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The bizarre case of the resemblance between the embroideries of Assisi and Azemmour

Elya Assayag

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Abstract

This article uncovers overlooked stories of women's communication and knowledge exchange across the Mediterranean and proposes using embroidery, a craft predominantly practiced by women, to trace these exchanges. The discussion begins with the unique figural embroidery of Azemmour, a small Moroccan town, that is distinct from all other Moroccan embroideries. To explore the influences on the Azemmouri embroidery, the article turns to Assisi, Italy, where strikingly similar embroideries were produced. The article suggests that the Franciscan Order, founded in Assisi and present in Morocco since the thirteenth century, may have contributed to this exchange. By tracing this circulation, this investigation emphasizes the value of conducting "fragmented history," which pieces together fragments of sources. The article argues that the circulation of embroideries across the Mediterranean enabled women in Assisi and Azemmour to establish nonverbal communication that transcended time and space.

Keywords: Morocco; Azemmour; Assisi; Embroidery; Women's History; Material Culture; Franciscan Order

L'étrange affaire des ressemblances entre les broderies d'Assise et d'Azemmour

Résumé

Cet article retrace des récits jusqu'ici négligés de circulation des savoirs féminins à travers la Méditerranée et à travers la broderie, un artisanat pratiqué majoritairement par des femmes. L'analyse se centre sur la broderie figurative singulière de la petite ville d'Azemmour, dont le style se distingue des autres traditions de broderie du Maroc. Afin d'expliquer cette singularité, l'article se tourne vers Assise, en Italie, où l'on produisait des broderies remarquablement similaires et avance l'hypothèse que l'ordre franciscain, fondé à Assise et présent au Maroc depuis le XIII^e siècle, a pu contribuer à ces circulations. En retraçant ces trajectoires, cette enquête met en lumière l'intérêt d'une « histoire fragmentée », qui consiste à assembler des fragments de sources et qui montre comment la circulation des broderies à travers la Méditerranée a permis aux femmes d'Assise et d'Azemmour d'établir une forme de communication non verbale transcendant le temps et l'espace.

Mots-clés : Maroc ; Azemmour ; Assise ; Broderie ; Histoire des femmes ; Culture matérielle ; Ordre franciscain



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In her iconic 1976 article, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” feminist thinker Hélène Cixous calls us to “write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies”¹. Anyone who has worked on women’s history knows the difficulty of finding written sources produced by women. Even in periods and places where women were literate, few archives and collections deemed these writings important enough to preserve. What, then, are the ways we can write women back into historical narratives?

I suggest that tracing nonverbal communication embedded in material culture, particularly in women’s craft², is one answer to this question. This article argues that, as a women’s designated craft, the study of embroidered artifacts, alongside the historical contexts in which they were made, uncovers stories told by women, stories that did not receive a place in textual documents and, more generally, were not shared through verbal mediums³.

This article begins with the mystery of a unique style of embroidery found in the small Moroccan town of Azemmour. The earliest known pieces of Azemmouri embroidery date to the eighteenth century⁴. Unlike the geometric shapes characteristic of other Moroccan embroidery styles created during the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, the Azemmour style is figurative, depicting humans, animals, and other creatures. In addition, unlike major changes in embroidery styles in different regions of Morocco, the surviving Azemmouri embroidery style has remained similar to the designs from before the colonial period. To understand how Azemmour came to have such unique embroidery, the story transcends Morocco’s geographical boundaries, reaching across the Mediterranean to Italy, specifically to Assisi, a small town in the region of Umbria. Reconstructing the story of women from across the Mediterranean and the knowledge they transferred across the sea and throughout time, this article explores how knowledge and aesthetic trends have been transferred between generations of women.

A dragon among geometric shapes

Morocco has a rich history of crafts. There are many types of crafts still seen in the old city centers in Morocco. From cast, wood, and copper works through the marvelous *Zellige* (the Moroccan mosaic tilework), the unique pottery, and weaving⁵. Among these, the history of textile embroidery is particularly remarkable. Produced almost exclusively by women⁶, the embroiderers developed unique styles that were typical for each

¹* I would like to thank Mason Voit and Karin Eisen for reading and rereading countless versions of this article. To Moshe Sluhovsky, my eternal mentor. To my dear colleagues and scientific editors of this special issue: Benjamin Badier, Yazid Benhadda, Abdelmou-
naïmFanidi, OthmaneMouyyah, and Soufiane Taïf for their brilliant comments, encouragement, and constant support. Special thanks also to Latifa and Fatima from cooperative Almhadeb in Azemmour and to Raffaella Bartolucci for teaching me to create and “read” their embroideries. A great thanks is also due to Daniel Hershenzon and Ana Struillou, who patiently guided me through fascinating sources on the circulation of objects in the early modern Mediterranean. Finally, I would like to thank the reviewers who pointed out this article’s blind spots in a direct and constructive manner, helping me to sharpen my arguments.

²Cixous Hélène (1976), “The Laugh of the Medusa”, *Signs*, 1(4), p. 875.

³Nicholas Claire (2010), “Moroccan Women Embroiderers: Technical and Ethical Reconfigurations”, *Ethnology: An International Journal of Cultural and Social Anthropology*, 49(2), pp. 105–28.

⁴The premise of this article is based on Rozsika Parker’s phrase that “[t]o know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women.” Parker Rozsika (2022), *The Subversive Stitch – Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, London, Bloomsbury, p. VI. This article came out of the research I conducted for my dissertation. In my dissertation, I studied shifts in Moroccan embroidery styles during the second half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, the period of European imperial quests in North Africa and the French and Spanish colonialism in Morocco. The study traced diverse agents who were involved in the transformation of knowledge and aesthetic trends of Moroccan embroideries. Assayag Elya (forthcoming June 2026), “Embroidering Histories: Women, Craft, and Colonial Powers in Morocco, 19th–20th Centuries”, PhD thesis, Columbia University.

⁵See for example: Paul Dahan’s private collection, Brussels, 21960, Broderie d’Azemmour, 18th century. Online, accessed on 1 December 2025. URL: <https://www.judaisme-marocain.org/recherche>; Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, 74.1962.0.191, Fragment d’ornement de lit, 18th century, Embroidery, silk thread on linen, 26,4 x 100 x 0,1 cm. Online, accessed on 1 December 2025. URL : <https://collections.quaibrantly.fr/?action=search&field=/Record/ObjectNumber&label=N%C2%B0%20de%20gestion&value=74.1962.0.191>.

⁶Jereb James (1996), *Arts & Crafts of Morocco*, San Francisco, Chronicle Books; Talout Meknass Fawzia (2010), *Dar Maalma: L’artisanat Au Féminin*, Rabat, Editions Marsam.

