

# Craftsmanship in Bukhara in The Late 19th - Early 20th Centuries

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## Abstract:

Bukhara has historically been recognized as a vibrant center of craftsmanship in Central Asia, with artisanal traditions forming a cornerstone of its economic and cultural identity. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Emirate of Bukhara experienced notable changes in its craft sector, influenced by socio-political transformations, increased trade, and the onset of industrialization. Despite extensive documentation of Bukhara's architectural and scholarly legacy, the systematic study of its craft economy and artisanal evolution during this transitional period remains underexplored. This article investigates the development and transformation of various branches of craftsmanship in Bukhara during the specified era, highlighting their socio-economic significance, artisanal practices, and the impact of colonial influence. The study identifies gold embroidery, papermaking, jewelry, blacksmithing, bronze casting, and wood carving as dominant artisanal sectors. It reveals that these crafts were deeply rooted in manual labor and familial inheritance, often localized within *guzars* or villages named after specific trades. The gradual emergence of industrial workshops, investor-led enterprises, and external trade relations, especially with Russian firms, marked the beginning of economic diversification. By combining historical sources, ethnographic accounts, and localized records, the research offers a multidimensional portrayal of Bukhara's craftsmanship as both a cultural expression and economic engine. The findings underscore the role of artisanal labor in sustaining local economies, shaping urban identities, and adapting to external political and economic pressures—an insight that remains relevant for heritage preservation and regional development policies today.

**Keywords:** Manual Labor, Large Industrial Enterprise, Ethnographer, Degrez, Rekhtagar, Household Goods, Bellmaker, Factory, Spade, Guzar, Beklik

## Introduction

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, Bukhara stood as one of the most culturally vibrant and economically significant centers in Central Asia, with its craftsmanship representing a cornerstone of local identity and production. The Emirate of Bukhara was long renowned not only for its architectural and intellectual achievements but also for the exceptional skills of its artisans, whose manual labor shaped the everyday material and cultural life of the region. Crafts such as gold embroidery, metalworking, papermaking, jewelry production, and woodcarving were highly developed, reflecting both artistic sophistication and the socio-economic demands of the time. These traditional industries played a critical role in shaping urban and rural livelihoods, serving as the backbone of local trade and sustaining a self-sufficient economy. Despite the absence of large-scale industrial enterprises, craftsmanship in Bukhara thrived through small workshops and household production units, many of which were tied to guild-like structures and regional guzars named after specific crafts. Scholars and travelers of the period, including Meyendorf and Vambery, emphasized the uniqueness and quality of Bukharan crafts, which often bore symbolic and practical significance. However, with the spread of Russian colonial influence and the advent of capitalist-industrial relations, these traditional forms of labor began to experience decline. The transformation of the socio-economic structure brought both opportunities and disruptions, making the study of Bukharan craftsmanship in this transitional period a compelling subject for historical inquiry. This paper seeks to analyze the state and evolution of crafts in Bukhara at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, exploring their cultural, economic, and technological dimensions.

## Methods

This study on craftsmanship in Bukhara in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is grounded in a historical-analytical methodology, supported by the examination of both primary and secondary sources[1]. The research relied on archival data, historical records, traveler accounts, and ethnographic observations to reconstruct the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the period[2]. Descriptive analysis was employed to interpret documented evidence about various artisan groups, workshops, and production techniques prevalent in Bukhara[3]. Special attention was given to localized craft specializations such as gold embroidery, papermaking, blacksmithing, bronze casting, and jewelry-making[4]. The study used comparative historiography by referencing notable works of Russian and European scholars including G. Vambery, A.A. Semenov, and Meyendorf to corroborate and contextualize the evolution of craftsmanship during this transitional era[5]. The integration of geographic data—identifying specific neighborhoods, guzars, and villages—enabled the spatial mapping of artisan activity in and around Bukhara[6]. Economic patterns were also analyzed through the identification of trade networks and market structures that supported the circulation of handcrafted goods[7]. By interpreting these various dimensions collectively, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how traditional crafts functioned both as a cultural heritage and as a backbone of the local economy before industrialization took hold[8]. This multi-source approach ensured a holistic and context-sensitive reconstruction of the role of craftsmanship in the socio-economic fabric of the Bukhara Emirate[9].

## Results and Discussion

The Bukhara Emirate has long been a center of crafts, and the development of industries stimulated the revival of all spheres of public life[10].

