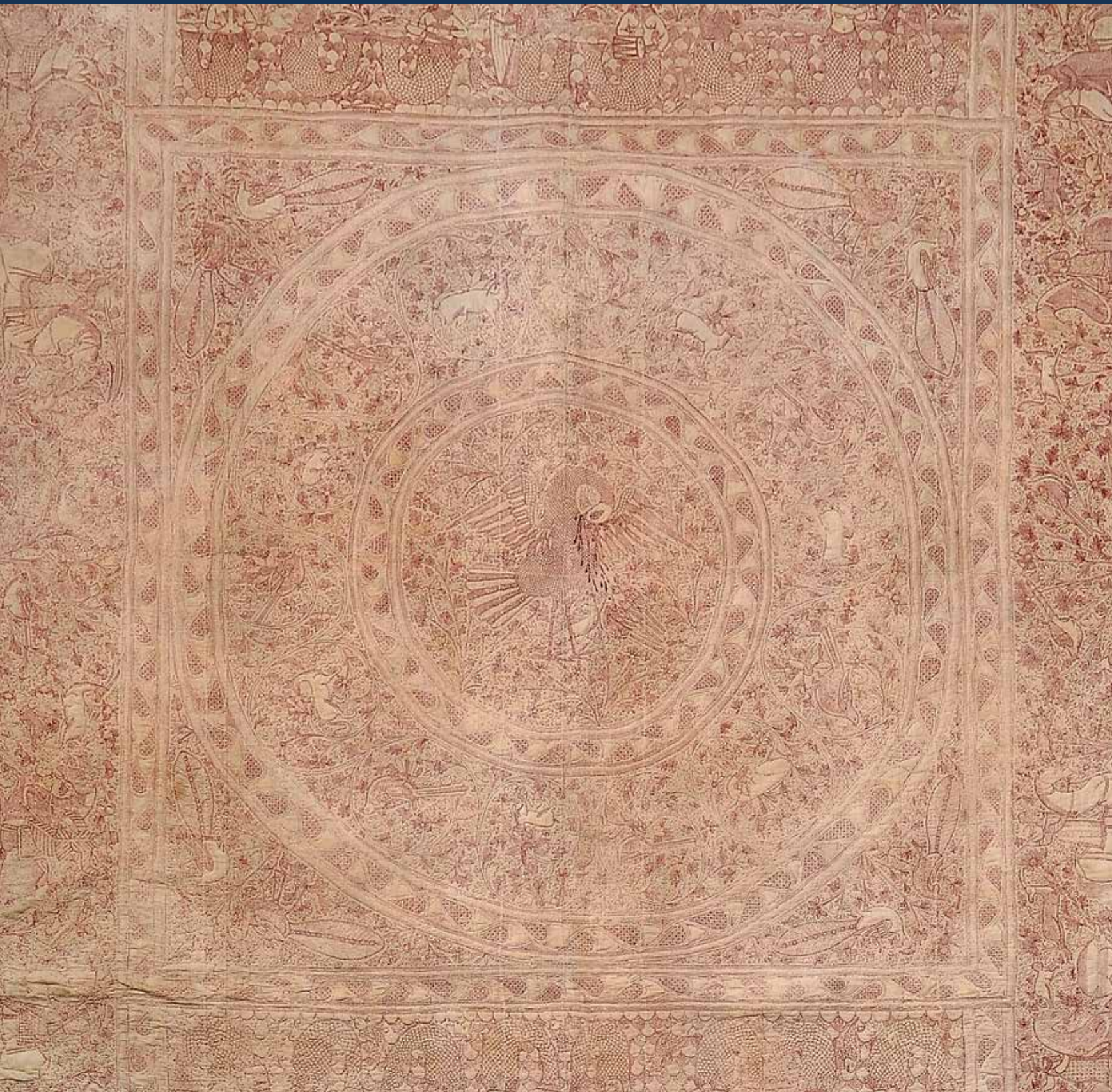


SÃO ROQUE

Antiques & Art Gallery

A Coverlet or Wall Hanging — Indo-Portuguese, possibly Bengal, 1st-quarter of the 17th century



A COVERLET OR WALL HANGING

Cotton and silk

Indo-Portuguese, possibly Bengal

1st-quarter of the 17th century

Dim.: 290.0 × 215.0 cm

F1290

Indo-Portuguese coverlets, or wall hangings, are important testimonies of the symbiosis between the Indian and the European cultures, both for their aesthetic references and iconographical and iconological repertoire, as well as in terms of techniques and choice of materials, all expressive elements of the Portuguese presence in India.

Jointly with other precious objects of identical origin, Indian embroidery was highly appealing to the wealthy European elites, who became avid consumers of such exotic goods, mainly produced in Bengal and Gujarat, cotton producing regions renowned for the qualified manufacturing of such embroidered pieces.

João de Barros (1496 – 1570), Portuguese chronicler and overseer at ‘Casa da Índia’ between 1533 and 1578, described the Bengal region as being one where ‘so much cotton is harvested and where there are so many weavers producing the finest cloth, that they could dress the whole of Europe. (...) and as can be seen in the embroidered cloths, in the finest coverlets and in the other things that arrive from there’¹. In relation to Gujarat, often referred to as Cambay, he registers that ‘in that kingdom there is more use of silk and gold thread for the production of all sorts of textiles, than in the rest of India’².

