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# Kyrgyz Felt of the 20th and 21st Centuries

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**KYRGYZ FELT IN THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES  
AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE NOMADIC PAST**

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The history of felt production in Eurasia can be traced to the end of Bronze Age when nomadic sheep herding was the main activity of the nomadic inhabitants of the region. It was, however, during the early Iron Age when nomadic culture acquired its specific character, producing mobile tents covered with felt, weaponry, horse harnesses, specific clothing and items made of felt, hide and wood. In the burial mounds of the mountainous Altai region, Eastern Kazakhstan and Mongolia, many household items were discovered, including felt carpets that utilized mosaic, applique and quilting techniques, demonstrating a rich aesthetic and high level of skill. (Fig. 1)



*Figure 1. Felt fragment - Bronze age, Pazryk, Western Siberia Hermitage Museum, Photo: Chris Martens*

Felt was among the products traded on the Great Silk Road. Texts, miniatures, engravings, drawings and paintings of the 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries serve as proof of the production of felt in the Middle Ages. In 19<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> centuries felt was one of the main items providing the traditional livelihood of the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks and other nomadic, Turkic speaking people of the Russian Empire.

Common artistic and technological features of felt production indicate deep contacts and links between Turkic and Turkic-Mongolian language speaking people of Central Asia and Caucasus, who's shared historical past was the nomadic lifestyle. In settled parts of Central Asia, production of felt items was considered to be the craft of city dwellers: Uighur craftsmen decorated felt with vegetative ornaments and used camel wool as well.<sup>1</sup>

The harsh climate of the mountainous areas where Kyrgyz people have historically settled, some more than 4000 feet above sea level, led them to manufacture and use felt, the most practical material for their lifestyle. The portable house of nomadic Kyrgyz tribes, the yurt, was covered with layers of felt,

<sup>1</sup> Development of feltmaking by Uigur people in urban areas; R.U. Karimova "Handicrafts of Uigur people", "Dike Press", Almaty, 2005

(Fig. 2) and its interior decoration included richly ornamented felt carpets, (Fig. 3) as well as household items, clothes, horse harnesses and many other things.



*Figure 2, left. Yurt, Kyrgyzstan, 2001. Photo: Janice Arnold*  
*Figure 3, right. Kyrgyz yurt interior – felt carpets. Photo: Sagyn Ailchiev*

In traditional Kyrgyz culture felt patterns and markings denoted the region or tribe of the maker and in general, symbolized home, prosperity, wellbeing and peace. In addition it had an aesthetic function as well.

Felt also had a supernatural function and was sometimes thought to be an amulet as well, offering protection from evil sources. In ancient nomadic Kyrgyz society, the elected leader was lifted in the air by tribal members on a piece of white felt, symbolizing public acknowledgment of his power and authority. Ancient Kyrgyz believed that felt reduced aggressiveness and thus, women placed felt rugs under the feet of warriors returning home, assuming that it will help them return to a peaceful life.<sup>2</sup>

Felt was also used in traditional medicine.<sup>3</sup> Afflicted parts of the body were wrapped with felt sheets that were initially soaked in salted water and dried in cases of flu or fractured or broken limbs. The ash of burnt felt was used as an antiseptic to treat open wounds. Felt was also used to wrap the body of a deceased person at the time of burial.<sup>4</sup>

Fleece that was sheared in the autumn was preferred for felt. The main techniques of felt production are simple felting, mosaic, and appliqué, each of which has variations. The most popular and widespread products are *ala-kiyiz* and *shyrdak* rugs.

The process of felt production represents the tradition of men and women working together, accompanied by various customs and rituals (providing of food, good wishes etc.). The main work:

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<sup>2</sup> I heard about this just last year from Emil Kaptagaev, the Head of the President's administration. He told me that women in rural areas say that such a ritual would bring peace and decrease the anger of men in society.

<sup>3</sup> Wrapping the body or parts of the body of a sick person with felt (or saturating it in salt water and then drying it, is still in use today especially by the Kyrgyz in rural areas (they also wrap the body in the skin of a sheep or goat). People believe that helps not only to keep the body warm, but that it has a positive medical effect on the bones as well. Old women used to sleep in long socks made of black felt, which helped to alleviate the pain of arthritis and used felt ashes to stop bleeding. This info was told me by my Granny, as well as by Kenje, a well known felt maker and healer in Tamchy (Issyk Kul) who utilizes it in her healing practice.

