

## **Running Stitch: The NGO-generated Kantha**

**Kolkata, West Bengal,**

Once created in the privacy of Bengali homes, poured over by candlelight after the day's domestic duties, traditional Nakshi kantha quilts serve a variety of functions as prayer mats, commemorative articles, and ceremonial items. Constructed from the thread of recycled saris, the stitches which bind the kantha's cotton layers together also bind Bengal's past to its present-- constructing a literal and metaphorical narrative thread that charts 200 years of the daily lives, social structures, religious beliefs, mythologies, and cultural convictions of the Bengali people.<sup>i</sup> <sup>ii</sup> Yet following the Partition of 1947 and the ensuing conflicts, kanthas all but disappeared from national consciousness. After the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), the textiles emerged in a new context—as marketable decorative goods.<sup>iii</sup> Having uncovered a commercial demand for the quilt, a series of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in West Bengal and Bangladesh began re-training a new generation of Bengali women to utilize the kantha to economically support themselves.<sup>iv</sup> No longer a personal or practical expression of Bengali culture, commercial kantha aesthetics are now decorative objects; they invoke and groom the folkloric motifs of their predecessors—at once referencing and 'perfecting' this domestic craft with new methods of production and commercialization.<sup>v</sup> Contemporary kanthas thus transform folk culture into a readily and publicly accessible record of women's shifting societal roles.

My research seeks to examine this private-public, personal-commercial trajectory through the lens of the kantha's art historical development, addressing the quilt's history, social implications and evolving expressive potential. Though contemporary art historical texts dismiss the kantha's commercialized iterations, my work will investigate how the contemporary kantha might be read as an equally potent symbol for contemporary West Bengal. Utilizing interviews and site visits with three NGO's based in West Bengal, my work will address: How do NGOs utilize the kantha to activate women within West Bengal's economy? Does this mobilization confer meaning upon this traditional folk object as it transcends the personal, private realm to become a publicly commodified good? Is this

trajectory itself indicative of an increasingly, globalized West Bengal (and thus, is the textile equally relevant today as it was during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—a time of burgeoning nationalist sentiments)? Can this changed meaning be read in contemporary kantha aesthetics? Considering both the opportunities forged for women with the commercialization of the kantha, and the artistic or expressive compromises made to attain this economic success, my project will analyze the way in which contemporary production and design methods support a historically-referential iconography that records Bengal's shifting economic and artistic structures.

Working closely with my collaborator, documentarian Dustin Neiderman, our research will provide objective information about the manufacturing of kanchas, will generate an multi-dimensional art historical platform for understanding their complex position in contemporary society, and will ultimately produce a textual analysis and a documentary that will both invoke and parallel the historically reflexive documentary mode of the kantha itself.

### **The Kantha in Text: Art historical analyses, and their economic bias**

Headed by scholar-collectors Gurusaday Dutt and Stella Kramrisch, the kantha became a subject of art historical consideration in the early twentieth century.<sup>vi</sup> After the textile's NGO-generated revival, this academic interest was renewed—though the revival itself remained outside of art historical interests. Beginning with Niaz Zaman's seminal 1981 work *The Art of Kantha Embroidery*, post-revival texts have instead focused on establishing a vocabulary to resolve the textile into its production method, motifs, aesthetics (stitches, borders, size, shape), iconography, and functions.<sup>vii</sup> These works discuss the Nakshi Kantha primarily as a folkloric object, representative of Bengali religious and national identity.<sup>viii ix</sup> Zaman's book—last revised almost 20 years ago—remains the most comprehensive and judicious treatment of the Kantha revival. In detailing the development of three NGOs after the Liberation War, Zaman describes the NGO's attempt to economize and de-personalize the art of manufacturing kanchas through the specialization of workers, the use of embroidery hoops and pre-determined designs, and the employment of hybridized darning stitches.

