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## From Silk Road to Cotton Field: Weaving Uzbek Identity

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**From Silk Road to Cotton Field: Weaving Uzbek Identity**

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For the Fall 2011 Ethnic Textiles course at the University of Rhode Island, each student was tasked with researching the political dimensions of a textile from our collection that was considered “ethnic dress.” In this paper I will discuss research I did on an early-twentieth century man's coat from the Feraghana Valley in Uzbekistan, secondly, the political issues that arose through my research, and lastly a reflection on the process of integrating the theme of textiles and politics into the course. First I will introduce the textile I studied by describing its construction and design, and then explore the political context. This is a man's coat, the outer fabric is a silk warp ikat, and it is lined with printed cotton and glazed cotton ikat facing with embroidered braid trim. The construction of this coat is typical of Central Asian garments.<sup>1</sup>

The main design motifs are the ram's horn, roundels containing stylized pomegranates, and butas.<sup>2</sup> The introduction of the buta motif in Central Asia can be traced back to the fifth century B.C.E. during a period of cultural exchange with Persia, and the ram's horn, pomegranate, and disc or sun motif are standard Central Asian motifs relating to fertility and ancient sun worship.<sup>3</sup>

These enduring motifs give a sense of aesthetic continuity, but the proportions and popularity of the designs changed over time. These designs are created with an ikat technique.<sup>4</sup> Ikat is a Malay-Indonesian term, in Uzbekistan this process is called *abranti* or “banded cloud,” which references the soft outlines of the motifs.<sup>5</sup> Ikat textiles are made when warp threads are dyed in sections before weaving, then woven into a warp-faced fabric. Ikat can be traced to Indian fabric and yarn tie-dyeing, which was introduced to Central Asia by the seventh century C.E.<sup>6</sup>

As I was gathering this general information on my textile, I began to formulate questions that were not being answered in my reading, and I started to focus on what I considered to be the political aspects of this coat. The disembodiment of these objects through display, the regional history that led to these coats being collected in the west, and the lack of attention paid to the colorful printed linings typical of these coats were the three themes I discovered during my analysis.

Looking at similar textiles, what struck me was that almost all of the images had the coats arranged in the same way- flat.<sup>7</sup> This presentation emphasizes the pattern on the fabric, and to some degree the

<sup>1</sup> Dorothy K. Burnham, *Cut My Cote*, (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1997), 24-28.

<sup>2</sup> Janet Harvey, *Traditional Textiles of Central Asia*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, *Traditional Textiles of Central Asia*, 41-44.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Zernickel, “The Textile Arts of Uzbekistan” in *Heirs to the Silk Road: Uzbekistan*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 224.

<sup>5</sup> Zernickel, “The Textile Arts of Uzbekistan” 216.

<sup>6</sup> Zernickel, “The Textile Arts of Uzbekistan” 220.

<sup>7</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum website. “Coat.” Museum number 9187(IS) .Accessed October 10, 2011; University of Manchester Whitworth Art Gallery website. Accessed November 29, 2011. Accession #T.1976.34

[http://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/collection/advsearch/objdispextra/?irn=25887&QueryName=DetailedQuery&QueryPage=%2Fcollection%2Fadvsearch%2Findex.htm&col\\_TitObjectName=coat&LimitPerPage=20&Search=Search&utma=](http://www.whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/collection/advsearch/objdispextra/?irn=25887&QueryName=DetailedQuery&QueryPage=%2Fcollection%2Fadvsearch%2Findex.htm&col_TitObjectName=coat&LimitPerPage=20&Search=Search&utma=)

