

UNIT 6: CHAPTER 3

The Nomads of Central Asia: Turkmen Traditions

After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- ◆ identify ways the art of the Turkmen people of Central Asia reflects nomadic life; and
- ◆ understand the functional and symbolic role objects played in their lives.

Introduction

The history of Central Asia presents a constant political and cultural interplay between nomadic and settled peoples. Art museums have rarely displayed the material culture of nomadic peoples, even though their traditions exerted a powerful influence on art and culture. There were many tribal groups in Central Asia, and the Turkmen, Uzbeks, and Kazakhs, among others, all have rich artistic traditions. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a particularly strong collection of Turkmen textiles and jewelry; an exploration of these everyday artworks can help us understand the lives and traditions of the Turkmen people.

The art of the Turkmen nomads serves specific practical purposes. Some works marked important life events, such as the ceremonies surrounding birth or marriage. Others were destined for use in portable dwellings or were bartered to townspeople for metal goods, such as dye pots or weapons. Turkmen artists are known for their skills in weaving carpets—largely the work of women artists—and making silver jewelry, which was the work of male artists.

Who Are the Turkmen?

The Turkmen art discussed in this chapter dates from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, and the way of life described here pertains to the Turkmen who lived during that period. The Turkmen have a long history in Central Asia, but little is known about their early history because they did not keep written records. Although the Central Asian Turkmen still exist and some still live nomadic lives, most have permanently settled in and around the country of Turkmenistan. The Turkmen were historically pastoral nomads and herders of sheep. The people known as Turkmen are in fact made up of more than two dozen major tribal groups, and were documented as living in Central Asia as early as the ninth century. With the advent of Islam in Central Asia, the Turkmen people converted, combining Sunni Islam with elements of their pre-Islamic faith, known broadly as Shamanism.

For most of their history the Central Asian Turkmen were politically independent, largely existing outside the control of ruling dynasties. Despite this, the Turkmen played a significant role in shaping the cultural, political, and economic landscape of Central Asia. Turkmen herdsmen frequently provided transport and security for the caravans traveling from one city to another with valuable merchandise. Meat, cheese, wool, and leather from the Turkmen flocks found their way to towns and cities, and prized Turkmen horses were traded across Central Asia. The Turkmen were also warriors and occasionally plundered other areas for supplies and trophies.

The Nomadic Way of Life

Because the livelihood of the Turkmen depended on their livestock—including sheep, goats, camels, and horses—year-round access to pastures was essential. Every Turkmen tribe had its own pattern of migration and its own preferred winter and summer pastures and springs or oases for watering flocks. This way of life is called pastoral nomadism. It allowed tribal groups that depended on livestock to move where their flocks could graze as the seasons changed. To support this way of life, all their possessions had to be easily portable. Camels were the favored method of transportation because they could traverse rough terrains, carry heavy loads, and subsist on very little water.

The Dwelling

In addition to livestock, the most important Turkmen family possession was the housing unit: a fabric-covered domed tent fashioned from slender wooden poles that were tied together with rope each time it was erected. The dome of the wooden frame was covered with large, thick slabs of felt that were secured with fabric bands. The felt allowed for ventilation and protection from water during rare rainstorms.

The primary furnishing of the tent was a large carpet (known as a main carpet) that covered most of the floor, though less affluent families may have used felt floor coverings. Additional carpets served as doors and exterior decoration. The Turkmen hung storage bags filled with clothing, cooking utensils, bread, and tent pegs on the walls. The faces of these bags were woven in warm colors and elaborate patterns incorporating abstracted floral motifs, called *gul* (fig. 44), which are particular to each tribe and tribal subgroup. These textiles served both functional and decorative purposes in the Turkmen dwelling (fig. 45).

FIG. 44. Comparison of the Arabatchi (detail, image 39) and Salor (detail, 1974.149.46) *guls* in the Museum's collection



FIG. 45. A Turkmen family, about 1910–15





Weaving

The tradition of Turkmen weaving, dating back centuries, was a universally female practice and constituted a major part of women's contribution to tribal cultural and economic life. Weaving also played an important role in the socialization process; young women learned their art from their mothers and older sisters. By the time a girl was considered old enough to marry, often shortly before she turned twenty, she was already an experienced weaver. Women created many items for a dowry or as wedding decorations, such as the tasseled trappings (*asmalyk*) designed to decorate the camel that carried a woman from her father's tent to that of her new husband.

