

Panel 1: Title

Reeds & Wool:

Patterned Screens from Central Asia
from the Sommer-Krieger Collection of Kyrgyz Reed Screens

Panel 2: Credits

Credits

This exhibition was organized by Dr. John L. Sommer from the reed screens in the Sommer-Krieger Collection. The exhibition was produced by Kauffman Museum, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas.

Reeds & Wool Exhibit Team:

John L. Sommer, Guest curator
Chuck Regier, Exhibit Development
Robert Regier, Graphic Design
Rachel Pannabecker, Interpretive Text
Scott Meissen, Production
Esther Eash, Children's Programming

Companion Book:

The Kyrgyz and Their Reed Screens by John L. Sommer

Photographs courtesy of:

Dr. John L. Sommer, *The Kyrgyz and Their Reed Screens*
Hutchison Library, London, Disappearing World Collection
The Kirghiz Pattern

Support for this exhibition was received from:

Dr. John L. Sommer
Kauffman Museum
Stauth Memorial Museum

Panel 3: Yurt assembly photo

Panel 4: Introduction

The grasslands of Central Asia are home to the Kyrgyz people.

Traditionally the Kyrgyz were nomadic herders who lived in circular felt tents known as yurts and migrated seasonally with their flocks. Because they carried all their possessions with them, useless, breakable things had no place in their homes. If beauty was to be found, it was among useful, portable household items, like the patterned reed screens (*chirmagan chiy*) used to furnish the yurt.

Panel 5: Map

Central Asia lies between Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The Republic of Kyrgyzstan (formerly Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic) is a multicultural country which includes traditional peoples like the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks as well as

Russians and Ukrainians who were moved to the mountain country when it was part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Panel 6: The plant materials

The reed used in Kyrgyz screens is a slender, stiff grass called *chiy* (pronounced chee). *Chiy* (*Lasiagrostis splendens*) is not cultivated but is found growing wild in thick clumps along the roadsides. *Chiy* grows to a height of ten feet, averaging 1/8 inch in diameter. Thin, straight stems are preferred for patterned screens.

Chiy plants are gathered in late summer by groups of men and women working together. The plant complete with roots is harvested and then dried for one to two weeks. Prior to being made into screens, the leaves are removed and the ends trimmed.

Panel 7: Photo of yurt and mountain

Panel 8: Making the screens

Specially skilled women (*chyrmakchy*) among the Kyrgyz make the patterned screens. Carded sheep wool is dyed in several colors, traditionally madder red, indigo blue, and yellow. The master *chiy* maker skillfully wraps a thin, even layer of the unspun dyed wool around each tallgrass stem according to a pattern she retains only in her memory.

When all reeds are wrapped with wool the maker takes them to a handmade "weaving" frame which holds long, strong woolen cords wound onto pairs of stone weights. The cords are used to bind the reeds together in a twining process. As each stem is placed in sequence, "the pattern emerges as a miracle."

Making reed screens is a Kyrgyz women's art. Girls and young women learn the craft from their mothers and grandmothers. Wrapping reeds with wool is often a winter activity. A nine-foot long patterned screen takes two to three months to create.

Among the Kyrgyz, patterned screens are a traditional part of a bride's dowry. Screens are also traded by northern Kyrgyz to Kyrgyz people further south, where screen making is less developed.

Panel 9: Types of Screens

Patterned reed screens serve as wall screens and as space dividers in a yurt.

The long *kanat chiy* (twenty feet or more in length) is a wall screen. It is placed between the yurt's lattice frame and the outer felt covering, helping to insulate against winter cold. During warmer weather when the outer felts are lifted it allows ventilation while maintaining privacy.

The shorter *ashkana chiy* functions as a space divider, separating the central fire and cooking area from the women's area where food and utensils are stored. This decorative screen is similar in size to an Oriental rug.

Patterned screens can also serve as decorative door curtains, suspendable shelves, or can be formed into cylindrical storage containers.

Reed screens are fully portable and can be rolled up for storage and transport. An unpatterned section of reeds at one end of the screen functions as a protective covering against soil and wear. Plain reed screens (*ak chiy*) are also used as protective underlays for felt carpets, molding presses for making felt carpets, food-drying racks, wind screens, or coverings for newly threshed wheat.

Panel 10: Photo of woman working in front of yurt

Panel 11: Change

Traditional Kyrgyz culture has changed significantly in the 20th century. Nomad migrations were restricted during the time of Soviet control, and herding families were pushed onto collectivized farms.

Reed screens have changed too. Now Kyrgyz women use synthetic dyes instead of natural vegetal colors. Pictorial designs have become more common, including landscapes and portraits of Soviet heroes, such as the Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin.

Yet the art of making reed screens is being kept alive. Professor Klavdiya Ivanovna Antipina (pictured above) wrote extensively on Kyrgyz material culture. From 1953 to 1955 she co-directed an expedition that recorded the screen-making process, took photographs of Kyrgyz women and their screens, and preserved older examples. Today, the Center for Aesthetic Education, in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, maintains a program to cultivate appreciation for traditional arts. Young women learn to wrap short *chiy* stems, using synthetic fiber donated by a local textile factory, and are instructed in the twining technique using a scaled-down frame.

Panel 12: Designs

Geometric motifs dominate the patterns found in reed screens. Prominently featured are large rectilinear forms, such as an octagon, rhombus, square, rectangle, or equilateral cross. A virtuoso *chiy* maker can also create curvilinear forms such as a circle or medallion.

Within and around the large figures are smaller ornamental motifs:

- a double-curve "ram's horns"
- a single-curve "hook" or "scroll"
- a multi-fingered "comb"
- a notched "paw"
- an eight-pointed star

Only rarely are animal forms or written inscriptions found on Kyrgyz reed screens.

The designs in reed screens are similar to patterns seen on flatwoven kilims, mosaic felt rugs, and silk ikat fabrics made by Central Asian nomads. Some scholars have suggested that Turkish tribal kilims (woven carpets) have their origins in the design and function of these reed screens.