

## The Art of *Gurama*

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### What is *Gurama*?

*Gurama* is an important part of Azerbaijan's material culture with a rich history and is widely spread in our country. In the rich heritage of the traditional arts of the Azerbaijani people, a prominent contribution is made by *gurama*—the art of patchwork sewing, based on certain established principles and national traditions. For many centuries, Azerbaijanis have created in *gurama* a variety of textile forms: bedspreads, pillowcases, covers for pillows and chests, covers over shelves or doors, covers for chairs and many more. All were widely used in traditional Azerbaijani homes, providing both national colour and comfort, and creating a certain mood, especially a harmonious atmosphere. This came from a flow of patterns, apparently spontaneous but in fact born from immutable structural rules and undoubtedly bearing sacred meaning, passed on from generation to generation.



In Azerbaijan *gurama* means “united”; in Western Azerbaijan the craft is known as *gurakh*. In Turkey, it is *girkh yama*, that is, “forty connections”, in Iran the term means “forty loops”. In the countries of Central Asia, we come across *kurak* or *kurau* (Kazakhstan), and *kurama* (Uzbekistan). In one form or another, this mode of textile production can be found among all Turkic, and primarily, nomadic peoples. At the same time, in Europe and the United States, quilting or patchwork is widespread to this day. In the USA, studies continue to be published today on the roots of this decorative and applied art, the history of its origins and distribution, the internal mechanisms contributing to its development, its social significance, and so on.



The most common reason for the emergence of this craft, which is accepted by all with national and universal value, comes down to the economic factor: it was an attempt to create something useful from leftover scraps of cloth (or leather). According to the world experience, it was considered relevant at the early stages of the formation and development of different civilizations, such as "waste-free production". But why has this desire to make full use of 'production waste' survived millennia, equally in Europe, Asia and both 'Old' and 'New' Worlds? It is a historical fact that in every culture this addiction to working with scraps had its own specific context. Naturally, one of the strongest impulses for the creation of *gurama* was a hostess' natural desire to give her home a feeling of warmth and comfort. But it is also obvious that the art of *gurama* is not limited to the desire to recreate, enhance, or reveal the beauty of the surrounding world. The fabric cuttings included in a particular composition carry information that constitutes a kind of chronicle of the family, clan or community. And that is why the products comprising these “fragments of memory” were given special importance. I remember well how, as a child, I liked to examine the pillows or



bedspreads in my grandmother's house, noticing some familiar scraps among them. My grandmother's older sister could spend hours telling of the origin of this or that piece: some were cut from her wedding dress, others from the celebratory blanket of her first grandchild. The very process of creating a *gurama*, starting with the smoothing of tiny scraps, became a true evening of memory, when this or that piece of fabric was the catalyst for the production of a long story from the family chronicle.

## History of Gurama

According to archaeological data, items of patchwork have existed since ancient times in Asia, Europe, and Africa. The earliest evidence of them dates back to 3400 BCE and is in the image of an Egyptian pharaoh wearing a quilted robe. The image itself is a carved ivory figure held in the British Museum in London. Also in Egypt, near Cairo, an example of appliqué was discovered from the 10th century BCE, more precisely—980. It is made of pieces of gazelle skin and is kept in the Bulag Museum in Cairo. A costume decorated with patches and held in a Tokyo museum is from about the same period. Researchers from Central Asia also date the appearance of the *gurama* technique to ancient times. One of the earliest examples of *kurama* (or *kurak*) here may be in a petroglyph from the 8th century, found in Kochkur Valley, Kyrgyzstan. The widespread use of *gurama* items in Azerbaijanis' everyday lives was largely due to the intensification of local textile production. In the early Middle Ages, the weaving of silk, cotton and woollen fabrics developed in the cities of Azerbaijan. Local fabrics fully satisfied the needs of the local population, although there were also some imported fabrics, mainly to satisfy demand from the wealthy. Silk, chintz, velvet, damask and wool were the main fabrics used for *gurama*. The most interesting examples were created in the Karabakh, Ganja-Gazakh, Balakan and Baku regions.



## Gurama Centre

Throughout *gurama*'s centuries-long history, a certain system of images, colour and structural features, areas of application and, finally, technologies for creating this textile form have developed around the world. As in many other parts of the world, *gurama* in Azerbaijan is one of the most traditional forms of applied art still practiced in cities and villages. As part of the life of a modern person, as a product of today—like any other form of modern creativity—it reflects the rhythms of time and corresponds to the tastes of the most diverse members of society.



