

ZARDOZI EMBROIDERY



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1. Introduction

Different styles of Indian embroidery have been handed down from generation to generation such as Zardozi, Chikankari, Sujni, Kantha, Kasuti, Toda, mirror work. The passion for embroidery in India has led to great experimentation in the field, with several styles, creating dazzling effects such as the 'stained glass' look, the long cross stitch, rice stitch, textured panels and much more. One can see embroidery on wall hangings, saris, textiles and garments, incorporating unique motifs and patterns. Zardozi is one of the oldest and most beautiful embroidery styles of India. It is used extensively in clothing and home decoration. Painstakingly and delicately done by hand, creations in Zardozi work are timeless, unbounded by the shackles of trends.

1.1 History of the craft

Zardozi — the magnificent metallic embellishment of India — dates back to ancient times. It finds mention in Vedic literature, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and all accounts of the Sultanate period. The country, from very early times, was known for the use of gold embroidery on a variety of objects including furnishings, trappings, parasols, and equestrian ornaments. The more aesthetic and evolved embroideries were used on court costumes and especially on accessories such as shoes.

The historical accounts of this craft are shrouded in the usual romantic stories and inaccurate data. But the only certainty is that *zarkas* — a Persian word meaning *zari* or gold embroidery — was widely used in all the accounts. History says that from the 13th century, the craftspeople who worked with this medium, setting seed pearls and precious stones with fine gold and silver wire, were known as *zardos* workers.

Done with metal wire and metal pieces or sequins on velvet, satin and heavy silk bases, Zardozi is one of the most famous and elaborate techniques in metal embroidery. The original embroidery of Zardozi was done with pure silver wires coated with real gold, and was known as *Kalabatun*. Though silver and gold wires have now been replaced with synthetic threads, the art remains the same. The use of metal embroidery in Indian textiles and costumes, especially those used for ritual or ceremonial purposes, demonstrates the importance of gold and silver within the culture.

Of all the crafts of the country, *Zardozi* seems to have flourished and survived to the present day like few others.

2. Regions Known for Zardozi Work in India

- Hyderabad
- Lucknow
- Jammu, Kashmir
- Kolkata
- Varanasi
- Agra
- Delhi

- Farrukkabad

This document is based on the craft carried out in the region of Delhi.

3. Producer Communities

Zardozi embroidery is the glitteringly ornate, heavily encrusted gold thread work practiced in various parts of the country. An imperial craft brought to India by Delhi's first Turko-Afghan sultans in the 12th century, Zardozi became equally popular with the wealthy Hindu, Muslim and European elite down the ages. Today several families in Varanasi, Agra, Lucknow, Rampur, Bareilly and Farukkabad have revived this old craft to supply exquisite *zari* embroidered bridal outfits and *salwar kameezes* to boutiques around the country. In recent years, Zardozi has seen a renewed interest in Hyderabad. *Zardozi* is also combined with *Dabka* work and is originally said to be from Lucknow.

Traditionally, only men did *Zardozi* work, and mostly in Lucknow and Kolkata. But now, Hyderabad is growing as a major *Zardozi* centre. Today, 10-15 per cent of the thousands of *Zardozi* workers in Hyderabad are women.

4. Raw Material

4.1. Metal Wire

Metal ingots are melted and pressed through perforated steel sheets, to be converted into wires. They are then hammered to the required thinness. Plain wire is called *badla*, and when wound round a thread, it is called *kasav*. Smaller spangles are called *sitara*, and tiny dots made of *badla* are called *mukaish*.

4.2. Embellishments



Cowrie, dabka, sequins and sitara

The original Zardozi thread was made from an alloy of silver and gold. The wire that came out of the furnace, although containing a lot of silver in it, glittered like gold. This flattened wire was then twisted around silk threads to form the spring like Zardozi. Zardozi uses *dabka* (a spring type of thread), *kora*, *katori*, *tikena*, and *sitara* (sequins) and also glass and plastic beads at times. All these are usually purchased from the local markets or from wholesale markets like Kinari and Sadar Bazaar. Heavy and grand to

look at, garments made with Zardozi embroidery can weigh a lot in terms of pounds and kilos.

