Design for Grassroots Production in Eastern Turkey through the Revival of Traditional Handicrafts

Hazal Gumus Ciftci\textsuperscript{a}, Stuart Walker\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Lancaster University
\textsuperscript{b}Lancaster University

*Corresponding author email: h.gumus@lancaster.ac.uk

This paper presents the results of research that investigates the barriers, restrictions, opportunities, and potential of crafts in Eastern Turkey and it brings design for sustainability principles to the future development of this sector. Field trips to Eastern Turkey revealed the challenges and issues of traditional handicrafts along with potential development opportunities. However, there are some contrary views - that design should not interfere with - and potentially would distort or destroy the genuine values inherent to traditional crafts. Therefore, this paper investigates - through practice-based design research - if and how design can contribute to the development of crafts sector. Three of the existing traditional handicrafts (Oltu-stone prayer beads, harik shoes, and felt sheets) in Eastern Turkey are selected to demonstrate the promising design interventions.

Keywords: Turkey, migration, traditional handicrafts, sustainability, design intervention, practice-based design research

1. Introduction

Over the years, social and economic inequities have led to significant migration from eastern to western Turkey. The major consequence of this migration, from underdeveloped rural areas to more developed urban regions, is socio-economic disorder and the difficulty people experience in adapting to a different region and lifestyle. The more developed regions welcome the influx of human labour, but often make poor use of the people’s skills, many of which are important in relation to local traditions and culture.

The loss of traditional handicrafts cannot be related solely to migration. It is also linked to transitional problems encountered in the middle of the twentieth century, moving from the traditional, predominantly rural, production methods that were prevalent during the Ottoman Empire to the modern Turkish Republic, with its development of more up-to-date, technologically sophisticated, “modern” fabrication sites (Şişman et al., 2009). Recent studies on traditional crafts in Turkey demonstrate that the number of traditional skills and artisans is decreasing day by day (ibid.).
Although there have been attempts to overcome the disparity between the regions, it is evident that those efforts were not successful and most of the economic growth initiatives have benefitted the western part of Turkey (Eşiyok & Sekmen, 2012). As a result, further industrialisation investments have been made in the West, and the socioeconomic gap between the West and East of the country has increased (ibid.).

Traditional handicrafts are products that arose from people’s needs, and they are practised over many generations. With the so-called technological and scientific advancements, handicrafts started to fade away due to the pressure of competitive global markets. Keeping up-to-date is another reason for their disappearance since contemporary taste in clothing, furnishing, and well-being changes very rapidly and the craft products are regarded as old-fashioned.

Although the reasons given above are the main obstacles to the evolution of traditional handicrafts, there is also a lack of understanding and an undervaluing of these works. Having considered these factors, this research project looks for a more profound understanding of the relationship between design for sustainability and traditional handicraft production especially in Eastern Turkey while creating possibilities for crafts to thrive now and in the future.

2. Design for Traditional Handicrafts

Somewhat inevitably, localisation is one of the key aspects of sustainability given the carbon emitted during transportation of goods, the loss of heritage and local knowledge associated with more centralised, heavily industrialised, mass-production, and depletion of resources related to large-scale production for global markets (Manzini, 2007). Furthermore, local production can be far more effective regarding solutions for a production system’s failures and flaws.

Thackara supports this idea, saying that “Locality matters not just as a place to sell things, but as a medium of innovation” (2005, p.74). Over the last 30 years, a monoculture and a monotype lifestyle have been increasingly embraced by the world’s citizens. Regarding design and the grain and texture of our material cultures – our human-made environments – the beauty of the local and the importance of living within the limits of what we have also started to fade (Birkeland, 2002, p.237).

Globalisation, as mentioned above, tends to be a one-way phenomenon and a belief in being like the rest of the world is rapidly transforming most of the unique cultures in the world into normal or even degenerate ones. As stated in Globalization 101’s report, globalisation’s impacts on culture may not be clear; however, the changes in local cultures, values and traditions are inevitable while being surrounded by foreign products, movies, music, etc. (2014). Opposing views state that globalisation is a way for cultures to merge (ibid.). Unfortunately, locality and locally produced goods started to serve this global culture recently by being just another souvenir object. Traditional handicrafts are affected by growing industrialisation and the growth of the monoculture created by globalisation. Since they are a part of the intangible cultural heritage, the importance of safeguarding these values is evident.

