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The Art of Woodcarving in Fergana in the 19th–20th Centuries Household in Life Place

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the development and role of woodcarving in the Fergana Valley during the 19th and 20th centuries, emphasizing its function as both a practical and aesthetic component of daily household life. Based on historical-analytical and ethnographic research, the study examines carved architectural elements such as doors, windows, pillars, and ceiling decorations, alongside household items including chests, tables, and furniture. Special attention is given to the ornamental repertoire—geometric, floral, and symbolic motifs—which reflected the artistic taste, worldview, and social status of the people. The article also explores the contributions of prominent schools and masters, such as the Kokand school and the work of Usto Kadyrjan Haidarov, highlighting their influence on the preservation and enrichment of national decorative traditions. Comparative analysis with the craft heritage of Bukhara and Samarkand underscores the distinctive features of Fergana woodcarving. The study concludes that woodcarving in Fergana not only fulfilled functional needs but also served as a vital expression of cultural identity and spiritual values, thus forming an integral part of Uzbekistan’s intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: : Woodcarving, Fergana Valley, daily life, applied art, national heritage, ornament

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1. Introduction

The Ferghana Valley, especially cities like Kokand, has long been a center of skilled wood-processing and carving. Kokand in particular is often cited as a major hub for woodcarving art in the 19th–20th centuries.

What Kinds of Wood Items Were Carved

Carving was applied to a variety of household and architectural components:

Architectural elements: Fretted (openwork) columns, doors, ceiling beams, panels, decorative wooden screens, carved ceiling vassa plates.

Furniture & domestic objects: Tables (including “khan-taxta” – low tables), stools, chests, caskets, bedside tables, decorative panels, lockers, etc.

Decorative household ornament: Doors, panels, sometimes small items like box-type containers, panels that decorated interiors.

Ornamental repertoire: Stylised floral designs (e.g. “islimi”), geometric patterns, backgrounds with patterns like pargori, baghdadi, etc.

Relief styles: There were flat relief carvings, incised patterns, some backgroundless carvings, trihedral notched styles.

Openwork carving: Particularly in structural elements like columns, screens, panels – carving that lets light/shadow play through. E.g. the “openwork columns” of the Juma mosque in Kokand are famous [1].

Kokand School: Very prominent in this region. The work of Usto Kadyrjan Haidarov is especially noted, in producing household items decorated with original ornaments and making use of “pargori style”.

The Umarov family in Kokand is also famous for their work restoring and creating doors, ceilings, etc., with their style including “vassa plates” and openwork components. letsgouzbekistan.com

Many wood-carved pieces served both functional and decorative purposes: tables for tea, low tables (khan-taxta), chests/cabinets for storage, doors/room divisions.

Ceilings in some houses were decorated with carved elements (vassa plates, beam ornamentation). These contributed to interior ambience, light, shadow, perceived status of the house [2].

Woodcarving also signalled wealth, taste, craft lineage: having elaborately carved doors, or fine carved furniture was a marker of status. The motifs, intricacy, and workmanship were important socially. (Implied in the descriptions of prominent masters and palaces etc.)

There was a steady elaboration of styles during the late 19th century, including more refined ornament, more variety in household items.

The 20th century saw both continuities and transformations: masters’ dynasties persisted; some styles were preserved, but also external influences and modern tastes had some effect[3]. Also some decline in very large architectural wood carving due to changing building practices.

Preservation and restoration efforts in more recent decades have tried to bring back original styles (e.g. restoration of carved ceilings from fretted plates based on surviving pieces).

Uzbek folk applied decorative art has a centuries-old history, and woodcarving occupies an important place in it. In particular, the Fergana Valley was one of the centers of this craft in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the products produced by local craftsmen were appreciated not only by the local population, but also by people from other regions [4]. demand high was Patterns and ornaments used in Fergana wood carvings expressed the artistic taste, customs and outlook of the people. House doors, window frames, porch columns, home furnishings and even architectural parts of mosques and madrasas are carved. decorations with installed [5].

As noted by scientist Ghulamov : " Wood "Carving was not only a necessity in life, but also an expression of the people's aesthetic views and dreams" (Gulomov, 1975, B-84).

