



Textile Museum of Canada

CANADIAN TAPESTRY  
THE FABRIC OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

## Online Exhibition - Glossary

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**Abaca:** A fibre derived from the leaves of a relative of the wild banana plant, native to the Philippines. The fibres, also known as Manila hemp, are long, lustrous and do not swell when wet.

**Acetate:** A synthetic fibre used to make fabric with a silk-like appearance, which resists stretching and shrinking, and is moderately absorbent.

**Acrylic:** A synthetic fibre used to make warm and lightweight wool-like fabrics. It is often used in place of wool due to its strength and affordability.

**Alpaca:** A domesticated camelid with long silky fleece. The hair fibre from the fleece of the animal can be used to make fine wool.

**Appliqué:** A technique that uses various fabrics that have been cut and stitched onto each other.

**Asymmetry or symmetry-breaking:** The absence of symmetry in a design or a failure to meet expectations of symmetry. Minor asymmetries and symmetry-breaking occur frequently in textiles and contribute to the liveliness of a design.

**Backstrap:** A loom with tension to stretch the warp ends; the tension is applied by the weight of the weaver's body.

**Bark cloth:** A type of textile made by pounding a sheet of bark until it is soft, thin and pliable.

**Basket:** a container that is hand woven with pliable materials, often some form of wicker, willow branches or reeds.

**Bast fibres:** Strong, woody fibres obtained from the stems of certain plants.

**Batik:** A method of dyeing native to Indonesia, which uses hot liquid wax drawn onto fabric. When the fabric is dyed it cannot reach the areas that have been waxed. When the wax is removed, the design becomes visible against the newly coloured background.

**Bead embroidery:** A technique for stringing beads on thread, singly or in groups, and stitching them down to a base fabric.

**Beater:** A device for packing the weft threads into the cloth as it is woven. On some looms the beater is a flat stick, on a shaft loom it is a part of the loom and holds the reed.

**Block or stamp:** A piece of wood, metal or other relatively hard material that has been carved with a design. When the block or stamp is covered with ink, dye or paint and pressed onto a surface, it produces an impression.

**Bobbin lace:** A type of lace that is made on a pillow. The maker holds bobbins (attached to threads) pinned by one end to the pillow and manipulates them in either crosses or twists to create the pattern.

**Boteh:** A pear- or tear-shaped figure that inspired the "paisley" design used in patterns for Oriental rugs and many other textiles. Some specialists consider the origin of the motif to be a pear or pinecone, while others suggest a Zoroastrian fire bird with a long, curled, peacock-like tail.

**Braiding:** A technique of combining multiple strands into one larger and stronger strand in a regular patterned order.

**Burlap:** A coarse, strong woven cloth made of jute, hemp or flax. Burlap is often used to create bags or as reinforcement in linoleum.

**Buttonhole stitch:** A stitch used to outline motifs, it is also known as blanket stitch. This versatile stitch looks like a ladder when used in double form. When blanket stitch is worked around a point it forms a circle.

**Camelid:** A member of the *Camelidae* family, to which the llama and camel belong.

**Carded:** Fleece that has been drawn across wire-toothed cards in order to align the fibres prior to spinning. Fleece that has been carded and then spun produces soft, fuzzy "woolen" yarns.

**Carpet:** See rug.

**Cellulosic fibres:** Cellulose is one of the main elements of plants, and is suitable for textile making in many different forms. Cellulosic fibres come from seeds, stems, leaves and bark.

**Chintz:** A plain-weave cotton fabric printed with floral designs, usually with a glazed finish.

**Coiling:** A technique, usually in basket making, in which pliable strands are wrapped around bundles of other strands to create a mat or container.

**Combed:** Fleece that has been combed in order to align the fibres prior to spinning. Fleece that has been combed and then spun produces hard, fine "worsted" yarns.

**Complementary warp:** Warps of two different colours are set up in two complementary sets that are integral to the structure of the fabric. Unlike supplementary weft, there is no ground cloth on top of which the pattern is created. Each warp has its counterpart on the opposite face of the cloth, and the design is achieved from the two sets of warps interlacing with the weft. The result is a design with the colours in reverse on each face.

**Cotton:** Belongs to the genus *Gossypium* of the *Malvaceae* family. Cotton was domesticated in the Americas at least 4,500 years ago. The seed pod of the plant ripens and splits, revealing

a boll of white or coloured lint. The raw fibres kink and interlock naturally, making them easy to spin into yarn.

**Couching:** Threads laid over a pattern line are held down by short stitches. Couching is often used with metallic threads that would otherwise cut the cloth, or bend out of shape if they pierced the cloth.