Dabka is bought at the rate of Rs 500/kg, sequins at an average rate of Rs 300-400/kg; the cost could vary depending on the size of the sequins. Small beads are purchased at a rate of Rs 20-100/pound (1 pound = 450 gms), again depending upon the size. Of late, the colored threads available in the market are replacing *zari* and gold threads. Anchor threads are most commonly used. A box consisting of 25 skeins (*lacchis*) costs Rs 80/-. Cheaper brands like Dolly and Magica offer lower prices of Rs 60/- per box¹

4.3 Raw Material Procurement

The Zardozi thread comes in long curled strips of shiny gold wire and is sold by weight. It has to be cut to size depending on the design. A variety of materials are used for the embroidery: *zari*, sequins, cowries, beads, shiny stones that look like diamonds, *dabka*, *sitara*. They are all purchased from the local market. All these embellishments are usually bought in bulk and stored for later use.



Store room

¹ All the prices are as per Jan'05 information

5. Tools Used



5.1. Frame / Adda



Adda or wooden frame

This is a wooden or metal frame over which the cloth is pulled tightly, so that it does not move while the artisans are at work. This also enables faster movement and clear vision.



Big and small frames

5.2. Needle



Zardozi needle

The embroidery is done with a needle. A hooked awl kind of needle called *ari* can be used, or a simple stitching needle. The needle used is the smallest available, generally numbered nine. But it could depend on the design and the thread used.

5.3. Scissors

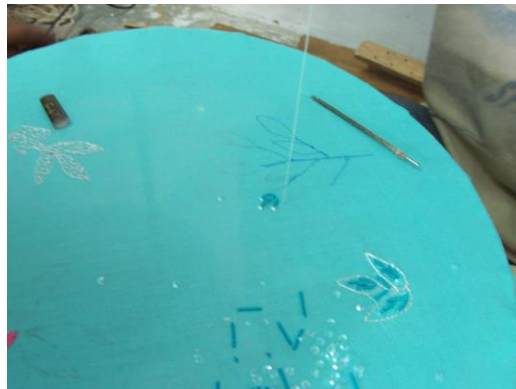
A pair of scissors is an essential tool of the workers involved in the embroidery. It is required time and again to cut the threads and loose ends.

6. The Process of Zardozi Embroidery

Zardozi is sheer magic of nimble fingers and imaginative designs.

6.1. Designing

Earlier the designs used to be very Mughal in nature, comprising of floral and leaf patterns derived from that era. With modern influences, the patterns have changed. More and more geometric designs are used but flowers, petals and leaves still find their place. Clients specify patterns and motifs to suit their budget and choice.



Nature inspired motifs

The design is first traced on a tracing sheet and holes are made along the traced pattern using a needle.

6.2. Tracing



Spreading the fabric



Placing the tracing



Kerosene and robin blue mixture



Rubbing ink for transfer



Design traced on the fabric

The fabric on which the embroidery is to be done is placed on a flat table and the tracing sheet is placed in position. A solution of kerosene and Robin Blue is made. A wad of cloth is dipped into this solution and wiped against the tracing so that the ink seeps through the holes to trace the design on to the fabric. This is then sent to the embroidery workers.

6.3 Setting the Adda/Frame



Cloth framed tightly

The fabric to be embroidered is stretched taut over a frame called the *adda*. This concept has evolved from a knockdown camp bed called the *khatia* used in rural areas. The *adda* follows the assembly and tightening principles of the *khatia*, and gives the cloth a uniform tension. It consists of four wooden spars (sometimes, bamboo is used for the end members) resting on wooden posts. The frame can be made to fit any size of fabric.



