

Article

Evolution of Mythological Topics in the Art of

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Abstract: The article provides a scholarly analysis of the historical evolution and dynamics of the interpretation of mythological themes in the fine and applied arts of Uzbekistan from ancient times to the present.

Keywords: Fine Art, Myth, Epic, Folklore, Artistic Heritage, Style, Terracotta, Totemism, Animism, Fetishism, Islamic Art.

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1. Introduction

The art of Uzbekistan holds a distinctive place in the civilization of world artistic culture. Artifacts and unique visual images discovered across the regions of our country attest to the creation of an exceptionally rich heritage in this field [1]. Over long historical processes, our ancestors continuously enriched their experience in the artistic interpretation of cults, as well as mytho-epic and folkloric concepts. As a result, distinctive traditions of visual representation were formed [2]. Examining the stages of development of this heritage from ancient times to the present day, and systematically studying the stylistic features characteristic of each historical period, makes it possible to theoretically substantiate new dimensions of our national art [3].

2. Materials and Methods

The results of our analysis indicate that during the primitive periods, which lasted until the 4th century BCE, the populations living in various regions of our country gradually developed both spiritually and aesthetically. The belief that the real world was governed by certain supernatural forces gave rise to the earliest forms of religious views. Such ideas were reflected in images found in caves and on rock surfaces, as well as in household items made of clay, bone, stone, and marble, and in terracotta figurines. These objects differ from one another in their external appearance, form, size, artistic level, and production techniques. Although the thematic images of the earliest periods were rendered in simple and archaic forms, they possess particular scholarly value due to the diverse interpretations of our ancestors' mythological thinking. A number of artifacts depict rituals related to early beliefs such as dualism, hunting and gathering practices, as well as totemism, animism, and fetishism. Their role and scientific significance in the study of various cults and systems of mythological thinking are truly incomparable.

In the history of the fine and applied arts of Uzbekistan, the period from the 4th century BCE to the 4th century CE holds particular significance. In the art of antiquity, a range of images related to Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Hellenism, and local myths emerged. The form and content of previously existing, relatively simple representations based on various beliefs began to undergo transformation. In crafted objects and artifacts, the scope of mythological views expanded, and it can be observed that they gradually became a leading force in society. This phenomenon is of great importance in identifying the artistic, ideological, and stylistic distinctiveness of ancient art.

3. Results

In studying the uniqueness of the medieval artistic heritage, “Islamic art” occupies a significant place. In particular, the miniature art of Movarounnahr is regarded as one of the world’s unparalleled masterpieces [4]. Scenes based on legends described in medieval written epics, Sufi traditions, local cults, and epic narratives were depicted in artistic compositions. During this period, several miniature schools operated, including those of Herat, Samarkand, Bukhara, and later Shahruhiya. Miniatures illustrating the legendary events of renowned literary masterpieces of their time—such as the “Shahnameh” and “Khamasa”—are of exceptional scholarly value due to their distinctive artistic features [5].

In the 18th–20th centuries, during the period of the khanates, miniature art underwent stylistic changes and became somewhat modernized. As a result, it gradually moved away from its original form and traditional artistic principles. The development of our artistic culture followed a complex and diverse trajectory. Historical transformations and socio-political relations that emerged within society had a profound impact on the development of art and the emergence of new forms and styles. During this period, thematic expression was mainly reflected in the forms and external decorative elements of examples of folk applied arts [6].

In the 20th century, during the colonial and former Soviet periods, the development of art was rich in innovations. Although the colonial policy of Tsarism is historically condemned, we cannot ignore the contribution of Russian painters and sculptors to the development of national themes. In the works of painters such as Vasily Vereshchagin, Sergey Dudin, Robert Sommer, Ivan Kazakov, Arshak Tetevosyan, Pavel Benkov, Mikhail Kurzin, Louis Bourdier, and sculptor Nikolai Vishnevsky, ideas based on Islamic aesthetic perceptions and Sufi-inspired concepts found their expression. Their creative works also engaged with local myths, legends, and oral traditions.

