

Stages of Historical Development of Wood Carving (From The Early Middle Ages to The 20th Century)

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Abstract:

Woodcarving is a deeply rooted artistic tradition found across many cultures, reflecting spiritual beliefs, social structures, and aesthetic values. In Uzbekistan, this craft has evolved uniquely over centuries, influenced by religious, political, and cultural shifts from the early Middle Ages to the 20th century. Despite its rich history, a comprehensive historical synthesis that connects the stages of development, regional schools, and stylistic changes of Uzbek woodcarving remains limited. This study aims to trace the chronological development of woodcarving in Uzbekistan, highlighting key regional styles, cultural influences, and artistic transformations across historical epochs. The research identifies major developmental stages from ornamental and figurative carving in the early Middle Ages to the ornate Timurid epigraphic style and the emergence of regional carving schools (e.g., Khorezm, Bukhara, Margilan) by the 18th century. It also explores the socio-political factors that shaped woodcarving during the khanate period and the Russian colonial era. This study presents a synthesized historical narrative of Uzbek woodcarving, emphasizing the integration of religious symbolism, local craftsmanship traditions, and cross-cultural artistic exchanges. The findings underscore the role of woodcarving as a medium for cultural expression and identity in Uzbekistan and offer insights for preserving and revitalizing traditional craftsmanship within contemporary cultural heritage frameworks.

Keywords: Board, Panel, Sogd, Box, Decoration, Pattern, Fortress

Introduction

Over the centuries, wood carving has developed in all regions of the world, and depending on the socio-economic, political, cultural, military development and spiritual unity of peoples and the societies and states where they live, various unique artistic styles have emerged in this field. Wood carving existing in all nations is mainly divided into the following main types: contour, geometric, relief, cut. These species had different positions in different periods.

According to researchers, at the beginning of the millennium AD, woodcarving was widely developed in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, especially the production of wooden sculptures of various animals and people, various objects with their images, and the processing of chess pieces. The local population's worship of deities and the need for associated statues contributed to the development of these areas of carving to a certain extent.

Woodcarving in Central Asia developed in two main directions - ornamental and figurative. However, these directions sometimes intertwined, creating complex compositions imbued with deep artistic ideas, not devoid of philosophical content. These directions were reflected in the buildings of those times.

During the excavation of the 1,300-year-old palace of the Ikhshid rulers of Samarkand in Afrosiab, “remains of charred carved beams and figures holding their caryatids were found in one of the halls that had been reduced to ashes in a fire.”. It should be emphasized that over time, the boundaries of the art of woodcarving expanded, gradually separating from the life of ordinary people and acquiring an aristocratic spirit. It became a tradition and practice to use the possibilities of the art of woodcarving to decorate the luxurious palaces and residences of kings and rulers.

Methods

The methodological basis of this study is grounded in historical-comparative and descriptive-analytical approaches to trace the evolution of Uzbek woodcarving from the early Middle Ages to the 20th century[1]. The research employs a diachronic perspective to identify stylistic and technological transformations across different historical epochs[2], including the pre-Islamic period[3], Islamic Golden Age, Timurid Renaissance, and colonial era[4]. Primary data for the study were derived from archaeological excavations, museum collections[5], preserved architectural elements[6], and documented examples of carved panels, doors[7], columns, and household items[8]. Artifacts such as the charred door from Kafirkala, the columns of the Juma Mosque in Khiva, and the carved panels from the Shahizinda complex provided tangible evidence for analysis[9]. Comparative analysis was utilized to differentiate between regional carving schools—such as Khorezm, Bukhara[10], Kokand, Tashkent, and Margilan—based on stylistic elements, motif composition, carving depth, and use of color or inlays[11]. The study also integrated iconographic and semiotic methods to interpret the symbolic significance of patterns[12], inscriptions, and motifs within their cultural and religious contexts, including influences from Buddhism[13], Zoroastrianism, and Islam. Additionally, historical texts and visual sources were examined to validate the chronological development and artistic functions of woodcarving[14]. By synthesizing material evidence with scholarly discourse, the methodology allowed for a holistic reconstruction of the cultural, technical, and aesthetic dimensions of Uzbek woodcarving across centuries[15].

Results and Discussion

The initial period of the rise of the art of carving dates back to the early Middle Ages. The territory of Uzbekistan was considered one of the important cultural centers of the East during the early feudal period, and the art of carving that emerged here is recognized as a high expression and independent direction of human artistic and aesthetic thought. It expressed the spirit of the times, artistic tastes and views, and served to satisfy the needs of the world of cyborgs.

Another notable exhibit is a charred wooden door found in Kafirkala. This panel depicts the goddess

of fertility and all living things, Nana, who was considered the most revered deity in the ancient state of Sogd, which existed on the territory of Uzbekistan. The ancient settlement of Kafirkala existed from the beginning of the 1000s to the 12th century. The panel was found in the center of the city, which once housed a high mound with letters and documents. The archive was completely burned to the ground during the Arab invasion in the 8th century. Only 500 ceramic seals used to authenticate documents and a few bags of money have survived.

