



Article

Reviving Tradition: Modern Wood Carving in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: The article provides an in-depth analysis of contemporary traditional wood carving in Uzbekistan, which forms an integral part of the nation's cultural heritage. Particular attention is given to the artistic characteristics of this craft, which has undergone centuries of development. The study emphasizes the importance of traditional wood carving not only as a decorative art form but also as a medium for preserving cultural values and passing down artisanal skills through generations. This approach allows for the identification of key features of continuity that persist in modern wood carving art, despite technological and social changes.

Keywords: wood, technology, tradition, school, master, carved pattern, relief, ornament, columns, boxes.

1. Introduction

Modern traditional wood carving in Uzbekistan retains the distinctive ornamental decorative style characteristic of the country's applied arts. Despite the gradual decline in its application within contemporary architecture, Uzbek woodcarving masters have, in recent years, created an impressive range of works, from elegant and refined souvenirs and striking exhibition pieces to large monumental creations integrated into modern architectural projects.

The study of Uzbekistan's wood carving tradition is extensive, with much of the research focusing on historical monuments. Notably, some of the most significant works in this art form were produced in combination with architecture. Archaeological findings from Panjakent, such as fragments of friezes, panels, and architraves, provide evidence of this synthesis. Historical accounts also highlight the use of carved wood in fortifications, civic, and religious buildings during the early medieval period. Examples include the carved wood monuments of the Zerafshan Valley and Khiva (9th–12th centuries), the flourishing of the craft during the late medieval period (14th–17th centuries), and the intricate carvings that adorned monuments in Bukhara, Samarkand, and Khiva in the 18th–19th centuries, where wood carving was extensively used in both religious and secular structures.

The art of wood carving is deeply rooted in traditional architectural practices and vernacular housing designs. This art form has been shaped by the continuity of creative achievements passed down through generations. Studying the artistic characteristics of traditional wood carving, which has undergone centuries of evolution, provides valuable insights into the features of continuity that persist in modern wood carving art.

Adhering to time-honored artistic traditions, contemporary craftsmen contribute significantly to preserving this unique form of folk art. Wood carving has historically been

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employed in architectural elements such as columns, ceilings, cornices, doors, and latticework (panjara). Additionally, domestic wood carving has developed a wide variety of items, including tables, stools, chests, cabinets, caskets, cradles (beshik), Quran stands (lauhi), pen cases, bookbindings, inkwells, chess sets, combs, and more.

2. Materials and Methods

Two main carving techniques are distinguished: background carving, where flat-relief patterns are created by recessing the background, and non-background carving, involving engraved patterns. Background carving, executed with exceptional precision, adorned high-quality objects made from hardwoods, such as caskets, turban cases, Quran stands, bookbindings, and tall, multi-faceted tables. In contrast, everyday items were typically decorated with simpler non-background carving, featuring basic patterns like triangles, brackets, and lines, which added decorative touches to the smooth wood surface.

Designs were applied using paper stencils ("akhta") or drawn with compasses and rulers to create geometric grids known as "pargori." The carving process involved outlining the pattern with chisels of various curvatures. The resulting designs featured a silhouette effect, with the background treated with a dot-punch tool to create a matte finish that highlighted the glossy surface of the ornamentation. Through their artistry, modern craftsmen continue to uphold and enrich the traditions of this remarkable folk art.

Uzbek wood carving employs several primary techniques for finishing flat reliefs and recessed backgrounds. Relief edges may be left straight ("zamin kor" or "lula pardoz"), while the relief surface may be left smooth (with or without polishing) or receive additional treatment, such as slanted cuts ("chukka pardoz"). Recessed backgrounds may be left untreated or adorned with point punching techniques ("chakich" or "gurzi"), each creating a unique artistic effect.

The traditional term "islomi" refers to carved designs with a stylized vegetal pattern. There are numerous varieties of "islomi" and "girikh," each with specific names like "islomi gul," "aylanma islomi," and "shash girikh." Relief carving with recessed backgrounds is richer in artistic quality compared to non-background carving and is frequently used in monumental architecture and unique household items. This technique creates a relief effect by deepening the background and supports a variety of technical and artistic treatments.

3. Results

Each style features specific ornamental motifs, carving techniques, and relief effects. The classification into background and non-background carving reflects a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the pattern and the carving technique. Woodcarvers masterfully united vegetal and geometric arabesques, emphasizing their linear harmony. The characteristic linearity of "islomi" patterns manifests in the flowing rhythms of interwoven elements ("tanob") and repetitive lines ("raftor"), which form the basis of ornamental compositions, constructed with straight ("tog'ri taqsim"), mirrored ("chopu rost taqsim," "qaytarma islomi"), or circular ("aylanma taqsim") layouts.

In the style of ornamental "islomi" wood carving, there are three main types of "raftors":

"Yak raftor": A single undulating line.

"Du raftor": Two lines moving rhythmically and intersecting at different points.

