

A Woven Narrative

The Story of Antique Kashmir Shawls

Romi Lamba



A Woven Narrative is a conversation with private collector Romi Lamba, as he walks the audience through the history of Kashmir and European shawls. Highlighting various aspects of weaving and design, he will illustrate his presentation by displaying several masterpieces from his own collection, which includes both antique Kashmir and European shawls dating from 1820 to 1890. Mr. Lamba has been collecting shawls for the past 35 years and has acquired pieces from dealers and auction houses in the US, England, France and India.

Shawls of Paisley design were in fashion for nearly 100 years, from 1790-1880, woven and embroidered in Kashmir and Europe during that period. The Kashmir shawls, known as *Jamewaars* in India, were hand woven in a unique style of tapestry weaving that is now a lost art, and are considered by many to be among the most beautiful and intricate examples of textile and carpet weaving. Together with their European counterparts, these shawls and their paisley patterns have left a permanent mark on the history of textile design.

Recommended Reading

These books are hard to find in Hong Kong, but are more readily available in India and England, and through the Internet.

1. *The Kashmir Shawl* by Frank Ames, Antique Collectors Club. The bible of antique shawls.
2. *The Cashmere Shawl* by Monique Levi-Strauss, Abrams. A beautiful book focusing primarily on French shawls.
3. *Woven Masterpieces of Sikh Heritage* by Frank Ames, Antique Collectors Club. A follow-up to his first book, focusing on shawls produced between 1820 and 1850.
4. *Cashmere: A French Passion 1800-1880* by Monique Levi-Strauss, Thames and Hudson. A revised and expanded edition of her classic 1987 book on French cashmere shawls with superb photographs and a wealth of archive material.
4. *The Kashmiri Shawl, From Jamavar to Paisley*, Sherry Rehman and Naheed Jafri. Mapin. Contains many shawls from Pakistani collections.
5. *Pashmina – The Kashmir Shawl and Beyond*, Janet Rizvi with Monisha Ahmed, Marg. A greater focus on shawls made for the domestic Indian market.
6. *Kashmir Shawls - The Tapi Collection*. One of the best global private shawl collections, housed in Gujarat and owned by Praful and Shilpa Shah.

Attached below is an excerpt from an article on collecting Mr. Lamba wrote, published in the Sunday magazine of the South China Morning Post on June 2, 2013, that provides some background on how he started collecting shawls. The full article can be found at:

<http://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1248231/collect-calling>

I can clearly recall my first brush with collecting. Fresh out of college, in the mid-1980s, my fiancée and I would go antiquing to shops and markets in Philadelphia and the Main Line area of the American city. Soon it was day trips to New Hope and Lambertville, then weekends to Amish country, occasionally farther afield to the Poconos and even New England.

As an Asian living in America, I found myself attracted to antiques from the East. My next passion was rugs and carpets. I befriended an Iranian dealer on 23rd and South (in Philly) and spent Saturday afternoons in his store. I bought heavy tomes on Kirman, Anatolia, Bakhtiari, Shirvan; I splurged on a subscription to Hali, a magazine as opulent as the rugs and textiles it portrayed; I began to buy a few carpets.

One day Parviz showed me his private collection of Kashmir and paisley shawls. He insisted they were “not for sale”. Unsurprisingly, I succumbed to the lure of those three words: a red flag waved at a bull.

I begged him to sell me just one. My focus shifted to these ageless and mysterious textiles, woven finer than the tightest knotted carpet, patterns never set down in cartoons or words but recited across generations, a lost art that disappeared at the end of the 19th century due to Franco-Prussian battles and famine in Kashmir. In France and England they invented mechanical Jacquard looms to reproduce these shawls but were unable to match their handmade intricacy. Here, finally, I had found something remarkable that I could own, from India, the country of my origin.

I didn't know it then, but I was hooked; not just to the shawls themselves, but to the lifelong addictions of a collector. Years later, we named our younger daughter Senna, after the Persian town famed for its paisley kilims and rugs.

