

London University Showcases Work of Kazakh Craftswomen

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Kazakh boy with falcon



Visitors to London University's Kazakh Craftswomen of Mongolia's 'Rich Cradle' exhibition were greeted with a yurt (felt house). They could sit among the embroidered felt and woven textiles made from a mixture sheep's and camel hair and watch a documentary on the lives of the craftswomen who lovingly stitched the fabrics in the western-most province of Mongolia, Bayan-Olgii.

The exhibition was the brain child of Dr Anna Portisch of London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, who wanted to bring to life the work of the craftswomen behind the artefacts and the skills and processes involved in their production.

In 2004 – 2005 she spent a year in western Mongolia living with a Kazakh family in the village of Soghaq. The subject of her research was domestic and craft production by Kazakh women. "As I was focusing on learning processes and skill

-based knowledge, I undertook a type of 'live-in apprenticeship' learning the techniques involved in making felt carpets (syrmaq) and wall hangings (tus kilz)", Dr Portisch explained.

"In the summer of 2008 I returned to visit the family with a view to bringing textiles home for an exhibition. I hadn't warned them that we might possibly be interested in buying a yurt. From a practical perspective we weren't at all sure how we would get just a small one (this one is considered small and weighs 400 kilos) back to London".





Felt carpet

There was no question of putting it on the internal flight which operates between Bayan-Olgii and Ulaanbattar, the Mongolian capital. It was too bulky, too heavy and the parts were too awkwardly shaped. The yurt travelled by road in a UAZ 452 4x4 Russian van. From Ulaanbattar it was shipped in a container by train to China and then by boat to Europe, arriving in Southampton three months later.

In addition to the yurt, the exhibition had a number of

embroidered wall hangings whose patterns are inspired by the natural environment and local plants, and felt carpets made of two layers of felt; a plain bottom layer and a colourful top layer.

The wall hangings are made of cotton fabrics with a red, velvet border. After being cut to size the fabric is divided into equal sections by folding it or by using arms and hands to measure it. Each section is filled with a pattern. The pattern can be drawn using a stencil, flour, milk and a match stick to draw the s

outline of the pattern. Soap and milk can also be used. Some women say that only three sides of a border are completed as the fourth is hidden behind the bed and therefore not seen. Other women say that if the fourth side is completed with red velvet the craftswoman has completed her life's work and is ready to die.

Around 80,000 Kazakhs form the largest minority in Mongolia and live mainly in the western-most province of Bayan-Ölgii, meaning 'Rich Cradle' in Mongolian. From the 1860s into the 1940s, tens of thousands of

Kazakhs fled the Russian and later Soviet interventions in today's Kazakhstan and settled in Mongolia. They have retained Kazakh as their first language and many of their unique cultural practices and traditions.

Most are dependent on domestic animals for their livelihood. Many move several times a year with their herds between fixed seasonal settlements. Other families with smaller herds stay closer to their winter house during the summer but will nevertheless set up a yurt (kiiz yi, meaning 'felt house').



An embroidered wall hanging made by Seterkhan Kuebegenqyz y in the 1970s (from Bayan-Ölgii Province)



The landscape in winter in Bayan-Ölgii Province

The summertime yurt (and to a lesser extent the winter house) is richly furnished with embroidered, felt and woven textiles.

A day of talks, film screenings held in conjunction with the exhibition created an understanding of the historical background of the Kazakhs of western Mongolia; their economic and political situation; their daily life in this area; and domestic craft production by Kazakh women. The speakers included Professor Peter Finke, Raisa Kader, and Dr Anna Portisch.

Two films were screened: 'L'appel de la Steppe' - [Call of the Steppe] by French travel writer, Antoine de Changy, and film maker Céline Antomarchi-Lamé: a film about the Kazakh Diaspora in western Mongolia and Dr Portisch's extended stay with a Kazakh family in the Altai Mountains. The second film, 'The Ballad of the Trader' by French anthropologist, Gaëlle Lacaze, depicted the livelihood strategies of Kazakh traders in western Mongolia after the fall of Soviet-backed socialism in Mongolia.

The exhibition was dedicated to Dr Biquamar Kamalashulya a Kazakh ethnographer and Sterquan Kobegenqyzy a craftswoman. It was sponsored by the Embassy of Kazakhstan.

and his marriage is virilocal and the youngest son is charged with taking care of his parents until their death. Bota moved in with her husband and mother-in-law after the wedding.

Box

Bota's story

Bota is the third of seven siblings. She lived with her parents and siblings after completing the 10th grade at school until her early 20s. She met a chap in the summer of 2005 who she married shortly afterwards. Her husband was the youngest of 11 siblings. He lived with his widowed mother

Bota's mother Apiza began to prepare the gifts for the couple, the groom's parents and his siblings. Fifteen felt carpets would be needed: two for the couple, two for the grooms parents and one for each of the groom's siblings, all of whom had already established their own families. When living with her parents Bota had made one syrmaq but fourteen more would need to be made.



A Kazakh yurt in Bayan-Ölgii Province. The crown and roof poles are exposed while the yurt is set up in the summer settlement

Embroidered wall hangings (tus kiiz) on display at the museum shop in the aimag centre Ölgii



As Bota's parents did not have a large flock of sheep and therefore did not have enough wool to make the required felt for the carpets Apiza considered taking out a bank loan to buy the felt and other materials. She expected to pay back the loan by selling the animals she would receive in return for the carpets.

Many women prefer to buy at least some factory made pile carpets to include in wedding related gift sets. Pile carpets with motifs of running horses of

mountain goats on hillocks adorn the walls in many houses and in Bayan-Olgii and are popular as wedding gifts.

In the summer of 2008 you could also buy as a new type of pile carpet in the market in the province of Ölgii. The carpets were made in the neighbouring province of Erdenet and featured Kazakh felt carpet patterns. Such factory carpets also require a considerable investment. They cost 90 pounds. A teacher's monthly salary is 45 pounds.