The Kashmir Shawl:
Indian Fashion Reaches Europe

For centuries fine wool shawls were woven in the far northwestern mountain area called Kashmir (now the state of Jammu and Kashmir). The shawl weaving industry for all of India was centered there. The shawl was a vital component of properly costumed men and women, reaching its apogee as a fashion in India during the Mughal empire. Apparent expert shawl weavers were brought to Kashmir from Turkestan by the ruler Zain-ul-Abidin in the fifteenth century although wool shawls may have been woven there in earlier centuries (Irwin 1955: 2; Pauly in Yale 1975: 8). The design of the shawl, and the word shal/ from which it is derived, are of Persian origin. Originally the word applied more to the type of fabric used than to a specific garment. Shal meant any garment made of fine wool, especially goat wool. The best Kashmir shawls were made of pashmina, wool spun from the fleece of a goat that lives high in the mountains of Central Asia and Tibet, but not in Kashmir. This goat’s fleece fabric or a sheep’s wool fabric of similar texture has come to be known in English as cashmere because of its association with shawls produced there.

The saga of the shawl’s evolution and eventual decline over centuries is a fascinating one, linking fashion, art, and economics in a complex network of international trade. Originally a man’s garment, by the mid-nineteenth century, the shawl had been transformed into an enormous square draped over their gown by European women, its surface a riot of abstract floral patterning. Changes in design, form, and method of manufacture have been the subject of much scrutiny in recent years. John Irwin’s unearthing of William Moorcroft’s investigation of the weaving industry in the early nineteenth century has proved especially valuable (Irwin 1955, 1973).

The Mughal presence in India persisted for about four hundred years, and several emperors were famed as patrons of the arts. Akbar (r. 1556-1605) and Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) were especially competitive with the Persian courts for outstanding artistic displays. Indian arts subsequently became more divergent from those of Persia. The first European influences are attributable to herbas circulated among the courts, an idea noticed by Basil Gray as early as 1567 (cited by Pauly in Yale 1975: 27). This tendency toward increased naturalism solidified during the reign of Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707). By the eighteenth century, Mughal decorative design had become a model of restrained, delicate ornament, verging on the static. Architecture, textile design, and metalwork commonly employ floral motifs, reflecting the Islamic love of gardens. Flowers typical of early eighteenth century patterning appear in an Aymer painting in the Watson Collection (see Pl. 2.41): it shows Krishna leading Radha through a garden depicted as a number of individual, isolated plants arranged in tidy rows. Krishna’s patka (sash) features a similar motif on its border.

Several other paintings in the Watson Collection express the use of this type of ornamental design in garments and other textiles. Indeed, Mughal society was a particularly cloth-conscious group, and correspondence of ornamentation between textiles and other arts is frequently apparent. The basic garment forms for men were a fitted coat with full skirt worn over long trousers, with a patka around the waist, a shawl draped over the shoulders, and a turban wound around the head in one of a variety of fashions. These garments are depicted in a late eighteenth century manuscript illustration from the *Alamgir-nama* (Pl. 2.80) depicting Aurangzeb and his courtiers. The regular placement of small floral forms on the courtiers’ coats, for example, is quite clear. This painting also shows the Mughal penchant for using textiles in numerous contexts—canopy covering Aurangzeb’s throne, carpet, covers on the throne’s front, elephant and horse trappings, etc.

In a mid-eighteenth century Marwar painting, also in the Watson Collection (Pl. 2.45), we see similarly lavish use of textiles as canopies and awnings, as well as the elaborate use of intertwined floral design on what are apparent tiled or painted walls. The nobleman wears a turban, patka and shawl but rather than coat and pants he seems to be wearing two coats, the outer one shorter than the inner. It is interesting to note that while the border of his shawl features individual flowering plants in a single row, similar to the border of the patka worn by Krishna in Plate 2.41 discussed above, here the patka border is more complex, being deeper than that of the shawl and featuring more extensive floral ornamentation.