⁷Leather and metal thread embroidery were also done by men in Morocco, but textile embroidery was and still is a women’s craft. See more in: Ricard Prosper (1918), *Broderies - Arts Marocains*, Alger, J. Carbonel.

specific geographical region and community, and that were distinct from each other in design, materials, and types of stitches⁷.

The influences on Moroccan embroidery are difficult to trace. The oldest surviving pieces date back to the eighteenth century. However, these are only the ones that survived. The fragile nature of embroidered artifacts, coupled with the historical undervaluing of women's crafts, led to the scarcity of surviving embroidered pieces. The practice of this craft in Morocco began to be documented in the Middle Ages⁸. However, embroidered artifacts were discovered in Egyptian tombs as early as the third century BCE⁹, and it is possible that they circulated along Saharan trade routes in earlier periods than the Middle Ages, though there is no clear supporting evidence.

Some of the embroidery styles known today are believed to have originated from the non-urban embroideries of the Amazigh, the indigenous tribes, in the Atlas Mountains¹⁰. One example of these embroidery styles is the one practiced by the Jewish communities of Tafilalt, which features rows of diamond shapes, separated by straight lines, all done in red, yellow, and green braided stitch [Image 1]. Another example is an embroidery that is still practiced by several Amazigh tribes in the Anti-Atlas region. Their embroideries uniquely use wool threads (and starting in the early twentieth century, also synthetic threads), employing a type of braided stitch to create diverse and colorful geometrical shapes [Image 2]¹¹.

Image 1: A detail from an embroidered shirt from Tafilalt (Anti-Atlas Mountains), silk thread on cotton 97x46 cm



Source: embroidery collection of The Oudayas National Museum of Adornment, Rabat (1239M)

⁷ Ricard P., *Broderies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 11; Denamur Isabelle (2003), *Broderies marocaines*, Paris, Flammarion, pp. 16-21.

⁸ Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁹ Mis Zaira (2008), *African Costumes and Textiles: From the Berbers to the Zulus: The Zaira and Marcel Mis Collection*, Milano, 5 continents, pp. 11-14.

¹⁰ Ricard P., *Broderies...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-13; Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines*, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-125, 129-139.

¹¹ Labrusse Rémi, Lévêque Fatima, and Salaberry Émilie (eds.) (2022), *Tarz: broder au Maroc, hier et aujourd'hui*, Musée d'Angoulême, 18 juin-31 décembre 2022, Paris, Skira, pp. 161-171.

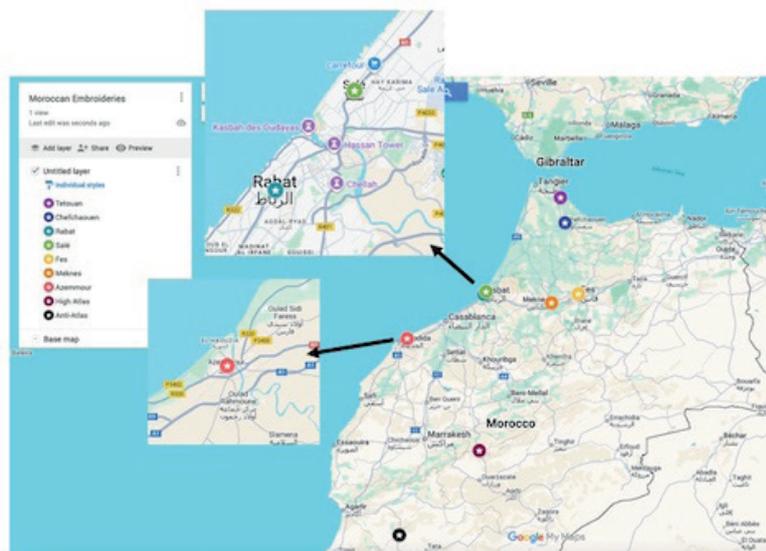
Image 2: A detail from an embroidered fabric from the Anti-Atlas Mountains, Synthetic acrylic threads 180x125



Source: Textile Research Center, Leiden (TRC 2010.0339).

The two embroidery styles that are believed to originate from the Amazigh embroidery are those of Fes and Meknes. Other styles of Moroccan embroidery known today are associated with the cities of Tetouan, Chefchaouen, Salé, Rabat, and Azemmour. The influences on these styles are diverse. To understand the uniqueness of Azemmour's embroidery, I will briefly discuss the aesthetics of the other types of Moroccan embroidery¹².

Image 3: Locations of main styles of embroidery in Morocco with a close up of the geographical proximity of Rabat and Salé and the location of Azemmour



Source: Google Maps, August 2025

¹² For a more elaborate overview of the different Moroccan embroideries see: Ricard P., *Broderies...*, *op. cit.*; Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines*, *op. cit.*; Alaoui Rachida (2011), *Florilège de la broderie marocaine*, Milan, Paris, Skira.; Baldoui Jean (1941), *Les Arts indigènes au Maroc*, Paris, Éditions de "l'Encyclopédie coloniale et maritime"; Labrusse R., Lévêque F., and Salaberry É. (eds.), *Tarz...* *op. cit.*



To explore the map visit:
 Elya Assayag, "Moroccan Embroidery Styles Map",
 My Map Google Drive, December 2023, Online, accessed on 1 January 2025.
 URL: <https://tinyurl.com/EmbrioderyMorocco>

As is shown on the map [Image 3], the various types of Moroccan embroidery are widely distributed throughout the country. In each region, women have preserved a unique style of embroidery [Image 4], passing the knowledge down from generation to generation. These styles differ in their types of stitches, the designs, the colors, and sometimes the materials. In each location, women created and taught a different "dialect" of this nonverbal aesthetic "language" of embroidery.

Image 4: Examples of embroideries from across Morocco. Going clockwise: Tetouan; Chefchaouen; Fès; Meknes; Salé; Rabat



Source: Embroidery collection of The Oudayas National Museum of Adornment, Rabat

In Tetouan, colorful flowers composed from various asymmetrical geometric shapes are embroidered on warm yellow or gold fabric¹³. In Chefchaouen, symmetrical geometric shapes resembling architectural motifs are done with *point de trait bouclé*¹⁴. There are also the monochromatic Fes and colorful Meknes embroideries. Both are done with a counted stitch that generates thin-lined geometric shapes, resulting in identical embroidery on the front and back of the fabric¹⁵. The monochromatic and polychromatic embroidered fabrics of Salé use a braided stitch similar to Chefchaouen's *point de trait bouclé*, yet generate different designs¹⁶. This is in contrast with the ultra-colorful floral patterns done with a simple satin stitch in Rabat¹⁷, a city separated from Salé by only a narrow brook [Image 3].

¹³ Ricard P., *Broderies...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12; Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines*, *op. cit.*, p. 52; Guérard Marthe (1969), "Contribution à l'étude de l'art de la broderie au Maroc - Troisième partie: Les Broderies de Tétouan." *Hespéris Tamuda*, X, pp. 191–216.

