

Felt.



# Tien Shan Mountains Kyrgyzstan



# Traditional Felt Rugs

Felt sells felt rugs or 'shyrdaks' made entirely by hand by nomadic women in the Tien Shan mountains of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, a former Soviet republic which became an independent country in 1991.

The rugs are traditionally made to insulate and decorate the circular tents - or yurts - that the nomads live in.

Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great and Marco Polo would all have seen and most probably slept on shyrdaks as they passed through the region.

Today they are still made in exactly the same way as they've been made for at least the last 2,500 years.



# Traditional Yurts



# The Nomadic Life

The population of Kyrgyzstan is around 5 million. 70% of them are still nomadic, at least during the summer months.

Small family groups travel together each year around the same sequence of pastures. Some tend domestic sheep and goats, others herd cattle, others horses, while others still hunt with enormous and highly trained eagles.

Kyrgyzstan consists of a glacial mountain range, the natural barrier between China and the Former Soviet Union.

The weather system is called 'extreme continental' because in the winter it is incredibly cold and in the summer it is incredibly hot. In spring, as the snow recedes, new plant growth appears, and ruminant animals (sheep and goats) naturally move up the slopes to forage for fresh new grass. The nomadic cycle formalises this movement with two moves up the mountains and then, as the snow returns and forces them down the slopes, two moves back down.

Shyrdaks are traditionally made during the summer months, outside the yurts, on the pasture. These days, rugs are also made indoors (often inside large yurts) during the winter months.



# How Felt rugs are made

The rugs are usually made by a team of women consisting of one 'master maker' who is responsible for running her team of 6 women.

The master maker also negotiates the pattern and meaning of the rug to be made and draws the pattern on to the felt at the pattern cutting stage.

Men are usually involved at just two stages in the manufacturing process.



1. First, the sheep are sheared using hand held shears. This stage is usually carried out by men. After the sheep have been sheared, the fleece is washed.



2. The wool fleece is then sorted by colour: white, brown and black. This is also the time to remove impurities such as twigs, bits of grass, small stones, etc.



3. Once sorted, the wool is placed on wire mesh 'beds' and beaten with metal sticks. The women traditionally sing at this stage to keep up a rhythm as they beat the wool.



4. The beaten wool is laid out to cover a reed mat to a depth of up to 10cm. This raw wool is wetted with hot water and then rolled up.



5. The rolled up reed mat is then towed across the mountain pasture, heating and meshing the wool inside. This is the second time the men are involved.



6. The team of women work in unison to roll and unroll the fabric. With each roll the mesh becomes tighter and stronger.



7. A large traditional metal cauldron is placed above a wood fire with a branch of Wormwood to infuse the water with the plant's insect-repelling qualities.



8. Natural dyes from plants are still used today. For example, the insides of pomegranates create a bright fuchsia pink, while their burned skins give a jet black colour.



9. The technique with Kyrgyz rugs is to cut the pattern through two sheets of different coloured felt at the same time to create a 'positive' and a 'negative'.

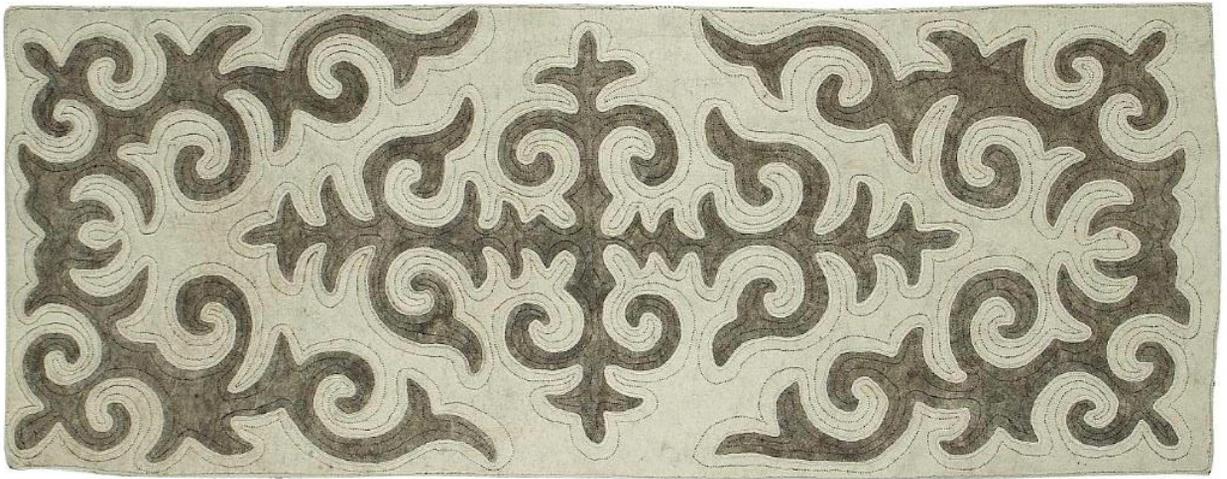


10. Once the pattern has been cut and pieces arranged, they are pinned into place using thorns and sewn together using a simple blanket stitch. To obscure this stitching a decorative braid is added.



11. The felt has now been cut, stitched and braided. This whole decorated layer is now sewn through to a plain felt base. If the stitching breaks the surface, it results in a quilted surface which is lovely to walk and lie on.





## Symbols and meanings

### The interpretation of this Shyrdak:

Night has fallen on a mountain pasture. The new moon is shining in the sky. A falconer lives here. His four kinds of cattle are already asleep. His eagles sit on their perches, waiting expectantly for their master to feed them.



Leaf



Crescent



Ram's horn



Goat's horn



Eagle



Crow's foot



Cauldron / hearth / home /  
yurt / nest / motherland



**The interpretation of this Shyrdak:**

The plants which grow in the spring water that runs down over stones from the high mountains are very beautiful. Cotton white clouds soar in the sky. Around the edges of tables laden with different foods are vessels full of kymyz. Everything is set for a great celebration.

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|---|--------------------|---|--|
|  | Chain of mountains |  | Goat's horn  |
|  | Water plant        |  | Crow's foot  |
|  | Cloud              |  | Vessel for kymyz<br>(Fermented mare's milk)            |
|  | Ram's horn         |  | Cauldron / hearth / home /<br>yurt / nest / motherland |