RUSSIAN TEXTILES

PRINTED CLOTH FOR THE BAZAARS OF CENTRAL ASIA

by Susan Meller

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SUSAN MELLER

Photographs by DON TUTTLE

With Essays by KATE FITZ GIBBON

ANNIE CARLANO

ROBERT KUSHNER

Abrams, New York

Project Manager: Andrea Danese
Editor: Harriet Whelchel
Designer: Darilyn Lowe Carnes with E.Y. Lee
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Contents

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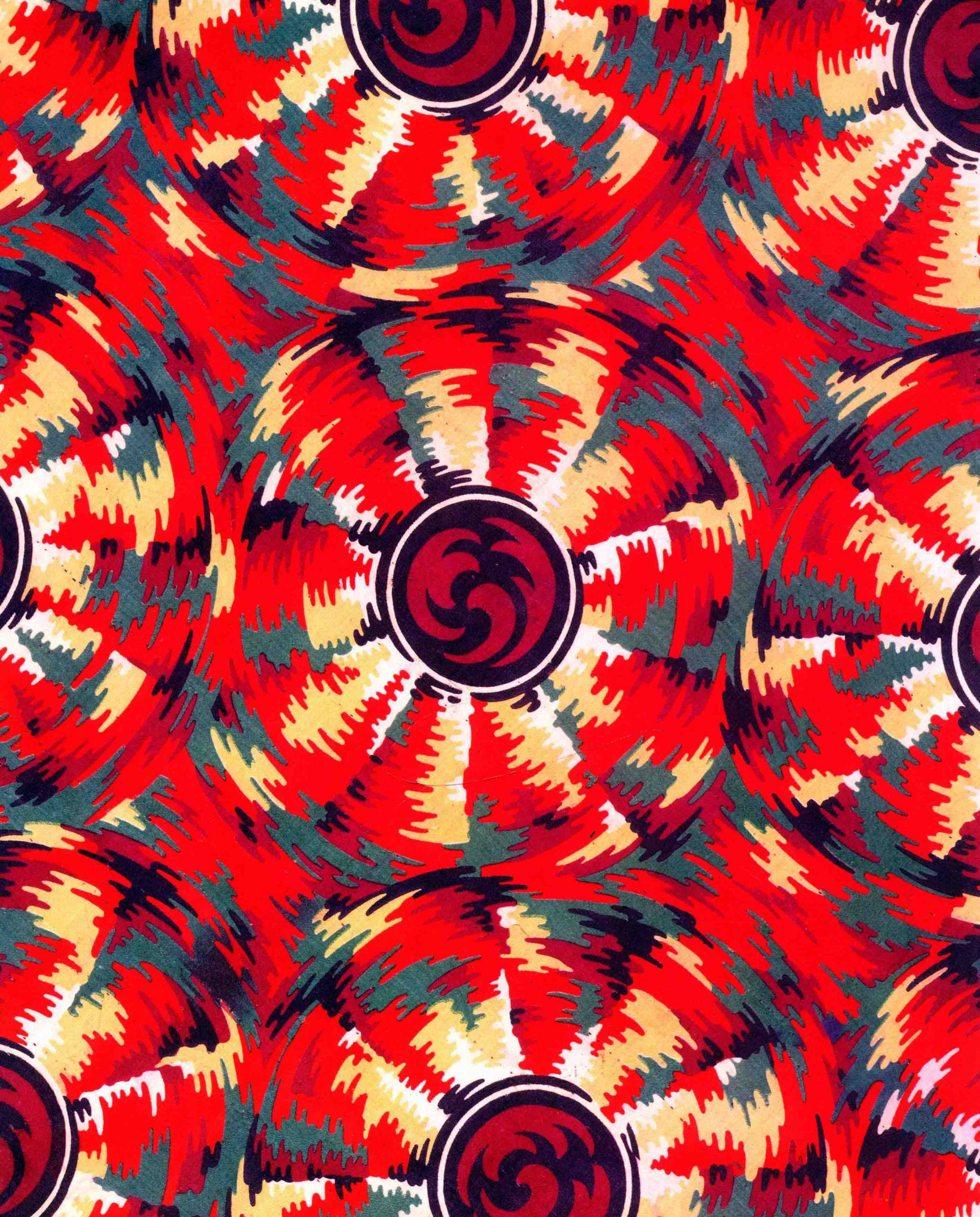
To my husband, Frank Rubenfeld, and
my parents, Robert and Ruth Fujitani



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Preface

The printed fabrics in this book are examples of cotton cloth designed and produced in Russian factories from about 1860 to 1960. Ivanovo, a city approximately 185 miles northeast of Moscow, was the country's textile producing center, and many of the mills there specialized in export fabrics. The cloth illustrated here was exported from the Russian textile mills to the bazaars of Central Asia, where it was bought by the local peoples and sewn into everyday garments, household items, bedding, animal trappings, and the linings of silk ikat robes.

