

vital products

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pride of place
gifts for mothers, daughters, sisters, partners

carved in stone
unique wedding gift from Kenya



carved in stone

Steeped in ancient symbolism, the Kisii stone wedding sculpture is a traditional marriage gift from Kenya. The two loops represent the two people that are joined through marriage but who remain unique individuals. The smaller loop, symbolising the bride, rests under the large loop (the groom), suggestive of the role of husband as hunter and protector. The traditional blessing that accompanies the sculpture says: May the union last as long as the stone from which the sculpture is carved.

This wedding sculpture is made in Nyamarambe, a small village near Kisii in western Kenya and the home of the 150-member Nyabigena Carvers Cooperative. Carvers from the village workshop extract the stone – commonly, although technically inaccurately, referred to as soapstone – from nearby quarries. It is then carved with hand chisels, small picks and clubs of wood. The village women then complete the process, sanding the wet stone with a range of papers to achieve a polished finish before waxing and buffing the work to a high sheen.

The Nyabigena Carvers Cooperative is one of many small enterprises selling its wares through Kenya's Undugu Society, a leading social development agency originally established in the 1970s to offer first shelter then education and vocational training to the street children of Nairobi. The fledgling enterprise (its name means solidarity or camaraderie) set up a small carpentry workshop – now a technical school teaching six trades. Today the Undugu Society works with over 900 families and groups in several regions of the country, including Kisii, Lodwar, Nairobi, Kajiado, Machakos, Kitui and Mombasa. In providing international markets for the wide range of indigenous crafts from these groups, the Undugu Fair Trade Unit, a subsidiary branch of the Society, is able to improve opportunities for local handcraft producers, reducing the need for rural workers to seek jobs in the cities and revitalising local pride and interest in traditional crafts and craft-making skills.



Members of Kisii Soapstone Art and Craft polish the finished stone product.



acts of stitchcraft

Stitched into bags, blankets or personal clothing, the art of embroidery has been used for thousands of years to enhance the simplest textiles. Yet within this universal application of needle and thread there lie the unique stories of people, place, cultural traditions and aesthetic values. Vital looks at three distinct styles of stitchery from India, Bangladesh and Thailand.

India, St Mary's Mahila Shikshan Kendra

Gujarat, India's western-most state, is renowned for its colourful textile traditions. In the city of Ahmedabad the artisans of St Mary's Mahila Shikshan Kendra practise the distinctive style of embroidery used by the Kathiawadi desert nomads who settled in this area many centuries ago. Characteristic of this style are vibrant naturalistic designs incorporating elephants, peacocks, flowers and ferns stitched in bold, striking colours often on a black cotton background. The intervening spaces are filled with leaves and buds. Such motifs are inspired by daily life, ancient beliefs, rituals and religion, and have been passed down over the centuries from mother to daughter. There is also a strong emphasis on mirror work, known in India as abhala, used to evoke the sight of light on water in this arid region. These tiny mirrors, a legacy of past trade with Europe (trading ships used shards of glass as ballast), are held in place with tiny buttonhole, herringbone or cretan stitches. As well as the embroidered wallhangings and toran (traditionally hung over doors and windows to bring good fortune into the house), St Mary's artisans make cushion covers, bags, purses, bed spreads, tablecloths, Christmas decorations and clothing.



Bangladesh, Aarong

Nakshi kantha, the form of embroidered quilting that prevails in the Bengal region of Bangladesh, serves as both a functional article and a unique symbol of cultural identity and indigenous folk art. Kantha art was originally made by illiterate women who would stitch personal and village stories into the quilts to give to their loved ones. Today, women continue to gather together to make these traditional textiles, stitching together several layers of recycled fabric to make a single kantha which is then embroidered with colourful designs. While these patterns are unique to each artisan, there are recurring motifs such as the lotus, moon, chakra or wheel, swastika, tree-of-life, mountain, fish, boat and animals (elephant, horses, peacocks, tiger and monkeys). These are applied using different types of often highly complex running kantha stitch, each named according to the pattern it creates, hence beki par (wavy border), nolok taga (nose-ring border), maach par (fish border), chok taga (eye motif border) and gaach par (tree border). The fabric shown here is from Aarong, a fair trade organisation working to provide a livelihood for thousands of mainly rural women and to preserve the ancient art form of kantha.



Thailand, Thai Tribal Crafts

The Akha tribe, one of the seven minority ethnic groups in northern Thailand supported by fair trade organisation Thai Tribal Crafts, is renowned for its exquisite and highly decorated traditional clothing and accessories. The Akha women spin cotton into thread with a hand spindle, then weave it on a foot-treadle loom. The cloth is dyed with indigo, then sewn into clothing – a loose jacket, puttees (a strip of cloth wound around the leg from ankle to knee) and, for women, a short black skirt. The sombre tones of the fabric are brightened by the addition of seeds, buttons, coins, shells, dyed feathers, bright green beetle wings and vibrant embroidery tightly stitched with naturally dyed two-ply thread. The result is a rich iconography that is both decorative and spiritually significant, part of a rich tradition brought with the tribe from Burma many generations ago. Central to this tradition are the dazzling silver-studded and beaded headdresses worn by the Akha women, which are added to over the years to mark the gradual transition from girlhood to womanhood. To supplement the tribe's meagre income from subsistence agriculture, the Akha tribe today make a range of exquisite saleable textile items adorned with silver coins and beads stitched into the cloth with exceptional skill.



