Review of "Sacred Scraps: Quilt and Patchwork Traditions of Central Asia," by Christine Martens

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Sacred Scraps: Quilt and Patchwork Traditions of Central Asia

Author: Christine Martens

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Review by Carol Bier

Drawing upon years of extensive travel, field research, and personal interviews with craftsmen and scholars in Central Asia, Chris Martens has produced a magnificent book to accompany the 2017 exhibition at the International Quilt Study Center & Museum in Lincoln, Nebraska, for which she served as guest curator. This book, and the exhibition, documents the prolific quilt and patchwork traditions of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Funds for travel, research, and systematic collecting came from the museum, with the support of the Robert and Ardis James Foundation; she also received support from The International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) for travel in Turkmenistan.

By juxtaposing historical photographs with her own stunning visual documentation of these craft traditions today, Martens has constructed an important cultural narrative based on her field notes and personal experience as traveler, artist, and scholar. The book is brilliantly designed, with text, documentary image, and object working together to establish a contemporary lens with which to view and understand the functional objects she collected, now among the holdings of the International Quilt Study Center & Museum. The museum’s photography beautifully illustrates each object, labeled by name (with local terminology), ethnic identity, and its geographic location of use.

The book is organized thematically by cultural context, explaining both meanings and uses of objects, and giving names by which objects are known locally. A preface introduces the sacred significance of textile fragments that are used in religious contexts related to spiritual practices. A poignant Turkish lullaby precedes the introduction:

May my daughter learn to sit
May she wear a thimble
On a white felt carpet may she sit and sew.

A regional map, illustrating today’s geographic boundaries of the five Central Asian republics (which gained independence in 1991) and their neighbors (Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, and China), is followed by a brief introduction
to the complex relationship of geography and people. This is especially important where nomadic pastoralism has been the historical norm, always in precarious balance with political entities, settled populations, and mercantile exchange. In such perilous settings, subject to the ongoing vagaries of politics and weather, the concomitant role of protective amulets and talismans is pervasive in warding off evil spirits and ensuring health and prosperity, a motivating force that underlies the production of many of these patchworks and quilted textiles.

The text proceeds according to a logic that is culturally based, addressing key rites of passage, including weddings, births, and childhood, followed by illness and death. Pilgrimage and saint worship are discussed in relation to shrines and burial spots, but pilgrimage to Mecca is not mentioned, likely reflecting the occlusion of its significance during the seventy years of Soviet rule. From my own recent visit to Uzbekistan (with Chris Martens), we observed that the role of the haji (pilgrimage to Mecca) is resurging, although it remains under strict governmental control. The section for weddings is longest, describing a bride’s dowry, and all manner of household goods and furnishings that incorporate quilting or patchwork (hangings, covers, pillows, cradle covers, bedding, storage containers for food, scissors, mirrors, and salt, pads for baking bread, potholders, horse and camel trappings). Sections follow on quilted clothing and design. The book concludes with a sequence of four very brief case studies of contemporary manifestations of these cultural traditions, which are otherwise quickly disappearing, illustrating the work of the Art Group Tumar, South Tribes of Kyrgyzstan, Aigul Diushenalieva, and Central Asian Craft Support Association, which seek to protect and sustain such quilt and patchwork traditions.

An afterword offers an apt quotation from the Kyrgyz filmmaker Aktan Abdukalykov, relating kurak (patchwork) to the aesthetic of Kyrgyz cinema with reference to the patching together of fragmentary memories:

'It is not important if I assembled it in a correct way. Traditional craftsmen never over-analyze their designs. It's an unexplainable and spontaneous think—it either flows along or not. I think this is the essence of kurak.'

Kurak as a form of cultural expression relies upon the very simple technologies of cutting and sewing, requiring scissors, a needle and thread, along with a thimble and pin, all easily transported from place to place. The sewing machine was introduced from European Russia in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Very often, the fabrics that went into the construction of patchwork were reused, but they carried meanings relating to history, memory, and an individual’s aspirations.

As an exhibition catalog, this is a beautiful and substantive volume, well-illustrated with twelve full-page, full-color bleeds, several of which depict traditional cultural practices. Many additional images provide ample details of patterns, designs, and construction. The visual documentation of cultural traditions, now vanishing, is especially welcome, as is the amazing variety of quilting and patchwork that has sustained these lifestyles. The book addresses important cultural themes of craft, technology, ceremony, and practice that are too often omitted from scholarly literature that draws upon either written or oral traditions. As a scholarly contribution, the extensive endnotes provide full bibliographic citations. The presentation would have benefited from a table of contents and an index. Also missing are object dimensions. The distinct languages of the region (Slavic Russian, Iranian Tajik and Persian, and several Turkic languages) and their complicated social and historical interaction that has led to the sharing of vocabulary (such as suzani, needle) is implied in the text, but a fuller discussion might provide greater insight into the dynamic complexity that so characterizes the peoples of Central Asia, whether sedentary, nomadic, or semi-nomadic. A cross-referencing of tribal names to ethnicities, languages, and geographic ranges would also be beneficial, but probably beyond the scope of this exhibition and its outstanding publication.

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