

Pottery of Uzbekistan: A living record of Central Asian history and culture

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Purpose of this Research

I traveled to Uzbekistan in September/October 2002. My objectives in this project were:

- to understand the relationship between historical and contemporary Uzbek pottery by examining Uzbek pottery from the 3rd century BCE to the present;
- to assemble a collection of representative pieces that would form the core of an exhibit of contemporary pottery from Uzbekistan;
- to create an exhibit that would use contemporary Uzbek ceramics to show historical influences that have shaped Uzbekistan and Central Asia,
- to show common cultural influences between the West and Central Asia, and
- to put forth a positive picture of Central Asian culture in contrast to the negative views that have formed in the West as a result of the terrorist attacks of September 2001 and the ensuing war.

The Exhibit

I presented an exhibit at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) in New York City from November 18 to December 20, 2002 in connection with its Central Asian Heritage Week. An online version can be found on my website, www.rmerrillphoto.com. The exhibit presented ceramics, photographs and a small number of other Uzbek crafts. The exhibit was presented in the ground floor lobby of the SIPA building, where it was seen by several thousand people during its installation. Response to the exhibit was extremely positive. The Islamic curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Mr. Stefano Carboni, came to see the exhibit; this was the first instance he knew of Uzbek ceramics being exhibited in the United States. The Consul General of Uzbekistan, Mr. Ziyodilla Khodjimmedov, has extended an invitation to repeat the exhibit at the United Nations in March, 2003. The exhibition was covered by SIPA's newspaper Communiqué, Voice of America Uzbek Service and various Uzbek newspapers. It was featured on several Uzbek and Central Asian events lists, as well as the Turkistan American Association website. With more lead time before the March 2003 exhibit I will have more opportunity to publicize it via the American press.

Summary of Approach and Research Methodology

I visited ceramic masters throughout Uzbekistan to interview them and observe their techniques. I also visited museums, an archaeological excavation and a government ceramic factory.

Tashkent: Akbar & Alisher Rakhimov studio & house museum, Museum of Fine Art, Museum of Applied Art, Modern Art Center, Fine Art Research Institute Gurumsaray Village

Ferghana Valley: Gofirjon Marajapov studio, Maqsudali Turapov house museum Rishtan, Government ceramic factory, Sharofiddin & Firdauz Yusupov studio, Ibrahim Kamilov studio & house museum, Qodirali Polvonov microfactory

Samarkand: MEROS artists cooperative, Islam & Zarif Mukhtarov studio, Khoduyberdi Khakberdiev studio, Mansur Nasirov studio, Museum of A. Ikramov, Afrosiab Museum

Urgut (Samarkand region): Numon Oblaqlulov studio

Uba Village (Bukhara region): Jabbor Rakhimov studio

Gijduvan (Bukhara region): Abdullo & Alisher Narsullaev studios & house museums

Paikend (Bukhara region): Archaeological excavations of ancient kilns and ceramic studios

Kattaboq Village (Khorezm region): Sultan Atajanov studio

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

I have categorized the expression of historical influences in the work of contemporary Uzbek ceramic masters into three modes: hereditary, archaeological, and post-factory. Each mode represents a different trajectory for transmitting the craft, and each relates to a different period of Uzbek history.

Hereditary masters (16th-19th centuries): All ceramic craft in modern Uzbekistan has its roots in the traditions of masters who have passed their craft from generation to generation for centuries. “Hereditary masters” are those who today continue to perpetuate the specific styles and techniques passed to them from their families or teachers. Some craftspeople (mostly men, but a few women in the present generation) can recite their lineage as far back as the mid 17th century, while their techniques can be identified as much older. Generally speaking, the work of hereditary masters could be described as having a folk art feel. It is primarily representative of ceramic craft in the 16th – 19th centuries, the period between the collapse of Tamerlane’s empire and the Soviet era.

The Soviets had a devastating effect on all the crafts of Uzbekistan, through their policy of forcing craftsmen to work in collective factories and prohibiting them from producing individual work. Many artisans simply ceased working. The few masters who remain carry precious knowledge that should be carefully preserved. One example of this is ishkor glaze, an ash-based glaze developed between the 8th and 12th centuries that was widely used through the 15th century. Only one master remains who works exclusively with a crude form of this glaze. A handful of others can make it, but they work in it only occasionally.

Archaeologists in Uzbekistan have largely ignored, and in many cases have destroyed, the post-Timurid layer of history in the process of excavating older periods. Thus, the living legacy of the few remaining hereditary masters is a vital record of Uzbek ceramics since the 15th century.