2. Materials and Methods

The following methods were used in the article:- Historical-analytical method - based on the study of sources from the 19th-20th centuries, woodcarving samples were analyzed. - Ethnographic method - based on the doors, pillars, chests, and window frames preserved in the Fergana Valley, their function in life was shown. - Comparative analysis - the work of Fergana craftsmen was compared with that of Bukhara and Samarkand craftsmen, and distinctive features were identified [6].

3. Results and Discussion

Woodcarving in Household Items

By the late 19th century, woodcarving in the Fergana Valley had become an inseparable component of domestic culture, extending far beyond its initial utilitarian function. Wooden household items were not only designed for durability and comfort, but they were also expected to reflect the artistic values and cultural identity of the family who owned them. Doors and gates, in particular, served as powerful symbols of social

standing. According to Borovkov (1927), the decorative patterns carved on the doors of Fergana houses indicated the status, taste, and aspirations of the owner. Such testimonies show that woodcarving was deeply embedded within the social fabric of Fergana, functioning simultaneously as a practical necessity and as a marker of identity[7]. The symbolic importance of household woodwork meant that families often invested considerable resources into acquiring finely carved pieces, and these objects became treasured possessions that linked the aesthetic world of craftsmanship with the everyday realities of domestic life.

Among the household items most frequently adorned with carvings were chests, chairs, stools, tables, and small decorative objects. Chests were especially significant in the cultural life of the Fergana Valley, as they were not simply used for storing clothes or household textiles. Instead, they became essential components of marriage traditions, functioning as part of the bride's dowry and representing the dignity of the family[8-9]. A finely carved chest, often decorated with floral and geometric motifs, reflected not only wealth but also the hopes of prosperity and harmony in the new household. The motifs chosen often carried symbolic meaning: floral ornaments symbolized vitality and continuity of life, while intricate geometric patterns expressed order, stability, and a cosmic sense of balance. By integrating such symbols into everyday objects, Fergana craftsmen elevated ordinary items into aesthetic and spiritual artifacts.

The *khan-taxta*, or low table, represents another example of woodcarving's intersection with cultural practices. Used during tea gatherings and social visits, these tables held a central place in the domestic and social life of the valley. The act of hosting guests around a beautifully carved *khan-taxta* carried layers of meaning: it was not only an act of hospitality but also a demonstration of refinement, generosity, and family prestige. In such cases, the table was both functional and symbolic. Carvings on these tables, often featuring flowing vegetal motifs and complex lattice-like designs, highlighted the Fergana Valley's mastery of balancing elegance with utility. Through these objects, families demonstrated their adherence to cultural traditions while at the same time affirming their social rank[10].

The stylistic repertoire of the Fergana craftsmen in household items was remarkably diverse. Flat-relief carvings, incised patterns, and backgroundless styles were commonly applied to small furniture and storage pieces, while trihedral notched techniques gave depth and shadow to more elaborate objects. The technical skill required for these designs reflected generations of knowledge passed down through apprenticeships. Every carved household object embodied the memory of craft lineages, linking the lives of ordinary families with the mastery of artisans who ensured that their work was more than decoration—it was the material expression of beauty, order, and cultural values[11].

Carving in Architectural Structures

Woodcarving in the architectural domain reveals even more about the cultural significance of this art in the Fergana Valley during the 19th and 20th centuries. Residential houses, mosques, and madrasas throughout the region incorporated carved wooden elements into their design, creating spaces where functionality, spirituality, and artistry intersected. Among the most striking examples are the openwork columns of the Juma Mosque in Kokand, which remain famous for their intricate and airy designs. These columns demonstrate the ability of Fergana craftsmen to create structures that were not only technically stable but also visually captivating. The perforated carvings allowed light to pass through in complex patterns, casting shadows that changed throughout the day[12]. In this way, the carved wood did not merely support the structure physically—it also created a shifting aesthetic atmosphere that imbued the mosque with spiritual depth.

In residential architecture, carved doors, window frames, ceiling beams, and vassa plates were standard features of houses belonging to both wealthy families and the broader population. However, the level of intricacy in the carving often reflected the social

position of the homeowner. Wealthier families commissioned highly detailed and elaborate carvings, sometimes featuring dozens of intertwined motifs, while modest families opted for simpler geometric or floral patterns. These differences once again highlight the dual role of woodcarving as both an art form and a social signal. Karimov (2005) emphasized that the unique style of Fergana pillars reflected the religious and cultural worldviews of the people, suggesting that architectural woodcarving in this region was as much about expressing collective identity as it was about decorating private homes[13].