construction of the coats, but not how it would look on a body. I found only three photographs of these collected coats where the coat was not presented flat. The makers, wearers and other components of the ensemble are not part of the mainstream presentation. Bodies make objects that end up in museums, but museum exhibitions can obfuscate this<sup>8</sup> Museum curators display these ikat coats flat in exhibition photographs and collection catalogs, visually emphasizing the garment's construction and the textile design motifs. This presentation separates the coats from their creators and original use. This disembodiment is part of what Svetlana Alpers calls the “museum effect – turning all objects into works of art.”<sup>9</sup> The visual aspects of the coats are emphasized over their cultural and historical context. This presentation frames the coats as art objects, validating their inclusion in museum collections and at the same time exoticizing them, and emphasizing their difference from Western dress. While Central Asian ikats are part of a unique textile tradition, the emphasis on the textile design over the use of the textiles is only one interpretation, though it is the dominant interpretation that I found in my research. The disembodiment of these objects is one way of visually abstracting them from their function as clothing to an object that is indented for visual consumption only. The relative uniformity of presentation encourages a certain perception of these objects as frozen in time and space, extracted from their origins. In addition to the uniformity of presentation, I had a difficult time finding information on the recent history of these textiles. The first thing I did was find similar objects in literature and in other museum collections to familiarize myself with chronological and regional trends in design, and also to see how the objects were described. For example, there are few specific dates associated with these textiles, although the scale of the motifs and level of detail can indicate general time periods.<sup>10</sup> My research eventually did confirm that the colors and scale of the ikat design is typical of the Ferghana Valley, which is now divided between three countries: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Though now Central Asian countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are named for ethnic groups, the region is one of mixed Diasporas.

Studies of “ethnic” dress tend to ignore the political history of Uzbekistan.<sup>11</sup> The difference between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the effects both regimes had on Central Asian textiles is an intriguing topic, but one I have not found is emphasized by textile scholars.<sup>12</sup> While it can be argued that the political context is too complex to be dealt with in research about textile production, without understanding Central Asia's position as a source of raw cotton and market for Russian printed cotton textiles, the analysis of this coat must remain focused on an aesthetics and design, which are only part of this coat's story.

With Russian conquest of Central Asia and the subsequent Soviet revolution, Central Asian nomadic groups were encouraged by colonial authorities to settle permanently.<sup>13</sup> Some did, and others fled to

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffry David Feldman, “Contact Points: Museums and the Lost Body Problem” in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*. (Oxford: Berg, 245 -268) 254.

<sup>9</sup> Ipers, Svetlana. “The Museum as a Way of Seeing.” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 25-32) 26.

<sup>10</sup> Zernickel, “The Textile Arts of Uzbekistan” 226.

<sup>11</sup> Frances Kennett, *Ethnic Dress*. (New York: Facts on File, 1995) 112.

<sup>12</sup> Reinhard Eisener, “From the Russian Conquest to the Declaration of Sovereignty” in *Heirs to the Silk Road: Uzbekistan*. (London: Thames and Hudson. 1997) 339-345.

<sup>13</sup> Kennett, *Ethnic Dress*. 115.

Afghanistan and Pakistan, taking with them both the textiles and the textile production. By taking ownership of their regional textile traditions, the republic of Uzbekistan establishes itself as a natural part of the region's history. In Uzbekistan these coats are still given as gifts to visiting heads of state.<sup>14</sup> Central Asian-style ikat production is not limited to Uzbekistan, however, and aid agencies working with Afghan refugees living in Pakistan are encouraging ikat production. During the 1930s, resettlement plans drawn up by the Soviet government moved nomadic people to maximize production. Those who fled to Afghanistan were key to sustaining Central Asian ikat techniques.<sup>15</sup> Thus the lining of the coat in the URI collection shows not only the trade networks between the Russian Empire and Central Asia, which can be seen as an extension of the Silk Road trade, but also the character of industrial and economic innovations in Russia.