<sup>4</sup> Wrapping dead body into felt: P.P.Semenov-Tianshanskii "Trip to Tian-Shan in 1856-1857", OGIZ, Moscow, 1946; A.S. Kochkunov "The dwelling in the system of the funeral rituals of Kyrgyz people.

preparation of the wool (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) and felting, dyeing of felt and production of the final felt product – is done by women.



*Figure 4, left. Kyrgyzstan, preparing fleece, Gulbar Ismailov, Kyzl tu'uu village.*  
*Figure 5, right. Kyrgyzstan, cleaning and fluffing fleece, Gulbar Ismailov, Kyzl tu'uu village.*  
 Photos: Chris Martens

Since ancient times Kyrgyz used local vegetation as natural dyes: sorrel leaves, sand acacia, camel burr, scoring rush, wild black nightshade, pomegranate, walnut and madder. Indigo and cochineal were brought to Central Asia by traders from Iran and India. As Russia started to produce comparatively cheap chemical dyes of various colors, they replaced natural dyes.

The older female generation actively involve children in cleaning of the wool, and teenagers are usually busy pressing or rolling the felt. Men's work consists of sheep shearing, preparation of wood for boiling water, participation in the process of felting (including pressing by foot or pulling behind a horse or donkey) and sale of the finished products at the market.

Traditional Kyrgyz felt items can be divided into several types:

- items for insulation and decoration of the dwelling: outside covers of the *yurt*, ground coverings *kiyiz*, rugs *ala kiyiz* and *shyrdak*, floor pillows *jer jazdyk*, wall hanging carpets *tushtuk* and *tush kiyiz*, etc.
- household items: yurt details and furniture *uuk kap*, *kerege kap*, shelves for the hats and cups *tekche*, wall hanging bags for the kitchen items *ayak kap*, *chyny kap*, mirror and cosmetics *ainek kap*, horse saddle bag *kurjun*, additional bags for other instances of nomadic life *torbo*, *bashtykcha* etc.
- clothing items: male and female hats *kalpak*, *topu*, *takya*, coats *kementai*, socks *baipak* etc.
- Items for animals: horse cloth - *at jabdyk*, horse cover for under the saddle *tokum*, protecting cover for the udder *jelim kap*, bag for food *jem torbo* etc.
- Items for rituals and religious events: amulets *tumar*, prayer rug, *jay namaz*, carpet and cover for the body (at a funeral), and so on.

When viewing the yurt as a body space environment, we perceive it not just as a physical object of aesthetic value but we see it as part of a sacral environment, a model of the universe, each detail of which has a symbolic, ritual feature and special semantic.

Felts covering the exterior of the yurt *tuurduk*, *uzuk*, *tunduk japkych* are fringed by black and white thread woven from yak hair as protection from the evil-eye. The felt door cover *eshik japkych* that closes the entrance to the yurt, is also decorated with ornaments symbolizing power and prosperity.

Ala-Kiyiz (Figs. 6, 7, 8,9) felted floor rug is produced by two main methods:

- ornaments of multicolored wool are placed on top of the basic black wool layer
- ornaments are cut from thin layers of pre-felt and placed on the top of the basic felt. *Ala-kiyiz* produced by second method is called *taldyrma*.



**Figure 6, left.** Kyrgyzstan, laying fleece for *ala ki'iz* Kyzl-tuu village . Photo: Chris Martens  
**Figure 7, right.** Kyrgyzstan, heating water for felting, Kyzl tu'uu village. Photo: Chris Martens



**Figure 8, left.** Kyrgyzstan, wetting fleece for *ala ki'iz* and rolling in reed screen -Kyzl-tuu.  
**Figure 9, right.** Kyrgyzstan – Kyzl tu'uu – pressing felt. Photos: Chris Martens

*Shyrdak* floor rug (Fig. 10) is the most popular traditional felt item in Kyrgyzstan. It is included in the list of necessary items of the bride's dowry, and up to the present day it is made in the countryside, almost in every home. The word *shyrdak* derives from technical stitching process *shyruu*. The main feature of *shyrdak* is the balance between the foreground and the background, according to negative-positive principles of pattern building. Symmetry of the compositional parts of the *shyrdak* is very important. Production of *shyrdak* includes such techniques as mosaic, applique, cord decoration and quilting. In addition to the above-mentioned techniques, craftsmen use mixed techniques where mosaic can be combined with appliqué, quilting or embroidery.

Kyrgyz felt items have a specific artistic appearance and are noted for their softness of ornamental lines and particular color combinations that reflect the local landscape with motifs of flora and fauna. Ornaments often expressed encoded messages from the creator of the item to the recipient, thus reflecting pre-Islamic, shamanistic beliefs of the Kyrgyz, who were very confident in the powers of nature and rituals.