Mass-production and globalisation are not the only reasons for the disappearance of handicrafts. Craft is described as “a social activity” because it is learned through apprenticeship (Bonanni & Parkes, 2010) which explains the necessity of craftspeople to find youngsters who are interested in and enthusiastic about their crafts in order to pass on their skills. The UNESCO report mentions that the learning phase is considered a long period by apprentices, but it is the only way to practice a craft (2003).
Although McGuirk (2011) defines the comeback of handicrafts as a “post-industrial nostalgia for the pre-industrial” and shouts out that designers benefit from the crafts just because there are not enough manufacturers supporting them (ibid.), others suggest the opposite (Tung, 2012; Chick & Micklethwaite, 2011). This counter argument varies from “playing a catalytic role in facilitating the propagation of local craft knowledge into other industries” (Tung, 2012) to “be exposed to international market trends that will hopefully inspire new marketable products” (Chick & Micklethwaite, 2011, p.150).

Anisef (2010) cites Rafael Cardoso for his view on craft and design being “complementary aspects of the same ongoing process of shaping experience through the interaction between people and things. Designers are referred to as a “bridge” in the Designers meet Artisans report (UNESCO, 2005) because they have the potential to bring fresh perspectives - by selecting different materials, altering the production processes, developing products or introducing new tools. The same report also points out that there are other views claiming that the alterations to the craftsperson’s decision mechanism and innovations made to the product that does not include cultural values are risky (ibid.).

3. Traditional Handicrafts in Turkey

As mentioned above, there are various problems associated with the continuance and flourishing of traditional handicrafts in Turkey. Problems include:

“Migration from the villages to cities, some handicraft products’ becoming obsolete, an increase in population, an increase in the use of machines with the development of technology, changes in habits, fashion trends, decreases and variations in raw materials and increasing numbers and types of products on the market that are imported from Asian and Far Eastern countries such as India and China.” (Arli cited in Özkan Tağı & Erdoğan, 2008)

Moreover, systematic research of Turkish handicrafts is rather insufficient where this heritage cannot be interpreted and spread or even commercialised and become a part of cultural tourism (Oğuz, 2002). On the other hand, there have been several attempts to rejuvenate traditional handicrafts in Turkey, starting in the 1920s, with the foundation of the Republic of Turkey. Şişman et.al says:

“A cultural policy was developed... and much research was conducted, exhibitions prepared, museums founded, catalogues published by the official authority in the three decades following the establishment of Turkish Republic in the mid-1920s.” (2009)

In the 1960s, handmade objects became tourist attractions (Altuntas & Ozturk cited in Şişman et.al, 2009). The governmental organisations for the marketing of traditional handicrafts were founded in the 1970s and were active until the end of 1980s. However, they did not have an effective sales network, production capacity or ability to create direction for the crafts sector (Oğuz, 2002). Özkan Taği and Erdoğan (2008) suggest that “collecting, research, education, marketing, and production” are ways of tackling these issues along with more subtle methods in reviving or in evolving this age-old knowledge:

“Importance should be attached to quality in the production of handicrafts. The quality can be increased by using high-quality raw materials, maintaining the traditional characteristics and providing opportunities for new designs and the higher quality, the more the demand will be.” (ibid.)
Demircan makes an analysis (Figure 1) of cultural objects in Turkey listing those according to production methods, functions and whether they are designed or not (2005, pp. 76-105).

![Figure 1. Analysis of Traditional Products](Reproduced from Demircan, 2005, p. 81)

Through this chart, the relationship between handicrafts and design in Turkey can be effectively comprehended. However, the quality of this interaction between traditional craftsmanship and contemporary design depends on various components such as respecting one another and being open to possibilities. Collaboration between designer and craftspeople in Istanbul was investigated by Kaya & Yagiz:

“Prospective designers’ familiarity with crafts contexts has the potential to develop further into a collaborative form of production. This form of production is characterised not only by its alternative way of making products in editions but also by its genuine blend of practices based on exchange and integration of knowledge and experience.” (2011)

On a final note, traditional handicraft practices, which are considered part of the intangible cultural heritage, can only be safeguarded by “singing the songs, telling the tales, weaving the cloth, throwing the pots, and passing along skills and traditions to the next generations” (Smith, 2009).

