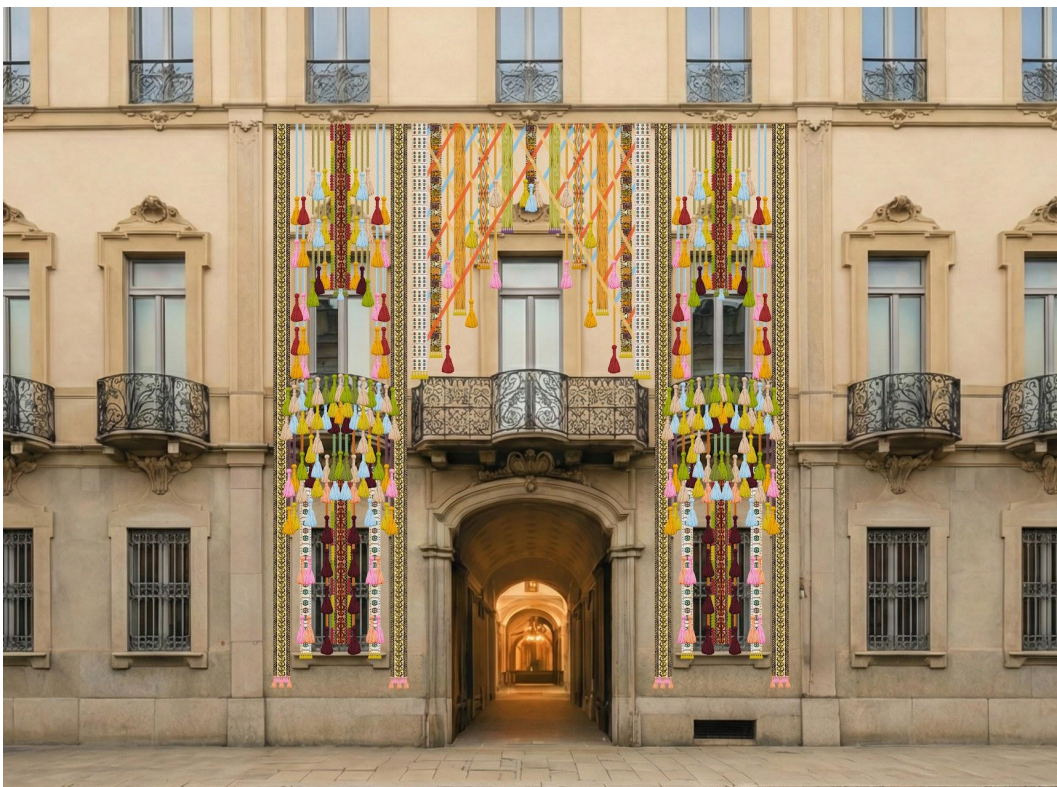


UZBEKISTAN STAGES A POETIC EXPLORATION OF CRAFT, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL LEGACY FOR DEBUT AT MILAN DESIGN WEEK 2026

- The Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF) presents *When Apricots Blossom*, an immersive design exhibition within Palazzo Citterio in Brera from 20-26 April 2026.
- Commissioned by Gayane Umerova, Chairperson of ACDF and curated by Kulapat Yantrasast, Founder of WHY Architecture, the exhibition celebrates Uzbek craft through a contemporary lens.
- Twelve contemporary designers including Bethan Laura Wood, Marcin Rusak, Fernando Laposse, Nifemi Marcus-Bello and Bobir Klichev present new work in collaboration with Uzbek artisans.
- The Aral Culture Summit, Aral School and a specially commissioned film are featured as part of ACDF's long-term engagement with the Aral Sea region through education, cultural initiatives, and interdisciplinary exchange.



Entrance to Palazzo Citterio, indicative render:

Tasseled threshold tapestry by designer Bethan Laura Wood with Uzbek artisans.

When Apricots Blossom, Milan Design Week 2026. Courtesy of ACDF and Bethan Laura Wood Studio.

3 March 2026, Milan, Italy — The **Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF)** presents ***When Apricots Blossom***, an immersive takeover of historic **Palazzo Citterio** in Brera during **Milan Design Week 2026**.

Commissioned by **Gayane Umerova**, Chairperson of ACDF, the exhibition brings together thematic installations, new contemporary design commissions and live programming as expressions of cultural renewal to reframe and revive the material language and environmental legacy of the **Aral Sea region and Karakalpakstan**, an autonomous republic in northwestern Uzbekistan.