The same year, on a trip to Manhattan, in New York, I stopped by an antique market on 56th and 2nd I had visited several times. Wandering through its maze of stores, I came to a halt at a tiny stall I had never noticed before. On a glass shelf I saw several shawls rolled inside out.

From the dangling threads I recognised them as Kani shawls from Kashmir, rather than their smoothly backed European counterparts. Opening out the shawls revealed their fragile brilliance, chaadars longer than bed sheets, a kaleidoscope of vivid colours, and mihrabs (prayer niches) criss-crossed by snake-like paisleys. That day, at the age of 26, I signed the largest cheque I had ever written: US\$12,000 for 10 shawls; I bought them all. Amazingly, the dealer let me take them home with me even before he cashed the cheque. The need to possess them, right then, satisfied both my objectives: to clutch my treasure in my arms and to allow me to explain my crazy, impulsive behaviour to my wife. For when she saw them, no explanation I provided could speak to her the way the shawls would.

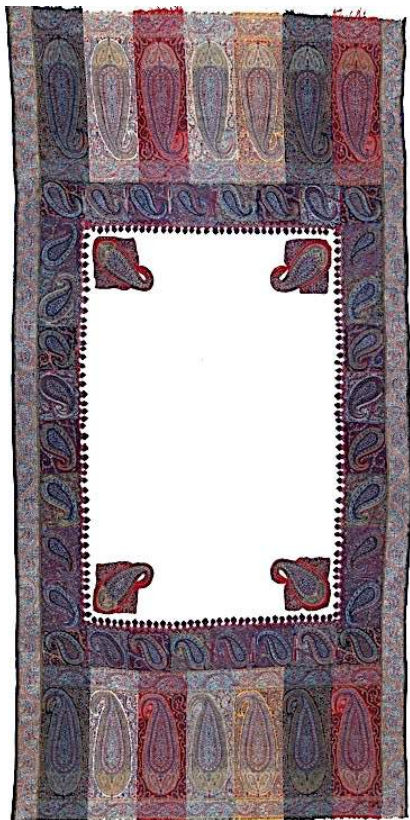
Long Kashmir Shawls

Kashmir Stole (*Patka*), Kani Weave on Pashmina, c 1800-1820



Red Kashmir Shawl, Kani on Pashmina, c 1810-1830

This “Doshalla” shawl is a traditional “Chaadar” (rectangular sheet) shape, with minimal or no repairs over time. On each end the shawl has two rows of boteh (paisleys) separated by floral “hashia” borders. The floral patterns within and around the larger paisleys have become quite intricate compared to earlier examples. The four corners of the centre have paisleys that were usually embroidered, not woven, onto the shawl, a trend that continued for decades.



Harlequin Kashmir Shawl, Kani on Pashmina, c 1820-1840

This shawl was extensively repaired from its damaged condition, the overall shawl was shortened and the original magenta centre was replaced with a white modern pashmina fabric. These shawls are named harlequin shawls because each boteh of the palla (wide border at end) is highlighted by a different ground colour. The harlequin effect creates a compartmentalized approach, but still very much follows a linear framework.

Unusual Allover Pattern Kashmir Shawl, Kani on Pashmina, c 1820-1840

This unusual shawl displays paisleys and colours characteristic of the first half of the 19th century, yet strays from the overall plain center design usually deployed in that period. While still maintaining a linear and symmetrical structure, the shawl's overall effect is more striking to the eye. It is likely the shawl has been reduced in length at some point in time, as can be observed by its overlapping paisleys. The distinctive harlequin border reflects the primary 4 colours used in the shawl itself.



Chaadar Kashmir Shawl, Black Center, Early Sikh Period, Kani on Pashmina, c 1820-1840

The woven pattern on the four sides of this fine shawl's center depict floral bouquets or plants, with a wavy vine running through the design's bottom. The encroachment of pattern into the center was an innovation introduced by the Sikh workshops. The overall pattern on the shawl follows the period's linear, compartmentalized approach with paisleys in the outer and inner borders in shades of red and blue. The unusual Hashia borders are quite decorative and alternate round flowers with floral crescent moons.



