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# Artisanal Collaborations and the Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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**Artisanal Collaborations and the Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

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May 11, 2021

*This paper is a partial fulfillment of requirements  
for a Master of Science degree in Nonprofit Studies.*

## **Abstract**

Traditional craftsmanship has been identified by UNESCO as one of the five broad domains of intangible cultural heritage. Indigenous craft is the second largest employer of women worldwide, and a cultural heritage in many parts of the world. The advance of globalization and industrialization has resulted in the exploitation of these workers and the loss of this heritage.

Recent collaborations between nonprofits, nongovernmental organizations, commercial businesses, and foundations have resulted in new business models that incorporate the preservation of craft, economic empowerment, and improved social welfare for the populations involved. However, there are often direct conflicts between trying to preserve cultural heritage and generating economic growth. This study seeks to understand how these collaborations balance improved economic well-being with the preservation of cultural heritage.

By utilizing the Haugh and Talwar framework for an emancipatory social enterprise (see Appendix B), the research focuses on the following questions:

1. What are the tensions between the elements of preserving intangible cultural heritage and economic empowerment in artisanal collaborations?
2. Who are the stakeholders in these collaborations and what is the hierarchy of power?
3. Does a focus on economic empowerment effectively negate the concept of preserving an intangible cultural heritage or is this an evolution of that craft/tradition?

This study is a qualitative comparative case study of two craft collaborations, utilizing inductive research and interviews. A key member of each group was interviewed via Zoom, the transcripts analyzed and distilled into themes comparing the balance between cultural preservation and economic empowerment. By examining the roles within these collaborations, three key elements of a successful artisanal collaboration were determined to be a long-term commitment, predictable funding, and community leadership. This model could be adapted to the many smaller groups promoting traditional handcraft as a method of empowerment and cultural preservation.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Indigenous craft is the second largest employer of women in developing countries (Global Women Artisans, n.d.), but according to a study published by the Mastercard Foundation, the “sector has been chronically underserved by investment, digitalization, access to business finance and markets” (Powered by People, 2021). Handwork generally takes place in the home, where women can continue their roles in the care of their families. Home-based craft is a “favored income-generation activity of nongovernmental organizations” (Le Mare, 2012, p. 98), as it does not challenge established gender structures, creates additional income for women, and is based on abilities they may already have (Haugh & Talwar, 2014). In many of these development models the craft was a means to an end, rather than a skill that could be reinterpreted to create long-lasting impact.

Traditional craftsmanship has been identified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as one of the five broad domains of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, n.d.). Concluding that cultural heritage does not end with artifacts and monuments, UNESCO has expanded the definition to include “traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants” (UNESCO, n.d.). Understanding handcraft as a component of cultural heritage emphasizes the importance of respecting tradition in the utilization of artisanal skills for empowerment initiatives.

Women have a major role in preserving cultural heritage through craft. The techniques and processes are passed down through generations, creating a sense of community identity. Handwork enables them to work at home, manage their daily domestic tasks, and bring in extra

income that they can invest in the well-being of their families. This creates empowerment, both socially and economically, as women gain stature in the home and in their communities (Haugh & Talwar, 2014; Le Mare, 2012; Shealy, 2011). Recent collaborations among nonprofits, nongovernmental organizations, commercial businesses, and foundations have resulted in new business models that incorporate the preservation of craft, economic empowerment, and improved social welfare for the populations involved. By combining traditional skills in handwork and textiles with modern design and business methods, the artisans can expand the markets for their works, generate income, and continue the traditions of their culture (Davelaar, 2017; Tung, 2012). However, there are often direct conflicts when trying to “preserve distinctive cultural heritage while capitalizing on potential to generate economic growth” (Nicholas, 2014, p. 5). There is a need for a sustainable development model that both creates empowerment for the artisans and sustains their cultural heritage. By developing partnerships that respect the history and value of the artisans, handcraft can be recontextualized to create a dynamic future rather than a statically preserved tradition (Brown, 2019).

This paper is a comparative analysis of two different collaborations through the lens of cultural heritage, tradition, and social benefit through traditional handwork. One collaboration is focused on the heritage and craft of a rural community in the southeastern United States. The other collaboration concentrates on the culture and art of communities in Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan. Utilizing the framework of emancipatory social enterprise (ESE) researched by Haugh and Talwar (2014), this research seeks to understand the elements that create a successful social enterprise while respecting creative cultural identities.



## **Significance of the Issues**

In the globalization of the last four decades, the intangible cultural heritage of handwork practices has increasingly disappeared. Industrialization and urbanization have created a workforce that is struggling to survive in developing countries and losing their culture of place as workers migrate to the cities for low-paying manufacturing jobs.

Transparency and ethical manufacturing are key concepts in the textile and apparel industry but difficult to enforce. The fashion industry creates a culture of consumerism and waste, and is negatively associated with human rights, low wages, and poor labor standards within its supply chain (White et al., 2017, p. 382). The 2019–2020 pandemic has put these violations in the public eye, as clothing brands and retailers canceled orders for finished product without taking any financial responsibility for these goods (Human Rights Watch, 2020). As companies strive to improve their triple bottom-line goals of environmental, economic, and social performance (Hiller & Kozar, 2017), partnerships with artisanal collaborations can bring creative product to their assortments while delivering a strong socially conscious message to their consumers. This in turn gives the artisans new markets for their work and may create economic empowerment. However, the requirements for larger-scale orders require profit for the buyers, which might result in an aesthetically undervalued product and little benefit for the communities that produce it.

## **Scope of Project**

This study will first provide a historical overview of different collaborations that have placed artisanal skills in a commercial context, including their purpose and outcomes in terms of both empowerment for the makers and the ownership of cultural practices. The literature will

focus on the roles of intangible cultural heritage, collaborations between artisans and nonprofit organizations, economic empowerment, and gender equality.

A comparative analysis was conducted between two different enterprises that work with artisans. Collaboration #1 is a small Fair Trade enterprise (for profit) in the United States that promotes the craft of artisans in the Central Asian counties of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Collaboration #2 consists of a nonprofit group that partners with artisans, commercial businesses, and NGOs to create viable craft practices that result in sustainable social benefit for the artisans' community. This study will focus on the nonprofit's project with a community of quilters in the American south. The participants were an executive of the nonprofit and the director of the Fair Trade enterprise. Interviews were conducted utilizing a video call, the recordings of which were transcribed, analyzed, and organized into themes. Additional research was done utilizing available materials and published documents on the partners of each collaboration. The goal of this research is to understand the roles of each group in the balance of preserving intangible cultural heritage while generating sustainable social benefit through traditional handcraft practices.

## **Definition of Terms**

### ***Cultural Heritage***

UNESCO defines cultural heritage as “the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present, and bestowed for the benefit of future generations” (UNESCO, n.d.). During the 2003 UNESCO International World Convention, intangible cultural heritage was categorized separately as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the

instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, n.d.). This heritage manifests itself in five domains: oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festivals. The knowledge and practice concerning nature and the universe falls under these domains, as does traditional craftsmanship. For the purposes of this study, cultural heritage will refer to both the traditions associated with craft and the processes of creating artisanal products.

### ***Artisan/Handworker***

Artisans, simply put, are skilled people creating something with their hands (Adamson, 2021), and “skilled craftspeople who use locally available materials to create products and generate income” (Tung, 2012, p. 71). In this paper, the term artisan will refer to the persons who make traditional handcrafts.

### ***Nonprofit Organization***

Nonprofit organizations are described as “an entity that conducts business without shareholders and without a profit motive” (*GuideStar Nonprofit Reports and Forms 990 for Donors, Grantmakers, and Businesses*, n.d.) whose purpose is to provide a public benefit and further a social cause (Heaslip, 2020). Salamon states that the “nonprofit sector is a collection of entities that are organizations, private (as opposed to governmental), nonprofit-distributing, self-governing, and noncompulsory” (Salamon, 2012, p. 15). The research in this study will refer to nonprofit organizations as groups who provide services without monetary gain.

