




Presented by  
Maiwa Handprints &  
KMVS co-operative

VANCOUVER  
**museum**

**Alberta**  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

THROUGH THE  
**EYE OF A NEEDLE**  
STORIES FROM AN INDIAN DESERT

*March 27 – June 6, 2004*



**News Release — March 26, 2004**

**The Provincial Museum of Alberta unveils two exhibitions celebrating East Indian and Indonesian artisans**

*Edmonton...* The Provincial Museum of Alberta presents two new exhibitions that explore important social and cultural themes while celebrating the strength of the human spirit through art. *In the Shadows of Volcanoes* and *Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories from an Indian Desert* will be on display at the Museum from March 27 to June 6, 2004.

*In the Shadows of Volcanoes* reveals some of the hope, diversity and mystery of Indonesia through 57 magnificent works by 31 artists. The exhibition was originally produced by the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Explore the struggle for independence through art as the women of the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan co-operative in India share their stories and craft in *Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories from an Indian Desert*. This vibrant collection of 98 embroideries, numerous photographs and a video presentation explores the themes of poverty alleviation, women's empowerment and sustainable economic growth through a co-operative. *Through the Eye of a Needle* was originally produced by the Vancouver Museum.

A parallel exhibition featuring the works of the *Edmonton Needlecraft Guild* will be on display in the Museum's Café Cases.

The Provincial Museum of Alberta is located at 12845-102 Avenue in Edmonton. For further information, phone (780) 453-9100 or visit our Web site at [www.pma.edmonton.ab.ca](http://www.pma.edmonton.ab.ca).

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**Note to editors:** *In the Shadows of Volcanoes* and *Through the Eye of a Needle* will open with a media event starting at 10:30 a.m. on Friday, March 26, 2004.



## Exhibition Overview

Through exquisite examples of embroidery and powerful photographs, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories From an Indian Desert* offers visitors the opportunity to participate in the lives of the women of the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) co-operative in Gujarat, India, and to understand and appreciate their struggle for empowerment and sustained economic independence.

The Provincial Museum of Alberta acknowledges the work and vision of **Dr. Paula Swart**, the Vancouver Museum's Curator of Asian Studies, and **Charllotte Kwon**, the guest curator responsible for producing the *Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories From an Indian Desert* exhibition.

### Thoughts from Charllotte Kwon, Director of the Maiwa Foundation and President of Maiwa Handprints

*For me the journey began ten years ago, but for the embroiderers, it began thousands of years ago when they first began to use the stitch as a language. When I first started working in Kutch, I was mesmerized by this language but distressed by an economic environment that was threatening its existence. For the next decade, Maiwa made a commitment to the artisans of Kutch to create an infrastructure through which they could reclaim the excellence of their tradition and take it to the world.*

*The Kutch artisan sustains her culture one stitch at a time. Her work is mindfully created and comments on her history and that of her people. Excellence in craft is a viable way for craftspeople to communicate who they are, where they live and the essence of their culture. Their work builds bridges between their culture and the rest of the world. I invite you to enjoy **Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories from an Indian Desert**. Visit often and tell your friends of this remarkable group of artisans and their first international exhibition.*



Charllotte Kwon meets with a group of Sodha women in their village.



## Features of the Gallery

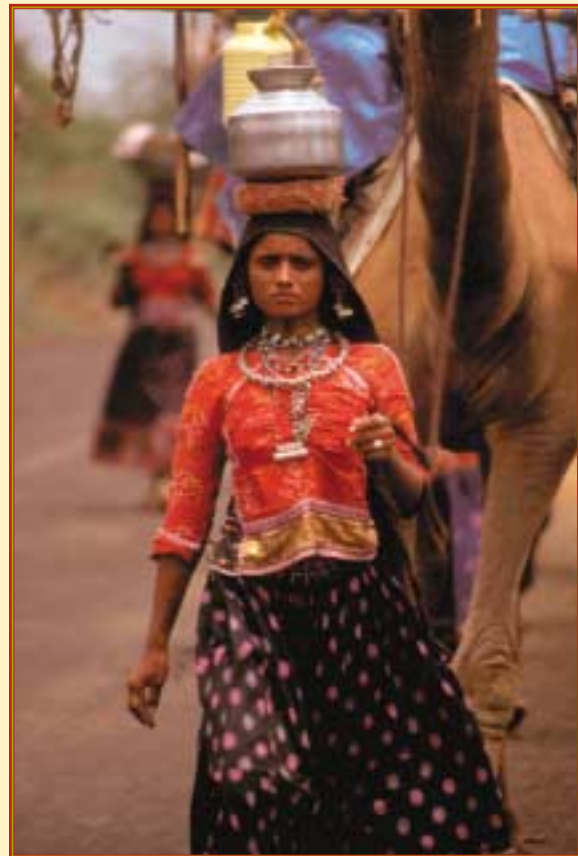


Visitors to the gallery will encounter:

- 98 exquisite embroideries
- a collection of powerful photographs
- a 30-minute video presentation and six silent video monitors illustrating village life and the art of embroidery.

