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GILĀN XX. HANDICRAFTS

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xx. Handicrafts

The Gilān region does not have a great craft tradition, as do other provinces of the interior of Iran with their towns famous for one or more specialties: carpets, ceramics, metalwork, etc. At most we might number among local traditions silk or floss silk cloth (the celebrated *čādoršab* of Qāsemābād), the embroidery (*qollābduzi*) of Rasht, the wickerwork (*ḥaṣirbāfi*), including mats, baskets, and hats; turned-wood objects (table legs, cigarette holders, etc.); and pottery (including *gamaj*—green-glazed bowls in which the finest culinary recipes are prepared). This limited range of local craftsmanship is due to two factors: taking the broad view, Gilān was a region that produced raw materials (including silk), to which one came for supplies, much more than a region where finished products were made; and the area long remained rural, with only minor importance accorded to towns housing professionals, workshops, and master craftsmen (see Rasht).

Textile specialties. While Arāk, Isfahan, Kashan, Kermān, Tabriz, and Yazd are famed for their carpets and silk brocades, resource-rich Gilān (see *ABRIŠAM*) is known for its much more modest creations: taffetas, such as the *long* (striped and checked loincloth knotted around the waist at the public bath), unicolored sashes (at one time exported to Georgia), and *kajini* (textiles of floss silk, often mixed with cotton, used for ordinary garments, such as the familiar *čādoršab*; see the inventory of these traditional products in Chodzko, pp.

78-79). The weaving of silk and floss silk (*šaʿrbāfi*) textiles was found throughout Gilān in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Lafont and Rabino, 1910,pp. 57-59, attest to the extent and volume of these activities). Today, this output is especially concentrated in eastern Gilān, at Qāsemābād in particular. These fabrics are woven on looms (*pāčāl*) with treadles and two rows of heddles (Figure 1 and Plate I; on the operation of this loom, see Wulff, pp. 204-05; Bazin and Bromberger, p. 62). The woven lengths (*taḵta*) are then sewn together to make the *čādoršab*, a fabric with geometric patterns (Plate II), which women tie around their waist when working or over their shoulders to carry a child.

The other craft specialty of the Gilān plain is embroidery (*qollābduzi*), that of Rasht being especially esteemed. There were 15 workshops in Rasht in 1992 (*K. G.*, III, p. 47) and 38 professional embroiderers in 2004 (MAI). The craft has been the object of a preservation effort by the regional Heritage Service where a young *ostād*, a master craftswoman (formerly the occupation was practiced by both sexes; today it is almost entirely female), maintains the tradition. The embroiderer keeps the material stretched in a wooden clamp (*jaride*) that rests on her thigh and on which she exerts pressure with her other leg. The designs, drawn on tracing paper, are copied onto the material before the embroidery work proper begins; they are basically geometric and vegetal motifs (such as *qonče,* bud of a flower, *sar barg* and *riz barg*, broad and narrow leaves; see Plate III). To do her work, “The embroiderer takes a crochet hook (*qolāb*, *suzan*) [...] and pierces it through the cloth [...]. Holding the embroidery thread (*naḵ*) on the reverse side of the cloth, she grips it with the crochet hook [...] and pulls a loop formed by it to the front, and, with this thread loop still around the hook, pierces through the cloth again, gripping the thread underneath, and pulling the next loop up, and so on; thus producing the chain-stitch (*pič*; Wulff, pp. 218-19). Another technique (*tekkeduzi, moʿarraq*) consists of appliquéing onto the material a “multitude of small scraps of cloth in all colors, cut into the most complicated shapes and artistically resewn in such a way as to produce designs resembling those of the shawls of Kashmir. The seams are covered over with silk embroidery whose colors harmonize with those of the material” (Lafont and Rabino, 1910, p. 60). The two techniques—embroidery and appliqué—are often combined on the fabrics used to adorn saddlecloths (*ʿaraq-gir*), cushions (*rubāleš*), tablecloths (*rumizi*), tapestries (*rudivāri*), and blankets, and even clothing (Brugsch, p. 89) and slippers. Some of these items, prized not long ago by the aristocracy, are the flower of regional craftsmanship.

Weaving wool and goat hair is a specialty of the mountainous regions—Ṭāleš and Gāleš—of Gilān. The main product is a heavy material with a plain weave (one over, one under), the *šāl.* When both the warp (*tār*) and weft (*pud*) are wool, the material, first fulled in soapy water (which gives it an appearance not unlike loden woolen fabric), is used to make clothing: trousers (*šalvār, šālšalvār*), jackets (*kut, šakā*), and skullcaps (*kalā*). The saddlebags (*ḵarjin*) carried by donkeys and mules are also made of woolen *šāl.* On the other hand, the warp of larger-capacity bags (*juol*) is made of strands spun from both wool and goat hair, which results in a stronger fabric. As for the awnings (*čādor, šāl-e čādor*) that cover the roofs of cottages or the branches of huts (*pargā, pori*), they are made entirely of goat hair. The *šāl* is woven either on a horizontal loom on the ground with one row of heddles (Figure 2), or on a treadle loom with two rows of heddles, similar to that used for weaving the *čādoršab* (Figure 1), or using a different method of holding the warp (Clothing xxii, Plate clvii).

