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THE ACTIVITY OF ARTISTIC TEXTILE MASTERS IN KASHKADARYA IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY: SPECIALISED SCHOOLS AND MASTER–APPRENTICE TRADITIONS

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Abstract: The article studies the activity of artistic textile masters in the Kashkadarya region of Uzbekistan in the second half of the twentieth century. It examines how embroidery, carpet weaving, terma and other textile crafts were organised within the Soviet system of artels, factories and folk-art enterprises; how specialised training was provided through vocational schools, art education institutions and circles; and how the traditional ustoz–shogird (master–apprentice) system continued to operate within families and mahallas. Based on art-historical and ethnographic literature and on the analysis of surviving textiles, the article argues that formal training and state enterprises ensured the continuity and public recognition of the crafts, while family-based apprenticeship preserved the regional artistic styles of Shahrisabz, Kitab and the steppe districts.
Keywords: Kashkadarya, Shahrisabz, Kitab, artistic textiles, embroidery, suzani, carpet weaving, terma, folk-art enterprises, vocational training, master–apprentice tradition, ustoz–shogird.

Introduction

Artistic textiles are among the most expressive forms of the decorative and applied art of Uzbekistan, and the Kashkadarya oasis has made a distinctive contribution to them. The embroidery of Shahrisabz and Kitab, the pile and flat-woven carpets of the steppe districts, terma bands, felts and patterned cotton cloth of the region are represented in the collections of the State Museum of Arts of Uzbekistan, regional museums and many foreign museums. Scholars such as G. L. Chepelevetskaya and O. A. Sukhareva described the artistic features of Shahrisabz embroidery in the middle of the twentieth century, and later Western researchers, including K. Fitz Gibbon, A. Hale and S. Meller, drew attention to the embroidery of the Lakai and other Uzbek tribal groups of southern Uzbekistan.

Much less attention has been paid to the people who produced these textiles in the second half of the twentieth century and to the ways in which their skills were transmitted. This period is especially important: it was a time when traditional crafts were incorporated into a planned economy, when new forms of professional education appeared, and when, at the same time, family traditions of learning continued to operate largely outside official structures. The purpose of this article is to analyse the activity of textile masters in Kashkadarya between the 1950s and the end of the 1980s, with particular attention to specialised schools and to the master–apprentice tradition. The study uses historical-comparative and descriptive methods, the analysis of published ethnographic and art-historical works, and the study of textiles preserved in museum collections and private families.

Historical background of textile crafts in the oasis

Textile production in Kashkadarya developed at the meeting point of two cultural traditions. In the old cities of Shahrisabz and Kitab, embroidery was practised by townswomen and was closely linked with the work of professional pattern-drawers (chizmakash), who drew compositions on fabric for embroiderers. Shahrisabz embroidery became known for its dense coverage of the ground,

the use of chain stitch (yurma), couching (basma) and especially cross-stitch, known locally as iroqi, as well as for its rich red, crimson and yellow colours. Large suzani, bed covers (ruijo), prayer mats (joynamoz), small decorative panels and embroidered skullcaps were produced.

In the steppe and foothill districts of the oasis, semi-nomadic and settled Uzbek tribal communities, among them the Lakai, Kungrat and others, created a different textile culture. Their women wove pile carpets, flat-woven palas and gilam, narrow terma bands for decorating yurts, felts and bags, and created boldly ornamented embroideries in which large, stylised motifs dominate. These two traditions, urban and steppe, formed the basis of the textile heritage that masters inherited at the beginning of the period under consideration.

The organisation of craft production in the Soviet period

From the 1920s and 1930s, craftsmen in Uzbekistan were gradually united into cooperatives (artels), and in the post-war decades many artels were transformed into state enterprises and factories of the folk-art industry. In Kashkadarya, the embroidery enterprise in Shahrisabz became the main centre of artistic textile production. It employed both workers in its own premises and women who embroidered at home on orders from the enterprise. Its products included embroidered panels, cushion covers, tablecloths, skullcaps and souvenirs, which were sold in the republic and presented at exhibitions. Carpet and textile production was also organised in Karshi and in a number of district centres.

This system had important positive effects. Masters received a regular wage, social guarantees and supplies of fabric and thread; their work was shown at republican and all-Union exhibitions of decorative and applied art, including the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy in Moscow; and the most skilled craftswomen received honorary titles and awards. As a result, embroidery and weaving were recognised as professions rather than only as domestic occupations, and the names of individual masters became known beyond their home towns.

