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Artistic Ceramics Of Uzbekistan: Traditions And Innovations

Alieva Surayyo

Doctor of Art Studies, Professor, Leading Research Fellow, Institute of Art Studies, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan, Tashkent

Abstract: The article analyzes the development of artistic ceramics from the 20th to the early 21st century. It examines the distinctive features of the artistic style of Uzbek ceramics in the context of preserving and creatively interpreting traditions in contemporary masters' practice. The study explores the adaptation of new forms, the dynamics of stylistic changes, and the process of creating a new system of imagery in the ceramics of Uzbekistan, and also traces the relationship between tradition and innovation within a broad socio-cultural and historical context.

Keywords: Ceramics, tradition, school, genesis, ornamentation, technology, glaze, interpretation, style, form.

Introduction: One of the most ancient and exceptionally interesting types of applied art in Uzbekistan is artistic ceramics. In terms of technique, it is divided into two main types—unglazed and glazed. Unglazed hand-molded ceramics has deeper historical roots. In the middle of the second millennium BCE, the potter's wheel appeared in Central Asia, which transformed the appearance of unglazed ceramic ware. From that moment on, it became more sophisticated and varied in both form and decorative design.

Today, alongside utilitarian pottery, craftsmen also create traditional clay toys—whistling figurines known as khushpulak—which are left unglazed and likewise date back to ancient times.

Unglazed ceramics today is represented by large household items used in the daily life of rural communities—khums, tandirs (ovens for baking flatbread), jugs, and other vessels produced in several centers of Uzbekistan. One of the few such places is Kasbi, a site known in the past for producing both unglazed and glazed ceramics. The village of Kasbi served as a notable center for making these items; in the 1970s–1980s the craftswoman Ambar Sattarova worked

there, creating unique toys shaped like birds and animals on wheels. The traditions of this type of toy go back to the most ancient times, as evidenced by archaeological findings. With A. Sattarova's passing, the tradition of making wheeled toys disappeared. Today, Kasbi toys are created by the wife of ceramist Bakhtiyor Sattarov (the daughter-in-law of A. Sattarova), though in a different style—fairy-tale animals without wheels.

Renowned ceramists from Samarkand, Sharif Azimov and Khakberdy Khudayberdiyev, both Academicians of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, are successfully working in the unglazed ceramics technique today.

Terracotta toys are created by the Samarkand craftswoman Dilorom Mukhtarova, who continues the terracotta sculptural traditions of the Mukhtarov dynasty. In Rishtan, Firdaus Yusupov, the son of Sharafiddin Yusupov, produces terracotta toys inspired by multi-headed dragons from Ura-Tepa, a motif popularized by the celebrated master Gafur Khalilov.

It is known that from the late 8th to the early 9th century, glazed ceramics emerged and became widespread in the cities of Mawarannahr. By the 19th century, the main schools and centers on the territory of present-day Uzbekistan had taken shape:

- a) the Samarkand–Bukhara school, with centers in Tashkent, Samarkand, Urgut, Bukhara, Gijduvan, Shakhrisabz, Kitab, Kattakurgan, and Denau;
- b) the Fergana school, with centers in Rishtan, Gurumsaray, and Andijan; and
- c) the Khorezm school, with centers in Khiva, the village of Madyr and Kattabag, Chimbay, and others. Each center preserved its own local features.

By the late 1960s, however, an alarming trend toward the disappearance of several unique centers of folk ceramics in Uzbekistan had begun to emerge. In many respects, this was linked to socio-economic factors. Unfortunately, by the present time, the ceramic traditions of Samarkand, Kattakurgan, Shakhrisabz, Kitab, Denau, and Tashkent have been largely lost; some centers have ceased to function altogether, and only a few museum specimens attest to the flourishing state of this craft in the past.

In the 1960s–1980s, not only did the market for folk ceramic products significantly shrink, but the number of practicing potters also declined sharply. Many renowned masters passed away, while others—unable to find apprentices, support, or material security—abandoned the craft, which had become unprofitable. The products of folk masters could not compete with industrial goods made of porcelain, metal, or plastic.