**Cross stitch:** A very popular stitch also known as Berlin or sampler stitch. Cross stitch is used to fill areas, and usually involves counting threads in the base fabric to make sure every stitch is the same size.

**Dobby:** A loom usually containing at least eight shafts, with pegs instead of pedals to control the raising or lowering of the shafts. The pegs allow many more combinations of shafts, which mean more complicated structures can be woven.

**Double weave:** A weave that produces two textiles simultaneously, one above the other. In patterned double weave, the two textiles change places to create the design.

**Drawloom:** A loom with the capability of weaving complex patterns, made possible by the addition of sets of extra shafts. Historically, two people operated the drawloom; one person sat above the loom and manipulated the warp threads to create more pattern combinations.

**Embroidery:** A process of applying decorative stitches to cloth by sewing. The word “stitch” comes from the Old English verb *stice* – to prick or puncture – and the puncturing of cloth with a sharp implement is the basis of all embroidery.

**Feather stitch:** A looped stitch, worked alternately from left to right. Also called coral stitch.

**Felt:** A fabric made by matting yarns through heat, moisture and agitation, rather than by interlacing threads.

**Felting:** A process of creating a fabric by making fibres mesh together through heat, moisture and agitation.

**Fibre:** A thin, flexible strand that can be combined with other fibres to make a textile.

**Fleece:** A raw fibre that is usually shorn from a wool-producing animal such as a sheep or alpaca. After washing, fleece is carded or combed and then made into felt or spun into yarn.

**Heddle:** Also called a needle, an individual string or metal piece with a hole or space through which a warp thread is drawn. One heddle on a loom takes one warp thread.

**Hemp:** A fibre from the cannabis plant that is grown to produce food, fuel and fibre. Hemp fibre is strong and durable.

**Hooked Rug:** A rug created by pulling yarn or strips of fabric through a mesh backing, usually burlap.

**Hooking:** Refers to a technique for pulling loops of yarn or cut fabric strips through the spaces in a woven ground cloth, usually burlap, to create a thick surface texture.

**Indigo:** A blue dye obtained from the leaves of the several varieties of indigo plants, which grow in subtropical regions all over the world. The leaves contain *indican*, which is insoluble in water and has to be rendered useable through fermentation. One of the most ancient dyes, indigo can produce dark blue colours on fabrics of all kinds including cellulosic fibres. The Woad plant, native to temperate zones, also contains *indican*, but in lesser quantities.

**Inlay:** A supplementary weft that does not cross the entire width of the cloth, but is laid in by hand only where it appears in the design.

**Interlacing:** Two or more long, thin pliable elements travel over, under and around each other to form a new object. Interlacing is a general term, applied to any object created this way, e.g., a basket, braid, or knitted or woven blanket.

**Jacquard:** A loom that makes it possible to control each warp thread, so each and every warp end can be raised or lowered at will to form an intricate design.

**Jute:** A long and shiny fibre that can be spun into strong, coarse threads. The plant and fibre are both called jute and are grown in warm and humid climates.

**Kapok:** A member of the tropical tree family called *Malvaceae*. Since it cannot be spun, the fluffy fibre found in the kapok tree's seedpods is used as filling and insulation.

**Knitting:** Intertwining threads in a series of connected loops. Knitting is a single interlace system since only one thread is used at a time.

**Knotted pile:** A structure used primarily for rugs. On a loom, a row of knots tied individually around two warp ends alternates with a row or two of plain weave wefts to give stability to the rug. A rug knot can be symmetrical (Turkish or Ghiordes) or asymmetrical (Persian).

**Knotting:** A technique of making textiles with knotting rather than weaving or knitting. Macramé is a popular form of knotting.

**Lace:** An openwork cloth with a design formed by a network of threads made by hand, or on special lace machinery with bobbins, needles or hooks.

**Linen:** A fabric made with fibres from the flax plant.

**Loom:** A device for weaving with a means of holding one set of threads (the warps) in tension so another set of threads (the wefts) can be woven into them one at a time.

**Looping:** An ancient technique (similar to knitting or netting) of interlacing a single yarn in loops with a previous row of loops to make a fabric.

**Madder:** A Eurasian plant with roots that contain the red colouring agent “alizarin.” Madder, or “*alizar*” in Arabic, is the basic colourant for Turkey Red – a dye process that was famous before the 19th-century invention of synthetic dyes because it was vivid and long-lasting.

**Mordant:** A substance (usually a metallic salt) that creates a chemical bridge between fibre and dye. A mordant, from the French word *mordre*, “to bite,” permanently fixes dye to fibre.