Her work set up the creative-versus-contrived disjunction between traditional and contemporary kanthas, which has justified their continued dismissal from art historical analyses.<sup>x xi xii xiii</sup> More recent literature, which touts early kanthas as “repositories of memories of particular makers, givers, recipients, and owners,” echoes Zaman's emphasis on the personal creativity of traditional kanthas in contrast to their regulated contemporary iterations—minimizing the kantha's role as a tool (and symbol for) the economic liberation of women.<sup>xiv xv</sup> In her essay “From Rags to Riches: Valuing Kanthas in Bengali Households,” scholar Pika Ghosh alludes to this shortcoming, stating that an examination of “the significant changes arising from the newer initiatives spearheaded primarily by Non-governmental Organizations (NGO’s) would certainly inflect and enrich this discussion, if not take it in entirely different directions.”<sup>xvi</sup>

In addition to its light art historical treatment, the kantha has also been excluded from a robust body of literature addressing Indian craft industries. These studies encompass the commodification and globalization of crafts more broadly, the evolution of folk culture in relation to capitalism and national identity, and the socio-economic and gender politics of Indian textile industries; they ultimately assess crafts from an economic and anthropological perspective, rather than a solely aesthetic one.<sup>xvii xviii xix</sup>  
<sup>xx</sup> <sup>xxi</sup> Given the kantha's role in economically activating women, and its position as a commodified folk object, the contemporary quilt deserves examination—from art historical, anthropological, and economic viewpoints. My project will combine aspects of these cultural-material analyses with traditional art historical analyses, synthesizing perspectives from a variety of disciplines; it will both expand the art historical dialogue surrounding kanthas, and provide a historical case study that traces the Bengali path to modernity.

## **Methodology**

In creating a comprehensive and multi-disciplinary assessment of the contemporary kantha, I will first explore physical examples of the textile, preserved and maintained by institutions (such as the Gurusaday Museum, the Ashutosh Museum, and the Indian Museum). I will use these museum

collections primarily as visual resources, to aid in understanding the aesthetics of the traditional textiles in preparation for contextualizing their contemporary position.

Yet the bulk of my research will concentrate on a series of interviews and site visits with two NGO's based in Kolkata (Self-Help Enterprise [SHE] and Art Illuminates Mankind [AIM]) and one based in Murshidabad district, north-west of Kolkata (Street Survivor's India/Katna's Kantha). These organizations have been selected to serve as case studies of West Bengal's kantha-creating NGOs, and attest to the highly varied production, design, and marketing of contemporary kanthas.<sup>xxii</sup> In our email contact with each NGO, we have received enthusiastic responses and commitments to help in our research. Kolkata itself is a logical base for our studies. As an enormous metropolis, it provides fertile ground for studying the modernization of Bengali culture, with access to a number of useful cultural resources (museums, universities, the Craft Council of West Bengal, NGO headquarters, and storefronts where kanthas are sold). As SHE, Street Survivor's India, and AIM employ women in rural villages, the organizations selected will also provide ample opportunity for studying another important facet of Bengal's identity and artistic practices: the rural-urban dichotomy.<sup>xxiii</sup> As a component of my research, I will travel to these locations to interview and observe kantha embroiderers. This urban-rural comparison will provide me with the chance to study kanthas against India's multiplicity of settings, and against West Bengal's evolution towards modernity.

My interviews of the administrators and embroiderers will be semi-structured. This form of interview style combines the conversational aspects of ethnographic interviews with the directed style of structured political science interviews; it will thus allow me to obtain a range of factual and opinion-based information.<sup>xxiv</sup> As the interviewees will be treated as elite interview subjects with expertise in their field, they will be awarded respect and allowed to speak extensively about the topics which they themselves designate important. Due to the nature of this approach and the broad range of subjects, the interviews and site visits will retain a degree of flexibility. (Methodology and questions have been approved by the Human Subjects Research Review Committee). The interviews will be conducted in

English at the NGO headquarters, as contact with each NGO—and each NGO's web-based identity—has been established in English. However, the subject pool spans a spectrum of potential socio-economic positions and educational experiences, and interview questions also will be prepared in Bengali. Based on the advice of the NGO's, interviews of embroiderers will be conducted in Bengali with the aid of an interpreter.

