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## Kashmir Shawls: The Perfect Exemplar of a Textile Shaping and Being Shaped

By Joan Hart, Ph.D

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The history of the Kashmir shawl and its stylistic progress and appropriation by other cultures reveals that an art form can be viewed as is (sui generis), and also in a context of social life that is not always what we would like to celebrate. And because the shawls have been made over centuries, this context has changed frequently.<sup>1</sup>

The Kashmir shawl is very special because it combines: a material that is extremely rare and luxurious which we now call cashmere or pashmina, a weave structure that is unique in its region and very complex, a symbolism of design motifs that is still debated, color dyes still not fully explored, a design that is also unique for its region. (All the shawls illustrated in this discussion are from my collection and cannot be reproduced.) It is not possible to provide in-depth coverage of all the peregrinations, changes and influences on shawl creation. I will focus on the eighteenth- to the late nineteenth century developments.



Kashmir shawl detail, c. 1680, tus, double interlock tapestry weave. Joan Hart Collection.

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Rizvi and Monisha Ahmed, *Pashmina: The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond*, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2009, pp. 202-217. Rizvi intertwines political and social context for the construction of the shawl with economic and production information in the most detailed manner throughout her book.

This is the border of a very early Kashmir shawl, which I believe dates circa 1700. There are very few extant shawls of this great simplicity and early date. There can be no doubt, even in its state of wear and loss, that it is a Kashmir shawl: the yarn is a very fine probably tus wool, which came from the underbelly of Tibetan goats. The shawl was woven in a double interlock tapestry twill technique which is unique to Kashmir. Once the warp was in place, bobbins or kani of red, peach, black and light indigo were worked into the weft using the tapestry technique.



(Photo from Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl*)

This kind of production by one to three weavers at the same loom could produce a shawl in a year to three years.<sup>2</sup> You can see that the black dye was the most fugitive in the early shawl and most of it is gone with the yarn, leaving holes throughout the shawl. The flowers are dainty small ones, and there are ten rows of around 25 of these flowers distributed across the large border area of the shawl. Note that the flowers are not lined up in tight rows, but rather diagonally placed. This diagonal placement of flowers and sprigs is a key design feature of a Kashmir shawl, an important insight of my study. The weavers were disposed to showing movement, asymmetry and bright colors.

Surrounding the palla or border flowers in this fragment is a smaller border of crocii which at one time had a black meander through it. My early dating of this shawl is based on the color

<sup>2</sup> John Irwin, *Shawls, A Study in Indo-European Influences*. Victoria and Albert Museum, Ipswich, 1955, chapter 1 "The Kashmir Shawl", pp. 1-18. Irwin is among the earliest authors to describe the production process.

palette, especially the peach and yellow colors, the use of crocii, the smaller size of the shawl and the yarn which is very fine.

The shawls in Kashmir appear to have been made as early as the second or third centuries CE. Very few scholars have traced the origins of the shawl, but Moti Chandra traced the few references to woolen items that could be shawls to the Vedic Age (1500-500 BCE), recognizing all the while that any inference from this early literature is pure speculation.<sup>3</sup>

In the seventeenth century, Emperor Jahangir described the great fame of the Kashmir shawl production. He stated that the wool for the shawls came from a goat which is peculiar to Tibet. "In Kashmir they weave the pattu shawl from wool and sewing two shawls together they smooth them into a kind of saqarlat (broad-cloth) which is not bad for a rain coat."<sup>4</sup> There was a royal monopoly of the tus shawls. Jahangir valued the shawls and often presented one as a personal mark of honor to those favored in his court.

Europeans who ventured into Kashmir left accounts. Bernier in 1661 describes the shawls as having "a sort of embroidery, made in the loom", not quite understanding the double interlock twill tapestry weave!...The Mughal and Indian men and women wore them in winter round their heads, passing them over the shoulders as a mantle."<sup>5</sup> In Indian literature, it is clear that the shawls were now being exported to other countries, mostly by independent merchants but also the East India Company.

We learn "these shawls are about an ell and a half long, and an ell broad, ornamented at both ends with a sort of embroidery made in the loom, a foot in width."<sup>6</sup> This shawl end is consistent with those dimensions and early date.

