

PHILANTHROPIC TOURISM AND ARTISTIC AUTHENTICITY:
CULTURAL EMPATHY AND THE WESTERN CONSUMPTION OF KYRGYZ ART

By Willow G. Mullins

Dr. Elaine J. Lawless, Dissertation Advisor

ABSTRACT

My dissertation offers a culturally-based examination of the aid-driven western marketplace for Central Asian crafts based on detailed textual and visual analysis of websites, film, online and print catalogues, and comics as well as ethnographic research in Kyrgyzstan and at the Santa Fe International Folk Art Market. I begin with the question: what happens to traditions and to the people who practice them when they are actively mediated and placed for sale outside of their culture? It is my argument that the narratives of tourism, philanthropy, connoisseurship, and authenticity that marketers deploy and shoppers literally “buy into” draw on cultural assumptions about Central Asian gender roles, race, and modernity that proliferate in the western cultural landscape in ways that both challenge and replicate biases handed down from nineteenth-century travel and missionary writing. Specifically, how do humanitarian aid organizations, arts agencies, catalogue companies, anthropologists and folklorists engage in the circulation and exchange between the needs of one group and the desires of another?