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## UZBEK SUZANE — FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY

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### Abstract

This article highlights the history and contemporary state of Uzbek Suzani, one of the most famous directions of national craftsmanship in Uzbekistan. By analyzing its historical roots, the authors examine the evolution of traditional embroidery techniques, materials, and designs that reflect the rich cultural history of the region. Special attention is given to the symbolism and significance of Suzani motifs, as well as their adaptation to modern conditions and needs. The article emphasizes the importance of preserving this unique art form and its role in the cultural heritage of Uzbekistan.

**Research Objective:** To comprehensively analyze the art of Suzani in Uzbekistan, as a significant part of the country's cultural heritage, highlighting its history, symbolism, and impact on contemporary art and design. This study includes an examination of historical periods that influenced embroidery styles and techniques, as well as considering the adaptation of traditional embroidery methods to modernity and their application in contemporary artistic projects.

**Research Methods:** The study of historical sources, including literary works, archival materials, and historical accounts, to reconstruct the history of Suzani and understand its evolution in the context of Uzbekistan's and Central Asia's history. Evaluation and analysis of Suzani samples from the perspective of design, style, color, and technique. Utilization of this analysis to comprehend the cultural and symbolic significance of patterns and motifs. The findings confirm that Suzani embroidery, with its centuries-old history, reflects the cultural and historical shifts of Central Asia. Traditional embroidery techniques and styles are preserved, while simultaneously adapting to contemporary needs. Suzani patterns carry profound symbolic meaning, essential for understanding the cultural identity of the Uzbek people, and exert a significant influence on modern art and design. Additionally, Suzani embroidery plays a crucial role in the economy and social stability of the region, particularly among women, and garners increasing international interest, facilitating cultural exchange and promoting Uzbek culture on a global scale.

**Scientific Novelty:** This study analyzes the evolution of Uzbek Suzani as a form of decorative and applied art, with a focus on its adaptation to contemporary conditions and globalization. It explores new trends in the use of Suzani in modern design and fashion.

**Practical Application:** The study advocates for the inclusion of the history and techniques of Suzani in art history and cultural studies curricula. It suggests utilizing Suzani as a

key element in promoting tourism in Uzbekistan. The organization of exhibitions and cultural exchanges with other countries is proposed to showcase the uniqueness and beauty of Uzbek Suzani, as well as to facilitate the exchange of experiences with other cultures. These practical applications aim to not only preserve but also develop Uzbek Suzani as an integral part of cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** *Embroidery, globalization of art, design, cultural heritage, international recognition, fashion, education, craftsmanship, preservation of traditions, contemporary art, traditional art, Uzbek Suzani, economic significance*

### **Problem Statement:**

This research into Uzbek Suzani is predicated on the need for an in-depth understanding of how traditional embroidery art adapts and maintains its relevance in the modern world, characterized by globalization and continuous cultural shifts. The study aims to uncover how traditional methods, symbolism, and styles of Suzani are preserved or transformed in response to contemporary trends. It also seeks to explore the impact of such changes on the perception and value of Suzani as an element of Uzbekistan's cultural heritage, as well as its role and place in contemporary art and design.

### **Analysis of Recent Research:**

Elmira Gul's work "Heavenly Gardens and Earthly Gardens: The Embroidery of Uzbekistan: The Hidden Meaning of Sacred Texts" (Moscow, Marjani Foundation Publishing, 2013) delves deeply into the symbolism and hidden meanings in Suzani patterns. This work is a significant contribution to understanding the cultural and religious aspects of embroidery.

In Elmira Gul's article "Suzani — Embroideries of Uzbekistan" in the "Halcha" magazine (Baku, 2014), the history and development of Suzani in Uzbekistan are explored. The study focuses on the diversity of embroidery techniques and styles, presenting them within the context of the region's cultural traditions.

Gayane Umerova's article "The Relevance of Traditional Values" in the "Sanat" magazine highlights the significance and relevance of traditional Uzbek values, including through the prism of Suzani embroidery. This research emphasizes the importance of preserving traditions in the modern world.

Together, these studies form a comprehensive knowledge base about Suzani, covering historical, cultural, and symbolic aspects,

while also leaving room for further exploration of the impact of modernity on this traditional art form.