4. Practice-based Design Research

The aim of this research is to determine if and how design practice contributes to the positive development of the traditional handicrafts sector in Eastern Turkey. There is a lack of scientific research, inventories, and interventions about the preservation of traditional handicrafts in the region. Therefore, practice-based design research is employed to answer research questions. And here design refers to the designing process or the designed product; hence, the process is iterative

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1(from right to left) Image1 (üzerlik/ evil eye protection), image2 (copper mug), image3 (felt vests, slippers, and hat), image4 (mass-produced coffee cup) (courtesy of researcher), image5 (electric teapot - Arçelik, 2016), image6 tea glass (Birselplusseck, n.d.)
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until “the need, or problem, is understood as the solution is generated and evaluated” (Eckert and Clarkson cited in Evans 2010). The iterative design research process can be seen on Figure 2:

**Figure 2. The Iterative Process of the Design Research**

The process of finding the existing traditional handicrafts had two stages:

1. Literature review gave insights about the field and challenges of the traditional crafts sector in the region. The desk research only helped to find the types of crafts that possibly exist in Eastern Anatolian region, but there was not enough information about craftspeople who are still practising their skills.
2. Interviews with local authorities, development agencies, and tourism and culture offices provided more information about currently practised traditional handicrafts. These crafts included coppersmithing, jewellery making, needle lace, ehram² weaving, kilim and carpet weaving, wood carving, musical instruments making, doll making, felt making, shoe making, and Oltu-stone prayer beads making.

This study includes three selected crafts: Oltu-stone prayer beads making, harik shoe making, and felt making. These three handicrafts are chosen because (i) the other crafts were less visible in the region, and (ii) they were identified as more significant to the area and having more potential for development.

Design criteria were developed based on the research findings, literature review about three selected handicrafts, and the researcher’s observations in the field. The criteria for each type of craft differ because each sector has its own particular challenges and opportunities. However, general design criteria can be identified as being considerate of:

1. Personal Meaning
2. Environmental Care
3. Social Responsibility
4. Economic Issues

4.1. Expected Impacts of Design Interventions

There is a decline, and even a disappearance, of traditional craft production in Eastern Anatolian region and there are indications that design interventions could, potentially, help revive traditional skills.

² A type of textile for clothing in Anatolia.
The principal concern for craft and design projects is the disconnection between designers, artisans, and the local context. Therefore, a meaningful design intervention for the revival of traditional handicrafts in Eastern Turkey would be one that takes into account: individuals and their feelings, concerns and motivations; social interactions and community suitability and support; respect and care for the environment; and, in order to achieve these, the economic viability of the proposals (Walker, 2014, p.19).

Personal Meaning: Crafts making can be considered as a form of meditative practice (Gurisik, 2006, p.201). During interviews, craftspeople said that they love their jobs and they would continue producing against all struggles. The challenges start at the workshop where masters and apprentices spend most of their life. Design propositions can, potentially, enable craftspeople to work in better environments, have their rights to be recognised, and be rewarded for their invaluable contribution to the local culture i.e. continuing tradition, cultural heritage, inter-generational knowledge, and practices.

Environmental Care: Minimising waste and energy use, non-toxic materials, locally sourced materials’ use are encouraged for environmental stewardship because there are less shipping and local recognition of effects. Interviews reveal that substitutes for local materials create problems such as the credibility of local craft. However, shortage of local materials also leads craftspeople to use imported raw material. Therefore, recycling and up-cycling can be promoted.

Social Responsibility: Craft making is often a communal activity. In the case of the harik shoes, for example, the upper part is knitted by women, and the cobbler makes the shoe sole, which he sews to the knitted piece. Unfortunately, craftspeople said that younger people are not interested in learning these traditional skills. For this reasons, interventions can include design propositions as well as new ways of passing on skills by including marginalised groups in traditional handicrafts production.

Economic Issues: Financial instability is one of the main concerns, which force the craftspeople to quit their practice. Therefore, economic viability needs to be ensured when designing for traditional handicrafts’ revival.

In line with these expected impacts the following design propositions aim to be “moderate, relatively unimportant [i.e. not overstating the place and significance of material goods], useful, congruent with meaning, warranted, and empathetic” (Walker, 2014, pp.20-21).

4.2. Oltu Stone Prayer Beads

Oltu-stone prayer beads (Figure 3) are regarded as one of the most famous products of Eastern Turkey. Excavation of Oltu-stone occurs only in the Oltu district of Erzurum, and it is processed in Oltu and Erzurum. Unlike the other handicrafts, Oltu-stone prayer bead makers still train their sons in their craft. However, even though they have no difficulty in finding apprentices, these craftspeople still have a pessimistic view of the future due to market conditions.