These site visits and interviews will aid in detailing the design and production process for each NGO's kanthas, and will begin to generate a body of information that is not presently available. The interviews will also yield information about each organization's objectives with respect to women's economic liberation and the preservation of the kantha. Combined with information regarding women's wages, working hours, and working conditions, the study will begin to gather information that suggests each NGO's true ability to activate women in the public economic sector. Yet while these economic factors will contribute to my analysis of contemporary kanthas, my study will not be constructed as an economic assessment. Rather, it will introduce the evolving economic potential of kanthas as a central component of their meaning, perhaps providing the foundation for further art historical and economic studies. To synthesize this economically minded information with the historic, artistic, and cultural significance of the kantha, I will also ask all interviewees to define and describe kanthas and kantha aesthetics, and to detail their experience with the textile prior to professionally working with them. A copy of these interview questions is available in the last section of this proposal.

As a final component of my research, I will visit the stores where these kanthas are sold and marketed. This will allow me to document and analyze the contemporary kantha's public presentation. This information will be explored in contrast to the traditional kantha's private use as a gift and heirloom object commemorating highly personal 'life-cycle occasions.'<sup>xxxv</sup> By detailing the specific artisanal, design, presentation, and marketing practices of contemporary kantha creation, I will develop a body of knowledge that will parallel the detailed understanding of traditional kanthas.

This project comprehensively integrates my academic art historical interests with my desire to explore art as an active agent for social change. Thus far, my art historical coursework and undergraduate research experience have prepared me for the task of working independently, and have honed my textual and visual analysis skills. The courses “Buddhist Art History,” and “Art in L.A.: 1945-1980,” have been instrumental in my ability to conduct art historical research and visually analyze my subjects. For instance, “Buddhist Art History” provided me with an excellent basis for examining and interpreting South Asian narrative traditions, and my final paper for the class was based on the analysis of a thangka quilt—a Tibetan religious textile. In my “Art in L.A.” course, I explored the Assemblage technique in relation to sculptural and filmic representations of Watts, and the subsequent creation of space and identity. As this research is inherently concerned with the expression of site specific identity, and its interaction with the physical community, it provided an analytical experience that will parallel the identity-discussion of my proposed research in West Bengal.

Two summers of Undergraduate Research have also developed my ability to pose research questions, and devise strategies for solving them independently. After my first summer working on a statistical analysis project for the Teachers + Occidental = Partnership in Science Program (2010), I crafted an art historical project which comparatively analyzed a postwar housing development in Los Angeles with the ideologies of the modernist Le Corbusier (2011). My second project sought to expand the art historical discourse by considering temporary, emergency housing, and generating new comparisons for examination. This project has a similar mission in mind, and, like architectural research, entails the synthesis of knowledge from a variety of disciplines.

These experiences have shaped and refined my own skill set, and have equally contributed to my conviction in and desire to study art which effects changes in the community. Yet no one experience has allowed me to explore the arts as they being actively enacted to effect social change. The Bengali kantha, which began as a venue for women's personal expression, and transformed into a venue for women's economic advancement, fulfills my objectives as an art historian. Researching and

will chart an actively evolving folk art form; furthermore, we will record information valuable to the NGO's themselves—who benefit from both consideration by the art historical community (which will aid in expressing the importance of their work and product), and objective third-party consideration and documentation (which may aid in assessing their own approach against the approach of other organizations). *Running Stitch: The NGO-generated Kantha Revival* would provide an incredible opportunity to both refine my current skills as a researcher, and develop new ones. The kantha has inspired generations of Bengali women, and art historians; to be a part of understanding and preserving this great record of national history and identity speaks to all of my academic and personal interests—and truly excites my passion for continued research.