**Chaadar Kashmir Shawl, Green Center,
Sikh Period, Kani on Pashmina
c 1820-1840**

As graphic patterns intensified during the Sikh period, faintly outlined botehs, almost phantom-like, became less dominant. This transitional shawl maintains an overall linear compartmentalized design, but the viewer can feel the paisley motifs bursting at the straight edges as though eager to meander into neighbouring territory. The richly-dyed shawl displays iconic patterns of the Khalsa Punjab. A similar shawl is displayed in WM17, Woven Masterpieces of Sikh Heritage, Frank Ames.

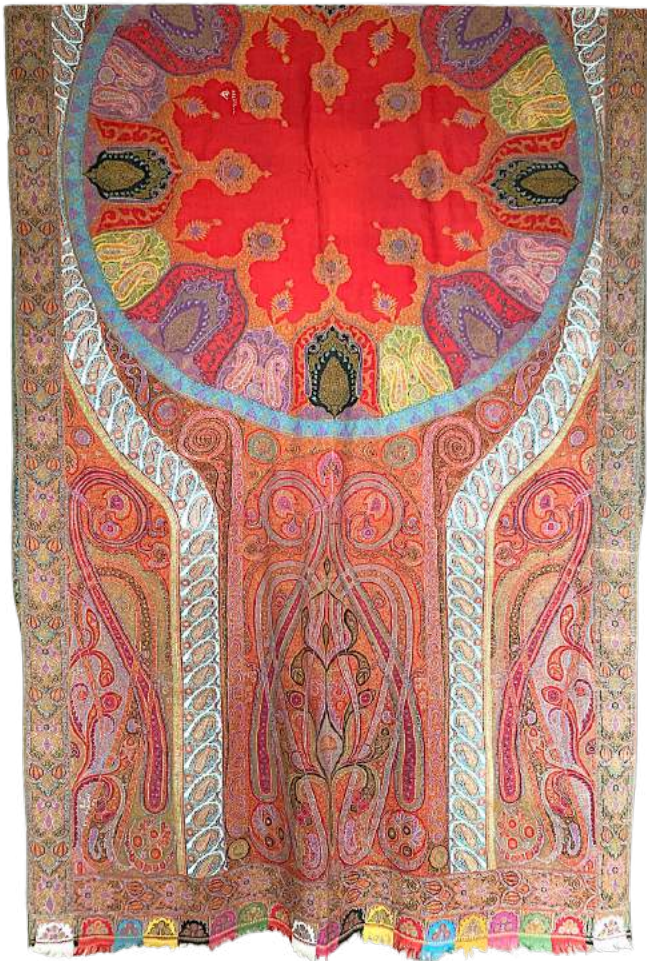


**Chaadar Kashmir Shawl, Duck Egg Blue
Center, Sikh Period, Kani on Pashmina,
c 1820-1850**

Later Sikh period shawls often combined a melange of Hindu and Islamic motifs, incorporating a mix of snake-like elongated boteh, barely recognisable as paisleys, zoomorphic or split-leaf hanging vines, often encased in mihrabs or arches. The inner Hashia border would still be visible, although no longer shaped as a broad stripe. This shawl is reminiscent of the patterns employed in Diwali shawls, with frond-like vines and tendrils in a variety of colours creating an overall celebratory atmosphere of fireworks.

