

Tracing Cross-Cultural Precedents of Sashiko Stitching and Mirror Work Embroidery in Contemporary Fashion

Dr. Sonu Mehta¹, Ms. Agnaya Patel²

¹Sr. Assistant Professor, NIDC, Sankalchand Patel University, Visnagar

²Teaching Assistant, NIDC, Sankalchand Patel University, Visnagar

Abstract

Sashiko meaning “little stabs” is a form of decorative reinforcement stitching from Japan. Traditional sashiko was used to reinforce points of wear, or to repair worn places or tears with patches. Today this running stitch technique is often used for purely decorative purposes in quilting and embroidery. The white cotton thread on the traditional indigo blue cloth thread gives sashiko its distinctive appearance, though decorative items sometimes use red colour. Fashion often emerges from dialogue between distinct cultural traditions. This research explores one such dialogue: combining geometric sashiko patterns, rooted in Japanese hand-stitching, with reflective mirror work (Shisha/Abhla Bharat) from Gujarat and Rajasthan's textile heritage. Among four sashiko categories studied — Moyozashi, Hitomezashi, Kogin, and Boro — Moyozashi and Hitomezashi proved most suitable for western wear due to their geometric scalability. Twenty motifs were selected based on geometric integrity, symmetry, and fashion compatibility, then digitally reconstructed in CorelDRAW for layout, proportion, and mirror-placement exploration. Garment illustrations across dresses, tops, tunics, jackets, and co-ordinated sets bridged digital design. Findings confirm Moyozashi and Hitomezashi's structural adaptability across garment types, with sashiko's linear geometry and mirror work's luminous accents forming a coherent, distinctive aesthetic. Digital tools proved essential for precision and iteration.

Keywords: Sashiko, Mirror work, Digital tools

Introduction

Sashiko is a form of Japanese folk embroidery that originated in the rural regions of northern Honshu during the Edo period (1603–1868). The word ‘Sashiko’ translates approximately as ‘little stabs’ or ‘small piercings’, a reference to the simple running stitch that forms its structural basis. Over time, the functional running stitch evolved into an extraordinarily disciplined art of geometric pattern-making. Sashiko patterns are constructed upon grid-based frameworks in which the running stitch travels in continuous horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines to produce interlocking geometric forms.

In the context of Sashiko, the geometric pattern families that define the tradition are themselves a form of encoded cultural knowledge — each pattern encapsulates a set of geometric rules, a symbolic meaning, and a set of manual skills that together constitute a living intellectual heritage. Similarly, the stitching frameworks, mirror-placement compositions, and thread colour traditions of Indian mirror work embroidery represent centuries of refined aesthetic judgement and technical skill. To bring these

traditions into one dialogue within the context of a contemporary western wear design exploration is not an act of simple but a rigorous design investigation was needed. Computer Aided Designing (CAD) plays an important role in this process of design development and contemporisation.

Objectives

1. To study the traditional art Sashiko of Japan.
2. To Develop the Design for Western Wear with fusion of Sashiko or Mirror Work.
3. To Design Western wear garment through digital illustration

Methodology – the study was conducted in two phases

Phase I

Collection of motifs

In order to document the geometric motifs of *Sashiko* and mirror work (*Shisha*), museums, books, craft centres, shops and artisans were used as reliable data sources. Twenty-five motifs of geometric *Sashiko* patterns and mirror work designs were digitally photographed .

Phase II

Design Development

1. Selection of motifs:

Twenty-five documented geometric motifs of *Sashiko* and mirror work were evaluated and the best ten motifs of each of geometric *Sashiko* (including traditional patterns such as *Seigaiha*, *Asanoha*, *Shippo*, *Kagome* and *Yabane*) and mirror work designs were contemporized through CorelDraw software with two variations of each motif. Altogether. A catalogue of stylised designs was created through CorelDraw.

2. Layout and variation of designs:

The five most preferred motifs were arranged in different layouts. They were arranged for corner design, centre design, all over and border design through CorelDraw. Three types of layouts were developed for each of the geometric *Sashiko* patterns and mirror work designs as adapted for western silhouettes.

