

Kazakh embroidered wall hangings



LEFT: Interior of summertime yurt displayed in the recent exhibition at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS. The yurt was transported from Bayan-Ölgii aimag in 2008, and furnished with Kazakh textiles from Bayan-Ölgii. With kind permission of SOAS.

In western Mongolia, the summertime yurt of the Kazakh minority is elaborately decorated with textiles. Brightly-coloured felt carpets cover the grass floor, densely embroidered wall hangings (*tus kiiz*) decorate the lattice walls, and many other embroidered pieces and woven ribbons decorate the yurt. These textiles are made by girls and women in daily life. A recent exhibition at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, London focused on these craftswomen and their textiles.

Anna Portisch

FROM THE 1860S INTO THE 1940S, tens of thousands of Kazakhs fled Russian and later Soviet interventions in Kazakhstan, many thousands settling in western Mongolia. Today, some 80,000 Kazakhs live in the western-most province of Mongolia. The Kazakh are the largest minority in Mongolia, making up just over four percent of the population. They have maintained Kazakh as their first language and many of their unique cultural traditions.

During the winter, Kazakhs live in log cabins or mud brick houses, and from June to September in yurts. Households usually have a variety of *tus kiiz*, displayed on the walls in the summertime yurt, and sometimes also in the winter house. Women make *tus kiiz* for their own households, but these wall hangings may also have been passed down as heirlooms or given to the couple on the occasion of their wedding, in which case an embroidered dedication to the husband or wife may be read amongst the elaborate patterns. Craftswomen also usually embroider the year the *tus kiiz* was made and their own name in amongst the patterns. Often, individual family members have a favourite *tus kiiz* which hangs next to their bed.

Tus kiiz are made in the home, as part of the daily routine. Cotton fabric is divided into sections and each section is then filled in with a pattern drawn free hand or using a stencil with flour. The pattern may then be outlined further using milk and a matchstick, a crayon or soap. A section of the fabric is then stretched taut and sewn onto a metal (or wooden) frame. The section that is stretched over the frame is embroidered with a hooked needle (*biz*), creating a chain stitch along the outline of the already drawn pattern. After one section has been completed, the fabric is taken off the frame and realigned so that a new section can be embroidered.



ABOVE LEFT: behind the beds of each family member, a wall hanging (or sometimes a factory-made pile carpet) is hung. Winter coats are bundled up under embroidered pieces at the centre of the bed, and some beds have curtains. ABOVE RIGHT: detail from a *tus kiiz* with an embroidered red velvet central piece, made in the 1930s by an unknown craftswoman. LEFT: Kazakh craftswoman selling her *tus kiiz*.

Tus kiiz feature stylised patterns inspired by plants and animals, such as flowers and ram's horns. Certain patterns are also named after the internal organs of animals, for instance liver, kidney and heart patterns. The patterns are often arranged to mirror one another, and no space is left 'blank'. The main embroidered field is framed by a red velvet border on three sides. Some women say that the fourth side is left unfinished since it merely hangs behind the bed and goes unseen. Other women suggest that if the fourth side is finished with red velvet, this indicates that the craftswoman has completed her life's work; that is, she is ready to die.

Working a few hours a day, it can take up to a year to complete a *tus kiiz*, although some women work more intensively and can finish in as little as a month. Many elderly women explain that their eye sight has deteriorated over the years, due to the long evenings spent embroidering by candlelight. To help with the extensive embroidery work, experienced craftswomen may enlist their daughters or daughters-in-law, thereby also teaching them to make these textiles. Several women often contribute to a single embroidery, and their different styles of embroidering or completing a pattern can be seen in the detail.

Women often recycle and innovate. During the period of Soviet-backed socialism (until 1990) materials were often in short supply. Many *tus kiiz* from that period are therefore embroidered with thread extracted from existing fabric or garments. Similarly, certain tools are made from recycled materials. Since the 1990s, it has become fashionable to make *tus kiiz* and other embroidered panels in a 'fluffy' style (*tukhty keste*) using old veterinary syringes (rather than a hooked needle). The threaded needle is pushed through the fabric leaving a little loop protruding on the other side, creating the 'fluffy' style. These embroidered pieces are made with brightly coloured thread imported from China, and the patterns are often taken from new sources of inspiration. Kazakh women take a pragmatic approach to textile production, using the tools and materials that are available. They recycle and innovate in different ways, often creating astonishing pieces of work from the few materials that are available to them and given the practical constraints that characterise their lives.

Further information about the exhibition and associated events is available from www.kazakhcraftswomen.co.uk. For more images of Kazakh wall hangings go to www.iias.nl.