



# Metal Threads in Embroidered Coverlets of Chamba

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Decorating the fabric using metal wire embroidery is of ancient origin as is evident from various texts and epics. Gold has been incorporated in textiles in various forms from early times, because of its comparative rarity and its material properties of malleability and ductility, which makes it valuable (<http://www.craftrevival.org>, Singhal, 2017). The use of metallic yarn for adornment was also seen in embroidered coverlets of Chamba. Gold and silver threads were used occasionally in the filling of jewellery, utensils, and musical instruments to suggest metal and on the borders of the female and male garments to accentuate the effect of brocade (Bhattacharya, 1968). However, it was interesting to observe that unlike other metal embroideries the technique of embroidering with metallic thread in Chamba embroidery was easier and simple. For embroidery very fine needle was used as used for untwisted silk embroidery yarns. The embroidery was worked with no extra tools and similar stitches were used as used for filling of embroidery. Nevertheless, the purpose of using metallic threads remained the same i.e. Ornamentation. The present research was undertaken with the objective of identifying decorative features created using metallic threads in embroidered coverlets of Chamba.

## Methodology

The aim of the present study was to identify the original features of craft and the changes that had taken place in order to revive the craft in its conventional form and character. The following methodology was followed in order to achieve the objectives of the study.

## Area of study

According to the review of literature, this kind of embroidery was practiced not only in Chamba but also in other districts of Himachal Pradesh and neighboring areas. The area of study was very vast; therefore, for the present study district Chamba and neighboring areas like Kangra, Basholi, Guler and Nurpur were identified.

However, in a study of the data obtained from the various government agencies it was found that:

- The craft of Chamba embroidery was no more practiced in the areas of Kangra, Basholi, Guler and Nurpur.
- The craftspeople were available mainly in Chamba town, its periphery and other parts of the district Chamba namely Chamba, Sarol, Sidhkund, Badiyankothi, Mangla, Murara, Mehla, and Chowari. Therefore, the study was conducted in the above regions.

## Sample selection

A variety of people including master craftsmen, embroiderers, artists, trainers and art historians from different groups involved with the craft were selected for holistic insights.

The details of master craftsmen achieving national and state awards in Chamba *Rumal* and miniature paintings were obtained from the office of the development commissioner for handicrafts, Kullu. The details of number of embroiderers engaged in the craft were procured from Himachal Pradesh state handicrafts and handloom corporation Ltd., Shimla. However, no information was available on the population of miniature artists in Chamba town. The samples selected for survey of field were given below:

- **Master craftsmen:** the total population of artisans comprised of 4 master craftsmen in Chamba *Rumal* embroidery and 3 master craftsmen in miniature painting. Using census-sampling technique, 7 master craftsmen were included in sample for conducting interviews.
- **Trainers:** trainers imparting training in government and non- government centers in Chamba were selected using purposive sampling technique. There was no specific number of trainers available although master craftsmen in embroidery were giving trainings in their own centers. Some experienced and trained embroiderers were located who were either state awardees or instructors in schools. Six of them were identified and selected for the study.
- **Embroiderer:** the total population of female embroiderers in 15 self-help groups was 183, where each self help group on average consisted of 10-14 embroiderers. Using random sampling technique, five artisans were selected from each self-group. The total sample size included 70 female embroiderers.
- **Miniature artists:** master craftsmen in painting were approached to locate miniature artists, as no information on total population of miniature artists was available in government records. 8 miniature artists were selected using purposive sampling technique.
- **Scholars:** on the basis of purposive sampling technique art historians working in the area were identified. 10 of them were consulted and interviewed.

### Data Collection

The initial archival material on traditions of Chamba embroidery, design repertoire, craft process, local dynamics was collected through literary material, museum material and field study. The information was sourced from museums, books, NGO's and people associated with the craft. The sources of information were given below:

- Bhuri Singh museum, Chamba
- Calico museum, Ahmedabad
- Crafts museum, New Delhi
- Delhi crafts council center '*Charu*', Chamba
- Himachal state museum, Shimla
- Indian museum, Kolkata
- National museum, New Delhi
- Personal collection of various people engaged in the craft

### Identification of traditional embroidery characteristics

Decorative characteristics include features, which were extensively used to enhance visual appeal, and aesthetics like *color*, ornamentation (*shingar*), textures, finishing stitches (*sajawati tankae*) and edgings. In this article the emphasis was given on ornamentation and textures created using metallic threads.

