

Carpets in Kazakhstan

Kazakh carpets both ancient and modern have remained the stronghold for the preservation of the rich patterns for Kazakhstan. Various weaving techniques, different patterns and the array of colors beat imagination. Take a look at the tekemet, in which the colored patterns are rolled on to the felt, or the syrmak, where the ornament is executed by incrustation, application or pattern weaving, or the felt, wall-carpet *tuskiiz* decorated by woven patterns from gold or silver threads and pattern insertions. The *klem* carpets made from napped or plain materials, the *alasha* sewn from ornamental patterns and the patterned mats *shim shi* compare equally with the bigger carpets.

Kazakh women, from sunrise to sunset busied themselves with the never-ending household work. Nevertheless, they found a spare minute to weave. They were all masters of this art which they did wholeheartedly that is why their creations and fantasies have become genuine art masterpieces and the *yurta* which they decorated became a small phantasmal colorful world.

“I never saw an idle woman. As soon as they finish their housework, they pull and spin tirelessly at the spindle and wheel until there is enough yarn for her loom”, to quote the impression the German scholar R.Karutz had of Kazakh women. Having prepared the yarn, the women went onto the next task of weaving.

Carpet production today has not changed much preserving its traditional form, purpose and techniques of their manufacture. The fibres used in making a carpet differ in thickness just as the primary materials for their production. The warp is usually made of thick, durable coarse plain hair. Delicate fleece is used for the weft and the finest – for pile threads. Carpet quality and durability are determined by the number of knots in a square decimeter, which in Kazakh carpets total 800 and upward and may even reach 2000.

Ornamentation peculiar to Kazakh napped carpets usually consists of 4-5 rhombuses in the center with square, rectangular, graded or octahedron patterns along the length. Large patterns and few concentric rhombuses with geometric flourish are inserted in those figures. Hexahedron shapes, hooks or *omyrtka* patterns dot the whole area of the carpet. Images of birds and animals are rarely found. Sometimes napped carpets are decorated with triangles aligned in a row, lines, horns, rhombuses or some recurrent patterns.

The color range of napped carpets is not so wide coming in their traditional red or claret-colored background. A blue background is a rare exception. White color is used as a background for very small differently colored patterns.

Out of the items made from napped material, various bags – *korzhyn*, *kerme*, *ayak kap* as well as decorative woven bands, *baskur* have the most demand. *Korzhyn*, a saddlebag and *kerme*, a bag for dishes and house utilities are of analogous color and pattern to the carpets. These bags and napped carpets are mainly found in the southern regions of Kazakhstan. In the north, these articles are made from felt with an ornament of applique work.

The *baskur* is a decorative woven band used to fasten the felt covering onto the frame of the *yurta*. At the same time, a beautiful *baskur* serves as a decoration both inside and outside the

tent. Most of them have a nap surface (tukty baskur) and made on a predominantly white background (ak baskur). The one with red background is locally known as Kyzyl baskur. Another variety of the baskur has the patterns napped on a smooth background. Apart from that there are some ak baskur with the ornaments done in pile and not napped.

In spite of the limited production of napped articles, both napped and non-napped baskurs are widespread. This may be explained by the nomadic way of life since they form an integral part of the yurt.

The complexity of a composition of a baskur is determined by the different kinds of different ornaments on it. Zoomorphic motifs were often used as geometric rhombuses and triangles. Some even had a mixture of both zoomorphic and plant motifs. Pileless carpets also come in different types, namely, arabi klem, sharshi klem, tarkta klem, etc. Arabi klem is the most widespread of them. 'Arabi' is the central patterns in the form of geometric flourishes. Traditionally, the patterns are arranged along the vertical axis from stripes of different widths and lengths. This interchange of wide and narrow stripes forms the ornamental motif known as arabi klem.

Carpets with the central part decorated with squares of rhombuses filled with patterns are called sharshi (square) klem. Those with a central part of interchanging stripes and graded pattern are called takta klem (striped carpet).

Among all the pileless woven articles, the most popular and widely used in the country is the woolen floor carpet – alasha. The alasha is sewn from stripes of fabric ranging from 20 cm to 40 cm in width woven by any of the following techniques, namely, terme, kezhim teru or orama terme.

Patterns created by terme method uses coloured threads of warp set up in pairs and interlaced with weft. Woven in such a way, these ornamented stripes are later sewn together along their length to form the alasha. A material binding forms the edges of the alasha. Red and blue are the most dominant colours of the terme along with frequently used combinations of red and dark brown or red with green and yellow.