Named after a 1930's poem by Uzbek playwright and literary scholar Hamid Olimjon - an ode to hope, optimism and possibility - and coinciding with spring in Milan, *When Apricots Blossom* traces a narrative of resilience in the Aral Sea region through craft and design. For decades, those communities have faced profound environmental change. In the 1960s, the Aral Sea began shrinking dramatically following the diversion of its feeder rivers for irrigation, causing it to lose over 90% of its volume, turning one of the world's largest inland lakes into desert.

When Apricots Blossom unfolds as a spatial journey through Palazzo Citterio, guided by architect **Kulapat Yantrasast**'s focus on three core aspects of Karakalpak culture: textiles, food and shelter. He positions craft not as nostalgia, but as living knowledge: a system of making that carries memory, identity and adaptation across generations.

An Experience Shaped By Place, Material, And Memory

On the palazzo's facade, a large colourful tapestry is crafted by **British designer Bethan Laura Wood** in collaboration with Uzbek artisans. Transforming the entrance into a richly textured threshold, the ornate work draws on the heritage of textile craftsmanship in Uzbekistan. Colourful bespoke tassels and hand woven ribbons, traditionally used to adorn nomadic yurts, cascade over the building. Known for her vibrant use of colour, Wood drew inspiration from her personal archive of antique textiles from Central Asia, alongside the colours and patterns she encountered while travelling through Uzbekistan for this project.

The entrance courtyard greets visitors with an orchard-inspired interpretation of apricot trees, designed by **Uzbek floral artist Ruben Saakyan**. The apricot tree; its fruit is one of Uzbekistan's significant exports and a symbol of hospitality and prosperity, has proved remarkably resilient in the Aral Sea region, one of the world's harshest environments for sustained agriculture.

A large 'deconstructed yurt', designed by **WHY Architecture** and conceived as a space for gathering, creates a focal point in the palazzo's historic Milanese garden. Inspired by the mobility, artisanal construction and material preparation of traditional yurts from Karakalpakstan, the pavilion will host talks, workshops and events as well as moments for quiet reflection.

Contemporary Designers Showcase

At the heart of the exhibition in the main gallery, the story of the Aral Sea unfolds within an undulating topography of reed-like rods that evokes regional landscapes.

Twelve contemporary designers were invited to create a custom bread tray and two bread stamps in collaboration with artisans in Uzbekistan. Celebrating the central and sacred role of bread in Uzbek culture, cuisine and hospitality, the trays are designed to display traditional Uzbek bread (*non*). Decorative stamps (*chekich*) are used to stamp bread that is produced throughout the week during the exhibition. Designers used materials common to crafts in Karakalpakstan, including wood, silk, felt, ceramic and reed.



Bread tray by designer Didi NG Wing Yin, made of local reeds from Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan.
When Apricots Blossom, Milan Design Week 2026. Courtesy of ACDF and Didi NG Wing Yin.

Participating designers include: Bethan Laura Wood (UK), Bobir Klichev (Uzbekistan), Didi NG Wing Yin (Finland, Hong Kong), Fernando Laposse (Mexico), Glithero (Netherlands, UK), Kulapat Yantrasast (Thailand, US), Marcin Rusak (Poland), Nifemi Marcus-Bello (Nigeria), Sanne Visser (Netherlands, UK), Sevara Haydarova Donazzan (Uzbekistan, Italy), Studio CoPain (Belgium), Raw-Edges (UK).

The Aral Sea: Past, Present and Future

As part of ACDF's long-term engagement with the Aral Sea region, the main gallery presentation will unveil a **park redevelopment** project in the regional capital of Nukus, an introduction to the **Aral School**; a design programme investigating resources and solutions for cultural and ecological regeneration, and the **Aral Culture Summit**; an emergent platform that brings together designers, architects, artists, scientists and policymakers to create new social, economic and cultural pathways using local knowledge and international expertise.

A specially commissioned film, *Where The Water Ends* by filmmaker **Manuel Correa** and architect **Marina Otero Verzier** introduces the Aral Sea region through the lives, rituals, and public forums of Karakalpak communities, asking how memory is preserved amid climate collapse.