### Results

The documentation of ornamental aspects of craft was very important in sustaining the craft in local environment. The detailed analysis of museum material revealed the traditional ways of practicing the craft. The variety of themes, designs and motifs added to the richness of the embroidery. The most fascinating aspect of *rumals* was the depiction of vast subject theme of subjects (Pathak, 2010). According to the review of literature, motifs of embroidery were broadly characterized as figurative, flora, fauna, and architecture. Each motif and object was intended to be a symbolic echo of the situation and does not merely provide a naturalistic background (Aryan, 1976). Their function was expressive rather than representational. Detailed form of ornamentation was seen in these motifs. In embroidery ornamentation were either carried out using metallic yarn or embroidery thread. *Metallic yarn* was used to show effect of gold and brocaded effect in motifs as seen in costume of Krishna and Rukhmani (Figure1). Embroidery threads were also used for adornment and to bring out fine details like in crown of Krishna and adornment of his feet nails in red colour (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Metallic thread used for ornamentation,  
 Courtesy: After, Aryan 2010



Figure 2: Embroidery thread used for ornamentation,  
 Courtesy: After, Aryan 2010

Depending on area to be filled single stitches were taken in small areas (figure 3) while for broader areas rows of stitches were visible (figure 4). Single straight lines were worked in stem stitch or running stitch (figure 5). It was also observed in earlier specimen that metallic yarns were wide and used alone for adornment i.e. Without being combined with embroidery threads.

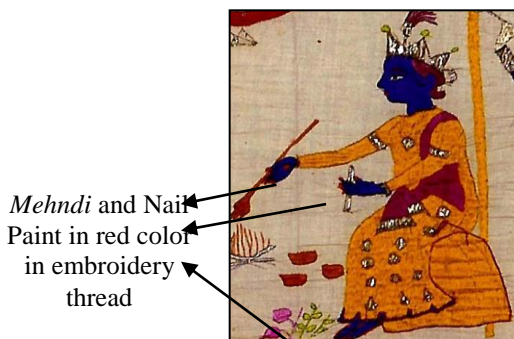


Figure 3: Areas filled with metallic thread in single stitches,  
 Courtesy: Calico museum



Figure 4: Areas filled with metallic thread in rows of stitches,  
 Courtesy: National Museum



Figure 5: Straight lines with metallic thread worked in running stitches,  
 Courtesy: Calico Museum

According to embroiders at present, they were using two strands of metallic thread (Figure 6) or sometimes metallic thread was combined with embroidery thread for smooth working (Figure 7). It was also observed that working with metallic thread was difficult as compared to embroidery threads as it breaks frequently and pulling of metallic thread through fabric was difficult.



Figure 6: Crown filled with two strands of metallic thread,  
 Courtesy: Personal collection



Figure 7: Umbrella filled with embroidery thread combined with single strand of metallic thread,  
 Courtesy: Personal collection



The detailed ornamentation and textures made using both metallic yarns and embroidery threads were discussed below:

**Ornaments:** Design features used for decoration of figures are known as *Shingar*. In female figures, it chiefly included ornaments like nose ring commonly known as nose ring (*Chamba Nath*), earrings, necklace, finger rings, bangles, anklets, *tika* (Figure 8) etc. Some other decorative features were observed in female figures was lip colour, nail paint, *henna* on hands and feet. (Figure 9)