Archaeological influence (3rd century BCE to 15th century AD): The work of the Rakhimov family in Tashkent represents a scholarly approach to contemporary ceramics. The family was engaged in making ceramics as early as 1790’s so their roots are in hereditary craft, but since the 1930’s their work has been shaped by an intense interest in archaeological Uzbek ceramics from the Greek era (2nd century BCE) to the Timurid dynasty (14th – 15th centuries CE). For many years they produced historical reproductions for the Soviet government, and in doing so, carefully researched historical

materials and techniques. This fluency in historical idiom informs their original, contemporary work. In comparison with hereditary ceramic masters, much of the Rakhimovs' work has a more high art feel.

At present the Rakhimovs are the only family taking a scholarly approach to ceramic-making, but their influence is widely felt. Akbar Rakhimov is acknowledged as one of the foremost ceramic scholars in Uzbekistan. He and his son Alisher are now building a school where they will tutor students in historical ceramic techniques. The school will potentially have long-lasting and wide-ranging effects on the future development of ceramics in Uzbekistan. Akbar has also been deeply involved in restoration projects with the World Monuments Fund and UNESCO.

The Rakhimov family has also spent decades documenting the work of hereditary masters. Akbar spent years learning from a now-dead master how to make ishkori glaze himself in order to preserve the knowledge. In addition to their historical studies, both Akbar & Alisher have in the years since independence expanded their realm of inquiry to include Native American and Japanese ceramics.

Post-factory ceramists (20th century to present): The town of Rishtan in the Ferghana Valley was the site of a large collective ceramic factory during the Soviet era. The government of Uzbekistan continues to operate the factory today on a smaller scale. During the Soviet era many hereditary ceramists were forced to work in this factory. After independence in 1991, many left to set up home workshops and microfactories; today there are approximately 150 ceramic studios in Rishtan. The techniques employed in these studios range from traditional hand-throwing to industrial techniques such as jiggering and molding. The designs are strongly influenced by factory designs, in some cases simply imitating them. Depending on the amount of custom work involved, these studios may turn out a few pieces per week or a thousand pieces per day. The mass-produced work of the government factory and microfactories is very inexpensive and so is still widely used by Uzbeks. More intricately-decorated handmade pieces from artisan workshops are more expensive and hold great appeal for foreigners; they are widely available throughout Uzbekistan and dominate tourist sales. Sadly, they are the least traditional of contemporary Uzbek ceramics, though it could be argued that they represent a new trend that will be tomorrow's tradition. Traditional Ferghana Valley designs have disappeared in all but the work of a few old masters and ishkori glaze has been replaced by lead glaze.

Factory-made ceramics replaced most handmade ceramics during the Soviet era, and cheaper factory-made Chinese & Uzbek porcelains are replacing those now. If Uzbek families have artisan-made ceramics they are usually antiques or special pieces for special occasions, such as large plov plates used and given for weddings. The primary market now for artisan-made ceramics (and most other crafts) in Uzbekistan is tourists and foreigners. While this presents a great economic opportunity for artisans, it also carries two inherent problems: keeping the crafts true to their tradition versus adapting them to the tastes of a foreign market, and the fragility of the tourist market, as witnessed since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Since independence in 1991, NGO's such as UNESCO and Aid to Artisans, as well as some Uzbek municipalities have played an important role in the renaissance of Uzbek crafts through grants to artisans and assistance in the development of marketing relationships outside Uzbekistan. The Internet is playing an important role in this

process. A 1996 provision by the Uzbek parliament (lobbied for by artisans with the encouragement of Aid to Artisans) eliminated taxes on artisan goods for five years and was extended in 2001 for three more years.

The phenomenon of foreign influences shaping Uzbek culture is not new. Uzbekistan, as the hub of the Silk Road, was historically a melting pot for ideas from across the Eurasian continent. On the other hand, the ability of Uzbek artisans to retain traditions in the face of great opposition was demonstrated during the Soviet Era. In a new era of global communication and marketing, it remains to be seen how Uzbek artisans will balance the seemingly opposing forces of tradition and foreign influence.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas

Ishkor glaze: Ceramic chemists at the Smithsonian are analyzing components of the glaze to determine how to improve the quality to 15th-century levels. The Rakhimov family is just beginning a project to learn to cultivate ishkor plants in order to ensure the future availability of materials. Post-15th century archaeology: As new archaeological sites are discovered and excavated, attention should be given to preserving more recent layers along with older layers.

Tourism effect: How are Uzbek crafts changing in response to tourist tastes?