Result and Discussion

The four major categories of sashiko were found while exploring the secondary sources . these are::

1. Moyozashi: This style of sashiko involves the use of long, flowing running stitches that trace continuous, unbroken geometric patterns across the fabric surface.. Patterns in this category include well-known motifs such as the shippo (seven treasures), asanoha (hemp leaf), and kikko (tortoiseshell).
2. Hitomezashi: This style is worked on a grid, with each stitch placed individually at intersecting points. The result is a compact, pixel-like surface texture that builds up into larger geometric compositions through repetition.
3. Kogin: it is a pattern darning technique worked horizontally across the warp threads of the fabric. It creates dense, embossed geometric motifs with a bold, structured quality reminiscent of woven tapestry. While visually striking, Kogin's rigid directional structure limits its application on complex garment constructions; however, it can be used effectively as a focal embellishment on flat panels or statement pieces.

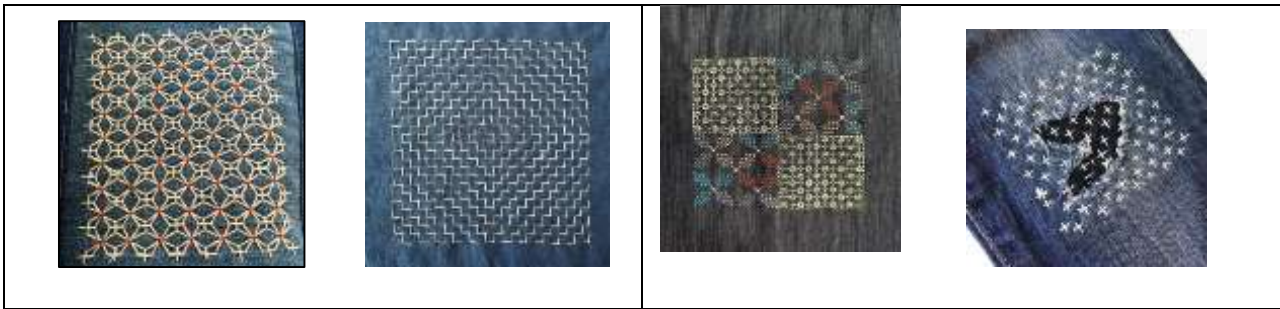
4. Boro: It is a related practice that involves the patching and reinforcing of worn fabric with visible stitching and textile fragments. It reflects the Japanese philosophy of mottainai (avoid waste) and wabi-sabi (beauty in imperfection).

Selection of 20 Motifs

Twenty distinct geometric sashiko motifs were selected following a comprehensive review of traditional Japanese pattern libraries, craft literature, and contemporary fashion applications of sashiko embroidery. The selection criteria included the following considerations: Geometric Integrity, Symmetry and Visual Balance, Repeat Value and Scalability, Fashion Compatibility

The 20 selected motifs :





Combination of Design

In CorelDRAW, the 10 combined design layouts were developed by overlaying mirror placement markers onto the completed sashiko pattern arrangements. Several compositional strategies were explored:

1. **Geometric Congruence:** Mirrors were placed at positions that aligned with the geometric logic of the sashiko pattern — for example, at the centre points of hexagonal or diamond units — so that the mirror work appeared to be an organic extension of the embroidery rather than a separate element.
2. **Contrast Through Clustering:** In some designs, mirrors were clustered along the edges or borders of the sashiko field, creating a contrasting frame of reflective embellishment around the geometric pattern.
3. **Hierarchical Emphasis:** In garments where a single prominent motif was used as a focal design element, mirrors were concentrated within or immediately around the motif to create a visually dominant centre piece.