Kashmir Striped “Khatraaz” Shawl, Kani on Pashmina, c 1840-1870

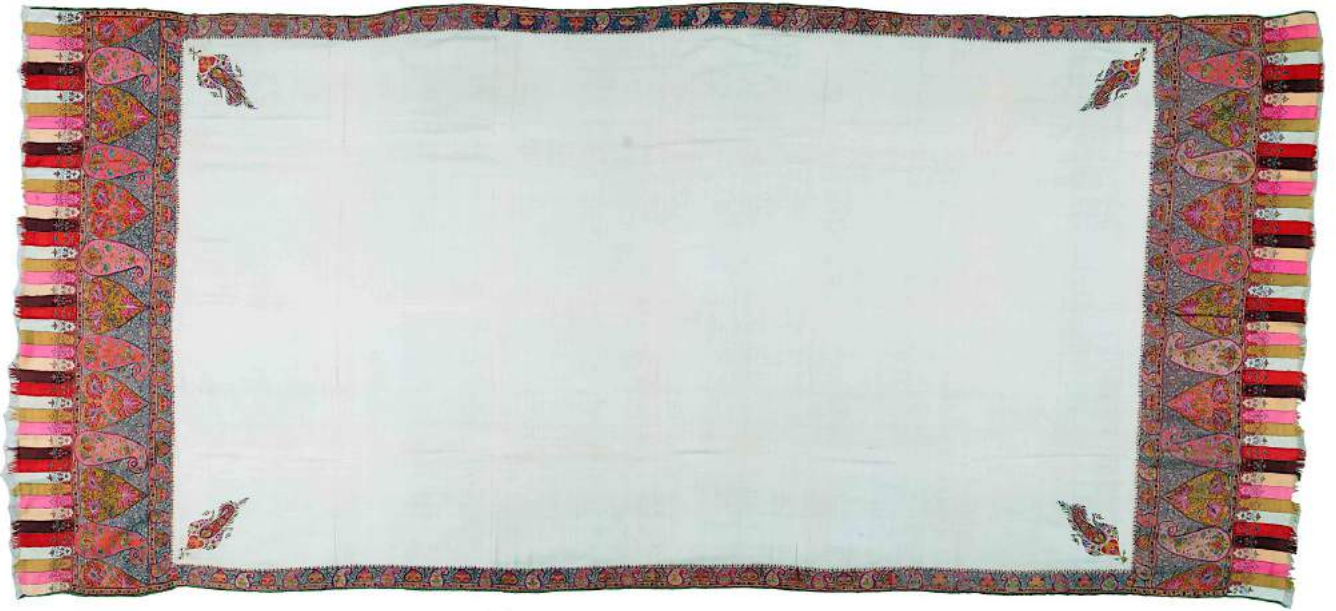
This long shawl, originally in the collection of New York-based carpet dealer and textile dealer Parviz Nemati, was published in his book “Shawls of the East, From Kerman to Kashmir”. Striped shawls in this style were called Khatraaz shawls, and this is an exceptional example, woven in one piece on the loom. The intricate design features flowers, in particular irises, and scrolling vines, and has an extremely high warp count. The vivid colours, superbly preserved, include red, green, blue, purple salmon and white, and this unique shawl is one of the finest extant Khatraaz shawls in history.



Chaadar Kashmir Shawl, Red Circular Center, Dogra Period, Kani on Pashmina, c 1850-1870

This dramatic shawl is dominated by its star shaped red center surrounded by multi-coloured arches filled with paisleys and large leaves. The center’s pinwheel effect is quite unique in shawl design. Two white background curved paisley stripes straddle the shawl’s length, with elongated paisleys and tendrils completing the field. It almost feels as though this workshop was experimenting with mixing different design effects to create a new style of shawl able to compete with the boldest European designs.

Kashmir *Dorukha* (Reversible) Kani and Embroidered Shawl Pashmina, c 1860-1890



This Dorukha (reversible) shawl retains its original cream center and has not been extensively repaired. Dorukha shawls were generally woven in a single interlocked method (as compared to double interlocked in typical Kani weaving) and enhanced with needle embroidery to create their reversible format with no threads or knots showing on the reverse side. Dorukha shawls were and still are highly prized in India, and almost none of them was shipped to the West. In the picture below, this shawl has been folded over and the shawl's front and back are compared side by side, making it difficult to tell them apart. The colour palette used in Dorukha shawls is more typical of later shawls in the domestic market, emphasizing pink, lilac, saffron and lighter shades over maroon and dark blue, and the harlequin border uses a similar Dorukha technique combining Kani and embroidery.