Visitors will have the opportunity to contribute directly to the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan co-operative through the purchase of catalogues and beautiful KMVS-made embroideries in *The Museum Shop*.

Alberta also has its share of skilled embroidery craftspeople. A parallel exhibition featuring the works of the *Edmonton Needlecraft Guild* will be displayed in the Museum's Café Cases.



## ***A Selection of Stories contained within *Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories From an Indian Desert****

### **Earthquake**

On the morning of January 26th, 2001 a massive earthquake hit the Kutch Desert.

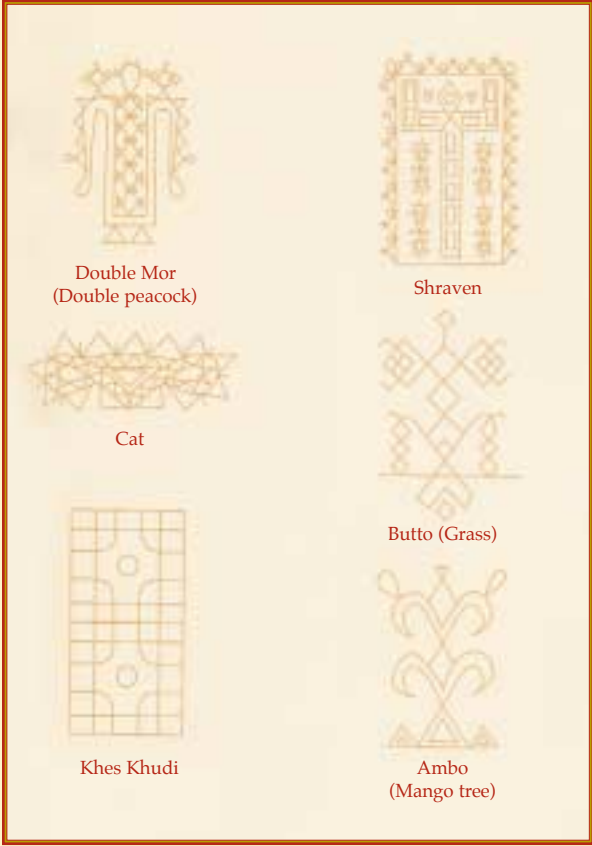
Measuring 7.9 on the Richter Scale, seismic activity was felt across most of India and Pakistan. Approximately 7,900 villages were affected by the quake; more than 400 villages were completely destroyed. The earthquake and hundreds of aftershocks affected nearly 15.9 million people, resulting in more than 25,000 deaths, 167,000 injuries and the destruction of over one million homes. UNICEF estimates that as many as 5 million children were directly affected by the earthquake by the loss of family, home or school. The devastation unleashed by this massive earthquake in Kutch was so enormous that for weeks the tragedy seemed immeasurable and unending.

*All we need is a needle and thread to return to work*  
—said by KMVS member following the earthquake.

The craftswomen from KMVS were now able to use their combined strength and self-reliance to face one of the greatest challenges of their lives. They rebuilt their villages and supported each other in their losses. The women quickly returned to daily routines and their embroidery – their primary source of income. This was of fundamental importance, as government food rations ended and promised relief did not materialize.

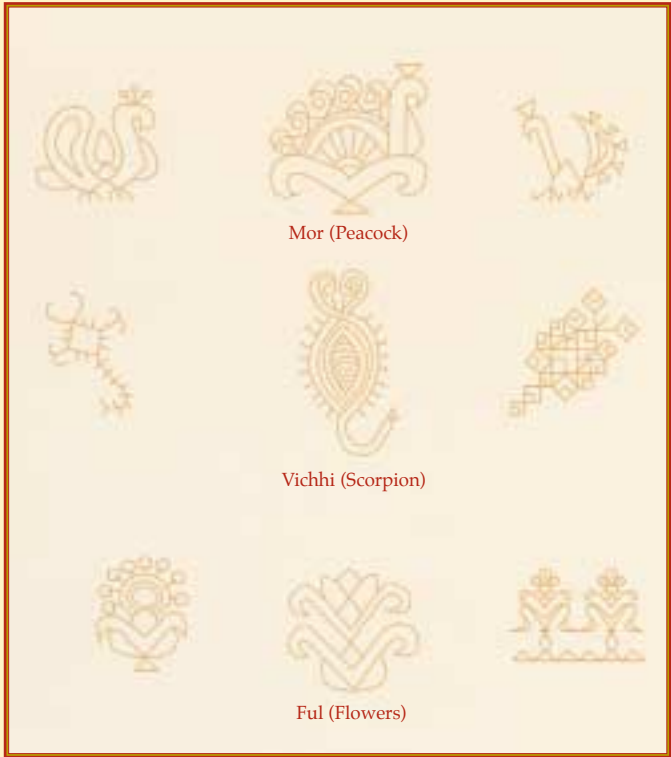
The village of Dhamadka  
a few days after the  
2001 earthquake.





