



Decoding Motif Language in the Woodcraft of Punjab and its Application in Interior Design

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ABSTRACT

The woodcraft of Punjab has a rich legacy of cultural expression and knowledge developed by skilful artisans over a period of time. The motifs in this craft are of great value not only within woodcraft but also in expressing cultural values and identity. This research aims to understand these motifs, their meanings and their application in Interior design. The study has identified four major categories of motifs - floral, geometric, narrative and religious. All of these motifs look different. The floral designs depict nature, growth and being in harmony. The geometric designs are often linked to order, balance and clarity. The narrative designs are about telling stories and showing life experiences. The religious designs are connected to spirituality or cultural values. These designs are not just valuable because of what they mean. Also because they can be used in modern design settings. The floral and geometric designs are more flexible because they can be easily made bigger or simpler. The narrative and religious designs need to be used carefully. The research also looks at how to modify, simplify and reinterpret motifs for use in interior design. It also talks about the challenges of using these designs today. There are problems with making the designs bigger or smaller as needed, standardizing them affording them and losing special skills. These problems often limit how well



traditional designs work in life. This means that the best way to use these patterns is not to copy them but to understand and adjust them to fit needs. In this way the research helps to connect the skills we have with what interior design needs in a more thoughtful and careful way.

1. Introduction

In recent years, people have become more interested in combining traditional crafts with modern design. This is happening because people are more aware of the need for sustainability, cultural identity and new design ideas (Asia InCH, n.d.; Development Commissioner [Handicrafts], 2015). Traditional woodcraft in Punjab is an example of this especially because of its detailed designs and rich collection of motifs. The motifs used in Punjab are not designs that are aesthetical but also communicate the values, beliefs and life experiences of the people.

There has been a number of change in motifs over time because of the influence of historical events, religion and also crafts. Earlier, crafted woodwork with detailed motifs could be often seen on the designs of doors, windows and furniture in homes and rural buildings of Punjab. With the introduction of steel, concrete and mass-produced boards intricate woodwork started to decline. Despite this decline some craft centres in Hoshiarpur and Kartarpur continued to preserve the tradition of wood inlay and carving (Vasudeva, 2019).

Different types of motifs could be seen on architectural and furniture forms. These motifs were not used randomly but with a specific consideration. The Geometric and floral designs were commonly used in inlay work because they were easy to repeat and could be done precisely. Narrative motifs started to be used in customized crafts. Religious motifs that included script motifs continued to be used in both secular and sacred contexts. Intricate and symbolic motifs were used on entrance doors while repetitive motifs used on furniture surfaces. Sheesham or deodar wood was preferred for woodcraft because of their durability. In places like Hoshiarpur, Inlay work was extensively done with materials such as ivory, brass, bone and synthetic materials.

One problem designers usually face have when using motifs in designs is that they do not have enough knowledge about traditional crafts and their cultural meaning. The designer might not understand how to use the woodcraft motifs in a visually appealing manner. This means they either use the motifs without thinking or they do not use them all. The objective of this paper is to learn more about the motifs used in



Punjab woodcraft and how they are used in designs. This will help in understanding why certain motifs are used in Punjab woodcraft and what they mean and also how they can be applied in modern designs.

2. Literature Review

Asia InCH (n.d.): The documentation provides information on woodcraft traditions in Punjab especially in Hoshiarpur, which is known for its wood inlay work. The article focuses on using sheesham wood with materials like brass, bone and synthetic materials. The study notes that common motifs like geometric designs are often repeated symmetrically on inlaid panels, borders and furniture surfaces.

Vasudeva, R. (2019): The paper explores wood inlay art in Punjab specifically in Hoshiarpur, Jalandhar and Amritsar. It looks at using geometric designs in wood furniture through intricate wood inlay work. The paper also discusses the shift from ivory to materials. Additionally it addresses issues like declining patronage, higher costs and artisan involvement.

