

Examples of the Art of Gold Embroidery in Bukhara: Historical, Cultural, and Ethnographic Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the craft of gold embroidery, developed in the Bukhara oasis and turned into a distinct form of applied art, as well as the gold-embroidered garments accumulated by the emirs of Bukhara over the years, along with related historical and ethnographic information, based on sources and scholarly literature. In the article, the materials of the Bukhara State Museum-Reserve were studied as the subject of research.

Keywords: Art of Gold Embroidery; Gold Threads; Bug'Chakhona; Guzari Zardo'Zon; Gold-Brocaded Products; Gold Embroidery Collection; Bukhara Emirate; Manghit Dynasty; Cultural Heritage; Museum Collections; Traditional Crafts; Applied Arts.

1. Introduction

The art of Bukhara gold embroidery is one of the types of folk applied arts that has been developing since ancient times. Wall paintings from the early Middle Ages and collections currently preserved in museums around the world, consisting mainly of wool, silk, semi-silk, and cotton fabrics that reached there via trade routes, upon careful study, reveal that some parts of the garments were decorated with gold threads [1].

Among the spoils taken during the Arab invasion of Bukhara was a boot belonging to the Khatun, the ruler of the state at that time, along with its sock. The boot and sock were valued at 200,000 dirhams because they were sewn with gold threads and adorned with precious stones [2]. That is, even in the early Middle Ages, gold-embroidered garments were considered valuable and classified as types of court attire. At this point, we can also understand that such garments were unfamiliar to the invading Arabs and possessed a distinctly local character.

1.1. Study Objectives

The main objectives of this study are as follows: (1) to trace the historical development of the art of gold embroidery in Bukhara, (2) to analyze the traditional techniques, materials, and stylistic features employed by Bukhara artisans, (3) to examine the socio-cultural role and symbolic significance of gold-embroidered garments in the emirate court and society, (4) to document and classify the gold-embroidered items preserved in museum collections in Uzbekistan and abroad, (5) to assess the influence of Bukhara's gold embroidery on regional craft traditions and its recognition in global cultural heritage, and (6) to emphasize the importance of safeguarding, transmitting, and revitalizing this intangible cultural heritage for future generations.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted based on a historical and cultural approach to the study of the history of Bukhara gold embroidery art. The main sources analyzed were the collection of gold-embroidered items from the emirate period of the Bukhara State Museum-Reserve, the museum's accession books, and artifacts belonging to the emirate. The

museum materials were classified according to their origin, production technology, ornamentation styles, and socio-cultural significance. As additional sources, written historical documents, descriptions of exhibitions, and information about past artisans were used. In the analysis process, methods of visual observation, comparison, and typological analysis were combined. Through this, the changes in the art of gold embroidery across historical periods and its role in the culture of the emirate's court were revealed.

3. Discussion and Results

For more than a century, the Bukhara Museum has been collecting rare treasures of world history and examples of our region's culture. The museum's initial collection began to be assembled during the era of the Bukhara emirs. On November 8, 1922, the first museum in Bukhara began operating [3]. At that time, the main collection of the museum consisted of items brought from foreign countries that had adorned the emir's palace. Today, the museum preserves more than 137,000 historical artifacts. More than two thousands of them are part of the emirate collection, a certain portion of which consists of items that were presented as gifts to the Manghit emirs [4].

After the fall of the Bukhara Emirate (in 1920), examples of our national culture and items of great historical significance began to be taken abroad. The Ministry of Education of the Bukhara People's Soviet Republic repeatedly stated in the press and in public speeches that historical artifacts could not be taken abroad and requested that anyone possessing items of historical significance bring them to the Ministry of Education. Within two years, the number of historical artifacts had increased, providing the basis for establishing a museum. In addition, during this period, items left from the emirate and its officials referred to as "things left from the old government" had also grown in number [5].

