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# Samarkand Suzane

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Samarkand came into history of world culture as a capital of Amir Temur's empire. The city was surviving difficulties after disintegration of the empire, but could keep a status of the largest center of culture and art crafts. The original Samarkand embroidery excites especial interest. Despite the close neighbourhood of the large centers of embroidery – Bukhara, Nurata and Shahrizabz, which gravitate to general Bukhara school, the Samarkand school has preserved own style, captivating by monumental solutions, laconic colour and dynamic forms.



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It is interesting, that the study of Uzbekistan embroidery began from Samarkand. In the 1930s, O. Sukhareva, the senior researcher of the State Museum of History (Samarkand) collected the richest material on the Samarkand embroidery. Now, the manuscript is kept at the library of the State Museum of Arts (Tashkent) (1). Some her articles were based on this material and published (2, 3). Later, the Samarkand embroidery was not a subject of special studying, however the works, devoted to this field of national art touch upon it.

Suzane – large wall clothes take a key place in Samarkand embroidery. Suzane were made on white homespun cotton base, silk or on factory-made coloured fabric. Silk or cotton threads, sometimes- woolen (for details), were handcrafted or factory-made. As O. Sukhareva noted, the red wool came into use just in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and fell into disuse in the 1880s. It forms one of dating parameters (2, p. 121). The Samarkand embroiderers applied satin stitch (bosma and sometimes qanda-hael). Contours of patterns were touched in with tambour stitch (yurma). Ornamental compositions have two major forms:

- rows of large floral rosettes, framed by foliate rings
- rows of floral bushes

Evolution of these patterns represents one of the most fascinating aspects of research, which finally brings light into genesis of suzane ornament. O. Sukhareva pointed out three periods in evolution of the Samarkand patterns:

- The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century – the 1880s – preservation of archaic features in ornament and technology,
- 1890-1905 – transition to a new style and technology,
- 1905-1917 – final formation of the new style.

The earliest Samarkand embroideries (before 1880) demonstrate more elaborate pattern and rich colour palette. Their style is quite reasonably considered as picturesque and naturalistic (1, p. 4). The embroidery was made on a white background, sometimes on claret, green or violet factory-made fabrics. Various tinges of red and green colours were combined with complementary colors – yellow, blue, grey, grey-green and violet-black. The major motif – a large floral rosette – lola (tulip). The embroidery with rows of floral rosettes could be considered as a typical sample of local style. Rosettes were often made in red tones and framed with foiling rings, which had various tinges of green colour, added by bright red lines. G. Chepelevetskaya assumes that such rings represent a grapevine (4, p. 71). However, we should note that this motif is wide spread in textile of the Muslim East, but its connection with a grapevine is hardly traced. Direct analogues were found in Bukhara embroidery, where a round rosette within a green foiling ring forms one of major elements in different compositions, mainly of medallion type, as well as in Iran vase carpets (the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> cc.) with magnificent palmettes and rosettes within a circle of thin branches (5, p. 26). Probably, a spiral – classic Islamic motif in ornamental decoration of carpets, wall paintings, etc. became a prototype of this pattern.

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The genetic affinity of these elements causes no doubts, but in this case carpets, palmettes and rosettes represent elaborate forms with fine details and polychromic colour; a branch is solved as a thin line with rare elongated leaves and small rosettes beaded on. The pattern performed by the Bukhara chizmakish (drawer) exposes simplified forms: palmette is much more modest, and a thin branch is wider. Trefoils along the diameter turn it into a green ring. Transformation that is more significant is marked in the Samarkand variant, where a rosette becomes larger and obtains especially local character, which goes back to motifs on early medieval terracotta plates from Samarkand (4, p. 81). Palmettes as more elaborate elements, are absent at all; the foiling ring becomes massive. Sometimes, leaves transform, turning a ring into something like a gear hoop.