Gayane Umerova, Chairperson of The Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF), says: *"Milan Design Week has always been a place to showcase design innovations, solutions to global challenges and aesthetic excellence. Uzbek craft and contemporary design are rooted in cultural continuity, so we want to contribute to this moment with new ways of thinking about place, resilience and regenerative practice while inspiring more thoughtful production, curation and consumption. The social and environmental stories behind the people and techniques on show are vital, particularly the Aral Sea's regionally rooted knowledge systems of Karakalpakstan. Kulapat has a deeply humane approach to spatial storytelling – ideal for a project that asks audiences to attend to material nuance and the social histories embedded in objects."*

Kulapat Yantrasast, Curator of *When Apricots Blossom*, says:

"Uzbekistan is such a rich and diverse country. When I travelled there, what I found fascinating is that the craft traditions are ongoing, and almost uninterrupted by industrialisation. People still make bread, still embroider, the way they did centuries ago. That's not so true for many other cultures, where traditional crafts have been disrupted and now exist mainly for tourists. Uzbekistan has a young population that really embraces craft and can keep it alive for the future. We've chosen to focus on the three craft forms of textiles, food and shelter, to provide a glimpse into the life of people in Karakalpakstan."

Milan Design Week: Thematic Resonance

When Apricots Blossom aligns with Fourisalone's 2026 theme, 'Be the Project'. It frames design as a continuous, evolving process rather than just a finished product, highlighting human agency, responsibility, and the integration of new, non-linear intelligences in creative work.

Palazzo Citterio's intimate historic scale, part of Milan's "Grande Brera", is central to the exhibition's curatorial approach, offering a setting designed for "slow looking" and close attention to texture, process and provenance.

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Press Kit and Images: Link [here](#)

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Notes to Editors:

- **Event:** Milan Design Week 2026
 - **Exhibition Title:** *When Apricots Blossom*
 - **Presented by:** Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF) and Gayane Umerova, Chairperson of ACDF
 - **Curated by:** Kulapat Yantrasast, WHY Architecture
 - **Address:** Palazzo Citterio, Via Brera, 12. Milan, Italy
 - **Press Preview:** 19 April 2026, 10:00 - 17:00, By Invitation Only
 - **Public Dates:** 20–26 April 2026, 10:00 - 18:00 daily
 - **Website:** acdf.uz | **Instagram:** [@acdfuz](https://www.instagram.com/acdfuz)
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About the Aral Sea region

The Aral Sea lies between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It was once the fourth-largest freshwater lake in the world. Since the 1960s, it has lost approximately 90% of its original size after the Soviet-era diversion of water from its two main feeder rivers to irrigate cotton fields. By 2007, the northeastern portion had dried up completely. The United Nations has identified the shrinkage as one of the planet's worst environmental disasters, causing a loss of biodiversity and fish life whilst creating challenges around soil, water, energy, food, textiles and air quality that now define the region surrounding Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan located in western Uzbekistan.

About Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF)

ACDF was founded in 2017 to promote Uzbekistan culture at home and abroad, developing and supporting initiatives in the fields of fine arts, architecture, literature, theatre, music, craft, design and dance. It is also the driving force behind the Aral Culture Summit – a new enterprise aimed at transforming the Aral Sea region through art, culture, design, and science, with a focus on social and ecological change.

Positioned at the forefront of Uzbekistan's cultural development, ACDF is committed to fostering the cultural ecosystem of the country, driving the creative economy, and providing opportunities for practitioners on a local, regional and global stage. ACDF believes that culture and heritage are vital in shaping society, uniting communities, bridging generations, and facilitating cross-cultural conversations.

ACDF has successfully led the fourth edition of the World Conference on Creative Economy (WCCE) (2-4 October 2024), Uzbekistan's participation in Expo 2025 Osaka-Kansai, Japan (April – October 2025), and the inaugural edition of Bukhara Biennial (September – November 2025). In March 2026, ACDF will open the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Tashkent. Other projects include the construction of the new National Museum of Uzbekistan designed by Tadao Ando, and the restoration and partial reconstruction of the Palace of the Grand Duke of Romanov. ACDF also launched “Tashkent Modernism. XX/XXI”, an ongoing research project documenting and protecting the city's modernist architecture, highlighted by two significant publications in collaboration with Rizzoli New York (published in 2024) and Lars Müller Publishers (published in 2025). acdf.uz | [@acdfuz](https://www.instagram.com/acdfuz)

About Aral Culture Summit

Aral Culture Summit is an emergent initiative led by the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF), dedicated to social and environmental transformation of the Aral Sea region through art, culture, design and science. Through initiatives including residencies, laboratories, workshops, exhibitions, and festivals, the Summit endeavors to bring about innovation and positive change in the Karakalpakstan region of Uzbekistan. The inaugural Summit took place in April 2025 in Nukus, Uzbekistan. The second edition will be held in September 2026.

