

The Art of Central Asia

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The present book deals with the art of the four Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics – the Kirghiz Republic, the Tajik Republic, the Turkmen Republic and the Uzbek Republic. They occupy an area stretching from the Caspian Sea in the west to the Chinese border in the east, a region of strikingly diverse climatic zones. This land is characterized by its magnificent mountain ranges, blossoming oases along rivers and vast steppes transforming gradually into the “singing” quicksands of the desert.

Central Asia is a country of ancient civilizations; it has a very rich historical and cultural heritage. Even during the Bronze and early Iron Ages, the culture of Central Asia ranked alongside the culture of the classical Orient – from Mesopotamia to India.

In the 6th century B.C., a considerable part of Central Asia was seized by the powerful Iranian state of the Achaemenids, and in the 4th century B.C., by the army of Alexander the Great. The period between the 3rd century B.C., when the Greek rule was overcome, and the 3rd century A.D. was marked by the emergence of the Parthian Kingdom of the Arsacids (region in South Turkestan, Iran and part of Mesopotamia), the Graeco-Bactrian and, later, the Kushan Kingdom (which included, in addition to Bactria, vast areas beyond the Amu Darya and down to the Indus and Ganges) and the state of Kangyu (Khwarazm, Sogdia and territories north of it). In historical and cultural terms, this was the era of the formation and upsurge of local antiquity, whose flowering was determined both by the factors of internal social development and by contact with the Hellenistic states in Iran and India.

Compared to preceding epochs, the artistic culture of antiquity is a totally new phenomenon. The art of Central Asia developed from the start in close interaction with the art of neighbouring countries. But in the period of antiquity this process became particularly intense. In art works from the southern provinces one can see traces of ancient Iranian, Hellenistic and Indo-Buddhist influences, whereas the art of the north-east and parts of the central regions betrays the strong influence of Sako-Scythian art. But for all that, Central Asian artists did not simply copy foreign forms and motifs. Instead, they modified and re-interpreted the borrowed themes, images and stylistic devices in conformity with local notions and aesthetic objectives, producing new and highly ingenious art as a result.

The collapse of the ancient Central Asian states and the intrusion into the territory of northern nomadic peoples in the 4th and 5th centuries paved the way for the emergence of a new social system. The period between the 6th and 8th centuries saw the process of intense feudalization of Central Asia, which was broken at that time into a multitude of semi-independent principalities. It was the era of Central Asian feudal lords, whose numerous impregnable castles were scattered about in the region's valleys and mountains. A vivid manifestation of the new social system was the appearance of a special type of early-medieval culture. Various art forms and crafts came into being in the as yet small number of towns.

The region's lack of political unity facilitated its occupation by the Arabs. Thus, the entire territory from the Amu Darya to Semirechye (the area of Seven Rivers), fell in the 7th–8th centuries under the power of the Caliphate and was called *Mavera al-Nahr* in Arabic; the southern region of present-day Turkmenia became part of the Khorasan province, and only Khwarazm retained its former designation.

The assertion of Islam as the dominant religion had a vital effect upon many aspects of life, including artistic culture. Central Asia not only adopted many features of the Caliphate culture of the Muslim East, but also made important contributions to it.

The period between the 10th and 12th centuries was marked by a fundamental change in art. The traditions of antiquity were abandoned along with the development of monumental painting and sculpture. Meanwhile, the decorative style arising in the 11th century came to dominate the art of all Islamic countries, with architecture and applied art emerging as the focus for artistic creativity. On the political level, in the 9th–10th centuries, local rulers, while still formally subjugated to the Caliphs, were in effect independent, and from the early 11th century onwards, Turkic dynasties established themselves in the region following the waves of Turkic invasions. The period was marked by the growth of towns (the largest being Samarkand, Bukhara, Merv, Akhsyent, Uzen and Urgench) and a rapid development of urban culture.

The culture of Central Asia suffered great losses in the early 13th century, resulting from the Mongol-Tartar invasion. It was only by the early 14th century that social life was more or less revived, allowing artistic culture to resume further development, reaching its acme in the late 14th and early 15th centuries under Timur and the Timurids. These artistic traditions continued well into the reign of the Uzbek dynasty of the Shaybanids (16th century) and the Astrakhanids (17th century); however, the slackening of foreign political and economic contacts of Central Asia during this period and the aggravation of internecine feuds led to a social crisis in the 18th century and the almost complete cessation of cultural activity. Only in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was there a certain cultural revival in the Bukhara Emirate and the Khanates of Khiva and Kokand, which grew in scope during the period that saw the inclusion of the latter two into the Russian Empire. From that moment on, Central Asian lands began to be called Turkestan and the Transcaspian territory.

The periods of mature and late feudalism in Central Asia were marked at one time by a rise, at another by a fall in the level of artistic creativity, with the most outstanding achievements occurring, as before, in architecture, manuscript illumination and crafts.

In 1918, after the Great October Socialist Revolution, the Central Asian territory became part of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which subsequently was transformed into four independent republics in conformity with Lenin's national policy.

The Soviet period witnesses a genuine flourishing of the Central Asian peoples' creativity: new art forms, such as easel painting, graphic art and theatrical design have come into being; monumental painting and sculpture experience a revival; and a powerful impetus has been given to further development of the traditional applied arts.

This book presents examples of the most characteristic art forms of Central Asia. Arranged chronologically, they provide comprehensive information on the development of the arts in this region from ancient times to the present day. The Soviet period is represented by works that continue these age-long artistic traditions.

