

SPOTLIGHT

IKATS OF UZBEKISTAN: JEWELS OF THE SILK ROAD

BY STEPHANIE MITCHELL

Some of the world's most beautiful fabrics come from the heart of Central Asia, the route of what we now call the Silk Road. That name was coined in the late 1800s by a Western explorer, but for millennia, caravans of luxurious goods, spices, and bright silk fabrics plied the maze of trading routes which connected the east and west extremes of Eurasia.



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE MITCHELL

LEFT: Men typically do the ikat dying. When you see how meticulous this is, it is amazing anyone ever thought this was a good idea, but the results make it worthwhile! **MIDDLE:** A cloth beam holding a 250-meter abr warp. **RIGHT:** The Said Akhmad Khodja madrassah in Margilan, a former religious center, now houses a series of handicraft workshops such as this one where a striking silk ikat is being handwoven.

The silks of my dreams come from the very heart of the Silk Road, in what is now Uzbekistan. These breathtaking creations are called *atlas* or *abr-band* in Central Asia, although we know them as *ikat*, a Malay word meaning “tie.” *Abr-band* means “cloud-tying,” from the slightly fuzzy-edged designs that some tales say were inspired by the multi-coloured reflections of clouds seen in water by a weaver.

The finely woven, bright ikat-patterned 100% silk fabric is called *khan atlas*, or “king’s silk,” although anyone in central Asia will understand you if you simply say that you have come in search of *atlas*. The reeled silk warp is dyed in resist patterns, then the warp-dominant silk fabric is woven in an *atlas* (satin) weave structure on eight or twelve shafts. According to Gulam Valiyev and

Ohunjon Ahunbabayev, writing in *Modernity of Tradition: Uzbek Textile Culture Today*, the more shafts used in the weaving, the brighter the appearance of the *abr* pattern.

Brightly patterned *atlas* is proudly worn today as a symbol of national identity, particularly significant in a country which has been independent for only 25 years. The *abr* patterns are seen everywhere, from elaborate wedding dresses and luxury velvets to costumes for traditional dance or patriotic performances, and in cheaper cotton or synthetic versions used for everyday dresses or to decorate market stalls.

OASIS CITIES AND A FERTILE VALLEY

Travel to Uzbekistan these days usually begins in the capital Tashkent and proceeds to fabled cities such as

Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva. These historic oasis cities were once independent khanates or capitals of vast empires. There one can see gems of medieval Islamic architecture and wander through bazaars resplendent with *atlas* made into a dazzling array of *chapans* (traditional style men’s coats) and the slightly more gathered long robes worn by women, as well as wall hangings, bags, and accessories.

The true home of *atlas*, however, lies across the 7,000-foot high Kamchik pass, which takes the traveller from the arid climate of the main part of Uzbekistan over the Tian Shan mountains, through a tangled mass of international borders to the fertile Fergana Valley.

Mulberry growing is thought to have come to Fergana in the 6th or 7th century CE. At some later point, *ikat* techniques were combined with the local silk

production to create the industry which now draws travellers to the Fergana city of Margilan.

Out of Margilan's population of about 200,000, nearly 10 percent are employed in the two main silk factories, producing both machine-made and handwoven fabrics. Silk is not a cottage industry here—since czarist times the fabric workshops of Margilan have shipped luxury goods prized far and wide, to rulers and the wealthy as far away as St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Central Asian consumers know and appreciate their *khan atlas*: in one shop a mother-in-law and a bride-to-be engaged in lengthy discussions with the salesman about the designs for the bride's trousseau. At another, there was an angry outburst from the boutique owner, who feared her precious design was being purloined when I attempted to photograph an elaborate wedding dress combining traditional *ikat* designs with Western-style white ruffles.

TECHNIQUE AND DESIGN

The technique used in Margilan resembles resist-dyeing as done elsewhere in the world: portions of the warp are tightly tied off and covered, and the warp



Sobir Umarov and Yusuf Mamayusupov showed off Yodgorlik's latest fabrics to local shoppers, including these designs which were being considered by a young bride-to-be and her future mother-in-law. Although the pattern on the far left looks very modern, it is actually based on traditional Zoroastrian-inspired designs.

is dyed, leaving the covered areas free of dye. The process is repeated with different colours until the desired pattern is complete. The meticulous process requires the warp to be stretched on a rack for the design to be outlined, then dyed in small precise batches

It is the color combinations and designs which distinguish the Central Asian version of *ikat* from those found in Malaysia, India, Japan, or elsewhere. While some of the most striking and modern-looking patterns feature only two high-contrast colors, other patterns may include as many as four or five. One of the most popular combinations is a yellow ground with patterns in some combination of green, black, blue, and red. Both chemical and natural dyes are used in *atlas* production. After dyeing, the warp-dominant fabric is woven in satin weave, and the cloth is sold in 9-meter lengths, just enough for a traditional robe. The fabric is used in long panels to show off the design with minimal cutting or waste.

Atlas designs may resemble those on Ottoman Turkish porcelain or be based on the circular and curving forms of Zoroastrian symbolism. Very modern-looking squared-off geometric designs can also be found even on *atlas* robes over a hundred years old.

CHANGE AND TRADITION

Atlas production and the lives of those who produce it have changed hugely over time. The technique has evolved from the days of the khanates through the Russian empire to state-controlled production in the Soviet era. In earlier times Jews, Uzbeks, and Tajiks variously controlled *ikat* fabric production (silk or



Yodgorlik produces both handwoven and machine-made fabrics, the latter on vintage machines like this one.

cotton) or the making and use of certain dyes. Today the silk yarn production and the weaving for *atlas* are done mainly by women, while men do the designing and dyeing of the warps. At least one family firm is bringing precious silk velvet *atlas* back into production, and new designs are continuously being created. In the last decade, Central Asian *ikat* has been popularized in mass-market fashion, albeit often in printed imitations. One can only hope that this popularity will create more awareness and demand to keep Central Asia's weavers busy.

RESOURCES

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