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<sup>3</sup> Moti Chandra, "Kashmir Shawls," *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, no. 3, 1954 (Bombay), pp. 1-10. Chandra appears to be the only author able to find early references to shawl production in India.

<sup>4</sup> Moti Chandra, "Kashmir Shawls," *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, no. 3, 1954 (Bombay), p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Moti Chandra, "Kashmir Shawls," *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, no. 3, 1954 (Bombay), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Moti Chandra, "Kashmir Shawls," *Bulletin of the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India*, no. 3, 1954 (Bombay), p. 13.



18<sup>th</sup> century shawl border, double interlock tapestry weave, Joan Hart Collection.

In the late eighteenth century, we receive some clear information about the Kashmir production: it was already commercial, exported to many areas over horrific routes to the royal courts of Russia, Persia, Europe and beyond and it was a male business.<sup>7</sup> Just about every other textile in the region was produced by women, often for domestic use, such as the phulkaris, embroidered scarves kilims, carpets.

The adoption of the shawl in the West had positive and negative consequences for the Indian trade. Initially, the shawls were simply seen as sumptuous and desirable, unexpected luxury that anyone rich would enjoy. The artist Elizabeth Vigee Le Brun first noted the shawls at a party in 1795 in St. Petersburg where she entertained her guests with “tableaux vivants” using cashmere shawls as props.<sup>8</sup> Turkish Janissaries wore them as part of their uniforms until the 1820s. The shawls were already being shipped far and wide during the eighteenth century. And like the chintz production of the Coromandel Coast, the shawls were designed for specific areas: for example, Persians loved the striped shawls, Russians loved the long shawls.

From 1780 to 1830, there is a sudden profusion of portraits of women throughout Europe with Kashmir shawls wrapped around them. And I do mean profusion. An artist who could skillfully depict a face and a shawl design was able to make a living. After the French Revolution, women stopped wearing the brocade and damask heavy dresses of the eighteenth century. They adopted a simple muslin dress, with empire waist and with a long draped skirt. Because their shoulders were exposed in these dresses, the shawls were a welcome wrap to keep them warm, and they added color which conjured the warm and sunny Orient. By the 1790s, France was already experiencing the fascination for the shawls. Napoleon and his officers brought shawls to their wives after the Egyptian campaign. Napoleon’s first wife Josephine fell for them and collected them. Josephine’s portrait by Gros depicts her in a dress made from a beautiful Kashmir shawl,

<sup>7</sup> Janet Rizvi and Monisha Ahmed, *Pashmina: The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond*, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2009, pp. 206-216.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

and another is wrapped around her.<sup>9</sup> The French led in fashion at this time. Josephine owned 60 shawls, costing an exorbitant amount.

The non plus ultra was the Kashmir shawl, which was so expensive only the wealthy could purchase them. They became a necessary item in a woman's trousseau, and as local production evolved the shawls went down-market. The fashion and passion for shawls lasted until the late nineteenth century.

These images will give you a sense of the intensity of the passion for the Kashmir shawls in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well as the sudden development of indigenous French, Scottish and English weavers and manufacturers taking up the demand locally, but basing their designs on Kashmir shawls. The Kashmir moon shawl with central medallion and quarter medallions in the corners was echoed in French and Edinburgh shawls in the early nineteenth century.



Kashmir Moon shawl, 1725, Joan Hart Collection.

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<sup>9</sup> Monique Lévi-Strauss, *The Cashmere Shawl*, NY: Abrams, 1988, pp. 23-26.



French 1810 moon shawl, the French made these on drawlooms from cotton and wool. Joan Hart Collection.

Even prior to Josephine, we have Jacques-Louis David's portrait of “Marquise de Sorcy de Thelusson” of 1790, who was in advance of French fashion with her lovely shawl.<sup>10</sup> These portraits by well-known artists which are firmly dated often provide our only knowledge for dating the shawls, just as dating of carpets often is only achieved by viewing Renaissance paintings.

A watercolor painting in the Louvre demonstrates fully the accord between East and West in their appreciation of the Kashmir Shawl. This painting could be called “East meets West at the Louvre”. It is a painting by Jean Baptiste Isabey called “The Grand Staircase of the Musée Napoleon” 1804-14.

