



LAG ZO

ལག་བཞོ།



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Lag Zo means “handmade” in Tibetan. Lag Zo is a celebration of the incredible range, knowledge, and skill in traditional Tibetan craft, including *thangka* painting, silversmithing, wood carving, stone carving, *khyenle* bronze casting, black pottery, and a wide variety of textile arts made from felted and woven yak wool. To support the sustainability of Tibetan craft tradition, the Smithsonian Artisan Initiative is working with Tibetan artisans and partners in China to provide training workshops, product design and development support, one-on-one mentorship to artisan enterprise, and improved connection to both local and international markets.



DZONGSAR | རྫོང་སར།

Dzongsar is a remote valley in Derge County (Kandze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture), Sichuan Province, where the majority of its 6,343 residents are agro-pastoralists. The area is famous for the monastery of Dzongsar, one of the largest monastic universities in Kham during the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, when the renovation of the monastery was permitted, it established craft workshops headed by the few remaining elderly practitioners who retained traditional knowledge and skills. Now these workshops have become real schools of traditional crafts and enterprises. There are currently 27 workshops, in which more than 1,000 artisans work in 13 traditional crafts like lost-wax casting, pottery, thangka painting, and wood carving.



DZONGSAR BLACK POTTERY

Tibetan potters are called *dza mkhan*. *Dza* means “clay” or “pottery,” and *mkhan* means “the maker.” Black pottery has a long history, passed orally through generations. Many artisans focused on kitchenware such as cooking pots, teapots, wine jugs, and vases, before metal wares were introduced in Tibet. Others created vessels for agriculture and animal husbandry practices. Potters used to travel to households to fulfill custom requests, but not since demand has drastically declined.

Ziwu | Black Pottery



After China’s Cultural Revolution that threatened traditional practices and beliefs, only one black pottery maker remained. In 2003, Tashi Namgyal established a pottery workshop in Dzongsar, Dege County (Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) to preserve the tradition. As the fourth generation of his family practicing black pottery, he has taught more than thirty students in his workshop. When he began to suffer from rheumatism in 2010, his son Jamyang Gelek took over. There are now eighteen full-time potters at the workshop, all from local villages. They use natural materials for their tools—stone, wood, and leather—and collect clay from the local mountains. Their products include teapots, cups, and vases for home decoration to meet the new customer demand.







DZONGSAR BRONZE ARTWORK

Tibetan bronze art has a long history, but the earliest written record of it only dates back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Based on lost-wax casting and sand casting, Dzongsar Khyentse developed a unique bronze style known as *khyenle* in Tibetan. *Khyen* refers to the Dzongsar Khyentse Buddhist lineage, and *le* means “bronze.” With its unique material and exquisite craftsmanship, it won high praise. It involves various technical skills, including drawing, clay sculpting, lost-wax casting, sand casting, metal sculpting, mold making, and more. An artisan has to master all these skills to make a statue.

Dzongsar Khyenle



Nima and his son, Dawa Dakpa, founded a *khyenle* workshop called Khyenle in 2003. Since then, Nima has trained more than thirty artisans in the exquisite traditional bronze sculptures. They also create contemporary products for the international market involving Tibetan symbolism and ideology, like jewelry and other keepsakes. Khyenle’s mission is preserve the arts and crafts of Tibetan culture and empower independent artisans. If traditional artisans can earn a living off their crafts, these traditions will continue to thrive. The organization is built on the principles of fair wages, fair-trade practices, safe work environments, retention rates, ethical standards, local hiring and sourcing, community participation, and local charitable contributions.







GOLD AND SILVER

Gold and silversmiths are called *ga wa* in Tibetan. *Ga* means “sculpting,” and *wa* refers to the person who makes it. In some U-Tsang regions of Tibet, *ga* was have low social status in the community, whereas in other Tibetan areas such as the Kham region, they are well respected artisans, primarily because they ean better income with their skills.

Quzin, Gold and Silversmith

Tashi Dorjie was the one of the first people to teach traditional crafts after the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. He was a pious Buddhist and encouraged locals to stop hunting, drinking, and smoking. Anyone who stopped was welcome to be his student. Today Dorjie’s son Quzin is continuing his father’s heritage, passing his skills onto artists in his community of Dzongsar, Dege County. They make Tibetan accessories such as earrings, purses, and lockets.

Sonam Tashi, Gold and Silversmith

As the son of the most famous silversmith in Rebgong, Sonam Tashi has taken on the tradition from his father to become a respected artisan in his own right. He creates unique, delicate tea sets and recently designed and crafted a collection of necklaces incorporating Tibetan symbolism.