The kezhim keru is a weaving technique typical of western and southern Kazakhstan. Alasha made by this technique is very interesting and displays rich patterns that decorate the soft surface of the carpet.

The orama terme technique brings out the brilliance in the stripes from which alasha is made. The patterns made by this method appears only on the right side of the carpet.

Another variety of Kazakh carpets are the tekemet, symmak and tuskiiz made of felt.

The tekemet is a big felt floor carpet in which the colour combinations usually does not exceed five. The predominantly large patterns are mostly of zoomorphic motifs that have been created centuries ago and transferred from generation to generation. The main pattern is big and fills the central position. The bordering pattern is made of a series of small independent beautiful patterns.

The tekemet method employs rolling a previously coloured pattern from a woolen surface onto a semi-finished felt. This makes the pattern blurred without distinct outlines.

Oyuly tekemets were highly appreciated and had exclusively decorative purposes. Patterns were made by applique work, which involves stenciling the pattern at first, put on a felt base and stitched with decorative yarn – zhiyek.

Floor carpets like syrmak and otkiiz had their patterns made by the technique called inlaying. They differ in sizes and purposes. The syrmak is smaller than the otkiiz and its usual dimensions do not exceed 200 cm x 100 cm. the otkiiz is rather bigger and meant for daily use. Its name comes from Kazakh words ‘ot’ – fire and ‘kiiz’ – felt, because since ancient times, the carpet was laid around the hearth in the yurta.

The next group of carpets – syrmak come in various types. The most ancient of them is komsha. Patterns are made by stitching woolen thread on the right side in the form of the ornament. Spiral-like patterns are accentuated with the help of coloured decorative yarn – zhiyek.

The most popular and widespread are syrmaks made in technique of inlaid work. To make syrmak, felt of two different colours are chosen and laid on one another. The pattern is then drawn with a piece of coal, chalk or soap and cut out. After that, the pattern of one colour is inserted into the aperture of the other and sewn. The patterns are decorated with zhiyek. Now the ready right side of the syrmak is laid on the coarse felt and stitched together with the patterns. This process is called locally ‘syru’, from which the word syrmak stems. Carpets produced in this manner are very durable and could be used for over 50 years.

Every region of Kazakhstan has its own peculiar way of inlaying the patterns of syrmaks. In the east and south-east of Kazakhstan, tarakty muyiz, patterns of ramified horns are very popular.

Beside inlaid syrmaks, there are some made by the applique technique and decorated with the fringes of coloured horse hair. In applique work usually cotton material, thin cloth, velvet or sometimes silk are used. In contrast to the oyuly tekemet, where the pattern is sewn on a single felt, in syrmaks the pattern applique is fastened onto the felt with the help of an interwoven cord. Then the patterned felt is stitched along with the felt lining just like the syru method used for making syrmaks.

From the second part of XIV century, when a lot of cheap manufactured articles including fabrics like cloth, velvet, silk started to filter its way into the steppe, wall felt carpets started to crowd out the bedspread-like carpets – tuskiiz sewn from coloured cloth, velvet, silk with beautiful embroidery.

Tuskiiz were embroidered with coloured threads, mostly with silk, often in combination with golden embroidery. The most popular embroidery technique was considered to be chain-stitches. Satin-stitch was seldom used, that is why it is very difficult to come across tuskiiz totally embroidered in satin-stitch.

In embroidered tuskiiz plant ornaments prevail, but double flourishes, cross-like figures (kos-muyiz), as well as motifs resembling bird’s outstretched wings, amulets, vessels, almonds

can also be found. Embroidery is done on only three sides of the tuskiiz. A plain coloured inset of silk, cloth, brocade or plush occupies the central position of the tuskiiz. This middle part is not decorated with embroidery as it is mostly covered by big fluffy pillows. It is for the same reason that the other end of the tuskiiz is not decorated too.

Along with embroidery, rich ancient tuskiiz had a fine binding of luxurious fur, golden laces decorated with nacre, coral or pearls or embossed metallic plates.

For centuries unknown craftsmen and talented artists created different domestic articles, the artistic perfection of which surprise, gladden and arouse pride for being a part of it.

Many carpets are still being used by the people, others have lost trace in today's contemporary life, but are carefully kept and exhibited in the museums of Kazakhstan. They have disappeared from everyday life, they still 'live' in the museums as the most rare relics of the past, as creations of our predecessors, skilled masters and stand in testimony of their gift of nature, sense of colour and inborn love for colours.

Used material:

Askar Yesmakhanov 'Carpets of Kazakhstan'