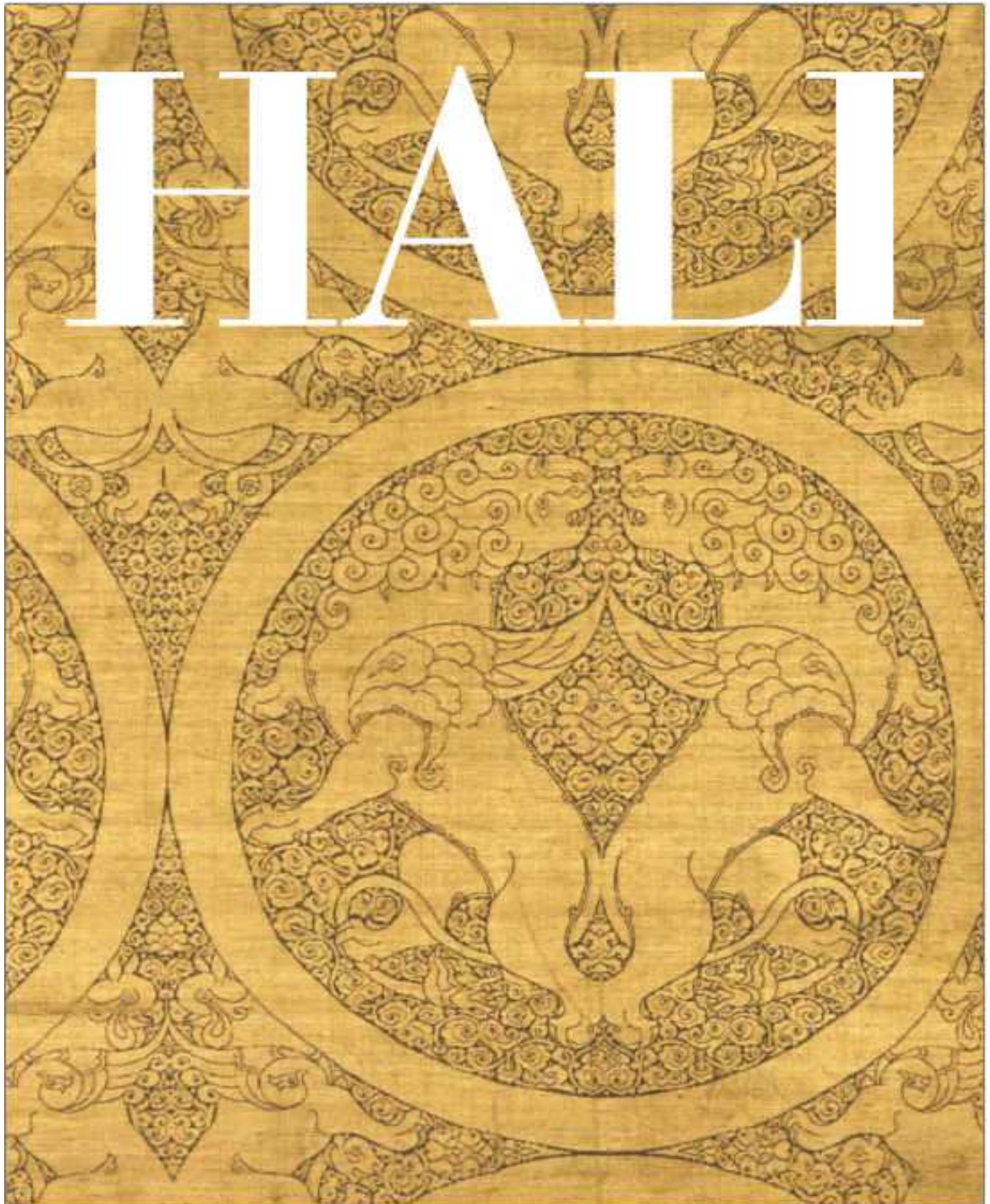


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*Textiles along the Silk Roads*

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# Heads held high

Paul Michael Taylor describes how a headscarf became a symbol of identity for the nation of Azerbaijan—and how tradition has been renewed through eras of change

**T**he Azerbaijani *kelaghayi* (woman's silk headscarf) has long been one of the most popular elements of traditional Azerbaijani clothing, and an important icon of Azerbaijani national identity. In 2014 it was included on the UNESCO list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Yet very little information is available in English about these textiles, or their manufacture and symbolism—though in 2017 Asli Samadova provided HALI readers with a brief account of her visit to a private collection of *kelaghayi* in Baku's Inner City.