¹⁴ Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines*, *op. cit.*, p. 75-91; Guérard M., « Contribution à l'étude de l'art de la broderie », art. cité, pp. 191–216.

¹⁵ There is also an older style of embroidery in Fès named "Aleuj". For more information see: Guérard Marthe (1968), « Contribution à l'étude de l'art de la broderie au Maroc - Première partie (suite et fin): Les Broderies de Fès. Deuxième partie : Les Broderies Anciennes de Rabat », *Hespéris Tamuda*, IX, pp. 123–137.

¹⁶ Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines*, *op. cit.*, p. 169-177; Guérard Marthe (1978), « Contribution à l'étude de l'art de la broderie au Maroc - Cinquième Partie: Les Broderies de Salé », *Hespéris Tamuda*, XVIII, pp. 211–32.

¹⁷ There is also an ancient Rabat embroidery. Typically, this embroidery that dates before the nineteenth century is less colorful than its more modern counterpart, or even monochromatic. However, both Rabat styles are usually done with painted silk threads on cotton or muslin fabrics. Ricard P., *Broderies...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12, 17-18; Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines*, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-167; Guérard M. « Contribution à l'étude de l'art de la broderie... Les Broderies de Fès », art. cité, pp. 137–155.

Finally, we get to the embroidery of Azemmour, a small town located south of Casablanca along the Atlantic coast. This embroidery stands out in comparison to all other non-figurative Moroccan embroideries [Image 5]. The most popular design in contemporary Azemmour embroidery is that of a dragon, looking backward and sticking its tongue out [Image 6]. This dragon also decorates the walls and roads of the old city of Azemmour, making it the informal symbol of the town.

Beyond the designs themselves, Azemmouri embroidery is distinct from other types of Moroccan embroideries in the types of stitches¹⁸. The two main stitches are: a Holbein stitch used to outline the figures and the decorative motif, and a long-legged cross stitch, a unique stitch that produces a braided pattern, which is used in the background around the figures¹⁹.

Image 5: Designs of Azemmour embroideries, as documented in the 1916 Moroccan embroidery survey, conducted by Prosper Ricard, the head of the Service des Arts Indigènes, the colonial office that was responsible for teaching and preserving indigenous art during the French colonial period in Morocco (1912-1956)



Source: Jouin Jeanne (1932). "Les Thèmes décoratifs des broderies marocaines : Leur caractère et leurs origines." *Hespéris Tamuda* xv, 1(2), p. XIX

¹⁸As was mentioned, a type of braided stitch is also used in Salé and Chefchaouen. At first glance these stitches resemble the Azemmouri background stitch; however, it is clear when looking closely, and particularly when looking at the back side of the embroidery (what is usually called "the wrong side"), that it is not the same stitch. Doing embroidery myself and learning the basic stitches from Moroccan women taught me to notice these differences in stitches and materials.

¹⁹Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines, op. cit.*, pp. 181-189.

Image 6: The Azemmouri dragon, 40 x 40 cm cotton threads on cotton, cooperative Almhadeb (فینواعت), Azemmour, 2023²⁰



The earliest surviving piece of Azemmouri embroidery is dated to the eighteenth century. Its uniqueness is outstanding in light of the Moroccan Islamic and, more broadly Maghrebi, tradition of refraining from depicting figural images in arts and crafts²¹. In my research, I combine archival research, material culture analysis, and oral history interviews conducted in Morocco, France, Italy, the United States and elsewhere. Some people I interviewed as part of this project argued that the Azemmouri embroidery was influenced by Portugal, due to the Portuguese rule (1513-1541) and commercial presence in Azemmour and neighboring El-Jadida (formerly Mazagan) during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries²². However, I could not find any aesthetic connection between Portuguese and Azemmouri embroideries.

As I examined the embroidered artifacts and learned to practice the craft myself, I realized that embroidery can easily be compared to language: the different stitches are like letters; once you master them, you can combine the “letters” to create larger designs – “sentences” and “paragraphs”. As with language, certain “phrases” become trends, circulating among “speakers” of the same “language” and sometimes being translated into other “aesthetic languages”. Women who embroidered communicated with each other and with previous generations through using this nonverbal “language”. Thus, researching this nonverbal “language” reveals important stories about their creators, indicating social trends related to how knowledge has been formed, transferred, and transformed by women. It is important to note that scholars from various disciplines refer to women’s crafts as languages²³. Unlike them, I find it useful to compare embroidery to language in order to explain its communicative aspects. However, I am not addressing the linguistic question of whether or not it is a language.

²⁰ For a 19th century example of the Azemmour dragon see: Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, 74.1962.0.172, Fragment de cache-matelas, 19th century, Embroidery, 152 x 32 cm silk threads on linen. Online, accessed on 1 January 2025. URL: <https://collections.quaibrantly.fr/?action=search&field=/Record/ObjectNumber&label=N%C2%B0%20de%20gestion&cvalue=74.1962.0.172>.

²¹ Allen Terry (1988), “Aniconism and Figural Representation in Islamic Art”, in *Five Essays on Islamic Art*, California, Solipsist Press, pp. 17–37. Aniconism in Islamic art (the avoidance of depicting figurative images in arts and crafts) is a vast topic. There is no Koranic prohibition on depicting images of figures, and the tradition was developed from interpretations of different Hadiths. Those interpretations have been manifested differently in different regions and periods. There are many Islamic art traditions that do depict figural images. However, in Morocco most arts and crafts, both religious and secular, stick to aniconism and depict mainly geometric and floral patterns.

²² Within this period the formal occupation of the region by Portugal was between 1513-1541. However, the Portuguese stayed in the region for much longer. Direction des Affaires Indigènes (1932), *Villes et tribus du Maroc - Volume XI - Région des Doukkala - tome II - Azemmour et sa Banlieue*, Paris, Honoré Champion, pp. 47-58; Cornwell Graham (2022), “The Historical Geography of Azemmour: Environment and Empire on the Moroccan Atlantic Coast”, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 27(5), p. 1063.

²³ See for example: Alkhateeb Sarah (2021), “The Role of the Jordanian Embroidery in Preserving the Non-Verbal Language of the Cultural Heritage”, *Multicultural Education*, 7(2), pp. 303-322; Sadiqi Fatima (2024), *Women and the Codification of the Amazigh Language*, Lanham, Lexington Books; Segalo Puleng (2018), “Women Speaking through Embroidery: Using Visual Methods and Poetry to Narrate Lived Experiences”, *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 15, pp. 298–304.

