



Assiut - The Cloth of Egypt
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Riq Player, Early 20th Century
Cabinet Card. Courtesy Library of
Congress



British Caravan, The Graphic, Feb-
ruary 1, 1906, p. 172 Detail.



Unknown Arab woman,
First Decade of the 20th century.



Antique & Vintage Assuit on dis-
play at the Liquid Silver boutique,,
Photo by L. Harris



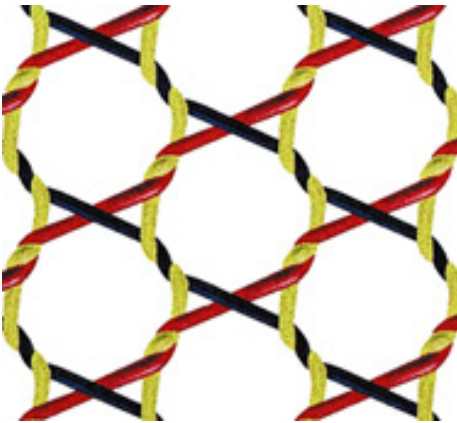
Tally - or metal - work appears in
Turkish style garments and house-
hold textiles from the mid 19th
century on. Robe from the collec-
tion of N. Hernandez.
Photo by A. Westerfeld



Alma Aicha's dance in the Egypt-
ian café of the Rue du Caire, Paris,
1889 - Bibliothèque Nationale,
Département des Estampes et de
la Photographie.



John Heathcoat - Inventor of the bobbinet machine. - Wikipedia



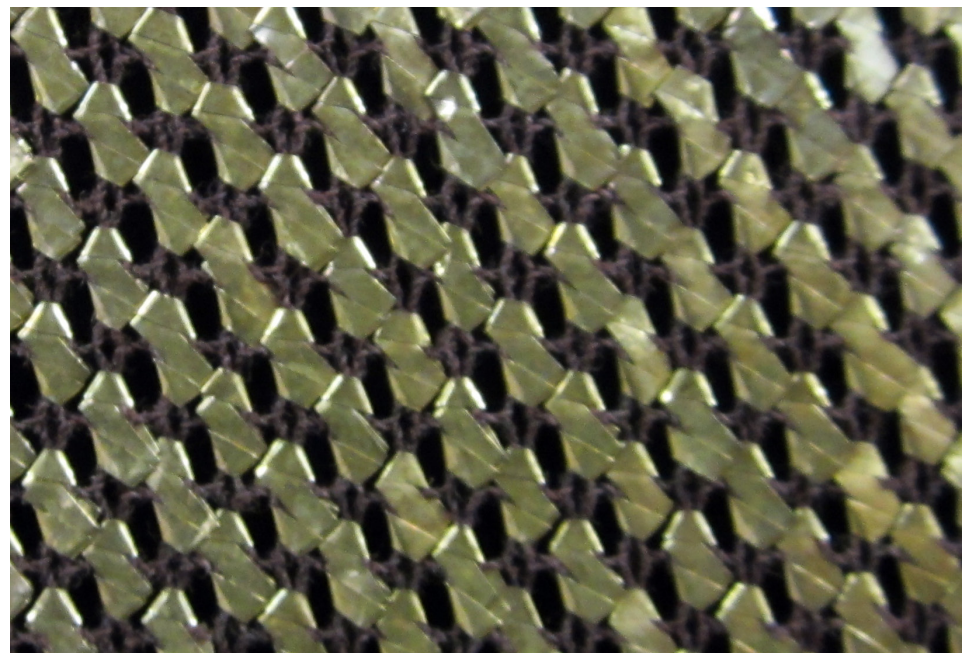
Bobbinet structure - Wikipedia



Hand Crafted Needle and Plate for Tally Embroidery. Courtesy Lacis, Berkeley. Photo by A. Westerfeld