Parallels between the Iranian carpets of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the embroidery of Bukhara and Samarkand, regarding both separate ornamental elements and compositions, are not casual. They prove that genesis of some compositions goes back to the Middle Ages, when the vegetative decor in art textile reached the peak of development. The sketches for carpets and embroideries were done by professional artists, which worked in big cities or palace workshops and created refine and exquisite patterns. However, the Samarkand embroidery demonstrates lesser connection with “palace”, professional and elite medieval art tradition, even though in the past Samarkand was the capital of the Timurid empire. The reason laid in permanent invasions of nomads, especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when “Samarkand was fully deserted” (6, p. 115) and traditions of palace culture had been kept just as traces. The Samarkand embroidery represents a bright example of folk art style.

Further evolution of Samarkand patterns went towards simplification. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> -20<sup>th</sup> centuries, embroideries became larger in size, ornamental details became bigger – rosettes reached 1 m in diameter. A number of rosettes grew up to 15 – 20 (1, p. 111). These changes required a larger seam. The colour scale was reduced, the black colour substituted the green.

At last, in the third period, factory-made fabrics and strings became dominant; ornaments kept monumental character; the elements simplified, the colour became contrast and small details disappeared. The scholars connected enlargement of embroidery sizes with “the social situation” – “growing trading bourgeoisie aspired to demonstrate the power and riches through the embroidery” (1, p. 9). However, this tendency had a negative effect

on the decor. The aspiration to enlarge patterns caused turning of foiling ring into a broad winding bine with firm curls, crowned by trefoils or cinquefoils. It filled up the field, not leaving any place for additional motifs, fully changing design of the embroidery. In some cases, such bine transformed into numerous spirals, which were embroidered directly from a flower, assimilating it to a spiral rosette. So, natural transformation of the pattern gave new variants of a foiling ring, which appeared in 1905 and gradually superseded all other patterns, “becoming the most fashionable foiling ornament” (1, p. 121). Rather thin, at the beginning, they were becoming thicker, making the ornament massive and devoid of dynamics. Such were requirements of customers – to make a foiling ornament thicker in order to use more threads and so to demonstrate that the embroidery belongs to rich family (1, p. 122). These motifs are often specified as “spiral-shaped curls of melon” or “melon bines”. However, it would be difficult to agree with interpretation of these elements as “reflection of activity of a woman-embroiderer in the epoch of matriarchy, when she gathered edible plants and later learned to cultivate them” (2, p. 133). Such interpretation occurred among the embroiderers, which based on similarity between the new pattern and certain natural forms. Actually, genesis of these black bines could be related to ordinary thin branch with leaves.

Another feature of Samarkand suzane – a narrow border, framing the central field, is also typical of the national style. While professional artists pay great attention to the border, the border has auxiliary function in the case of folk art- it is rather narrow and ornamented modestly. Unlike Samarkand suzane, Bukhara's ones have wide, richly ornamented border. That reveals influence of “palace” style, which in Bukhara, the capital of emirate, has been kept better. Having common features of decor, Bukhara and Samarkand suzane (rosettes within foiling rings, cross element – chahar-chirag (four lamps) and floral bushes) could be identified by width of the border and characteristic colour.

A feature of the Samarkand embroidery is the colour palette – red and black colours on a white background, having formed at the turn of centuries. It is hardly possible to connect this change with new aesthetic views of embroiderers, more likely, it was caused by practical factors – difficulties of green threads painting. As we know, to be painted in green, the threads were first painted in yellow (by means of isparak), then the threads were put in indigo solution, which always was hard-to-get dye. Indigo was imported from India, and painting was carried out in special painting workshops. Due to expensive technology, dark blue color has been always





used just for a few details. Obviously, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Samarkand could occurred problems with indigo, what led to substitution of green colour by black. The black paint taken from mallow, remained more accessible. O. Sukhareva cited opinion of old embroiderers, which protested against such innovation: "You have no shame, isn't it possible to make a pattern green?!" (1, p. 109). It is interesting, that this enforced limitation of colours gave unexpected effective result – contrast combination of red, black and white became an original brand mark of Samarkand suzane.

