Suzanis are what one may call a collective form of art, as they are made by groups of women rather than one individual. Used as wall hangings, bed or table covers, and for wrapping clothes, these large handcrafted embroidered textiles have added color to drab and harsh living quarters in communities across Central Asia for hundreds of years. Traditionally part of women’s dowries, suzanis were usually presented to the bride and groom on their wedding day, as a symbol of the merging of two families.

Deriving their name from the Persian or Farsi word for “needle,” the origin of the suzani can be traced back hundreds of years to nomadic tribes in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian countries. These countries were located along merchant routes between East and West and connected a rich variety of peoples, cultures, and religions, and led to the inevitable exchange of goods, ideas, and traditions. Experts can easily determine an individual suzani’s place of origin by its embroidery design, as each area has developed its own distinct motifs, most of which symbolize health, power, happiness, good fortune, and fertility.

Most commonly, suzanis consist of four or six narrow strips of homespun cotton fabric, stitched together to form one large panel upon which the embroidery design is drawn by an experienced embroiderer, usually an older woman familiar with the region’s symbols and motifs. Once the design is drawn, the strips are separated and distributed among the potential bride’s female relatives who will embroider them.

The making of a suzani was a long-term process that could stretch over years. The embroiderer of each panel would often improvise with small deviations from the design or color scheme, incorporating her own personal style and making each panel unique. After the embroidery is completed, the strips are restitched together, inevitably slightly mismatched, and misaligned, with thread colors varying since no natural dye ever yields identical colors.
Most suzanis are embroidered with threads of silk, and more rarely with cotton or wool. Red is the most prevalent color, traditionally obtained from the cochineal insect. The majority of threads are colored with vegetal dyes. Sources have traditionally included saffron, indigo, pistachio nuts, and pomegranates, among many other plants. There are also several stitches common to suzani embroideries - couching, looping, and counted stitch (cross-stitch) - used to make a variety of motifs, with images of the sun and moon, flowers, vines, pomegranates, and other fruit, among other images from nature.

The Tashkent Suzani

There are two different kinds of suzanis that come out of Tashkent, Uzbekistan: the “paliak” (moon design) and “guilkurpa” (flower cloth). Tashkent suzani contains 12 large circular designs or medallions, embroidered in red, in rows with serrated borders. The circles are spaced equally apart and have dark green leafy design surrounding each circle and dividing the main ground into sections. Throughout the border, there are smaller red circles that are also equally spaced apart.