

**Stephanie Bunn**

## **Felt as a change-maker in contemporary Kyrgyzstan**

### **Felt's coherence and endurance**

In Central Asia, felt has been made for at least 3 millennia - as a textile used in the home, for clothes, for animal bags and even to cover people's tents. The felt-makers in this region have been the wives and daughters of nomadic herders, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Turkmen, Mongols, Adhige, Bulgars, Chechens and their ancestors during more than 2500 years. Herodotus wrote about herders in this region from 500BCE, saying that they lived in felt tents which they built around the 'ponticum tree' (1954). Archaeological finds from the frozen tombs of Pazyryk from 450BCE reveal felt carpets, hangings and saddle covers made using similar designs, patterns and techniques as 20<sup>th</sup> century Kyrgyz felt floor coverings (Rudenko 1970). Archaeologist Aurel Stein found felt slippers on rubbish tips at Mazar Tagh in Xinjiang from the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, using similar techniques and motifs to those used in contemporary Mongolian quilting. And Chingiz Khan famously declared in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE that if the Mongol nation ceased to live in their felt *gers* (tents), they would cease to be as a nation (Bunn 2010). (Figures 1 and 2)

Given these examples, it is difficult to think of felt-making as a 'change-maker'. Surely this resilient textile is one of the more stable features of life in a region where people have always been mobile, nomadic, and where the changes and rise and fall of different nomadic khanates through history, have meant that some groups have come to the fore and dominated, while others have long since been absorbed or disappeared? If it is really the case that until recently felt-making has been much the same as in the distant past, how can it act as a force for change?

My answer to these questions is that it is precisely because the people who engage in felt-making work in a flexible, improvisatory, adaptable way, because they value their pasts and their futures, and because for most of its history, felt has been made by women in domestic, informal contexts, that felt-making has continued to endure today, albeit it in a continuously changing, dynamic and yet coherent form (Bunn 2011). While we may look at artefacts in museums and from archaeological digs which indeed reveal an apparent stability of pattern and technique from ancient textiles of the Central Asia region to felt textiles made today, what we do not see is the practice, or the social context in which these textiles were made.

My understanding of craft 'traditions' is that people do not simply replicate what their ancestors did in craft production in most situations. Most makers at *Making Futures* would probably agree that in their own practice, to simply 'reproduce' old forms would not be very interesting, and why should this not also be the case for craft-workers and textile-makers of the past? More often, people working within a 'traditional' craft practice are adapting and improvising for a world where the past is both 'wholly collected up and grasped in the present' (Merleau Ponty 1970, 69), but which is also generative, forward looking, part of the 'onward propulsion of life' (Ingold and Hallam 2007). In other words, while they may be working within a cultural vocabulary of designs and techniques, they are always improvising around a theme, and the form and style of their work is growing and changing, even if it appears coherent within that vocabulary. The question is, how we can come understand this process through artefacts and craft objects – when the stuff that people make appears to provide us with such very tangible, solid evidence of social and cultural stability and coherence at some times, and also of change and development at others?

As said, the practice of felt-making among many nomadic peoples in Central Asia extends back millenia. The apparent continuity with the past is even more challenging given that felts are made by women, who move to live with their husbands when they marry, in a society where heritage is passed through the male line. This confounds the usual expectation that 'traditional' designs in felt patterns are emblematic markers of lineage and family. Instead, felt designs have been brought into the family by new wives who share and copy each others' patterns, borrowing and developing designs as women working together do (Bunn 2011). In other words, felt practices and designs have maintained their cultural profile through subtle, homely means of domestic practice and communication, rather than because they are part of a dominant social prescribed discourse of heritage in this region. And, as discussed above, women felt-makers also work in a very improvisatory way – no two pieces are alike, although they draw from a common cultural vocabulary of motifs.

Even the recent Soviet experience (1917-2001) in the region, which endorsed an ideological modernizing project, encouraging people to leave past practices behind, and aiming to mechanize what was hand-made, did not fundamentally transform felt technique or design, although it was undoubtedly instrumental in diminishing its production. Given this – the coherent and sustained production of felt of such high quality, drawing on apparently similar cultural references over a long historical period is quite remarkable – and surely very relevant to a conference concerned with "craft as a change maker in sustainably aware cultures".