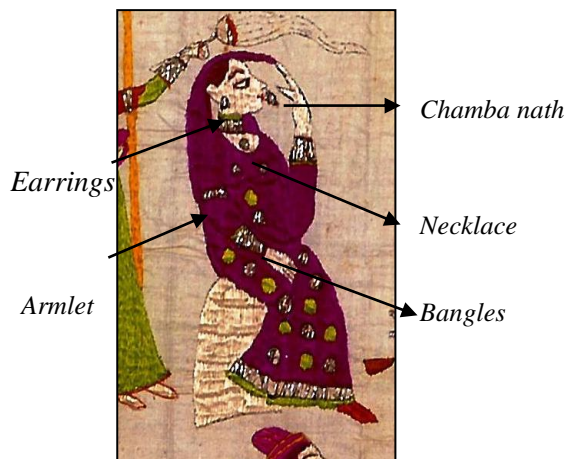


Figure 8: Female Ornaments in metallic threads, Courtesy: Vijay Sharma

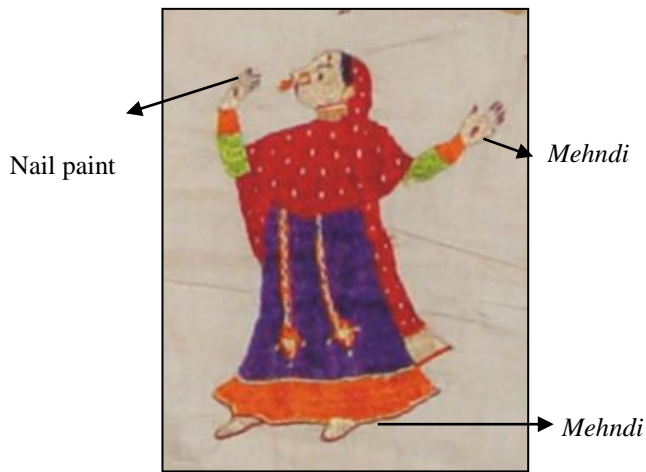


Figure 9: Decorative features in embroidery thread, Courtesy: Vijay Sharma

In male figures, detailing was carried out as *Mormokut*, slippers, *sindooritilak* etc. (Figure 10). In animals metallic yarns were used to adorn the ornaments of face, neck, ivory and feet ornaments. Minute body parts of figures were shown in small stitches like in eyes, ears, sharp pointed nose, fingers of hand and feet.

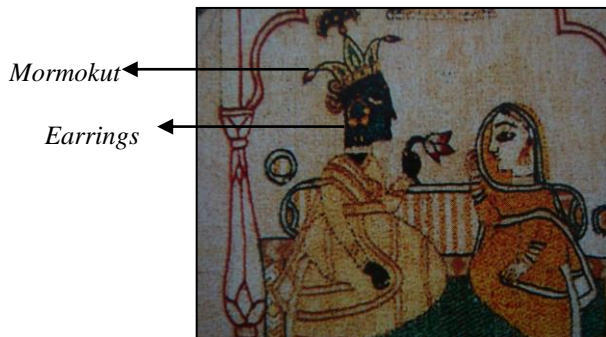


Figure 10: Male ornaments in embroidery threads, Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010

**Costumes:** Brocaded effect in garments was shown by metallic yarn by creating patterns in field of costumes, at hems or borders of the costumes. Generally, the filling in costumes was carried using embroidery thread, whereas, small patterns in the costumes was made in metallic yarn (Figure 11a). The costumes were sometimes filled with embroidery thread and alternately worked with fine stripes in metallic thread (Figure 11b). The metallic threads were also seen at hem of *odhani*, *patka* etc. The patterns were also created using embroidery threads also (Figure 12).



a. Pattern in field and borders      b. Fine stripes in metallic thread

Figure 11: Patterning in costumes using metallic threads Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010



Figure 12: Leaf pattern in two colours in embroidery threads, Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010

**Animal trappings:** Brocaded effect with metallic yarns was specifically seen in trappings of animals, chariots, palanquins etc.(Figure 13, 14). They were either used at hem or alternate broad stripes at edges. It was evident that patterns were also created using embroidery threads.

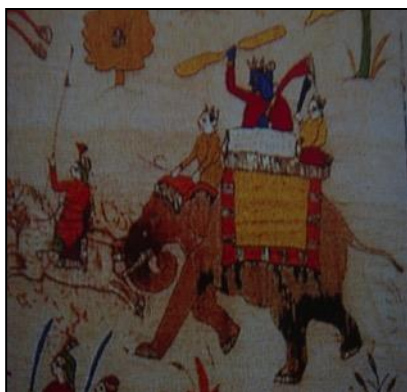


Figure 13: Metallic threads in animal trappings Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010 Figure 14: Pattern created in palanquin using embroidery threads Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010

**Borders:** Threads of either type were also used to adorn borders by highlighting certain parts (Figure 15). This balance the entire composition since it is used in the inner composition, which creates sense of symmetry when used in outer borders as well.