This delicate floral design is called buta (sometimes written *boteh*), literally, “flower.” In the early eighteenth century this slender form of flowering plant began to change to a denser form, with many flowers on one plant. The bright red shawl worn in a Kangra style painting of Raja Bir Singh (Pl. 2.86) is indicative of this trend, although the painting dates to the late eighteenth century. The buta design, often referred to as the “cone” or “pine” in the literature, cannot be a precise indicator of date, for “because a certain form came into vogue at a certain period, it did not necessarily follow that earlier types were superseded. In fact, it often happened that the older well-tried motives and patterns outlived the new” (Irwin 1955: 12). That is probably the situation here, for by the late eighteenth century,
the Kashmiri buta form had been heavily influenced by a form also called the cone, but more closely linked to a leaf or tree design common to Persian art.

Textiles dating before 1700 are extremely rare, and the Allen Collection owns no complete shawls that can be dated reliably to the eighteenth century. A small fragment with very narrow borders (Pl. 1.9) is the oldest Kashmiri piece in the collection. It is complete from selvage to selvage; its four-foot width and the delicate small flowers and leaves on the vine correspond to the side borders of shawls dated to the mid eighteenth century by Irwin (1973: Pls. 5-9). It is woven in twill tapestry, a discontinuous-welt technique with wefts inserted using toji or bobbins. The nineteenth century Kashmiri painting in Plate 1.10 shows the shawl loom in operation.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, the shawl was established as a fashionable garment in Europe. Numerous portraits by Ingres from the first decades of the century depict fashionable French women, their fine muslin empire style gowns the ideal background for the long, graceful shawl. Legend credits its introduction to Napoleon, who purchased Kashmiri shawls during his Egyptian campaign and brought them as gifts to his empress, Josephine. However, they were probably introduced several years earlier (Rossbach 1980: 17).

According to one of Josephine’s ladies-in-waiting, Mme. de Remusat, the empress “had from three to four hundred shawls... [which] she draped over her shoulders more gracefully than anyone else that I have ever seen.” Her opinion is visually substantiated by Prud’hon’s portrait, now in the Louvre. Whether possessing so many shawls was due to her own extravagance or her husband’s capricious habits is difficult to say; Mme. de Remusat goes on: “Bonaparte who thought she was too much covered by these shawls, would pull them off and sometimes threw them into the fire” (cited in Waugh 1968: 214).

From about 1820 on, the fashion for shawls in Europe began to affect shawl design, at first somewhat subtly and later with increasing abandon. Two fine shawls in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin collection effectively illustrate this trend. One of the shawls, while still restrained in its designs and amount of color, nonetheless differs significantly from earlier shawl types (Pl. 1.11). Executed primarily in twill tapestry technique, it also includes embroidered cone motifs. Irwin dates similar shawls to about 1830 (1973: Pls. 32, 33); Pauly and Corne date an almost identical piece to early nineteenth century and point up the parallel in design to “the shape of the Sasanian double-wing
motif" (Yale 1975: Pl. 11). This piece is an exceptional fine shawl, probably the only complete shawl discussed here that is made of asi tus pashmina, wild goat fleece. Rectangular in form, the soft undyed off-white of the field shimmers, outlined by delicately drawn borders of medium blue cones accented with red, green and tiny flecks of yellow. The large cones in the border face one direction, above these a row of smaller cones facing the opposite direction, which continues onto the side borders, creates a lyrical rhythmic quality which would be marvelous seen on a moving figure. Within each large cone are numerous plant forms, a star shape, and a flowering branch. The outline of the form is made up of tiny blossoms which come together to create a curved tip of four tendrils. The fineness of the wool and weaving, and the sensitive use of color and placement of motives make this shawl an example of a successful interrelation of design and weaving skills.