"Se raftor": Three lines flowing in harmony within a single rhythm.

The treatment of relief emphasizes flat ornamental forms through the "pardoz" system, which includes techniques for shaping relief lines ("chekka pardoz," "lula pardoz"), relief surfaces ("chokka pardoz," "ariqcha pardoz," "qoshiqsimon pardoz"), and backgrounds ("gurzi pardoz").

The essence of “islomi” carving lies in the continuous patterned line (“tanob”) and its dynamic rhythm (“raftor”), enhanced by the “pardoz” finishing techniques. These techniques reveal the infinite movement and flatness inherent in the patterns. Compositions may feature simple, rhythmic lines or intricate motifs such as curls (“gajak”), medallions (“madokhil,” “turunch”), floral rosettes (“gul”), leaves (“barg”), and buds (“guncha”).

Ornamental wood carving comprises various border designs, panels, and medallions. Complex combinations of vegetal “islomi” motifs and geometric grids (“girikh”) often appear layered, with vegetal patterns forming the base and geometric grids the upper layer. Occasionally, both motifs are carved on a single plane with different “pardoz” finishes—e.g., the vegetal motif with angled cuts (“chekka pardoz”) and the geometric pattern in the “lula pardoz” style—creating the illusion of a rich, two-layered carving.

The intricate “islomi” style includes the distinctive “mukarrari,” a two- or three-layer carving with large-scale patterns and elaborate “pardoz” finishes. This style features characteristic “islomi” motifs, such as flowing tendrils intertwined with medallion shapes (“islomi madokhil”) and complex compositions covering doors, column shafts, or panels. Symmetry is a key element, with motifs often designed in mirrored layouts (“qaytarma islomi”).

“Raftor” patterns are widely used, appearing in simple single-layer carvings without relief finishing (“yakka islomi”) and in complex multi-layered carvings (“qosh islomi”). The “mukarrari” style is distinguished by its intricate designs and richly detailed reliefs.

Rooted in smooth rhythms and precise interwoven lines, “islomi” wood carving demonstrates a deep understanding of the relationship between the pattern and its material realization. The dynamic rhythm of the patterned lines, along with expressive details and ornamental elements, highlights the elegance of carved surfaces on items such as doors, column shafts, tables, stools, and caskets.

Uzbekistan's wood carving, with its rich ornamental heritage, exhibits clearly defined regional features. For example:

- Khorezm Masters: Known for their large and small spiral motifs, called *aylanma islomi*, these patterns are also seen in majolica tiles, ceiling paintings, and metal carvings, reflecting a consistent artistic style across various crafts.
- Tashkent School: Characterized by intricate interwoven medallions that appear to grow from one another, these motifs are closely related to the designs found in carved ganch (gypsum) panels.
- Bukhara Style: Distinguished by the harmonious combination of *islomi* patterns with geometric grids (*girikh*). The carved designs from Bukhara prominently feature geometric arabesques, with countless variations of *girikh* and *islomi*. Both styles hold a significant place in classical ornamental decor.

This regional diversity underscores the unique artistic identity of Uzbek wood carving, blending shared traditions with local adaptations to create a vibrant tapestry of craftsmanship.

4. Conclusion

Compared to other forms of applied arts, wood carving in Uzbekistan has evolved more gradually. While each historical period brought changes to carved wood—some artistic features were lost while others emerged—the craft has seen significant shifts, particularly since the 1990s. Market-driven transformations altered the focus of woodcarving, with artisans in renowned centers like Kokand, Khiva, Samarkand, and Tashkent primarily fulfilling commissions for architectural interiors, which became their main source of income.

Traditional decorative items such as intricately carved polygonal tables and pierced screens, once widely popular, have largely disappeared from the repertoire of contemporary

craftsmen. Household objects now serve more as souvenirs, a niche largely filled by Tashkent artisans.

Despite these changes, the ornamentation in Uzbek wood carving retains its distinctive character, shaped by the broader stylistic traditions of Uzbekistan's decorative arts. Classic principles of symmetry in vegetal and geometric compositions remain prominent. The stylization techniques of these motifs emphasize graceful linear rhythms and finely detailed elements, reflecting the essence of their decorative and dynamic qualities within a confined surface.

The relief forms in Uzbek wood carving are designed to highlight the expressive motion of patterns and the interplay of light and shadow. Over time, the craft has developed a characteristic richness and density of ornamental motifs, filling the surface of objects uniformly—a hallmark of Uzbekistan's classical decorative arts.

The horizontal and vertical divisions of architectural elements, such as beams, columns, and doors, along with flat and volumetric surfaces, provided the foundation for compositional techniques in Uzbek wood carving. These principles guide artisans as they intricately carve columns, doors, polygonal table surfaces, caskets, and more.

The masterful arrangement of patterns on any surface is a distinctive feature of Uzbek woodcarving, showcasing the virtuosity and enduring artistry of its practitioners.

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