



Fig.17.1 : Embroidered Lucknow, Lucknow
early 19th century, gilt thread and strip, spangles
twisted metal-thread cord, purls, sequins
glass beads and polychrome silk yarns
on deep red velvet, 158 x 52 cm
Jnana-Pravaha Museum, Varanasi, Acc. No. 2013.43

*L*ucknow, *City of Illusion* is the title of a book of 19th-century photographs that allows a rare glimpse of the city's ephemeral architecture and its illusory ambience. Illusion, because photographs of the city taken during the 19th century help us recall an almost magical fairy tale like city. Its topography dotted with domed mosques, extensive palace complexes with baffle like gateways and walls, elaborate gardens with follies, vast Shia religious shrines, tombs, homes of the aristocracy, the British Residency, dwellings of assorted Europeans besides innumerable structures of bewildering shape and size. The city was a unique pastiche of European architecture planted in the east under the stylistic diktat of Nawabi patronage that was as much occidental in the orient as it was oriental in the occident. A former capital to the region of Awadh and presently of the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the topography of the city was to forever change at the hands of the British after they quelled the Uprising of 1857. Wanton deliberate destructions have left no trace had it not been for photographs and other images that survive. To this corpus of memorabilia, we can add two unusual topographic embroideries that depict the city, its fabled structures and its rich riverine culture along the Gomti that meanders around the city articulating its name.

These embroideries sit across two continents, both fairly similar in the scenes they portray though of different size and shape. One at Jnana-Pravaha (JP) Museum, Varanasi and the subject of this note while the other is at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London. The former embroidery is rectangular in shape and measures 158 x 52 cm, Fig.17.1. The London piece measures 182 x 173.5 cm with its gold fringes. The only evidentiary information available comes to us from the London specimen, Acc. No. 0762(IS), and the museum dates the textile to c.1855. The museum's catalogue entry for the piece states: *Karchob/Takt Kosh/Kishtinuma by Sherendazka (embroidered in metal wrapped thread in Latin script and repeated in ink in Persian script on label on reverse of textile)*.¹ The label in effect summarising that the textile was made of *karchob* embroidery, for use as a *takt kosh/takht posh* (seat/throne cover) with designs of *kishti* (boats) made by Sherendazka. I assume the improbable name of the *zardoz* is a Latin corruption of the Persian original. The museum's records further specify that the object was transferred to the V&A from the Indian Museum in 1879. An 1880 register entry reads: Room 9, Inside Case 66)'0762. Carpet. Crimson Velvet ground, embroidered with gold; Benares. 8473.

The mention of Benares/Varanasi is what links us to the second specimen at JP. This fragment is faded with losses to its crimson/maroon velvet pile. The central velvet panel with its embroidered cityscape is surrounded by four borders in an off white satin silk embroidered with metallic yarn, *dabka*, glass beads, and polychrome silk threads. The border design with a band of alternating big and small eight petalled flowers has a pink (faded) silk core and other foliage motifs. The textile has a further end panel which holds within it a distinct embroidered circle split into four quadrants with flowers and sprigs on the same velvet ground (3 circle on either side with 8 spokes in the V&A example); its borders a continuation from the main field. The differences between the two embroideries besides their size and

shape as previously recounted are the presence of two identical end-pieces in the V&A sample while the JP fragment has one end piece, the other possibly lost. The two textiles while outwardly similar have variations in the scenes they depict; both focus on the Gomti and the multitude of boats floating on it and are crisscrossed by a depiction of Lucknow's fabled stone bridge, well documented in 19th century photographs. The JP fragment clearly shows the bridge's 13 pointed arches.² While called a stone bridge, it was made of bricks on brick piers over stone coping.³ Believed to have been built c. 1780 during the reign of Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula (r.1775-1797), it was replaced in 1912 by the Hardinge bridge popularly called the Lalwala-pul (red bridge). The precise depiction of the bridge to some extent informs us that the textile must in all probability predate the newer construction. The V&A example depicts the bridge too, but here the number of arches is curiously much higher at 18.