### ***International Nongovernmental Organizations (INGOs)***

INGOs have been defined by the United Nations as international organizations that are not established by an intergovernmental agreement, exclude profit-making organizations, and operate in more than one country. These organizations deal with many facets of human society and can fall under two generalizations: advocacy for their mission and client or providing services such as humanitarian relief (Davies, 2014).

### **Case Study Collaborations**

The two collaborations chosen for this study are different in structure. Collaboration #1 is a partnership consisting of a certified Fair Trade enterprise entity based in the United States and artisans in Central Asia. Collaboration #2 is a partnership among a nonprofit organization, a foundation, and a group of artisans based in the southeastern United States. The two groups were chosen to understand the different processes involved in utilizing handcraft as a means for social and economic empowerment, and what the effect on the culture of the respective communities might be. By exploring the successes in these initiatives and the challenges, and what future outcomes might occur for both collaborations, the research could benefit other models of empowerment through craft.

#### ***Collaboration 1—Social Enterprise, Fair Trade Organization, and Central Asian Artisans (SECA)***

##### *Social Enterprise*

This social enterprise (SE) was founded in 2014 and is structured as a sole proprietor LLC (limited liability corporation). The company works with over 100 artisans in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and has customers on four continents. For the purposes of this study, this collaboration will be referred to throughout as SECA. Utilizing a closed circle

business model, goods are purchased directly from the artisans and imported into a central location in the United States. The inventory is held until sold, generally through the website, craft fairs, and trade shows. As a Fair Trade Enterprise, the company is independently funded and small in scale.

### *Fair Trade Federation*

The Fair Trade Federation (FTF) is defined as “a trade association of fair trade enterprises fully committed to equitable and sustainable trading partnerships. We strengthen and support our members to grow the global movement of trade that values the health of the planet, and the labor, dignity, and equality of all people” (Fair Trade Federation Code of Practice, n.d.). Since its beginnings in 1994, FTF has focused on supporting fully committed businesses to expand markets for artisans and farmers around the world. The organization spans multiple product categories including coffee, agriculture, textile, and craft. To be a verified fair trade business, an organization must submit a yearly application to the FTF committee defining its commitment to engage in approved fair trade practices. These include trade as the primary activity, direct relationships with the artisans in the global south, and creating opportunity for socially and economically disadvantaged partners.

### *Central Asian Artisans*

The artisans in Collaboration 1 are based in the countries of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Formerly part of the Soviet bloc, handcraft in these regions was part of the cultural suppression that the Soviets practiced during the late twentieth century. The artisans create handmade items including ikat weaving, felting, embroidery, woodwork, ceramics, jewelry, and knives. The research of this study is focused on artisans in Tajikistan.

### *Context of Tajikistan Artisans*

Tajikistan is a former member of the Soviet bloc, gaining independence in 1991. A landlocked and mountainous region, it borders Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, China, and Afghanistan (see map in Appendix A). Tajikistan was first created as an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan in 1924, but in 1929 the USSR designated Tajikistan a separate republic and transferred to it much of present-day Sughd province. Ethnic Uzbeks form a substantial minority in Tajikistan, and ethnic Tajiks an even larger minority in Uzbekistan. The country experienced a civil war from 1992 to 1997 among political, regional, and religious factions. The current president is Emomali Rakhmon, who came to power in 1994 and has granted himself limitless terms and lifetime immunity through constitutional amendments in 2015 (CIA, n.d.).

Tajikistan became a member of the World Trade Organization in 2013 but remains the poorest country in Europe. Due to the lack of employment opportunities in Tajikistan, over a million migrants travel to Russia each year to find work. Migrant labor is Tajikistan's largest export, accounting for 30% of the total GDP, or 2.2 billion US dollars in 2018 (Lemon, 2019). According to the Migration Policy Institute, one out of every three working age men works abroad. This results in an overwhelmingly female domestic workforce and an economy dependent on remittance sent from abroad (Lemon, 2019).

The social implications for the wives of these workers are myriad. Women do not traditionally work outside the home, and the long-term absence of husbands and fathers has led to family breakdown, with some men abandoning their Tajik wives and marrying in Russia. Others do not divorce their wives but stay in Russia and stop sending money to their families, leaving the women desperate to care for their children. Some of these abandoned women turn to prostitution or polygamy to survive (Lombardi, 2013).

## ***Collaboration 2—Nonprofit Organization, Foundation, Quilters (NPUS)***

### *Nonprofit Organization*

The nonprofit organization in Collaboration #2 is a 501(c)(3) founded in New York City in 2006. The company's programming currently encompasses over 1,100 artisan businesses in more than 110 countries, impacting over 250,000 handworkers. The organization leverages its strategic partnerships with the fashion and home goods industries to benefit artisans. The nonprofit provides training to the artisans to strengthen their creative and business skills, operate independently, and scale their operations. Programming is funded by fee-based programs for the textile industry, philanthropic donations, and grants. This collaboration will be referred to as NPUS for the purposes of this research.

### *Foundation*

The NPUS partnered with a 501(c)(3) nonprofit founded in 2010 that is dedicated to supporting the contributions and cultural traditions of African American artists from the American south. Most of the foundation's 1,100 holdings were donated by a collector who traveled the American south in the mid 1980s purchasing artworks by unknown African American artists. The organization has been committed to transferring most of its works to the collections of leading museums since 2014, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, the High Museum of Art, the New Orleans Museum of Art, and the Ackland Museum of Art (Candid, n.d.). In 2018, the foundation was absorbed as a supporting organization into a community partnership dedicated to improving the quality of life for the communities of the artists whose work is represented in the foundation's collection.

### *American Artisans*

The artisan group in this collaboration is based in a community in the rural American southeast. Descended from the enslaved workers of the original landowners, the artisans live in an area that is isolated both geographically and from the lack of basic services. Quilts have been created for generations, utilized for warmth, and made up of whatever materials were available including feed sacks, worn-out clothing, and fabric scraps. Their craft has achieved acclaim over the years, first during the 1960s as part of the civil rights movement, and again in an exhibition in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century at a major art museum in New York City. The quilts have been described as “hard edge abstract paintings or unsung Op masterworks” (Richard, 2002). This recognition has not improved the quality of life for the creators of the quilts, and over half of the residents of the community live in poverty.

### **Structure of Paper**

This study is organized into three additional chapters. In addition to this introduction, the literature review (Chapter 2) will provide an overview on the topics of cultural heritage and identity, the historical context of social enterprises utilizing handcraft, empowerment of women, and the continuation of craft heritage for future generations. Chapter 3 will review the methodology of the research project, including the themes and subthemes from interviews, and then present findings. Chapter 4 will present conclusions, limitations, and opportunities for future research.



## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Craft can be described as the skillful creation of handmade items that are utilized in daily life. Empowerment programs based on the utilization of traditional craft practices are common in the developing world and among marginalized populations (Littrell & Dickson, 1997). The income derived from these programs can give the maker confidence and contribute to improved living circumstances for the family. Craft traditions are closely tied to cultural heritage and identity, not only in the physical manifestation of the product created, but in the knowledge that is passed down generationally (Holtorf, 2020; Sethi, 2012). This review will focus on literature that examines the meaning and influences of culture, the historical context of social enterprises utilizing traditional handcrafts, the empowerment of women through craft, and the continuation of these practices through future generations.

### **Cultural Heritage**

Cultural heritage is currently represented as both tangible (material objects and monuments) and intangible (the practices and knowledge that create cultural identity). Heritage is both a representation of the past and a vision of the future. The 2003 General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined intangible cultural heritage as the practices, knowledge, and skills associated with the objects and artifacts that individuals and communities recognize as part of their cultural heritages (UNESCO, n.d.). UNESCO provides five domains in which this heritage is manifested: oral traditions, the performing arts, social practices and rituals, the knowledge and practice concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. This cultural heritage is transmitted generationally and is in a constant state of transformation as communities react to changes in their environment and perception of the past (UNESCO, n.d.).