### **Purpose of the Article:**

The article aims to thoroughly investigate and analyze Uzbek Suzani as a crucial element of Uzbekistan's cultural heritage, shedding light on its historical development, traditional methods, and styles, as well as their transformation and adaptation in the modern world. The article seeks to explore the interaction between traditional art and contemporary trends, examining how modern changes in society and culture affect the perception and significance of Suzani. Furthermore, it focuses on studying the role of Suzani in contemporary art and design, identifying new directions and opportunities for this unique form of decorative and applied art.

### **Presentation of the Main Material:**

The culture of the Uzbek people is a centuries-old concentrated experience, materialized in art objects, labor, and everyday life. This wealth of traditions, rituals, and customs reflects the worldview, moral and aesthetic values that shape the uniqueness of the nation, its identity, social, and spiritual identity. Architectural monuments and works of fine and applied art of Uzbekistan have brought worldwide fame to the country, while the methods of their study have strengthened the reputation of the national culture as a whole.

Among the variety of decorative and applied arts of Uzbekistan, a special place is occupied by Suzani — embroidery, deeply rooted in the lifestyle, traditions, and everyday life of the Uzbek people. The mesmerizing patterns and bright colors of Suzani reflect the unique creativity and individuality of the Uzbek people, remaining an emblem of their art throughout the centuries.

Suzani (Uzbek: сўзана, Persian: سوزندو) is a form of hand embroidery, representing a decorative textile crafted by folk artisans in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Iran. The name “Suzani” originates from the Persian word “suzan,” which means “needle.”

The base for Suzani traditionally utilized homespun white or unbleached calico of local production — buz (Tajik: карбос). In European terminology, this fabric was known as mata (Arabic: متو — goods), or malla (a reddish-brown colored mata) (Elmira Gül, 2013).

Suzani are often created from two or more pieces, which are subsequently meticulously joined together. This art form has been practiced in Uzbekistan for centuries and is a vital part of the country’s cultural identity. Suzani embroidery, with its long and rich history in Central Asia, has become synonymous with Uzbek culture and plays a significant role in promoting tourism in the region.

Historians believe that the art of Suzani embroidery has been practiced in Central Asia for over 2000 years. Over the centuries, the materials and methods of embroidery have undergone changes, reflecting the economic and cultural transformations in the region. For instance, in Samarkand, from the 1850s to the 1870s, almost exclusively local materials were used, but by the end of the 1890s, factory-produced threads and synthetic dyes began to be utilized.

Suzani embroidery is not just a cultural relic but a living art form that continues to be practiced by artisans throughout Uzbekistan. Many families pass down embroidery skills and techniques from generation to generation, preserving this tradition. Uzbek Suzani is known for its bright and unusual design, serving as an ethnic element reflecting the rich cultural heritage and artistic traditions of the Uzbek people. Its intricate design is a testament to the skill and creativity of Uzbek women and their contribution to the country’s art and culture.

Uzbek Suzani, with its long and rich history in Central Asia, is one of the most expressive and recognizable forms of traditional Uzbek art. Traditionally, Suzani was created as part of a bride’s dowry, symbolizing luck and prosperity for the newlyweds. Additionally, it could also have religious sig-

nificance, decorating the walls during religious ceremonies.

This embroidery style quickly became a significant part of Central Asian culture, passed down through generations and reflecting the unique styles and techniques of each family. Suzani is known for its bright and unusual designs, often containing geometric shapes, flowers, and animals, created using silk threads on cotton or linen fabric. These compositions reflect the rich cultural heritage and artistic traditions of the Uzbek people.

Contemporary Suzani continues to be a living art form, maintaining a connection with tradition while adapting to modern conditions and needs. It remains an important part of Uzbekistan’s cultural heritage and an expression of the unique artistic talent of the Uzbek people.

Suzani were traditionally embroidered on wool, cotton, or linen fabric. In the early period in Samarkand, embroideries were often done on fabrics of basic colors: white, red, and yellow. A special place was held by Suzani on a white background, for which a coarse local cotton fabric known as karbos or mata was used. By the end of the 19th century, embroideries on silk fabrics began to appear, especially in Bukhara, Samarkand, and Shahrisabz, where silk was used to create particularly rich embroideries.