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<sup>i</sup> Darielle Mason, "Background Texture: Lives and Landscapes of Bengal's Embroidered Quilts," in *Kantha: the embroidered quilts of Bengal*, ed. Darielle Mason (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>ii</sup> An important note about the regional and religious identities of kanthas: Kanthas are a domestic art form that took root in Bengal well before the country was partitioned. Thus kantha traditions exist today in both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Scholars typically discuss kanthas as embodying a "bengali" identity, in place of referring to the more recent nationalistic divisions. Furthermore, the nationalistic movement represented by early scholars—such as Gurusaday Dutt—is linked to a Bengali (rather than Bangladeshi) sense of identity. Viewing contemporary kanthas—which have been revived on both sides of the border between Bangladesh and West Bengal—thus poses a particularly difficult question with regards to understanding "national" identity. Furthermore, while many kanthas depict overtly Hindu stories, they are typically thought of as a hybridized form of religious expression. Scholar Pika Ghosh describes kanthas as expressing "the beliefs and practices shared among Hindus and Muslims."

Pika Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal: Kantha Imagery and Regional Identity," in *Kantha: the embroidered quilts of Bengal*, ed. Darielle Mason (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press, 2009) 81.

<sup>iii</sup> Zaman, Niaz, *Art of Kantha Embroidery* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1993): 139-141.

<sup>iv</sup> Zaman, *Art of Kantha*, 141-143.

<sup>v</sup> Prior to this commercial adaptation as a decorative object, kanthas existed solely for private, domestic use as prayer mats, commemorative articles, or ceremonial items.

Mason, "Background texture," 1-3.

<sup>vi</sup> Zaman, "Women's Voices," 116.

<sup>vii</sup> Other recent examples of kantha texts include Perveen Ahmad's *Aesthetics and Vocabulary of Nakshi Kantha* (1998), Asis K. Chakrabarti's *Kantha: The Traditional Art of the Women of Bengal* (2000), Mason et. al.'s *Kantha: the Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (2009), draw respectively from the Bangladesh National Museum, the Gurusaday Museum, and the Stella Kramrisch Collection/Jill and Sheldon Bonovich Collections.

<sup>viii</sup> Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal," 88-89.

<sup>ix</sup> Zaman, "Women's Voices," 118-119.

<sup>x</sup> Zaman, *Art of the Kantha*, 139-141

<sup>xi</sup> Zaman revisits the kantha revival in her "Women's Words/Women's Voices" essay, published in the *Kantha: the embroidered quilts of Bengal* in 2009.

Zaman, "Women's Voices," 116-117.

<sup>xii</sup> The process of specialization is most succinctly demonstrated by Zaman's discussion of "face girls," who spend 7 hours of their 9 hour days devoted to the creation of naturalistic and convincing faces on contemporary kantha quilts. (148) The use of embroidery hoops is an extension of this desire for a perfected, tight look, as the hoops eliminate the characteristic rippled surface of traditional kanthas. Furthermore, the use of darning stitches creates kanthas which are more vibrant, colorful, and efficient to produce. (146-148)

Zaman, *Art of the Kantha*, 146-148.

<sup>xiii</sup> Zaman's discussion includes the NGO's Kumundini, Bangladesh Rural Action Committee (BRAC), and Skill Development for Underprivileged Women (SDUW).

Zaman, *Art of the Kantha*, 145-147.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ghosh, "From Rags to Riches: Valuing Kanthas in Bengali Households," in *Kantha: the embroidered quilts of Bengal*, ed. Darielle Mason (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, in association with Yale University Press, 2009) 32.

Ghosh, "Embroidering Bengal," 81.

<sup>xv</sup> Zaman herself only briefly discusses the kantha as "an example of women's development," mentioning the social services, such as daycare, education, healthcare, provided by the NGO Skill Development for Underprivileged Women (SDUW). Yet neither she—nor her successors—explore how this function has conferred meaning and identity upon the contemporary kantha.

Zaman, *Art of the Kantha*, 145-147.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ghosh, "From Rags to Riches," 36.