### *Heritage and Identity*

Collective memories and traditions are closely connected to the common memories that create identities for communities. The traditional heritage of “the objects, practices, knowledge, and environments that sustain cultural worlds across generations” (Geismar, 2015, p. 72) and the importance of the memories associated with this heritage “become a significant symbol for collective identity” (Apaydin, 2020, p. 3). This identity allows groups to come together and create a sense of belonging, which provides a “critical resource for survival in a complex world” (Apaydin, 2020, p. 3). There is an increasing awareness of both the loss of cultural identities due to the negative effects of globalization, and the importance of sustaining this cultural heritage as a resource that is available to all (Lowe, 2013).

Cultural heritage is a powerful factor in controlling and destroying communities. The destruction of cultural identity is a common tool utilized throughout history to establish hegemony over minority groups (Apaydin, 2020). This destruction can be during times of outside occupation, conflict, natural disaster, or economic upheaval. The colonization and imperialist practices of conquering nations have been directed at destroying the culture of their subjected populations for centuries. In central Asia, the Soviet concept of a common culture including dress, dwellings, arts, and music was “one means among many by which the more backward nations could be forcibly advanced, so that all nationalities of the Soviet Union could progress toward communism together” (Woods, 2016, p. 13). The destruction of the cultural heritage of a community weakens both its collective memory and the cohesiveness of the group, facilitating the assignment of a different identity within the overall society.

Common identity can go through many iterations depending on the political and economic circumstances at a given time. There is a tendency to consider this heritage as a thing

of the past, but the importance of managing “heritage futures,” which deal with the effects of cultural heritage in societies both present and future (Holtorf, 2020), is becoming more prevalent in international policies. As society changes, the role of heritage is determined by the interpretation of the past based on the confines of the present, which creates a moving, evolving history rather than a stagnant one (Linn-Tynen, 2020). Countries may reevaluate their communal histories as their political and economic circumstances change. One example of this is a new cultural heritage museum being constructed in Saudi Arabia. The nation is redefining its collective identity through the “transformative political potential of tangible and intangible heritage” and placing new importance on its cultural history (Radke & Al-Senan, 2015, p. 90). The importance of cultural heritage in maintaining group identity is constantly changing and transforming as the groups and their place in society shift and evolve.

### ***Ownership of Heritage***

The question of who assigns value to cultural heritage and what traditions are deserving of preservation is a result of the power dynamics within that society. Heritage is viewed by individuals through various lenses of self, including religion, class, and personal beliefs. The meaning and value assigned to heritage is determined by the identity of those who determine this value; “heritage is only heritage because society chooses to acknowledge it as such” (Linn-Tynen, 2020, p. 262). It can be “invested in more singular notions of the past and are often committed to suppressing multiple constituencies or narratives” (Geismar, 2015, p. 72) reflecting the values and identities of the dominant societal group. The narrative is dependent on who is telling the story and from what perspective.

Intangible cultural heritage is deeply connected to collective memory and identity and is developed through shared knowledge and experiences over time. Collective identities can be

influenced and sometimes oppressed by controlling the narrative of what is and is not recognized as heritage (Linn-Tynen, 2020). The identity politics of assigning specific heritages to the dominant groups in a society can “essentialize differences rather than foster commonalities” (Holtorf, 2020, p. 310), tearing apart the social order rather than bringing it together. Common identities do not necessarily represent all members of a society on an equal basis but reflect viewpoints of the dominant groups who control the narrative and its interpretation.

Shifts in society are bringing about change in the representations of heritage identities and their meanings. The “values supporting heritage practice are shifting to more socially responsive concerns as communities and stakeholders reclaim authority over heritage matters and insist on more participatory roles in its management” (Samuels & Shackel, 2018, p.130). The destruction of cultural heritage at a grassroots level can lead to transformation, creating a more equitable heritage for communities who may not have been represented in the past.

### ***Craft and Cultural Heritage***

The creation of handmade items used in daily life reflects both the natural surroundings of a community (such as the grasses used in basket making, or the cotton used in textile weaving) and the language and beliefs of that culture (as in the patterns and colors used in the creation of a ceramic pot). Craft can combine the intangible and tangible by the memories associated with the object and the maker. A piece of needlework can hold memories of a time, a place, and a culture that no longer exists; the stories and traditions behind the embroideries continue the history for future generations. It is universal in that these stories are made manifest, and create “things that transverse time, location, and faith” (Vartanian, 2020, p.68). Handcrafts, especially textiles, are often transportable, and the creation of traditional objects can be a reminder of home and identity for displaced populations, refugees, and immigrants.

As an expression of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, the suppression of handcraft is also a means of destroying communal identity to assimilate into a broader society. During the Soviet occupation of Central Asia, Uzbek traditional weaving artisans had their property and shops confiscated, their labor devalued, and ultimately, “unable to withstand the repressive treatment, were forced to work in factories and mills” (Shomirzaev et al., 2020, p.136). Similar practices take place in marginalized communities where handwork that once held great symbolic and ceremonial value is degraded to the level of tourist trinkets to make a living (Adamson, 2012).

Craft is also a symbol of pride and identity for emerging nations and populations, a “reflection of the relationship between humans and their environment within their historical, cultural, and social contexts” (Tung, 2012, p.71). During the early days of India’s independence, the empowerment of handcrafts in the rural villages was closely linked to Gandhi’s vision of a free and independent Indian nation (Sethi, 2012). Craft is an important component of India’s cultural identity today, and the study of traditional craft practices is being incorporated into the mainstream Indian education system (Emmett, 2015).

### **Historical Context of Social Enterprises Utilizing Traditional Handcrafts**

Ethnic handcrafts have long been utilized as forms of social enterprise, but until recently not on a commercial level. Handwork programs have traditionally been a part of INGO programming, generating supplemental income for the artisans who are generally women. The use of handwork in vocational training programs in refugee camps is common, as the work can be done in the home and is portable. Historically there have been several models incorporating craft as a source of economic and social empowerment, including faith-based organizations, Fair Trade enterprises, INGO initiatives, and partnerships with commercial retailers.

### ***Faith-Based Organizations***

Religious organizations have incorporated indigenous craft work as part of their outreach programs, generally on a small scale for philanthropic fundraising purposes. One example of this is Oxfam, founded in the UK in 1942 by a group of Quaker intellectuals, activists, and academics to assist World War II refugees in Greece. In the 1950s, Oxfam began to sell crafts made by Chinese refugees in their retail shops, thus marking the earliest beginnings of fair trade in Europe (Wolfer & del Pilar, 2008, p. 450). Oxfam has since grown into a multinational philanthropic organization with outreach programs in 90 countries (Oxfam, 2021).

One of the most successful versions of the faith-based artisanal business model has been Ten Thousand Villages, the nonprofit retailer founded by members of the Mennonite church. Ten Thousand Villages pioneered “the concept of fair trade by buying crafts directly from artisans in the developing world, paying them a living wage for their work and developing long-term relationships with them (Wolfer & del Pilar, 2008, p. 456). Their closed circle business model (goods were initially sold in volunteer staffed outlets owned by the organization) has evolved into a global network of 70 stores and 300 allied specialty shops, encompassing over 20,000 makers in 30 countries (Green America, n.d.).

### ***Fair Trade Enterprises***

Fair Trade Organizations (FTOs) originated in the 1960s with church charity and nongovernmental organization (NGO) groups working with the poor in developing countries (Randall, 2005). Fair Trade businesses “are deeply committed to a mission of sustainable, people-centered development” (Littrell & Dickson, 1997), and cover multiple product ranges, including agriculture, handcrafts, and toys. The groups that represent the makers must submit to

a rigorous evaluation by the Fair Trade organization proving that they are compliant with the ethical and environmental requirements of the group.