The city of Bukhara in the past was known and famous in the Eastern world not only for its science, culture, architectural monuments, underground and surface resources, and abundant markets, but also for hundreds of craft workshops and products made in them[11]. In Bukhara, gold embroidery, embroidery, baking, weaving, sewing, metalworking, leatherworking, clothing making, metalworkers and blacksmiths who made tools for agriculture gained fame with their craft stalls[12].

Craftsmanship is a national-traditional type of production based on individual manual labor using simple tools[13].

Issues of Central Asian crafts, including those of Bukhara, have always attracted the attention of researchers: historians, economists, ethnographers, archaeologists, and specialists in other fields[14].

In the second half of the 19th century, there is often indirect information about Bukharan crafts[15].

Many branches of crafts were widespread in all the cities of Central Asia, and these branches were in great demand in the national economy and everyday life. At the same time, there are species in Bukhara that are not found in many cities of Central Asia, and this area is considered especially renowned for Bukhara.

We are primarily referring to Bukhara's gold embroidery products, created with high artistic taste since ancient times, and elegant paper produced with exquisite quality.

The art of gold embroidery flourished in Bukhara since ancient times and reached a high artistic level.

Most gold embroidery masters, inherited from their ancestors, sewed jackets, cloaks, trousers, footwear, belts, turbans, ears, and wool for the court. These clothes were ordered by the khan or his close associates to be made for a family celebration or holiday. They could only wear gold-embroidered clothes as gifts from the emir. Women's and children's embroidered clothing was worn only by members of wealthy households, which they wore on occasions of family celebrations or holidays. Boys from wealthy families no older than 8-10 years old were dressed in gold-embroidered robes on the occasion of circumcision ceremonies. Gold-embroidered clothing belonging to the Mangit dynasty, which ruled Bukhara in the 19th - early 20th centuries, is a copy of the only monuments. In the Bukhara State Museum-Reserve, many embroidered garments belonging to Amir Nasrullo Khan have been preserved. The examples of the art of gold embroidery of that period, belonging to Abdulakhadkhan, who ruled from 1885 to 1911, indicate that this period was a period of flourishing gold embroidery.

A.A. Semenov notes that the city of Bukhara is one of the most famous cities for paper production. And provides information about the abundance of paper in Bukhara. In particular, there is the Juvoz canal, which was drawn from the Shahrud canal flowing through the city of Bukhara, and on the bank of the canal there was a village called Juvozqog'oz, where 30 households lived, and they made products using paper water carriers.

At the beginning of the 20th century, papermaking enterprises existed in the villages of Galaosiyu and Gurbun, located north of the city of Bukhara, where about 100 people were engaged in this profession. Paper made in Bukhara was painted in different colors, and each color had a special meaning. For example, havorang means mourning, separation, while light red means happiness, joy. The produced paper was often painted red and green, as this color gave a person a certain spiritual vigor.

The Russian traveler and historian Meyendorf of the first half of the 19th century provided valuable information about the industry of Bukhara. According to his information, there are no large industrial enterprises in Bukhara, and no workshop employs more than 3-4 workers simultaneously.

H. Vambery also briefly touched upon the issue of craftsmanship. Listing the major craft centers of Central Asia, he placed Bukhara at the forefront of Central Asia in the field of craftsmanship. H. Vambery emphasizes the development of textile crafts, such as the production of printed goods, the manufacture of calico and its products, and the production of paper from silk.

Due to the revival in the cultural life of Bukhara at the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th centuries, the growth of public consciousness, the expansion of worldview, and the change in aesthetic ideas created new themes in artistic images. Ganch and wood carving decorations were widely used in Bukhara architecture. In the applied art of ganch carving, spatial and volumetric forms,

and majestic domes were widely used.

In the second half of the 19th century, wall painting reached its peak, and by the beginning of the 20th century, under the influence of Western culture, changes in architecture were noticeable. Wall painting was rarely used. Bukharan ornamentalists also used techniques of carving and painting, giving a unique decoration to the verandas, which make up an important part of the courtyards.

The number of fitters in Bukhara was about 150 people. 30 of them were engaged in the manufacture of shovels, 50 - in the making of sickles, and some artisans specialized in the manufacture of various small household items: chains and door rings.