Figure 15: Patterns created border using embroidery thread and metallic thread Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010

**Architecture:** Architectural patterns in the walls, palace etc. was created using embroidery thread in different colours and also adorned with metallic yarns alternately. Metallic threads were specifically used to decorate flags, umbrellas (chattar), mandap, musical instruments etc.(Figure 16). They were mainly shown as narrow band signifying use of gold.

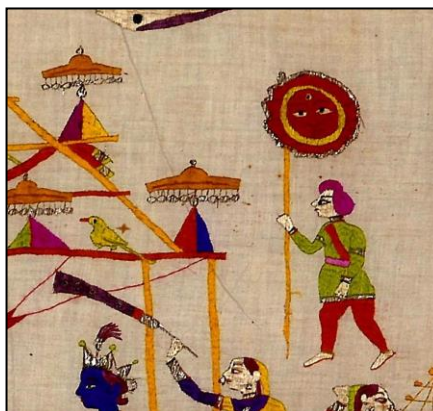
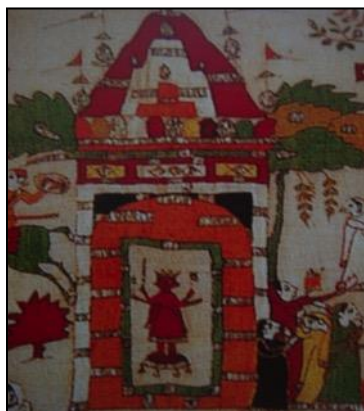


Figure 16: Designs in temple, umbrella, and flag created using metallic threads, Courtesy: After Aryan, 2010

In embroidery, textures were made as attempt to create visual interest and add realism to objects, as they exist in nature. Apart from use of metallic threads, the textures were achieved by technique called voiding where narrow gap was created between rows of stitches (Figure 17).



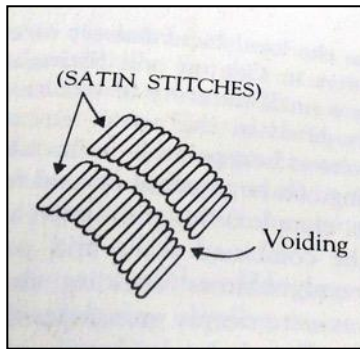


Figure 17: Voiding technique



Figure 18: Textures in costumes and leaves created using voiding technique  
Courtesy: Calico Museum



Voiding technique was used to bring out fine details and separating areas without outlining. The outline was done only in outer parts and details within motifs were cleared using voiding (Figure 18). It was also used to create most frequently used striped pattern in motifs. Textures were created by filling background in shape of motifs leaving them unembroidered or filled using different colours. This technique was used to create patterns in costumes of female forms and horse rider (Figure 19, 20).



Figure 20: Textures in costume created by filling background and unfilled design area  
Courtesy: Vijay Sharma



Figure 21: Texture in horse created by filling background and design area in separate colours,  
Courtesy: Boston Museum

## Conclusion

It is imperative to document technical and decorative characteristics of craft in order to restore the craft in its original form. Decorative characteristics were fine subtle nuances of craft, which makes craft invaluable and object of appreciation. It was also observed that in miniature style coverlets detailing, ornamentation and textures were conspicuous. These coverlets showed prominent use of metallic threads. On the other hand, folk style coverlets also exhibited strong innate sense of decoration with emphasis on creating textures using embroidery threads in varied colours.

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## About the Author

Rohini Arora is an Academician and Design Consultant. She has done research on 'Capacity Building of Artisans for Sustenance of Traditional Chamba Embroidery' under the supervision of Dr.Ritu Mathur and Dr.Veena Gupta and a Ph.D. degree has been awarded to her in Fabric and Apparel Science, by Lady Irwin College, Delhi University. Currently she is running a resource centre in Chamba, for the revival of craft 'Chamba Rumal: Handicraft of Chamba'