To complete this overview of products made from wool, we may mention one other specialty of the mountains of Gilān, the stockings (*gurāve* or *jurāb*), single-colored or multicolored, knitted by the women with five needles; they are especially heavy (each strand of yarn is made of two threads doubled over). See also Clothing xxii.

Work in rushes and reeds. Wickerwork (creation of reed fences; manufacture of mats, baskets, and hats from rushes) is a signal activity of the delta of the Safidrud, the Caspian shore, and especially the Anzali lagoon. There were in 1986 1,506 families dedicated to this activity in the region (*K. G.*, III, p. 34). Several varieties of rushes (*gāli*) and reeds (*ney*) belonging to the genera *Carex, Typha, Sparganium*, and *Phragmites* (Bazin, I, p. 78; Bazin and Bromberger, p. 73) grow in abundance on the Caspian shores and marshes as well as in the reservoirs developed for the irrigation of rice fields (see GILĀN xi. IRRIGATION).

From reeds are made, in the shore settlements, the fences (*parde*) that surround the domestic compounds and the walls of some rural buildings (Bromberger, p. 25). The reeds are bound together by wattling with plaited strands.

The Gilānis classify rushes according to two criteria: thickness and color. In this way they distinguish the *li* (large *Carex*) from the *suf* or *sim*, with a thinner stalk and shades of maroon, yellow-green, or whitish (*abrišam gāli* “silk rush”

is what they call this last). The rush worker can play with these nuances of color to create the design of the mat she is weaving.

It is in fact the mats (*hasir*) that comprise the bulk of the output, traditionally. The women weave them in summer and fall in the courtyard of their house (Plate IV). The loom they use (Figure 4) is of very simple construction. The warp, consisting of doubled strands (called *lu*) of *li*, is held between two horizontal poles, each of which is supported by two vertical stakes; a wooden comb (*šone*) is incorporated into the loom so that the weft, passed from hand to hand, can be vigorously tamped down.

The operator—or the two operators who face each other and work on the same mat—can make a single-color mat by using the same variety of rush for the weft throughout the entire length of her work or, as has been noted, can play on the variety of colors by alternately using a light shade and a darker one. For such esthetic purposes, she can also play on the variety of types of weave: the simplest mats, usually intended for domestic use, have a plain weave (one over, one under); those meant for sale to tourists have a cross weave (i.e., two over, two under) or serge (one over, two under, the twill weave); the last two are sometimes combined in a single piece.

The manufacture of baskets (*zanbil*) is found in a smaller area than the manufacture of mats and is especially concentrated around the Anzali lagoon and the mouth of the Safidrud (Bazin and Bromberger, map 36). Baskets of any size are made of spiral work, with sewn plaits, provided with a flat base, and their rims and handles are made of very strong cords also plaited from rushes. According to the commodities being transported and the sex of the bearer, the diameter of the base of the basket ranges between 40 and 80 centimeters, and it may be more than 50 centimeters tall. Women use a small basket when picking tea leaves; men who are bringing their products to sell in the bazaar attach a large *zanbil* to each end of a flexible pole (*čān ču*) that they bear on their shoulders (Plate V).

To these traditional items may be added fans and especially hats, which are also made of plaits of sewn rushes, which are mainly intended for the tourists who flock to the seashore at vacation time. This “neo-craftsmanship” has flourished strongly since the end of the imperial regime, and the shops that sell these things have mushroomed near the shore and the shrines (such as Emāmzāda Hāšem) and along the main roads.

Pottery. This too is a traditional activity in the region; according to *K. G.* (III, p. 37), in 1986 43 villages still had one or more ceramic workshops. Output, however, is in decline, with plastic and metal replacing pottery for domestic use (jugs and various containers), and tin (*ḥalab*) replacing tiles (*sofāl*) where they had been used for covering roofs. Oblong and globular churns (*nerḵe*), bowls (*gamaj*) with a green glaze, and various shapes of tiles from the west to the center of the province are the most typical ceramic ware. To these traditional items may be added decorative objects (vases, copies of ancient ceramics, etc.) intended for a tourist clientele.