Long European Shawls

Long French Shawl, Hand Loom, Silk and Wool, c 1810-1830

The botehs (paisleys) in this early French shawl are longer than the comparable Indian red shawl and are filled with a millefleurs (1,000 flowers) pattern. The overall design reflects the typical linear pattern of a single row of large paisleys enclosed within two Hashia borders which also surround the large off-white center. Unlike the Kashmir shawls where the 4 paisleys at the centre's corners were always embroidered, in their European counterparts, the border paisleys are woven as part of the main shawl. The colours of wool used in this shawl encompass the standard palette of red, blue and green common in the early 19th century.



Long Paisley Shawl, Norwich or Edinburgh, Jacquard Loom, Silk and Wool or Cotton, c 1820-40

This unusual British shawl has its original navy center, a colour that was not often used in European shawls. The border designs don't rely on the typical paisley patterns; instead they display more gothic and architectural motifs in the style of the French shawl designer Amedee Couder, whose square shawl is presented here today. The shawl's narrower "Hashia" borders echo the vertical torch-like motifs in the wider panel. Those torches alternate in the main border panel with vase shaped floral bouquets, suggesting an intriguing mix of masculine and feminine influences. This shawl does not have any kind of fringe or harlequin border, probably dating back to its original design and manufacture.



Four Seasons Long Shawl, French, Jacquard Loom, Cashmere and Wool, c 1830-1850



One of the rarities in the antique paisley world is the so called 'Four Seasons' shawl. The shawl was meant to be worn with a different colour facing outward under the neckline over the shoulders, after folding the shawl in half, then triangular, to wear at different times of the year. This example has an extremely rare center medallion of four pastel shades. The remainder of the shawl has three large cartouche mihrabs (arches) in either half, within which elongated paisleys, compartmentalised pines and tendrils and vines create a pleasing overall impact reminiscent of Mughal architecture. The jacquard loom weaving is extremely fine, and woven into the yellow center medallion is the signature and trademark of the shawl maker's workshop, Hebert & Fils.

French Long Shawl, Jacquard Loom, Cashmere and Wool, c 1850-70

This later period French shawl is unsigned but is without question designed by one of the major shawl houses. Its design is reminiscent of certain Kashmir shawls of the Dogra period, in particular the white tendril-like pattern that starts in the 4 corners and surrounds the black and white four-leaf center. The remainder of the shawl contrasts the monochrome tendrils and center with rows of coloured cartouches. This design illustrates the evolution of shawl structure to move beyond an isolated shawl center and compartments to an integrated, often zoomorphical, theme more commonly found in carpet design.



Square Shawls

Square Kashmir Moon Shawl, Kani on Pashmina, c 1820-1850

Moon or “Chandar” shawls were the primary type of square (or Rumaal) shawls made in the first third of the 19th Century. A typical moon shawl contained a circular center with 4 matching quarter circles in the shawl’s corners. This unusual and striking Moon shawl uses a mirror-like diagonal pattern and two contrasting colours - red and navy blue – to create a distinct impact. The design suggests the shawl could have been folded diagonally and worn in two different ways to create the impression of two shawls. The red portion of the field repeats small paisleys framed by wide borders of navy paisleys, whereas the blue portion employs a trellis and vine design framed by a wide border of red paisleys. The center and 4 quarter moons display a more delicate floral pattern.



Striped (Khatraaz) Kashmir Moon Shawl, Afghan Period, Kani on Pashmina, c 1810-1820

This square “Rumaal” moon (Chandar) shawl displays a Khatraaz striped pattern with yellow and white broader stripes interspersed with narrow red and blue stripes. The “cosmic” central medallion is composed of rosettes in the form of flattened flowers in an orbiting fashion around a large central flower. The idea of a “transparent” central medallion on a colourful Khatraaz background creates the illusion of a moon in free suspension. Like most moon shawls, there are four quarter moons, in this case also “transparent” in the shawl’s corners. The beautiful colours, including the dark indigo and bright cochineal, virtually disappeared after the early Sikh period. (Frank Ames, *The Kashmir Shawl*, Colour Plate 183)