The other shawl from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin may date as early as 1820 (Pl. 1.12). It is similar in format to the earlier Mughal shawls, being rectangular, with end borders much deeper than the side borders; the field is undyed creamy white. However, the motives used are clearly divergent from previous tendencies in Kashmir shawl art. Rather than neatly defined cones of floral clusters or leaf forms, this shawl has pale green stylized cones with deeply bent tips, arranged in pairs. From within these long green cones, red cones emerge, their tips bent in the opposite direction and overlapping those of the green cones. Overlying this already complex interaction of forms are vines, arabesques and meanders in pink, blue and yellow, all on a red and purple ground. Every form is outlined in another color, and each contains many smaller floral elements. This main border design is set off by bands of an arabesque and palmette design, and an inside border of shorter, bent overlapping cones continues around the sides. The outside border was woven separately and sewn on, perhaps at a later date. This careful arrangement of positive and negative spaces, to the point that ground and motive become almost indistinguishable, is clearly a new direction in Kashmir shawl design, and is almost certainly the result of foreign demands. Color renderings brought back to England by William Moorcroft in 1823 show that specific shawl patterns were created not only for the European market but for Russia and Persia as well (Irwin 1973: figs. 6-13; Karpinski 1963). The increased depth of the borders on all four sides, the degree of penetration of design into the center
field, and the addition of tabs of solid color at the ends all point toward trends that continued to develop in shawls made for export throughout the century (Irwin 1973: pls. 24, 25; Yale 1975: pl. 16).

A twill tapestry shawl from the Watson Collection in the Elvehjem Museum of Art may have been woven for the Persian market in the mid-nineteenth century or even woven in Persia (Pl. 1.13). Except for its rectangular shape, it bears little resemblance to the Mughal-inspired designs of the shawls in Plates 1.9, 1.11 and 1.12 above. The field is densely patterned and the end borders are apparent very shallow. (These borders, however, have been cut and originally may have been a great deal deeper.) The layout is a multicolor warp-striped field in which wide light aqua, pink and offwhite stripes alternate with narrower red ones. This field is overlaid with diagonal, interlinking tan vines to which are appended red and blue flowers; in each corner is a quarter circle. Stripes, quarter circles, and vines are all filled with different small floral and leaf motifs. This shawl is a complex variation or combination of several, more standard shawl types made for foreign, non-European markets.

Pauly and Corrie illustrate a Kashmir shawl with quarter circles at the corners, dating it to the early nineteenth century (Yale 1975: Pl. 13). However, that shawl is square in shape and features a circle in the center of the field which the Watson shawl lacks. That format is known as chand-dar, 'moon' shawl (Irwin 1973: 15). Nor does the Yale shawl have a striped ground, but it does have a diagonal allover vine pattern; the interstices of the connecting vines are filled with curved cone motives, not blossoms, as on the Elvehjem shawl. Irwin illustrates a detail of a moon shawl in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which has a striped ground but no vine pattern (1973: Pl. 15); the borders and infill of the circular sections are very similar to the Yale shawl. He further states, citing Moorcroft, that a densely patterned ground, "in which the pattern almost completely covers and conceals the colour of the ground" (ibid.: 15) sometimes with a trellised field and central and corner medallions, was favored by Persian consumers. He illustrates such a fabric used to make up a man's coat (ibid.: Pl. 38).

A twill shawl illustrated by Pauly and Corrie further the idea of the Elvehjem shawl's Persian flavor. In this Yale shawl, which they identify as "for the Persian market, or of Persian origin, late 18th
century’ (Yale 1975: Pl. 9), each stripe is filled with floral patterning that is quite similar to that in the quarter circles of the Watson shawl. The stripes themselves are of one broad width, however, and are not separated by narrower stripes as they are in the Watson piece.

Two pieces discussed by Rossbach in The Art of Paisley, both in the collection of the University of California, Berkeley, resemble the Elvehjem piece rather closely. He associates a striped layout with Turkish rather than Persian influence. One shawl, he calls “Near Eastern...described as a Cashmere” and dates it to the nineteenth century (Rossbach 1980: 88). It has the same striped format of alternating wide and narrow stripes as does the Elvehjem piece; in it, too, “scroll-like motives are superimposed over the stripes, with secondary motives adjusting to both the stripes and the scrolls” (ibid.). Since only a detail is illustrated, it is not known whether it features circles in the corners. However, Rossbach illustrates another shawl with multi-color striped layout, meandering vine, corner quarter circles and central circle, and an end border of the same serrated leaf and carnation design as the Elvehjem piece (ibid.: 90-91). It is identified only as a “Cashmere-type shawl” and not dated.

