



JANUARY 2017

Flowers and Prayers

Small Embroidered Hanging or Prayer Mat



VISIT THE BMA

and see *Small Embroidered Hanging or Prayer Mat* in the **Imagining Home** exhibition.

Artist unidentified. Detail, *Small Embroidered Hanging or Prayer Mat* (Nimsuzani or Djoinamaz). Early 20th century. Afghanistan or Uzbekistan, possibly Bokhara. Cotton ground, silk embroidery threads, cotton backing. 53 x 38 1/4 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Jerry Maizlish, Sparks, Maryland, BMA 1991.460

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Flowers burst with color on this richly embroidered prayer mat or hanging from Central Asia. A profusion of blossoms and leaves on delicate stems climb up the sides, over the top, and all around the border of the textile. But the large dark area in the middle remains nearly empty.

People who are unfamiliar with this type of embroidered fabric might assume that the center was unfinished or unimportant. On the contrary, the unfilled central arch has great significance, as its shape recalls a *mihrab*—a niche in the wall of a mosque that points toward the holy city of Mecca. (bit.ly/2i8VI6B). Traditionally, Muslims face Mecca and pray five times each day. After placing a prayer mat on the bare earth (or floor) so that it points toward the holy city, a worshipper kneels, leans forward, and touches hands and forehead to the ground.

A young bride might have been expected to present a beautifully embroidered prayer mat to her new husband as part of her dowry. Girls as young as eight years old learned stitchery techniques from their mothers and developed impressive embroidery skills as they matured. Carefully following outlines that had been inked onto cloth, a bride-to-be would have used needle and silk thread to fill each outline with color and create valuable textiles for her eventual new home as a married woman. She would have been aided by other female family members who gathered together in lush courtyard gardens, quite different from the dry, brown, desert environment of much of Central Asia. As women embroidered floral designs on pillows, bedspreads, tablecloths, and wall hangings, good wishes for young brides were sewn into each stitch of these enduring family treasures.

CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Central Asian textiles embroidered with colored silk threads are called *suzani*, which comes from *suzan*, the Persian word for needle. Describe the design of this *nimsuzani* (small *suzani*). Is the placement of flowers random or symmetrical? How similar are the colors, shapes, and sizes of flowers on each side? Compare the design of this prayer mat with *suzani* designs on other types of Central Asian textiles. bit.ly/2ivPm1Z

Mihrabs may be pointed, curvilinear, or rectilinear. Study a selection of prayer mats and identify those that incorporate a mihrab shape. bit.ly/2iUT46k

Gardens are important in the art and design of the Muslim world. See how the 16th-century Mughal Emperor Babur supervised the layout of a four-part garden. Then design a garden for yourself. bit.ly/2iZRGBS

PRINT THE IMAGES ON PAGES 2 AND 3 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.



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