During the Soviet period, continuous ideological propaganda was carried out with the aim of creating a unified “Soviet people’s art.” Great emphasis was placed on political themes that glorified the ideology of the “Red Empire.” However, these ideas did not take deep root in the hearts of our people. In evaluating our mytho-epic heritage, which has a rich creative tradition and deep historical roots, a one-sided approach prevailed. The principle of interpreting and evaluating artworks from a class-based perspective dominated artistic criticism [7]. In particular, atheism, which opposed religion, became a leading ideological force. The works of artists who addressed national themes were often undervalued, subjected to unjust criticism, and in some cases even faced various forms of pressure and prohibition, reaching the level of exile. Despite such conditions, hundreds of creators, including Abdulla Donish, S. Pochchaev, Vladimir Kaydalov, I. Ikromov, T. Arslankulov, A. Nikolaev, K. Basharov, Chingiz Akhmarov, and M. Yuldoshev, continued to turn to local mytho-epic themes in their work.

In examples of applied arts, decorative compositions adhered to the principle that “the part is the basis of the whole,” achieving artistic integrity through the symbolic depiction of a specific part of an animal’s body (such as the head, horn, leg, wing, feather, or beak). Such ornaments were sometimes used as single motifs, in some cases as paired elements, and in other instances as continuously repeated decorative patterns [8].

Such inappropriate practices were partially curbed in the 1980s due to the spiritual transformations, as well as the policies of Perestroika and Glasnost. In particular, the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and the emergence of independent states in its place completely eliminated negative attitudes and unjust interference in our national art. During the period of independence, truly national works began to be created—works that reflected the mythological and mytho-epic themes developed by our ancestors, distinguished by their artistic perfection and profound content [9].

Thanks to independence, a new chapter was opened in the centuries-long chronicle of traditional art. An objective assessment of our people’s invaluable artistic culture began to emerge. In order to reveal national identity, scholars turned to Sufi philosophy, which embodies the authentic values of our people. This, in turn, set new tasks for art historians. As a result, attention to these themes increased, and systematic research into

their true essence was initiated [10].

In the theoretical study of the interpretation of cults, mytho-epic, and folkloric themes in the fine and applied arts of Uzbekistan, conclusions from three main disciplines were primarily relied upon. Scientific observations made by archaeologists regarding artistic artifacts discovered during archaeological excavations, as well as studies by folklorists examining certain aspects of the subject from various perspectives and the theoretical conclusions derived from them, were analyzed. In contrast to these, the scientific conclusions derived from art historical research devoted to the study of the history and theory of the fine and applied arts of Uzbekistan were taken as the main foundation.

In establishing the theoretical foundations of these themes in the fine and applied arts of Uzbekistan, a systematic and chronological approach was adopted to classify them comprehensively according to their content into types and categories. This, in turn, facilitates the study of the stylistic distinctiveness of visual expression in the art of each historical period under consideration [11].

4. Discussion

In the ancient period, early mythological concepts and beliefs were expressed in a very simple form, and in most cases they were reflected in the external appearance of everyday objects. Some of them were also represented in artistic decorations or on coins minted by rulers [12]. Through the scientific study of ancient art monuments created in the territory of our homeland, we have come to the conclusion that cults and mythological systems of thought underwent a comprehensive process of formation and development. In the early medieval art of Sogdiana and Khorezm, thematic representations were developed in metalwork, ceramics, sculpture, and monumental wall paintings. In most of these works, mythological heroes, legendary creatures, as well as zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and celestial mythological motifs were interpreted in diverse ways [13].

The art of Turkic-speaking peoples and the Sogdians began to integrate and mutually influence one another. Heroic themes played a dominant role in epic narratives. The spread of the Manichaean religion also had a significant impact on artistic expression.

Artistic monuments discovered at sites such as Afrasiab, Varakhsha, Old Termez, Bolaliktepa, Dalverzintepa, Khalchayan, and Erkurgan serve as vivid examples of this artistic development [14].