Crill, R. (2015): The study examines how the paisley design, also known as ambi or kairi in India developed historically. It explains that this design originated from design and is linked to ideas like fertility, growth and continuity. This motif appears in forms in crafts like woodwork.

Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) Government of India (2015): The report discusses handicraft practices in India including woodcraft in Punjab in places like Hoshiarpur and Kartarpur. The report mentions the challenges faced by the handicraft industry in India, such as industrialisation and low artisan participation.

Jyoti, N. R. (2023): This study highlights the traditions of crafts in Punjab and their cultural and social significance. It also shows that the motifs used in Punjab crafts are inspired by nature, life and cultural values.

The reviewed research works make observations about the materials, techniques and motifs used in Punjabi woodcraft. However, only few studies examine these motifs as a visual language, including their evolution and application in Modern interior design.

3. Research Methodology

A qualitative and analytical approach to study motif language in woodcraft of Punjab is adopted in this research. The methodology is structured around three main components:



3.1 Data Collection

The data has been collected through:

- Literature review of craft documentation and academic sources
- Visual analysis of woodcraft samples and case studies
- Observation of motifs in existing Interior applications

3.2 Classification of Motifs

The motifs are classified into four main types that are instrumental in analysing the characteristics of the motifs and their meanings.

- Floral Motifs
- Geometric Motifs
- Narrative Motifs
- Religious Motifs

3.3 Analytical Framework

Each type of motif was analysed based on the following criteria:

- Symbolic meaning
- Visual characteristics
- Design flexibility
- Adaptability in Modern Interior spaces

3.4 Evaluation Criteria

Motifs adaptability was evaluated based on the following criteria:

- Scalability

- Compatibility with modern materials and techniques
- Relevance to user preferences
- Integration with design systems

4. Motif Language in Punjab Woodcraft

4.1 Floral Motifs

The floral motifs are one of the most popular and major components of regional woodcraft of Punjab and include motifs such as lotus, tulips, vines and rosettes, usually designed in a balanced and symmetrical manner. Floral motifs also extend to representations of fruits, vegetables, and natural elements, reflecting everyday life and the creative interpretation of nature by artisans. In addition to their use for decorative purposes, floral motifs also possess various symbolic meanings related to fertility, harmony and spiritual growth. They are usually designed in a composition format called *phulkari* and *bel patti* borders and possess a high degree of flexibility for use in modern Interior design applications. They can be simplified and effectively incorporated for use in various design applications including wall panels, partitions and furniture surfaces.



Figure 1: Floral motifs used in *Phulkari* and *Bagh* (Source: Kaur et al., 2014)

4.2 Geometric Motifs

The geometric motifs are characterized by structured arrangements of interlocking squares, diamonds and hexagonal grids, reflecting principles of order, symmetry and balance. These motifs are often linked to spiritual and cosmological ideas found in Islamic and Sikh artistic traditions. Such motifs also serve functional purposes in architectural elements like *jali* screens, where they facilitate ventilation, light filtration and privacy.

These are most popularly used in modern designs because they can be easily repeated. They also work well with modular systems and modern digital fabrication methods like CNC cutting and laser engraving.

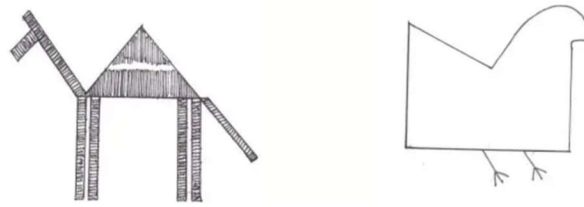








Figure 2: Geometrical motifs used in Phulkari and Bagh (Source: Kaur et al., 2014)