## Interpretation of Stitches

Embroidery defines the critical differences between communities and signals the relationships amongst them. The artisan is the community's historian and her work is mindfully created. Changes in embroidery styles over time reflect the changing conditions of the community, contact with new environments, and cultures.



## Formation of the KMVS co-operative



The women of the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (KMVS) co-operative have been working since 1989 to improve their situation through workplace initiatives and community health improvement strategies. KMVS is a structure that enables the women to access information, training and skills, and to be able to

change the conditions in their community. There are 4,500 members, of which 1,800 are skilled artisans. As well as handicraft production, KMVS organizes programs in natural resource management, education for women and girls, health education and legal support. It runs a radio broadcast in tribal dialect, a newsletter, a self-managed screen-printing unit and a savings and credit program.

The women of KMVS are committed to embroidering the designs of their own heritage. They firmly believe in cultural property rights and they refuse to copy the work of other cultures as has been demanded by dealers. They recognize the long-term benefit of preserving and building upon their own traditions. They control the pricing and marketing of their work and they recognize the power of working co-operatively and maintaining exceptional quality.

This exhibition is the realization of a dream: to attain such excellence in their work that they are recognized on the world stage. Just as the women identify each other's cultural identity through the stitching on their garments, the world will come to know them by their embroidery.



## Through the Eye of a Needle Fact Sheet

Source: *Through the Eye of a Needle Catalogue – Maiwa & Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (2003)*

- ✂ Kutch is located in the state of Gujarat in western India. Pakistan is to the north and the Arabian Sea envelopes Kutch to the west and south.
- ✂ The Kutch desert is home to descendants of nomadic tribes: Jats, Sodhas, Meghwars, Mutwas and Rabari. This area has been a nexus for migration and trade for the last 500 years, drawing people from as far away as north Africa and central Asia.
- ✂ The partition in this region between Pakistan and India was formed in 1947.
- ✂ Throughout the desert, Kutchi is a common language spoken alongside the dialects of individual communities. Urdu is widely spoken amongst Muslims as it is the written language of the Qur'an, and some people who have been schooled in a mainstream education will speak Gujarati or Hindi.
- ✂ Religious groups in the Kutch derive primarily from Muslim, Hindu, Jain and Christian beliefs.
- ✂ Finely embroidered articles are used in dowries.
- ✂ Each community possesses a distinct style of embroidery that embodies their identity and is passed down from mother to daughter.
- ✂ Changes in embroidery styles through time reflect the changing conditions of the community: contact with new environments, individuals and cultures.
- ✂ The embroidery work is a language, that identifies a woman first by her tribe, then her caste or religious sub-group, and often will denote specific information such as marital status or birth of a first child.



The plasterwork of homes makes an excellent surface to receive paint. The spare rainfall ensures that embellishments are preserved for many years.



## Through the Eye of a Needle Fact Sheet

Source: *Through the Eye of a Needle Catalogue – Maiwa & Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan (2003)*

- ✘ In order to maintain local traditions, preserve the dignity of traditional skills, and control the pricing and marketing of their work, the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan co-operative (KMVS) was formed in 1989.
- ✘ The KMVS connects distinct tribal communities and has 4,500 members in the crafts sector and 8,000 in the whole co-operative, including milk sellers, herders, etc.
- ✘ The co-operative was originally started to fix a more secure price for the tribal communities' milk and animals. This inspired the embroiderers to look at a more co-operative way of selling their work, and pooling their expenses and buying power. Currently, male leatherworkers, who primarily construct sandals and animal trappings, are looking at joining the co-operative for similar reasons.
- ✘ The KMVS co-operative provides access to information, training and skills. KMVS runs a radio broadcast, a newsletter, a self-managed screen-printing unit and a savings and credit program. It also organizes programs in natural resource management, education for women, family planning and legal support.
- ✘ Maiwa Handprints, founded in Vancouver, Canada in 1986 and run by Charllotte Kwon, is one of the largest importers of traditionally embroidered cloth from the Kutch region.
- ✘ Maiwa pursues an unusual business model similar to commissioning of an artwork. The artisans are advanced a substantial payment (at least fifty percent) on a large order and no attempt is made to dictate design choices.
- ✘ Maiwa Handprints Ltd. established the Maiwa Foundation in 1997; it was registered as a private trust in 2001 to help fund practising and re-emerging artisans in the craft sector. The Maiwa Foundation has carried out numerous charitable activities for the benefit of artisans and craftspeople in developing nations.