In the art of the 19th–12th centuries, a new stage began in the interpretation of monuments related to cults and mythological themes. Celestial mythological images—birds (eagle, falcon, Simurgh, peacock, goose, pigeon, nightingale, Huma bird), supernatural creatures (sphinx, griffin, rhyton, demons, winged horse, winged camel), animals (camel, sheep, argali, gazelle, goat, deer, stag, lion, bull), and reptiles (snake, tortoise, frog, mouse, hedgehog)—became widely распространены. These motifs acquired diverse forms depending on the materials used and the stylistic direction of their representation [15]. Later, this group of images underwent transformation and was enriched with new forms and meanings under the influence of Islamic aesthetics that began to take shape in the medieval period.

Under the influence of Islamic ideology, sculptural representations and monumental wall paintings in the visual art of Movarounnahr gradually began to disappear. They were replaced by various symbolic and applied-decorative objects. During the medieval period, local epic traditions developed further, and with the growth of mythological imagery in lyrical-romantic poetry, a poetic language of metaphor and allegory emerged. A number of mythological images were reinterpreted and resemanticized on the basis of Sufi ideas [16].

This period's artistic uniqueness can be observed in the depiction of a one-headed, two-bodied fantastical creature within the arch of the reception hall wall of the palace of the Termezshahs, located in Old Termez. It is also suggested that the image of a two-bodied being on a bronze base dated to the 11th–12th centuries, preserved in the collection of the Samarkand Museum, is directly related to the ancient motif of twins [17].

As supporting examples, one may note that the legendary Anqa bird is described as having two heads; a two-headed horse statuette was discovered at the Uygarak monument in Khorezm; and similar representations of two-headed horses and two-headed birds are also reflected in Uzbek folklore, which further strengthens our observations.

The thematic imagery of this period, on the one hand, was nourished by artistic traditions formed in antiquity and the early medieval period, while on the other hand, it emerged in direct connection with the formation of a new Islamic aesthetic style [18]. Objects that existed in pre-Islamic times—such as amulets, representations of fairies, oil lamps, incense burners, and other household items—as well as birds and animals that were once deified, were reinterpreted and enriched with new Islamic meanings (for example, the lion associated with Ali, the camel with Salih, etc.) [19]. The medieval Islamic world remained closely connected with pre-Islamic legends, and a number of semi-morphic images became integrated into Islamic-period artistic representations. In Muslim art, prophets, great saints, and spiritual leaders were often symbolically associated with celestial motifs (for example: the dove with Noah, the ant with Solomon, the camel with Khizr, and Al-Buraq with Muhammad, etc.) [20].

5. Conclusion

In the fine and applied arts of Uzbekistan, thematic imagery is based on various symbols and emblems. A comprehensive scholarly study and analysis of these elements makes it possible to understand the essence of the representations. This is because the motifs and images they contain are not merely artistic fiction, but are grounded in ethnographic and archaeological evidence, giving them significant theoretical and practical value. In studying the evolutionary processes of the historical development of art, these themes possess particular scientific importance.

Based on the above conclusions and the specific nature of the topic, we consider it necessary to implement the following proposals and recommendations in the future. It is well known that in ancient times, numerous images related to Hellenic and Hellenized art, as well as local myths, were created in the territory of our homeland. This tradition continues to this day. A number of our artists are creating paintings interpreted in various perspectives and artistic solutions on themes such as “The Abduction of Europa,” “The Muses,” “Centaur,” “Anahita,” “Zoroaster,” and others. Today, the necessity of supporting these works and organizing special exhibitions aimed at properly honoring and rewarding creative artists is increasingly emphasized by the demands of the time itself.

Folk oral creativity is an inexhaustible treasure. A vivid example of it is found in the anecdotes of Nasriddin Afandi, who has long been a symbol of wisdom and wit. Our people greatly value sincere and harmless laughter. Therefore, the proposal to hold an annual exhibition in April titled “Nasriddin Afandi’s Anecdotes in Visual Art,” in cooperation with the editorial office of the magazine “Mushtum”, would undoubtedly bring positive results for the development of this field.

The scope of sources and information related to this topic is extremely broad. In order to enable our people to benefit from this heritage, there is a need to launch special programs on the “History of Uzbekistan” television channel based on the most significant monuments of art from each historical period. If this project is implemented in both Uzbek and Russian languages, the quality and international prestige of the program would increase even further. All necessary conditions and opportunities for this are currently available.

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