



## Crafting Futures programme in Central Asia

Galina Koretskaya

*The article is compiled by Galina Koretskaya, Head of Arts and Creative Economy in Central Asia, British Council Kazakhstan based on reports and materials written by Dr Marta Gasparin, Dr Steve Conway and Dr Martin Quinn (Copenhagen Business School and University of Leicester School of Business).*

Crafting Futures is British Council's global programme which aims for a sustainable future through making and collaboration – supporting a future for craft by understanding its value in our history, culture and world today. The programme brings together craft practitioners, designers and organisations from around the world to explore possibilities for this future together.

Crafting Futures is tailored to the need of the local communities, and our inclusive approach means it is open to craft practitioners of any background in any location.

## **Kazakhstan Overview**

Crafting Futures programme in Kazakhstan was developed in partnership with University of Leicester, Royal College of Arts and Kazakh Union of Artisans (UoA).

Kazakhstan is a large country but sparsely populated. The programme focused on two cities – Almaty (cultural capital of Kazakhstan) and South Kazakhstan Province with the province capital – Shymkent. In 2018 Shymkent received a priority status and joined Almaty and Nur-Sultan as a city with the special importance. Since then the Government of the South Kazakhstan Province has been developing a strategy as a touristic center of Kazakhstan.

In the short term, there was a pressing need for business training for artisans and crafts people.

The goal of the first phase of the workshops in 2019-2020 was to build on the storytelling sessions of the 2019<sup>th</sup> pilot study to produce a small exhibition of Kazak craft where the artisans can tell their own story. The second phase of the workshops in 2020 – 2021 was realized during pandemic online and offline where focused was on:

- Deployment of creative and business skills that enable and articulate collective creative leadership ambitions of the craft practitioner communities in Kazakhstan
- Mapping and making more visible the practices, work, artifacts of individual practitioners in order to bring international and national visibility, i.e. using Open Street Maps as a framework
- Using the Business Canvas Model, to enable the individual and independent approaches to entrepreneurship and business

## Uzbekistan Overview

The programme for Uzbekistan has been developed by the University of Leicester and Association of Artisans “Hunarmand” and Human House art gallery with the support of Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Chamber of Commerce of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

The craft sector is pivotal to the socio-economic development of Uzbekistan, and it plays a critical role in conserving and perpetrating a rich culture. Craft processes, defined as the practices, knowledge, and sets of skills that different communities materialise in specific ways, are classified in Uzbekistan as a UNESCO intangible heritage, driving economic growth, supporting local incomes and the cultural preservation of ancient traditions at risk of being lost (UNESCO Tashkent Office 2014). The UNESCO intervention and classification in Uzbekistan has contributed to revitalising the craft sector during the post-Soviet independence period, shaping national identity and mobilising a narrative of being an artisanal country on the Silk Road. In 2018, the then new President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, began important wide-ranging reforms, such as the privatisation of the economy and the provision of support to SMEs, which benefitted the craft sector. The sector has been badly affected by the COVID-19 crisis, challenging its long-term sustainability.

The programme piloted in 2019 and a number of aspirational medium and long-term objectives were posed. In the **medium term** the programme was seek to:

- Contribute towards empowering local communities by bringing together diverse individuals, genders and community groups through arts and culture, contributing to more open and sustainable societies; and
- Contribute towards the creation of an enabling environment for inclusive participation and leadership in public life, by developing skills for employment and creative enterprise, and reducing barriers to participation in creative sectors.

## Legacy year programme in 2023

Much of the craft in **Kazakhstan** during the previous years of the programme was developed for the local market. This was partly connected to a desire to increase the amount of Kazak products owned by households – for example the wood workers and instrument makers made a lot of ornamental traditional Kazak instruments that were for display in homes rather than playing and the textiles workshops were producing traditional clothing for weddings and exhibitions within Kazakhstan rather than an international market.

Throughout the programme it became apparent that there was a lack of business support for craft practitioners and that their marketing was limited at best. Very few of the participants we spoke with had thought about their supply chains or the impact this might have on their image.

If an international market is to be achieved, then more work will need to be done on the authenticity of the products and proving exactly where they have come from.

Craft is constructed from its heritage, and it needs a very profound knowledge of the traditions in order to innovate it. Craft masters in **Uzbekistan**, who have a very profound knowledge on the traditional patterns and processes are experimenting to create new products. They are immersed in craft history and can develop new languages. Experiments concern shapes, functions, languages and processes.

Some of the craft-makers in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are experimenting to create products that are suitable for the contemporary lifestyle, such as bags for holding a computer or tablet. Experimentation is not limited only to colours and motifs, for example, but it also concerns relearning previously forgotten techniques.

The request from international tourists, especially European and American, is embedded in an exoticisation of the image of the Silk Road, which on the one hand, has the potential to attract tourists, but on the other perpetrates the Western-idea of Central Asia as the Silk Road states, as the “real Orient”, the ‘One Thousand and One Nights’ sort of place, and a fantasised other place that encounters the West. Whereas these narratives can help boost tourism, these are dangerous stereotypes to play, and craft-makers, in the quest of answering to market forces, might be forced into acting on a stereotypical vision that is not authentic, but is constructed as a reflection of what they think the Western tourists perceive of them.

In this way, there is a serious risk that craft-makers are not considered independent agents or agents of change. Policy-makers, in the process of creating the “made in

Uzbekistan brand” and “made of Kazakhstan brand” need to think carefully about the implications of such an approach, and should consider empowering craft-makers through their research rather than merely pleasing the tourists.

The final project was held in February 2023 and aimed to support the visibility and internalisation of local crafts markets, as well as celebrate the legacy of the Crafting Futures programme in Central Asia. Twenty-five artisans and designers from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan came together in an ancient city Khiva in Uzbekistan for a collaborative workshop to learn more about heritage. They were given a brief to co-design a new high-quality product or product range inspired by historical national heritage and using locally sourced materials which would appeal to international as well as a local markets.

Criteria for creating the new product were:

- **Quality:** The use of high-quality and locally sourced materials where possible, a high level of manufacturing technology and attention to product details
- **Authenticity:** A visual expression of the true meaning of tradition
- **Innovation:** Aiming for a combination of the traditional and the contemporary through creative materials, design and manufacturing process
- **Environmental impact:** Respect for the environment when using materials and production technologies
- **Social responsibility:** Ethical labour and no illegal labour practices used
- **Demand in the market:** Functionality of the product, safety in use, balanced ratio of price and quality

View [photos](#) of the workshop to see the results of the work and video about the project [here](#).

More details about crafts sector in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and Crafting Futures programme could be found on British Council website.

For Kazakhstan <https://kazakhstan.britishcouncil.org/programmes/arts/crafting-futures>

For Uzbekistan <https://www.britishcouncil.uz/en/programmes/arts/crafting-futures>