

Early 20th c. Head Cloths

Turkey

There are as many opinions about head coverings and their relationship to the censorship of women as there are wearers. Some see it as a male-imposed custom. Others enjoy wearing head coverings. First and foremost in the Koran, Allah tells believers that they should “lower their gaze and be modest,” and tells women that they “should draw their veils over their chests and not display their beauty except to their husbands, and fathers...(continue a list of family members who are permitted to view women)”. For Islamic feminists wearing the head scarf is not threatening because it is both an expression of personal faith, not domination, and they feel an advantage of being known for who they really are rather than being judged by their beauty or lack thereof. It is interesting to point out that in Turkey, today, women cannot wear headscarves in public buildings and government buildings such as schools and courtrooms.

Regardless of the opinions on either side and beyond the questions of subservience, the execution of exquisite compositions is a young girl's expression of her feelings, hopes and wishes for which there is no other sociably acceptable verbal outlet. These head cloths are worked in counted and pulled thread on loosely woven cotton and are designed by a maker conscious of how they manipulate traditional designs.

EGA collection 357 above; 00211 below

Pair of Tunic Panels

Middle Eastern

In the West questions arise about the dress of women in the Middle East. "Don't they get hot?" is somewhere at the top of the list. The question is based largely on the assumption that their modest coverings are heavy, though actually the fabric is light and blocks the sun. But Middle Eastern garments and embroidery were not always light. Although not as common today as it was up until the last century, heavy embroidery was applied to the front of the bodice of Middle Eastern garments. Such embroidery was worn to protect this specific and significant part of the body—for it is recognized as the source of life for offspring. The layers and abundant zigzagging lines of embroidery ward off the evil eye and uphold of commands of Allah. Although such heavy embroidery would not be comfortable to wear in this region, women were nevertheless tolerant of this dress.

The pair of embroidered panels of the 19th century consists of coarsely woven cotton fabric that is couched with twisted cotton thread of reds—the most powerful protective color. Metal tubes were applied in the border with fringe

EGA collection 00164 a, b

Early 20th c. Turkish Fragment

Turkey

A result of their Nomadic past and wrapping their possessions in textiles for journeys, Turkey has a rich textile tradition and, even today, households contain a large number of textile items. Turkish embroideries are made commercially and domestically and thus are made by both men and women. Women of a harem would gather; the younger occupied with making headscarves, towels, sheets and quilts to decorate their nuptial chambers while the older would make goods for children. A girl's embroideries mirror all the desirable characteristics expected of her: patience, perseverance, diligence, beauty, and skill. A girl's embroidery indicated her ability and motivation as a wife and she was judged by potential in-laws according to her work.

This fragment is a lovely example of artistry. The design and execution of embroidery is very fine. It is comprised of silk and metal threads on fine gauze fabric. Valued for its exquisiteness, the piece was purchased by Gen. Sir John Maxwell, pre-WWI, when he was governor general of Egypt. .

Cecile Carver donor

EGA collection 00335

Bedsread or Wrapping Cloth Fragments

Middle East or Central Asia (Ottoman-style)

Ottoman-style textiles are methodically designed and embroidered according to the function of the piece. For instance, towels and napkins were free of embroidery, except for the band of embroidery on each end so that one could wipe the hands on the non-embroidered area and still appreciate the beauty of the embroidered border. While mirror covers usually did not have embroidered borders, bed covers and wrapping cloths most often did. While Ottomans loved floral designs and the designs are found on most all textiles, each type of flower was preferred for a particular object. Young girls would embroider tulips, the flower of fertility, on bed covers for their nuptial chamber. The favored hyacinth and pomegranate were embroidered on wrapping cloths.

A girl's duty was to impress her future in-laws with her extensive use of design and well as the execution of embroidery. Upon her acceptance as a suitable wife, gifts would be wrapped in wrapping cloths and sent to the house of her fiancé and future in-laws. These two fragments from the early 19th century are bordered and are thus either from a bed cover or a wrapping cloth. Stylized flowers are worked on linen in silk thread with outlines in ladder stitch, tendrils and stems; and heavy chain Bokhara couching.

Mary Gosvenor Ellsworth donor

EGA collection 00091

Widows of Bangladesh

Flora the Embroider

Bangladesh

In Bengali society in Bangladesh, widows are outcasts. A woman is stripped of her place in society, and most often loses her rights to her husband's house. Her father's household has no duty to take responsibility for her and if she is childless or has only daughters, she faces poverty, isolation, and harassment. Even today widows are accused of being responsible for their husband's death, excluded from religious and social life, and face severe abuse. To escape such treatment widows often become the responsibility to refugee camps and here generate income from their embroidery.

This surface-embroidered picture was created by the widows in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. It is an art form known as *nokshi kantha* or "quilted design," entitled "Flora the Embroiderer." The elaborate design embroidered on a silk ground depicts Bangladeshi woman seated at interior doing embroidery. This embroidered picture clearly depicts an ideal life: one of water, plant life, ornaments, and luxuries amid their reality of daily water sanctions, drought, plain living quarters, and displacement.

EGA Collection 00468

Liesl Cotta De Souza

Village Belle

Goa, India

Freedom of expression means that every person has the right to hold opinions and has the right to express them. While artists in the United States have enjoyed freedom of expression, artists in other regions of the world are not as fortunate. Many are in exile in countries like the US and the UK. Artists in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India blur the line between social censorship and self-censorship. Like some women who have left their homeland and discussed the oppressive nature of head coverings, some artists have relocated and insist that religious and political constraints have not allowed them freedom of expression. Likewise, as some women have insisted that head coverings are advantageous, some artist self-censor or prefer to reflect on censorship or silence, viewing it as non-threatening.

Liesl Cotta De Souza is an artist from Goa, India who prefers to reflect silence in her work. The Goan motto: "*Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava*" (Equal Respect for All Religions) reflects the city's openness to expression. Not bound by censorship, Liesl commits herself to depicting solitude and silence in respect to emotion. Her needle painted picture is an image of a young woman, wearing a long veil and typical Indian costume, and seated on her knees and crouching over with her face hidden in her handkerchief.

EGA Collection 00833