Oltu-stone carvers face competition from cheaper prayer beads made from imported Georgian stone. During the interviews, the craftspeople and local development agency officers mentioned this imported stone as a problem, which is a relatively recent occurrence.
Georgian stone is very similar to Oltu-stone, and there is a possibility that they come from the same vein (Anon.). However, the mass-produced prayer beads (made from Georgian stone) create a challenge. The stone from Georgia is reported to be softer, therefore; it is more suitable for mass-production (Kocaman, 2013). The ground stone is mixed with glue and then moulded into two thousand prayer beads each week (ibid.). As well as the difference in cost, there are also concerns about health issues since there are no quality control mechanisms in the manufacture of the mass-produced Georgian stone prayer beads (ibid.). The difficulty in distinguishing between the two stones results in mistrust between purchasers and retailers. Rumours about originality put the craftspeople’s work in jeopardy, and customers question the authenticity of the prayer beads. Even some of the vendors may not be able to tell the difference between the two types of prayer beads (Eymirli et al., 2013).

By observing every stage one stone has to go through, it is easy to recognise the difficulty in creating these beads by hand. Plain stones are processed through eight different stages, and there are silver ornamental versions that require even more stages in the manufacturing process. One of the interviewees said that people who visit the workshop are surprised by the length of the procedure. This delicate work is associated very closely with Erzurum, and the city has a potential to develop its tourism, especially in the winter season. Since the 1990s, the Palandoken Ski Centre has been attracting many tourists, and the locally produced Oltu-stone goods are the tourist market’s most popular souvenirs (Kocaman, 2013).

A recent study, conducted among the Oltu-stone carvers, states that half the craftspeople think their occupation might disappear, whereas forty percent are hopeful for a better future, and the rest believe they could preserve what they have today (Alparslan, 2009).

Policymakers’ and local authorities’ suggestions for the development of the sector seem rather weak although there are a few reports on its specific problems. Craftspeople complain about the lack of support and limited resources. According to a report prepared by local universities, the mines are not
mapped, and the reserves’ potential capacity is unknown (Devlet Planlama Teşkilatı Müsteşarlığı, 2000). Exposure of these mines would generate jobs for thousands of people in the region (ibid.)

In summary, problems of the sector are:

- Competition with Georgian Stone,
- Lack of support from the local authorities;
- Lack of promotion;
- Lack of branding;
- Inability to be organised as a guild.

Certification for the authentic Oltu-stone products to label their quality and regulate the prices is seen as one of the solutions to overcome the issue of credibility (Eymirli et al., 2013). Although the brand registry for Oltu-stone exists, original Oltu-stone products are not yet certified (ibid.). The use of a certificate stating the authenticity of prayer beads would ensure customers’ trust and allow a stronger brand for Oltu-stone prayer beads to be built globally.

In the light of these findings, production of Oltu-stone prayer beads requires an intervention to overcome the issues above. Consequently, there is limited information being conveyed to customers. Craftspeople claim that the customers were more satisfied with the products and the prices when they learned about all the phases a stone goes through. Therefore, the design interventions may consist of work on:

- Geographical indication\(^3\) (GI),
- Packaging and logo,
- Providing information about the provenance of the beads via brochures, videos, etc.

A design for packaging and brand identity was developed for the research. The logo is a sign of authenticity that can only be granted by local government. The packaging displays the signature of the master who was responsible for the making of the prayer beads and the story of the stone from excavation to finished product is included in the box, and customers are directed to online videos via the QR code:

**Figure 4. Oltu-Stone Prayer Beads Packaging Design**

### 4.3. Harik Shoes

Harik shoes (Figure 5) are made and worn in the region surrounding Bitlis (Tontaş, 2014). The shoes’ soles are made from hemp, and the upper part is knitted from goat hair. Okay (2012) writes that the

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\(^3\) Geographical Indication is a sign to identify the origin of a product.
area in which harik shoes are used is very limited due to the materials they are made from. He says that harik shoes are also used by folk dance groups (ibid.). It takes three to five days to make a pair of harik shoes, and there is only one shoemaker producing harik shoes in the region. Although he is registered as a craftsperson with the Ministry of Culture, his resources are very limited. He has been doing this work for fifteen years and has little support from the government. He complains that he does not even have a fixed salary or regular supply of materials.

This last remaining master tries to make a living by selling shoes to folk dance groups in Turkey. The upper part is knitted by the local women and the knitting material makes the shoes hard to maintain and to wear. During the interviews, hemp was still being provided by the government; however, at a subsequent interview, the shoe master explained that he could not get any hemp at the time. Since training and apprenticeship are one of the most important phases of being a master of handicrafts, the shoemaker was also trying to set up courses for young people. However, his efforts were unsuccessful, since all traditional crafts require being patient and invested in the job, and this is not appealing to young people who want jobs with more immediate results. The reasons for the disappearance of harik making are:

- Lack of support from government;
- Lack of networking with local organisations;
- Inefficient promotion;
- Inability to reach customers;
- Unavailability of material;
- Long production times;
- Lack of craftspeople/trainees.
Therefore, the suggestion is a redesign of harik shoes, making the shoes with alternative local materials for the revival, updating, and survival of this age-old handicraft. The sole can be changed to leather when the government does not provide hemp. Leather soles are already used for another traditional shoe (Yemeni) in South Eastern Turkey. The insole material is upcycled felt from the region. The upper part is proposed to be knitted as a sheet and cut into a pattern, unlike the original harik’s, which is knitted as a bootee. The top piece will be knitted from sheep’s wool instead of goat hair and have a textile lining. As a result, production is projected to be faster, and with the redesign, new markets are expected to open up. The areas for intervention are:

- Refining manufacturing process;
- Change in materials;
- Creating appropriateness for daily usage.

Below is the design proposition for harik shoes:

![Figure 6. Harik Shoes Redesign](image)

### 4.4. Handmade Felt

Laufer says that felt making, which is basically “rolling, beating, and pressing animal hair or flocks of wool”, is ancient in Europe and Asia (1930). Anatolian felt is believed to have its roots in Central Asia (Gurisik, 2006), and felt products were used by Turkic nomads in their daily lives (Ovacık & Gümüşer, 2016).

Traditional felt production consists of three phases (Çeliker, 2011; Anon., 2011): First, the felt maker places the wool on the ground and prepares the pattern above this laid wool. Then he spreads the wool, lays the pattern on it and pours soapy water over it before the wool is rolled out. Finally, the
felt is washed and left to dry. Felt is known to breathe, provide insulation, and to be a resistant and long-lasting material from which saddles, carpets, wall hangings, tents, beds, shoe insoles, bags, saddlebags, cloaks, and other garments have been made for centuries (Ovacik & Gümüşer, 2016).

Decrease in customer demand and a lack of apprentices started the disappearance of felt making in Turkey (Ovacik & Gümüşer, 2016). After the Second World War felt-making workshops began using electrical presses; however, this change did not enable felt makers to compete against mass-produced textile effectively (Gurisik, 2006). Gurisik also says that from the 1970s, wool exchange markets disappeared because of the felt makers’ economic struggle (ibid., p.79).

Figure 7. Felt Made in Iğdır

During the field research two felt making workshops were visited. One was a workshop in Eastern Turkey that produces carpets, saddles, tents, and shepherds’ cloaks, made from wool that comes from nearby villages after the shearing season. The felt maker explained that he has been in business for twenty years and neither the production process nor the products have changed since then. When asked about a chair cover in the workshop, the felt maker sounded insecure about creating new products.

The other felt maker works in Western Turkey and has a wider product range since he is trying to keep up with the contemporary market. He has also worked with a designer experimenting with different materials such as copper and leather, and he produces tablecloths, shawls, slippers, vests, and accessories as well as carpets. Financially, this workshop is in a better condition than the one in Eastern Turkey; however, the felt maker claims that prejudices in society about handmade felt are difficult to overcome (i.e. people still think felt will smell, create dust, and be dirty).

Problems of felt making in Eastern Turkey are:

- Mass-produced textiles are readily available in the market at cheaper prices,
• Low product quality – although made traditionally, quality is often perceived as poor by modern standards,
• Difficulty in guaranteeing supply of source (wool) material (due to shearing seasons and lack of providers who clean the wool beforehand),
• Limited market (felt maker only produces felt sheets, saddles, tents and shepherds’ cloaks).

The researcher proposed several product designs for sheets of felt. The final design proposition combines the felt with locally sourced leather to create unique bags, which still bear the characteristics of the upcycled rugged felt and open up a different market (Figure 8). The elements of design intervention are:

• New product development;
• Upcycling;
• Combining felt with diverse materials.

![Figure 8. Felt and Leather Bag](image)

**Conclusion**

Traditional handicrafts in general and in Eastern Turkey are in decline due to lack of practitioners, issues with raw materials, the disinterest of youth, financial downturn, and working conditions of artisans. These issues intensify because local authorities/organisations do not support craft enterprises effectively and there is a lack of communication between all parties. In fact, designers may be the key persons for creating a synergy between all the interested bodies and design practice may invigorate traditional crafts production, marketability, and promotion. Therefore, this research outlines a practice-based research in an attempt to revive traditional crafts through design.
interventions by displaying three handicrafts’ (Oltu-stone prayer beads, harik shoes, and handmade felt sheets) next possible journey.

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About the Authors:

Hazal Gumus Ciftci is PhD student at ImaginationLancaster.

Stuart Walker is Professor of Design for Sustainability and Co-Director of the ImaginationLancaster design research centre at Lancaster University.

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