Jewelry Making

Unlike the women in the tribe who wove textiles, men made jewelry. The process required fire, chasing tools made of hardened steel, and an understanding of techniques for shaping and decorating silver. Although metalworking was a logistical challenge for those living a nomadic lifestyle, the Turkmen excelled in this medium.

In Turkmen society, jewelry served several functions. Its precious metal (silver) and semi-precious stones (carnelian was the favored gem) served as a tangible and convertible form of wealth, which in hard times could be sold or pawned to help the tribe or family. Jewelry was also a form of conspicuous consumption and an indication of status that proclaimed the wealth and prosperity of its wearer. Equally important in traditional Turkmen society was the apotropaic, or protective, power ascribed to jewelry—shiny silver, bright red or blue stones, and tinkling pendants were thought to protect against the malign influence of evil and envious spirits. Girls wore jewelry from an early age; it was thought to promote fertility and good health, and was given as gifts on important occasions, such as religious holidays and celebrations of rites of passage.

Detail, image 39

Storage bag faces

Early 18th–19th century

Central Asia, probably present-day Turkmenistan,

Arabatchi tribe

Wool (warp, weft, and pile), cotton (weft); asymmetrically knotted pile; 29½ x 54½ in. (74.9 x 138.4 cm)

The James F. Ballard Collection, Gift of James F. Ballard, 1922 (22.100.40a,b)

LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS CHAPTER

Like many Turkmen objects, this textile combines functionality and portability with striking decoration.

FUNCTION

Storage bags added to the comfort and beauty of the tents in which the Turkmen lived. The bag was hung from the interior structure of the tent and served as a portable wardrobe or cupboard.

DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

Woven in woolen pile, the design consists of row upon row of tiny knots of wool yarn tied to a woolen foundation. Small quartered medallions, whose design is unique to each Turkmen tribe, rest on a grid formed by small octagons with green knotted extensions. The dyes used to color the wool are all traditional; some were bought in the marketplace (indigo) and some were harvested locally (madder). A variety of warm reds and reddish browns, obtained from madder root, dominate the color palette.

CONTEXT

The motifs decorating the field of these storage bag (*chupal*) faces are called *gul* (fig. 44), and their design is unique to the Arabatchi subgroup of Turkmen nomads. Each Turkmen tribe had their own individual *gul* that they used to decorate carpets and bags. This makes it possible to identify the tribal affiliation of the maker of a storage bag like this. Textiles were traditionally woven by women and furnished Turkmen tents; carpets covered floors and entryways, while smaller rugs were incorporated into bags of various sizes to hold a range of goods, architectural decoration, and animal trappings.

KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Nomads, Turkmen, daily life, visual identity, portable furnishings, weaving, wool, cotton



39. Storage bag face

40 Amulet

Late 19th–early 20th century

Present-day Uzbekistan, Karakalpak tribe

Silver, fire gilded with false granulation and twisted wire and beaded wire decoration, gilded and silver appliquéés, chain-link and cone-shaped pendants with slightly domed and cabochon-cut carnelians and turquoise beads; 9½ x 10½ in. (24.1 x 26.7 cm)

Gift of Marshall and Marilyn R. Wolf, 2008 (2008.579.12)

LINK TO THE THEME OF THIS CHAPTER

This amulet combines symbolic meaning, exquisite craftsmanship, and precious materials to create a wearable and portable object of both monetary value and talismanic power.

FUNCTION

Turkmen jewelry was not only decorative; it also was thought to have protective properties. This amulet, worn as a chest pendant, was designed to offer the wearer protection. The central hollow cylinder, which opens on either side, would have held a rolled paper scroll containing blessings, passages from the Qur'an, or prayers. The gentle sound produced by the many dangling elements was believed to ward off evil spirits.

The talismanic function of the amulet illustrates the Turkmen tribes' blending of pre-Islamic customs and beliefs with the Muslim faith.

DESCRIPTION/VISUAL ANALYSIS

The size and weight of this amulet contribute to its dignified appearance. The body is made of silver, which was gilded for a multicolored effect. Harmoniously placed throughout are orange-brown carnelian stones, which were widely prized for their protective properties. Tiny bits of turquoise provide blue accents. The solidity of the upper section is balanced by the hanging pendants extending below.

CONTEXT

Though men made Turkmen jewelry, most was worn by women. Jewelry indicated a woman's wealth, tribal affiliation, and social and marital status; one could tell if a woman was a young girl, newlywed, or long-married just by looking at her jewelry. Jewelry was often made of high-quality silver and there are documented cases of women selling their jewelry for the tribe in times of dire need.

