

# Designs From The Heart

Charming personal embroideries by rural Pakistani women that now adorn chic handbags and purses will be on display at Al Bastakiya Art Fair in Dubai. Helena Frith Powell reports. The embroidery is flawless and the image charming. It is of a little girl lying in the grass with her eyes closed. Around her small birds flutter. She is smiling and looks like she may be dreaming about something good to eat, or a prince who will come and carry her off to live in a castle far, far away. The image is on one of 23 textiles, some of which will be on display in Dubai as part of Al Bastakiya Art Fair, from March 15 to 21. The textile was created by two young women, Hasina and Mussarat, from the remote town of Chitral in northwestern Pakistan. It depicts one of Hasina's childhood memories, when she was sent to buy chewing tobacco by her uncle. "She decided to try the tobacco on the way home," says Rolla Khadduri, who is originally from Lebanon but lives in Dubai and has set out to inspire rural women in Pakistan to use their creativity to make a living. "She wanted to see what all the fuss was about, what the adults were spending their money on. But she blacked out. The birds she embroidered are like the birds you see in cartoons when someone has been knocked out."

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*My Prayer is ...*, is a collection of embroidered buttons, spelling out 100 women's prayers. Below, a clutch bag inspired by the prayers.

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"Niswar", as the textile is named after its inspiration from chewing tobacco, now also graces handbags and purses, along with the other 23 textiles. Some of the accessories have even made the pages of international magazines such as *British Vogue* and *Grazia Australia*. Not bad for a group of women from a place so remote that it is cut off from the rest of Pakistan for a third of the year due to extreme snows and is 11 hours by road from Peshawar on a good day, and up to 17 hours on a bad day.

None of it would have happened had it not been for Cath Braid, an Australian who was studying fashion at Central Saint Martins College in London at the time. She came across the women of Chitral while working on her thesis.

"I was impressed with their embroidery skills," she says in a telephone interview from Pakistan, where she has lived since 2002, until recently alongside the women she is working with in Chitral. "I decided to go back and see if I could do something with them. And once I started it was not something I could let go of."

Along with her sister Ange, Braid set up Polly&Me, "a fashion label with a social conscience", in 2007 and worked with the women to create the 23 textiles that would eventually be the basis for this second collection "Gup Shup", Urdu for informal



Women in northwestern Pakistan have been encouraged to use their embroidery skills to make a living.

chitchat and gossip. "The pieces illustrate the ebb and flow of their daily life," says Khadduri. "Child-rearing, home-making, and praying."

Women trace the images from the textiles on to canvas. Then they give out the right colour thread to the women embroidering. The embroidered textile goes through quality control in Chitral, then in Islamabad, and finally is sent to Karachi where it is made into a bag by a leather company. The lining (a screen-printing of the narratives) is stitched inside to complete the product.



A childhood memory of blacking out after trying chewing tobacco.

One of the most popular lines of the collection is Prayers, where the women embroider their individual prayers, ranging from the trivial such as "I pray Cathy brings me back a present from Australia" to the more serious, such as "I pray to untie the knot so I can be married", which is the prayer that originally inspired the collection.

Catha Siddiqui, who is from the US but lives in Dubai, bought two bags from the collection last autumn. "Anyone who meets Rolla would be inspired to buy a bag or two," she says. "To hear her speak of the women of Chitral and their lives is really moving. They are building a sustainable industry, centered on women, that will support and improve their community. When you add how pretty the bags are on top of that - how could I not buy one?"

**S**iddiqui owns a Prayers clutch bag. "It is beautiful - subtle and elegant. I bought this because some day I am going to go back to the US and I know it will be something people will ask me about. It seems like this will be the perfect opportunity to tell people that Muslims are not so very different from non-Muslims. We all want traffic to be better, to have a great hairstylist, a nice house, educated children as the women's prayers reflect. We are more alike than we are different."

Fatma Shah, who is of Pakistani origin but also lives in Dubai, works with Braid and Khadduri to promote the women's work throughout Pakistan and abroad through art exhibitions. She agrees that the products are so much more than mere fashion statements. "They are about women's philosophy of life and also how they see themselves," she says. "This is buying with no remorse. Women wear these bags with pride knowing that they are made by Muslim Pakistani women."

Polly&Me now works with more than 500 women in and around Chitral town. "It is time we break down the stereotypes of what rural women in Pakistan are," says Khadduri. "Mostly they are just like you and me."

Except they are a little better at embroidery.

The textile pieces (and the bags) will be available at Jadeed art pavilion, at the Bastakiya Art Fair (BAF 2010), running from March 15 to 21. Further information from [www.bastakiyaartfair.com](http://www.bastakiyaartfair.com) or see stockists' details, page 47.