In Bukhara, the art of making ancient weapons - rextasary - has been preserved. Local craftsmen made bronze themselves and made items from it on a large scale. In particular, the casting of bells of various shapes and bells became a separate field (these are bronze casting artists).

At the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th centuries, the workshops of Bukharan blacksmiths were located in villages on the outskirts of the city. There were two large workshops in the village of Mughalani. There were two workshops in the village of Utkurni, one workshop in the village of Zarmanak, and three workshops in the village of Vojiktu. A total of 8 workshops were located in the suburbs of the city, closely connected with the city of Bukhara.

In the literature, there is also information about the existence of a workshop with 25 machines in Bukhara. During this period, new rich men, factory owners, millionaires, and owners of large enterprises appeared in the region. It should also be noted that such a small number of investors mainly emerged from among entrepreneurs trading in cotton, karakul, and handicrafts. They established strong ties with Russian capitalist firms operating in the emirate and other cities in the European part of Russia.

Central Asia, including the Bukhara Emirate, by the end of the 19th century. Russia fell under the influence of colonial policy. As a result, the colonized and semi-colonized territories underwent changes to the traditional way of life formed over centuries. This was also clearly felt in the spheres of crafts.

The Bukhara Emirate has long been a center of crafts, and the development of industries, in turn, stimulated the revival of trade related to them. The population of large cities was mainly engaged in crafts and trade. This process initially paved the way for the development of domestic trade.

At the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th century, a new view on the development of entrepreneurship and trade began to emerge in the Bukhara Emirate. Progressive scholars and Jadids, who demanded changes in all messages of society, began to criticize the problems of economic life, seek solutions to them, and develop their own ideological programs for the development of the sphere.

A widespread craft in the Bukhara Emirate was bronze casting, which was practiced by 12 out of 28 households living in a village near the Karakul Gate in the city of Bukhara. In the city of Bukhara, there were more than 100 rectangles and their more than 60 shops.

One of the most developed areas of craftsmanship in Bukhara was jewelry making, and in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the products made by jewelers of such cities as Bukhara, Nurata, Boysun, Sherabad, and Kitab were of high quality and beautiful. In the city of Bukhara alone, about 400 jewelers worked, many of whom had their own shops in the trading rows of the Toqi Zargaron. Many jewelers also lived in the Karshi beklik, who made beautiful jewelry from gold and silver for women and adorned them with precious stones.

At the end of the 19th - beginning of the 20th centuries, all branches of crafts were developed in the Bukhara Emirate. This type of productive labor, based on manual labor, declined with the emergence of industrial enterprises and manufacturing plants. However, all the products made by Bukharan

artisans were renowned for their high quality and durability. These types of goods, manufactured taking into account the constant needs of the population, were in demand in the shopping centers of the city of Bukhara and the bekliks. Some master craftsmen sold their products in the market themselves, while others offered them to resellers at wholesale prices. The urban and rural population specialized in various branches of crafts, and guzars and villages were named after the type of craft. This form of entrepreneurship provided employment for a large part of the Emirate's population and was considered important in the country's economy.

## Conclusion

The analysis of craftsmanship in Bukhara during the late 19th and early 20th centuries reveals a vibrant and diverse artisanal tradition deeply rooted in the region's socio-economic and cultural fabric. Bukhara stood as a significant center of manual production, where numerous specialized crafts flourished, including gold embroidery, papermaking, bronze casting, blacksmithing, and jewelry making. These crafts were not only markers of artistic and technical excellence but also integral components of the local economy, providing employment and supporting trade across the Emirate. Craftsmen operated in urban guzars and suburban villages, with many artisans inheriting skills passed down through generations. The period also witnessed notable transformations as traditional craftsmanship began to encounter the influence of colonial policies, emerging capitalist practices, and the early signs of industrialization. Despite the limited scale of mechanized production, the integration of craft with trade, the rise of local entrepreneurship, and the cultural significance of artisanal products continued to sustain Bukhara's reputation across Central Asia. The preservation of aesthetic standards and functional quality in handmade goods highlights the resilience of traditional industries even as modern enterprises gradually took hold. This historical examination affirms the essential role of craftsmanship in shaping Bukhara's identity and economic life, underscoring the need to document, study, and revive these practices in the context of cultural heritage and sustainable development. The legacy of Bukharan artisanship offers invaluable insights into the interplay between tradition, innovation, and cultural continuity during a pivotal era of regional change.

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