Earlier versions of FTOs tended to focus on the producers rather than consumers of these products, which sometimes resulted in a charity-based model that was not a viable business. They utilized a non-interventionist approach, supporting the artisans in locating markets for their crafts rather than guiding them in creating products that will sell (Brown, 2019). As competition for the craft market increased, there has been a shift away from this charity-based model by creating higher quality, more marketable products. (Hutchens, 2010; Reed, 2009). Products are sold at craft shows, trade fairs, FTO-certified retail outlets, and direct to the consumer through social media. The growth of direct marketing to consumers has resulted in an emphasis on connecting consumers with the lives of the producers, “inviting the consumer to feel a sense of solidarity with the producer in their opposition to the crass world of global capitalism” (Murray, 2012, p.5).

### ***Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and Commercial Partnerships***

In 2015, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which “provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries—developed and developing—in a global partnership” (United Nations, n.d.). Many commercial brands have incorporated these goals into their corporate social responsibility (CSR) platforms and sourcing strategies, including both social and environmental manufacturing policies.

The Ethical Fashion Initiative, headed by Simone Cipriani, is the operational arm of the International Trade Centre's Poor Communities and Trade Programme (PCTP). The ITC is a partnership between the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. The EFI aims to reduce global poverty by involving micro-entrepreneurs in the developing world through international and regional trade (Ethical Fashion Initiative, n.d.). The EFI connects artisans from Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, Haiti, the West Bank, Ethiopia, and Cambodia with luxury fashion designers, to their mutual benefit. The EFI is also a strong supporter of the African fashion industry, showcasing local designers at international trade fairs, giving them exposure to world markets, and expanding their customer base.

Nonprofit organizations such as Aid to Artisans operate on a service/training-based model rather than providing a selling platform. By focusing on product quality and demand, leveraging commercial partnerships with the fashion, interiors, and gift industries, these groups provide training in design, business practices, product development, and marketing, enabling artisans to build a sustainable business platform that they manage independently (Aid to Artisans, n.d.) By creating partnerships between commercial designers and artisans, markets for their handcrafts can be expanded. The retailers benefit by promoting socially responsible practices to their customers. Having a strong NGO partner that can create a market demand for the products through training, product differentiation, and high quality standards is essential for creating a long-term production model. NGOs also have access to outside markets and streams of revenue to support these enterprises (Davelaar, 2017).

### **Empowerment of Women**

Women have a major role in preserving cultural heritage through craft. Ideally, handwork enables them to work from home, manage their daily domestic tasks, and bring in extra income.



This can create empowerment both socially and economically, as women gain stature and invest in their families and communities.

Handcraft production is seen as a female occupation; it does not challenge traditional gender roles and is not a threat to male opportunities for employment (Le Mare, 2012).

“Handcraft production is a favored income-generating activity of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)” with 91 percent of the organizations in the Women’s Affairs Department in Bangladesh being involved in handcraft programs (Le Mare, 2012, p. 97). As these programs take place in the home, handcraft production is done in addition to women’s domestic and agricultural duties (Le Mare, 2012; Hutchens, 2010), and can increase the already heavy workload that women shoulder by adding hours to an already long day (Hatcher & Tu, 2017). However, art production can generate income for women who lack mobility, offer flexibility in hours, and often “incorporates traditional skills that women already possess” (Shealy, 2011).

Involvement in social enterprises can “offer women a path for incrementally increasing economic, cultural and political empowerment and increase the power they have over their actions” (Haugh & Talwar, 2014, p. 655). By generating income for the family, the power dynamics in the household can shift, causing changes in men’s attitudes towards women and men’s roles in supporting the work. Women become “more involved in family decisions, use of their own income, and the education of children. Male family members listened to their opinions” (Le Mare, 2012, p. 99). This also resulted in the artisans reassessing the value of their daughters, wanting them to complete their educations, learn a marketable skill, have a good marriage, and have a well-paid occupation (Haugh & Talwar, 2014; Le Mare 2012; Shealy, 2010).

Artisans participating in a group benefit from additional services, including the opportunities to earn new skills, gain confidence, and acquire social skills. Being a member of a producer group has extended the social network of many women, and most now feel confident in speaking their opinions in the community. “Learning experiences made them stronger businesswomen and gave them confidence for developing sustainable businesses” (Littrell & Dickson, 1998, p. 181), and this confidence combined with the support of group members allows the women to have more authority in their life decisions.

### **Continuation of Craft and Future Generations**

The future of handcraft and culture is changing rapidly. Although the issue of “whether cultural traditions are embodied in product aesthetics or in production processes remains contested” (Hutchens, 2010, p. 458), the literature and research reflect a need for adaption. Consumer demand for unique, ethically sourced products is growing, and craft enterprises need to “adapt to modern reality, rather than artificially preserving it in museums or tourist villages” (Murray, 2012, p.10), possibly utilizing more modern techniques and patterns.

To retain the involvement of the next generation in their family’s traditional craft, opportunities and incentives are necessary. These include education, new techniques, and attention to market demand rather than adhering to traditional designs (Shealy, 2011; Tung, 2012). Traditional craft practices need the support of outside agencies such as museums to recognize handcraft as part of the national cultural heritage (Brown, 2019) as well as legislative and logistical partnerships. The question of cultural heritage comes up against “issues of social justice. If the alternative is for traditional handmade techniques to die from lack of interest by the young generation” (Murray, 2012, p. 10), then changes are necessary. Incorporating traditional handcraft knowledge into curriculums for both mainstream and university education will give the

next generation the awareness and knowledge to adapt these skills in new ways (Emmet, 2015; Sethi, 2012; Shomirzaev et al., 2020; Tung, 2012).

Mobile powered technology advances are also agents of change. In a report issued by the MasterCard foundation, a new technology platform is being launched that will provide artisan businesses with software to overcome the barriers of financing, market access, and lack of technology for business automation and scale. Classifying the sector as Creative Manufacturing and Handwork (CMH), the Powered by People (PBP) mobile platform aims to “place the CMH sector at the forefront of a major shift towards boutique manufacturing” (Powered by People, n.d.). The effects of power dynamics may determine which groups and countries will benefit from these advances in technology.

Craft traditions are a repository of culture, a method of generating social and economic improvement (if not empowerment), indicators of identity, and a source of heritage. As societies and cultures change and evolve, the design and creation of these cultural crafts will have to adapt to new surroundings.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology and Findings**

This paper seeks to understand the relationship among artisanal collaborations, social and economic empowerment, and cultural heritage. The following questions framed the research:

1. What are the tensions between the elements of preserving intangible cultural heritage and economic empowerment in artisanal collaborations?

2. Who are the stakeholders in the collaborations and what is the hierarchy of power? How does the artisan community benefit?
3. Does a focus on economic empowerment effectively negate the concept of preserving an intangible cultural heritage or is this an evolution of that craft/tradition?

A case study was conducted utilizing two different collaborative models. The first model is a small Fair Trade certified enterprise in the United States, referred to in this paper as “SECA.” This is a for-profit social enterprise that is funded solely by the proprietor and the sale of crafts. This organization promotes the craft of artisans in the Central Asian countries of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, concentrating its focus on Tajikistan. The political environment of this region presents many challenges for the artisans to market their work overseas, as well as language and geographical barriers.

The second model is a nonprofit that partners globally with artisans, commercial businesses, and NGOs to create viable craft practices that result in sustainable social benefit for the artisanal community. The project in this particular collaboration focused on a rural community of quilters in the American south. The partnership consisted of the nonprofit organization, a foundation that supports the heritage and communities of the region through the sale of its art, and a company that creates commercial selling platforms for small craft entrepreneurs. This collaboration provided training programs for the artisans and economic support for the community and region in general. For the purposes of this study, it is referred to as “NPUS”.