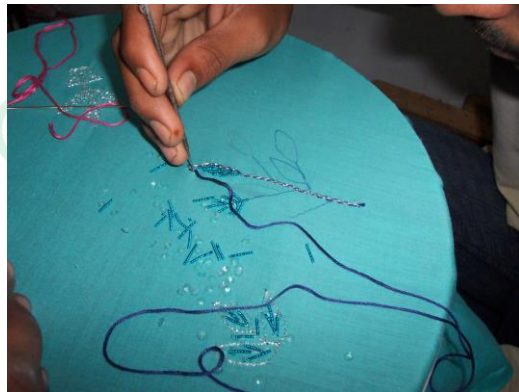
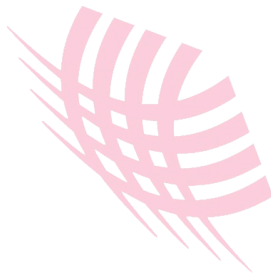
Dabka in use



Men at work

The artisan sits on the floor behind the wooden frame working on the piece of cloth. The frame itself is quite large, and can comfortably accommodate five to seven artisans working together on the pre-traced designs.

6.4. The Embroidery



Zardozi in progress

ark
e in india

A simple needle or a crochet like hook fixed to a wooden stick called the *ari* are used for the embroidery. The *ari* greatly enhances the speed of the work, as it enables the artisan to pass the threads both above and below the fabric. The *ari* has its disadvantages, though. One tug at a loose thread can spell disaster to the entire design as it can unravel in a matter of minutes. The needle and thread method is far more dependable, but is very time and labor consuming, and hence far more expensive.

All kinds of combinations are used to add to the grandeur of Zardozi. A little bit of thread work here or a few sequins or semi precious stones added there, can make the fabric appealing while giving it a unique exclusivity.



Zardozi in gold

If the design is smaller, then a smaller metal frame can also be used instead of the wooden planks. This is much more comfortable when the embroidery is to be focused in a particular area of the fabric.

The smallest work takes a day to be completed and the most exclusive one can take up to ten days. Each piece is charged per design and material used. For bridal wear, the embroidery is usually very intricate and neatly done with the finest *dabka*, cowries and stones. For such work, the embroidery could cost as much as Rs 10,000-15,000/-.



Heavy bridal Zardozi

7. Uses of the Product

These days Zardozi is used to make exquisite evening dresses, coats; fashion accessories like purses, handbags, belts, shoes; ceremonial adornments like badges and insignia; furnishing accessories like cushion covers, wall hangings table covers and boxes etc. A few European and American designers have set up workshops in India, which specialize in Zardozi work on cushion covers, table linen and even curtains.



Cushion Covers in Zardozi

8. Marketing

Zardozi embellished outfits have always been 'en vogue' especially for weddings and special ceremonies. During the last fifty years, the revival of Zardozi has been phenomenal. Not only is it found in the latest designer outlets, but it is being used yet again for interiors of mega weddings and grand ceremonies. Today the Indian ramp is ablaze with products of the craftspeople — the materials may not have the same aesthetic of the Mughals, but they do cater to the demand for highly ornamented garments with glittering beads and sequins.

With the change in times and demand, the Zardozi craftsman has become vital to the garments 'en vogue' in Hollywood and Bollywood.

9. Changes in Recent Years

By the end of the Mughal era, the art declined because of its high cost and the lack of precious metals for the purpose of embroidery. It was again revived in the 20th century. Today, like everything else, Zardozi too has its limitations: being sold in the market at a much cheaper cost, made out of copper and brass wires plated with gold. The latest additions are colored Zardozi with a plastic base. Far more pocket friendly, this new Zardozi lasts longer and is lighter to wear.

At times the base fabrics have plastic replacements in place of what was formerly pure gold and the motifs are so far removed from the original, that the product does not resemble what had at one time bedazzled visitors to the royal courts of India. The days of using real gold and silver thread are now history. What one can get, however, is synthetic or 'tested' zari embroidery.

The richness of gold may no longer grace the work of *Zardozi* craftsman, but the glitter and glamour endures - hopefully it will for years to come. Zardozi is as tenacious as the wires the craftsmen work with.

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