari even though there are master artisans in the workshops we do see that .... there is already a large group of people who are involved in making Kalamkari fabrics. So, for example, someone will be involved in washing, then dyeing, then like making the wood blocks and then printing and then washing again and so on. In terms of like hand drawn Kalamkari we have seen that how it is again like I mean the washers would do something and then there are people who would do the initial stages of preparing the fabric, then the drawer would draw, then there are also the mordent drawer who would apply mordant and then like the dyes would dye them. So, there are like many people who are involved in those kinds of textile making. Similarly, we can find that to be in silk weaving and so on. In terms of embroidery we see that I mean there are perhaps that I mean there is also something that is much more sort of individualized in which we see that I mean much more of the small scale working atmosphere is encouraged in embroidery making in which we find that can be in a workplace or that can be in the residential house. That either women or men would sit there, work on embroidered fabrics by themselves or it can also be part of like a larger community activity in which everyone sit together and work. So, all those different kinds of things we find that to be there in embroidery. That is the reason what happens that a lot of times since there is already a surface that is built and that is the fabric or as I have mentioned that there can be multiple layers of fabric and on the top of that one is doing embroidery) that is the reason there is always this tendency of sort of adding to the already existing narratives. So, in terms of that what I mean is that each and every fabric piece would have already a story of their making, their association and so on. Then when they are layered together or if there is a piece of fabric and then cotton yarn or silk yarn is used for like doing embroidery on the top of it, this is a way of overlapping narratives. It is a way of overlapping experience that happens in the act of embroidery; and happens in a very different way from how rocket weaving, plane weaving or dyeing must have worked.

Now with those I mean we will also be looking at a few region-specific embroidery techniques or like I mean their larger significances. So, for example we will be looking at the embroidered Kashmir shawls. So, just to make it very clear that there are different kinds of Kashmir shawls, there are like tapestry woven (like the twill tapestry woven Kashmir shawls) and so on or like I mean those fine plain Pashmina Kashmir shawls. But the thing is that we are talking about here very specifically the embroidered Kashmir shawls which would come into the practice by sometime in the 18th century. Then we will also look at the rumals of Chamba and both Chamba and Kashmir these places are nearby and in that case, we will also see that I mean what kind of drastic difference the Chamba rumals would have and how that differs from like the Kashmir shawls. We will not specifically do a comparison between Kashmir shawls and Chamba rumals but one can see that I mean how this region-specific embroidery styles and their practices that sort of chart a different trajectory altogether. And then we will also be looking at the Kantha quilts of Bengal. Of course, the Kantha quilts of Bengal are something which will be drastically different since in one hand if we are talking about northwestern India or Indian subcontinent and the Himalayan region. Then Kantha quilts are something which are made in the part of eastern India in Bengal (of course like I mean when I say Bengal it is not just the West Bengal but the undivided Bengal) and then what are their significances in the local life and how those are used, how those are utilized and how they were perhaps collected and so on. Now and when we will be looking at all those practices and then there will be several other practices we will look at in terms of some of the other utilitarian fabrics which involve embroidery and in all those cases for Kashmir shawls, for the rumals of Chamba, for Kantha quilts and the other textiles we will also be looking at them simultaneously with the other kind of visual representations. So, for example part of architecture, part of miniature paintings and so on to understand that I mean this kind of practices were not really developing in the void, they were not being exclusively developed by only a group of people and no one else. But it was something we can find that in which there are always those correlation between one practice with the other.

Yet the other thing we will also find is sort of to look into the understanding of technique and its impact on the artisan's mind perhaps or like I mean the makers psyche. That is to do with like I mean the little of embroidery as a tool for writing and drawing and this is something perhaps we can relate to the first topic that we sort of addressed and that is about narrating and overwriting stories. So, for this thing what we see that I mean using the needle of embroidery as a way of sort of .... making a narrative or perhaps that I mean the way we can see that how this needle of embroidery is sometimes used for making those lines or like a linear flow of a particular idea is something whether we can consider it as a similar way of writing, drawing and so on.

Now then we will also look into this other topic that .... concerns the ideas of workmanship, domesticity and textiles. Because in a lot of cases as I have already mentioned that embroidery can happen in an intimate scale; where the housewives, the homemakers they do the work in the afternoon after their household work and everything else. But also at the same time it can happen in an artisanal workshop where all men would work on embroidery. So, since like this kind of things happen in a lot of times we see that I mean there is a tendency towards associating embroidery with domesticity or many other kinds of textile making with domesticity and we will be looking into this trajectory to understand ... whether we can actually sort of associate a particular technique with the concepts of domesticity or workshop setting or should we be more fluid when we are sort of trying to associate one technique with the human conditions.

