ON VIEW: October 28, 2017 - March 25, 2018

Exhibition Resource Guide

What Is a Kantha?
Kantha is a term used across the Indian sub-continent to describe decorative stitched quilting. In Gujarat, hangings patterned with concentric circles or squares in running stitch are known as kanthas, while in Bengal, kanthas are stitched for a variety of purposes, such as winter quilts, covers and wraps for books and valuables or as mats for ceremonial purposes. They are most often given to daughters on the occasion of their marriage, as a token of love, or as a gift for a newborn child or grown son. They are often, as tradition has it, made up of old cast off saris or dhotis. They can be the work of two or more generations of women and are treasured as family heirlooms.

EXHIBITION THEMES

Traditional Process
To make a kantha, three or four layers of sari or dhoti (women’s or men’s clothing garments) are laid on top of each other and quilted. The simple running stitch used in quilting produces an embroidery-like design.

Portrayal of Daily Life
Kantha quilts illustrate the whole of life in rural and urban Bengal. Often reflective of the sometimes quirky outlook of a Bengali housewife and mother, and her sense of humor and wry amusement at her society.

Multiple Uses
In Bengal, kanthas are stitched to use as winter and summer quilts, covers and wraps for books and valuables, and mats for ceremonial purposes. They were also given as gifts for many occasions.
Recycled Material
Cast-off saris or dhotis often comprise the inner layers, and a new or at least clean and untorn rectangle of muslin or mill-woven cloth is used for the face. There is a superstition, prevalent particularly in rural Bengal, that a quilt made out of used cloth will ward off the effects of black magic.

Women’s Work
Kantha making was always done during a woman’s spare time, after all of her domestic chores were done. A rural Bengali woman would always rise early and get as much done during the cool hours of the early morning as she could. The middle of the day would be devoted to such pursuits as kantha making, the dry, sunny days of winter being ideal for this purpose.

STUDENTS WILL EXPLORE

- Design and decoration as communicators of cultural traditions, stories and values
- Textile processes including running stitch and quilting
- The use of recycled material
- Daily life in Bengal during the 19th and early 20th centuries

Cover (Kantha)
20th Century Bengal, India
Cotton
Gift of Stephen Huyler, 2006-81-407
Cover (Kantha)
20th Century West Bengal, India
Recycled cotton sari
Gift of Stephen Huyler, 2006-81-404

Bed Cover (Kantha)
19th Century Bengal, India
Cotton
Gift of Stephen Huyler, 2006-81-405
IN PREPARATION FOR YOUR VISIT

Schedule a Museum visit and Docent-led tour through the Education Department. Mingei offers free admission for all K-12th grade and college groups and transportation reimbursements for Title 1 schools.

Email: sfoley@mingei.org

Call: 619-704-7495

Complete an online tour request form: www.mingei.org/education/museum-tour-request

- Review the information in this hand-out with your students; build their knowledge, excitement and confidence before they arrive.

- Discuss museum etiquette and review the Tour Guidelines document that will be sent to you when your tour is confirmed.

- Explain to students that a Museum Docent will guide them through the exhibition. Explain that a Docent is a knowledgeable Museum-trained volunteer who will share valuable information with them.

- Explain that Mingei International is a museum of folk art, craft and design that shows work from all over the world, and that “mingei” is a Japanese word that means “art of the people.”
DESIGN YOUR OWN KANTHA STITCH CARD ACTIVITY

Kanthas from Bengal are created and often presented as gifts or considered family heirlooms. They create visual narratives of daily life and culture.

In this project, students will create their own Kantha inspired stitch cards utilizing a basic running stitch (or Kantha stitch) to draw designs and patterns.

MATERIALS

- Pre-punched Cardstock
- Embroidery floss
- Sewing needles
- Tape
- Scissors

VOCABULARY

Kantha- a quilt native to Bengal created with repurposed saris and embroidery

Embroidery- Handicraft of decorating fabric using a needle to apply thread

Running Stich- a simple needlework stitch consisting of a line of stitches

Bengal- a former province of Northeast India

DIRECTIONS

1. Thread needle, no need to tie off string.

2. Sew through back of card and leave a short tail.

3. Tape down the tail.

4. Use a running stitch to create patterns and designs. Create a border. Create an interior design.
5. Take off needle and tape down ends so your work will not unravel.

6. Repeat, while adding various colors.

7. Finish by cutting away any long loose threads.

8. Display or give away as gift.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Explore Common Motifs

1. Lotus/Mandala
2. Paisley
3. Pinwheel
4. Tree of Life
5. Kadamba
6. Animals