Assiut – Fascinating Facts

- Known as tulle bi telli or al tally throughout Egypt, in the west, this cloth is named after its city of origin, Assiut. This region was the heart of the Egyptian textile industry in the 19th century.
- Assiut is spelled a variety of ways. It's transliterated from Arabic into English and there are no set spelling conventions. The two most widely accepted spellings for the name of this Egyptian city are Assiut and Asyut, but there are dozens of variations on this spelling. When performing key-word searches, be sure to use every variation you can think of, including these assuit, asuit, asyute, azute, and even azoot.
- The ground cloth is made from cotton tulle, named after the lace capital of France. However, the machine used to make the mesh ground cloth was invented in 1806-1808 by English inventor John Heathcoat. These machines were quickly exported to France, and then via France to Egypt during the cotton production explosion of the 1840's.
- Shawls made from this embroidered cloth began appearing in the last quarter of the 19th century and were first sold to tourists travelling the Nile.
- This fabric was first described in Edwardian era travel literature as "spangled mosquito netting." Travelling women would purchase these shawls for wear over their hats to prevent bites from malaria-infected mosquitos.
- Vintage assiut shawls are primarily made from the high-quality long-staple Egyptian cotton grown throughout the Assiut region. The quality is so fine, antique dealers will sometimes mistake the cloth for silk. Modern assiut is made with lower quality, shorter staple thicker cotton threads.
- Production of Assiut reached its zenith of popularity in the 1920's at the height of the archeological rush to uncover the ruins of ancient Egypt.



Antique Assiut - Stitch Detail.
Photo by A. Westerfeld.



Traveller's Quotes

“Here are the bold-embroidered veils of Assiut, so soft in texture that they may be drawn through a woman’s bracelet, yet so indestructible that they are handed down as heirlooms from one generation to another. These veils are always dear. A good one, well covered with embroidery, costs from two to three pounds; but they represent long weeks of labor, and pass through many hands before reaching the European purchaser. The best are to be bought at Assiut, the only place in Egypt where they are made; but they find their way in small quantities to Assuan, and even to the bazaars of Cairo.” p. 682

Repplier, Agnes. “Christmas Shopping in Assuân.” *The Atlantic Monthly* 75 (1895): 681 – 685.



“We also stopped at Assuit, or Asyut, or Suit – I like these Egyptian names – you can spell them any way you please. Every one of them has all the spellings you can think of; you could not invent a new one if you tried. It is at Assuit they make the spangled shawls, and the natives flock down to the boat-landing to sell them. Gaddis had probably telegraphed ahead of that floating asylum of Americans was on the way and they assembled accordingly. Long before we were in trading distance they began to dance about and gesticulate – the sheen of their fabrics blazing in the sun – crying the prices, which they did not expect to get.” p. 365

Paine, Albert Bigelow. *The Ship-Dwellers: A Story of a Happy Cruise*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1910.

“For half an hour, perhaps longer, I sat silent beside them, feigning a lively interest in the animated street scene. Conjurors were performing their tricks upon the pavement; an Arab with a trained monkey was directly in front of us. The street-vendors spied us so accessibly near the railing and came and spread for their wares to tempt us; spangled shawls that glittered like molten moonlight, silky rugs, gaudy fly-brushes, ostrich feathers, post-cards, scarabs, spurious relics and trophies of the wars in the Sudan—all were offered up to us by eager, brown hands through the railing.” p. 15

Cox, Marian. “The Book of the Dead: A Tale of Modern Egypt.” *Forum* v. 55 (Jan. 1916): 3 -28.



“Yesterday we called at Assiout, which to the tourist on the Nile means but one thing – “spangled shawls.” When I set out from London there was one thing I knew I should not do in Egypt, and that was buy a silver or gold spangled shawl. I did not know where they were to be found or how much the cost, but I knew they were Egyptian and that I hated them.” p. 143

Lorimer, Norah. *By the Waters of Egypt*. New York: Methuen & Co., 1909.