The threads used for embroidery were typically handmade silk, less often cotton or wool. The dyeing of threads was done at home using natural dyes; roots of madder (ruyan) that grew and were cultivated in Central Asia, yellow flowers of isparak, mallows, pomegranate peel, onion husks, saffron, usma, and many other substances were used for this purpose.

Threads dyed with natural dyes have preserved their depth and nobility of tone for centuries; the embroidery made with them was more harmonious and noble in color (Gül Elmira, 2014).

Originally, mainly homemade silk threads were used for embroidery. The women of the family preparing the dowry would raise silkworms and unravel the cocoons, applying various techniques for thread production and processing. In the 1890s, factory-made threads, distinguished by their

high quality and luster but also higher cost, began to be used in embroidery.

Research on Samarkand Suzani has shown that most of them are made with the “basma” stitch, a type of satin stitch. This technique required considerable labor and thread consumption, as the reverse side of the fabric was also densely stitched. The process of creating Suzani was labor-intensive and required special attention and skill from the embroiderers.

The elements and methods of Suzani embroidery not only reflect cultural and economic transformations in Central Asia but also contributed to the development and enrichment of Suzani art, making it more diverse and vibrant.

From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was active use of imported fabrics and the first synthetic dyes in Samarkand, reflecting cultural and economic exchange between Central Asia and Russia. These changes led to the emergence of new styles and techniques in Suzani embroidery, significantly expanding the possibilities for embroiderers. An example of such a change is the use of cotton mitskal, dyed in red and blue colors by Bukharan dyers.

Suzani embroidery is a form of improvisational art where each piece is unique, and the artist has the freedom to create their own design. Although Suzani has evolved over the centuries with the emergence of new styles and techniques, a deep respect for tradition remains an important part of this craft. Many artisans still use the same methods as their ancestors and feel a strong sense of pride in preserving this art form for future generations.

Uzbek Suzani is rich in symbolic motifs that are passed down from generation to generation. For example, the pomegranate in Uzbek culture symbolizes fertility and abundance, making it a popular motif in Suzani. Images of grapevines, flowers, and animals are also common, each carrying its own unique meaning and significance.

Suzani is known for its bright and bold colors, as well as the incredible detail in its patterns. The use of silk thread gives the embroidery a special luster, making it even more visually attractive. These design elements make each Suzani piece a unique work of art. Artisans have the freedom to create

their own unique compositions, bringing an individual character to each piece. This creative freedom allows craftsmen to express their personal styles and artistic intuition.

Many of the patterns and motifs used in Suzani embroidery are inspired by nature. Plant elements, such as flowers and vines, not only lend natural beauty to the embroidery but also reflect the world in which the artisans live and create. Suzani patterns are more than just decorative — each carries its own special symbolism. An appropriate ornament can protect against misfortune, the evil eye, and poverty. For example, the depiction of the Huma bird symbolizes happiness, a chili pepper pod represents protection from evil spells, and a pomegranate signifies fertility.

A blooming garden is a primary ornamental image in Suzani. Flowers from gardens and flowerbeds, transferred onto fabric and transformed by the imagination of the embroiderers, become classic folk patterns. These ornaments serve not only as decoration but also symbolize wishes for happiness and prosperity, embodying fertility. Suzani can be up to three meters wide and six meters long. To create such a large canvas, individual embroidered fabric fragments are used, which are then carefully joined together.

Suzani represents a national art form that has developed its style over the centuries. Bukhara, Nurata, Gijduvan, Samarkand, Shahrisabz, Tashkent, and Fergana have become centers of this art. Each embroidery school has its own unique local characteristics and preferred motifs. The diversity of themes and techniques is so vast that even similar motifs are interpreted differently in various regions. Some motifs are unique and found only in specific types of Suzani. For instance, Nurata Suzani is distinguished by its clear and brightly expressed patterns, making it easily identifiable from other regional works.

Local Suzani are adorned with floral bouquets that stand out vividly against the white background of the fabric. They are notable for their richness and variety of floral motifs, holding a prominent place among Uzbek Suzani embroideries. Unlike Nurata and Bukhara Suzani, Samarkand embroidery is characterized by a larger, more succinct design. Its main motif is a round rosette in raspberry tones, surrounded by a leaf pat-



tern. The decorative and distinct simplicity of the bold pattern is a hallmark of Samarkand Suzani embroidery.