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Week 5

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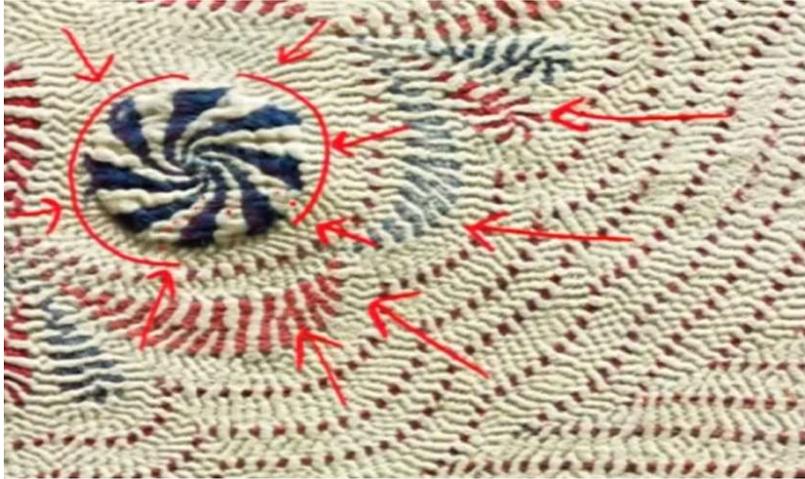


Stitches between motifs create a ripple effect, characteristic of the traditional *kantha*. Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Jill and Sheldon Bonovitz Collection

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So, with all those things I also just like to give a small introduction about the image that we have on screen and this image is something that we have here it's a detail from a Kantha quilt and that came from the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA). ... in this one what we see .... of course for Kantha what happens that we see the layers of fabric which are put together and then this simple running stitch in which we see the needle and the thread that sort of like penetrates through the layers of fabric and creates lines like this. That's because one part of the thread would go underneath the fabric surface and making only this parts visible on the top of it. That is how the running stitch is created and this is the running stitch we see all over in the Kantha quilt. So, for that what we see here that in Kantha usually like the same color like I mean if there is this white fabric that we see then white thread or unbleached thread is used for making the quilting and then on the top of that the other colors are used (and we will get into the details of how what kind of yarn or thread is used for making Kantha and so on). What I wanted to also talk about is that even though we are talking about simple running stitch but there even there we find that there are many different kinds of incorporating color or like even the gap between these stitches can make a huge difference. So, for example, the directional lines that we see in this cases and that sort of makes this ripple effect. ... it kind of like concentrates around this central medallion like structure and once it reaches this medallion like structure we see this running stitches they sort of disappear. .... then the gap between this running

stitches increases and that is how like I mean this plump kindly bulbous kind of area sort of emerges which is not emerging in the other parts of this Kantha. So, that's the reason



it's sort of like I mean gives almost this 3D or embossed kind of feeling in this ... medallion like space which is not there in the other part of the Kantha. So, all these different kind of possibilities can

happen even with a running stitch. ... that is the reason we need to understand that embroidery is something that is also it gives a huge ground for the makers to explore all these possibilities. Using like I mean for embroidery we do see that I mean even though the surface is built but it gives tremendous possibility for exploration to the makers to understand that I mean how the surface is there already and what different kind of surface texture can be created and how that can make a difference not only for the makers but also for the people who would be using them. So, with that I mean let us look into few of the other things.

So, for example that when we say that this particular kind of textile making that is

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**Weaving with extra weft and Embroidery: Why there is a difference?**

Right: Detail from Kantha. From: <https://tatter.org/events/kantha-2/>

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A video player interface showing a lecture titled "Lecture 21 : Characteristic Features of Embroidery". The video content displays two images: on the left, a traditional patterned textile with a repeating motif of figures and animals; on the right, a close-up of a textured Kantha embroidery with a red and white pattern. The video player includes standard controls like play/pause, volume, and a progress bar showing 14:55 / 28:11. A URL is provided at the bottom: <https://tatter.org/events/kantha-2/>.