The first three accession books of the Bukhara State Museum-Reserve consist entirely of items directly related to the emirate. Later, the collection continued to grow with items donated by the public, which, with the help of museum specialists, were identified as belonging to the emirate collection. Gold-embroidered items occupy a significant place in the collection. Garments belonging to the emirs of Bukhara and their families are now preserved not only in museums of Uzbekistan but also in museums in Russia, Germany, Austria, and other countries around the world.

Gold embroidery is the craft of sewing patterns (embroidery) with gold thread. Since ancient times, threads made of plain silk were dipped into a solution of silver and gold dissolved in mercury. As a result, dazzling gold threads were produced, and the colorful nature of the silk further enhanced the garments.

The emirs of Bukhara mainly wore garments made of pure silk, velvet, and kundal fabrics. These garments were embroidered with gold threads and were therefore called "ton" (robe). In the Ark, the emirate's residence, there was a special "bug'chakhona" (a place for robes and other garments) located beneath the courtyard of the reception hall [6]. In this room, garments prepared by the emir as gifts were stored, and they were considered part of the state treasury. When the emir wished to reward those who came to greet him, he would signal to the attendant waiting in the hallway, and a new set of clothing, called a "sarpo" (sar – head, po(poy) – foot), would immediately be presented to the visitor. In the Bukhara Emirate, gold-embroidered robes also played a role in distinguishing the ranks of state officials and military personnel. That is, until the time of Emir Muzaffar Khan, there were no various

titles or orders. Officials were identified by the various items they possessed. Primarily, only high-ranking military officers were awarded gold-embroidered robes. Of course, the qushbegis and beks also wore gold-embroidered garments, as they too were considered to hold certain military ranks.

Most of the robes (to'n) of the emirs of Bukhara were sewn in the gold embroidery style. For example, the robe of Emir Muzaffar Khan of Bukhara (1860–1885), currently on display in the Ark's Bukhara Emirate history exhibition and made in the gold embroidery – zamindozi style, took five months to produce and was sewn jointly by three skilled craftsmen (elderly gold embroiderers capable of working in the same style, as only they could accomplish such work). The robe weighs more than 10 kilograms and was worn layered over other garments [7]. In this exhibition, there is also another large robe made of velvet fabric, with two long strip-shaped patterns on the front. On the back, between the two shoulders, is a circular “medallion” design, crafted with such precision that in one spot the gold thread was passed through twelve times. The sleeves and hem of the robe are also thickly bordered with gold embroidery [8].

Several gold-embroidered items belonging to the emirs of Bukhara are also on display in the exhibition of the Sitorai Mohi-Khosa Museum of Applied Arts. The oldest of them dates back to the 1860s and was sewn to mark Emir Muzaffar Khan's accession to the throne. The robe is made of green velvet and decorated with floral motifs in the guldozi and zamindozi styles [9].

It is known that until 1920, there were 300–350 master gold embroiderers working in Bukhara. Gold embroiderers lived in more than ten neighborhoods of the city. In particular, the Mir Do'stim neighborhood, located in the southwest of the city, was also known as “Guzari Zardo'zon” (the gold embroiderers' neighborhood) [10]. In the Ark fortress, almost all Bukhara gold-embroidered items were made for the needs of the emir's palace, with only a very small quantity being sent to the market for sale. Gold-embroidered robes, waistcoats, overcoats, trousers, footwear, belts, turbans and hats for men were made exclusively for the khan, as well as by the khan and his close relatives for a family celebration or festive occasion. None of the officials had the right to order any of the above-mentioned garments for themselves. Gold-brocaded garments could only be worn if they were gifted by the emir. Gold-brocaded robes were presented by the emir during the process of conferring a specific position.

In addition, gold-embroidered clothing for women and children was exclusive to members of wealthy households. They wore these garments on the occasion of a family celebration or holiday. Boys from wealthy families, aged no more than 8–10, were dressed in gold-brocaded robes for their circumcision ceremonies.