One of the main commodities that traveled west on trade routes that crisscrossed Central Asia was silk fabric. Silk production in China can be traced to 3500 B.C.E., and the method of cultivating silk worms, and harvesting the silk from the cocoons was kept secret until around 100 C.E., where we find the first evidence of silk production in Central Asia.<sup>16</sup> The Silk Road provided a history that Uzbeks could be proud of, before the nineteenth century colonization by Imperial Russia and subsequent Soviet revolution. The major cities in Uzbekistan of Samarkand and Bukhara were stops along the Silk Road.<sup>17</sup>

In Susan Meller's *Russian Textiles: Printed Cloth for the Bazaars of Central Asia*<sup>18</sup> she mentions that during the late 1960s, western tourists began traveling to Kabul, Afghanistan, and returning with these objects that ended up in antique shops, museums and private collections.<sup>19</sup> While Meller focused on the linings of these textiles, this is the most specific reference to how these textiles were brought to Europe and the U.S. As I researched the coat, I was surprised not only at the consistent display of the textiles, and the lack of historical context, but also that the bright linings were ignored or only mentioned in passing. I started with my sources on Central Asian ikats, the descriptions of the lining fabrics sometimes mentioned Russia, but not how or why Russian fabric was so consistently used in these textiles, or how the authors and collectors knew they were Russian. So I started looking at the history of the Russian textile industry, and how closely it's growth was tied to the Russian Empire's expansion into Central Asia during the mid 19th century.<sup>20</sup> The cotton for the lining of all these Central Asian coats was very likely grown in present-day Uzbekistan, transported to Russian textile mills, then printed fabric was transported back to the bazaars of the old Silk Road cities.<sup>21</sup>

The impact of Russian domination and then Soviet restructuring of the political, economic and social environment is the history of the people who wove and wore ikat textiles. It is important to point out that one of the major reasons for the Russian invasion of Central Asia in the mid-nineteenth century was because of it's agricultural potential, and after the Soviet Revolution, Central Asia was organized as a giant cotton field.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Zernickel, "The Textile Arts of Uzbekistan" 229.

<sup>15</sup> Kennett, *Ethnic Dress*, 115.

<sup>16</sup> Zernickel, "The Textile Arts of Uzbekistan," 213.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Kennett, *Ethnic Dress*, 112.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Meller, *Russian Textiles: Printed Cloth for the Bazaars of Central Asia*. (New York: Abrams, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Meller, *Russian Textiles*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Yatsunsky, "The Industrial Revolution in Russia," 116-7.

<sup>21</sup> Portal, "Muscovite Industrialists: The Cotton Sector (1861-1914)" 161-196.

<sup>22</sup> Boris Z. Rumer, "Central Asia's Cotton Economy and Its Costs" in *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation*. William Fierman, ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991) 83.

This legacy of unsustainable mono-agriculture is something that Uzbekistan is still coming to terms with. Intensive irrigation, pesticides and fertilizers have had a tremendous impact on the landscape and health of the people of Uzbekistan.<sup>23</sup> The regional history of nomadic groups, foreign trade and invasion create a very complicated environment, but at the same time provides a rich source for cultural symbolism to draw from.<sup>24</sup> Ikat textiles provide a material culture that embody this history, and silk ikat coats with Russian cotton linings are witness to the cultural exchange that has always characterized Central Asia.

The source I mentioned earlier, Meller's *Russian Textiles* provided some of the clearest answers to my questions about the historical context of these textiles, but unfortunately for me, I did not have access to this book before the course was over. I had tried to find the book through interlibrary loan, but it was not in our university's system. I ended up buying the book this summer, which brings me to some of the issues I came across trying to research this textile in a political context.

The call for papers for this conference was incorporated into the coursework after an afternoon of brainstorming with Blaire about how great it would be to work with the theme of Textiles and Politics for her upcoming Ethnic Dress course. I had just co-curated an exhibition in our textile gallery as part of another course, and I was excited to incorporate both this conference theme and some kind of exhibition to encourage discussion about textiles and politics within our department, building, and beyond.

At our first class meeting on September 8, 2011, we each selected an object from the University's Historic Textile and Costume Collections. Blaire worked with collections manager Susan Jerome to pull non-Western textiles from the collection. Our draft of the abstract was due on September 22, two weeks after first encountering our textiles, in addition to weekly readings and short papers.