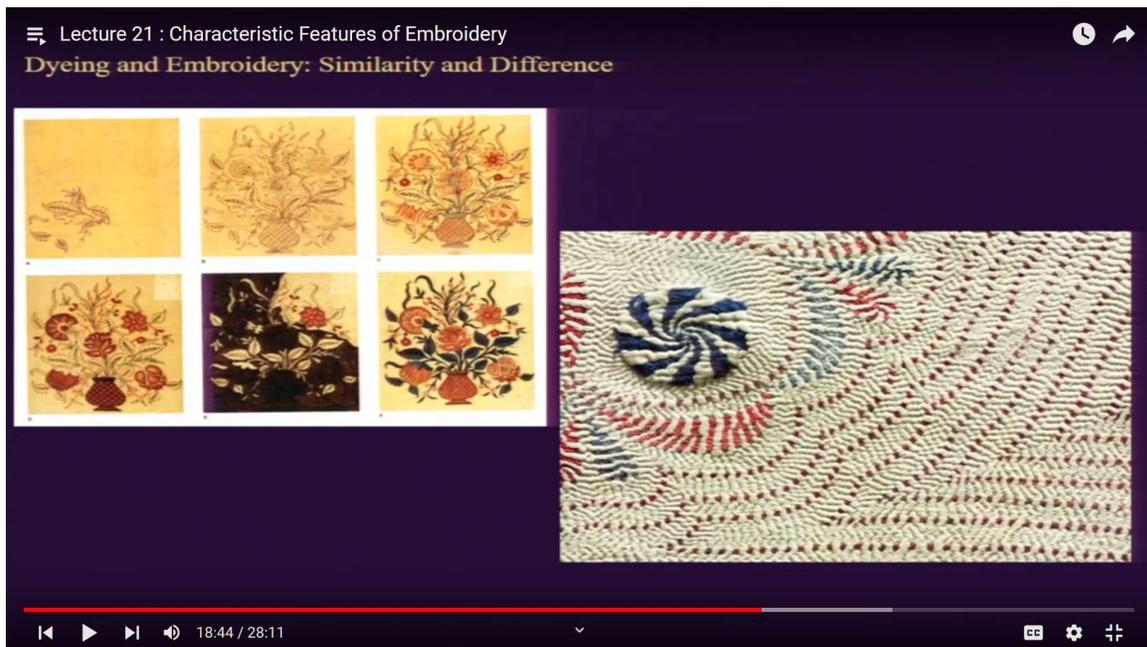
embroidery is there and in which like whether running stitch is used and different other kind of stitches are used then what is the difference between this kind of textile making with the other kind of textile makings that we have already looked at. So, for example, what we see that I mean weaving with the extra weft what happens in the brocade textile making or in Jamdani and so on and then we can understand that in that case we already have a warp, we already have a weft and then on the top of the weft the extra wefts are added for making this complicated patterns. So, and of course we have spoken about that I mean the more complicated textiles there are multiple warps which are added and then of course like multiple wefts are always added in this kind of brocaded textiles. So, for example, if you

think about it there is already a weft and then ... one is using weft on the top of it. So, it is already it is kind of like I mean addition to the warp and the weft.



... if we come back to embroidery there is already a surface that is built by warp and weft and then one is adding a needle and thread on the top of it for making all those patterns or quilting or whatever it is. So, in both these cases if like extra yarn is used on the warp and the weft then why there is a difference? So, the difference might be that in terms of like brocade making, in terms of Jamdani making and so on when the extra weft is added that time like the surface is still being built. So, it is not really like a pre-built surface on the top of that extra weft is used. The weft is there, the warp is there already in this constellation, on the top of that the extra weft is added, and then like I mean the weaver would be beating that and then adding like I mean the weft again. So, it is kind of like I mean it gets enmeshed into the making of this fabric itself, into the construction of this fabric. So, the fabric is not pre-constructed but it is in the process of construction and within which like this extra thread is added and then it becomes part of like I mean

