

Ornamentation and symbols: Beauty and meaning in everyday life

In traditional daily life, even the ordinary Kazakh did not know an unadorned space. Everything around him, beginning with the interior appointments of his yurt was decorated or “ornamented” by his own or a family member’s skilled hands. To adorn something in this manner is to domesticate it- to make it part of one’s own cultural universe. Thus, all craft work – from the simplest vessel to a fine blanket, from a horse’s harness to items of daily life, but also art.

Ornamentation is not simply decoration. It is a special language and knowing that language opens a path to the nomad’s world of art. A dictionary of Kazakh ornamentation would occupy many [ages. Among the motifs are cosmic symbols such as the sun, the stars and the crescent moon; geometrical elements such as the triangle, the diamond, the cross and the prehistoric swastika; zoomorphic figurations such as a ram’s horn, a bird’s wing or a bird’s beak, a camel’s footprint or a camel’s eyes and botanical representations such as a flower, a leaf or a sprout. All of these elements can be combined in complex constructs that have a philosophical essence comparable to a Buddhist mandala and can be read by cognoscenti like an open book. Kazakh ornamentation is one of the humanity’s oldest codified symbolic systems comprised of shapes and colors. Thus, the color blue is the symbol of the sky; red represents fire, blood or life itself; green is the symbol of vegetation, spring and beginnings; white represents that which is high or celestial; gold is wisdom or knowledge; and so on.

In Kazakh decorative arts the primary concept is not the oppositions between good and evil, but rather the unity of these seemingly contradictory notions, as mentioned earlier. In each ornamental composition can be found a map of the universe, the social group and individual in unity. Each carpet, for, example, is an individual composition, a personal microcosm of the universe that was fashioned by the hardworking hands of a female artisan. Carpets are always outlined by an ornamental border made up of a wave-and-water motif that represents the world-wide ocean, the basis for life on this earth. The earthly world is, in turn, framed by fish scales and mice tracks; and triangular amulets are framed by the unity of the large rhomboid medallions that symbolize the joining of the male (the triangle pointing upward) and female (the triangle pointing downward) essences.

The magical connotation of ornaments is self-evident since they “protect” entrances and exits, borders and joined edges, whether of the body, clothing, the yurt or everyday utensils. In the yurt, for example, the patterned strips unite all elements: the lattice framework with the upright support poles, the poles with the “shanyrak” or roof-hole frame and the shashak-bau, the woven patterned cords with tassels at the end that dangle like rays of hot sun. Similarly, clothing is decorated at the hem, sleeve and collar and the edges of headgear and footwear, vessels, indeed most objects are also decorated; the edges of wooden plates, glasses, the edge of a ladle and the outer side of vessel covers, for example. One can find the same motif on the wooden door of an entryway, on the cupola-like circle of the shanyrak, on carpets and on pieces of jewelry. The same ornamentation can be executed in a variety of techniques; carved on wood, etched

or brazed onto metal, tooled on leather, rolled or sewn onto felt, embroidered on textile or woven in a pile carpet. It is significant that in Kazakh, the word for decorating or ornamentation is oyu, meaning “deepening or carving out”, which harkens back to the earliest times of Kazakh life when pictures were carved out of stone.

Historically, Kazakh artisans made use of almost every conceivable kind of material available to them. The horns and hooves of domesticated and wild animals were crafted into handles, serving spoons and snuff boxes. Ribs, shoulder-blades, shins and jaw-bones became carved ornamentation for furniture and details of the yurt. Leather was fashioned into sheepskin coats, headgear, containers, slipcovers and chests and sewn into horse harnesses, saddles and accessories. Wool and other animal hair was used to make felt, blankets and clothing.

Most of the applied crafts symbolize the art of the nomads. The torsyk is sewn from smooth-grained leather and has horn-like scrolls on each side, a slender throat and a cupola-shaped plug. The frothy kumys always stays cool and fresh in it, and never spills even if one is riding at a furious gallop. The syrmak is used to adorn the floor or walls of the yurt and its decorative motif in the form of a ram’s horn is an ornamental formula of Kazakh art.

The art of the bone-carver or suyekshi has reached a very high level. A variety of traditional wooden products are adorned with carved bone: the headboards of beds; wooden pillows known as zhastyk agash; the support known as zhuz ayak for holding rolled-up carpets, felts and pillows at the top or place of honor; the tops of the lattice framework and roof poles of the yurt; the tops of the churn-staffs for frothing kumys and on musical instruments as well.

Even in an overview such as this, the myriad applications of ornamentation and adornment in Kazakh culture – from dwellings to furniture, from utensils to weapons and ceremonial dress to winter clothing – quickly becomes evident. It is not an exaggeration to state that in the circle of life, from birth to death, the cycle of Kazakh’s being is spent in a world of beauty, whose elements are repeated through colors, shapes, symbols and signs of the natural world, in other words, the world of nature is perceived and organized into everyday life by the very same laws as the world of man and vice versa. This is the essence of the sense of comfort, protection and eternity that was so necessary in the constantly changing life of the nomad.

Used materials:

“The soul of Kazakhstan”, A.Kunanbay