BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg
BG PULSE JOURNAL

THE CITY THAT REFUSED TO BE PAINTED OVER

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Doi: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23531522

Annotation: Uzbekistan has placed 157 monumental mosaics under state protection. The decision rescues more than colorful facades: it recognizes a twentieth-century public art form that turned ordinary buildings into archives of ambition, identity, and urban life.

Keywords: Uzbekistan Mosaics; Tashkent Mosaics; Monumental Art; Public Art; Cultural Heritage; Mosaic Conservation; Soviet-Era Art; Uzbek Visual Culture; Urban Memory; Architectural Preservation.

A rescue written into law

For years, the mosaics of Tashkent lived in a strange category: too large to enter a gallery, too familiar to be treated as monuments, and too firmly attached to ordinary buildings to escape the hazards of ordinary renovation. They appeared on the ends of apartment blocks, schools, factories, cultural centers, hotels, and administrative buildings—fields of cobalt, turquoise, amber, and white rising above traffic and courtyards. Residents passed them every day. Then, sometimes overnight, a composition would disappear beneath gray paint, fresh cement, insulation, or a billboard selling something more temporary than the art it concealed.

In March 2024, Uzbekistan changed the legal status of this vulnerable urban collection. Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 154 added 157 mosaics and related monumental works to the National List of Immovable Objects of Tangible Cultural Heritage. Most are in Tashkent, but the register also reaches Nukus, Urgench, Khiva, Samarkand, Namangan, Andijan, Jizzakh, Kokand, Angren, Gulistan, and other districts. The measure followed an expert review that had earlier considered 161 works; the adopted resolution protected 157.

The bureaucratic language matters. The listed works are to be entered into the state cadastre, and the property records of the buildings that carry them must note their cultural value. Construction or alteration affecting the buildings, their protection zones, or adjacent territory now requires a conclusion from the Cultural Heritage Agency. A mosaic that could once be mistaken for expendable facade treatment has become, in law, a monument.

But the decree is more than an administrative correction. It acknowledges a basic truth about modern cities: heritage does not always arrive as a palace, a mosque, or an archaeological ruin. Sometimes it is fixed to the flank of a nine-story apartment block, exposed to exhaust, weather, advertising, and the changing taste of every new property manager.

The art was hiding in plain sight

Tashkent's mosaics belong to the great reconstruction of the city after the 1966 earthquake, when architecture became an instrument of speed, confidence, and collective reinvention. Standardized housing and civic buildings rose across the capital, but their broad, windowless walls presented both a problem and an opportunity. Monumental artists turned those blank elevations into public canvases. The result was an open-air collection dispersed across the city rather than concentrated in a museum.

These works did not simply make concrete more cheerful. They changed the scale at which painting could operate. A monumental mosaic must be read from a moving car, from the opposite side of an avenue, and again from a few feet away. At a distance, it acts through silhouette, color, and rhythm. Up close, it dissolves into hundreds or thousands of individual pieces, each catching light at a slightly different angle. The image is stable, but its surface is never still.

That optical life is essential to the medium. Paint sits on a wall; mosaic becomes part of the wall's physical presence. Ceramic, glass, stone, and cement endure the same heat, frost, dust, and rain as the architecture. Their toughness helped make mosaic an ideal public art form, yet durability produced a dangerous illusion: because the works looked permanent, cities behaved as though they could survive neglect.

The imagery was remarkably varied. There were celebrations of labor, education, science, sport, music, motherhood, harvests, and space exploration. There were also birds, pomegranates, flowering vines, celestial bodies, and almost abstract geometries indebted to Central Asia's long decorative traditions. Official modernity met older visual systems, but not as simple quotation. Artists enlarged, fractured, and reassembled familiar motifs until they belonged to the scale of the modern metropolis.

Ornament, ideology, and a measure of freedom

Soviet monumental art is often reduced to propaganda: heroic workers, technological triumph, a radiant future. Those themes are present in Uzbekistan, but they do not explain the mosaics' emotional range or formal invention. Distance from Moscow, local artistic networks, and the need to make mass construction culturally legible created room for experimentation. Uzbek ornament, Persianate geometry, Silk Road color, folklore, and contemporary abstraction entered the same visual field as factories, athletes, books, and rockets.

The most compelling panels do not resolve these influences; they hold them in tension. A figure may be unmistakably modern while surrounded by a pattern whose ancestry reaches back centuries. A composition devoted to industry may shimmer with the saturated blues associated with the tiled monuments of Samarkand. Repetition, symmetry, and vegetal rhythm can soften the ideological certainty of the subject. The state commissioned a message, but the artist built a world around it.

This is why the mosaics deserve to be judged as serious works of art rather than nostalgic curiosities. Their makers had to coordinate image, architecture, material, distance, climate, and public movement. They worked with walls that could not be carried into a studio and viewers who had not chosen to enter a museum. The city was both exhibition hall and audience.

