



Guardians of the Silk Road's Heritage:

Women of the Mountains of
Central Asia

October 2022 to 21 May 2023



All text written by the artists and lead
curator





Guardians of the Silk Road's Heritage: Women of the Mountains of Central Asia



A landscape of open plains and the highest mountains on earth, cut with deep valleys whose rivers feed most of Asia. For thousands of years this landscape witnessed processions of caravans carrying cargoes of spices and silks, along with ideas and innovations, heading along the ancient silk routes joining east and west. Cities grew up and grew rich from the trade, forts were built to defend and control it, and shrines served the spiritual needs of those undertaking the long, arduous journey. But with power and wealth comes conflict and these lands have long been contested throughout history from the Mongols and Persians to the British, Chinese and Russians.



With the rise of sea trade in the age of sail and then steam the importance of these land routes shrank. But now there is talk of the 'New Silk Roads' sparked by China's vast 'Belt and Road Initiative'. It aims to create transit corridors across what they call the 'Eurasian land bridge' connecting China to Europe. The mountains of Central Asia will once again become a world of trade and transport.



Some people living along these routes fear that their way of life may be destroyed while others see opportunities to bring local arts and crafts to new audiences. It is set against this backdrop of



uncertainty that the GCRF Resilient Silk Routes Heritage Network aimed to foster ways for local communities to develop their cultural heritage, commercially and creatively. To make cultures move once more across the mountains, to learn from each other and work together.



This exhibition showcases the work of the professional artists and craftswomen who do so much to preserve and transfer traditional knowledge and skills, adapting them for new audiences and popularising Central Asian folk art. Through reimagining and reworking, the cultural heritage of these crafts and the aesthetic forms of the region are remembered and kept alive. These women do it without loud speeches or political statements proclaiming the importance of national heritage, for them it is a way of life, an act of love.



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The label text featured in this exhibition was written by the photographers and craftswomen who created the works.





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Felt, feelings, and freedom (2022) By Saniya Nurova

History has not left us the names of craftswomen who for centuries created the finest samples of felt carpets. Today despite the popularity of their works their ingenuity remains in the shadows. This photo project is an attempt to bring these women into the light, showing the faces, hands and feelings of female creators who devoted their lives to creating felt art.

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Mountain communities (2018-2022)

By Gulmira Kutueva and Alina Zhyrgalbek

Embroidered textile

Kyrgyzstan

Mountain communities are like miniature embroideries. Highlanders who live among mighty mountains and natural elements, adopt the wisdom of nature and its beauty. Highlanders seem strong but in the middle of nature, their houses and lives are fragile and delicate like small, colourful embroidered patterns.



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Innocent (2021)

By Altyn Kapalova and Manshuk Esdaulet

Textile

Patchwork in traditional cultures is created from colourful pieces of fabric. Yet this panel is made of white pieces of cloth to remind us of a tragic page in the history of Kyrgyzstan, 'Yrkyn', The Great Exodus of 1916. During this devastating period of history hundreds of thousands of ethnic Kyrgyz and Kazakhs died attempting to flee to China. Crossing the inhospitable Tien-Shen mountains to escape conscription into the Russian Army and the violence that followed, the white bones of our ancestors were left scattered in mountain ravines.

The white fabrics used within the patchwork take on multiple meanings tied to these events. They represent the *kepin* in



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which the bodies of the deceased are traditionally wrapped in Kyrgyz practices.

White in Kyrgyz is '*ak*' - meaning innocence and honesty. Symbolising the thousands of innocent people who became victims of violent political decisions by the authorities of the colonising country; thousands of people who drowned in grief and survived the hardest forced migration. Like the patchwork, colours have faded away from the lives of people who survived Yrkyn.

We have been collecting oral histories to unravel these white spots in the history of events that began in 1916.



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Contemporary nomad women (2019-2022)

By Qantar

Digital Paintings

Kazakhstan

For the past 8 years, Qantar has been creating digital art based on the traditions, folklore and culture of the peoples of Central Asia. Through her visual stories, she represents the interweaving of times and cultures. Presenting an inclusive vision in which traditions and folk art belong to all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, sex or gender identities.

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Women (2020) By Aida Baltabaeva Textile

Dolls have always been a part of culture, they tell a lot about the plants that grow in this area, about the climate, prohibitions, rules, national costumes. In the age of total consumption, I create dolls from the remnants of fabric, using plastic bottles as a base. I create different women: with and without children, young and old, with long hair and short hair, with and without headdresses. This series shows the variety of traditional head scarf tying. I wanted to document the art of tying headscarves, which is disappearing for obvious reasons.

Ceramics from Uzbekistan



Ceramic production has played an important part in daily life in Uzbekistan since the 8th century CE. Settlements grew up along the famous Silk Roads making ceramics for both the domestic market and for export to both the east and west.