I had a really difficult time writing the abstract for this paper because I felt that I had learned just enough about my textile to get myself into trouble. For example, I knew that Central Asia was a region characterized by nomadic groups, and the coat was labeled as from the Ferghana Valley, but I wasn't sure how accurate that piece of information was and how that identification was determined. I also was unsure what political issues I could find. It was a really valuable experience, though at the time I was terrified to submit the abstract. We were required to write an abstract for our project, but actually submitting it was voluntary – Catherine Murphy, Hilary Baker, Holly Paquette, and I submitted our abstracts though others did not. Working on a conference paper in a course was helpful because in addition to keeping us on track with writing goals, the other readings for the course and class discussions became brainstorming sessions for our individual projects. It was also helpful that we were all researching “Ethnic” textiles, so we were somewhat constrained by our sources -we couldn't do a lot of primary research, so we started our research with encyclopedic books on “ethnic” or regional textiles that would only have chapter or sometimes just one photo and a caption about our object so we kept an eye out for someone else's' textile and share sources. As we were all researching our individual projects, we found issues of identity, status, and cultural exchange to be common across our textiles.

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<sup>23</sup> Jörg Stadelbauer, “The Aral Sea: A Regional Ecologic Disaster with Global Implications” in *Heirs to the Silk Road: Uzbekistan*. (London: Thames and Hudson. 1997), 355.

<sup>24</sup> Laura L. Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 33.

The day after our final we got the email that our session had been accepted and since then the joke has become “this is the class that never ends.” For me, one of the things that has meant is that ever since I began studying this coat, I have seen Central Asian ikat inspired designs on everything from discount beach towels to high end upholstery fabrics to sketchers shoes. This resurgence in popularity is in no small part due to the work of contemporary ikat artisans like Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov.<sup>25</sup>

Over the summer I discovered that the neglected lining fabrics are enjoying a surge in popularity among textile collectors. This past summer, Blaire shared some photographs she had taken at a non-profit indigenous art festival, the Cultural Survival Bazaar in Tiverton, Rhode Island, and show a coat that has had it's lining carefully removed. The Russian prints are now so popular that they are being unpicked from coats and sold on their own. This coat was purchased in Turkey, by a textile dealer who said that the ikat and the printed fabric were being sold separately and that stack of printed linings she bought had all sold quickly. So these vibrant patterns are apparently taking a place in the current market for vintage fabrics for quilting and other fiber arts that use recycled fabric.

More than just the aesthetic qualities of these textiles, is the relationship between the fabrics used to create the coat, and how they are a physical representation of the cultures that have shaped Central Asia. The outer fabric that connects Chinese sericulture, Indian tie-dyeing, and Persian motifs shows the same kind of networks of style trade and influence as the the Russian printed cotton lining fabric with Chinese butterflies and Islamic crescents.<sup>26</sup> The complex history and contemporary realities of Central Asia are embodied in these textiles, providing more than aesthetic exoticism, but a political framework on which a distinctly Central Asian style emerges. Studying the political contexts of textiles is just as important as learning about how the fabric is dyed and woven. As I explored the separation of these textiles from their original context and how meaning is negotiated in different times and places, I became a little self conscious that I was not traveling to different collections to analyze coats or flying to Uzbekistan, Afghanistan or Pakistan to get answers to my unresolved questions. But when I tell people about this project I don't describe the physical coat, I talk about the exchange and evolution of ideas, aesthetics and textile techniques that can tell us so much about the people who made and wore these fabulous coats.

Overall I found this to be an incredibly valuable experience as I finish my masters and progress from lurking in the back of professional conference to becoming involved in the conversation, even if I have not presented terribly groundbreaking research, this session was the successful result of Blaire's idea to shape a course around the textiles and politics theme to guide and encourage us as we all transition from spectator to participant in the world of textiles.

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<sup>25</sup> Rasuljon Mirzaahmedov” <http://ikat.uz/node/90>

<sup>26</sup> Meller. *Russian Textiles*, 174.

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