The collaborations are listed as follows:

	<i>Collaboration #1 (SECA)</i>	<i>Collaboration #2 (NPUS)</i>
<i>Ownership structure</i>	Fair Trade certified social enterprise	Nonprofit
<i>Partner</i>	None	Foundation
<i>Sales of handcraft</i>	Internal website platform	Commercial platform
<i>Location of artisans</i>	Artisans (Central Asia)	Artisans (Southeastern United States)

The two partnerships were chosen to compare different types of collaborations (NGO/nonprofit as opposed to Fair Trade) and their practices. There are similarities in that both groups of artisans are in geographically isolated communities, have been historically marginalized, and reside in impoverished areas. Interviews centered around the effect of the initiatives on the artisan communities, the economic and social benefits to the artisans, and the preservation of cultural heritage. It should be noted that the data gathered in these interviews represents the viewpoint of the organizations, not the artisans or their communities.

### **Data Collection**

Key representatives of the nonprofit organization and the social enterprise (not including the artisans themselves) were interviewed utilizing a video call, the recordings of which were transcribed, analyzed, and organized into themes. The interviews (one interview per organization) took place on February 25 and March 4 of 2021, and each was approximately one hour long. One respondent is the founder of the Fair Trade organization representing craft

artisans from Central Asia; the other is an officer at the nonprofit dedicated to the empowerment of artisans on a global level. Each respondent was asked questions that related to the structure of their partnerships, the effects that those partnerships might have on the artisan community, the preservation of cultural heritage, and how the collaborations might contribute to evolution of the craft. The interview questions are available in Appendix C.

The voice recordings were transcribed using the Otter.ai app, then coded to create a thematic analysis. Between the two respondents, there were 51 pages of transcription, resulting in 47 different codes. These were then analyzed and distilled down to 6 major themes and subthemes, searching for concepts that were repeated multiple times in each conversation. Additional research involved websites, available materials, published documents, museum catalogs, personal communications via email, and webinars related to the partners of each collaboration.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were transcribed, the data were organized into a code book to determine emerging themes, utilizing the framework of Haugh and Talwar's emancipatory social entrepreneurship theory (Haugh & Talwar, 2014). Identifying factors of the respondents were removed to create an unbiased database. Over 70 initial themes were identified, and then narrowed down by further analysis into categories with subsequent subcategories, along with supporting quotes. Six key themes emerged from coding the interviews and organizing the data from both collaborations. Although the organizations operate on opposite sides of the world, similar concepts permeated the conversations. These themes encompass community, culture, empowerment, capacity building, sustainability, and the importance of collaboration rather than philanthropy.

These categories have been organized into the following six tables.

**Table 1**

<i>Community Involvement</i>	
<i>Subthemes</i>	<i>Supporting Quotes</i>
Building community engagement	“community needs component of trying to identify what it was the community was looking for”
Empowering community	“the official sector think that artists need Western help to preserve their own culture” “community did not need outsiders to come in and like make things better, but that a lot of the skill sets, and talent existed within the community itself”

**Table 2**

<i>Cultural Heritage</i>	
<i>Subthemes</i>	<i>Supporting Quotes</i>
Preserving cultural heritage	“for most for the textile arts in particular, the women have preserved these cultural traditions” “was incredible to see how the women reacted in learning about the culture, and realizing that, that women had important roles in culture, and entrepreneurship” “because they are very closely connected to the cultural traditions and the authenticity” “And I think culture, having a cultural connection is a is a big part of that”
Connecting craft to identity	“the Soviets did their best to destroy any cultural identity outside of the Soviet identity. They sent artists to prison” “that connection to culture provides some sort of central foundation and identity, that there’s a hole without it, and you end up feeling disconnected” “and so many of the quilters like if you look at a lot of the quotes and testimonials from the quilters on ___ site like quilting is their way of life”

	<p>“It’s not something that needs to be taught or imposed upon or implemented. It’s something that’s like, truly within the blood of the culture in the community.</p>
Continuing generational heritage	<p>“just across all artists, craft communities is like, these are techniques that are passed down from generation to generation”</p> <p>“But I think for the next generation, there needs to be like a viability in that craft to be an actual source of, of income or a career”</p>
Preserving heritage through museums and tourism	<p>“these large poster type things that were created as a quilt trail put in front of the homes of the famous quilters who are featured all over the world; so things like that, that like are intended to do good for the community.</p> <p>“I think it’s going to broaden the audience, the western audience, and get give them the experience of, of bringing a piece of that world they the products will simply be a part of the entire experience”</p>

**Table 3**

<i>Empowering Artisans</i>	
<i>Subthemes</i>	<i>Supporting Quotes</i>
Creating economic empowerment	<p>“Plus, like everywhere else in the world when women have money. They invest in their families and their communities”</p> <p>“utilize their craft technique and their artistic skills for income generation”</p>
Building confidence for women	<p>“and being able to support their just having income, gives them say, in the family, and gives them more, more self-confidence. And it gives them more people listen to them if they’re bringing money in. The family will listen to them when they have an idea”</p> <p>“our capacity building work to really kind of arm them with what they need to grow and build viable businesses”</p>



**Table 4**

<i>Building Capacity</i>	
<i>Subthemes</i>	<i>Supporting Quotes</i>
Transferring skills to artisan community	<p>“that’s the second big piece that ___ is working on is skills transfer. So, making sure there’s not again, outside reliance”</p> <p>“building the bridge between these brands and retailers in a way that’s like holistic and supportive and meeting the community where they are”</p>
Providing support	<p>“is the community wants our support and assistance and kind of the structure of those to kick those off”</p> <p>“in order to build a financially viable enterprise, support more artists than artisans, they need a wider market”</p>

**Table 5**

<i>Building a Sustainable Enterprise</i>	
<i>Subthemes</i>	<i>Supporting Quotes</i>
Expanding market	<p>“next phase of work first being expanding the number of shops based on interest and excitement of cultures to have their own jobs. The second being the sustainability”</p>
Build supply and create demand	<p>“not a strong and sustainable and impactful demand side of things”</p> <p>“I think that’s really the third piece of supporting the quilters in giving them information around like trend data or other things or things that they might consider for their shops that are you know, smaller form or different form that they can create”</p>
Making a long-term commitment	<p>“it’s not self-sustaining, because that short-term infusion of cash doesn’t isn’t long enough, and big enough to build something sustainable”</p> <p>“so needing to have a long-term presence, but a long-term commitment, or a long-term plan for projects that were being launched was one”</p>

**Table 6**

<i>Value of Partnerships</i>	
<i>Subthemes</i>	<i>Supporting Quotes</i>
Adding value	“and our value add is specific to collaborations and income generation through leveraging craft in a sustainable way”
Developing independent relationships	“collaborations I feel with the communities is that it does showcase to the next generation” “base of nonprofit is all about helping, which I think robs the artisans of a certain amount of dignity” “I prefer the concept of collaboration, rather than helping”

## **Findings**

### ***Community Involvement***

The importance of community was mentioned both in the personal interviews and in communications from the organizations (websites, webinars, Instagram postings, emails). Being sensitive to the needs of the artisans’ communities, understanding their challenges and goals, and knowledge of the outcomes of past initiatives are key in developing a successful enterprise.

### ***Community Engagement; Trust Building***

The interviews emphasized that building trust within the artisan community is essential, understanding what the stakeholders themselves need and want rather than what an outside group might think they need. In the case of the quilters, the respondent discussed how the nonprofit was invited to the community to participate in a focus group to both understand what the artisans wanted to have happen and what the challenges might be. The community had some negative experiences in previous efforts to capitalize on their craft, and any new endeavor needed to be a

partnership between the nonprofit and the quilters themselves. “So really kind of meeting the community, where they were, and then also kind of putting aside any preconceived notions or expectations that we had based on past experience, and really kind of listening first, to be able to then support” was how the nonprofit began to proceed constructing the project.

The makers in Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan, have also faced challenges concerning initiatives that bring in short-term projects but do not maintain a continuous presence. The owner of the SECA has spent over six years developing community relationships to understand what the artisans need as opposed to what a “westerner” might think they need.