It is believed that the walls of the fortress were decorated with carved wooden panels, one of which miraculously survived the fire. Apparently, during the destruction of the structure, the wooden door was covered with soil and other debris, which created an almost oxygen-free environment, and the wood turned the color of charcoal. The wooden panel was discovered in 2017, and it took almost 4 years to restore it to its original appearance.

In addition, with the spread of Islam in Central Asia, a new direction in decoration and patterning developed. The art of ornamentation, which was not a representation of reality on the surface of doors, but its symbolic and simplified forms, found expression, and was enriched with epigraphic images in Arabic script based on the demands of the time. The door surface was decorated with rectangular, square, or triangular compositions that combined Islamic and geometric motifs. These images reflected various symbolic symbols, shapes, plants, zoomorphic, and anthropomorphic motifs.

Of course, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic elements were rarely used in woodcarving and were mainly created based on the wishes of the owners of the house. It is noteworthy that during this period, various appeals, warnings and words of advice, as well as texts related to the content of the architectural complex, appeared on the inscriptions and panels of doors. The emergence of epigraphic patterns was also a characteristic reality of the period. Epigraphic pattern - decoration in the form of writing is mostly done in the Kufic script of the Arabic script: some examples that have survived to us testify that the painters fully mastered the artistic possibilities of wood carving in this regard as well.

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One of the largest and most notable monuments, indicating the high level of woodcarving in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan at the beginning of the first millennium AD, is the aforementioned Juma Mosque in Khiva (10th-11th centuries). This mosque consists of a flat-roofed, one-story building with a minaret, the roof of which is supported by 212 columns with unique carved patterns. Although only 25 of the original pillars have survived, and the rest have been replaced in later centuries, they testify to the high level of imagination and skill of the woodcarvers, the full application of woodworking technology, and the fact that no mistakes were made in the choice of wood.

During the reign of Amir Temur and the Timurids, a new cultural life began in the country. Many historians rightly call this period the second Renaissance of the peoples of Central Asia. Because the buildings built during this period, due to their grandeur and uniqueness of architectural solutions, still give our cities a spirit of antiquity, charm, and mystery. These structures are indistinguishable from the carved doors, gates, and other examples of woodcarving that have been taken to various museums around the world.

A magnificent epigraphic frieze made of wood carving dating back to the 11th century was found near the mausoleum of Kusam ibn Abbas in the Shahizinda complex. During the reign of Amir Temur, wood carving, like other types of artistic crafts, reached a high level of development. In the 14th century, the mausoleum of Kusam ibn Abbas was decorated with a magnificent panel with intricate patterns, and a carved wooden panel can also be seen in the mausoleum of Sayfiddin Boharziy in Bukhara. Sayfiddin Boharziy was a prominent representative of the Kubra order, a Sufi mystic and sheikh, and his khanaqah

was built during the Timurid period. Part of the exquisitely crafted wooden sagana was destroyed (or stolen) before the events of the 1920s, while part of it is currently kept in the Bukhara Ark Museum-Reserve. The sagana testifies to the high technical and artistic skill of woodcarving of the 13th-14th centuries. The star-shaped, spiral patterns on the surface are combined with small floral ornaments. In terms of style, it resembles a 13th-century sag in the Cairo Museum (Egypt).

Among the surviving monuments, columns and doors occupy a special place, and we can find the finest examples mainly in the decorations of tombs. "This is Sheikh Shamsiddin Kulol (Shakhrisabz, XIV-XV centuries), Hazrat Imam (Shakhrisabz), Khwaja Ahmad Yassavi (Turkestan), Qusam ibn Abbas (Shakhi-Zinda, Samarkand), Wooden carved doors of the mausoleums of Guri Amir (Samarkand). The State Hermitage Museum houses the doors of the mausoleums of Khoja Ahmad Yassawi, Kusam ibn Abbas (Shahi-Zinda complex), and Guri Amir (Samarkand, early 15th century); all of them are vivid examples of the talent of woodcarvers of the Timurid era. The exquisite wood carving is executed with jeweler's precision, in harmony with silver and mother-of-pearl inlays, and precious woods.

A new stage in Uzbek woodcarving dates back to the 14th-18th centuries. Of the few objects inscribed with the names and titles of the Timurid princes, the objects of Ulugbek deserve special attention. Today, a carved box made of sandalwood dedicated to Ulugbek, which is one of the most valuable exhibits in the treasury of the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul, is of unparalleled quality. The box was made in Central Asia in the early 15th century and is decorated with Islamic motifs, with gold handles and locks. The box's decoration combines the traditions of the Islamic world's ornamental style with Chinese motifs popular in the Timurid Empire. The lid of the box bears the name and title of Ulugbek, and a medallion with a magnificent dragon image between two cartouches. The decoration of this box and works from the early 15th century - the carved doors of the Guri Amir mausoleum in Samarkand and Shamsiddin Kulal in Shakhrisabz, a carved door fragment in the Metropolitan Museum (Central Asia or Iran, 1450-1500), and the carved woodwork of the tomb of Taj al-Mulk Waladdin Abul-Qasim (Mozandaron, 1473) (15th century) - demonstrate the development of the style.