Textiles became one of the most important and valuable exports of Portuguese India. Goa and the Gujarati territories of Diu, Daman and Bassein, developed intense trading and diplomatic links with the Mughal Empire which, from the reign of Akbar (154 – 1605) onwards, promoted the opening of mills in Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, Lahore and Ahmedabad, exclusively destined to the production of luxury textile products.

Impressed by the unfamiliar local atmosphere, the Portuguese that had contact with India became enthusiastic consumers of embroidered coverlets, both for the fineness of the material and exuberance of polychromy as well as for the exoticism of patterns. This progressive involvement with the Indian taste however, did not curtail the demand for western motifs, such as those with Christian associations’, in the pieces that they commissioned. As prestigious Eastern luxury items, Indo-Portuguese coverlets were also eloquent social status and wealth markers for their owners.

First-half of the 17th century Bengal woven and embroidered coverlet or wall hanging made for the Portuguese market, featuring a centrally placed pelican in its piety, hunting scenes, animals, birds and instrument playing mermaids.

The two white cotton panels are embroidered in red and yellow silk (*bombyx mori*) using the chain stitching technique, with white backstitched quilted ground. It has a fringe of identical colours and taffeta lining. Following the characteristic geometric pattern of Mughal and Islamic embroidered coverlets, this specific example is also rectangular shaped and framed by a wide symmetric border. This rectangle is subdivided into three parts; the central square that occupies its total width — the ground — between two long, rectangular bands. Narrow strips that intersect each other perpendicularly, segment the various sections of both ground and border.

The central ground is defined by a double framed circular medallion — tangential to the four smaller square sides — featuring an exuberant pelican piercing its own breast to feed its young with its own blood — a symbolic allusion to Jesus Christ

¹ João de Barros, *Ásia* — 4 *Décadas*, Livre 9, Chap. I, Lisbon, 1946, p. 503.

² IDEM, *Ibidem*.



Sacrifice and to the Eucharist transubstantiation of the Body and Blood of Christ — on a field of floral and foliage motifs. The outer circular band is defined by a composition of foliage scrolls that surround alternating depictions of birds and deer. The medallions are framed by sinuous vines and grapes — symbols of Eucharist and Resurrection. Two face-to-face peacocks separated by a Tree of Life fill the corner spaces that complete the ground.

From the two wide bands, above and below the centre, emerge four pairs of face-to-face and mirrored mermaids. These creatures, with their large fish-scale covered tails, are likely to portray an iconography resulting from the crossing of European prints with Indian mythological beings, such as the *Nagini*, demigoddesses associated to fertility and protection. With their lower bodies submerged in the sea amongst numerous fish, and their upper bodies above the water surrounded by floral and foliage elements, they are each playing a different musical instrument of European origin.

The broad border is decorated with boar and deer hunting scenes on a field of exuberant foliage and floral motifs interspersed with parrots — Hindu symbols of fertility. The various horsemen figures holding spears and attired in early-17th century western fashion with doublet and ruff collar shirt, fashionable accessories up until ca. 1630, are accompanied by hunting dogs. They have short hair and their head is covered by semi rigid wide brimmed hats adorned with plumes.

In the four corners, depictions of western heraldic rampant lions, symbols of power but also transport vehicles of the supreme Hindu goddess Durga, the protective Mother of the universe.

All the narrow bands framing the various sections of the coverlet are filled by sinuous vines and grapes which, associated to wine, refer to the Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

The group of coverlets, or wall hangings, to which the one herewith described belongs, allude to illustration patterns of Islamic books, with scenes and compositions that convey paintings from Mughal albums, such as the dense hunting scenes and the conceptualisation of paradise. But the carefully depicted motifs of pelican, rampant lions and musical instruments, were extracted from European printed models³. The perfect symmetry of the pattern is only interrupted by the central pelican that becomes dominant and unavoidable, hence reducing the decorative program, not only to Christ's sacrifice, but also to the new Avis dynasty rule, legitimate heir to the Portuguese throne, particularly considering that there were, at the time, other emerging topics that contradicted the prevalent Iberian dynastic propaganda⁴.

This Indian textile artwork, most certainly a Portuguese commission, commonly referred as 'Hunting coverlet', assumes the foremost relevance within Indo-Portuguese decorative arts, both for its excellent preservation as well as for its specific characteristics that fuse Indian to Western elements, from which stand out those allusive to Christianity.

In the collection of the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, in Lisbon, there is an Indo-Portuguese coverlet/wall hanging, identical to the one described and also dated to the 17th century (Inv. n.º 112 Tc.). ✍ TP

³ Models inspired by prints that travelled alongside the maritime routes and had a significant impact on Northern Indian Mughal Art. Easy to carry printed books were sent to Goa and, from there, divulged throughout India, not just by missionaries but also by travellers and merchants, particularly those supplying patterns to local artisans, as was the case of Bengal manufactured textiles. These source books, not all imported from Europe as there had been a working print in Goa since 1556, were used as models for narratives but also as inspiration for decorative elements such as borders and vine scrolls. Ex.: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* illustrated by Virgil Solis (1514–1564) feature maritime scenes with mermaids and sea monsters Cf.: KARL, Barbara, *Embroidered Histories — Indian Textiles for the Portuguese Market during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Bohlau Verlag GmbH & Co KG, Wien Köln Weimar, 2016, p. 91.

⁴ IDEM, *Ibidem*, p. 246.