Tracing the surprising connections between Azemmour and Assisi

When attempting to solve a historical mystery related to women's lives, the scarcity of sources produced by and about women requires us to collect different types of historical evidence. But what is historical evidence? For decades, the default answer of historians to this question was written documents²⁴. Yet, not finding answers in written archives, I expanded my search, leaving the written word and venturing into a world of material culture, expanding the types of primary sources used for studying history. In 2023 I began traveling around Morocco, conducting interviews²⁵, documenting material evidence in public and private embroidery collections, and learning to embroider in order to better understand the craft, the embroidered objects, and their creators. This is a "fragmented history"²⁶. It involves cross-reading fragments from various types of sources to offer possible explanations for historical phenomena. By tracing the mystery of the unique Azemmouri embroidery and the possible sources of influence on Azemmour embroidery, the article underscores the significance of this approach to doing women's history.

The main body of literature written about the circulation of textiles in the Mediterranean and beyond, and that could offer partial explanation for the transfer of knowledge between distant places, relates to the history of trade. Merchants transporting goods have always carried objects and knowledge between places²⁷. The trade between Azemmour and the Iberian Peninsula, for example, dates back to the sixth century, establishing an early connection between Azemmour and Europe²⁸. Another important trade route was the maritime route to India through the Atlantic coast of Morocco, established by the Portuguese at the end of the fifteenth century²⁹. This connection may explain some of the similarities between the Indian Kasuti embroidery and the Holbein stitch that is used in the Azemmour embroidery. Finally, Sicily is mentioned as a central place for textile trade in the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages³⁰, and was an important part of the connection between Morocco and Italy. However, these are all general narratives that do not offer insights to the interactions between specific styles of embroidery.

There were a few clues along the way that offered possible connections between the embroidery of Azemmour and embroideries in Italy and Spain³¹. The first time I heard of this connection was during a conversation I had with a curator at the *Fondation nationale des musées* [Moroccan Foundation of National Museums], Zainab Diouri³². She shared with me some background materials for an embroidery exhibition, "*Les secrets de la broderie marocaine*" [The Secrets of Moroccan Embroidery], that was exhibited at the Dar Si Saïd museum, in Marrakech, in 2022³³. These materials included a mention that the Azemmouri embroidery is reminiscent of the precious textiles manufactured in Spain and Italy. This general reference was also found in some secondary sources³⁴. However, no source provided the historical context for this claim or explained

²⁴ Winks Robin (1969), *The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence*, New York, Harper & Row, p. xv.

²⁵ Some interviews found their place as oral history evidence in my research, and some were only clues to uncover other evidence.

²⁶ Borrowed from Art History and adapted to general history. For more see: Nochlin Linda (1994), *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, London, Thames and Hudson; Tronzo William (ed.) (2009), *The Fragment: An Incomplete History*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute.

²⁷ Espagne Michel (2013), "La notion de transfert culturel", *Revue Sciences/Lettres*, 1, pp. 1-9.

²⁸ Correia Jorge, Teixeira André, and Lima Cruz Maria Augusta (2014), "Building and Performing: Early Sixteenth-Century Portuguese Presence in Azammūr", *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19(1), p. 93.

²⁹ Correia J., Teixeira A., and Lima Cruz M., "Building and Performing", art. cité, p. 97.

³⁰ Fennell Mazzaoui Maureen (1981), *The Italian Cotton Industry in the Later Middle Ages, 1100-1600*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Badawi Habib (2024), "Exploring Medieval Mediterranean Trade and Cultural Exchange", *و شاحبلال في خيرات مور*, *في طسوت ملاتاس اردل*, 5(2), pp. 8-19.

³¹ The similarities between the Azemmour and the Spanish embroideries (as well as the Assisi and Spanish embroideries), which will not be discussed at length in this article, are supporting evidence of the central role of the Franciscan Order in the diffusion of objects and knowledge between Morocco and Italy. There was a large Franciscan center in Spain which was constantly growing. In addition, many of the pilgrimage routes passed through Spain. For further reading see: Delavelle Stéphane (2019), *Franciscains au Maroc : Huit Siècles de Rencontres*, Marseille, Publications chemins de dialogue; Heullant-Donat Isabelle, (2012). "Martyrdom and Identity in the Franciscan Order (Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries)", *Franciscan Studies*, 70, pp. 429-53.

³² Zainab Diouri, in a discussion with the author, Rabat, September 2023.

³³ « Les secrets de la broderie marocaine » : Une exposition qui met en lumière le savoir-faire ancestral", *Aujourd'hui le Maroc*, 22 Mars, 2022. Online, accessed on 1 December 2025. URL: <https://aujourd'hui.ma/culture/les-secrets-de-la-broderie-marocaine-une-exposition-qui-met-en-lumiere-le-savoir-faire-ancestral>

³⁴ The first to mention the connection between the Azemmour embroidery and that of Italy and Spain is Jouin Jeanne (1935), "Les Thèmes décoratifs des broderies marocaines : Leur caractère et leurs origines II." *Hespéris Tamuda*, xxi, no. 1(2), pp. 149-150; Denamur I., *Broderies marocaines*, pp. 141-167, *op. cit.*

how these locations are connected. Following the call of the historian Carlo Ginzburg, I let myself “be guided by chance and curiosity, not by a conscious strategy”³⁵.

Concentrating on Italy and Spain, I began looking for aesthetic connections, specifically similarities in the designs themselves. Through visual comparisons using tools like Google Lens and through manual comparisons of digital collections, I discovered an extraordinary resemblance between embroideries from Azemmour and Italy [Images 7-10]. In particular, I noticed that some Italian embroideries which bear the closest resemblance to the Azemmouri style are attributed to Assisi, a small town in the region of Umbria, Italy.

Image 7: Floral pattern Azemmour embroidery, not dated, silk thread on linen and silk 93x260 cm



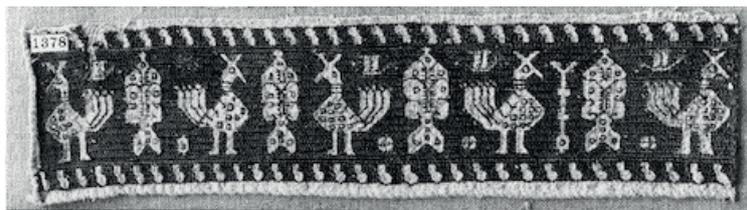
Source: embroidery collection of The Oudayas National Museum of Adornment, Rabat (D3946)

Image 8: Band, Italy, 16th century, silk on linen



Source: The Metropolitan Museum, New York (09.50.1375)

Image 9: Band, Azemmour, Morocco, 18th century, silk on linen



Source: The Metropolitan Museum, New York (09.50.1378)

Image 10: Broder, Italy, 17th century, silk on linen



Source: The Metropolitan Museum, New York (07.62.44)

³⁵ Ginzburg Carlo (1992), *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, Baltimore, Maryland, Johns Hopkins University Press, p. xi.