REBGONG | རེབ་གོང་།

Rebgong, located in Huangnan Prefecture, Qinghai Province, is considered one of the most famous Tibetan art centers. UNESCO added the region's Regong arts to the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009, including thangka cloth painting, wall painting, embroidery, sculpture, and woodcarving. Regong arts focus on historical figures, myths, legends, and epics of Tibetan Buddhism, but also some secular content.



THANGKA PAINTING

Thangkas are paintings on cloth found throughout the regions under the influence of Tibetan Buddhism. Commonly religious in nature, they portray Buddhist deities, arhats, or monks, often illustrating scenes from the lives of major religious figures. Another common theme is Tibetan mandalas, or spiritual paintings depicting the cosmos. They are used for worship, meditation, or rituals, in monasteries and in private homes. Some serve as instructional tools, like the medical tangkas that map the human body and its systems. The thangka tradition continues in Bhutan, Nepal, North India, and parts of China and Mongolia.







TIBETAN LEATHER BOOT MAKING

With 600-year history of the tradition, Gyang Kya village in Rebgong is known as the “village of Tibetan boots.” For generations, locals have earned their living by crafting Tibetan boots, favored for their lightweight, warm, moisture-proof, and durable qualities. Due to industrialization and modernization, the handmade boots are being slowly replaced by manufactured shoes. The younger generation of the village no longer inherits the boot making tradition.



Yangnor

In 2015, fifty families in the village raised 5,000,000 RMB (over \$750,000 US) to establish the Rebgong Gyang Kya Tibetan Development Co., Ltd., the first Tibetan boot company in Rebgong. Its mission is reduce the unemployment rate, economically empower the locals, and preserve the tradition. The master artisans design and develop products with unique cultural and local characteristics.







TEXTILE ARTS

Pulu is a striped wool textile, part of a 2,000-year-old Tibetan weaving tradition in Maisu. Typically this cloth was used in households and to create clothing such as the *chuba* (sheepskin coat) and *bang dän* (apron). Now it is the foundation of Ziwu's contemporary bags and purses. Ziwu uses only natural dyes, extracted from minerals and plant materials such as rhubarb, walnut shell, and indigo. By following this ancient dying technique that is severely threatened by modern industrialization, Ziwu creates unique products of superior quality, protects a more natural and sustainable process, and connects the buyer directly to the Maisu community.

Ziwu | Textile Arts



Founded by Tibetans in the valley of the Maisu region in 2012, Ziwu is a social enterprise devoted to the preservation of traditional Tibetan craftsmanship and continued product development. In a place that is home to ancient villages and over a hundred traditional crafts, Ziwu leads their production of beautiful bags and purses. Their collection “Rainbow over Tibet” shows respect to and inspiration from the *bang dän*, the colorful striped apron worn draped over women's traditional dress. Ziwu host workshops, and each piece in their collection is the product of creative collaboration between a master and a student.







YUSHU | ཡུལ་ལྗུལ།

Yushu is a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province that averages 2.6 miles above sea level. It is the source of the Yangtze, Yellow, and Lancang rivers and was one of the trade centers for the three regions of Tibet—U-Tsang, Amdo, and Kham. With a large population of stone carvers, it is also well known for the largest Mani mantra-inscribed stone pile in the world. “Land of Yak,” “Source of Water,” “Home of Mountains,” and “Origin of Dance”—all are names given to Yushu.



KNITTING, CROCHETING, AND EMBROIDERY

Yaks are essential in the traditional Tibetan nomadic lifestyle. Their rough coats are woven into heavy black tents that shelter against the weather, and the fat milk from the *zoe* (female yak) provides the base for yogurt and cheese. But yaks have also become central in the transition from rural to urban that many Tibetans experience today. The yak hair, tail, and down is used by CYAK in contemporary designs for bags, sweaters, hats, and scarves. These products connect the buyer to traditional elements and skills while creating a whole new feel to Tibetan handicrafts. CYAK's knitting, crocheting, and embroidery also take inspiration from Chinese and Mongolian traditions, reflecting our lives in multicultural communities.

CYAK Handicrafts



CYAK Handicrafts is a social enterprise founded in 2014 by Tsultrim, a Tibetan doctor from Yushu, Qinghai. He changed his path from medicine to helping Tibetan women increase their livelihood and protecting the vulnerable Tibetan traditional culture and skills. CYAK uses the finest *kulu* (yak down) and pure sheep wool in its knitting, crocheting, and embroidery, combining traditional handicrafts with modern designs.

The organization also provides trainings and language classes for the women in their community to gain entrepreneur opportunities and empowerment. As Tsultrim says, these women are truly the backbone and the mothers of the Tibetan Plateau.







