

Central Asia Crafts Support Association's Resource Center in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyz Craft Heritage Safeguarding: Issues and Activities

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Kyrgyz craftsmen family at work, weaving leather and making felt rugs © CACSARC, Kyrgyzstan



Custodians of traditional craft knowledge from the Naryn district of Kyrgyzstan © CACSARC, Kyrgyzstan

Traditional crafts have long been a part of the traditional nomadic culture of the Kyrgyz people, who have historically lived in close connection with nature. For the Kyrgyz people, the natural world was once seen as an inexhaustible source of raw materials and inspiration for the creation of handicrafts.

In ancient times, Kyrgyz masters created handicraft products to complement their nomadic lifestyle by using resources familiar to nomadic households. While many of these resources were related to the cattle-breeding activities of the community (wool, leather, horns, and skins), a lot of materials also came from nature (trees, shrubs, clay, and plants).

The Kyrgyz sense of ornamentation has traditionally reflected the creators' aesthetic perception of nature and social environment as well as their cosmological views of the universe. However, many of the motifs in the ornamental designs served not only decorative functions but also sacred ones as well; this can be seen in the symbols for protection adorning headwear, clothing, and dowry items. However, there are very few artisans who can 'read' the ornaments today, as much of the knowledge in reading this special Kyrgyz script has been lost.

In fact, the unique and traditional skills and knowledge, having been transmitted orally from generation to generation for centuries, have never been recorded in a fixed format, so they are on the verge of being lost forever. Artisans today frequently do not employ a complete traditional approach,

with many using synthetic materials, ignoring natural resources. Furthermore, many artisans, not knowing the range of Kyrgyz ornamentation, simply copy the motifs of other work without understanding the larger meaning of them.

Custodians of traditional knowledge generally belong to older generations, and they can be still found in traditional communities. However, their numbers are limited, and they will eventually leave this world, taking their precious experience and knowledge with them because the custodians' information is not recorded anywhere.

Kyrgyz society needs to learn more about its traditional culture. Scientists, ethnographers, craftsmen, art critics, and other specialists related to arts, culture, and the development of handicrafts need materials concerning cultural heritage. The same is also true of students, who need to know about their heritage as a way of helping to foster cultural diversity and sustainable development into the future.

Programmes in secondary public schools should be updated to incorporate subjects based on projects such as Kyrgyz Ornaments, Traditional Relationships with the Environment, and others. Teachers, however, need to be trained first. Specialised educational institutions, such as arts and crafts colleges as well as the Academy of Arts, need to improve their programs on traditional skills and knowledge of craft technologies and ornaments.

Due to the development of tourism in the region, craftsmanship is becoming a good business

for many Kyrgyz families. Competitiveness of handicraft products depends directly on the level of traditional knowledge and skills of artisans. Many artisans are suffering from the lack of knowledge on craft technologies and existing ornamental motifs and description of the motifs' symbols. Therefore, beginners in crafts production should be trained, and there should be training manuals published.

The public foundation CACSARC-kg (Central Asia Crafts Support Association's Resource Center in Kyrgyzstan) implemented many projects related to safeguarding Kyrgyz traditional crafts. During last two years, the foundation provided over a hundred trainings courses on traditional craft skills and knowledge for craftsmen and students all over the country.

From 2009 to 2011, the project *Beauty in Harmony with Nature: Kyrgyz Traditional Craft Technologies and Ornament*, was implemented by a team of trained professionals involved with CACSARC-kg. Previous to this project, there had never been a proper study of traditional craft technologies or the types and uses of natural raw materials and the methods of their extraction. In addition, the project allowed the teaching of the history and symbolism of Kyrgyz ornaments as well as ways to create and use them.

Within the scope of the project, field research was conducted to identify and organise information related to traditional Kyrgyz skills and knowledge. As a result of the project, a database was created to promote Kyrgyz handicraft heritage domestically and abroad.

There is an existing need urging us to safeguard Kyrgyz handicraft heritage for present and future generations of Kyrgyz people and generally for humanity. Communities all over the world should learn not only to value their common traditional culture but also to feel a sense of responsibility for safeguarding it for future generations.