Influenced by Chinese ceramics, Uzbek potters created their own porcelain-like ceramic using a sand-based material known as '*kashin*' which they decorated with vivid cobalt blue designs. By the 17th and 18th centuries unique regional styles had started to develop. Master potters passed on their secrets from generation to generation, with men often focusing on the production process and women on decoration. Many of the styles feature intricate designs inspired by textiles and wood carving.

Ceramic production declined in the early 20th century with the increased import of cheaper ceramics from neighbouring countries. Following the Russian Revolution the craft saw a revival from the 1920s onwards with the formation of *artels* (craft collectives) and training centres at Tashkent, Rishtan and Khiva which set out to preserve and promote traditional crafts.

Today ceramics are used for both decoration and for domestic use, and are often given as wedding gifts. Artists continue to use traditional decorative



techniques such as carving, engraving, stamping and hand painting. Many of the motifs incorporate traditional designs which are now considered an expression of national culture and identity.



This collection of contemporary Uzbek ceramics produced by master potters was acquired by the Oriental Museum with the kind support of the Friends of the Oriental Museum.





Ceramics from Uzbekistan



Blue dish By Odilbek Matchonov

Ceramic
2018-2019
Khorezm, Uzbekistan

DUROM.2022.365

Odilbek Matchonov is the son of the famous master potter Raimberdi Matchonov, whose works are in museum collections worldwide. Odilbek specialises in using traditional methods and has contributed to the restoration of historical monuments including Al- Khorazmi , Al-Beruni (1999-2000), Bakhouddin Nakshbandi (2003) and Sultan Vays (2004). He focuses on creating traditional ceramic dish forms such as chanok bodiya (a small sized deep dish with vertical sides on a high support) like the example on display here.

The Khorezm school is one of the most well-known centres of ceramics in Uzbekistan and Central Asia. At the beginning of the 20th century there were over 80 masters working across 15 workshops. Khorezm potters tend to favour deeper pots with thick borders rather than flat dishes decorated with traditional patterns and motifs. Khorezm ceramics are distinguished by strong coloured glazes, usually deep ultramarine and turquoise greens on a white background.



Ceramics from Uzbekistan



Water Vessel

By Numon Oblokulov

Ceramic

2018-2019

Samarkand, Uzbekistan

DUROM.2022.367



Plate

By Numon Oblokulov

Ceramic

2018-2019

Samarkand, Uzbekistan

DUROM.2022.368

Today, traditions from this unique ceramic center are being continued by Numon Ablakulov and his son Inom Ablakulov. They are descendants of famous master potter Abdullo Ablakulo (1648-1735) who established the Urgut ceramic school in the 17th Century. Numon has a small museum at his house displaying a collection of works by his father and grandfather.

Samarkand-Urgut ceramics are easily distinguished by their original decorative style of a green glaze dripped over a golden yellow glazed body. Jugs, dishes and khums (large vessels for keeping water or corn) are decorated with historic designs engraved with needles known as chizma (translated as 'drawing').



Ceramics from Uzbekistan



Dish with flower design

By Abdulla Narzullaev

Ceramic

Gijduvan, Uzbekistan

2018-2019

DUROM.2022.369



Dish with calligraphy design

By Abdulla Narzullaev

Ceramic

Gijduvan, Uzbekistan

2018-2019

DUROM.2022.370

Abdulla Narzullaev is from Bukhara, a region renowned for its colourful glazed ceramics. He comes from a family of at least six generations of ceramics masters and began learning his craft from his father at the age of seven.

Narzullaev has exhibited his work internationally in over a 100 exhibitions, including in the USA, France, Germany, UK, Japan, Pakistan and Kuwait. In 1992 he opened a museum of ceramics in Gijduvan, 45 kilometres from Bukhara, which also houses the workshop where he and his co-workers make traditional Gijduvan ceramics. Gijduvan decoration is confined to floral and geometric motifs in keeping with an Islamic tradition of not making images of living beings.



Ceramics from Uzbekistan



Duck shaped vessel

By Alisher Nazirov

Ceramic

2018-2019

Rishtan, Uzbekistan

DUROM.2022.371



Dish with floral design

By Alisher Nazirov

Ceramic

2018-2019

Rishtan, Uzbekistan

DUROM.2022.372

Alisher Nazirov, from Rishtan in the Fergana Valley, is one of Uzbekistan's most famous ceramicists. From the age of 12 he studied with some of Uzbekistan's best ceramicists and during the Soviet period was the main artist at the Rishtan Art Ceramics Factory. After Uzbekistan declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Nazirov visited Japan where he studied under Isojichi Asakura, a famous pottery from the Kutani school.