### *Community Leadership*

Both groups stated that the key to developing a successful artisanal collaboration is having community leaders as executors of these partnerships. Results of the nonprofit’s focus meetings with the quilter’s community revealed that the necessary skills to create a successful business already existed in the community, but they had not been properly invested in. Based on that information, training programs were set up by the nonprofit so that the artisans could gain the skills to manage their own e-commerce businesses. Another factor in meeting the community where they are is that the quilters preferred to have the business set up as individual enterprises, rather than working as a collective enterprise. The nonprofit emphasized that any partnerships should be quilter-led and operated to be successful on a long-term basis. However, the views of the artisans themselves have been interpreted for this study by the representative of the organization, and there could be issues within the community on leadership roles and communications.

In central Asia, the founder of the SECA has strong partnerships with the Executive Director of the Tourism Development of Tajikistan, which is dedicated to the development of projects designed to improve the economic welfare of the rural population through ecotourism and craftsmanship. The director sees her role as being a facilitator, easing the way for customers to communicate with the artisans online “so they will get the experience of working with a designer in Central Asia” giving more control of the transaction to the artisan.

### ***Preserving Cultural Heritage***

The connection of craft and handwork to the cultural identity of the maker appeared many times in the recorded conversations. In the interview, respondent #2 spoke about the importance of authenticity, and that the quilters are “very closely connected to the cultural traditions and the authenticity and are really dedicated to cultural preservation.” The history and traditions in both communities is expressed in the craft they produce, and the challenge for both is how to create economic empowerment without compromising this history.

### ***Heritage; Generational Continuity; Identity***

The literature shows that repression of culture is a method of maintaining control over a population. The interview subject for the Tajikistan artisans revealed that during the Soviet era, textiles and crafts were suppressed in Central Asia by the government in their quest to create a modern, unified society. By destroying the sense of culture and belonging, the cultural identities of the ethnic minorities were destroyed as well. When the Soviet Union collapsed, these identities had to be recaptured. The respondent further elaborated that in 1984, weaving masters in Uzbekistan were sent to prison for five years for practicing their art in secret, against government regulations.

In the quilting community, the interview subject discussed the craft heritage as “techniques that are passed down from generation to generation. It is not something that needs to be taught or imposed upon or implemented. It’s something that’s like, truly within the blood of the culture in the community.” The patterns and designs of the quilts have been part of the history for over a century and are central to how these women represent themselves. However, they are eager to evolve the craft. Respondent #2 indicated that supplying donated raw materials and providing market information on new uses for the techniques was exciting for the artisans and provides a path for expanding market demand for their products.

### *Cultural Tourism; Museums*

Both artisanal collaborations interviewed discussed the role of museums and cultural tourism. In the case of the quilters, the foundation has been placing the quilts in museum collections across the country. This has elevated the status of the craft, creating awareness of the community, while providing the foundation with revenue to create programs that bring social and economic empowerment. These programs include support of the sole elementary school in the area, rebuilding infrastructure such as clean water systems, and creating a vehicle for cultural tourism.

The SECA owner noted that in Tajikistan, the national museum has “a great emphasis on the cultural heritage of Tajikistan and its ties to Persia,” and has sponsored exhibitions dedicated to the traditional textiles of the region.

Tourism is viewed as both a method of education and a revenue stream. An earlier initiative in the quilters community is being upgraded and enhanced, with the goal of sharing the history and meaning of the area with cultural travelers “these large poster type things that were

created as a quilt trail put in front of the homes of the famous quilters who are featured all over the world; so, things like that, that like are intended to do good for the community” (respondent #2).

The SECA respondent spoke of organizing textile tours in Central Asia, “I think it’s going to broaden the audience, the western audience, and get give them the experience of, of bringing a piece of that world they the products will simply be a part of the entire experience. And, you know, all the marketing gurus are, are making it clear that the future is based on experience.” Tourism brings additional revenue and impact to the whole area; the handcrafts are a part of that.

### ***Empowering Artisans***

Empowerment of women, both from monetizing their craft but also enabling them to make their own decisions regarding how to manage their businesses, was a key theme in both collaborations. Craft as a factor in identity was a common factor, as was the elevation of status in the home based on income generation.

### ***Women; Identity; Confidence; Income Generation***

Traditionally, in Central Asia, women who go into business are either widowed or divorced; it is not the custom for married women to work outside the home. One experience shared by respondent #1 told the story of a group of women who put on a fashion show based on the traditional costumes of the different regions in Tajikistan. Understanding the roles of women in craft, culture, and entrepreneurship for hundreds of years was “an amazing, empowering experience for all of them.” The interview went on to discuss that workshops set up by Tajik

artisans to train young women in marketing, design, and cultural history create opportunities for them to bring income into their homes and gain a sense of self-reliance and confidence.

Both collaborations stress training and ownership in their partnerships, providing the tools and services for the artisans to be able to manage their businesses themselves. In the case of the quilters, by telling their stories on their online shops, some of the women have started their own social media feeds, expanding their narratives and building their market base. Having access to the internet and back up within the community has given them confidence to develop new skill sets.

The business model of collaboration #1 (SECA) is evolving from a Fair Trade selling platform to one that is focused on supporting the artisans. The goal is to provide the artisans with tools (cameras for photography shoots, developing confidence by participating in online experiences with potential customers) and managing the financial services for customers based in the United States. Local weaving and embroidery masters are providing training to the younger women in the craft techniques, as so many of them have been lost or forgotten. Both models are based on community partnership and ownership, as well as training and providing support.

Respondent #1 makes the point that “... everywhere in the world, when women have money, they invest in their families and their communities.” Craft enterprises enable women to work from the home, generating income that brings them self-confidence and better opportunities for their children. In the case of the Central Asian artisans, the income is generally supplemental and on a very small scale. However, by just having an income, the “women’s status in the family and community is elevated, they have more say in family decisions, and build up self-confidence.” This theme is repeated in the literature concerning social enterprises based on handcraft and by both representatives of the collaborations.

## ***Building Capacity***

### *Skills Transfer; Support*

The nonprofit was “founded to provide capacity-building support for artisanal communities, providing the tools and knowledge necessary to create viable businesses” (respondent #2). For the nonprofit (NPUS), this varies depending on the artisans and the parameters of their environments. The goal is for the artisans to be as independent as possible, and “to leverage their craft into product that generates an income stream.” Collaboration #1 has the same goal but without the funding that comes from grants and foundations and is working on a much smaller platform of direct to consumer sales.

The nonprofit working with the quilters is “making sure there’s not outside reliance on elements like photography, shipping, and logistics, but that the skill set and talent is within the community itself” by providing training and equipment to community managers. Collaboration #1 is developing the same type of model but on a more remote basis, providing the connections and support the artisan leaders need to expand their markets and build their businesses.

## ***Building a Sustainable Enterprise***

### *Expand Market; Supply and Demand; Long-term Commitment*

Long-term viability is another key theme for these collaborations. Both artisanal communities have had previous experiences with programs that were not funded or structured to make a lasting impact. Respondent #1 stated that cultural initiatives have been implemented in Central Asia by foreign embassies and governmental agencies. But often “the funding is only for three months, not long enough to see any real progress, and then the funding period ends,” and the projects do not make any sustainable impact.



The quilting community has had programs set up previously but without a long-term maintenance strategy. In the interview the point was made “that a presence where a nonprofit or a good meaning organization or partner came in and did something for a year did something once or for a short period of time and then left without any type of maintenance strategy.” By creating a dependency on the outside agency instead of building a self-sustaining model based on the capacities within the community, these models are at risk when the supporting agency ends the program.

The goal of both collaborations is to implement programs that give agency to the artisans to develop the skill sets to manage their own businesses, and thus create economic and social impact. However, there needs to be a continuous market for these products and services, which is one of the challenges both groups face.