**Figure 10.** Kyrgyzstan, Bokonbaeva – Shyrdak carpets hanging on fence to air, 2001. Photo: Janice Arnold

Ornamental motifs distinctive to felt are divided into the following groups: geometric, animalistic, floral, and less often – anthropomorphic and objects of everyday life. Straight, zigzag and wavy lines, triangles, rhombus, corners and circles all belong to the most ancient patterns and are linked to archaic layers of art. As a rule, such motifs are connected to the environment and nature. Creators of these motifs reflected their understanding of the earth, water, mountains, stars, and the idea of fertility in very simple forms. As time passed, the meanings of the motifs were lost and they were transformed into decorative symbols that have universal rhythmic-compositional features.

Among the most popular animal motifs are the spiral and curl elements, symbolizing animal horns: sheep – *kochkor myuz*, deer - *bugu muyuz*, broken horn – *syngan muyuz*. A whole spectrum of good wishes are linked to these elements: prosperity, power and courage. Other popular motifs that also act as amulets and talisman are crow’s claw – *karga tyrmak* and dog’s tail – *it kuiruk*.

Floral motifs are stylistically close to animal motifs. One of the most popular is the motif of a tree *darak* that has many different variations. The foundation of this motif is a pair of sheep or deer horns that are drawn with many symmetrical stems curling away from a central line. There are also other, more realistic ways to denote a tree. Anthropomorphic figures can be found in many felt items except those which are used to cover floors. Images of items used in the household as well as dates and/or the names of the person to whom the felt was dedicated are sometimes inscribed on the felt.

There is not a big difference between ornamental groups: geometric motifs can depict both animal or plant (wavy lines – wave or camel hump, rhombus - flower or an eye); animal motifs can change their meaning and be associated by craftsmen with other objects (a horn can be transformed to a hill, or tree branch; and a more complicated version of the horn design can become a bird, human and so on). Thus, felt ornaments are characterized by the transformation of elements, each of which has huge graphic and figurative potential, resulting in abundant variations.

Most of the motifs have sacral meanings. The Kyrgyz have always worshipped nature: sky, earth and water. It is reflected in felt patterns as well. Thus, the *umai ene* pattern symbolizes the mother of all living things and the patron of parturient women and newborn babies; *tenir ata* – symbol of the blue sky is of male origin. Patterns *bugu muyuz* (deer horn), *it kuirik* (dog’s tale), *karga tyrmak* (claw of the crow), *boru kyozy* (eye of the wolf) – are considered to be strong protective signs, probably because in the past these animals have been the totems of Kyrgyz tribes.

Even though there is a wide variety of colors in felt products, the following color combinations are the most popular and most widespread: black and white, grey and white, brown and white, yellow and

brown, red and white, red and brown, blue and red, green and red. A harmonious perception of the surrounding environment, reflected in ornament and color combinations, as well as a striking sense of proportions, peculiar to Kyrgyz women-craftsmen, has transformed ordinary felt items used in everyday nomadic life, into art objects with high aesthetic value.

Felt art that has thousands of years of history is a bright element of contemporary Kyrgyz culture. Kyrgyz felt from the end of 20<sup>th</sup> – beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, absorbed both a traditional mentality and modern consciousness, predetermined by globalization processes. Today, felt items such as felt rugs, interior items, clothing, and toys, and clothing produced by Kyrgyz craftsmen are being exported to many countries around the globe. Contemporary Kyrgyz felt products can be divided into two main groups. The first group includes felt items that reflect traditional culture and are used in both everyday life, as well as rituals, such as rugs, hats, outerwear and amulets. They are sold at local markets and are mainly distributed in Kyrgyzstan and culturally close neighboring Kazakhstan.

The second group includes utilitarian items based on design with the use of traditional and innovative technologies and materials. They are interior items, household items, clothes, toys and souvenirs. (Fig. 11) Here the focus is shifted towards design and materials of silk and cotton are used as well. These items are sold at both foreign and domestic markets. Kyrgyz products are now successfully competing with felt products from India and Nepal internationally.



Fig. 11 Kyrgyzstan – Tatiana Verotnikova, designer, Bishkek, 2009

Professional Kyrgyz artists today are inspired by ancient felt traditions as well, and in their creativity refer to the experience of their ancestors in the last half of the 20th century. Thus we can state that nowadays, felt production holds a very special place in the subjective and spiritual worlds of the Kyrgyz nation, a true cultural phenomenon.