KEY WORDS AND IDEAS

Nomads, Turkmen, daily life, jewelry, talisman, silver, precious stones



40. Amulet

Lesson Plan: Unit 6, Chapter 3 The Nomads of Central Asia: Turkmen Traditions

FEATURED WORK OF ART

Storage bag face (image 39)

Early 19th century

Central Asia, probably present-day Turkmenistan

Wool (warp, weft, and pile), cotton (weft);
asymmetrically knotted pile; 29½ x 54½ in.
(74.9 x 138.4 cm)

The James F. Ballard Collection, Gift of James F. Ballard,
1922 (22.100.40a,b)

SUBJECT AREAS: Visual Arts and World History

GRADE: Elementary

TOPIC/THEME: Art as a Primary Resource

GOALS

Students will be able to:

- ◆ identify ways art of the Turkmen people of Central Asia reflects nomadic life; and
- ◆ understand the functional and symbolic role objects play in their lives.

NATIONAL LEARNING STANDARDS

Visual Arts

- ◆ NA-VA.K-12.4 Understanding Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures
- ◆ NA-VA.K-12.6 Making Connections Between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

World History

- ◆ NSS-WH.5-12.6 Era 6: The Emergence of the First Global Age, 1450–1770
- ◆ NSS-WH.5-12.7 Era 7: An Age of Revolutions, 1750–1914

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

English Language Arts

- ◆ SL.CCR.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively

ACTIVITY SETTING: Classroom

MATERIALS: Graphite, colored pencils, markers, paper for sketching, at least three 5 x 7-inch note cards per student, a hole punch, one skein of yarn, and scissors

QUESTIONS FOR VIEWING

- ◆ The Turkmen nomads of the eighteenth to early twentieth century moved throughout the year to ensure their livestock had pastures to graze and water to drink. What might you enjoy about this lifestyle? What, if any, drawbacks might a nomadic lifestyle present?
- ◆ As nomads who moved with herds of sheep throughout the year, the Turkmen had easy access to wool, which they used to make a large range of everyday items, from portable furnishings to animal trappings. What goods or products does your community make out of wool?
- ◆ What natural resources are available where you live? How do they support your daily life?
- ◆ Imagine creating a wool bag like this. What steps might be involved? What skills or qualities might someone need to create such a bag? What special skills are valued in your community?
- ◆ Bags like this were hung inside the Turkmen dwelling, where they were used for storage. Look closely at the photograph of a Turkmen interior (fig. 47). What other goods furnish this home? If you could only keep what you could carry, what items would you choose? Why?

ACTIVITY

SUBJECT AREAS: Visual Arts and World History

DURATION: 120 minutes

Small quartered medallions (*guls*), such as the one on this bag, convey the identity of each Turkmen tribe. Although Turkmen *guls* are similar, each is unique. Compare and contrast the *guls* featured on this bag with other Turkmen *guls* (fig. 46). (You may also refer to the flag of Turkmenistan, which features the five distinct *guls* of the five main tribes.) What do the designs share in common? What makes each unique?

What shared interests, beliefs, or ties bring people together in your community? What visual cues, if any, convey membership in each group? Design a quartered medallion for a group you belong to (your family, your class at school, a club, etc.). Consider how the colors you select, shapes you choose, and type of line you use will best express key qualities of this group. If you are a member of swim team, for example, instead of focusing

on water or swimsuits, think of ways line might show fluidity, speed, or strength. Sketch four to five possible designs for your medallion and present them, along with a written or verbal description of your decision-making process, to a peer. Create three different versions of the design he or she identified as the strongest, each on a separate 5 x 7-inch note card. (Make the image as large as possible on the card.) Select your favorite medallion and add color with markers or colored pencils. Next, cut out the design and punch a hole at the top. Thread a piece of yarn through the hole and tie the ends together to create a necklace (make sure the loop of yarn is big enough to fit over your head). When everyone is wearing his or her necklace, look closely at the medallions and form groups based on similarities in subject or design. Discuss the features or qualities each “community” has in common and present your findings to the rest of the class.



FIG. 46. Comparison of the Arabatchi (detail, image 39) and Salor (detail, 1974.149.46) *guls* in the Museum’s collection



FIG. 47. A Turkmen family, about 1910–15

RESOURCES

Department of Islamic Art. “Turkmen Jewelry.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/turk/hd_turk.htm (August 2011).