Whether the introduction of the square as a common shape is linked to the European market or to Islamic custom is difficult to establish with certainty. As fashionable European women’s dress moved toward a fuller silhouette, it provided a suitable backdrop over which to display a large, square shape. Rather than the former four by ten feet size, after the 1830s six feet square increasingly became a standard. Pauli’s attribution of the square format to seventeenth century Mughal canopies (see Pl. 2.80) cannot be discounted (Yale 1975: Pl. 17), but she offers it only as one theory, nor does she try to explain why this should not become a garment form until two centuries later. The square format has persisted into modern times for canopies (see Pl. 1.8) but the common shape of Indian shawls is still rectangular. We witness from this time forward many and more drastic changes in shawl design as well. The early square shawls made for Europe have a relatively shallow border on all four sides (Pls. 1.14/Col. Pl. 1.2, 1.15, and 1.18), about fifteen to twenty-four inches deep, leav-
ing a large expanse of plain solid color area in the central field. The motives used on these shawls resemble those of the shawls of the 1820s only slightly. The cone form is present, but rather than repeated routinely across the border or interspersed with smaller motives, its presence is all but obscured by prominent arabesques and curving tendrils. The cone motif by the 1840s has become clearly of secondary importance.

There can be little doubt that the drastic change in design sensibilities of Kashmiri weavers was not of their own doing. Numerous travelers to Kashmir in the mid-nineteenth century report on the presence there of foreign agents, particularly French, who commissioned more marketable designs. As Irwin has pointed out (1973: 15, 16), rather than being "designed for eternity in the unchanging East" as an 1852 English magazine article would have it, almost all nineteenth century Kashmir shawls were designed in direct response to foreign tastes. In 1850, Simpson reported that "the French design patterns and send them out to Cashmere for execution" (ibid.).

It should be noted here that the Kashmiri shawl weavers had little say not only in the design of the garments, but even in their choice of vocation. They were weavers not just by trade or profession, but by caste. Throughout the nineteenth century, the shawl weaving industry was increasingly dominated by middlemen, both Indian and foreign; the weavers themselves made very little profit. In the 1830s the Jacquard loom was adopted in Paisley, Scotland for shawl production (Pauly in Yale 1975: 19). After the onslaught of mechanized shawl weaving in Britain and France, the Kashmir shawls had to be custom-made for the European market if they were to compete with the mass-produced goods.

Kashmiri weavers invented a means to produce complex patterns more quickly. Tilikar or pieced shawls date from about 1830 on. Rather than weaving an entire shawl in one piece, building up the pattern by minute degrees as required in twill-tapestry, weavers wove smaller plain or patterned segments. These were then cut apart and pieced together in a sequence deemed aesthetically pleasing and economically viable by the design agent. After that step was completed, the shawl was turned over to an embroiderer (rafugar) who carefully outlined or disguised the joins with ornamental stitching, or even created entire pattern areas.

The shawl in Plate 1.14/Color Plate 1.2 is a good example of tilikar technique. It features a plain red field, surrounded by a delicate wavy inner border of solid color areas embroidered with tiny flowers and cones. Sewn to this is a second, six-inch wide border woven in twill tapestry where undulating vines intertwine with small curved cones and leaf shapes. The multicolored motives and white background alike are filled with tiny flecks of colors. Periodically, cone shapes cut from fabric of similar design but with different color background are inset. Finally, the outer border features the multiple niches common from this time on, with multicolored embroidery on various solid color grounds. This border is in turn split by an undulating solid black line.