Another group of Samarkand suzane patterns consists of identical blossoming bushes on a central field. The blossoming bush is a classic motif, widespread in art of the Muslim East. It is used in wood painting and carving, ganch carving, ceramics, embroidery and carpets. However, this composition – strict rows of bushes is characteristic only for the embroidery. Not accenting the problem of its genesis, the scholars, paying attention to this composition, noted: "Numerous suzane and bolinpushes with new, for Samarkand, patterns – rows of bushes had appeared by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" (4, p. 31). Searching for analogies can throw light on this issue. Similar compositions could be revealed in the Bukhara embroidery and in Shrub rugs from Kerman (Iran) (7, p. 204). These carpets became known from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and, unlike ornamental carpets with vegetative-floral decor, imitated natural forms. Such sudden occurrence of this composition in Samarkand suzane enables to guess its borrowed character – probably, under influence of the Bukhara embroidery and imported carpets, which patterns the local embroiderers tried to imitate. However, interpretation of various bushes reveals original local character.

The brief analysis of Samarkand suzane patterns enables to notice, that the ornamental set of local embroiderers was connected both with local traditions and with pan-Islamic heritage. Speaking about decor, the critics mark its archaic character (1, p. 5). However, proceeding from said above, this definition needs some correction. Really, archaic elements are available in different ornaments, but their inconsiderable in number and stable compositions go back to the period of the Upper Middle Ages. The vegetative and floral style, characteristic for Islamic art, reached its peak in that period. Having adapted some classic elements, the Samarkand embroiderers developed original art language, which makes distinctive features of the Samarkand embroidery. Its major decor represents mainly vegetative-floral forms – rosettes (lola), vines, floral bushes and elements of chahar-chirag. However, the rich creative imagination allows to create new variants of patterns, which character bears specific features of national style – conventionality and primitivism of forms, semantically connected with the idea of fertility and blossoming nature. It is logic that the embroidery had a protective function and was intended to wedding ceremonies, when a bride was the most hurtable and needed additional protection. Samarkand embroidery generated as a stable phenomenon and, in its own turn, influenced the neighbouring centers – Urgut, Qattakurgan and Djizak. For example, Djizak standard pattern of the 19<sup>th</sup> century represents even more schematic, but rather

original variant of Samarkand ornament – a rosette turned into a plain dented circle, and a foiling frame – into rather wide festooned ring. So, the vegetative composition had transformed into geometrical. Such transformations of vegetative elements into geometrical and on the contrary were characteristic for folk art.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a number of embroiderers remembering pure traditions was reducing in Samarkand. Fortunately, traditions of the Samarkand style have kept in provincial Urgut, which now is a large local center of embroidery. Here, the Samarkand compositions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have developed up to maximal expressiveness – large festooned rosettes within wide foiling rings, still dominate. However, Urgut patterns, in comparison with their Samarkand prototype, are simpler and roughish. The laconic three-coloured scale – claret and crimson rosettes and black foiling rings are kept too. At the same time, Urgut embroideries represent a new stage in development of the pattern – a foiling ring turned into complex relieved motif, which fills up a field of embroidery. A white background obtains the important decorative function – it is felt as a thin graphic pattern. It causes the effect of white pattern on a black background. This decorative principle – a pattern without background, or complementarity of a pattern and a background is typical of nomadic art. The Samarkand embroiderers did not use it. Influence of steppe culture is obvious in the case of Urgut and was caused by neighbourhood of Urgut, where the Tadjiks prevailed, with numerous Kazakh villages. From time immemorial, the Kazakhs have been engaged into manufacturing of felt carpets, which technology predetermined formation of patterns without a background. Such influence of nomadic traditions is not exceptional. For example, the ceramics from Gurumsarai represents a unique sample of the pattern without background. Its monumental, archaic decor consists of curvilinear ornaments forming contrast white-dark blue compositions, which were initially characteristic for felt carpets “alakii”.

Original Urgut patterns demonstrate a final stage of evolution of just one graphic motif – rosette within a foiling frame, having gone a way from spirals of medieval artists up to wide dented vines, which pattern turns a background into the important decorative element. Graphic motifs – kumgans represent the innovation in Urgut embroidery. The foiling ring remain black, but the green colour appear in some details – the center of rosettes, inserts etc. In general, the embroidery of Samarkand and centers gravitating to it represents the stable original school, which, obviously, requires further researches.

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