From an early age Nazirov has been interested in archaeology which led him to reproduce the historic ishkor glaze which was developed in an attempt to copy Chinese blue and white wares. In recognition of his work to restore ancient traditional Rishtan ceramic forms and designs he was awarded the title 'Keeper of Traditions' in 2016.

He has exhibited in Moscow, Japan and Germany and his works are in the collections of the State Art museum of Uzbekistan, the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, the Ethnography Museum in St. Petersburg, and the Ceramics Museum in Komatsu.



Ceramics from Uzbekistan



Garden of Paradise
By Akbar Rakhimov
Ceramic
2018-2019
Tashkent, Uzbekistan

DUROM.2022.373



The Continuous flight
By Akbar Rakhimov
Ceramic
2018-2019
Tashkent, Uzbekistan

DUROM.2022.374

Alisher Rakhimov was born into a family of ceramic masters in Tashkent, an ancient centre of ceramic production. He studied ceramics within the family tradition from an early age before attending the Republican Art College in Tashkent. He has exhibited in Japan, UK, Germany, the USA and Israel and been part of various UNESCO projects to preserve and promote traditional ceramic production.

In 2004 he was the author of five documentary films for UNESCO entitled Ceramicists of Uzbekistan. In 2012 he received the title of 'Honoured Art Worker of Uzbekistan' and examples of his work are in the collection of the Museum of Applied Art in Tashkent.



Ceramics from Uzbekistan



Dish with eye design By Sharofiddin Yusupov

Ceramic

2018-2019

Rhistan, Uzbekistan

DUROM.2022.366

Sharofiddin Yusupov studied ceramics under his father and at the age of 30 he became the chief artist of the Rishtan ceramics factory. He has exhibited widely across Europe and Asia and was awarded a UNESCO diploma for his work in preserving traditional Uzbek ceramics.

He continues to make and sell his ceramics from his home using materials sourced from the local area. His ceramics adhere to a strict colour palette of cobalt, which gives a rich blue colour; copper oxide creating a bluish-green, and iron, which becomes brown during firing. According to ancient beliefs blue represents the colour of the sky and water, both of which symbolise happiness in Uzbek culture.

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Crossroads and destinie (2021)

By Cholpon Alamanova

Patchwork

Kyrgyzstan

This patchwork was created within the framework of the Silk Route Heritage Network project from fabrics brought by the research team collected during field trips to the mountainous regions of Tajikistan, Pakistan and Kyrgyzstan. The textile panel demonstrates the diversity and fusion of cultures within mountain communities.

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My Identities (2017)
By Zuura Turdubekova
Silk Painting

I am a professional artist and a professor at the Art University so I often think about my multiple identities. I travel all over the world showing my artwork but I am also a mother and a teacher. Somewhere deep down there is a me who misses traditional aesthetics, that's probably why I style traditional clothes. Many images I try on myself. In this work, this self-portrait, I am a woman - a vessel of traditional culture.

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Dedication

By Khimiya Torogeldieva

Embroidery

This work consists of three circles, in traditional embroidered art pieces, patterns are always framed but I allowed myself to go beyond. These three circles are dedicated to women who do painstaking work. Dedicated to their tenacity, strength, and freedom to express themselves.



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Anxieties and hopes of the people of Kyrgyzstan (2021) By Guliza Urustambek kyzy Kyrgyzstan

Since Kyrgyzstan gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, the country has faced numerous challenges from migration to unemployment, as well as crises affecting all sectors of the economy. These changes have particularly affected already marginalised and vulnerable groups, including women. Despite such adversity Kyrgyz women still have hope for the future. They continue to persevere with their everyday work alongside caring for loved ones and working to preserve their cultural heritage.



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Being a Child (2021) By Shukriya Nazridod Tajikistan

I remember being a happy child. I don't recall much about my toys. My actual playground was outside, in nature with friends and relatives: to run, to get hurt, to get dirty, to make mud pies, to cry and to laugh. While the civil war was happening in Tajikistan we were unaware, just being kids. What sort of childhood do we want for our children? In a world that is rapidly changing, where cities are growing ever more expansive and technology is becoming more influential in all aspects of our lives including our childrens, I present this project, to show places where children still have the space to grow alongside nature and their friends, to remind us of how we used to be.



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Moving Mountains (2021-2022) **By Marylise Vigneau** France



These environmental portraits focus on the stories of real Central Asian women. They seek to highlight their struggles, strength and resilience. They all cry and fight, dream and work, learn and play. They reflect on many ongoing economic and political issues and try to shape a future where they can breathe freely and have their rights recognised and supported. Amid grit and dust, industrial ruins and chronic political instability, under the dense Central Asian sky, these women are moving mountains.



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Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, April.4, 2021

In this staged scene, Alina Mambetalieva, a soloist at the Kyrgyz National Opera, dances around a veiled warlord, Bishkek Baatyr.