The local rulers, or khans, gave silk ikat robes lined with Russian printed cottons as official gifts. Ordinary people such as madrassah students, mullahs, and Jews can be seen in archival photographs wearing Russian floral prints. Kyrgyz families had bedding made of bright Russian printed cloth stacked inside their tents. Over the years, many of these items made their way to Afghanistan, either in trade or carried with their owners as they emigrated. It wasn't until the late 1960s, when Westerners began traveling to Kabul, that some of the surviving robes, embroideries, and trappings found in the local markets were brought back to Europe and the United States.

I discovered Russian printed cottons in the 1970s when I bought my first "art" textile from Artweave Textile Gallery in New York City. It was a striking Lakai embroidery (opposite) backed with a beautiful silk stripe. One day I noticed something else peeking out from behind the stripe. Underneath was a bold red-and-black print unlike anything I had ever seen (see p. 183). That was my first look at Russian printed cotton for the Central Asian market. I have been collecting them ever since.

My love of pattern and color goes back to my childhood. My great-aunt Tillie (née Tonya Goncharova, in Kherson, Russia, 1882–1971) designed robes for the family business in New York City. This was New York in the 1950s, and U.S. textile converters were printing thousands of new designs each year. The bathrobes and housecoats that my great-uncles manufactured used many brightly printed cottons. After each season, my great-aunt gave me the sample books to play with. The patterns appealed to me so much that I began to make my own sample books filled with swatches I created using Magic Marker on small pieces of old sheets. That was the beginning of both my textile-designing career and a lifelong appreciation of printed fabrics.

I worked in the textile industry for more than thirty years. In the 1960s, I was a fabric designer in New York City, working for two large southern mills. Part of my job entailed traveling to the old mill towns of Ware Shoals, South Carolina, and Tryon, Georgia, to strike off the current season's line of printed yard goods. *Striking off* was an industry term that referred to the adjusting and approving of each sample print (strike-off) as it was pulled from the machines. I was a young woman, barely twenty, sent by the powers-that-be in the big city to make sure that tens of thousands of yards of printed cloth looked right. It was a somewhat surreal experience. Those were the days of heavy, engraved copper rollers mounted onto huge machines that ran day and night. The noise was deafening and cotton dust was thick. Many of the mill workers were second or third generation, still living in the brown rows of rundown cottages that lined the main street across from the factory. Those mills are all shut down now, as are most of the printing mills in Russia.

Page 1: TURKMEN BOKCHE (shown inside out; see also p. 3). Russia, early twentieth century. Roller-printed cotton cloth, 14 x 14"

Page 2: ROLLER-PRINTED COTTON CLOTH (from bokche, p. 1). Russia, 1922–30. Designed by Lyubov Nikolaevna Silich (1906–1992) and manufactured in one of the Ivanovo factories, this pattern is an example of Soviet "thematic" or "agitprop" fabric. The whirling machine wheels symbolize power and productivity.

Page 3: TURKMEN BOKCHE. A *bokche* is a household bag, often used to hold flat round bread at a special occasion. This bag was made from recycled fabric; the outer fabric dates to 1922–30, and the lining dates from the early twentieth century (see p. 91). The bag itself, which measures 14 x 14", was most likely made in the mid-twentieth century.

During the 1970s, when my late husband, Herbert Meller, and I moved to Vermont, we began actively collecting old fabrics in the United States, Europe, and Japan, always with an eye for interesting patterns. We wanted to create an extensive archive of documentary designs that could be used as a source of inspiration by the textile industry. We started a business in New York City called The Design Library; over the years it has grown to include more than 5 million pieces of fabric and original textile paintings, all categorized by motif, layout, and age. For twenty-five years I was immersed in a world of pattern and color. I looked at thousands of designs each week. I dreamed about them at night. I liked them all. Some I really liked—a lot I loved! But of all those millions of fabrics, the Russian printed export cloths were what wound up forming my personal collection. I couldn't bear to part with them.

