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Threads of Tradition

A newsletter by Dhaga Fabric Studio

THIS EDITION · THE ART OF KANTHA

IN THIS EDITION

Kantha: The living stitch of Bengal

Few embroidery traditions carry as much quiet power as Kantha. Born from necessity and transformed into art, the Kantha stitch has survived centuries of change to become one of the most distinctive textile signatures of the Indian subcontinent. This edition is a deep dive — for makers, students, and anyone who wants to understand the cloth beneath the stitch.

HISTORY

From Rags to Heirlooms

The word kantha derives from the Sanskrit kontha, meaning 'rags' or 'patched cloth.' Historically, women in rural Bengal — in what is now West Bengal, India, and Bangladesh — would layer worn saris and dhotis, stitching through them with a simple running stitch to create warm, quilted wraps for infants and the elderly.

The earliest documented Kantha pieces date to the 15th and 16th centuries, though the tradition is almost certainly older. What began as resourceful domestic craft evolved into a highly sophisticated narrative art form by the 19th century, when Nakshi Kantha (pictorial Kantha) became a vehicle for storytelling, mythology, and social memory.

> *"Each stitch is a word; the finished cloth, a sentence passed from grandmother to granddaughter."*

TECHNIQUE

Understanding the Stitch

At its core, Kantha is a running stitch — the simplest stitch in embroidery — but its power lies in density, rhythm, and layering. Artisans pull thread from the coloured border of an old sari, so the palette is always determined by what the cloth already holds. This constraint — working only with threads salvaged from the fabric's own border — is not a limitation. It is the creative engine of Kantha. The colours are never arbitrary.

The base is typically multiple layers of soft cotton or tussar silk. The stitching compresses these layers and creates a gentle, rippled texture on the surface — giving Kantha its unmistakeable tactile quality. Density matters enormously: a tightly stitched piece (2–3mm between each stitch) produces a firm, almost quilted hand; a looser stitch (5–8mm) gives the cloth more drape and movement. Skilled artisans regulate this density by feel, not measurement.

The direction of stitching is equally important. Authentic Kantha is always sewn with the warp — parallel to the selvage — so the rows of running stitch follow the grain of the cloth. This alignment creates the characteristic wave-like ripple visible when the finished piece is held at an angle to the light. Stitching against the grain disrupts this effect entirely.

Thread tension is the artisan's most refined skill. Too tight and the cloth puckers; too loose and the stitch sits proud of the surface. The correct tension draws the layers together just enough to create a unified textile — what Bengali weavers call ekta kapar ('one cloth') — while preserving the suppleness of the base fabric.

Sada Kantha

The most elemental form — parallel rows of running stitch across the entire surface with no pictorial motifs. The beauty is purely textural: a gently undulating wave that catches light differently at every angle.

Nakshi Kantha

Pictorial Kantha featuring elaborate figurative motifs — the lotus, the tree of life, fish, sun, and river goddesses. The most prized collector pieces are Nakshi, often narrating scenes from Hindu epics.

Sujni (Bihar)

A regional cousin from Bihar — flatter, lighter in hand, and depicting village life, festivals, and folk ceremonies in a finer, tighter stitch. Often used for bed covers and ceremonial wall hangings.

Rabari (Gujarat)

A distinctive Gujarati variant combining the running stitch with bolder geometry, mirror-work (shisha) integration, and chain stitches. The palette is richer — reds, blacks, whites — and the motifs more angular.

FOR THE FASHION STUDENT

What to Know Before You Design

Thread direction matters. Authentic Kantha is always stitched with the warp — running parallel to the selvage. Contemporary adaptations that stitch against the grain lose the characteristic linear movement.

Irregularity is the signature. Handmade Kantha is never perfectly uniform. Stitch length varies; motifs shift slightly off-centre. This is evidence of the hand — machine imitations are regular and flat.

Base cloth affects everything. Traditional Kantha uses recycled cotton saris. Contemporary Kantha on tussar silk — as in our Bengal pieces below — combines the texture of wild silk with the graphic clarity of the running stitch.

Motif vocabulary. The lotus (purity), fish (fertility), conch shell (auspiciousness), and the tree of life (cosmic order) are core motifs. Understanding these allows you to engage authentically with clients.

Care. Cold water, gentle soap, dry flat. For silk Kantha, dry-clean only. Press on the reverse with a cool iron — never on the stitched surface.

SOURCING & AUTHENTICITY

How to Identify the Real Thing

The Kantha market is rife with machine-made copies. Genuine handmade Kantha can be identified by turning the cloth over: the reverse should show the thread path clearly, with the same pattern but slightly different tension. The stitches on authentic Kantha are never perfectly uniform — length typically ranges from 2–5mm within a single row.

Look also at the thread itself. Traditional Kantha reuses thread from the cloth's own border, so the colour may be slightly faded or uneven — a sign of authenticity, not poor quality.

FROM OUR COLLECTION

Kantha & Its Base Cloths

Whether you are working a Kantha stitch for the first time or sourcing cloth for a considered commission, the fabric you begin with shapes everything. Below is our current Kantha piece alongside the handwoven Bengal Tussar silks from the same studio — the traditional base cloth for the craft.

KANTHA EMBROIDERED



Peacock Blue Tussar Silk
Bengal Kantha Stitch
£22.50 / metre

VIEW IN COLLECTION !'

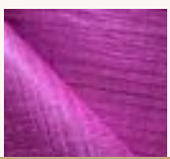
KANTHA BASE CLOTH



Light Beige Bengal Silk
Handwoven Tussar, 45 3 Wide
£22.50 / metre

VIEW IN COLLECTION !'

KANTHA BASE CLOTH



Magenta Tussar Silk
Handwoven Bengal Silk
£22.50 / metre

VIEW IN COLLECTION !'

KANTHA BASE CLOTH



Purple Tussar Silk
Handwoven Bengal Silk, 1 Yard
£22.50 / metre

VIEW IN COLLECTION !'