By the 18th century, local schools had clearly manifested themselves in a complete form, among which the schools of Khorezm, Kokand, Tashkent, Bukhara, and Margilan can be distinguished. Each of them had certain differences in methods and styles, along with commonalities. For example, majestic carving is the main direction of the Khorezm school of woodcarving. Khorezm carvers preserved the natural color of the wood, not painted it.

The Bukhara school of carving, which has its own unique traditions, is characterized by the decoration of attractive, subtle patterns with gold and silver water, and the use of colors on the ground of the pattern. In Margilan, flat carving with a deep ground was used, and in Kokand, flat carving with a short relief was used.

The Tashkent School of Woodcarving widely used flat-topped, unadorned woodcarving covered with patterns. Such methodological diversity, which is not mutually exclusive, is largely due to established local traditions, cultural contacts with other peoples and the degree of influence from them, the availability of local wood materials, the state of development of the means of production, and a number of other factors. The commonality in them can be felt and perceived depending on the composition of patterns, the level of processing.

In those times, there were no specialized craft schools in the modern sense, and the new generation of carvers was educated on the basis of the tradition of master-apprenticeship. Of course, the working methods of a skilled craftsman were passed down from apprentice to new apprentice. By the above-mentioned period, the types of majestic architectural constructions, which generally define the essence of the subsequent periods, had their finished form. Mosques were the leaders of these constructions.

During the Khanate period in Central Asia, unique schools of carving art developed and created attractive examples of each other. The rich and nobles, courtiers, built luxurious mansions and hotels,

residences and palaces, and tried to decorate them in the style of carving. The growing demand for the art of carving led to increased competition and disputes among craftsmen, and to a stylistic diversity of carving.

With the emergence of the Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand khanates, various professions, craftsmen, and artists began to gather in these cities. From that time on, woodcarving, along with other types of folk applied art, entered a new stage of development. Large buildings such as the Tash Khovli in Khiva, the Khudoyorkhan Horde in Kokand, and the Sitorai Mohi Khosa in Bukhara were decorated with magnificent patterns. Large-scale, patterned compositions appeared. These decorations were distinguished by their extreme elegance.

In accordance with the mentality, lifestyle, and economic situation of the population in each khanate, the art of woodcarving developed in diverse directions. In each large city and oasis, unique schools of woodcarving emerged, each distinguished by its compositional solution, carving style, and choice of materials.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the range of wooden household items expanded: these were walnut bowls, maple bowls, korsons, lagandarvesh, and wooden staffs used by shepherds (govron), whip handles, wooden amulets, rosaries, etc. Also, woodcarving ornaments often dominated the decoration of mosque mihrabs or shrines in mausoleums.

The occupation of Turkestan by the Russian Empire and the introduction of various items through the Russian-European culture directly affected folk crafts. It became a market demand that artisans adapt to the culture of the colonial nation and focus on exotic products. These developments naturally greatly expanded the range of objects decorated with woodcarving. Small carvings could now be found on non-traditional objects, such as medicine boxes, bird cages, boxes, suitcases, and cigarette cases.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, housing construction boomed in Tashkent. They used colorful patterns, ganch and wood carvings as decoration, and the interiors of wealthy homes were richly decorated with carved and painted patterns. The decoration of large administrative buildings was usually carried out jointly by craftsmen from different places. This made it possible to quickly fulfill the order. Not only Tashkent masters, but also Kokand, Bukhara, Fergana, and Samarkand masters worked on the decoration of buildings in Tashkent. Tashkent masters strove to make the pattern voluminous. To this end, they used light colors for the main pattern and darker colors for the background.

Conclusion

It can be said that the art of woodcarving in Uzbekistan has deep ancient roots. It developed in accordance with the socio-economic, cultural and political processes that took place in Central Asia, in particular, in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan.

The art of Uzbek woodcarving reflects the traditions, cultural and aesthetic views inherent in the cultures and ideologies of Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Islam, and has continued to flourish, despite some stagnation at certain times. As a result of various artistic and aesthetic requirements and the fact that the Uzbeks live as a nation forming a state in the territory of several countries, several unique schools have emerged in the art of wood carving, among other types of art (music, singing, dance, jewelry, carving arts, folk art). Each of these schools occupies a special place in the national Uzbek culture and the system of applied arts. Together, they represent the complete picture of Uzbek woodcarving, and it is impossible to imagine them completely separated from each other.

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