

National architecture and applied arts

According to the written sources, the finest architectural works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were the tombs of the Kazakh khans Jani Beg and Qasim Khan in the necropolis of the town of Saraychik.

A clear idea of the buildings of the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries may be obtained from monuments that have survived in relatively good condition. First and foremost are the mausoleums of Karmakchi-Ata and Saraman-Ata in the lower reaches of the Syr Darya. The first is a cube-shaped building with a dome in the form of a truncated cone – one of the traditional types of tomb in Kazakhstan. Other monuments in the lower reaches of the Syr Darya take the customary form of hipped-roof buildings. They include the mausoleums of Qara-batir, Tore-batir and Tore-tam. The monuments of central Kazakhstan, in the Ulutau district, are more diversified, although retaining the principle of hipped-roof construction. Polyhedral and ellipsoid mausoleums are also found here.

Different again are the architectural monuments of the Mangishlaq (Manqeshlaq) region, in the basins of the Emba, Sagiz, Uil and Khobda rivers. The monuments there were built exclusively of white limestone, a material that is easy to work, polish and ornament.

Wall paintings in mausoleums have a special place in Kazakh folk art. Their subjects were usually domestic, hunting and military scenes and episodes from the life of the dead.

The Kazakhs live in a world of ornament. Their traditional domestic decor is embellished with patterns. There are no household items untouched by decorative ornamentation. Literally everything is decorated – utensils, crockery, weapons and clothing. The ornamental folk art of the Kazakhs is epitomized in the yurt. Among yurt furnishings, the highest artistic value is attributed to multicoloured woven strips (baskurs) on a claret-coloured ground and narrow polychrome ribbons on a milky-white ground (bau), used as draping on the wall and the vault.

Mats in many colours made of chee grass interwoven with variegated woollen thread or silk cord furnish striking examples of Kazakh decorative art. They usually come in soft, delicate shades. Multicoloured felt and woven rugs, carpets (alashas), embroidered curtains (shimildiks), felt pouches for the walls of the yurt (ayaq-qabs) and brightly hued and patterned chest covers (sandi-qabs) are all used in furnishing the yurt. Decorative embroidery is very popular in Kazakh folk art.

Horse harness, leather saddle-cloths, and belts worn by men and women are decorated with punch-work. Objects made of bone are frequently decorated with open-work. The favourite motifs for bone carving are circles and spirals, and, rather less frequently, rhomboids and triangles.

Some of the finest examples of Kazakh applied art are to be found in necklaces and pectoral ornaments for women, medallions to adorn girls' braids and pendants decorated with filigree, gemstones and pearls. There is a wealth of ornamentation on bracelets, rings and silver cases decorated by carving, engraving, inlay, cloisonné work and enamelling. The designs are usually based on geometric and floral patterns.

The motifs of Kazakh decoration are many, and strict rules govern their reproduction and combination. The main elements are cosmological, zoomorphic, floral and geometric. The colour scheme of background and design is based on a rigorous system of colour composition. Black is generally used to make the decoration stand out more boldly, rather than white on a black

background. Kazakhs love the combination of black and raspberry, and of blue with light shades. Some colours have a traditional symbolic significance. For example, blue is the symbol of the sky; red of fire and the sun; white of truth, joy and happiness; yellow of the mind and grief; black of earth; and green of youth and spring.

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