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<sup>10</sup> Monique Lévi-Strauss, *The Cashmere Shawl*, NY: Abrams, 1988, p. 18.



Jean Baptiste Isabey, "The Grand Staircase of the Musée Napoleon" 1804-14, Louvre Museum, Paris, art resource.

This painting brings the early nineteenth century to the fore with our elegantly dressed Indian gentleman pausing at the top of the staircase of the Louvre and encountering two Empire styled ladies with gorgeous shawls draped around them. What makes this painting even more fun is knowing that the artist Isabey, a wonderful painter and student of Jacques-Louis David, designed the new Kashmir shawls of Paris for many years.

How do we know what was going on in Kashmir during this period, when very few travelers dared to enter territories in the areas around Kashmir? A Brit by the name of William Moorcroft gave the best accounts of shawl production in the early years of the nineteenth



century.<sup>11</sup> Moorcroft became the first Briton to become a professional veterinarian, training in Paris at the first such school for veterinarians. He returned to London to make a good living caring for horses. However, he gave it and his family up when asked to go to India and find the best horses for the British fighting forces. That was a very difficult mission and he was traveling constantly to find better stock for his stables. During his travels in the Himalayas and in the region, he became fascinated with the shawl production and endeavored to become a merchant in that field himself. He left us an incredible record of the Kashmir shawl industry of the time and also six amazing gesso paintings by shawl producers of shawl designs from 1823 which provide a solid reference point for dating shawls of the same design. These are in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. This shawl border is identical to one of the six gesso paintings and helps us date the shawl to prior to 1823.

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<sup>11</sup> Garry Alder, *Beyond Bokhara, The Life of William Moorcroft, Asian Explorer and Pioneer Veterinary Surgeon 1767-1825*. London, Century Publishing, 1985. Moorcroft is mentioned in most books on Kashmir shawls as a primary source for understanding all aspects of the shawl production in Kashmir. Alder's book provides a much improved version of his experiences as the very first explorer of the region.



Detail of a red long shawl from around 1820, Joan Hart Collection.

Moorcroft described the shawl production in detail: financiers who bought the raw materials and labor ran the business. The weavers were always employees, subject to oppressive taxes, debt and poverty.

The shawls are often of spine-tingling weaving of such delicacy, precision and beauty, that it is hard to correlate with the working conditions of the weavers who, we would imagine, would be celebrated. However, in truth they were little more than indentured workers, receiving payment in rice except when there was famine, and being bilked by their overseers by taxation. The Moghuls may have been the most generous to the weavers, but each succeeding conquest of Kashmir, from the Afghans (1752) to the Sikhs (1819) to the Dogra (1846) led to greater and greater taxation of the shawls and persecution of the workers. The rulers made a great deal of money off the shawl trade.<sup>12</sup>

It was serendipitous that at the beginning of this discovery of the shawl in Europe, the Industrial Revolution was imminent. Until well into the Industrial Revolution, the most valuable possession a person had was his clothing. The highly skilled and very long process of making a wearable item made it very costly. Early nineteenth century European weavers were well-paid and often worked on looms in their cottages. Jacquard's invention of a loom that was mechanized changed production forever, allowing for vast quantities of fabric to be woven on a single loom. The speed of production increased just as the new shawl accessory was taking off. A remarkable bringing together of the Kashmir shawls, their extraordinary popularity and the high demand for them, their quick adoption as culturally meaningful attributes, and the even more extraordinary ability of the businessmen of the day to seize upon this trend and very quickly transform textile production to meet this demand: all of this was unprecedented.<sup>13</sup>

Before the jacquard loom became dominant in Britain and France, however, drawloom weavers were imitating Kashmir shawls. Weavers in Scotland and France began this early production.

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<sup>12</sup> Janet Rizvi and Monisha Ahmed, *Pashmina: The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond*, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2009, pp. 206-216.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*. Britain: Antique Collectors Club, 1997. Throughout Ames' book, he refers to the industrialization of production of the shawl in various European centers. His work is particularly helpful in understanding the changes in looms and structuring of the shawls.