STONE CARVING

The Tibetan tradition of stone carving includes statues, Buddhist scriptures, and primarily Mani stones—slabs of rock carved and painted with scripture and symbols. Usually the stones are carved with the mantra “Om Mani Padme Hum,” a chant to recite during meditation of bodhisattva, who embodies the compassion of all Buddhas. Tibet is covered with these stones, which usually pile up around monasteries and important religious monuments.

Yushu Asia Stone Carving Trading Co., Ltd.

The Yushu Asia Stone Carving Trading Co., Ltd., is located in Samtse village next to the world's largest Mani stone pile, Gyanag Mani in Yushu. Here, villagers have been practicing stone carving for over 300 years. Company founder Samden Dhondup started learning stone carving at age 10, like any other village kid, but became a master of the craft and brought the stone carving tradition to the next level. Once he brought stone artworks to a new market, the majority of the village's population earn an income from stone carving. He currently employs twelve artisans and trains thirty students to enhance their stone carving skills and offer economic empowerment.







YAK MILK SOAP

Maya Mountain produces 100 percent natural, high-quality soaps using fresh yak milk and olive oil. Each piece is lovingly handcrafted by the “Tibetan Soap Ladies” in their community of Bde Chen. Compared to cow or goat milk, yak milk has higher in solid fat, protein, vitamin A, and calcium. The soaps’ coloring and fragrances are made with natural herbs and minerals and pure Australian essential oils including lavender, lemongrass, rosemary, lemon myrtle, and peppermint. The high content of moisturizing ingredients and great fragrances makes Maya Mountain Yak Milk Soap a special treat to the skin.

Maya Mountain

Maya Mountain founder Danma grew up in a yak herding nomadic family on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. In a patriarchal society with strictly defined gender roles, Tibetan women are often marginalized to the homes. Since 2015, Maya Mountain has created opportunities for women in Tibetan villages by teaching soap making skills that help them become economically independent and self-sufficient. By keeping production in the villages, women are able to stay in their communities, which benefits their families and the economic future of the village. Maya Mountain improves their self-confidence, their employment prospects, and ultimately their quality of life.





Blue Sheep

Established in 2013, Blue Sheep sells handicrafts made by home-based artisans from Chinese minority groups, particularly in Sichuan Province. Blue Sheep connects artisans, often rural and nomadic, with markets, allowing them to establish a stable income from their rich heritage traditions currently threatened by globalizing and urbanizing trends. In addition to operating under fair-trade principles, Blue Sheep also pays craftsmen on receipt of products to ensure income stability regardless of market, demand, and sales. The Blue Sheep artisan network is wide, featuring a diversity of craft traditions such as painting, embroidery, and leatherwork, sourcing from Sichuan to Yunnan provinces.



Dancing Yak

Dancing Yak Handicrafts is an ethical brand that supports Tibetan artisans in rural and urban China. Established in 2011 as a training center in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, it offers year-long sewing courses to address the income insecurity of Tibetans who have recently migrated to the city. Dancing Yak also sources materials such as hand-spun yak hair and hand-woven sheep wool cloth from nomadic women in rural Tibetan areas to ensure their economic and cultural sustainability. Its products range from jewelry and accessories to home goods and stationery. All products are eco-friendly and chemical-free.

The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage works to increase the visibility and vitality of culture bearers, artists, and traditions to promote cultural expression as essential to human well-being and community health. In an effort to champion cultural vitality and sustainability, we work with individuals and communities to preserve and elevate cultural practices, including those that improve and sustain local economies.

We recognize artisans as critically important partners in this work. Historically, artisans have also worked as designers, creating products based on local aesthetic and sociocultural requirements of their client. The rapid changes brought on by both urbanization and globalization have largely isolated artisans, as local clients turn toward cheaper, foreign-made alternatives. Artisans often lack knowledge of and access to unknown urban and foreign niche markets. This isolation has contributed to the loss of traditional knowledge as artisans turn to agriculture and other trades to earn a living. Further, as young people flock to urban centers in search of new opportunity, artisans are less likely to continue the long tradition of passing on this knowledge through family or apprenticeship. Traditions passed down and evolved over thousands of years can be lost in the length of one generation.

The Smithsonian Artisan Initiative, our program dedicated to building the sustainability of these traditions, brings together community-driven research and documentation, product development and enterprise training, world-class design development, and a suite of tools artisans can use to unlock access to both local and international markets. We aim to reposition artisans as leaders of the creative economy and provide the knowledge, skills, and support necessary for artisans and their communities to revive and sustain their craft traditions.





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