



RAINBOW WEAVE

Bibi Hanum's coats of many colours

In a time almost forgotten, Uzbekistan was at the cross-roads of the world. It was where silk, spices and ideas changed hands, and where the luxuries of the orient met the curiosity of the west. But Uzbekistan was not only a centre for trade but of creativity and beauty too. Many assume that textile practices belonging to Central Asian cultures dwindled and died years ago at the hands of Soviet 'modernisation' and industrial globalisation. However, in the case of Uzbekistan's traditional textiles this is untrue.

Bibi Hanum, an Uzbek clothing brand, brings beautiful Uzbek textiles to a global market. Aiming to be socially and culturally responsible, Bibi Hanum presents a beautiful collection, hand-made by Uzbekistan's most skilled artisans from some of the remotest regions of the country. They employ techniques of hand-tied, resist-dyed ikat, as well as suzani stitch work, whose style and ornamentation reflect centuries of cross-cultural trade along the Silk Road network.

Bibi Hanum was founded by Muhayo Alieva in 2006 in her mother's garage. Formerly a member of the Uzbekistan Cultural Affairs department, Alieva discovered the intricacies and processes of silk ikat while working on community development and artisan engagement programmes for the U.S embassy. In 2016 she decided to devote herself to the brand, which has since grown from strength to strength.

Besides creating beautiful clothing collections and showcasing the art of ikat to the world, another ▶





of Alieva's objectives for Bibi Hanum is to bring new opportunities to the women of Uzbekistan. Approximately 50% of Uzbekistan's female population aged fifteen and over are in employment, due to economic, religious and societal factors. The Bibi Hanum workshop in Tashkent offers women support and flexibility in an inviting, relaxed and modern workplace. As an enterprise respectful of history and customs Bibi Hanum looks to the past to revive the traditions of a rich and vibrant Uzbek culture, while simultaneously striving towards recognition for the women and artisans involved in making these beautiful clothes. Uzbekistan's diverse cultural heritage can be attributed to its strategic location and colourful history. A rich and vibrant past, not only of textiles and of trade, but of empires lost and won - the introduction of Islam in the 7th century, the Mongol invasion of the 13th century, and incorporation into the Soviet Union in the early 20th century, before declaring independence in 1991. Soviet rule enforced mechanisation and the prohibition of handicrafts, meaning that ikat artisans intent on preserving their knowledge and skills were forced to practice the traditions of silk ikat making in absolute secret. At the hands of mechanised textile production silk ikat was nearly lost forever.

Soviet policy enforced a new way of dressing and living for the women of Uzbekistan. 'Hujum' was a series of policies brought about by the Soviet state to remove all manifestations of gender inequality in Central Asia. The tradition of veiling by women in these cultures had been

commonplace, however, Soviet rule outlawed veiling. By abolishing all means of oppression and gender inequality apparent in Uzbekistan, the Soviets believed they could clear the way for the construction of socialism. But were these policies really the endeavours of a modernising revolution or was this colonial domination? It could be said that Soviet rule interrupted and extinguished cultural links with the past across Central Asia and in many respects the repercussions of the Soviet era are still being felt.

The majority of Uzbek people today dress in loose fitting, synthetic fabrics from China, a far cry from the beautiful robes which would have been worn in pre-Soviet times. Bibi Hanum, however, aspires to resurrect the status of hand made silk ikat, both locally and internationally. Slowly, local people are beginning to come round to the idea of wearing authentic silk ikat again and regard it as a luxury commodity, while in the West, ikat has a renewed allure. Brands including Etro, Osman and Gucci showcased silk ikat in their collections, and for Spring/Summer 2019 Oscar de la Renta shone a spotlight on the creations of Bibi Hanum, bringing international recognition to the company and to the mastery of the ikat artisans. Through social and cultural dedication, Bibi Hanum takes small, but by no means insignificant, steps towards supporting women while at the same time reviving recognition of the precious textiles of Uzbekistan on an international scale. •••**Rosie Gibson**

Bibi Hanum will be exhibiting at the Virtual Selvedge World Fair 3-5 September 2020