### ***The Value of Partnerships***

#### *Value Added; Independent Relationships*

These collaborations appear to be operating under the same framework of community support, community leadership, and providing services and training to the artisans. By shifting the focus of using handcraft to a sustainable business model, the craft can be not only be preserved but can evolve. Support can also take the form of funding but must have long-term viability. In the case of the quilters, “the community did not need outsiders to come in and like make things better, a lot of the skill sets, and talent existed within the community itself” but it was “necessary to be mindful of power structures, and not put the opportunity into the hands of individuals who could then decide how that resource was disseminated” (respondent #2). These

power structures can exist both inside and outside of the community and may cause inequalities in the benefits generated by the programs.

The developing strategy of collaboration #1 (SECA) is to expand the marketing opportunities for the artisans by “collaborating, not helping. I have always viewed this enterprise as a doorway. And by providing more publicity, more PR more information about this part of the world, building the audience.” This approach is based on building demand for both the products and the culture of the region.

## **Conclusion**

The research questions formed the basis of the interviews and determined the flow of the conversations.

1. What are the tensions between the elements of preserving intangible cultural heritage and economic empowerment in artisanal collaborations?
2. Who are the stakeholders in the collaborations and what is the hierarchy of power? How does the artisan community benefit?
3. Does a focus on economic empowerment effectively negate the concept of preserving an intangible cultural heritage or is this an evolution of that craft/tradition?

Six themes emerged from this research—community involvement, cultural heritage, empowering artisans, building capacity, building a sustainable enterprise, and the value of partnerships. Both collaborations had strong viewpoints on power hierarchies, the importance of community leadership, and the preservation and evolution of traditional craft techniques while

utilizing products as means of empowerment. The organizations and the artisans each group represents are different in terms of scope, size, and limitations but expressed similarities in the end goal—providing artisans the support necessary to build and maintain an independent, sustainable enterprise.

#### **Chapter 4—Discussion and Implications**

There is a long history of using traditional craft items as a tool to benefit communities that are suffering from the effects of war, disaster, famine, and lack of economic development. Global handcraft is the second largest employer of people in the developing world (after agriculture), currently creating revenue of over \$32 billion dollars, and women make up the majority of artisans and craftspeople (Artisan Alliance, n.d.).

These efforts began as charity-based programs that focused on economic benefits to the producers rather than developing the skills to create a marketable product. These programs evolved into mission-directed for-profit enterprises and Fair Trade organizations that created larger markets for handcrafted works (Littrell & Dickson, 1997).

Shifts in the fashion industry focusing on responsible sourcing, authenticity of product, and a narrative behind the product offerings have created a consumer desire for artisanal sourced goods. New business models are being developed that are partnerships between nonprofits, NGOs, foundations, and commercial fashion businesses that incorporate the artisanal supply chain. Applying modern design and business methods to traditional craft practices, the market for the artisans' work can expand, providing greater opportunities for economic empowerment

(Davelaar, 2017; Tung, 2012). However, the design interventions that may be instituted have the risk of diluting or even eliminating the cultural tradition and heritage of the product.

This goal of this project was to understand how nonprofit and Fair Trade organizations utilized handcraft to create social and economic empowerment, and what effects this might have on the cultural heritage of the artisan community.

## **Study Design**

A qualitative research project was designed consisting of a review of existing literature on the topics of artisanal collaborations, cultural heritage, and the empowerment of artisans through the utilization of traditional handcraft. The next step was to structure a comparative case study of two separate organizations dealing with artisanal products, using one-on-one interviews to gather data. The data were then organized into themes and analyzed, seeking similarities and differences in approach and execution of the respective groups. Information from the analysis was synthesized into core concepts that related back to the research questions. These concepts were grouped into the areas of preserving cultural heritage, community involvement, empowering artisans, building capacity, creating a sustainable enterprise, and the value of partnerships.

The literature available was extensive. The research centered on the separate areas of cultural heritage, historical context of various models of initiatives based on traditional handcrafts, and empowerment of women through social enterprises.

## **Key Findings**

### ***Preserving Cultural Heritage***

Preserving cultural heritage is always an element of a craft-based enterprise, but the question becomes the ownership of that heritage, what is being preserved, and by whom (Linn-Tynen, 2020, p. 261). There is also conversation regarding what constitutes the heritage of craft—is it the product itself or the process of creating it (Hutchens, 2010, p. 458). The balance between creating products that sell and maintaining traditional craft practices is difficult. In speaking of holiday ornaments from Central Asia at a craft fair, respondent #1 stated “it’s not authentic at all. The felting is authentic, but that the design, you know, it’s all Western generated.” However, these types of products have a market, and the artisans are benefitting from the sales of their work, as well as continuing a traditional craft practice, even though the actual item itself is meaningless to the person who created it.

The reinterpretation of traditional skills to create saleable products should focus on respect for the heritage inherent in the craft. Incorporating a modern aesthetic into the design process could create a lasting market for artisanal products and a continuation of traditional heritage (Brown, 2019).

### ***Historical Context***

Early models utilizing craft as an empowerment tool were generally charity-based operations, focused on increasing well-being for the producers rather than the craft product itself. These crafts were marketed through charity shops and church-based venues, rather than the general marketplace (Littrell & Dickson, 1997). This model developed into mission-based, for-profit enterprises operating within Fair Trade guidelines, where benefit to the producers is the key focus, but the products were sold in a much broader market (Hutchens, 2010; Randall, 2005). Handwork programs generally take place in the home, and as such have traditionally been a part of INGO empowerment initiatives, particularly for women. (Hutchens, 2010).

More recent nonprofit models are operating on a service and training platform for artisans, rather than providing a market for the sales of craft products. By focusing on the quality of the product, providing support to the artisans, and leveraging relationships with the fashion and home interiors industries, these collaborations enable the artisans to build independent business platforms.

### ***Empowerment for Women—Social and Economic***

These enterprises have been shown in both the literature and in the research to provide both social and economic empowerment to women. The ability to generate income often gives women the confidence to have more decision-making authority in the home, invest in their children, develop higher expectations for their daughters, and participate in community decisions (Haugh & Talwar, 2014; Sethi, 2012).

The income derived from craft enterprises usually benefits the individual artisans, who may then be able to invest in their communities. A larger economic impact derives from a partnership that implements a holistic plan, incorporating craft as part of a larger, community led strategy. Sustainable funding, investment in the infrastructure of the community, and a long-term commitment are building blocks to the success of the program. The collaboration with the quilters (NPUS) utilized the craft as a means of financial independence for the artisans, but benefits for community at large will emanate from the larger initiatives that the foundation has been able to implement.

### **Significance of Project**

There are many types of partnerships aiming to create empowerment through traditional craft practices. The field is crowded with websites and companies claiming to promote ethical

products that make a difference in a developing part of the world. A model that works in one area may not be suitable for another, depending on the environmental and societal factors involved. Many of these efforts are short lived and end up benefitting the group marketing the products more than the artisans themselves.

This small study shows that key elements necessary in these enterprises are long-term commitment, sustainable funding, and community leadership. Thoughtful design and products incorporating heritage craft can help to reinvigorate a tradition, but there needs to be a long-term demand for that product. Small enterprises can help to create economic and social impact on an individual level, but real change comes from strong partnerships with groups such as NGOs that can facilitate relationships with a larger market. These collaborations should develop and fund grassroots initiatives, while understanding the importance of textualizing traditional handcraft into marketable products that respect cultural heritage and technique.

### **Conceptual Model**

The key findings can be seen in the concept model in Appendix B. Based on the Emancipatory Social Enterprise process model (Haugh & Talwar, 2014), a successful artisanal collaboration should have the inputs of long-term commitment, sustainable funding, and community leadership. The outputs would be reflected in economic empowerment, social empowerment, and preservation of cultural heritage. These outputs result in benefit to the stakeholders (the artisans) and their communities.