Edinburgh drawloom shawl, 1820s, wool. Joan Hart Collection

The Edinburgh shawls were almost exact reproductions of Kashmir shawls, although the wool was not quite soft enough and the colors were so different that they are clearly not from Kashmir. Generally speaking, the basic European imitation of the Kashmir shawl continued unabated throughout the nineteenth century, but one also sees shawls that are totally unique and unrelated to the Kashmir designs such as the following early nineteenth century paisley origin and Norwich and French examples: The design of the Norwich shawl has a rococo and Asian pattern, while the French early shawl has naturalistic flowers, possibly designed by Isabey, using very rough wool.



Square 1840 Paisley shawl, likely Paisley, jacquard woven. Joan Hart Collection.



Norwich turnover shawl 1830. English, silk and cotton. Joan Hart Collection.



Ternaux shawl, France, 1810. Joan Hart Collection.

By the 1830s and 40s, the demand was so high for the shawls, that production just kept increasing and new designs were constantly invented. There were competitions for shawls that were new and spectacular at the Universal Expositions that were held in Paris, London, and Vienna in the nineteenth century. We know much about the production from the Exposition published reports of awards granted. Merchants were traveling regularly to India to advise the shawl producers of the latest fashion and Indian producers made shawls in imitation of the European ones. However, the designs in India were very popular in Europe until the end of production in the 1870s, despite the intervention of outsiders. Stylistic development in shawl patterns went from very simple long shawls with a single row of paisleys in the early nineteenth century to greater elaboration, the addition of a gallery above the main border area, then the filling in with vining vegetation of almost the entire previously empty central field.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl and its Indo-French Influence*. Britain: Antique Collectors Club, 1997. The last pages of Ames' book show the development of the Kashmir shawl and previous chapters on English and French production (by Pamela Clabburn) show some aspects of the early design elements.



Kashmir long shawl, 1835, wool, double interlock tapestry weave. Joan Hart Collection.

The evolution of shawl design was gradual and until about 1845, almost entirely dependent on the Kashmiri designers and weavers. But by the 1850s, French manufacturers began signing their shawls, stamping them with notes on prizes won at expositions, and enlarging the designs. The dominance of the Kashmir shawls came to an end with the over-production of cheaper shawls made in Europe.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Janet Rizvi and Monisha Ahmed, *Pashmina: The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond*, Marg Publications, Mumbai, 2009, pp.225-227. Others attribute the end of the shawl fashion to the bustle, the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, among others, but the over-production in Europe was the dominant issue.





Bietry signed shawl, Paris, 1855. Joan Hart Collection.

Throughout this development, the Kashmir shawl lost some of its most valuable properties: the later Kashmir shawls dropped in quality of wool, they became so large and rather unwieldy that it was difficult to enjoy them, and the naturalistic and oriental designs became quite different over time.<sup>16</sup> I love the late developments both in Kashmir and Europe, but many champions of one or the other do not.

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Cohen, Rosemary Crill, Monique Lévi-Strauss, Jeffrey R. Spurr, *Kashmir Shawls, The Tapi Collection*. Mumbai: The Shoestring Publisher, nd, Spurr's essay "The Kashmir Shawl and Markets". Spurr argues that the shawls were produced only for export and the market, not for indigenous use in Kashmir. This argument further casts aspersions on the artistry of the Kashmir weavers and designers. And when has a textile not been an item for the market? Colonial thinking pervades this literature even today.



Square Kashmir rumal shawl, double interlock tapestry twill, 1860. Joan Hart Collection.

Some are simply fabulous:



Parisian 1845 vegetal shawl. Joan Hart Collection.

From the scarcely known provinces of India, the Kashmir shawl flourished early on. It is hard to understand how isolated the territory was: Moorcroft was the first to visit many of the areas on the borderlands of the Himalayas and the first to write about it (sadly he died before his research could be published broadly). By the time the shawl fashion was finished around the world, the British had great control in India and nearly everything about the shawl and its production had

changed. I personally find this story “all good”. For the history of art, shawl production in Kashmir and in Europe demonstrates a clear stylistic advance within a century, one that is characteristic of most art forms. And the serendipitous coming together of the Kashmir “paisley” shawl with the women of the West and the new industrialization of the West is an amazing story, one that could have hardly been predicted. And the paisley is still with us in the work of new designers, as the love of “the other” and organic fantasy continues.

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