Mapping the several sites and structures seen across this embroidery has currently not been conclusive but attempting to plot the structures depicted alongside an actual map of Lucknow from the mid 19th century offers us some clues. While photographs give us a good sense of the layout of the city with its massive structures, they however don't inform us of the distance between sites as observed in panoramas and from elevated views. This also complicates the precise identification of depicted structures. Scenes on the central panel of the JP fragment display a curious mix of people, animals, architecture and busy life on the river. If we view the fragment with the additional end panel to our right, the activity on the river includes the presence of large metal thread embroidered sail boats. Near the left end of the scene, spanning the river is the afore-mentioned stone bridge. The elaborate structures on the bridge's lower bank resemble the remains of the now lost Panch Mahalla gateway leading towards the Machhi Bhawan with the distinct form of the Rumi Darwaza visible at the end. If this layout logic holds true then the elaborate structure to the right of the bridge at the lower end has to be the British Residency with its swagged walls and gate with guard standing beside a cannon on wheels. The opposite side, i.e the upper end of the fragment shows cantonment lands alongside gardens and European style structures or hunting pavilions. The scenes here include riders on horseback spearing wild boar and other depictions of a seated figure on a European style chair petting a peacock and a deer(?) with another figure under the same tree. Thick shrubs along the river banks, slender palm trees and other foliage, avian life and fauna animate the main field of our textile.

The extensive riverine traffic depicted is a reminder that even in the 19th century the river was an important means of transport both of people and goods. Unusually shaped steamships like the fish-shaped boat and the Nawab's pinnace were more elegantly shaped contraptions for pleasure sailing. But it was the robust *budgerow* (keeless large boats) that was used to transport both goods and people, albeit in much slower mode. Many of these boats were accompanied by other smaller boats often called *pulwah/pulwar* that held provisions and staff. The JP textile fragment depicts 5 large embroidered boats with one damaged and almost rendered invisible and several smaller canoes and rafts interspersed with ducks.

The V&A example is in much better condition with its almost intact and untarnished metal thread embroidery, velvet pile depicts similar structures.⁴ The residency depiction is better expressed with two clear gateways at the extremities with one leading up to the river which is a more accurate depiction. A fuller examination of this piece is however beyond the scope of this paper. What is however

intriguing is the marked difference in condition of the two embroideries? Is the visibly older looking JP fragment an earlier piece that was recreated afresh subsequently and hence in better condition at the V&A? More technical analysis will lead us to a better understanding of the two pieces. But their description as seat / throne covers is befuddling as they seem more topographic and almost like a piece of art perhaps commissioned by a European living at Lucknow. The depiction of the intact residency structures in both examples allude to a pre-1857 date. Additionally, these would also have been very uncomfortable to sit on, if indeed were meant to be seat covers.

Metal thread embroidery was a craft that was practiced across Awadh, both Lucknow and Benares could well be places where these two pieces were created. Embroidery with the use of gold/silver wire or *zari* is known as *zardozi*. The technique involves the use of simple handle needle and includes the use of metal wires of varying thicknesses besides many other materials. Other related materials used include *gota* and *kinari*, gold threads, beads, spangles, seed pearls, semi-precious stones, etc. When applied to heavier fabrics for use as furnishings as here for the so called seat covers the technique is referred to as *karchobi*, usually on velvet or silk with a sturdier lining cloth underneath. In both the pieces, the outlines and infilled details of the buildings, bridge, boats, human figures, flora and fauna, etc are brought alive by the use of slightly raised metal threads that give the textile a three-dimensional quality. This suits the purpose if indeed the textile was created to represent the city and to be viewed it as a topographic entity from a particular stand point. Perhaps the structures depicted were connected to our elusive patron's life? More work and careful examination of the two textiles is definitely needed and like all maps many a viewpoint from many a standpoint might yet yield further results.

References

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Fig.17.2 : detail: Fig.17.1



Fig.17.3 : detail: Fig.17.1