The gold-embroidered garments belonging to the Manghit dynasty, which ruled Bukhara from 1756 to 1920, are the only surviving relic specimens that have reached us today. Gold-embroidered items belonging to the early representatives of the Manghit dynasty have almost not survived to the present day. From the time of Emir Haydar (1800–1826), the only surviving relic is a gold-embroidered mahsi (soft leather boot). The mahsi bears the inscription of the Hijri year 1224, which corresponds to 1809–1810 in the Gregorian calendar. The appearance of such a date is the only known instance found on gold-embroidered garments to this day [11]. A considerable number of gold-embroidered garments belonging to Emir Nasrullah Khan (1827–1860) have survived. However,

most of the items belong to Abdulahad, who ruled from 1895 to 1911, as the art of gold embroidery by Bukhara's embroiderers flourished particularly during this period [12].

In the Ark, the emirate's residence, there was a reception hall courtyard where those who came to greet the emir, as well as beks, estate managers, and other officials who had a request for the emir, were received. During the reception, if the emir wished to reward someone, there was a hallway located in the "poyga" of the room where he sat, and an attendant would bring out a set of clothing from the "buxchakhona" beneath the room. Such gifts mainly consisted of gold-embroidered items [13].

Among gold-brocaded products, headwear holds a special place. One of the traditional headpieces for Muslim men is the turban. In the museum-reserve's collection of gold-embroidered garments, there are about ten gold-embroidered turbans, decorated with various plant motifs in the Indian shodoka style. It should also be noted that the emirs of Bukhara mainly wore white turbans and only wore gold-embroidered turbans on festive occasions.

The kultaposhaks (an ancient women's headwear), hair ornaments and jamalaks characteristic of Bukhara women's attire are also products of the gold embroidery craft. Among the components of women's headwear, the most common are the kultaposhak and the doppi (skullcap). Kultaposhaks were mainly worn by women, while doppis were worn by girls. Scarves were considered the most common headwear for women. Forehead bands were smaller in size and square in shape, and those belonging to brides and women from wealthy families were decorated with gold-embroidery patterns.

Women from wealthy households wore scarves embroidered in the "zardozi" style with gold or silver threads during ceremonies. These were brought by merchants from Russia and from the Kashmir region of India via the Silk Road.

The forehead band was made of gold and silk threads, measuring 10–15 cm in width and 50–55 cm in length, with cardboard placed inside. It was in the shape of a strap, with a scarf attached to it at an angle.

The kultaposhak is an ancient women's headwear. It was used in the Bukhara Emirate and later, during the 1950s–1970s, by elderly women. The decorative part of the kultaposhak, the sleeve, had edged trimming, while the part worn on the head was round like a doppi and lined. At the back, a sleeve-like part (the tail) was used to pass the hair braid through the hair wrap.

4. Conclusion

The art of gold embroidery has developed over centuries in the Bukhara oasis and has formed its own distinctive school. Because sewing and wearing luxurious gold-embroidered products was a characteristic feature of Bukhara, the largest emirate gold embroidery collection was formed. This collection, which provides information about the history of the art of gold embroidery, is preserved today as part of our cultural heritage in the Bukhara State Museum-Reserve.

5. Future Suggestions

1. Digital Preservation and Cataloging – Develop a comprehensive digital archive of gold-embroidered artifacts to ensure accessibility for researchers and future generations.

2. Comparative Studies – Conduct cross-regional research comparing Bukhara gold embroidery with similar traditions in Central Asia, India, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire.
3. Craft Revitalization Programs – Establish training centers and workshops to transfer traditional techniques to younger generations of artisans.
4. Integration into Contemporary Fashion – Encourage designers to incorporate Bukhara gold embroidery into modern clothing and accessories, strengthening cultural identity while fostering innovation.
5. International Exhibitions and Collaborations – Organize traveling exhibitions and collaborative projects with museums worldwide to promote broader recognition of Bukhara’s embroidery heritage.

Declarations

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Consent for publication

The author declares that he/she consented to the publication of this study.

Authors' contributions

Author’s independent contribution.

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