The *kelaghayi* is a silk scarf made of locally produced, untwisted threads with patterns printed by the traditional resist-dye method of waxing. The ornamentation and colour choice,

even the method of folding the finished scarf, all carry meaning. Historical examples can be found in major museums and collections within the country of origin and beyond.

The importance of *kelaghayi* to Azerbaijani identity can be seen in the country's fine arts. We frequently find, in Azerbaijani paintings from pre-Soviet times, that women in realistic scenes or portraits are wearing examples with identifiable patterns. *Kelaghayi* became especially prominent in paintings from the 1930s to 1950s in which women were shown wearing 'universal' Soviet Union clothing such as workers' or military uniforms. Such usage may be a way to assert the figure's distinctively Azerbaijani identity within the Soviet State's approved modes of indicating uniformity or conformity.



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1 Kelaghayi, anonymous artist, early 20th century. Azerbaijan Carpet Museum

2 Wooden dye-stamps with various patterns, ready for use in creating kelaghayi textiles, Basqal, Ismayilli Province, Azerbaijan, May 2024

3 'Herati' kelaghayi, Basqal, Ismayilli Province, Azerbaijan, mid-20th century. Azerbaijan Carpet Museum



3



4 Kelaghayi, anonymous artist, late 19th century. Azerbaijan Carpet Museum

5 The dyeing of cloths already stamped by the women with patterns of hot wax is entirely done by men. Basqal, Ismayilli Province, Azerbaijan, May 2024

6 Untitled, Farhad Farzali, 2013. Digital C-print, acrylic on canvas. From the series of eight acrylic on canvas paintings, the 'Kelaghayi #2000 Project'. This work depicts the 'pomegranate blossom' motif frequently depicted on headscarves made in Basqal

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Perhaps partly for these reasons, the *kelaghayi* became even more of a symbol of Azerbaijani identity in the years following independence in 1991. This may seem surprising since Azerbaijan is a country with such a long history and vast array of cultural products. These include a rich heritage of carpets, textiles and arts in various media that sometimes use elements found in the patterns and motifs of *kelaghayi*. Yet the government of Azerbaijan made a special effort to nominate the *kelaghayi* in particular for UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. In accepting the submission, UNESCO stated: 'The traditional practice of making and wearing headscarves is an expression of cultural identity and religious traditions and a symbol of social cohesion, reinforcing the role of women and strengthening the cultural unity of Azerbaijani society.'

Rooted in traditions found along the Great Silk Road, the art of *kelaghayi* is concentrated in two localities in Azerbaijan, Sheki city and the village of Basqal (sometimes written Basgal, 2, 5). Manufacture consists of several

stages: fabric weaving, dyeing and woodblock decoration. Weavers choose thin silk threads from sericulture producers and weave fabrics on looms before boiling and drying them to make square-shaped cloths. Using vegetable substances, masters then dye the cloths various

*The colours of  
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weddings and  
celebrations*

colours and decorate them with patterns using wooden stamps, covered with solutions made from rosin, paraffin and solid oil.

The colours of headscarves have symbolic meanings and are often tied to specific social occasions, such as weddings, mourning

ceremonies and celebrations. *Kelaghayi* making is an art transmitted through non-formal apprenticeship only, and is primarily a family occupation. Each family has its own stylistic features and patterns of decoration.

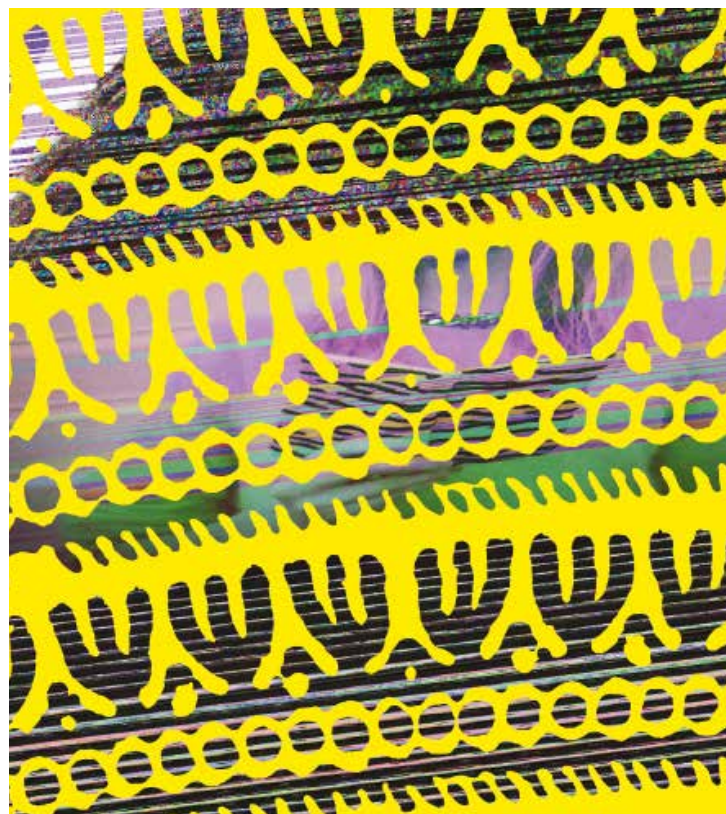
Clearly much research on the history of these silk textiles is still needed. Azerbaijan was part of the ancient 'Silk Road' trade and had become an important centre of silk weaving by the time Marco Polo visited in the 13th century. The authors of the 2018 book *Kālağayı sänāti / Kelaghayi art* (Azada Huseynova, Amina Melikova and Naida Abbasova) note that it is difficult to say with certainty when the *kelaghayi* arose as a distinctive form. They posit that it must have been at least 300 years ago based on the ascribed dating of some of the heirloom woodblock prints preserved today at Basqal.