**Square Embroidered Kashmir Shawl, Amlī on Pashmina
c 1830-1860**



Amlī (embroidered) shawls were visually identical to Kani (twill tapestry woven) shawls, the key difference being Amlī shawls employed needlework instead of a hand loom. However, Amlī shawls were quicker to produce and less expensive, so they were considered inferior to their Kani counterparts. This Amlī shawl has a multi-coloured square center with symmetrical smaller square compartments within, surrounded by matching squares filled with paisleys. The pattern is virtually identical to contemporaneous Kani shawls, yet the needlework and shawl's texture provide an additional level of precision and detail.

This striking Kani shawl is similar to many Chaadar long shawls of the same period, where the turquoise center extends through frond-like tendrils to dominate the shawl's overall pattern. Elaborate long paisleys occupy the shawl's four corners, encasing the turquoise tendrils. This Kani shawl was clearly influenced by European shawls woven on the Jacquard loom and its colour palette was also selected for the export market. Because the shawl is pieced together, it does not sit as flat as early Kani shawls or later European shawls.

**Square (Rumaal) Kashmir Shawl,
Kani on Pashmina
c 1840-1870**



**Square (Rumaal) Kashmir Shawl, Kani on Pashmina
c 1840-1860**



This highly unusual shawl merges traditional Kashmir paisley designs and a predominant colour palette of red and black with French floral borders and motifs set against a cream background. Woven on the finest pashmina, the shawl is light and easy to drape, and is one of the first shawls acquired by Mr. Lamba in his collection. The three-row floral and paisley outer border is very European in appearance and suggests this shawl was made for export. The four-leaf clover black center is echoed in the shawls corners similar to a Moon shawl, and the shawl displays a tension belying its disparate design origins which somehow also pleasingly coalesce.

While embroidered Amli shawls were considered inferior to woven Kani shawls in the 19th Century, in retrospect, embroidered shawls became the only available alternative for decorating shawls during most of the 20th century, and this technique gained its own respect for exquisite workmanship. Today, the best Amli modern shawls cost the same or more as modern Kani shawls. This superb Amli shawl from the middle of the 19th Century matches its Kani counterparts in design, colour and fine workmanship.

**Square Embroidered Kashmir Shawl, Amli on Pashmina
c 1840-1870**



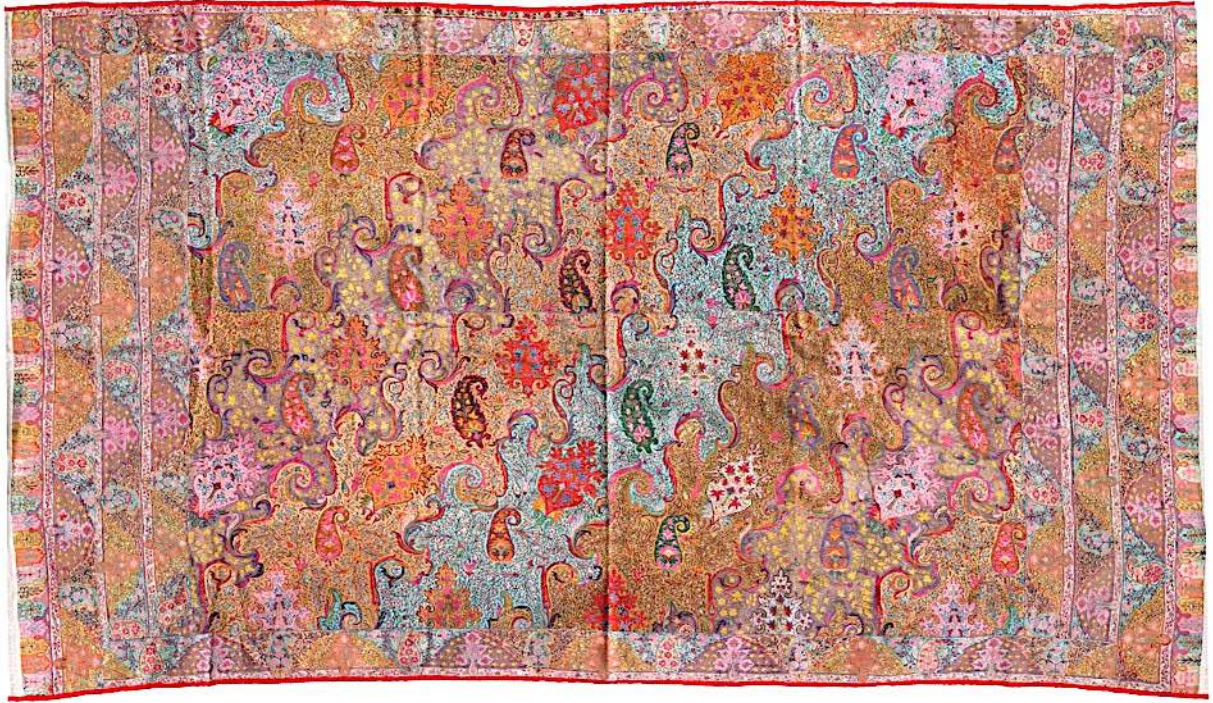
**Square French Shawl, Amedee Couder, Cashmere,
Jacquard Loom, c 1830-1840**