At the same time, the planned economy imposed its own requirements. Enterprises had to fulfil production plans measured in quantity, which encouraged simplified compositions and repetitive production. Patterns were often approved by artistic councils and reproduced in large series. New thematic motifs such as stars, cotton bolls, emblems and inscriptions dedicated to anniversaries appeared next to traditional floral and cosmological ornament. The division of labour, in which one person drew the pattern, another embroidered the outlines and others filled in the ground, weakened the creative role of the individual master, who in the traditional system had been responsible for the whole work.

Specialised schools and formal training

An important feature of the second half of the twentieth century was the emergence of formal training in the decorative and applied arts. Professional artists and designers for the folk-art industry were trained at art colleges and higher art education institutions in Tashkent, and some graduates returned to work as artists and designers at enterprises in the regions. In Kashkadarya itself, training was mostly practical: vocational schools and enterprise training workshops prepared embroiderers and weavers, and newly hired workers learned under the supervision of experienced craftswomen directly in the workshop.

An equally significant role was played by circles (to‘garaklar) of embroidery and needlework at schools, houses of culture and pioneer houses. These circles were often led by local masters or by teachers of labour training, and they introduced girls to basic stitches, the drawing of simple patterns and the history of national ornament. The pedagogical institute in Karshi, which trained teachers for the region, also contributed to the spread of knowledge of folk applied art through the training of labour and fine-arts teachers.

Formal training had both strengths and limitations. It made craft education available to a wider circle of young people, introduced the elements of drawing and composition, and gave graduates an official qualification. However, curricula were usually general for the whole republic and paid less attention to the specific local features of Shahrisabz or steppe embroidery. Thus, the deep knowledge of regional styles continued to be transmitted mainly through the traditional apprenticeship.

It should also be noted that formal and informal training were often connected through the same people. Experienced craftswomen who had learned in their families became instructors in enterprise workshops and school circles, while young women who received a vocational qualification continued to improve their skills under the guidance of older relatives. Such personal links ensured that some elements of local style entered even the standardised production of the enterprises.

The master–apprentice tradition

The ustoz–shogird institution is a historically formed system of transmitting professional knowledge in which the apprentice learns over many years in close personal contact with the master, absorbing not only technical skills but also ethical norms, aesthetic preferences and a sense of responsibility for the quality of work. In textile crafts, which were mainly women's work, this system functioned primarily within the family: mothers, grandmothers and aunts taught girls to embroider and weave from an early age.

In Kashkadarya in the second half of the twentieth century, the main incentive for this family learning was the custom of preparing the bride's dowry (sep). A girl and her female relatives prepared embroidered suzani, bed covers, cushions and other textiles for many years before the wedding, and the quality of these items was seen as evidence of the girl's diligence and of the family's status. Because the dowry tradition remained strong, domestic textile production continued even when private trade in crafts was restricted, and it was in the household that the old compositions, colour combinations and stitches were most fully preserved.

Within the mahalla, recognised masters also worked as teachers for neighbours' daughters, and in many cases the pattern-drawer remained a key figure who supplied designs to many embroiderers. In the steppe districts, the techniques of carpet weaving on the horizontal ground loom, of terma weaving and of felt making were similarly passed from generation to generation within kin groups. Characteristically, many women who worked at state enterprises during the day continued to embroider at home in the traditional style for their own families, so that the official and the family systems of transmission coexisted and influenced each other.

Changes in materials and artistic language

During the period under consideration, the materials of textile crafts changed significantly. Hand-spun silk and wool and natural dyes obtained from madder, pomegranate peel, indigo and other plants were largely replaced by factory threads and synthetic dyes. Industrial cotton and later synthetic fabrics were increasingly used as the ground for embroidery. These changes made production cheaper and faster, but they altered the traditional colour palette and the texture of the textiles.

Nevertheless, the basic principles of composition were preserved. In the 1970s and 1980s, growing interest in national heritage among art historians, museums and the public encouraged some masters to return to older patterns and to study museum collections. This shift, together with the continuity ensured by family apprenticeship, created the foundation for the revival of authentic forms of artistic textiles after independence.

Conclusion

The activity of artistic textile masters in Kashkadarya in the second half of the twentieth century was shaped by the interaction of two systems. The state system of enterprises, exhibitions and formal training provided stable employment, public recognition and a degree of professionalisation, but it also led to standardisation and a weakening of the individual master's creative role. The traditional ustoz–shogird system, supported by the custom of preparing the dowry and by the authority of masters within the mahalla, preserved the regional styles of Shahrisabz, Kitab and the steppe communities. The experience of this period suggests that effective preservation of craft heritage requires a combination of formal education and personal apprenticeship, with curricula that take into account the specific local traditions of each region.

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