

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), was established in the memory of Late Smt. Indira Gandhi and is visualized as a centre encompassing the study and experience of all the arts, each form with its own integrity yet within a dimension of mutual interdependence, interrelated with nature, social structure and cosmology.

The Janapada Sampada Division of the IGNCA undertakes research of the Indian cultural phenomenon in its totality and builds core collection of material and documentation on folk and tribal arts through multi disciplinary approach. One of the major programmes of the Division is Ethnographic Collection under which creativity at different levels is explored, researched and documented. A core collection has been built that includes textiles, masks, puppets, ritual objects from all over the country. Kantha embroidery pieces are one of the constituent of this collection.



Material: Cotton
Size: 110cm x 92cm
Late 20th Century, West Bengal



Design: Picture Street



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An Exhibition of Selected Pieces from the Collection of IGNCA



कान्था - वस्त्र पर कढ़ा काव्य

KANTHA

Poetry embroidered on cloth

11th - 30th December 2014, 10.30 AM - 6.00 PM
Twin Art Gallery, C. V. Mess, IGNCA, Janpath, New Delhi - 110 001

Entry & Parking free

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Kantha – the embroidered poetry on cloth – speaks volumes about the imagination of Bengali women and the aspirations that her craft-work reflects. Her creativity stands unmatched when she breathes life into a discarded saree, worn out from constant use and laundering. She transforms this simple five metres of old cloth into a most admirable, attractive and unparalleled utilitarian artefact. Initially, light coverlets or quilts - to withstand the mild winters and cool monsoon nights of Bengal - were made using the *Kantha* embroideries, which was limited to simple stitches and a few colours. Some *Kanthas* were used as swaddling clothes for babies; expectant mothers spent their last stages of pregnancy in making a *Kantha* for the new born, with the belief that this piece of cloth would bring good fortune for the family and protect the baby from diseases. Every home in a Bengali village housed a number of *Kanthas* that were more for personal use than commercial gain.

This folk art emerged from a combination of materialistic circumstances and daily needs, climate, geography and economic factors. The motifs embroidered were influenced by religious beliefs and superstitions, and of course what the women saw around them. These rural women gave a free rein to their imagination while capturing on their old and used pieces of cloth the colours and designs of the flowers they saw or the pond they bathed in or even the conch shell they blew before praying. This ordinary piece of cloth, embroidered in the simplest of running stitches, speaks of folk beliefs and practices,



Material: Cotton
Size: 95cm x 78cm
19th Century, West Bengal

religious ideas, themes and characters from mythology and epics, flora, fauna, man and nature; they also reflect the social and personal life of people in their own way.

Defining *Kantha* art, Gurusaday Dutt, who pioneered the resuscitation of the folk art of Bengal, correctly noticed that “the name '*Kantha*' signifies a poor man's wrap consisting of old used up cloth patched up and sewn into a single garment. It seems probable that patch works *Kantha* constituted the original form of *Kanthas* and that *Kanthas* of a decorative 'appliqué' type were evolved from this”

(Chakarbarti, 2007, p21)

Kantha since then has had a long history and seen many ups and downs. It has travelled many miles, from a poor Bengali home to the markets of Bengal, then almost disappearing from the scene; it has seen a rebirth or revival and has been finally reinvented as per the need of the times into its present form that is more colourful, with more dynamic designs and more uses. Today, the *Kantha* is just not limited to a Bengali home but has carved a special niche for itself and sees itself in great demand not only domestically but also in the export market. What must have begun as the aesthetic use of an old cloth due to lack of money is today a most respected craft universally.

Renowned for its bewitching and eye catching colours and designs, this craft which had such a humble beginning is now the crown jewel of embroideries around the world. Queen Elizabeth-II, ex- President Bush, Pope Johannes Paulus, Robert McNamara and late President Mitterrand - all have a piece of *Kantha* among their possessions.



Material: Cotton
Size: 186cm x 121cm
19th Century, West Bengal