Aral Culture Summit aims to regenerate, restore, and revitalise the environment of the region, while attracting new businesses that align with the principles of circular economy, creating sustainable economic growth. The project was officially announced in March 2023 during the UN Water Conference held in New York. This announcement was a significant step in drawing the attention of the world community to the environmental and cultural challenges of the Aral Sea region. aralculturesummit.uz | [@aral.culture.summit](https://www.instagram.com/aral.culture.summit)

About Aral School

The Aral School is an ecological education program in Nukus, Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan, representing a key phase in the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation's (ACDF) commitment to the social, ecological, and cultural regeneration of the Aral Sea region. Reframing environmental challenges through education, local community engagement, and global expertise, the Aral School will develop new solutions for the region and wider world facing broken ecosystems and the impact of climate change.

Founded by ACDF Chairperson Gayane Umerova and with the inaugural edition directed by bioregional designer Jan Boelen, the first pilot course runs from January to June 2026. It features 22 post-graduates (11 regional and 11 international from across disciplines) selected from an open call.

The 2026 program includes guest lecturers and mentors like Eugenia Morpurgo, Fernando Laposse, Justin McGuirk, Maria Lisogorskaya, Mae-Ling Lokko, and John Thackara. The inaugural course culminates with an exhibition of research and prototypes to be presented at the 2nd Aral Culture Summit in Autumn 2026 in Nukus. aralschool.uz | [@aral.school](https://www.instagram.com/aral.school)

About Gayane Umerova, Chairperson of ACDF and Founder of the Aral School

Head of the Department of Creative Economy and Tourism of the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and Chairperson of the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation (ACDF), Gayane Umerova is at the helm of building Uzbekistan's cultural infrastructure. Her efforts are bringing the nation's art, artists, and cultural heritage into the global spotlight. Currently, she is overseeing the restoration and development of the Centre for Contemporary Arts in Tashkent (CCA), poised to open in March 2026 and to become a new cultural hub for the region. She created and was the commissioner of the Bukhara Biennial (5 September - 20 November 2025). She has spearheaded the inaugural Aral Culture Summit (April 4-6, 2025); is driving the construction of the new Uzbekistan National Museum designed by Tadao Ando and was leading the cultural programme of the 43rd session of the UNESCO General Conference that will take place in Samarkand (30 October - 13 November 2025). She is the commissioner for the Uzbekistan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale Arte and Architettura since 2021 as well as for Uzbekistan's participation in Expo 2025 Osaka-Kansai, among other significant projects.

Committed to boosting Uzbekistan's prominence on the international culture scene, Umerova serves as the Chairperson of the National Commission of Uzbekistan on UNESCO Affairs under the Cabinet of Ministers and in April 2025 has been awarded France's Order of Arts and Literature. Her public service commitment is evident in her dedication to creating opportunities for young people in Uzbekistan's cultural sector and fostering a cultural economy that unites communities and generations.

About Kulapat Yantrasast

Thai-born Kulapat Yantrasast is the founder of WHY, an international architecture firm known for its work in the arts and culture sector. Yantrasast received a Master's and PhD in Architecture at the University of Tokyo before working closely with Pritzker prize-winning Japanese architect Tadao Ando for many years, where he helped lead transformative museum and cultural projects. WHY was established in the US in 2004, going on to earn acclaim for designing spaces that integrate art, culture and community. Recent works include the newly opened Dib Bangkok Contemporary Art Museum and the Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Ongoing projects include the new National Museum of India in Delhi and the new Department of Byzantine and Eastern Christian Art at the Louvre Museum in Paris, set to open in 2027. For this Milan exhibition, Yantrasast travelled across Uzbekistan, visiting cultural institutions and meeting artisans, to develop a vision that would celebrate the country's creativity.