**Motif:** An image or shape that is usually recurring. Motifs can be repeated to form different patterns.

**Muslin:** An inexpensive, plain-woven cotton textile.

**Natural dye:** A dye in which the colouring agent is extracted from plant, animal or mineral source. Some of the most ancient dyes include indigo leaves used for blues, and madder roots or cochineal insects for reds. With very few exceptions, natural dyes are more effective on protein fibres like silk and wool than on cellulosic fibres like cotton and linen.

**Needle lace:** A type of lace that is made with needle and thread in variations of buttonhole and other stitches on a backing fabric. When the lace is complete, it is cut away from the backing fabric.

**Netting:** A process of making nets that is similar to knitting, that is, one thread is used at a time to loop back into other threads to make a relatively open web.

**Nylon:** The first completely synthetic fibre ever developed. Nylon cloth or yarn is made from a family of high-strength, resilient synthetic polymers. It is a strong, easy-care, pliable fibre used in hosiery, sportswear and canvas.

**Paper mulberry tree:** A tree that grows in the Pacific Islands and other tropical regions. Its inner bark is used to make bark cloth, or *tapa*.

**Paste resist:** a starch paste is applied to a cloth’s surface to act as a resist when the cloth is dyed. The paste is removed when dyeing is complete.

**Pattern:** In textiles, a pattern is a series of repeating images or motifs on cloth, created either by the fabric’s structure or by a surface treatment such as painting or printing.

**Piecing:** A term to describe a textile that is made up of pieces of cloth sewn together.

**Piña:** A fibre from pineapple plant leaves. Textiles made from piña are exclusive to the Phillipines.

**Plain Weave:** Also called tabby, plain weave is the most common textile weave and the most basic over-one-under-one weave.

**Plaiting:** A basket or braid technique using interlacing strands to form a plait or a mat.

**Plied thread:** A thread composed of multiple strands of spun threads, twisted together in the opposite direction of that in which they were spun.

**Polyester:** Introduced in the early 1950s, polyester is a manufactured fibre notable for its strength (though not as strong as nylon), excellent resiliency and high abrasion resistance.

**Prayer rug:** A rug or carpet with the design of a niche or arch at one end, which may serve Muslim worshippers in prayer.

**Printing:** A technique of stamping a surface with an object covered in ink, dye or paint.

**Quilt:** The word “quilt” comes from the Latin *culcita*, meaning a bed, mattress or cushion. In North America, quilts have become the name for bedcovers made of layers of cloth sewn together.

**Quilting:** A technique of sewing through multiple layers of cloth in lines or patterns to fix them together, often with padding in between.

**Raffia:** A member of the Palm (*Arecaceae*) family of primarily tropical trees, shrubs, and vines. The African palm tree (*Raphia ruffia*) has large leaves that yield a fibre used for mats, baskets and other products.

**Ramie:** A fibre derived from a tall relative of the nettle plant, native to tropical Asia. Ramie is cultivated for the fibre located in its woody stems, which resembles flax.

**Rayon:** A manufactured fibre composed of regenerated cellulose that is derived from wood pulp, cotton linters or other vegetable matter.

**Reed:** A frame on a loom that has fine spaces through which the warp threads are drawn. The reed separates the threads and keeps them in order.

**Reed:** A tall grass with hollow stems used for baskets, mats and furniture.

**Resist dyeing:** “Resist” patterns arise from efforts to exclude colour from parts of a cloth’s surface. This is done by either applying paste (*adire*), applying wax (*batik*), or by stitching and gathering or tightly tying areas of the cloth (*tritik*, *plangi* and *shibori* are some of the terms for this technique). After the resist is completed, the cloth is dyed.

**Reverse appliqué:** A technique that involves cutting through layers of fabric to expose parts of underlying layers to form a design.

**Roller:** The part of a printing machine that prints patterns on textiles. A design is etched on a roller, and when the roller is inked and rolled onto a fabric, a repeating pattern is produced.

**Rug:** A rug is a floor covering, but in central Asia the term can also be applied to tent furnishings, bags for transport and animal trappings. The terms rug and carpet are used interchangeably.

**Running stitch:** A straight line of stitches used as an outline or frame for more complicated stitches.

**Satin stitch:** A filling stitch used to cover large areas with colour.

**Screen:** A frame upon which fine, permeable fabric is stretched. When part of the screen is blocked with a physical barrier, or with emulsion, ink is forced through on to a surface to produce a design.