I should also emphasise that Kyrgyz felt-makers I have known are not intentionally concerned with 'sustainability' in the way the term is often used in Europe and America. What many people I have worked with are concerned about (which is clearly relevant to sustainability) is 'balance', which comes across both in the balanced nature of their designs, and in the way their ideas about nature and the environment are integrated into their visual culture. Kyrgyz 'sustainable awareness' centres on their former practices as both hunters and herders. To kill animals for food means that one is killing animal souls, and that these deaths must be balanced in some way to ensure that there is no need for human souls (through family illness or death) as repayment. Although most Kyrgyz people today do not hunt, or even herd, the basis of these ideas still permeate their thinking and the ways they treat and think about their environment. This is very evident in their visual art, especially felt, in the positive and negative aspects of their designs and the natural forms used in them. However, with this still in mind, people are also very concerned with how to make a living in a world where one way you can do this today is to sell things you make in order to do so, although this is not something their ancestors necessarily did.

## **Changing economies of practice**

Over the past year, I have been carrying out research into contemporary developments in Kyrgyz textile art and Kyrgyz fashion. The aim of this has been to build upon earlier research I conducted throughout the 1990s, when I worked as an apprentice to several Kyrgyz women felt-makers, beginning 20 years ago, just before independence from the Soviet Union, until the early 2000s.

If the anthropologist in me has been fascinated by the coherence of felt-making practices in Kyrgyzstan, I'm also challenged by what the ultimate outcome may be of the past 20 years of change during the rapid move to global capitalism, following independence in 1991. Since then, there has been a very swift and sudden transition from domestic production of felt made by mainly rurally-based groups of women, who worked at home, making felt for dowry gifts for their children's weddings or for use at home, to the production of felt for sale on the global market by local NGOs. Today women are making felt for sale to tourists and for export abroad. And they are diversifying into other textiles and fashion. These are the groups I visited on my trip to Kyrgyzstan in spring 2011.

During this visit, while I was at the house of a felt-making NGO (Non-governmental organization) in the Naryn area, a Kyrgyz friend said, 'Look – this is a real *shyrdak*, she made it for herself.' A *shyrdak* is the Kyrgyz felt carpet par excellence, made by cutting patterns into two monochrome pieces of felt of contrasting colour, inserting the patterns and motifs cut from the first piece into the space cut out of the second to create a mosaic, and then quilting into the felt and sewing on coloured cords to enhance the felt and strengthen it at the same time. The leftover pieces of the mosaic create a second, reverse colour piece. Felts made this way are time-consuming but can last up to 20 or 30 years. This comment made me think, because while on this visit, almost all the felt *shyrdaks* I was seeing were made by groups to sell, in my earlier fieldwork, almost all *shyrdaks* were indeed made for people's families for themselves, in fact it was shameful to sell it.

It seemed to me that the movement towards making felt for sale had led to changes both in felt-making practices and in the felt produced. I wondered whether these changes were fundamentally different than those of the past, which as discussed seemed to manifest a dynamic coherence rather than change, or whether this change of economy of practice might lead to something more fundamental.

Generally Kyrgyz felt aesthetics and notions of quality centre on factors which include the ability of a master/mistress drawer to be able to draw the motifs so well that background and foreground are equally balanced. Technical considerations also included the density and evenness of quilting – which makes the carpet stronger, and the neatness of the back of the work. The colours should be bright, almost glow in juxtaposition to one another – like a Bridget Riley painting. This work is improvisatory – there are always new variations developing, such as the work of Jangyl Alibekova, who incorporated butterflies and birds into her *köpölök shyrdaks* (butterfly *shyrdaks*), a great master who was awarded medals for her work in the Soviet period. But despite, or perhaps because of its improvisatory quality, there has always been also an ongoing coherence to the work. (Figure 3)

The felt I was seeing this year, instinct told me, was 'not so good'. As an anthropologist – I know I am not supposed to judge. But Kyrgyz friends also judged it so, and there were a few reasons why.