Top - Dawn Devine - Photo by M. Baxter

Middle - Cabinet card from first decade of the 19th century

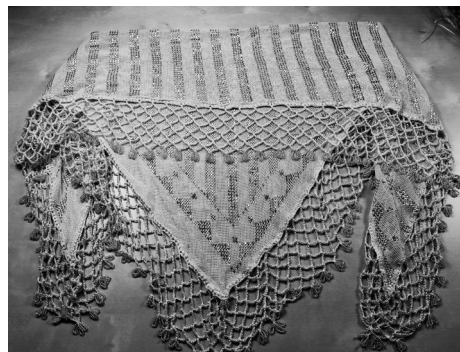
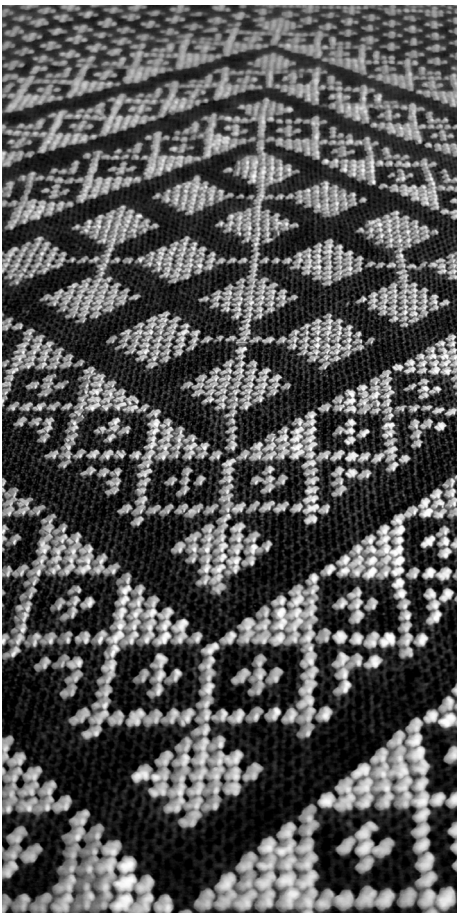
Bottom - Zourna from *The Dance*, 1914.



Above - Assiut Robes.
Below - Vintage Assiut
Photos by A. Westerfeld

Modern Assiut

- In Egypt today, Assiut has become a visual marker of denizens of Upper Egypt. Most modern Assiut is now made in and around Sohag.
- Assiut is worn by Egyptian women throughout the country during weddings and festive occasions. Dancers and performers of the specialized processional dance, the Zeffa, frequently wear wedding robes of Assiut. The lead dancer will frequently balance a candelabra on her head.
- An Assiut shawl is called a *Tarha*, and modern versions vary in size from 20" to 45" wide and 60" to 90" long. These are worn over the head, or wrapped around the shoulders.
- A wedding shawl has two principle motifs. The Bride or Arousa and the groom, which is represented by a camel, frequently with a reed or palm frond on the hump. White wedding shawls are worn on the wedding night, while black *Tarha* are for more daily use.
- Assiut robes, or galabeya, are worn for ceremonial purposes including weddings. These can have decorative bands, or all over patterns, but generally feature a diamond amulet pattern called a *hegab*,
- Decorative motifs are pulled from three major cultural traditions, Pharaonic, Coptic and Islami. But beware, the style of motif does not reflect the ethnographic leaning of the maker. Embroiders pull from a variety of traditions to suit their taste.
- Most Assiut made in Egypt today is for the tourist and export markets. Belly dancers utilize Assiut for traditional robes and as yardage to make performance ensembles.



Above - Assiut Head Scarf - Photo by D. Devine
Left - Basinah in Assiut Costume - Photo by A. Westerfeld



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Dawn has written a dozen books on designing and making costumes for Middle Eastern belly dance including the best selling *Embellished Bras* and the popular *Costuming from the Hip*.

Her articles on costume, history and construction have appeared in numerous print magazines and across the web. She's a regular blogger, writing about her favorite topics. Her books are available on her website, from your favorite belly dance vendor and on Amazon.com.

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