

by Fiona Ellis

For centuries, paisley patterns have wound their way in and out of fashion favor. The swirling, stylized teardrop shape borrows its English name from a small town just outside of Glasgow, Scotland, but its origins are a wee bit more exotic. Taking root in ancient Babylonia (where it decorated everything from plates to palaces) and moving west with the East India Company in the form of luxury shawls that became a status symbol for the stylish women of the Napoleonic era.

My own fascination with paisley patterns was sparked by an exhibition of Kashmir shawls at the [Textile Museum of Canada](#). While there, inspiration struck me—how could I interpret the Paisley patterns in a knitted form? As I experimented with the stitches ([the result is Paisley](#)) I found myself wanting to learn more about the history of this iconic motif. This led me on a journey where I not only spent several afternoons in the library at the museum in Toronto but also on a pilgrimage of sorts to the Paisley Museum in Scotland.

Originally depicted as a naturalistic plant with roots and flowers, paisley began with the *Boteh*, (“flowering plant” in Farsi) a design said to represent the date palm. As decoration on jewelry it can be traced back to the second and third centuries; later it appeared in other decorative arts from Persia. By the seventeenth century it was springing up on textiles woven in Kashmir. Presumably the motif was transplanted by the migration of people from region to region.



*The Boteh began showing up on Kashmir textiles sometime in the seventeenth century. Illustration by Fiona Ellis.*

In the early eighteenth century, the simple floral motif grew more flowers and the roots morphed into a vase. It eventually lost its naturalistic look, becoming abstracted, elongated and transformed into a scroll-like element, part of a complicated allover pattern. By the middle of the century it became recognizable as what is known in the west as a pinecone.





*Paisley progression. By the eighteenth century the design had morphed to clusters of flowers with roots forming a vase. By mid-century it had become a more stylized design. Illustrations by Fiona Ellis.*

This pinecone motif was fashionable for decoration in India, Persia and Turkey where the shawls were worn only by men. (In Persian the word *shal* described a woven fabric made of fine wool, not an article of clothing. It wasn't until 1662 that the word shawl was used in the west to describe the garment worn by women.) Persian men wore the cloth as a girdle, wrapped around the waist; in India it was carried across the shoulders. It is this versatility that still appeals to us today.

The political landscape plays a big part in the paisley shawl story. Shawls first found favor with British women in the eighteenth century, when men who worked for the East India Company brought them back to England for their wives and sweethearts. In the 1800s officers in Napoleon's army returned from the war in Egypt (which was under Turkish rule at the time) bearing paisley pieces as gifts to their ladies. (Empress Josephine was said to have quite a large collection.) The shawls quickly became a status symbol—their high cost and a growing fascination for all things Oriental made them highly prized.

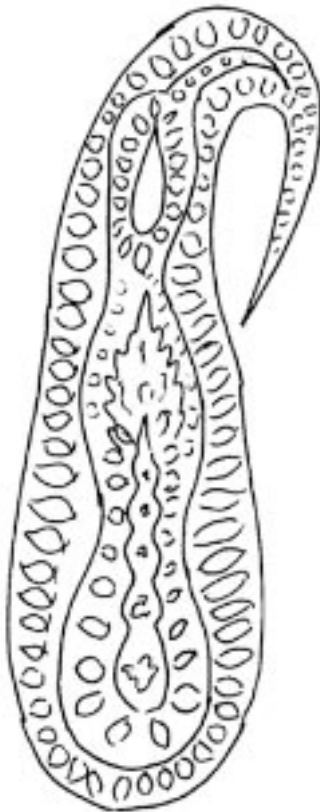


*Fashionably Wrapped: The Influence of Kashmir Shawls (2009),  
[Textile Museum of Canada](#). Photo: Jill Kitchener*

During the nineteenth century technological advancements in Jacquard loom weaving wielded its influence over paisley design. Older looms limited paisley patterns to five to six inches (12 to 15 centimeters) in size, but the more modern looms made it possible for one repeat to cover the whole shawl. This ability to create a larger design tied in quite nicely to the changing silhouette of women's dress. At the beginning of the century an artistically draped shawl added interest to the simple silhouette of the Empire-line gown. But as waistlines fell and the leg-o-mutton sleeve ballooned into vogue, the shawl, folded carefully to display all four borders, created a pleasing silhouette that emphasized the shoulders. The ever-increasing width of crinoline skirts had ladies discarding their coats and donning shawls for warmth as well as fashion. The large centered motifs, made possible by the new looms, were shown to their best advantage over such a wide expanse.

Middle-class women eagerly followed the style of the aristocracy, making the shawl an essential item of dress. European weavers quickly recognized a lucrative market and began to make copies of the Kashmir styles to meet the demand. In a strange turn of events the Europeans developed their own designs (inspired by Asian patterning), which were then sent back to Kashmir for manufacture.

In Britain, production of the shawls was pioneered in Norwich; Edinburgh soon followed suit. By 1808 the weavers in Paisley had become the foremost producers of the shawls. In 1812 they introduced an innovation that greatly facilitated the weaving of multicolored patterns. As a result, the Paisley weavers could quickly turn out copies of the Kashmir patterns for a fraction of the cost of the originals. Shawl shipments from Kashmir were met by merchants in London and within eight days imitations, woven in Paisley, would be for sale in fashionable London shops for a fraction of the price of the originals. Women shopping for shawls would ask to be shown the Paisleys, a subtle request for the lower price shawls. In time, the Paisley name became shorthand for the type of patterning on the fabric—the teardrop or pinecone motif we now know as the paisley.



*A more abstract, scroll-like version of the paisley appeared in the nineteenth century. Illustration by Fiona Ellis.*

The shawl market peaked between 1850 and 1860 and declined as the crinoline gave way to the bustle skirt. This new fashion put the focus on the back of the dress; shawls, which obscured this new shape, fell out of favor. The status of the shawls was further undermined by the introduction of a printed version, which could be bought for just shillings. Something once deemed exotic and highly prized had now become vulgar and commonplace.

Paisley patterns remained in the back of the closet for decades, a victim of fickle fashion tastes and an oversaturated market. The pattern reemerged in the 1970s when designers and a youth culture, looking to the east for spiritual enlightenment, brought the swirling shapes back to the fashion forefront. Paisley has swirled in and out of favor ever since and is currently enjoying the spotlight, showing up in the Spring 2012 collections of Jil Sander, Stella McCartney, Etro, and many more.