Often, resemblance implies a historical link³⁶. In this case it points to the transfer of knowledge and aesthetic trends between the two places but does not address the question of how these patterns circulated between them. Following the “how” question, I headed to Assisi, hoping to solve the mystery of the Azemmour embroidery and offer a possible explanation for how this style of embroidery was circulated between Azemmour and Assisi.

Threads that stretch across the sea

Arriving in Assisi in May 2024, I was not sure where to start. I decided to approach it as I did in Morocco – to walk throughout the city and ask around. Again, chance and curiosity guided me. I found a branch of the Franciscan Mission of Mary in Assisi, a mission that is part of the Franciscan sisters’ order. I knew this mission from Morocco, where they were involved in the production of Moroccan embroidery during the twentieth century by opening workshops throughout the country and training Moroccan women in the craft of embroidery³⁷. Visiting the Assisi branch, I discovered that the Mission of Mary in Assisi also had an embroidery workshop. Opened in 1902, the workshop was a place for young women and girls to learn embroidery and lace-making, following models of old textiles the sisters had found in convents in Assisi and surrounding areas³⁸. The mystery could be solved easily if there was a direct connection between the workshops in Assisi and those in Morocco – a convincing explanation of how the unique style circulated between the two places. Yet, I knew this could not be the answer. The earliest known Azemmouri embroideries predate the arrival of the Mission of Mary in Morocco at the beginning of the twentieth century.

However, this endeavor was not in vain. The mission had closed the embroidery workshop a few years earlier. However, Sister Maddalena Lainati³⁹, who had welcomed me and told me about the workshop, as she had witnessed its operation while it was still open, offered to put me in touch with an acquaintance who might help me, Raffaella Bartolucci. Bartolucci was born in Assisi, her mother had been trained in the Franciscan mission workshop, and she had passed on to her daughter the knowledge of the craft as well as patterns and embroideries she had created. Bartolucci fell in love with the old craft of Assisi embroidery and started to investigate it, eventually publishing several books on the topic.

In a pattern book by Raffaella Bartolucci⁴⁰, following her mother’s hand-drawn patterns of Assisi embroidery from the 1960s, she mentions that the Assisi embroidery is also called Franciscan embroidery. The Assisi embroidery can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when motifs still known today can be detected in pieces dating to the thirteenth century. During the Renaissance this embroidery style was widely disseminated thanks to the printing of patterns and the establishment of embroidery workshops⁴¹. Over the centuries the craft was passed from generation to generation. From the beginning of the twentieth century most of the teaching of this craft was done in workshops operated by the Franciscan sisters. This was also the time when the “Industrie Femminili Italiane” [Italian Feminine Industries] were established in Rome, helping to promote and preserve feminine crafts, including the Assisi stitch⁴².

The technique of the Assisi embroidery is a combination of a double running Holbein stitch, also known as *punto Santa Chiara*, for the outline of the shapes, and a simple cross stitch that fills the background. The embroidery usually depicts fantastic animals, plants, and humans⁴³. There are many resemblances between the embroidery of Azemmour and that of Assisi. The themes of the embroidered pieces, as well as the use of the Holbein stitch to outline the figures, are very similar. While the type of stitch used for the background

³⁶ Ginzburg C., *Clues, Myths...*, *op. cit.*, p. x.

³⁷ My PhD dissertation explores the role of embroidery within the broader context of the colonial period in Morocco. The exchange of knowledge, materials, and aesthetic trends following the operations of colonial powers in the region during the late nineteenth and through the twentieth centuries led to significant changes in Moroccan embroidery and the knowledge carried by women. Yet, this article represents my efforts to venture beyond the comfort of my dissertation to earlier periods and different locations.

³⁸ Lainati Maddalena (2015), *Le Francescane Missionarie di Maria in Italia – Storia della Provincia Italia dal 1876 al 1984*, Roma, Grottaferrata, pp. 320-321; Balani Don Felice (1996), *Missione senza frontiere – Cento anni di presenza operosa delle Suore Francescane Missionarie di Maria a S. Maria degli Angeli (1897-1997)*, Assisi, Francescane Missionarie di Maria, pp. 47-48.

³⁹ Sister Maddalena Lainati, in a discussion with the author, Assisi, May 2024.

⁴⁰ Bartolucci Cesaretti Raffaella (2004), *Il Punto Assisi - Tavole Edite e Inedite di un Ricamo Antico*, Italy, Accademia Punto Assisi.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

is different, in Azemmour it is a long-legged crossed stitch and in Assisi it is a simple cross stitch⁴⁴, the use of red as the main background color is another element that the two types of embroidery have in common.

Bartolucci's private collection of embroidery pieces, which she collected and recreated following old patterns, was an important source that helped demonstrate the resemblance between the two types of embroidery. For example, the tablecloth [Image 11], which was made at the beginning of the twentieth century in Assisi, depicting different mythical creatures, calls to mind in both shape and color the dragon that is so popular in the Azemmouri embroidery [Image 6].

Image 11: Assisi Tablecloth with Mythical Creatures, early 20th century, silk on linen



Source: Raffaella Bartolucci's private collection

The historical fragments I collected in Azemmour and Assisi enriched one another and strengthened the connections between the embroideries and their creators in both places. Yet I was still searching for an explanation for the remarkable connection between the embroideries from across the Mediterranean.

During one of my visits to Azemmour in 2023, while embroidering and interviewing a group of local women at the communal oven in Azemmour's old city – the Medina⁴⁵, an argument arose about the common symbol in current Azemmouri embroidery, which had become the symbol of the city and appears on its sidewalks and walls [Image 12]. The women were arguing about whether it represented a dragon or a lion.

Image 12: Azemmour dragon on the sidewalk in the old city of Azemmour



Source: photography: Elya Assayag, 2023

When I arrived in Assisi, the first thing I saw was the city symbol: a lion on a red background, sticking its tongue out [Image 13].

⁴⁴This small technical difference is hard to detect. I owe the ability to notice those differences to the amazing women in cooperative Almhadeb (بدملا قينواعت) in Azemmour, and to Raffaella Bartolucci in Assisi, who thought me the Azemmouri and Assisi embroidery. This method of “making and knowing” helps me better understand the craft, as well as analyze embroideries that I encounter, and by that adds an important level to my study.

⁴⁵A group of local women from Azemmour (who preferred not to be mentioned by name), in a discussion with the author, Azemmour, July 2023.