Firstly, a great feature of *shyrdak* is its economy of materials, a factor illustrative of its ongoing sustainable practice. As mentioned above, as a mosaic technique, the reverse of the pattern – the felt cut out to make the motif – is used to make a second piece, the reverse of the first, so nothing is thrown away. (Figure 4) Similarly, in the current market situation, when felts are commissioned from abroad through catalogues or websites to specifically ordered colour-ways, the reverse is always made up. If these reverse felts are not a part of the order, and not made in locally appreciated colour-ways (purple and yellow, for example), – unless another foreign buyer comes along, these reverse felts, less attractive to local eyes, will be left unsold, and wasted.

Secondly, the quilting was suffering because of the increased workload resulting from felts being made for sale. The rows are less dense, which means the felt is less durable. Most women making a felt *shyrdak* for a daughter's wedding or for a family gift in the past would ask relatives or friends for help. There is no compulsion exactly, but the work is often done as part of the networking system of reciprocally helping one's relatives, and sometimes neighbours, known as *ashar*. If you help someone, materially or with labour, especially a relative for a family occasion, they have a kind of obligation to help you in return at some point in the future. Work is usually done collectively. With increased demand for felt for sale through foreign orders and catalogues, helpers have had to be drummed up more insistently, and although people are often reluctant to bring in non-relatives, if they do so, they will usually be paid piecework. The great sense of compulsion to work on the felt to finish it for an order and often to a deadline, rather than working until the piece is finished, means that groups of women working on felt sometimes seem less than enthusiastic.

The move to a selling economy for this making process has led to a change in the work process, similar to that referred to by Jones in *Making Futures 1* (2009, 327). Jones refers to Hannah Arendt's notion of work (as opposed to labour), and *homo faber* (the creative human) as opposed to *animal laborans* (the beast of labour). It also evokes E.P. Thompson's *Time, work and Discipline* (1991), where work is either task-centred or time-centred (1991). Task-centred work takes as long as it takes. Reasons to participate may be social and cooperative or creative, but not equating time directly with money. This, in Thompson's view, means greater motivation and engagement with the job at hand (1991). The desire to finish the work for an order in the current situation, whether for family obligation or to complete piecework, has changed the worker's engagement from that of work-centred community hand-worker to time-centred labourer. Details like quilting, the necessity of which are not obvious to the foreign buyer, suffer. Quilting becomes less close, or more uneven, or the back of the work will be messy – all of which result in a less durable and less saleable felt. (Figure 5)

Thirdly, the use of middlemen or women also has an impact on felt quality. A frequent outcome of international trade is the middle-person's involvement in design. Today, almost all of the new Kyrgyz felt-making NGOs have established links with foreign markets: some taking internet orders, some are tied into binding and damaging contracts with VISA. In most cases, a middle-person is involved to liaise between local makers and foreign buyers. I encountered one pattern drawer from the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek who was preferred by the middleman and had been used to draw patterns for several different NGOs from very different regions – literally hundreds of kilometres apart. In felt made for domestic use, a local master from the village would have been invited in to draw the patterns. They would usually be an expert relative, invited in through some reciprocal, or *ashar* arrangement. The result of using one pattern drawer across the country is that local distinctiveness of designs is diminishing. The same patterns are being made into felts by groups as far apart as Naryn and in Bokunbaeva, all drawn by the same person. (Figures 6 and 7)

Other smaller changes include felts being made much smaller so that tourists can put them in their luggage, and the push by external NGOs, who prefer a subtle or 'natural' aesthetic, and think foreign buyers would too, to ask local makers to use natural colour or natural dyed wool.

## Positive change

But in the process of engaging with the global market, there have also been some interesting developments. Some of these are very positive, and some are sustainable.