Five main types of pottery industry could be identified at the end of the 1970s (see Bazin and Bromberger, pp. 75-78 and map 37 and, for further detail, Achouri). (1) In four villages of central Ṭāleš, south of Haštpar, some sixty potters used a tournette (hand-turned wheel), made of two disks of apricot wood placed one on top of the other. The rolls of clay, placed on a base plate, were smoothed to produce churns, bowls, jugs, bakers' ovens, etc., then baked directly in the fire in an oval kiln consisting of a low wall with openings blocked for each firing with plates of tin (Figure 5a). (2) Jirdeh, in central Gilān, is the most important center for women potters. There they use a slightly better tournette, where the upper disk (*sar-e čarḵ*) turns on a metal axis. The kiln is the same as in central Ṭāleš, and the output includes ceramics used throughout Gilān: bowls (*gamaj*) and their lids (*noḵon*), jugs (*čire*), mortars (*namakyār, nimkār*), and braziers (*manqal*); well hoops (*tonor-e čāh*) are also made there. (3) The *gamaj*, *noḵon*, and *čire* are usually sold unbaked at Gildeh and Ḵortum, two villages where the craftsmen have specialized in the creation and firing of glazes (*laʿaab*). Glazes are made with the lead from old car batteries mixed with glass ground with a foot-activated pestle (*pā-dang*) traditionally used in husking and polishing rice (see GILĀN xviii. RURAL PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES). The amalgam is heated with pewter and scraps of copper (on the role of pewter and copper as coloring agents, see Wulff, p. 162), then reduced to a powder. Added to water and ground in a handmill (*āsiāb dasti*), which is usually used for making rice flour, this powder yields a thin gray paste that is applied to the pots between the first and second firings. The upright kiln includes a firebox and a conical firing chamber (Figure 5b). After firing, the pots emerge from the kiln covered with a brilliant green glaze (Plate VI), a shade that pinpoints their provenance. (4) Other villages, west of the Anzali lagoon, near Siāhkal, south of Rudsar, are home to pottery workshops using the potter's wheel (Figure 6) to make churns, jars, cups for yogurt and water (*māst-gole, āb-gole*), smudge pots used by beekeepers to

smoke the bees out of their honeycombs, and again decorative items for the tourist trade, etc. The wives of some of these potters also use the tower wheel—and this is a rare occurrence anywhere in the world (see GILĀN xvii. GENDER RELATIONS)—to fashion mortars. Here the firing is accomplished in a tunnel-shaped kiln of masonry, heated by a subterranean firebox (Figure 5c). (5) Only the urban workshops of Rasht, located in the quarter of Ḵomeyrān-e Zāhedān, combined the use of the potter's wheel with compounding, applying, and firing glazes. Two of these workshops remained in the 1970s, whereas in this quarter some fifty potteries could be counted twenty years earlier.

Clay is also used for making tiles (*sofāl*) in two different ways, resulting in different finished products, from western to eastern Gilān. In the west, on the coastal plain of Ṭāleš, tiles are made on forms and have a lip (*dokme*) on their convex side for attaching them to the battens of the roof; they flare broadly and appear hollow (see GILĀN xii. RURAL HOUSING; Bromberger, p. 54 and photograph on p. 66). These tiles are different from those roofing the traditional urban houses of central and eastern Gilān, which come from cylinders made on the tower wheel that are cut in half lengthwise after drying for a day. Whichever way they are made, the tiles are piled into a large rectangular kiln heated by a vaulted, semi-underground firebox. Tile manufacture has declined considerably over the last few decades with the widespread use of tin (*ḥalab*) as a roofing material.

Other specialties are less widely found, whether they are traditional local matters that concern only a fraction of the rural population, or conversely a craft or a "neo-craft" intended for the trendy clientele of the cities.

We may mention, in the former category, items made of leather (*čarm*), a mountain specialty, especially in the town of Māsula. Until quite recently, shepherds from Ṭāleš and Gāleš wore shoes (*čumuš, čāroḵ*) of cowhide, created by the local craftsmen (the description of the manufacturing process, see CLOTHING xxii with Plate lxxi). These traditional shoes have been replaced, over the course of recent decades, by rubber *gāloš* made from used tires. Leatherworkers also traditionally produced everything needed for harnessing pack animals (horses, mules, donkeys, even pack oxen): straps, tethers, crupper, etc.

In the second category, woodworking and in particular turning occupy a noteworthy place. The creation of wood furniture—including the famous

bulaki chests used for storing clothes and valuable objects—is a major traditional activity in the town of Rasht (there were 120 cabinetmakers' workshops at Rasht in 1992 according to *K. G.*, III, p. 47). As for wood-turning, another Rasht specialty, it has experienced a renewal with the influx of tourists on the lookout for typical items: alongside the creation of spindles, table and chair legs, water pipes, have been added cigarette holders, tableware, novelty furniture, etc.

The creation of water pipes (see qalyān) from decorated gourds (*ḡalyān-kuʾi*) is another specialty of Gilān as of Māzandarān. Lafont and Rabino (1914, pp. 235-36) have left us a detailed description of how these *ḡalyān*s are obtained from gourds. When, at the beginning of July, the gourds begin to appear on the plants, "each one is enclosed in a wooden box, which will serve as a mold; as they grow, the gourds take on exactly the form of the boxes, which usually have six or eight side faces [...]. With a string they tie off the gourds just above the top of the boxes in order to produce a constriction and a bulge [...]. The molds are left on the gourds for a month." Another technique, which was cheaper, consisted in shaping the gourds by hand twice a day for ten to fifteen days; the gourds grown in this fashion were round. After many operations (drying, decorating with a burin, dyeing, plunging into a kettle of lukewarm water, etc.), the drawings appear in black on the calabash.

Among the specialties that used to contribute to the reputation of Rasht, we may mention enamelwork (*mināākāri*). But the craftworks that these days are represented as typical of Gilān at exhibitions of folk art are the *čādoršab* woven on the *pāčāl*, mats (*haṣir*), and embroidery.

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