In that sense, Uzbekistan's mosaics are democratic in the most literal way. They belonged to the visual experience of everyone: children walking to school, families returning home, factory

workers changing shifts, passengers looking through bus windows. No ticket was required. Their publicness was not a theme; it was their condition of existence.

How a monument disappears

Public art can vanish without the drama of demolition. A mural is covered by advertising. A facade is "renewed" in a fashionable neutral color. Exterior insulation buries the original surface. Windows are enlarged; air-conditioning units interrupt a composition; ceramic elements loosen and are discarded rather than catalogued. Each intervention can appear minor. Together they erase authorship, context, and memory.

Tashkent has seen all of these pressures. In 2018, public discontent helped secure the restoration of a mosaic that had been painted over on a residential building. In 2022, residents protested after workers coated large areas of several nine-story buildings near the city administration with cement. The covering was halted, and laborers had to remove parts of the cement manually—an absurdly physical reversal of an avoidable mistake.

The episode exposed a conflict familiar far beyond Uzbekistan. Renovation is usually presented as improvement, and modernist surfaces are often judged by whether they look new. Yet conservation asks a different question: what evidence of age, material, authorship, and civic history must remain visible? Cleaning a mosaic is not the same as repainting a hallway. A monumental work cannot be "refreshed" without understanding its original tesserae, mortar, color relationships, and bond to the building.

Relocation presents another dilemma. In 2023, a mosaic by Arnold Gan was dismantled as a newspaper-production building in central Tashkent was demolished, with plans to install the panel elsewhere. Saving the material was far preferable to destroying it. Still, a relocated mosaic loses part of its meaning: the proportions of the original wall, its relationship to the street, the angle of the sun, and the social history of the site. A mosaic is an image, but it is also an address.

Protection is the beginning, not the ending

The 2024 resolution gives heritage authorities a legal instrument that preservation advocates had long demanded. Yet listing alone cannot conserve 157 works distributed across public and private property. Protection must become a practical system: accurate documentation, condition surveys, authorship research, maintenance protocols, trained conservators, clear guidance for building owners, and penalties strong enough to deter careless alteration.

The first task is to know exactly what survives. Public documentation projects have already shown that Tashkent contains far more mosaics than the protected list. Some sources record more than 300 works in the capital; many remain unattributed, altered, or outside formal protection. A national digital catalogue should bring together historical photographs, artists' sketches, dates, materials, dimensions, restoration records, ownership, and geographic coordinates. Such a catalogue would not replace legal protection, but it would make disappearance harder to hide.

The second task is technical. Mosaic conservation sits between architecture and fine art. Specialists must diagnose cracks, water penetration, corrosion, failed mortar, unstable tiles, and damage caused by previous repairs. Replacement pieces should not flatten the subtle variations of the

original surface. Where losses cannot be reconstructed with evidence, honest conservation may be preferable to decorative invention.

The third task is cultural. Residents need to see these works not as remnants of someone else's political era, but as part of their own urban inheritance. School programs, walking routes, artist biographies, bilingual plaques, digital maps, and carefully designed nighttime lighting could transform dispersed mosaics into a visible cultural network. Tourism is one objective named in the government resolution, but the most important audience is local. A city protects what its residents have learned to recognize.

The walls are speaking again

Uzbekistan's decision arrives at a moment when cities across the former Soviet world are struggling to decide what to do with twentieth-century monumental art. Some works are politically compromised; others have been ignored because they belong to buildings considered too recent, too ordinary, or too unfashionable to count as heritage. The answer cannot be indiscriminate celebration. It should be informed attention: to artistic quality, historical context, local meaning, and the right of contemporary society to interpret the past without erasing it.

Tashkent's mosaics make a particularly strong case because their identity has never been singular. They are Soviet and Uzbek, ideological and decorative, industrial and handmade, architectural and pictorial. They speak in the language of their time, but they also exceed it. The most successful panels transform official themes into something more intimate: pride in knowledge, wonder at nature, delight in rhythm and color, faith in human creativity.

To preserve them is not to freeze the city in the 1970s. It is to allow a fast-changing capital to keep evidence of how earlier generations imagined progress. New architecture will continue to rise; facades will be repaired; neighborhoods will change. The question is whether change must require amnesia.

For decades, these mosaics watched over daily life without demanding attention. Now that the law has finally named them as heritage, the city has an opportunity to look back. The reward is not merely the survival of 157 panels. It is the recovery of an idea: that art can belong to the street, that beauty can be built into ordinary life, and that a wall can carry the memory of a nation.

Editor's note and selected sources

This is an original English-language feature developed from the supplied Russian report and expanded through independent research and artistic analysis. Publication editors should verify house style, image rights, captions, and the author biography before press.

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