Diba, Layla S. *Turkmen Jewelry: Silver Ornaments from the Marshall and Marilyn R. Wolf Collection*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

Mackie, Louise W., and Jon Thompson. *Turkmen, Tribal Carpets and Traditions*. Washington, D.C.: Textile Museum, 1980.

OBJECTS IN THE MUSEUM’S COLLECTION RELATED TO THIS LESSON

Robe, first half of the 19th century or earlier; Turkmenistan; silk and cotton (lining only) with embroidery; L. 47¾ in. (121.3 cm), W. 89½ in. (227.3 cm); Purchase, Hajji Baba Club and The Page and Otto Marx Jr. Foundation Gifts, in memory of Newton Foster, 1999 (1999.141)

Tent door hanging (*ensi*), early 19th century; Central Asia, Turkoman/Saryk; wool, cotton; 74 x 54 in. (188 x 137.2 cm); The James F. Ballard Collection, Gift of James F. Ballard, 1922 (22.100.42)

Image 40. Amulet, late 19th–early 20th century; present-day Uzbekistan; silver, fire gilded with false granulation and twisted wire and beaded wire decoration, gilded and silver appliqués, chain-link and cone-shaped pendants with slightly domed and cabochon-cut carnelians and turquoise beads; 9½ x 10½ in. (24.1 x 26.7 cm); Gift of Marshall and Marilyn R. Wolf, 2008 (2008.579.12)

Camel trapping, 19th century; Turkmenistan; wool embroidered with silk; 26¾ x 57½ in. (67.95 x 146.05 cm); Gift of Irma B. Wilkinson, in memory of Charles K. Wilkinson, 1989 (1989.383)

Tent door surround, 19th century; Central Asia, Turkmenistan; wool, goat’s hair; 52½ x 51 in. (134.5 x 129.5 cm); The James F. Ballard Collection, Gift of James F. Ballard, 1922 (22.100.37)

Fragment of a storage bag, first half of the 19th century; Central Asia, Turkmenistan; wool (warp and weft), cotton (weft and pile), wool (pile), silk (pile); asymmetrically knotted pile; 32½ x 49¾ in. (82.5 x 125 cm); The James F. Ballard Collection, Gift of James F. Ballard, 1922 (22.100.43)

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Unit 6: Chapter 3 Suggested Readings and Resources

Diba, Layla S. *Turkmen Jewelry: Silver Ornaments from the Marshall and Marilyn R. Wolf Collection*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

HIGH SCHOOL

A comprehensive introduction to Turkmen jewelry with detailed color photographs.

Grass: A Nation's Battle for Survival. DVD. 71 min. Harrington Park, N.J.: Milestone Films, 1992.

A classic silent documentary film made in the 1920s that follows the nomadic Bakhtiari people of Iran on their annual migration. These are not Turkmen nomads, but the documentary provides a good general picture of nomadic life.

Mackie, Louise W., and Jon Thompson. *Turkmen, Tribal Carpets and Traditions*. Washington, D.C.: Textile Museum, 2008.

HIGH SCHOOL

Major, John S., Joan Barnatt, and John Bertles. *Silk Road Encounters Education Kit*. Providence, R.I.: Asia Society and The Silk Road Project, Inc., 2001. Online version: <http://www.silkroadproject.org/Education/Resources/SilkRoadEncounters/tabid/339/Default.aspx>.

See especially chapter 3 of the Teacher's Guide, "Trading in the Silk Road Cities."

Thompson, Jon. *Oriental Carpets: From the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia*. New York: Dutton, 1988.

MIDDLE SCHOOL; HIGH SCHOOL

A broad introduction to carpet weaving in the Islamic world, featuring contextual photographs of nomadic life, information about how textiles are made, and a full chapter on nomadic weaving.

UNIT 6: CHAPTER 3 SOURCES

Diba, Layla S. *Turkmen Jewelry: Silver Ornaments from the Marshall and Marilyn R. Wolf Collection*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

Mackie, Louise W., and Jon Thompson, eds. *Turkmen, Tribal Carpets and Traditions*. Washington, D.C.: Textile Museum, 1980.

Schletzer, Dieter, and Reinhold Schletzer. *Old Silver Jewellery of the Turkoman: An Essay on Symbols in the Culture of Inner Asian Nomads*. Berlin: D. Reimer, 1983.

Thompson, Jon. *Timbuktu to Tibet: Exotic Rugs & Textiles from New York Collectors*. New York: Hajji Baba Club, 2008.

———. *Oriental Carpets: From the Tents, Cottages and Workshops of Asia*. New York: Dutton, 1988.