**Sewing:** Fastening with either hand or machine stitches.

**Shaft:** A frame in a loom that holds metal or string heddles that have eyelets. When a shaft is raised certain warp threads are raised. If the loom has two shafts, it can make only plain weave cloth. More shafts increase the complexity of the textiles that can be produced.

**Shaft:** A loom that contains at least two shafts to allow the formation of a shed across the width of the warp by means of a pedal.

**Shed:** The space created for the “shuttle” when a group of warp yarns are raised on a loom.

**Shisha:** A series of stitches that affixes mirrors to cloth. *Shisha* work is particular to India. Small, usually round mirrors (but also square or triangular) are fixed to the surface of the cloth by vertical and horizontal stitches. Then this grid is pulled apart by chain, buttonhole or cretan stitches to make a smooth frame for the mirror.

**Shuttle:** A holder for the weft threads when cloth is woven.

**Silk:** A fibre produced by silkworm larvae to spin their cocoons prior to pupating. The fibres can be spun into fine threads to make fabric.

**Slit tapestry:** A variation of tapestry weave in which the wefts do not interlock at the intersection of adjacent colour areas so slits appear in the weaving at horizontal colour changes. The Imperial Chinese version, done in very fine silk, is known as *kesi*.

**Spindle:** A thin, tapered stick used during the spinning process. When it is twirled, the spindle causes fibres attached to it to twist together and form a thread.

**Spinning:** The way most threads are made, i.e., by twisting clumps of short fibres while drafting, or pulling them out.

**Stencil:** A method of producing an image by applying paint or ink through a cut stencil on to cloth. The stencil can be made out of plastic, metal, cardboard, etc., and is cut with a motif, pattern or lettering.

**Stenciled resist:** A process of applying a starch paste to a cloth's surface through a stencil to create patterns that resist the dye when the cloth is dipped into the dye bath.

**Stitch:** A stitch is created by looping or knotting thread while sewing through fabric with a needle.

**Supplementary weft:** Creates a design by floating extra wefts over the ground weave without disturbing the structure of the weave. This is done on the loom and is called brocading. The decorative weft can change colour in each row resulting in a variety of colours throughout the design. Brocade is a type of supplementary weft weaving.

**Symmetry:** A fundamental organizing principle that means balanced proportions. Symmetry exists both in nature and culture. The analysis of symmetry leads to an understanding of patterns according to the basic principles of repetition.

**Synthetic dye:** A dye in which the colouring agent is manufactured. Some of the synthesized compounds (such as indigo for blue jeans) are identical to those found in nature.

**Synthetic fibres:** A class of fibres that is manufactured or chemically synthesized.

**Tapestry:** A structure in which warp yarns are covered with weft yarns, and the changes in colours of the weft yarns create the design.

**Tapestry:** Any loom can be used for tapestry, but the simplest kind is a frame to hold the warp threads in tension with no shafts, heddles or beater. In this case, the wefts are beaten in by the weaver with a comb.

**Textile:** A textile, also called fabric or cloth, is a general term for an item made by the interlacement of long, thin, pliable strands to make a two-dimensional structure.

**Thread resist:** Refers to the process of binding warp or weft threads (or sometimes both) to resist the dye bath, and then dyeing the threads to create patterns when they are subsequently woven. *Ikat* (Indonesia), *kasuri* (Japan) and *abr* (Central Asia) are local terms for the thread-resist technique.

**Tie dying:** A process of binding areas of fabric to create patterns and then dipping the fabric in dye. The areas that are tied will resist the dye.

**Twill Tapestry:** A variation of tapestry weave in which the wefts create a twill pattern.

**Twill:** Weft yarn passes over two or more warp yarns and advances to the left or right in a row to make diagonal lines in the weaving. Denim is a well-known twill weave cloth.

**Twist:** The term referring to the direction of a spun thread. A thread spun to the left is Z-spun – to the right, S-spun.

**Velvet:** A warp-pile weave in which the pile is produced by a special warp raised in loops above the ground-weave by bars. The loops are cut or left uncut after weaving.

**Warp:** A set of threads that are strung on a loom to hold them in tension, so weft threads can be interlaced with them to form a woven structure.

**Weaving:** The process of making fabric by interlacing a series of warp yarns with weft yarns at right angles.

**Weft:** A set of threads that is interlaced with warp threads, one at a time, to form a woven structure.

**Wicker:** Flexible and slender willow or cane twigs that are woven together to make furniture, baskets and other three dimensional objects.

**Yarn:** A cord of twisted or spun fibres. A thick cord is known as string, or rope; a thinner, more pliable cord is known as yarn, and is often used in knitting and weaving; a very thin cord is known as thread, and is used in fine weaving and sewing.