Image 13: Assisi's sign on the municipality building

Source: photography: Elya Assayag, 2024

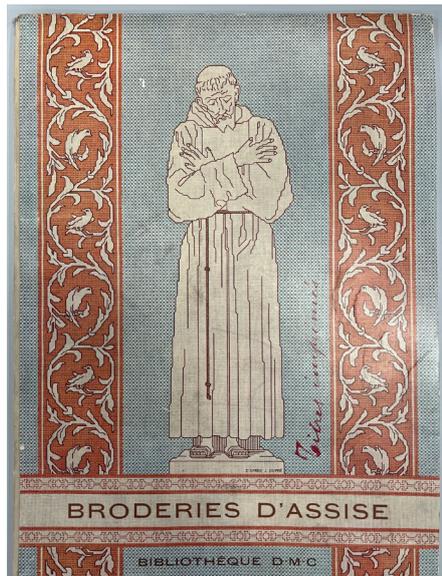
I thought back to the argument in Azemmour and wondered: is the dragon actually a lion? Can the origins of the Azemmouri symbol be traced to the symbol of Assisi – the lion? This encounter was first and foremost an important reminder of the importance of each interaction along my journey and the diverse types of evidence these interactions provided. There are reasons behind the naming of the Azemmouri figure as one creature and not the other. The language one chooses carries cultural and historical elements⁴⁶. Women who call it a lion may embody different aspects of the history behind the embroidery and the knowledge passed down to them over generations. This was also a reminder to lift my head from the books, or in my case embroideries, and see the larger story these cities from both sides of the Mediterranean were telling me. From this vantage point, it was clear that all routes in Assisi lead to one main thing: the order that was formed in this town - the Franciscan order [Image 14]. The Franciscan Order echoes the former histories of trade and material exchanges, and points to how threads were carried across the Mediterranean, and with a high probability, between the two small towns.

Image 14: The view when lifting my head up – The Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi [Casilica di San Francesco d'Assisi]

Source: photography: Elya Assayag, 2024

The local Assisi embroidery is closely linked to the history of the order. The fact that Assisi embroidery is often called “Franciscan embroidery” is just one manifestation of the close connection between the order and the town’s embroidery tradition. The embroideries depicting Saint Francis of Assisi, as well as the embroideries decorating the altars of churches in Assisi are another aspect of this connection [Image 15]. Finally, the stories about the sacred embroideries of Saint Clare of Assisi (Chiara d'Assisi), one of the first followers of Saint Francis and the founder of the Order of Poor Ladies, are further evidence that the link between the order and the Assisi embroidery goes back to the very beginning of the order’s activity.

⁴⁶ See for example: Kramsch Claire J. (1998), *Language and Culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Image 15: The cover page of an Assisi embroidery pattern book depicting Saint Francis of Assisi

Source: Bibliotheque D.M.C. (1928), *Broderies d'Assise*, Mulhouse, Thérèse De Dillmont

Another important aspect in the history of the Franciscan order is the strong connections it established with Morocco, as early as the thirteenth century, during the Almohad and Marinid dynasties in Morocco. Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardon, better known as Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscan Order, planned to travel to Morocco at the beginning of the thirteenth century to introduce the New Testament (l'Évangile) to the Muslim world. However, he ended up going to Egypt and instead sent five Franciscan friars from the region of Umbria to Morocco. The five were killed by the locals in Marrakech in 1220, followed by another Franciscan delegation to Morocco, who were killed in Ceuta in 1227. These friars were declared martyrs by the order⁴⁷. In many ways, their martyrdom laid the foundation for the continuing connections between the Franciscan Order and Morocco, positioning Morocco as a major pilgrimage site.

The Franciscans' expansion in Morocco was intertwined with the general introduction of Christians to Morocco by a series of trade agreements starting in the twelfth century, enabling traders from Genoa, Pisa, and Marseilles to settle on the coast of Morocco and practice their religion without interference⁴⁸. This trend grew with the Portuguese increased presence in parts of Morocco starting in the fifteenth century and lasting until 1769. The Portuguese expanded their hold in the ports of Safi and Azemmour, and in the greater Doukkala region, or as it was called back then, Mazagan (Mazagão by the Portuguese), of which Azemmour is part⁴⁹. The early presence of the Portuguese in Azemmour situated it as a more accessible place for Christians, and was celebrated by Pope Leo X in Rome⁵⁰. The Portuguese built religious monuments and expanded the presence of the Christian religion in the city. In addition to this general Christian expansion, there are records of two specific Franciscan friars who were sent to Mazagan in 1637 to conduct the religious life of Christians there⁵¹. Another chronicle, that of Father Luis de San Agustín, a Spanish Franciscan brother from Cádiz who arrived in Morocco in 1663, mentions that he traveled to Azemmour⁵². Furthermore, there are chronicles of specific Franciscans that could have been the direct link between Perugia (the region of Assisi) and Morocco. The story of André de Spolète is one of them. Spolète was born in Cascia and spent time in Spoleto, both cities in the same region as Assisi. He then arrived in Morocco in the seventeenth century, and traveled around until he settled in Fes⁵³.

⁴⁷ Delavelle S., *Franciscains Au Maroc...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-19.

⁴⁸ Delavelle S., *Franciscains Au Maroc...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁴⁹ Correia J., Teixeira A., and Lima Cruz M., "Building and Performing", art. cité, p. 96; Matringe Guillaume (1965), "Chrétienté et Islam au Maroc (du XVIe au XXe Siècle)", *Revue Historique de Droit Français et Étranger*, 43, pp. 639-640.

⁵⁰ Correia J., Teixeira A., and Lima Cruz M., "Building and Performing", art. cité, pp. 93-98.

⁵¹ Matringe G., "Chrétienté et Islam au Maroc", art. cité, pp. 613-616, 594-596.

⁵² Saura Lahoz Pascual (1921), "Los Franciscanos en Marruecos. Relación inédita de 1685," *Archivo Ibero-Americano* 17, p. 86.

⁵³ Desmazières Maurice (1938), *Un Martyr franciscain à Fès au XVIe siècle - André de Spolète, né André della Rosa*, Paris, Editions franciscaines.

Starting in the seventeenth century, with the expansion of commercial relations, the presence of the Franciscan order in Morocco increased steadily⁵⁴, and so was their mission. At first the Franciscans focused primarily on helping European captives who were held by the local authorities for varied reasons. Over time their mission evolved, and they began learning the language and creating programs that engaged the local population⁵⁵. During the colonial period in Morocco, the order was able to operate more easily. However, this was not without difficulty. The order had to promise not to engage in proselytization of Muslims. Additionally, after collaborating with the French colonial regime initially, the collaboration decreased dramatically due to the growing idea of French *laïcité* [secularism]. Nevertheless, the Franciscan order's presence in Morocco over the past eight centuries has established an important and continuous connection between Assisi, the order's birthplace, and Morocco⁵⁶.