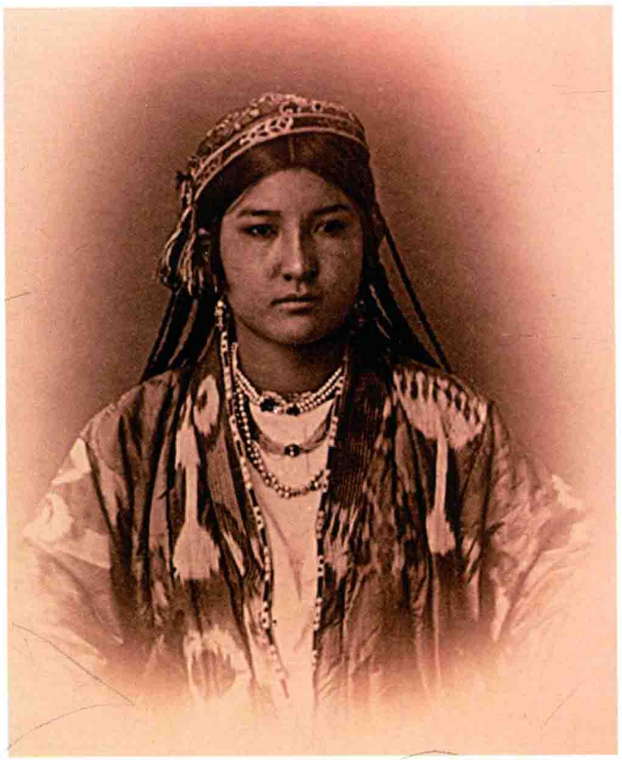
When I first started this book, my focus was on the patterns of the Russian printed cottons. But I soon came to realize that the story was more than that. Who were the people in Central Asia who bought these goods? What did they make from them? What was the history of this land of the Silk Road? Of course, answering each question fully would require a book in itself, but, for this book, I enlisted the help of Kate Fitz Gibbon, Annie Carlano, and Robert Kushner to provide glimpses into this intriguing world. Kate's knowledge of the social customs surrounding these textiles comes not only from her extensive research, but also from the many years she and her husband, Andy Hale, lived and traveled in Central Asia. Annie Carlano brings her academic and curatorial expertise to her overview of the development of Russian textile design. It was Annie who so enthusiastically supported my initial idea to make a book on these "quirky" fabrics. Robert Kushner and I met in the early 1990s, around the time my first book, *Textile Designs: Two Hundred Years of European and American Patterns for Printed Fabrics* was published. We immediately recognized in each other a kindred spirit: we were, in Robert's words, "obsessed with the decorative." I asked Robert if he would look at these Russian prints and contribute his artistic perspective on them. He has painted in words a provocative series of images in his essay, "More Might Not Be Enough."

When I look at the Uzbek ikat robe displayed inside out on my living room wall, with its lining of pink chrysanthemums floating on a Turkey red background, my pleasure is mixed with a certain poignancy. The Russian factories are closed, the workers gone; the Central Asians who once wove and wore the robes are also gone—but what they created lives on in all its vibrancy. If the fabric merchant staring out at us from the bolts of cloth stacked high in his stall in the Samarkand bazaar could look through the pages of this book, he would probably recognize many of his best-selling patterns!

Pages 4–5: WOMAN'S MUNISAK. Probably Bukhara, late nineteenth–early twentieth century; abr ikat, lined with adras ikat lapse and an Art Nouveau Russian printed cotton, 47 x 63" (See also pp. 98–99.)

Page 6: LAKAI EMBROIDERED HANGING. Uzbekistan. Late nineteenth–early twentieth century. The Lakai are a subtribe of the Uzbeks. Silk embroidery on red-orange felt, backed with Russian printed cotton; 26 x26".

Below: *FABRIC MERCHANT*. Samarkand, 1911. Many bolts of Russian printed cloth are stacked behind the merchant, who wears a robe made from a beautiful Russian print. A page from the Koran hangs above the merchant's head. Photograph by S. M. Prokudin-Gorskii, courtesy Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, and the Prokudin-Gorskii Collection



An Introduction to the Peoples of Central Asia

Turkestan, literally "Land of the Turks," refers to the general area that now comprises the five countries of Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This is a part of the world that has been in constant flux, with fluid boundaries, nomadic tribes, mass migrations, and invasions from the north, south, east, and west. Its importance in world history is succinctly stated by the 1995 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica:* "The historical significance of Central Asia to the world was that it served in the manner of a great inland sea, connecting China, India, Iran, and Europe by means of camel, ass, and horse caravans that moved goods and peoples, permitted military invasions, and spread technology, religions, ideas, and science through and across its breadth."