## Q & A with Cathy Roy

The Provincial Museum of Alberta's curatorial custodian of  
*Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories From an Indian Desert*

What do you find most interesting about the KMVS co-operative and their embroidery work?

*The KMVS co-op is an example of what can be achieved when people work together within the structure of a co-operative. The co-op is more than the sum of its parts - in this case, the individual needlewomen have the economic clout of a large supplier and distributor.*

How has the KMVS co-operative developed or changed the lives of the members involved?

*The KMVS co-operative was originally organized to facilitate sales of milk and animals by milk herders. Embroiderers joined the group to pool their expenses and buying power, and to sell their work. The co-operative has allowed members to retain their regional lifestyles and still succeed economically.*

What parallels in the Edmonton Needlecraft Guild display in the Museum's Café Cases would you want visitors to observe?

*This exhibition illustrates two things: what needlewomen in Edmonton are producing as examples of their own artistic expression, and what Gujarati families relocated in Edmonton have kept as examples of the needlework of their home state. The works of both groups show that, although the end products of needlewomen vary greatly, they are all produced by hand and draw upon the same vocabulary of stitches.*



## Q & A with Cathy Roy

The Provincial Museum of Alberta's curatorial custodian of  
*Through the Eye of a Needle: Stories From an Indian Desert*

How does the vocabulary of stitches in work represented by the Edmonton Needlecraft Guild illustrate our Alberta identity?

*The work of the Edmonton Needlecraft Guild reflects the cultural diversity of Alberta as well as illustrates the landscape of the region in which we live.*

How was the greater community involved with this exhibition?

*Craft guilds and teaching staff at the University of Alberta were contacted to find the group most closely related to the needlework shown in *Through the Eye of the Needle*. One of our local contacts in the Gujarati community, Suneeta Jobanputra, collected needlework for display from other members of the community.*

What would you like Albertans to learn from this exhibition?

*I would like Albertans to appreciate the richness of one of the cultures that makes up the Albertan mosaic. Albertans of western European descent often do not realize that other cultures rely heavily on visual symbolism to communicate and to identify groups within the community.*

*There are links within our history to groups joining together in co-operatives to improve their economic situation. Co-operatives were organized on the Canadian prairies in the early 20th century by farm produce providers for marketing and by consumers to secure cheaper sources of supplies.*

*In our world of mass-produced everything, it is interesting to pause and see works of beauty and utility that were created by the hands of individuals.*



## Curatorial Profile

### Cathy Roy, Technician, Western Canadian History Program

Before joining the Museum's family, Cathy spent more than a decade working as a custom tailor/cutter. She studied older books of patterns and techniques, which prompted her to pursue further education at the University of Alberta. Upon graduation, she lectured in History of Dress and was acting curator of the Clothing and Textiles Collection. Cathy has been with the Provincial Museum as the Western Canadian History Technician since 2000.

Cathy's primary responsibility is the storage and management of the collection's 120,000 artifacts. To help manage the collection, Cathy co-ordinates the efforts of four volunteers. On a weekly basis, Cathy speaks to several people wishing to donate their collectibles to the program. The artifacts accepted into the collection must have a historical connection to the story of Alberta. For example, an old dress may be an interesting piece, but unless there is an oral or written history attached to the garment, it serves little historical purpose.

Cathy also oversees loans from our collection to Alberta's historical sites and other regional museums.

Cathy's background is in textiles, so she is naturally drawn to the collection's garments. Other favourites include the collection of antique toys and exquisite pieces of Asian ceramics. Cathy would like to expand the collection's holdings of men's clothing, and she is also interested in collecting materials from local cultural groups that were active in the sixties and seventies. Along with the Curator of Western Canadian History, Jane Ross, Cathy helped curate the *SIXTIES* exhibition and curated *Domestic Art: Quilts from the Museum's Collection* in 2002.



Cathy Roy holds a Gujarati wall hanging lent to The Provincial Museum of Alberta by the Jobanputra family of Edmonton



## Museum Prices and Hours

### Admission:

	Regular	Annual Mammoth Pass: (Unlimited Admission plus benefits)
Adult (18-64 years)	\$10	\$35
Senior (65 and over)	\$8	\$30
Student (with ID)	\$8	\$30
Youth (7-17)	\$5	\$20
Family (Two adults and children 7-17)	\$28	\$70
Grandparent (Two grandparents and children 7-17)	\$28	\$60

**Hours:** Open daily from 9 am to 5 pm  
Admission is half-price on Saturdays and Sundays between 9 am & 11 am

### *The Museum Shop*

Contribute directly to the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangathan co-operative through the purchase of catalogues and beautiful KMVS-made embroideries in *The Museum Shop*. Works for sale include handbags, pillows, dolls and wall hangings (from \$9.99 to \$299.99).