Later, on April 14, the President of Kyrgyzstan, Sadyr Japarov, inaugurated his monument. Bishkek Baatyr is mentioned in the school syllabus, but historians are sceptical about his existence.

Since the '90s, statues of Baatyr (warlord in Kyrgyz) have been erected all over the country. Each place is supposed to have its own Baatyr. For the regions, it is a way to express their importance and underline their history. Many new monuments were erected to the hero of the eponymous epic, Manas. Manas is a legendary baatyr who united the Kirgiz tribes and returned their homeland. Combining historical facts and myths, these epics feature powerful women who are genuine companions.



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Bishkek, May.9, 2021

Portrait of Didana Suseeva, 24, posing on a toothless piano at the Bishkek circus where she sometimes performs.

She graduated in “Religious Studies” from the Kirgiz Russian Slavic University at the UNESCO Department of Culture and Religion. In a prominently Muslim country, this place is the only one where she could study religion in a neutral, scientific way. Now she works at the Research Center for Religious Studies. One project is about Kirgiz jihadists who went to fight in Syria and are now in jail in Kyrgyzstan. Interviews are being conducted to try to understand what happened.

The centre also organizes summer camps for youth to build a multi-confessional dialogue and encourage tolerance. Didana also dances at the Circus or at weddings to make a living. She likes to help the elderly and enjoy listening to their stories. She loves mountains and the nomadic culture. She is thankful to the Soviet era for the education and infrastructure it provided.



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Osh, May.5, 2021

Muhayo Abduraupova is a human rights lawyer. She poses humorously in the Osh amusement park where she works. In 2011, she founded the ONG "Positive Dialogue". The organization supports marginalized and vulnerable communities such as LGBT+ or HIV positive individuals and women. Muhayo seeks to eliminate discrimination towards women and girls by making juridical consultations more accessible for domestic and gender violence victims from remote areas, specifically. Her organization helps women to find support, asylum and escorts them to medical and social institutions.

She received many threats, including menaces of beheading and was beaten once on the street.

She also got attacked by nationalistic, patriarchal groups such as "Kyrk Choro", who think she promotes Western values that are not relevant to the Kyrgyz culture, which is based on traditional values and conservatism.



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Naryn, April.15, 2021

Kanisa Chungulova, 84, holds the portrait of her late son, Murat Saratov, who was sent as a young soldier to Afghanistan in 1979 and was killed there.

She lives in a small house just in front of the cemetery where her son is buried. She greets her visitors with a smile, both cheerful and melancholic and recounts her long life.

While Kanisa's mother was eight months pregnant with her, her father was deported to Siberia as a counter-revolutionary and never returned. It was Stalin's period, and these things occurred. She nevertheless had a relatively happy youth. She married her high school love, but he died of a brain tumour before reaching 40. She had 7 children and worked as an accountant in a meat kombinat that no longer exists. One of her other sons was hit by a car and left disabled. Her voice breaks when she talks about her sons. However, she says that she is grateful to God for this life and blesses us at the moment of departure.



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Min Kush, April.15, 2021

Min Kush, which means "A thousand birds" in Kirghiz, was formally established in 1955 as an industrial town built around a uranium mine.

During Soviet times, uranium was mined here for Russia's nuclear program. It was regarded as so crucial that the Kirghiz town was ruled directly by Moscow and attracted highly skilled labour from all over the Soviet Union; wages were double the national average, and employees were given special privileges and holidays. So secretive was Min Kush during Soviet times that it did not appear on any maps, and a permit was needed to enter.

Today the place is deteriorating; many buildings are empty and boarded up, and radiation levels can reach ten times higher than the norm.

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Guardians of cultural heritage (2019)

By Manizha Abdullaeva

Digital Paintings printed on canvas

Tajikistan

In mountain communities, women, in addition to everyday hard work, continue to be the creators and the crafters. Producing traditional embroidery, felt and woven carpets, beautiful clothes and shoes. These crafts amongst many others are preserved for future generations thanks to their skilled work and the transmission of traditional knowledge.

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Sisterhood (2020)

By Dinara Chokotaeva

Painting on silk

Traditional knowledge and craft skills are passed down by grandmothers and mothers during leisurely conversations surrounded by mountains and green trees, accompanied by the sounds of small murmuring rivers. These images are imprinted in my memory and being a professional artist, I visualise these warm memories of women's solidarity in my works.



Guardians of the Silk Road's Heritage: Women of the Mountains of Central Asia is a collaboration between the Oriental Museum, University of Central Asia and Durham University. The exhibition brings together ideas and materials developed through the GCRF Resilient Silk Route Heritage Network, an initiative funded by UK Research and Innovation through the Global Challenges Research Fund.



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