At a local level, one of the most interesting innovations, in my view, is being developed by women's husbands and male relations, who, in response to the increased demand for felt to use for materials for *shyrdaks*, have gone into machine production, because to make such quantities by hand would be very physically arduous. Because of the lack of finance and availability of felt-making machines, these men have developed a whole variety of home-made felt-making machines, carders, and so on from old car parts such as camshafts and agricultural machinery. (Figure 8, 9)

Regional felt-makers have also developed personal innovations in style. For example, Kenjekhan Toktosunova, one of the great felt pattern drawers of the past 30 years, has developed the use of graduated, blended colour wool sliver to create multi-coloured *shyrdaks* which, she says, are inspired by sky. These have become her signature designs. At the same time, many innovations do continue to be made simply at a local, domestic level anyway, as women making felts for hall runners, doormats and so on, use scraps and leftovers in different creative ways. (Figure 10)

More extensive developments at a national level have been introduced through the influence of international organisations such as the UN, and through visiting foreign experts. These kinds of changes have been aimed at the interface between traditional Kyrgyz practice and the international market. Through CACSA (Central Asian Crafts Association) local groups and individuals have been awarded UNESCO certificates of excellence, been attending international craft markets at Santa Fé (New Mexico), and so on – so the network for sales has been continuously expanding. Foreign felt artists, such as Germany's Katharina Thomas, and Hungary's Istvan Vidak, have been invited to "train" local people. One technique - *nuno* felting in particular, has caught on and been made Kyrgyz people's own. This involves felting Kyrgyz motifs into silk bought in from China or Uzbekistan. Both older and younger generations of Kyrgyz designs have developed ranges of silk scarves, and also skirts, even lampshades using this technique. These are now selling to foreign markets across the world.

## Kyrgyz Fashion and Design

The fashion and design world in particular appears to have offered new possibilities to develop people's business – and their skills. It has taken several paths.

Dilbar is perhaps the most internationally famous Kyrgyz fashion designer, and is the only one to have her own fashion house in Bishkek (Kyrgyz capital) alongside a second in Washington. She draws on her art school training in leatherwork, along with Kyrgyz traditional clothing styles and traditional pattern motifs to develop her collections. These include *beldemchi* front-opening, apron skirts, and hand-embroideries from felt patterns inspired by iconic pieces in the Kyrgyz Art Museum. She also draws on Kyrgyzstan's unique place on the Silk Road to incorporate a wide range of regionally traded fabrics, local leather, horse skins, Indian brocade silk, Uzbek *ikat* and so on. When she describes the details of the fabric of each garment to her customers, it is as if she is describing a journey along the Silk Road, Silk from Bukhara, brocade from India, leather from the local mountains and so on. (Figure 11)

Her collection themes, like those of many other Kyrgyz fashion designers evoke Kyrgyz heritage, her recent collection being entitled *Homage to the Kyrgyz Court*. This is a consistent feature of way the past continues to be collected up and integrated into present art.

Burul, a second fashion designer, also has a design-training background. Her work, mostly made from felt, also reflects the lessons from training workshops from Europe. At the same time it reflects her concerns to draw upon the materials of her ancestors. She incorporates nuno-felting and Katharina Thomas's uses of colour and sculpted felt costume to create quite striking collections which have won her prizes in Kyrgyz fashion week, in Paris, and from the UNESCO. Again, many sources of inspiration are Kyrgyz ancestry, her latest collection being themed *In the Way of our Ancestors*. She is now regularly going to Paris and other countries to exhibit her work. (Figure 12)

Older generations of designers educated in the Soviet period, that is until the late 1980s, treat their craft very seriously and draw on the excellent and rigorous education they had then. This has resulted at times in a prioritising of aesthetics and the 'art' of their work over commerce. The younger generation, including Aidai Asangulova and Aidai Chochunbaeva, are far more aware of being commercial, selling to chains such as Beta Stores and Red Centre in Bishkek, and finding foreign buyers. These young designers still appreciate Kyrgyz traditional art forms and their cultural heritage, but they also take in new sources of inspiration such as music. Aidai Asangulova, for example, 'must have the music' before she can begin work on her collections. Her recent collection was based upon a fusion of Kyrgyz *komuz* music and Mendelsson. She is aware of the appeal of artisan fashion, and the place that Kyrgyz work can take in capitalising on its hand-made quality, labelling all her work 'hand-made in Kyrgyzstan' to indicate this. (Figure 13) Aidai Chochunbaeva, who attended the Kyrgyz State University of Construction, Transportation and Architecture, has developed her nuno-felting in to a fine art, and is developing scarves, as well as interior pieces such as lighting. (Figure 14)