By the mid-1970s–1980s, the traditional ceramics of

Samarkand (U. Dzhurakulov, S. Rakova, A. Mukhtarov) and Tashkent (M. Rakhimov) had, in essence, been completely reinterpreted. A completely new stylistic phenomenon emerged—the Samarkand school of small-scale terracotta sculpture. The establishment of the Tashkent Experimental and Creative Combine of Applied Arts (renamed after M. Rakhimov in 1984), which produced experimental, unique, small-series, and limited-edition works and became a center of new monumental architectural and landscape ceramics, did not, however, serve as a foundation for the subsequent, consistent development of traditional Tashkent pottery.

Today, the situation in Uzbek glazed ceramics, in terms of preserving its authentic layers and the emergence of innovative approaches, can be divided into two streams. The first is traditional glazed ceramics, based primarily on local traditions of specific schools and centers. This category includes the masters of Rishtan (Sh. Yusupov, F. Yusupov, M. Saidov, A. Nazirov, B. Nazirov, A. Isanov, I. Kamilov), Andijan (M. Abduvakhobov), Gurumsaray (V. Buvaev), Urgut (N. Oblakulov), Gijduvan (Alisher and Abdullo Narzullaev), and Khiva (O. Matchanov, B. Atadzhanov). Although notable innovations in ornamental design can also be observed in the work of masters from these centers, they remain committed to traditional techniques and forms. New elements are introduced mainly through reinterpretation of specific ornamental motifs and vessel shapes. In other words, in the regions, local tradition carries greater weight, and its development proceeds in an evolutionary manner.

The second stream consists of innovative works in which the masters' individual creative initiative is more actively expressed, and the range of techniques and ornamental patterns is broadened without strict adherence to any specific local tradition. This direction includes the Tashkent masters Akbar and Alisher Rakhimov, who continue the traditions of the founder of this style, Mukhiddin Rakhimov. Working in the same innovative direction is the young ceramist from Bukhara, Abduvakhid Karimov, who reconstructs the traditions of Afrasiab ceramics and the blue-and-turquoise ceramics of 17th-century Bukhara, presenting them as original artistic creations. These masters preserve traditional technologies but introduce authorial innovations in the artistic design of their works, using ornamentation from different historical periods with greater freedom.

Overall, the process of adapting Uzbek ceramics to the conditions of a market economy presents several causes for concern. In the search for sales opportunities, many masters adjust to the unrefined tastes of tourists, which often leads to a loss of deeply rooted traditions and stylistic distinctions. An equally complex issue is that of apprenticeship. The old "usto–shogird" system has now

taken on a simplified and distorted form. In the past, masters would take on apprentices, train them to a certain level, administer examinations, and give their blessing, which functioned as a kind of diploma. Unfortunately, such practice no longer exists. Lacking opportunities for long-term training, young masters complete accelerated two- or three-month courses and then begin selling products that are artistically inferior. As a result, we encounter a situation in which the market undermines the traditional system of training highly skilled ceramists, leading to a decline in the overall quality of ceramics produced in historically renowned centers. Leading masters who produce high-quality works strive to sell them at prices corresponding to their craftsmanship, while their students sell their goods cheaply. Mass-produced items have flooded the salons, galleries, and markets of the tourist centers of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent. The younger generation of ceramists, oriented toward the market and the buyer, seeks to establish accelerated—and therefore lower-quality—production. At the same time, many among them still recognize the need to adhere to genuine, time-honored traditions.

The problem of apprenticeship and the preservation of traditions is closely connected with new historical circumstances—specifically, the functioning of ceramics within a market economy. For the contemporary master, it is extremely important to preserve and creatively develop the traditions of the school and region in which he acquired his skills.

Today, in the development of national ceramics, the issue of preserving its authentic character and its original ornamentation has become especially relevant. In this sense, maintaining the purity of the artistic and figurative structure of Uzbek ceramics is of great importance.

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