Couder's shawls are known for their architectural references, combining gothic elements and designs to create a style similar to stained glass windows such as those in Notre Dame. This gothic square shawl incorporates all these patterns in a harmonious colour palette. The shawl's center is an eight-pointed star, surrounded by 16 roundels. Couder's shawls also unusually dispense with any semblance of a plain matan or field and are fully worked. His corner motifs are not circular quadrants like typical moon shawls, but exhibit intricate patterns rarely seen in either Kashmir or Europe. This shawl, similar to his Isfahan and Nou-Rouz shawls, is a masterpiece of textile design with levels of detail rarely seen before or since.

Wearable Antique and Modern Shawls

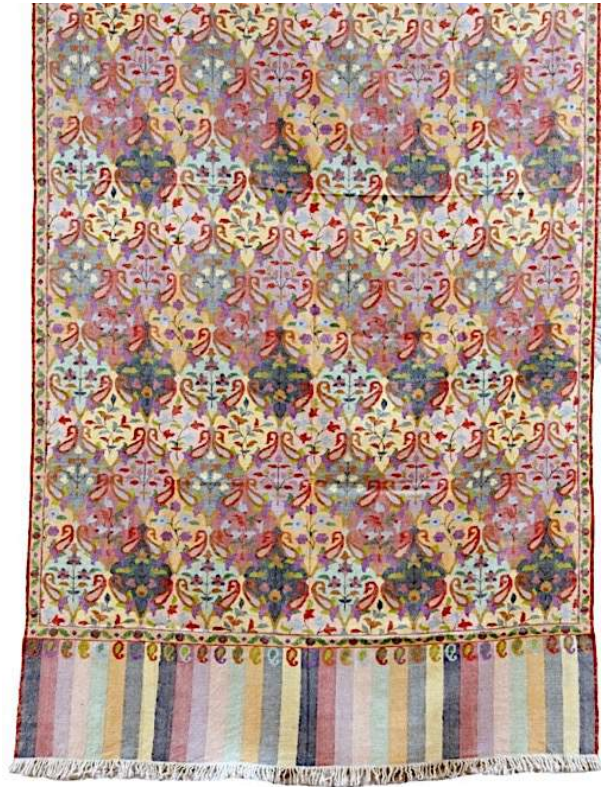
Kashmir Dorukha (Reversible) Kani and Embroidered Shawls,
Pashmina, c 1860-1890



**Kashmir Embroidered Shawl 2nd
Half 20th Century**



**Modern Kani Shawl
21st Century**



Modern Kani Shawls with Embroidery, 21st Century



Modern Kalamkari and Embroidered Shawls, Pashmina, 21st Century