The Suzani embroideries of Shahrisabz are remarkably expressive, often created on colored backgrounds. The pattern compositions of artisans in this region resemble carpet art more than traditional embroidery. A large medallion often occupies the center of the composition, with quarters of similar medallions at the corners.

Gijduvan Suzani, similar to Bukhara, is primarily embroidered using the Yurma technique, that is, with a crochet hook, employing *bigiz* — an iron hook with a curved end. In Bukhara, similar works are performed with a needle. The difference between Gijduvan and Bukhara Suzani is also noticeable in the threads used: in Gijduvan, specially treated, twisted threads are used, whereas Bukhara craftswomen use untreated threads. The base fabric also differs: Gijduvan Suzani is made on white or grayish *karbos* (homemade cotton fabric), red calico, white fabric, and light-gray reps, while Bukhara Suzani is made on more expensive fabrics, including white *karbos* and imported *Ghissar* fabrics.

Tashkent artisans have developed their own unique and distinctive style, known as *palyak* and *gulkurpa*. The main motif (from the Arabic فَلَآك — “*falyak*,” meaning “sky”) is represented by large dark-red circles densely filling the fabric. *Gulkurpa*, which translates to “flower blanket,” was traditionally used as a cover for newlyweds’ bed.

The vibrant floral pattern of *Gulkurpa* symbolizes happiness and a large family. Suzani embroidery from the Fergana Valley is characterized by its particular elegance and lightness of pattern, freely placed on a background of purple or dark green satin. Fergana Suzani is distinguished by its flowing airiness and the effortless grace of its ornamentation, making them unique works of art.

The ornamentation of Suzani embodies a special philosophy: it has a beginning but no end. According to ancient tradition, the craftswoman always leaves a small unfinished fragment in the embroidery, symbolizing the infinity of existence and the immortality of the human soul. This element underscores the profound meaning of Suzani art, going beyond simple aesthetics to include philosophical and

spiritual concepts that are part of the cultural heritage and worldview of the people.

In recent years, Uzbek Suzani has gained widespread recognition at the international level. Modern designers actively integrate Suzani patterns into their creations, thereby breathing new life into this traditional art and attracting a new audience. This expansion of Suzani’s application transforms it into something more than just a cultural heritage element; Suzani becomes a significant aspect of contemporary design, highlighting its universality and temporal significance.

The culture of each people is deeply rooted in all aspects of folk life and has a synthetic character. Personal immersion in the spiritual culture of one’s people is of great significance for every individual. Detachment from these spiritual treasures diminishes the depth of human thinking and sensibility. Spiritual culture is the sum of energy accumulated over centuries of human civilization development, the result of the efforts of many generations of our ancestors. Education plays a key role in maintaining the connection between generations. Thus, culture serves as a catalyst for the development of the human mind, directing and utilizing this accumulated spiritual energy.

The primary factor in the commercial success of Suzani artisans is their high level of professionalism and ability to creatively adapt the traditions of past centuries to the demands of the modern market. Previously, masters relied on personal experience, the canons, and traditions of their embroidery schools, but today many of them are attuned to the needs and tastes of contemporary consumers, as well as current fashion trends. This represents both opportunities and risks for the development of traditional Uzbek embroidery, as there is a danger of losing the uniqueness and depth of the art in pursuit of commercial success. It is important to find a balance between preserving traditional methods and embracing innovation, to enrich the art of Suzani without losing its historical value. Ultimately, innovation and change are inevitable and necessary, just as the magnificent embroidery samples of the past were once innovative.

Uzbek Suzani is not only a beautiful piece of art but also functional. The textile can be

used as wall decor, a tablecloth, a coverlet, or even as an item of clothing. Its durability and aesthetic appeal make it a versatile addition to any home or wardrobe.

Combining a rich history with contemporary trends, Uzbek Suzani continues to be a living and dynamic element of Uzbek culture. It not only retains its cultural significance but

also evolves, finding new ways of expression and application in the modern world. Uzbek Suzani is a unique example of ethnic textile art that embodies the cultural heritage and artistic talent of the Uzbek people. Its rich history, significant design, and practical application make it a valuable form of art that continues to be celebrated and admired worldwide.

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