The present population reflects the waves of migrations and conquests that have swept over Central Asia during the past thousand years. The people are descendants of Mongols, Chinese, Persians, Jews, Arabs, and many different Turkic tribes. The various languages spoken are part of the Turkic language family, except for Tajik, which is a Persian dialect. Today, of the 59 million inhabitants of Central Asia, 8 million are of Russian nationality. After the Arab conquest in the eighth century, most of Central Asia, with the exception of the Jewish population, became Sunni Muslims.

Jews have been living in Central Asia since the first century B.C., and they played a pivotal role in Central Asian textile trade from the beginning of trade along the Silk Road, early in the first century A.D., until the Russian Revolution in 1917. For hundreds of years, Jews and Muslims for the most part coexisted to their mutual benefit. Production of ikat (*abr*) fabrics, created by a distinctive dyeing and weaving process, was in particular a joint effort. Jews were traditionally the indigo dyers and the textile merchants, and Muslims handled the various stages of the weaving process. By the end of the nineteenth century, the trade in imported Russian textiles, including the printed cottons in this book, was mainly controlled by Jews. It was the heavy hand of Soviet control in the 1920s and 1930s that forced thousands of Jews to flee the area. Only a very small community remains today.

Central Asia has always been a huge melting pot of peoples. They are, however, connected in two major ways: they share the same religion, Sunnite Islam, and they are a people whose lives have been intimately involved with textiles. The nomads lived in tents with few personal possessions other than a sizeable assortment of handwoven and embroidered textiles that served most every household need. After the mid-nineteenth century, stacks of quilts and robes with bright Russian prints could be found in both city and rural dwellings. During the same period, sumptuous ikat robes began to be worn in the cities, and by the late 1800s many people were wearing brightly patterned ikats and Russian printed cottons.

In an area half the size of the United States, where the mountains are among the most rugged in the world and the windswept steppes bloom briefly in the spring with scarlet poppies, where deserts cover 60 percent of

CENTRAL ASIA

the land and the oases once seemed like paradise on earth, it is no wonder that the people of Turkestan craved color and pattern. Red was the favorite color, and it can still be seen everywhere in the culture—from the rich orange-red stylized flowers embroidered on *suzani* to the Turkey red fabrics in the pages of this book.

The Central Asian people's love of red and other brightly colored fabrics can also be seen in two fascinating collections of archival photographs made during the same timeframe covered by the textiles in this book. The first group was taken by N.V. Bogaevskii, an officer in the army of Tsar Alexander II. Bogaevskii was commissioned by the first Russian governor-general of Turkestan, Konstantin Petrovich Von Kaufman, to document in photographs that area's peoples, customs, culture, and buildings. All the Bogaevskii images reproduced here were taken in 1871 and1872 and are from the four-volume *Turkestanskii Al'bom,* in the Library of Congress.

In the early 1900s, photographer Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii proposed to Tsar Nicholas II that he should make a photographic survey of the Russian Empire. Nicholas agreed, and Prokudin-Gorskii was outfitted with a railroad car specially equipped to enable him to convert essentially black-and-white negatives into color by photographing onto a single three-by-nine-inch glass plate the same scene three times in rapid succession, using red, green, and blue filters, respectively. Between 1909 and 1912, and again in 1915, Prokudin-Gorskii completed surveys of eleven regions. The Prokudin-Gorskii photographs chosen for this book were taken in 1911 during his time in Samarkand. They are also from the collection of the Library of Congress, which reproduced his color images by a process called *digichromatography*.

Page 10, above left: *KAZAKH WOMAN (AI-KARA)*. 1871–72

Page 10, above right: *UZBEK WOMAN (OGUL-AI)*. 1871–72. Ogul-ai wears an ikat robe.

Page 10, below left: *TAJIK WOMAN (MAKASHAT)*. 1871–72. Makashat wears a Russian print under her ikat robe.

Page 10, below right: *DZHUGI GYPSY (ACHILDEH)*. 1871–72

Above left: *JEWISH WOMAN (LAULA)*. Samarkand, 1871–72. Laula wears a dress of Russian printed cotton.

Right: *IN THE COURT OF TILIA-KARI* (detail). Samarkand, 1911. The boy's robe is made of Russian printed cotton and lined with the print shown below left. Tilia-Kari is one of the three imposing madrassahs that form an ensemble in the Registan Square.