The authors also point out that, while many of the patterns or motifs are widely shared and applied to other media (including carpets, clothes and even cuisine), others are mainly used by particular workshops. It is thus sometimes possible to identify where *kelaghayi*



Photo: Paul Michael Taylor

5



6

were made. They observe that each workshop produced a wide variety of colours and patterns, some of which are considered to have healing properties, and all of which were required to be appropriate to the wearer's status.

In May 2024, after attending a conference in Baku, I had the opportunity to visit the village of Basqal, in the Ismayilli region. Good friends arranged for me to meet the crafters who make the authentic *kelaghayi* there, and to observe the process they are still using. Even before leaving the Azerbaijani capital, however, I was surrounded with examples of *kelaghayi* in museums and cultural centres. Of course, there were also vivid examples being worn by many of the well-dressed Azerbaijani female scholars and attendees at the conference and its associated events.

A particularly telling example of the association between the *kelaghayi* and Azerbaijan's national identity can be seen at the main entrance of Baku's pre-eminent cultural location, the Heydar Aliyev Centre. Visitors are greeted with a huge and impressive installation by the artist Daniel Wurtzel, titled *Air Fountain—Dance of Kelghayis*. Three very large *kelaghayi*-patterned textiles hang in a vortex of air which causes them to move

constantly, taking on various shapes as they whirl and drift. Their three colours are those of Azerbaijan's national flag.

After leaving Baku early in the morning for the long drive into the Caucasus mountain region of Ismayilli Province, I was met just over the provincial border by Elchin Mirzali, who guided our car to his busy workshop. Women predominate not only in the hand-stamping of wax patterns on the cloth before dyeing, but also in the vast spaces of the workshop where Soviet-era (1980s) spinning and weaving machines turn single silk threads into three-ply threads, before weaving them into rough cloth.

After this cloth is boiled and dried to make it smooth, it is cut into a standard headscarf size (about 150 x 150 cm), then dyed in a series of colours after women have stamped patterns onto it with hot wax. The wax prevents the next dye colour from reaching the textile; only the unstamped areas will absorb the colour of the next dye bath. The subsequent dyeing of pre-stamped cloths is entirely done by men, who dip each one into its dye bath of the appropriate colour (5).

The last steps of production involve washing the dyed cloths. First they are put into two vats of hot water mixed with a soap

locally made from animal fats mixed with baking soda—the first at 80 degrees, the second at 60 degrees Celsius (176 and 140 °F). Then they are rinsed in two vats of fresh water at room temperature. This sets the natural dyes and removes excess oils. Then, after drying, the traditional *kelaghayi* headscarf is ready to wear or to be packaged for sale—continuing to provide this important and meaningful textile for the people of today's dynamic Republic of Azerbaijan.

The products of this workshop have even inspired fresh evolutions of the textile. For example, the Azerbaijani artist Farhad Farzali visited Basqal to create a series of *kelaghayi*-themed paintings displayed at the Islamic Art Festival in Sharjah, U.A.E., in 2014. One example draws its inspiration from one of many *kelaghayi* patterns that repeats a particular motif (6), in this case the 'pomegranate blossom' motif. In this painting and others in the series, the artist is not recreating a *kelaghayi* textile in its entirety but isolating and exploring an individual motif. The glorification of these patterns and the crafting process, in contemporary fine art forms of Azerbaijan, is one more transformation of the country's historic *kelaghayi* textiles. ♡