### **Challenges and Limitations of Research**

The pandemic shut down of 2020–2021 forced this research to be entirely virtual, rather than conducted in the field. Therefore, the data gathered are presented from the perspective of

the contributing organizations, not the artisans themselves. It is not possible to see firsthand the effects of the collaborations in the communities or to grasp a full understanding of the viewpoint of the community members. This is a comparative case study, but the availability of only two participants limited the amount of data that were collected. An additional respondent was scheduled to be interviewed, but due to pandemic-related issues was unable to participate in the study. However, this situation was mitigated by the literature that supplemented the data gathered from the interviews.

### **Future Research Opportunities**

This study elevates several topics that might guide future research. These include the impact of integrating small handcraft enterprises into the commercial supply chain of large corporations, and what steps would need to be taken to create empowerment for the artisans. Understanding how to create a balance between traditional heritage and marketable product as well protecting the rights of the craftspeople needs clarification. As publicly owned organizations have increasingly visible CSR policies (Corporate Social Responsibility), perhaps creating a support structure for the artisans aside from payment for goods rendered would be a requirement.

Museums and cultural tourism have impact in elevating traditional handcrafts, as well as bringing awareness to the general population. Museums can contribute a great deal to the understanding and relevance of craft and the cultures the artisans represent. This awareness can serve to increase the value of handcraft both on an economic scale and on the perception of its importance. Cultural tourism, like museums, can bring awareness and value, but should be approached from the perspective of respect and dignity for both the craft and the artisans who create it. These effects and possible new models should be explored.



The research shows that because handcraft is generally low paying and requires a tremendous time commitment, future generations move on to more sophisticated work that ensures a better standard of living. More study should be done on how traditional skills and knowledge can evolve into an occupation that generates the respect and income that it deserves, thus creating opportunities for future generations.

One area of possibility for this is the luxury sector of the fashion industry, where the combination of a sophisticated design aesthetic and traditional craft techniques could bring authenticity to the collections (Brown, 2019). Traditionally these companies utilized local talent and craftsmanship to create authentic product, but with the globalization of fashion at all levels, many of these skills have disappeared.

Collaborations that retrieve cultural traditions in areas of conflict such as Turquoise Mountain warrant further investigation. By leveraging partnerships with foundations, museums, and luxury selling platforms, the organization is interpreting ancient craft techniques into a viable livelihood for communities ravaged by decades of war (Varoutsikos & Stewart, 2020).

The connection between social enterprises based on craft and social activism needs more study. As women gain heightened confidence and agency through working with craft groups, this confidence can lead to advocacy for social change on issues that affect them most. Additional information on the evolution of handwork as an empowerment tool for INGOs might shed light on new practices that create advocacy for the artisans.

And finally, more research should be done on the incorporation of traditional culture and handcraft studies into educational curriculums, not just in design schools, but as part of education

at large. This could have the effect of creating pride in regional traditions and transform them into evolving part of life for upcoming generations.

## **Conclusion**

Handcraft and artisanal work are rapidly gaining following in the mainstream market. Attracted to the narrative of uniqueness and heritage, consumers have expressed the desire to purchase products that reflect social responsibility, but do not always understand the true cost of these items. The narrative given by marketing teams does not always reflect the reality of the situation of the artisans, but rather presents an opportunity for the customers to feel they are making an ethical choice that makes a difference in someone else's life.

Utilizing craft as a means of creating empowerment, especially for women, is a long established practice in the nonprofit world, but these models are changing. The focus on community engagement and leadership, as well as the preservation of cultural heritage, is creating new models outside of the nonprofit arena. Previous collaborations created a top-down model that created a dependency on the outside agency. More recent partnerships focus on building a self-sustaining enterprise centered around capacities in the community and bringing a more elevated sense of design to the products generated. Bringing in outside partners to expand the market for the artisan's work can increase economic empowerment but may have a negative effect on the cultural integrity of the product.

This study has shown that while there is not one solution to balancing economic empowerment with the preservation of cultural heritage, there are key elements that contribute to a successful collaboration. By focusing on a holistic, long-term commitment, providing reliable revenue streams, and placing decision making at the grassroots level, craft-based empowerment

collaborations can create social change, whether it is large or small. By creating a model that gives voice to the artisans as participants and full partners rather than recipients of charity, craft-based enterprises can create a bridge between traditional and modern cultures, giving traditions life and creating benefits for the craft person's community.

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## Appendix A

### Map of Central Asia (Collaboration #1, SECA)



Source: [https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Central-Asia-downloaded-from-http-wwwsairamtourismcom-ca-today-on\\_fig8\\_308522990/download](https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Central-Asia-downloaded-from-http-wwwsairamtourismcom-ca-today-on_fig8_308522990/download)

**Map of Southeastern United States (Collaboration #2, NPUS)**

Source: <https://uwsslec.libguides.com/>

## Appendix B

### Concept Model of a Successful Artisanal Collaboration

Based on Haugh and Talwar's Emancipatory Social enterprise

#### Key Success Factors

Long Term  
Commitment

Predictable Funding

Community Based –  
Community Led

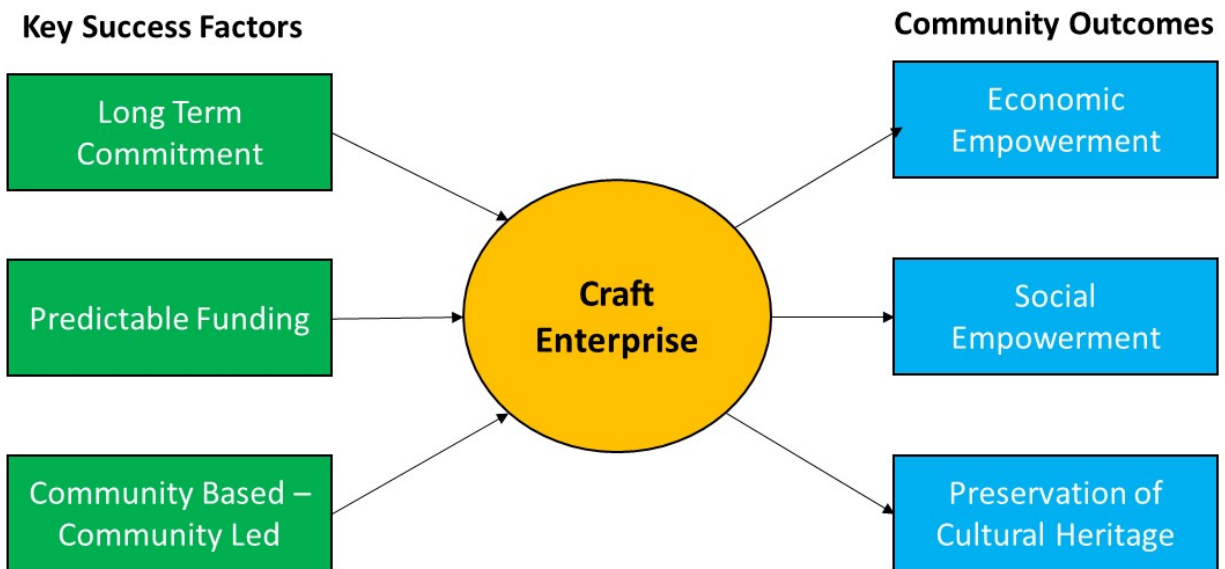
Craft  
Enterprise

#### Community Outcomes

Economic  
Empowerment

Social  
Empowerment

Preservation of  
Cultural Heritage



## **Appendix C**

### **Protocol Questions**

#### ***Introduction***

1. What would be a general description of your organization and its work?
2. Who are the communities that your organization serves?

#### ***Collaborations/Partnerships***

1. Who are some of the groups that collaborated with your organization on this project?
2. What is the role of each group in this collaboration?
3. How is this different than other partnerships that your organization is involved in?
4. What are the possible effects this partnership might have on the artisan's community?

#### ***Culture and Tradition of Artisanal Communities***

1. What effects might tradition and culture have on these communities?
2. What factors might contribute to the evolution of the artisan's craft?