<sup>xvii</sup> Two articles lay the groundwork for assessing the economic and gender issues as they apply to contemporary kanthas:

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Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber's article "Skill, Dependency, and Differentiation: Artisans and Agents in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry," and Michelle Maskiel's "Embroidering the Past: Phulkari Textiles and Gendered work as 'Tradition' and 'Heritage' in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab." The articles structure important questions with regard for evaluating models of production, particularly with concern for the traditional role of women in the home and their resulting exploitation by capitalist systems. While major differences exist between kantha embroidery and chikan or phulkari embroidery-- namely, the distinction between the "mass market" scale of latter, and the artisanal scale (and subsequent cost) of former—parallels do exist between each industry. Wilkinson-Weber's article, for instance, provides a critical examination of the role of capitalism and gender in the Chikan embroidery industry, which is serviced by women homeworkers—similar to the kantha production model fostered by many NGO's.

Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber, "Skill, Dependency, and Differentiation: Artisans and Agents in the Lucknow Embroidery Industry," in *Ethnology* 36(1997): 49-50.

Michelle Maskiel, "Embroidering the Past: Phulkari Textiles and Gendered work as 'Tradition' and 'Heritage' in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab," in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 58(1999): 362, accessed September 20, 2011 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2659401>.

<sup>xviii</sup> Beatrix Hauser's 2002 article "From Oral Tradition to 'Folk Art': Reevaluating Bengali Scroll Paintings" discusses the 20<sup>th</sup> century transformation of the patua tradition; originating as an almost exclusively oral narrative performance, the patua tradition is now a visual tradition, which commodifies the visual scroll painting component to capitalize upon the Bengali elite's perception of 'folk culture.' Her discussion specifically addresses the development of the Bengali conception and valuation of folk culture, which was initially introduced by the British and heightened by the rise in Bengali nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hauser's argument is particularly useful in light of the kantha, as she suggests that nationalistic feelings and the resulting market effectively created new folk cultures from existing traditions (specifically, in the patua's transformation from oral to visual tradition)

Beatrix Hauser, "From Oral Traditions to 'Folk Art'" Reevaluating Bengali Scroll Paintings," in *South Asian Folklore Studies* 61(2002): 106-107, 110-111 accessed October 10, 2011, <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1178679>.

Abigail S. McGowan's "'All that is Rare, Characteristic or Beautiful' : Design and the defense of Tradition in Colonial India 1851-1903"

<sup>xix</sup> This literature includes studies of the regional textile industries in India, the socio-economic and gender implications of these craft industries, and the role of NGO's in cultural and economic production.

<sup>xx</sup> Articles such as Maureen Liebl and Tirthankar Roy's "Handmade in India: Preliminary Analysis of Crafts Producers and Crafts Production," and Timothy J. Scrase's "Precarious production: globalisation and artisan labor in the Third World," serve to address larger political, ethical, and economic questions about the potential development and current state of traditional crafts.

<sup>xxi</sup> Maskiel, "Embroidering the Past," 362.

<sup>xxii</sup> For instance, the organization SHE employs homeworkers who live and work outside of Kolkata. Site visits to these embroiderers villages will be secured through Shamulu Dudeja, who has offered to accompany us to these locales. Through interviewing these embroiderers, I will gain a first hand account of the way in which the homeworking structure functions; this will provide interesting parallels to Wilkinson-Weber's study of homeworkers in the chikan embroidery industry, and will additionally provide a comparative point for my final analysis of contemporary and traditional kanthas (traditional kanthas were created and used in the privacy of the home).

<sup>xxiii</sup> SHE is based on a homemaker model, with administrative headquarters in Kolkata and embroiderers located outside of Kolkata in rural villages; Street Survivor's is located in the 2000 person village of Katna

<sup>xxiv</sup> Beth L. Leech, "Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews," in *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35(2002): 665, accessed December 27, 2011, [www.jstor.org/stable/1554804](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1554804).

<sup>xxv</sup> Mason, "Background Texture," 1.

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