

# KANTHA

***RECYCLED AND EMBROIDERED TEXTILES OF BENGAL***

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

## **Exhibition Resource Guide**

### **What Are Kanthas?**

Kanthas are intricately stitched and quilted textiles from Bengal. Women made them in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for daily use in their own homes, or for gifts or commissions. They layered worn-out saris, dhotis or other cotton material, then embroidered and often quilted elaborate designs and motifs. The size and thickness of a kantha depended on its intended function, whether as a decorative bedcover, seating mat, wrapping cloth, or cover for a mirror or other valuables.

### **EXHIBITION THEMES**

#### **Traditional Process**

To make a kantha, one or more cotton textiles are laid on top of each other and then embroidered and sometimes quilted. Today, the term “kantha stitch” is used to describe a simple running stitch.

#### **Portrayal of Daily Life**

Kanthas symbolize both the emotional experiences and the aesthetic aspirations of their makers, often achieved quietly and privately during spare moments of a long day of domestic duties. Kantha capture elements of daily life in rural and urban Bengal, often with great individuality and a sense of humor.

#### **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

The term “kantha” means “rags” in Sanskrit, which reflects the fact the pieces are made up of cast-off saris or dhotis. 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 tasks such 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



Kantha  
Late 19th/early 20th century  
India, West Bengal or Bangladesh  
Cotton  
2006-81-407



Kantha  
Late 19th/early 20th century  
India, West Bengal or Bangladesh  
Cotton  
2006-81-404



Kantha  
Late 19th/early 20th century  
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Cotton  
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-12<sup>th</sup> grade and college groups and transportation reimbursements for Title 1 schools.

**Email:** [sfoley@mingei.org](mailto:sfoley@mingei.org)

**Call:** 619-704-7495

**Complete an online tour request form:** [www.mingei.org/education/museum-tour-request](http://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.”