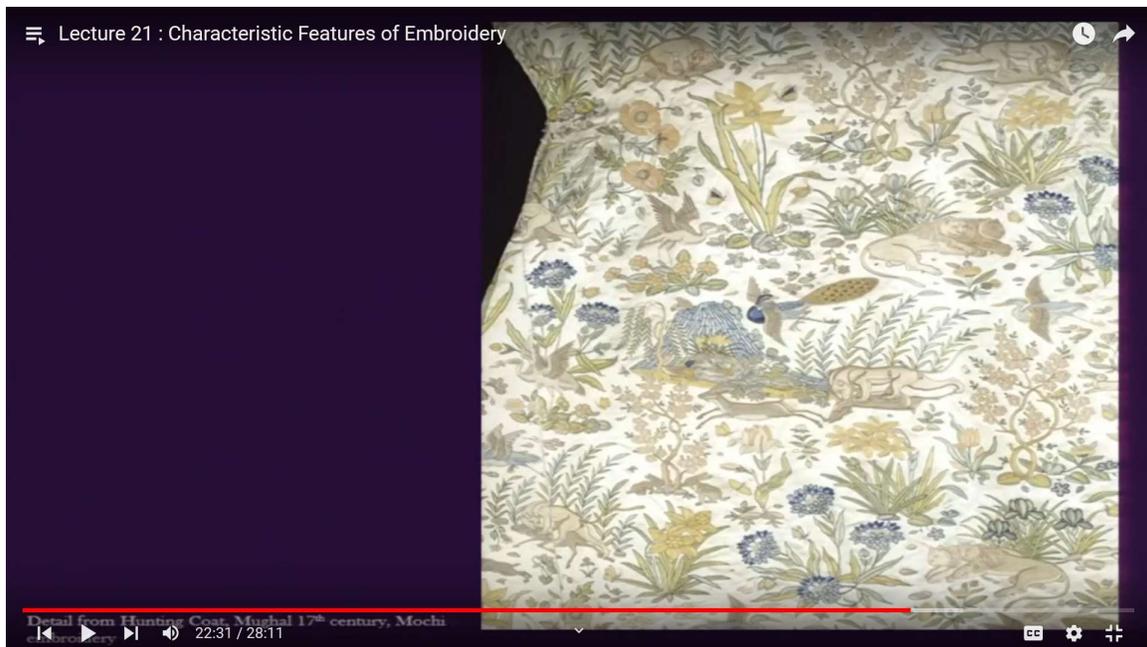
construction of this fabric. Whereas for embroidery what happens is the textiles are already constructed. So, for example, if we think about this image that we have on screen here on the right side ... it comes from a Kantha (it is a contemporary Kantha perhaps) and in which we see that I mean there is already this white surface that is there it is perhaps it is a worn out cloth. Then we find that I mean there are several layers of this kind of cloth and then those running stitches they sort of like make the of course like I mean they sort of like I mean bring all the other surfaces together and make it unified. But in this case, we see that I mean the construction is already there. The running stitches that is required here is not really meant to add to the construction, but perhaps strengthened the construction that is already there. And whereas for weaving we find that the extra weft is added during the construction. So, we need to sort of understand that the difference between this two is not just in terms of one is doing it in the loom, one is doing it in an intimate scale with a needle and a thread with a woven fabric. But it is also about, how the construction is done, and then like I mean if something that is adding to the construction or that is part of the construction of the fabric. So, construction is key to understand that I mean how the differences sort of play out between these two forms of textile making.



Now considering these two things if we think about it that I mean how the construction

and of course like I mean this exploration of the surface and so on this ideas work out for brocade making or like extra weft weaving and then also for embroidery. Then we can see that I mean whether there are similarities and differences between dyeing and embroidery practices. Because one thing for sure if we go with like I mean the thread of the earlier discussion about a pre constructed fabric, in this case we see for dyeing especially for the kind of Kalamkari dyeing that we have looked at so far. So, in that case we see that there is already a constructed surface on the top of that one is adding the layers or like one is adding the lines on the top of it for making the outlines, the images and slowly adding mordant and everything else. So, it is there in terms of how the construction is already there it is like a pre-made textile on the top of that one is adding. So, in that case we can see certain similarities between embroidery practice and dyeing technique that how in both cases there is already the pre-made textile and then on the top of that someone is adding layers on the top of it. So, but then the difference between them would be that when we see that there are those dye material which are added on the fabric surface it usually penetrates into the core of the fibers and (that is how like I mean it sort of stays) or like for the mordant when the mordant is applied on the fabric surface it sort of like I mean creates this receptive layer on the top of the fiber and which sort of like I mean absorbs this color on the fiber so, it is a way in which we see that the absorption of the color it is sort of like I mean becomes one with the fiber of the textile. So, after dyeing there is no distinction between like what is been dyed and then like I mean what was the pre-made textile. So, it is sort of like I mean the dyeing textile they sort of become the one. In terms of the embroidered fabric what happens that of course we see there is a pre-made textile and then the needle penetrates through the layers of the textile for making the embroidered pattern on the top of them. But the embroidered threads that we find they still remain distinctive. So, for example, if we see in this area or in like this area so we see that each and every prick that is made by those the needle and then like I mean each and every yarn that sort of like I mean passes through this fabric surface are distinctive. It is not something that we can see that had completely got enmeshed in the layer of the fabric but they still hold that distinctive identity even though now they are part of this fabric construction but still they are like distinctive from like I mean the fabric which was existing earlier. So, this idea that we see here that I mean even though in both