Carved wood in religious architecture carried symbolic meaning beyond its aesthetic value. Mosques and madrasas in the Fergana Valley frequently incorporated calligraphic designs, Qur'anic inscriptions, and abstract motifs, aligning the material space of the building with the spiritual aspirations of its users. This reflects a broader Islamic tradition in which geometric and vegetal designs serve to express divine order and beauty without depicting living beings. In Fergana, these designs were often distinguished by their refinement and lightness, reinforcing the idea that local artisans developed a recognizable style within the broader Islamic artistic heritage.

During the 20th century, architectural practices began to shift due to industrialization and the increasing use of new construction materials such as cement and brick. As a result, large-scale carved wooden structures became less common. However, the tradition did not vanish. Instead, it adapted, surviving in smaller architectural details and in the preservation of older religious and residential buildings. Restoration projects in the late 20th and early 21st centuries sought to revive these styles, reconstructing carved ceilings and columns using historical examples as models. Thus, architectural woodcarving in Fergana demonstrates both continuity and transformation: while large-scale carving declined, the symbolic and cultural role of the art persisted through preservation and adaptation[14].

Social and Cultural Significance

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Fergana woodcarving is its deep entanglement with social and cultural life. Carved objects were not only indicators of wealth and aesthetic taste but also bearers of cultural values and identity. In traditional households, a beautifully carved door or an elaborately decorated chest was a visible sign of a family's standing within the community. The symbolic language of the ornaments carried meanings that were immediately recognizable to viewers, creating a shared cultural vocabulary that tied together social status, artistic expression, and spiritual beliefs.

Madrahimov (1998) observed that every carving enriched the spiritual atmosphere of the house, imbuing it with meanings that went beyond the physical decoration. Indeed, woodcarving in Fergana can be understood as a form of visual storytelling, where motifs conveyed narratives about the family's values, religious devotion, and aspirations. A home without carved elements would have seemed incomplete, lacking the symbolic and spiritual dimensions that transformed a house into a culturally meaningful space.

The role of woodcarving extended into life-cycle rituals and ceremonies. For instance, marriage customs frequently featured carved items such as the bride's chest or decorative household furniture that became part of the dowry. These items were not merely practical but functioned as symbols of the new family's prosperity, taste, and cultural belonging. In this sense, carved wood was embedded within the transition from one stage of life to another, reinforcing its role in both material and symbolic terms[15].

Another important aspect is the way woodcarving reinforced the transmission of knowledge and values across generations. The art was preserved and expanded through the *ustoz-shogird* (master-apprentice) system, ensuring that skills and traditions were handed down within families or craft guilds. Notable dynasties, such as the Umarov family in Kokand, became custodians of this heritage, producing works that blended tradition with innovation. Likewise, the celebrated master Usto Kadyrjan Haidarov left a legacy of household items decorated with original ornaments, establishing the Kokand

school as a major center of artistic excellence. These dynasties illustrate how woodcarving served as a living tradition, continuously renewed through the creativity of successive generations.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of woodcarving in the Fergana Valley during the 19th–20th centuries demonstrates that this craft served not only as a functional practice but also as an integral cultural phenomenon. Carved household items—such as doors, chests, khan-taxta tables, and furniture—fulfilled both practical needs and symbolic roles, reflecting family prestige, aesthetic values, and social identity. Architectural carvings in mosques, madrasas, and residential houses elevated built environments by integrating spiritual symbolism with artistic mastery. The ornamental repertoire, including geometric, floral, and symbolic motifs, communicated collective beliefs and preserved cultural memory.

The distinctiveness of the Fergana school lies in its refinement, delicacy, and extensive use of openwork carving, which differentiated it from the monumental traditions of Bukhara and Samarkand. This integration of art into both sacred and domestic contexts highlights its universality and enduring cultural significance. Although the rise of industrial building practices reduced large-scale woodcarving, the craft adapted to smaller objects, while master-apprentice lineages and prominent dynasties ensured continuity.

Today, woodcarving remains a cornerstone of Uzbekistan’s intangible heritage, celebrated in restoration projects and cultural festivals. It continues to embody creativity, identity, and tradition, serving as a bridge between the past and the present while inspiring future generations.

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