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ART AND THE RESTORATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN UZBEKISTAN IN THE EARLY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

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Abstract: This paper examines how the visual arts of Uzbekistan and the system of art institutions contributed to the restoration of national identity after independence. It focuses on painting of the 1990s, its imagery and the institutional restructuring of the art field, centred on the Academy of Arts (1997). It also traces how, by the early 2000s, the ethno-modernist paradigm gave way to research-based and conceptual practices.

Keywords: independence of Uzbekistan, national identity, painting of the 1990s, ethno-modernism, Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan, art institutions, miniature, conceptual art.

Introduction

The contemporary art scene of Tashkent did not emerge from nowhere. Its themes, hierarchy of genres and institutional architecture were inherited from the first decade of independence. Without understanding how painting and the system of art governance were restructured in the 1990s, it is impossible to explain either the persistence of the official canon or the nature of the subsequent renewal.

The aim of this paper is to review the role of painting and art institutions in the restoration of national identity in Uzbekistan from the 1990s to the early 2000s.

Methods

The study draws on publications on the history of art in Uzbekistan during the period of independence, including the works of N. Akhmedova, as well as the founding documents of art institutions. Iconographic, genre-thematic and institutional analysis were applied.

Results and Discussion

Painting of the 1990s: the search for a national visual language. The first decade of independence was marked by an intensive search for cultural identity, and painting became its main laboratory. Artists turned to established Eastern symbolism: the pomegranate as a sign of fertility and unity, the peacock as an image of beauty and paradise, and the dervish as the embodiment of Sufi wisdom. Motifs of pre-Islamic and Sufi heritage returned to painting, together with objects of traditional everyday life (the beshik cradle, the chest, the arba cart) and subjects from classical literature and poetry. The historical genre and portraits of thinkers and rulers of the past served as a visual textbook of history.

At the same time, as N. Akhmedova emphasises, the problem of tradition was not reduced to the reproduction of folklore motifs. Tradition was to be understood "as a more complex system of cultural meanings rather than illustrative folklorism" (1). The most substantial works of the 1990s therefore did not copy ornament but sought a new plastic language, combining national visual memory with modernist devices: flatness, decorative conventionality of colour and rhythmic organisation of composition. The art process of this period can be described as a spontaneous formation of national artistic consciousness, in which the mastering of one's own heritage preceded integration into the global art context.

The Academy of Arts as the core of a new institutional model. The key institutional event was the establishment of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan by Presidential Decree No. UP-1701 of 23 January 1997. After the collapse of the Soviet system of branches of the Union of Artists, a structure was needed that could preserve the professional

school, support artists and shape a representative cultural strategy. The decree explicitly assigned to the Academy the tasks of preserving and enriching the traditional school of fine art, promoting national art abroad and fostering national pride and devotion to the ideas of independence (3).

The Academy largely inherited the traditions of the Union of Artists but built a vertically integrated model covering the entire cycle of art production, from education to international representation. Its system included the National Institute of Fine Arts and Design, established in the same year, 1997, on the basis of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Tashkent Theatre and Art Institute (4). The state thus obtained a single coordination mechanism: training, exhibition policy, commissions and the presentation of art abroad were concentrated in one vertical structure. In the 1990s the Academy primarily supported projects addressing historical images, traditional heritage and decorative form, which consolidated a stable ethno-modernist paradigm combining national symbolism with modernist form.

Miniature: restoring an interrupted tradition. Miniature painting occupied a special place in the new hierarchy as a symbol of continuity with the classical culture of the East. Significantly, the National Institute of Fine Arts and Design was named after Kamoliddin Behzod, a master of the Herat school of the 15th-16th centuries (4). The choice of this name linked contemporary art education with the Timurid era and made miniature one of the pillars of the "national" canon. In painting of the 1990s, the influence of miniature appeared in flatness, local colour and narrative composition.

Applied art: craft as a carrier of memory. Ceramics, embroidery, and wood and ganch carving acquired the status of guardians of national identity. In 1997 the Republican Association of Craftsmen "Hunarmand" was established with the aim of uniting craftsmen, protecting their interests and passing crafts on to future generations (5). For painting this had a twofold significance: ornament and the material world of craft became a source of imagery, but they also reinforced the perception of "national" art as primarily decorative.

Architectural decoration and the "national style". Domes, portals, majolica and carved ganch were widely used in public buildings of the 1990s. These elements functioned primarily as signs of belonging to tradition rather than as a structural system. Monumental painting and murals in the interiors of such buildings became an important area of state commissions and strengthened the link between architecture, painting and the ideology of independence (6).

The 2000s: the exhaustion of ethno-modernism and a new institutional environment. By the early 2000s decorative ethno-modernism was gradually exhausting itself, although it did not disappear. Artists moved from the symbolic reconstruction of the past to research-based strategies, absorbed Western experience and a wide range of artistic models, giving rise to a short but vivid period of conceptual art (2). Key artists of this period include Vyacheslav Akhunov, Jamol Usmanov, Alexander Nikolaev, Yura Useinov, Sergey Tychina, Bobur Ismailov, Elena Kambina and Alexander Barkovsky.

Importantly, these practices relied on institutions parallel to the state vertical. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) implemented the projects "Seismograph", "Underground of Bukhara", "Constellation", "Constellation. PS" and "Signs of Time"; the Goethe-Institut and the British Council supported exhibition and educational programmes, contributing to the emergence of a new generation of media artists and curators. Since 2001 the Tashkent International Biennale of Contemporary Art has served as a regular platform for international exchange. The medium expanded: video art, installation and performance developed, and projects moved beyond museum spaces. Thus, within the "Constellation" project (2005), the installation "Constant" was shown in an abandoned industrial workshop. V. Akhunov's concept of "art-heology" and

his critical work with archives laid the foundations of an analytical approach in Uzbek contemporary art.

Conclusion

The restoration of national identity in the early years of independence was achieved primarily through painting and through a new institutional model. Painting of the 1990s developed a recognisable ethno-modernist language that combined Eastern symbolism and Sufi and everyday motifs with modernist form. The Academy of Arts (1997) consolidated this language institutionally by uniting education, commissions and international representation in a single vertical structure. This model ensured the continuity of the professional school but narrowed the space for experimentation. The renewal of the 2000s, including conceptualism, new media and critical work with archives, therefore relied on alternative, predominantly international institutions. The combination of the state vertical and the independent environment became the foundation on which Tashkent emerged as a centre of contemporary art in the early 2020s.

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