In addition to the connections of the Franciscan Order to embroidery and to Morocco, it also had an important role in the circulation of objects across the Mediterranean. In his article, "Captive Objects: Catholic Artifacts across the Early Modern Western Mediterranean", Daniel Hershenzon demonstrates the central role that Catholic artifacts played in captivity and the ransom economy in the Maghreb. Leading religious and political figures regularly shipped Catholic artifacts from Italy and Spain, and the clergy were the main agents who circulated these artifacts. The article illustrates the significant role of the Franciscans in ransoming captives and establishing churches and convents in prisons in Fez, Marrakesh, and Meknes for the use of captives⁵⁷. The article does not specifically refer to the circulation of textiles. However, it mentions the movement of Franciscans and other objects between Italy, Spain and Morocco⁵⁸. This got me wondering about the circulation of textiles between these three locations. Here is the place mention that my article does not delve deeply into the Spanish case. However, the same style of embroidery found in Assisi and Azemmour was also found in Spain⁵⁹. This alludes to the centrality of Spain and the Franciscan order in the circulation of these embroideries between Italy and Morocco.

Indeed, different sources refer to the circulation of textiles between Italy, Spain and Morocco. In the book *Los Franciscanos en Marruecos* [The Franciscans in Morocco] that depicts the long history of the order in Morocco, there are many mentions of gifts that the Franciscan friars gave to the different Moroccan leaders in order to be accepted and release Christian captives⁶⁰. Other early writings on the presence of the Franciscans in Morocco, such as the 1896 book *Apostolado Seráfico En Marruecos* [Seraphic Apostolate in Morocco], mention costumes and fabrics that the friars brought to the Moroccan sultan to secure the release of hostages⁶¹. In the chronicle of Father Luis de San Agustín, he mentioned the aid sent to the order in Morocco from Spain in the 1680s. This aid came in the form of money, wine for Mass, linens, and coarse cloth⁶². Unfortunately, the descriptions do not elaborate on the fabrics themselves and whether they were embroidered or not. However, there are clear connections between Spain and Azemmour. Father Luis de San Agustín traveled to Azemmour⁶³. There are other indications of gift exchanges between Spain and Mazagan, such as the story from the sixteenth century about gifts arriving from Medina Sidonia in Spain

⁵⁴ Delavelle S., *Franciscains Au Maroc...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-68; Matringe G., "Chrétienté et Islam au Maroc", art. cité, pp. 622-623.

⁵⁵ Delavelle S., *Franciscains Au Maroc...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-87, 89-92.

⁵⁶ The activities of the Franciscans expanded, alongside the increased European presence in the region. Matringe G., "Chrétienté et Islam au Maroc", art. cité, p. 640.

⁵⁷ Hershenzon Daniel (2024), "Captive Objects: Catholic Artifacts across the Early Modern Western Mediterranean", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, pp. 5-8.

⁵⁸ In addition to the Franciscans' work in Morocco, the Trinitarians and Mercedarians also worked to free hostages in the Maghreb starting in the 16th century. To ensure the release of the hostages, they brought food and textiles in addition to ransom money. Once again, there is no mention of whether embroidery was involved, but it is another indication of textiles arriving from Europe to Morocco. See: Martínez Torres José Antonio (2005), *Prisioneros de los infieles. Vida y rescate de los cautivos cristianos en el mediterraneo musulman*, Barcelona, Bellaterra, pp. 98-99.

⁵⁹ See for example: Tent stitch, Spanish or Eastern, 18 x 46.5 cm Linen and Silk, MFA Boston (93.201). Online, accessed on 1 December 2025. URL: <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/72138/tent-stitch?ctx=e5a2eab4-1130-49fe-8275-62f60fd2965e&cid=514>.

⁶⁰ Fernández y Romeral Fortunato (1921), *Los Franciscanos en Marruecos. Con un prólogo de Eduardo Álvarez y Ardanuy* Tánger, Tip. de la Misión Católica. see for example pages 80, 107, 124-125, 169, 202-204.

⁶¹ Castellanos Manuel Pablo (1896), *Apostolado Seráfico En Marruecos: Ó Sea Historia de Las Misiones Franciscanas En Aquel Imperio Desde El Siglo XIII Hasta Nuestros Días*, Madrid, Librería de D. Gregorio del Amo, p. 461.

⁶² Lahoz P., "Los Franciscanos en Marruecos...", *op. cit.*, p. 87.

⁶³ Lahoz P., "Los Franciscanos en Marruecos...", *op. cit.*, p. 86.

to the governor of Mazagan⁶⁴. Reading all the sources together they indicate an exchange of gifts, including textiles, between Italy, Spain, and Azemmour and the wider Mazagan region.

In addition to gifts to secure ransom, throughout the centuries, the Franciscan brought to Morocco decorations for chapels and portable altars. This was supposed to make the captives feel more comfortable and prevent them from converting to Islam⁶⁵. The long tradition of decorating European chapels and altars with embroidered textiles, and specifically the Franciscan formative story of the sacred embroideries of Saint Clare of Assisi, makes it possible that the textile they brought as part of the portable altars to Morocco contained embroidery. Lastly, the early books about the presence of the Franciscans in Morocco mention the exposure of the local Muslim and Jewish communities to their churches in different occasions⁶⁶. A necessary link in explaining the circulation of the aesthetic trends to the local communities that did not use the altars and churches.

Since the embroideries had such an important place in Assisi and in the life of the order itself, given its portable nature, and the Franciscan tradition of circulating gifts and altars across the Mediterranean, it would not have been difficult for the Franciscans to carry embroideries or patterns that inspired the communities they interacted with in Assisi and Azemmour, establishing an aesthetic link between the two places.

The Franciscan Order as an agent of the diffusion of objects across the Mediterranean, adds, and not replaces, the histories of trade and other possible agents that may have contributed to the movement of embroidered objects, patterns⁶⁷, and knowledge of the craft, across different locations. Movements of objects and knowledge are always more complicated than any single explanation.

Tracing the circulation of objects focuses on the agents who carried them across the Mediterranean. Whether they were Franciscan friars or others, these agents played a central role in transporting aesthetic trends from place to place and exposing local communities to them. However, what can we learn about the creators of the objects, and in this case the women who created incredibly similar embroideries in Azemmour and Assisi? The embroiderers were the ones who decided how to create the embroideries, whether to copy the designs they were exposed to, change them, or maintain some elements while changing others. The next section will focus on the embroiderers in Azemmour and Assisi, discussing what we can learn about the connections they established with each other through the incredible embroideries they produced.

The nonverbal communication between women who never met

Among the magical creatures in the Azemmouri embroidery, there is a specific design that depicts creatures that are difficult to name – multi-headed figures with long necks, multiple legs, and large ears [Image 16]. The earliest dated band featuring this design is from the eighteenth century. It seems this style of embroidery did not survive the test of time and is no longer created by embroiderers in Azemmour today. When I asked people in Azemmour no one could explain this embroidery or interpret the bizarre creatures depicted in it.