Table 1: Traditional Geometric Motifs in Woodcraft of Punjab

Motif Name & Description	Motif Image	Traditional Use	Modern Adaptation
1. Jaalidar (Jali) Pattern			
Repeating geometric lattice used in windows, facades, partitions. Includes hexagons, quatrefoils, and grids.		Window screens, dividers, religious screens	CNC MDF jalis, laser-cut partitions
2. Nested Squares / Diamond Grid			
Squares within squares or tilted diamonds that create symmetry and visual depth.		Cabinet doors, wooden panels, manja frames	Feature walls, wardrobe shutters
3. Hexagonal Grid (Pinjra Work)			
Interlocking hexagons used in traditional cage-pattern lattice work.		Windows, balconies, folding screens	Decorative screens, lighting panels
4. Chevron / Zigzag Border			
Repeating V-shaped or step pattern, commonly used as decorative borders.		Dowry chests, panel trims, furniture borders	Table edges, trims, engraved borders
5. Eight-Point Star (Ashtkon)			
Interlaced polygons forming an 8-point star symbolising unity and cosmic order.		Ceilings, door panels, altars	CNC headboards, wall décor
6. Rosette / Geometric Floral Medallion			
Circular, radial motif resembling a stylised floral medallion.		Door centres, mirror frames, ceiling rosettes	Carved panels, coasters, wall tiles

4.3 Narrative Motifs

Narrative motifs frequently include depictions of animals and birds such as elephants, peacocks, and horses, reflecting rural life, folklore, and socio-cultural contexts. These motifs function as visual storytelling elements within the craft tradition.



4.4 Religious Motifs

Religious motifs carry spiritual significance. These motifs require careful and contextual use, as they are less adaptable to modern applications.

5. Application in Interior Design

The use of the traditional motifs in the present times has shifted from the replication process to the process of abstraction, simplification and adaptation. With the application of the current fabrication techniques, traditional motifs can now be replicated on a larger scale. The traditional motifs are no longer rigid elements rather are flexible elements in interior design. The floral and geometric motifs are more adaptable than the narrative and religious motifs on account of their flexibility.

This process of transformation and adaptation can be better understood by seeing how it is used in modern interior spaces.

5.1 Case Study: Jaypore Flagship Store, Bengaluru

Design Firm: Studio Lotus (2018)

1. Background & Context

Jaypore is one of India's most prominent brands curating artisanal crafts for the global and urban Indian market. In 2018, the company launched its flagship retail store in Bengaluru, designed by **Studio Lotus (2018)**. The brief was not merely to create a retail outlet but to transform the space into a **living gallery of Indian craft traditions**, reflecting Jaypore's philosophy of **contemporary craft revival** (Studio Lotus, 2018; Archinect, n.d.).

The store combines **luxury retail aesthetics** with **authentic craft integration** to connect heritagewith a modern shopping environment.

2. Design Intent



Figure 3: Exterior facade of Jaypore store

Source: Archinect (n.d.); Studio Lotus (2018)



- To create a **narrative space** where **Indian crafts** are **embedded into the very architecture** rather than just displayed as merchandise.
- To use the **Phulkari embroidery of Punjab** as **inspiration for the patterns and motifs in the space**.
- To establish a precedent for the use of traditional regional motifs in abstracted forms in architectural and interior design.



Figure 4: Interior View of Jaypore store

Source: Archinect (n.d.); Studio Lotus (2018)

3. Key Design Features

a. Phulkari Motif Adaptation

- The **geometric grid and floral embroidery of Phulkari** was used as the guiding motif.
- Instead of direct reproduction, the motifs were **abstracted and translated into spatial elements** like:
 - **Perforated wooden screens (jaali style partitions)**
 - **Ceiling patterns resembling Phulkari stitch grids**
 - **Wall reliefs inspired by the repetitive geometry of embroidery**

b. Material, Lighting details and Space Planning

- **Natural stone flooring in earthy tones**
- **Locally sourced wood** used for partitions, shelves and ceiling panels
- **Handcrafted metal accents** to enhance detailing
- Warm lighting highlighted textures and craft details
- Spotlights to emphasise merchandise
- The space was segmented by the addition of wooden partitions with Phulkari inspired perforations, unlike the open retail format.