Two mid-generation makers, Kadyrkul and Farzana, have a different arts heritage. They have no formal training, missing out on the possibility to attend art school, but came from a dynasty of crafts people – saddle makers and felt-makers – they are nieces to Kenjekhan Toktosunova. They make wonderful hangings, scarves and embossed felt coats, drawing on all the cultural influences of their families. (Figure 15)

Some designers have focused on art and interiors, rather than fashion. Fariza Sheseeva is the most successful of these. Her dynastic links are to both her family and her training. She claims to have learned from her mother and other female family members as a child, and also in the workshop of Kyrgyz artist Jumabey Umetov who was probably one of the first Kyrgyz artists to have a fine art training. – Yet he too drew on his mother's traditional skills such as *chiy* weaving and felt-making, creating art textiles in a Matisse-like style. Fariza's work, embroidery on felt, is inspired Kyrgyz by petroglyphs, evoking a deeper kind of ancestral connections. And not just local petroglyphs but from across Central Asia and Siberia, reflecting the nomadic perception that through movement Kyrgyz people are connected to a wider geographical region that just where recently created international boundaries have fixed them. She's very successful as an artist and also supplements this work with making smaller, cheaper artifacts, such as designer hats and tourist items. (Figure 16)

Likewise Gulmira Kutueva works on interior design – her embroidered felt panels have a very *retro* feel in a contemporary way – again inspired by past and nature with titles such as the *Four Seasons*, or *The Summer Pastures*. She also makes hats for her 'bread and butter' income, selling them to China, has trained Mongolian felt-makers in hat-making, and even sold one to Julia Roberts. She created all the interior design for the recent Kyrgyz ancestral-themed restaurant, *Supara*. (Figure 17)

## Felt as a change-maker

So where does this all take us? I think it shows, that on the one hand, wonderful, coherent, creative felt textile work can be produced, inspired by cultural references in a homely, domestic Kyrgyz environment, and that on the other, this produces work which

is both sustainable and dynamic. Furthermore, the improvisatory, creative, quality of this work also enables makers' work to be generative and forward looking, of an on-going sustainable quality, rather than resulting in purely innovative change which is somehow in opposition to what has gone before. In a time of great change such as this, with economic crises and recent revolutions and riots in the region, the value of Kyrgyz textile practice for women is that it gives them a space in which to continue to express their cultural values and long held respect for the environment

However, my recent research may also indicate that changing economic and working conditions, specifically the move from community, domestic-based production to commodification, may undermine the integrity of felt production in some areas such as quality, size, and above all, local autonomy and practice. In Kyrgyzstan, the new craft capitalism and artisan fashion may maintain the coherence of Kyrgyz craft production, but commodification will have an impact and we will have to wait to see whether Kyrgyz women designers, who still hold onto the production process, form a new and creative phase of Kyrgyz felt-making and other textile art, or whether commoditization will be ultimately damaging. At the moment, there are both good and less good developments. On the one hand, the work of designers such as Dilbar is fostering a renewed interest in new interpretations of historical design and hand embroidery, resulting in exciting forms of cultural renewal. On the other hand, old pre-1960s embroideries are being cut up by less concerned designers to make skirts, handbags, and hangings. On the one hand, old disused factories are now being transformed into artists' workshops, on the other hand, political events mean that other formerly collectively held workshops are now being rented out at very high prices. (Figure 18)

However, at this point, there are still some major factors at play in the production of new forms of Kyrgyz craft which would suggest a creative and sustainable way forward. These include makers' sources of inspiration, which include their respect and love for their ancestors, and their environment, both of which appear to be longstanding, and enduring, features of their textile (and other) art. Perhaps by maintaining a balance of these two sources, Kyrgyz craft workers and artists will continue to create a world where the past is both 'wholly collected up and grasped in the present' (Merleau Ponty 1970, 69), but which is also generative, forward looking, part of the 'onward propulsion of life' (Ingold and Hallam 2007), working both 'In the Ways of the Ancestors' but also towards both the continued well-being of their environment and their own practice.

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