⁶⁴ Fernández y Romeral F., *Los Franciscanos en Marruecos...*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, see for example pages 124-125, 202-204; Goudal Anastase (1955). *Histoire de la mission franciscaine à Meknès et origines du culte de la Vierge*, Issoudun, impr. de Laboureur, pp. 33-35.

⁶⁶ In a report about the initiation of a new church in Mazagan in 1897, the writer mentioned that the ceremony filled both Muslims and Jews with admiration. This suggests that Muslim and Jews, even though they did not use the churches in Morocco, were exposed to the artifacts within them in different occasions. Fernández y Romeral F., *Los Franciscanos en Marruecos...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 306, 394

⁶⁷ An interesting suggestion to the circulation of the Azemmour embroidery patterns is through early European embroidery books. Morgan Snoop traces the claim made by leading scholars of Moroccan embroidery like Caroline Stone, Imami Niloo Paydar, and Ivo Grammet about the connections between European pattern books and the patterns of embroideries in Azemmour. Snoop suggests that the embroidery pattern books from Europe circulated in Morocco through the network of Jewish traders in the Mediterranean, following the Jewish expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century and the large Jewish communities that settled in Azemmour and Safi, and later in Fes. This claim should be further investigated and supported beyond the incredible aesthetic similarities of the pattern books, but suggests another possible explanation for the circulation of these embroideries. Snoop Morgan (2023), "Motifs in Motion: Fes Belts (Ahzima) and Moroccan Design Innovation in the Mediterranean World", *African Arts*, 56(3), pp. 47-48.

Image 16: Band (Morocco), 18th century, silk on linen 187x24 cm

Source: Cooper Hewitt collection (1954-108-1)

As I was looking through Raffaella Bartolucci's private collection, she asked if I wanted to see a woven artifact she owned. Concentrating mainly on embroidery, I was unsure whether this would be relevant, but Bartolucci explained that Assisi designs were often transmitted between weaving and embroidery. Embroidery was a cheaper, and more accessible craft for women from lower classes, who could produce the common designs without owning a loom⁶⁸.

The piece she showed me depicted a man riding a horse and holding a bird [Image 17]. The style indeed resembled Assisi embroidery with an outlined white figure set against a colored background.

Image 17: Woven cover, Assisi, early 20th century, silk threads

Source: Raffaella Bartolucci's private collection

My attention was drawn to the decorated pole between each of the riders. I knew I had seen it before. Then, Bartolucci showed me an embroidered version of this design [Image 18].

⁶⁸ Raffaella Bartolucci, in an interview with the author, May 2024.

Image 18: Embroidery of a man on a horse, Assisi, early 20th century, silk threads

Source: Raffaella Bartolucci's private collection

The deconstructed figure in the embroidered piece helped me recognize the connection to the mysterious Azemmouri creature [Image 16]. The multiple legs were actually those of two different creatures: four belonged to the horse and two to the rider. The multiple heads also belonged to different figures: the horse, the rider, and the bird. Additionally, the decorated poles separating the riders in each piece linked all the versions together.

This comparison reveals, more than anything, the agency of the embroiderers and their communication with other embroiderers across the Mediterranean. As mentioned earlier, embroidery can be compared to a language. The case of the multi-headed creatures fits well with the analogy between embroidery and language. It is a classic case of translation – a translation of one aesthetic “language” into another⁶⁹. Women in one place encountered a design brought to them by one or more of the agents mentioned above and translated it into their local aesthetic “language”: the women from Azemmour using a long-legged crossed stitch, and Italian women using simple cross stitch. Like in the childhood game of “telephone” where children whisper a word around a circle, until it returns to the first child completely distorted, the multi-headed creature embroidery circulated between Italy, Spain,⁷⁰ and Morocco. It was “translated” according to what women in each place understood when encountering it. As Igor Kopytoff put it, “what is significant about the adoption of alien objects... is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use.”⁷¹ Even if not consciously, the women in Assisi and Azemmour (as well as the Spanish women along the way between these two places) were communicating with one another. They were exposed to similar patterns and chose to tell the embroidered story in their own aesthetic “language”.

We may not be able to “read” embroidery as easily as we read texts due to its nonverbal nature. However, tracing these threads of connection between different crafts and different places can help us better understand the history of their creators. In particular, it points to a path of knowledge transfer that is usually ignored – the transfer between women, especially women from distant places. Even if the fragmented historical evidence only allows us to assume the identity of the agents and the ways these objects circulated, the aesthetic similarities point directly to the transfer of the knowledge itself. Women on both sides of the Mediterranean communicated with one another, interpreting and recreating remarkably similar embroideries. This should not be ignored, even if we do not fully understand the routes and material aspects of the circulation of these patterns.

⁶⁹ Michel Espagne claimed that any passage of a cultural object from one context to another results in a transformation of its meaning. For him to transfer cultural objects is not just transporting, but a type of metamorphose. It is more than cultural exchange, where the goods are reinterpreted and not just circulated. Espagne M., “La notion de transfert culturel”, art. cité.

⁷⁰ We can see the distorted creature already in Spain, indicating its centrality in the circulation. See: Panel, Spain, 17th-18th century, silk on linen, The Metropolitan Museum, New York (13.211). Online, accessed on 1 December 2025. URL: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/219671>.

⁷¹ Kopytoff Igor (1986). “The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process”, in Appadurai A. (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 67.

The story I told began and ended with the embroideries of Azemmour. This could create a misconception about the direction in which objects and knowledge circulated. The route between Assisi and Azemmour was not a one-way route. Daniel Hershenzon argues that the circulation of Catholic religious objects was multidirectional, sometimes completing a full circle between the Iberian Peninsula, Italy, and the Maghrib, within the Maghrib, and back to Europe⁷². This approach should also be applied to the circulation of textiles and embroideries. It is reasonable to assume that embroideries traveled from Azemmour to Assisi, from Assisi to Azemmour, and that some crossed the Mediterranean back and forth several times. This is why I decided to ask about influences on local embroideries and not their “origin”. Influences are multidirectional. Rightfully, in her study, Miriam Ali-de-Unzaga argues that we cannot know which embroidery influenced the other. We tend to talk about the influence of the West on Morocco, but these claims often rely on the absence of materials rather than concrete evidence⁷³. This story could have begun and ended with the Assisi embroideries and the quest to find the influences on them. But I think I will leave this next quest to a historian of Assisi who might enjoy getting lost in Morocco for a bit.

Elya Assayag
Columbia University, New York

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⁷²Hershenzon D., “Captive Objects”, art. cité, pp. 5-8.

⁷³Ali-de-Unzaga Miriam (2024), “Bordados de Azemmur (Marruecos): Predecesores o Continuadores de bordados Españoles e Italianos?”, conference talk, Congreso internacional – *El Arte del Bordado – Historia, Tradición y Nuevos Horizontes*, Lorca, Spain, November 27-30.

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