Figure 5: Retail display and lighting details

Source: Archinect (n.d.); Studio Lotus (2018)



Figure 6: Interior detail showing Motif based panel design

6. Motif Application in Interior Design

This has been explained with the help of two examples:

Example 1: Peacock Motif Adaptation

Peacocks appear frequently in Punjabi folk textiles and khatola woodwork, symbolising festivity, beauty and celebration. As a representative narrative motif, the peacock was adapted by:

- tracing the original embroidered outline
- simplifying the feather cluster into repeated geometric curves
- unifying line thickness and contours
- enhancing symmetry for better scalability

This simplified peacock motif works well for:

- engraved wall panels
- feature elements in thematic hospitality spaces
- children's decor and boutique retail zones



Figure 7: Traditional Peacock Motif

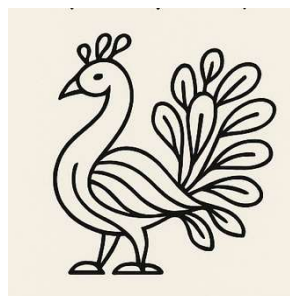


Figure 8: Adapted Peacock Motif



Figure 9: Crafted on CNC

Example 2: Geometric Phulkari Motif Adaptation

A Phulkari-inspired motif is selected, decoded for its symbolic meaning, simplified into a geometric form and applied as a wall panel or partition in a retail interior.

Adaptation steps:

- identifying repeating diamond geometry
- eliminating thread texture
- converting into modular vector units
- adjusting spacing for structural stability in wood

This motif category forms a strong backbone for:

- jaali walls
- headboard panels
- ceiling screens



Figure 10: Traditional Phulkari Motif

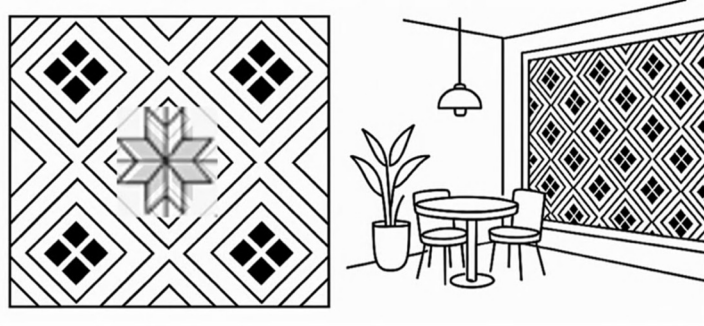


Figure 11: Adapted motif used as a wall panel Motif

Table 2: Adaptation of Motifs in Traditional and Modern Contexts

Motif Type	Traditional Use	Modern Application
Floral	Furniture, panels	Laser-cut panels
Geometric	Jali, partitions	CNC screens
Phulkari	Embroidery, carving	Laminates, panels



Religious	Sacred furniture	Limited use
Fauna	Inlay work	Decorative elements

7. Challenges and Limitations

Several challenges hinder the integration of Punjab woodcraft motifs into modern interiors:

- Lack of awareness among designers and clients
- Decline in skilled artisans
- High cost and time requirements
- Difficulty in standardization
- Competition from machine-made products

These challenges clearly highlight the need for simple and clear approaches to include traditional crafts in modern design.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study indicates that in modern design practice, traditional motifs are often used as a surface treatment and lose their deeper cultural and symbolic significance. This means that people do not really understand how to use motifs in a way that's meaningful. It is clear that just copying motifs is not a good way to make them part of modern design. Instead we need to think about what they mean. And understanding that how we can use that meaning in modern ways with new materials and techniques and in the spaces we live and work in today.

This study also found that the motifs used in Punjab woodcraft have a lot of potential for Interior design if we use them in a careful and thoughtful way. The approach suggested through this research will help designers to make decisions when they are working with traditional motifs and trying to make them a part of modern design.



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