1.14 Shawl
Detail of corners
Kashmir, 1840-50
72 x 72 in.
Color illustration
Twill weave, twill tapestry cut and reassembled (tilikar); embroidered Wool; red center, multicolor borders
WFI 1050

1.15 Shawl
Kashmir, 1840-50
66 x 67 in.
Twill weave, twill tapestry cut and reassembled (tilikar); embroidered Wool; black center, multicolor borders
WFI 1045
1.16 Shawl
Kashmir, 1850-70
77 x 74 in.

Twill tapestry cut and reassembled
(tikar); embroidered
Wool; black center, multicolor

State Historical Society of Wisconsin
49.215
1.17 Shawl
Paisley style, probably Paisley, Scotland, 1850-70
80 x 67½ in.
Supplementary weft, woven with Jacquard mechanism
Wool; black center, multicolor
WJGB 2254
There is another design feature that indicates the shawls in Plate 1.14/Color Plate 1.2 and Plate 1.15 were produced to cater to European fashionable tastes. When the entire shawl is viewed flat, one sees the right side of two adjoining borders and the wrong side of the other two. The shawl was constructed to be worn folded roughly in half along the diagonal; thus folded, the wrong side of the top half becomes the right side, with two borders visible one above the other, to be draped over the shoulders and down the back of a crinoline-skirted lady of fashion. The size of the shawl and the depth of the border expand with the fullness of the skirt into mid-century.

Plate 1.16 shows a shawl dating from 1850-70. Shawls made after mid-century show increasingly deep borders, to the extent that the field practically disappears. The limit to which the use of tilkar patchwork technique is extended also increases. Other shawls have more minute areas cut from different loom pieces, but the long, curved undulating white and black arcs that unify this shawl’s patterns must have been difficult for even a skilled embroiderer to control.

A comparison of this shawl with one woven on a Jacquard loom, shown in Plate 1.17, serves to point up the close relationship between the designs of Kashmiri hand looms and European mechanized looms. Both shawls feature an elaborate, convoluted interplay of motives symmetrically arrayed around the small black center, yet one was made on a simple frame loom with no labor-saving aids, and the other on a complex mechanized loom which then represented the vanguard of weaving technology. This design represents what has come to be considered typical Paisley design named for the weaving center at Paisley, Scotland. In some cases, the designs are copied so exactly from one type to another that only by using technical criteria can one tell them apart easily.

1.18 Shawl fragment
Detail of reverse
Kashmir, 1840-50
25 x 17 1/2 in.
Twill tapestry cut and reassembled (tilkar), embroidered
Wool, multicolor
WFI 1056
Plate 1.18 shows the reverse of a tilikar shawl fragment. The long bent tips of the cones, together with the complexity of that motif’s interaction with symmetrical, foliate forms, accentuated by the introduction of several shades of violet date it to about 1850-60. By looking at the reverse, we can see all the hallmarks of tilikar shawls: the tiny ridges created by the double-interlock that is characteristic of twill tapestry, the floats confined to pattern areas, the pieced construction, and the added embroidery.

These features can be contrasted with the floats that transverse the back of the Jacquard woven shawl shown in Plate 1.19. Each weft runs the full selvedge to selvedge distance, being pulled to the surface only where needed for the design. In some cases extremely long floats would be left on the reverse. If a large number of colors were used infrequently, this would also result in considerable bulk on the reverse and additional weight. For that reason the weft floats were usually clipped between pattern areas, leaving the ends exposed. They are held in place only by the tightly beaten wefts around them. The decline of the Kashmir hand-loom industry and the rise of the British industry went hand in hand. Ed Rossbach’s recent investigation led him to wonder (1980:65):

How could so many painfully laborious Cashmere shawls have been woven? . . . How could Europeans have demanded this of the Asians? . . . Since weavers of India were well acquainted with drawlooms and were highly skilled in their operation, why did they not turn to hand looms to compete with the Europe drawloom shawls? The Cashmeres remain as awesome accomplishments of the human hand, forever expressing Europe’s enchantment with its new machines and India’s desperate, feverish will to compete using its ancient hand methods.