cases we have like this pre-made textile on the top of that one is adding these layers but then, when we see that I mean there are those kind of issues in terms of how the dye stuff that penetrates into the fiber and becomes one with the textile; whereas for embroidery the additions the addition of the threads they always remain distinctive in terms of like I mean what is the fabric surface and what all extra threads which are added on the top of it for embroidery are always different from each other. So, those similarities and differences we can see in terms of like constructing the surface also like I mean retaining their distinctive identity. So, these are the kind of grounds we can find how we see this entire processes, they sort of unfold.



Now the thing is that I mean when we see embroidery now that we have looked into some of those basic differences between the other kind of textiles that we have studied so far that is brocade making or dyeing. So, in this case what happens we see that I mean in embroidered textiles there are a few things we need to remember that I mean of course primarily we understand that embroidery is something that is done for beautification, embroidery is something that is done for ornamentation. Now we need to also think beyond these ideas that of course this is definitely for ornamentation But we also see that I mean an ornamentation as we have already mentioned it earlier in our one of our modules that I mean how Grever would be talking about ornamentation not only as a way

of just giving visual pleasure but something that is very much contextual to the making of this kind of objects. Now ornamentation if we see about it that I mean it is not just about in terms of like embroidery ornamentation is not its final goal. Sometimes embroidery also means that it is there for repair and repair is something we find that I mean one of these words so for example like Rafugari or like I mean this is something to do with mending and reusing something that if there is something that holds certain kind of value or like I mean we can see about this thing that in terms of embroidery if this making this meticulous motifs for this luxury textile is something that is there to be used by exclusive people. Then the Rafugari or like I mean this way of like reusing textile repairing them or mending them is something that is not just part of like I mean the day to day activities I mean not just part of like I mean beautification or like ornamentation but it is also very much part of the commoners practice in which we find that if there are limited textiles one has and then how to make use of them if they are being torn or if they are like I mean being used for several times. So, in those cases also we find that how embroidery as a mean of like I mean adding strength to the pre-existing textile is something that is crucial. So, in terms of like I mean the words that we find and also like I mean kind of ideas we see that it is not just there in terms of just the regular practice but it also comes in terms of how certain religious practices are related to using or reusing material stuff. So, we will get into that when we talk about Kantha and so on.

Now some of the words that we find those are used for embroidery for example like Alwan and that is which we see from like I mean this medieval Indo-Persian words and this terms which are used for textiles as historian Irfan Habib also sort of noted and in this cases we see that this word Alwan is something that comes synonymous with embroidered cloth that is used in Gujarat or in Kashmir. ... so in this cases we see that I mean there is various kinds of like I mean stitches and various kinds of work that we find them to be used. So, if one is like to use this running stitches for stability or making those linear flow of the pattern and then we also find chain stitch, satin stitch and so on for like I mean different kind of purposes to be served. So, for example, this famed hunting jacket or hunting coat (that we have from the Victoria and Albert Museum collection that we have already studied in the Mughal context) in which we see this particular kind of

embroidery technique that is used that is done perhaps by the Mochi community all male embroiders from Gujarat in the 17th century and perhaps something that is also related to the word Alwan that also which comes up in Irfan Habib's delineation. ... in this case what we see that I mean embroidery is very specifically used for making this embossed effect of these motifs. The motifs are not there which are merging into the background but they are almost like standing out and it's not just because of the tonal variation but once we go close to them the chain stitch is something that makes this figure almost like a low relief like and those are the kind of qualities that is possible in this kind of embroidery. So, for example, that surface building and then enhancing the surface. So, there are those kinds of aspects we need to remember when we are talking about embroidery.

So, with these things we also can see that how embroidery it sort of like charts a very different path from how brocaded textiles, woven textiles, dyed textiles and so on they would have. ... we'll get into the significance of this all these different kind of textiles and their social context in the next lecture. Thank you.