However, currently alive mainly in the depths of rural society and only partly within the space of modern artistic creation, the art of *gurama* needs support both for its traditional forms and for the development of new forms and technologies. For this very purpose and on the initiative of the “Icherisheher” Museum Centre under the Administration of the “Icherisheher” State Historical and Architectural Reserve, together with the State Employment Agency of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Gurama Centre was founded in the “Gala” State Historical and Ethnographic Reserve. The Centre was opened on 20 December 2020. In addition to its undoubted spiritual component, the essence of this project is connected with the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of Azerbaijan programme for the development of entrepreneurship and the labour market by stimulating people’s interest in self-employment. Within the framework of this programme, the Centre was provided with all the equipment and materials necessary for its functioning. Thus, the Gurama Centre is wholly integrated into the social environment: new jobs are created, the number of taxpayers rises, and a solution to certain gender problems is proposed. Further, products created within this project become part of the national brand (see [gurama.az](http://gurama.az)).



*Gurama* is an integral part of the history of our culture. For every craftswoman, creating a *gurama* carried with it specific meaning. After all, many were made specifically for special occasions. The secrets of the art have been passed down from generation to generation. Returning to the purpose of this project, I note once more its focus on the continuation of a tradition through the centuries. Yes, mankind plans to explore the Moon and Mars. But the need for warmth and comfort, for beauty in the surrounding space will not disappear anywhere: it will always be with people, no matter how complete the penetration of digital technologies into our lives.

### **Gurama festival**

Within the framework of this project the Administration of the State Historical-Architectural Reserve Icherisheher started the First National Gurama Festival which has been launched on July 7, 2022, for the first time in Azerbaijan.

A large patchwork, five meters wide and 25 meters long, was presented as part of the festival in the Old City, Icherisheher.

Local people and visitors of the Old City and the employees of the Reserve Administration of Icherisheher took an active part in the creation of the giant *gurama*, where a single piece is sewn from small pieces of fabric.

The National Gurama Festival was co-organized by the Administration of the State Historical-Architectural Reserve Icherisheher, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Azerbaijan, as well as the Executive Power of the Baku City.

Starting from July 7, 2022, as part of the Festival a number of events were held, including a scientific-practical conference, a trade fair and exhibition of arts and crafts, master classes and art therapy.



The aim of the festival is to give a new life to the art of *gurama*, widely used until the early 20th century, but in danger of being forgotten with an increase in factory production.

On July 8, 2022, a scientific-practical conference was held at the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum. The conference started with the presentation of a documentary film entitled

*Gurama*. The well-known cultural workers of our country who was invited to the conference made interesting presentations on the topic of *gurama*. On the same day, trade fairs and an exhibition of arts and crafts organized by the Executive Power of the Baku City took place in the Chambarakand park. Around 20 local *gurama* artisans took part in the trade fairs and exhibition and presented their handicrafts there.

On July 16, 2022, other events such as "*Gurama* in custom and traditions", "*Gurama* in the kitchen", as well as a trade fair and exhibition of the handicrafts by *gurama* artisans took place in the Gala State History-Ethnography Reserve.

On July 21, 2022, master classes and art therapy for children with disabilities including autism spectrum disorder and down syndrome were held at the Azerbaijan National Museum of Art. The main goal of the event is to enable those children to have access to society, to acquire skills and to establish communication between them and their friends.

On July 22, 2022, a further event was held at "FR Gallery&Studio" established by two young collectors and researchers Fuad Jabrayilov and Ruslan Huseynov. The guests who attended this event gained further information about the history of *gurama*, its role in everyday life, and the samples of other arts and crafts included in the collection. This collection includes more than 4000 objects, 400 of which are currently exhibited in the gallery and studio.

On July 26, 2022, the master classes for the students of the vocational education centre took place in the Baku State Vocational Education Center for Arts and Crafts. The master classes were accompanied by the *gurama* artisans of "*Gurama.az*".

The festival ended with the presentation of the book, *Gurama*, published for the first time in Azerbaijan, and with the exhibition of handicrafts by *gurama* artisans.