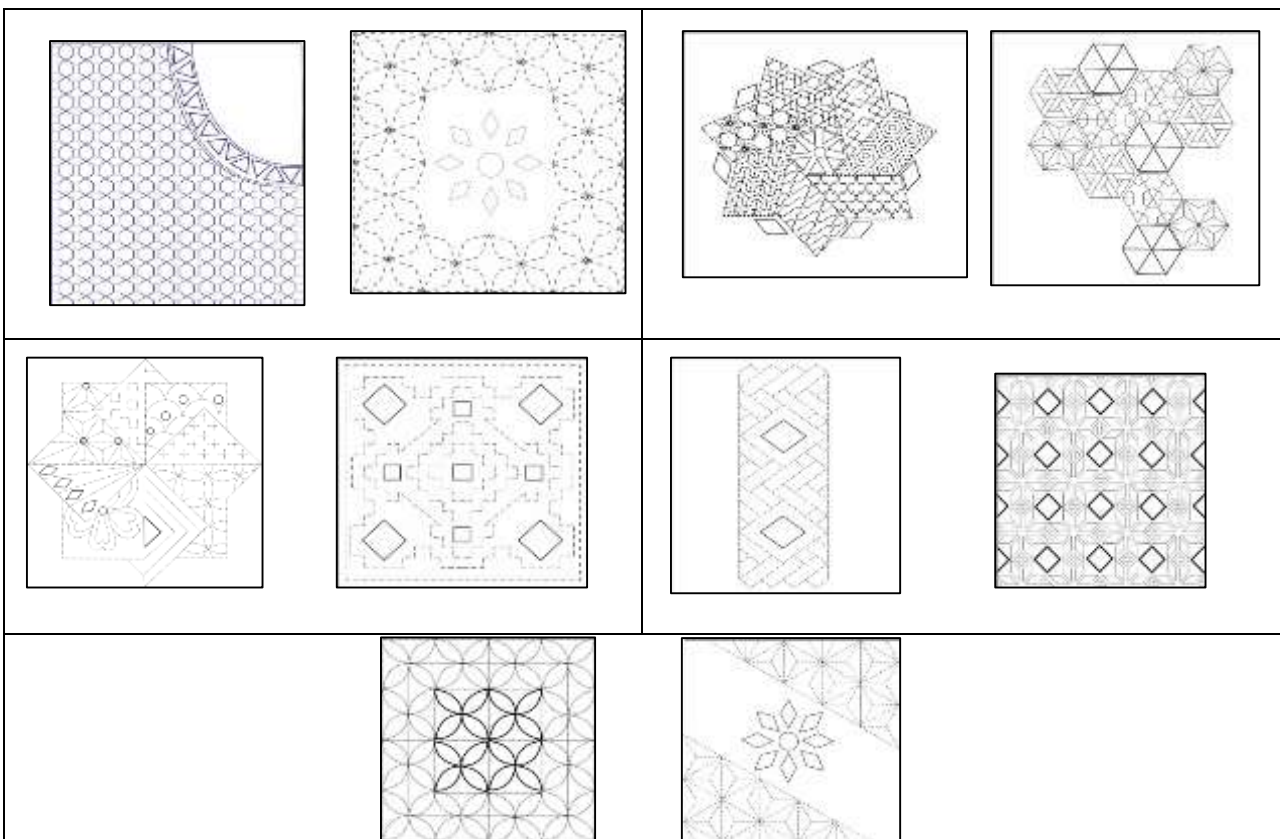


Illustration of Sashiko Garments

Garment illustrations were done by selecting 5 best suited designs with three different placements. The illustrations also helped in finalizing the specific placement of mirror work in relation to garment seams and structural lines, ensuring that the embellishment enhanced rather than obscured the garment's construction.

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Conclusion

This study of Japanese sashiko stitching and Indian mirror work embroidery translate into viable contemporary western wear design. Through a systematic two-phase development, twenty-five geometric motifs of sashiko and shisha work were documented, evaluated, and digitally reconstructed, from which

twenty motifs were finalized for their geometric integrity, symmetry, and fashion compatibility. Among the four sashiko categories examined, Moyozashi and Hitomezashi emerged as the most structurally adaptable to garment construction, owing to their scalable, grid-based geometry, while Kogin and Boro offered more limited but still meaningful applications as focal embellishments. The integration of mirror work through strategies of geometric congruence, emphasis demonstrated that reflective embellishment can be layered onto linear stitch geometry without compromising the coherence of either tradition. Garment illustrations across dresses, tops, tunics, jackets, and co-ordinated sets confirmed the cross-cultural fusion's aesthetic and structural viability. Throughout the process, CorelDRAW was used as an effective tool for achieving precision in layout, proportion, and iterative refinement. Overall, the research affirms that heritage hand-stitching traditions, when approached through creative digital design methodology, can be meaningfully contemporized for global fashion markets.

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