

Section 3. Theory and history of art

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ARTISTIC INTERACTIONS BETWEEN SOGDIANA AND CHINA DURING THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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Abstract

The article examines the role of the Silk Road in cultural exchange between the East and the West, with a focus on the influence of Sogdiana and its culture on China. The study explores cultural connections related to the spread of Buddhism, music, dance, and crafts, as well as the impact of Sogdian artisans on the development of Chinese art, including jewelry making and metalworking. The author analyzes archaeological and written sources that confirm the significant contribution of the Sogdians to Chinese culture, particularly during the Tang Dynasty. Special attention is given to dance and music traditions, which became an integral part of Chinese cultural life and a symbol of cultural integration along the Silk Road.

Keywords: *Silk Road, cultural exchange, art, Sogdiana, China*

Introduction

The Great Silk Road was a major international trade route that operated from the mid-1st millennium BCE until the 16th century CE. It played an exceptional role in the development of world civilization, uniting various states and peoples into a single cultural and economic space. One of the key regions with strategic importance along this route was Sogdiana. Its capital, Samarkand, for many centuries served as a vital center of interaction between the East and the West, contributing to the strengthening of trade, diplomatic, and cultural ties. It was during this period that the Chinese diplomat Zhang

Qian first introduced China to the “Western countries,” referring to Central Asia.

Research Methods:

This study employs a comparative method, which has allowed for tracing cultural interactions between China and Central Asia, as well as a historical-archaeological approach for analyzing material evidence such as artifacts, architectural monuments, and textual sources. The comparison of artistic objects, texts, and archaeological finds, such as silver vessels and tombs, helps to identify the processes of cultural integration and mutual influence that occurred along the Silk Road.

At different stages of its history, Samarkand played not only a political, but also a cultural role in the region. The most intense development of international cultural contacts in Samarkand occurred during the early medieval period (5th – 8th centuries). During this time, many neighboring states expressed interest in the city. Chinese chronicles contain references to Samarkand actors, musicians, and dancers who performed at the imperial court in China. Thus, Samarkand served as one of the most important bridges for cultural exchange between Central Asia and China.

The Sogdians made a significant contribution to the spread of Buddhism in China. Chinese chronicles mention four Buddhist monks of Sogdian origin (Mirzoyev, 2014). Based on their names, which began with “Kan,” it can be assumed that they belonged to the Samarkand dynasties.

Academic N. I. Konrad, analyzing the nature of these contacts, emphasized that the Kushan Kingdom played a crucial role in the cultural development of China. It was from this state that Buddhism entered China, and it came not only as a religious doctrine but also as a bearer of a broad cultural tradition (Konrad, 1974). Along with Buddhism, rich literature – both religious and secular – arrived in China, as well as various artistic crafts, including wood and bone carving, and artistic casting. Buddhism also influenced the development of sculpture and painting. Moreover, within its sphere, the foundations of theatrical arts were formed: on the one hand, as part of complex ritual practices, and on the other, as a result of interaction with folk theatrical traditions (Konrad, 1974).

Starting from the 6th century, the rulers of Turkestan frequently sent the best artisans as gifts to the Chinese imperial court. Along with Sogdian merchants, actors also came to China. The Chinese chronicle *Sui Shu* (“History of the Sui”) contains information about the musical culture of Central Asia, particularly Samarkand (Kan-go) (Bichurin, 1950). The Sogdians played a key role in introducing new musical instruments to China, including the lute, harp, and horizontal flute.

One of the early sources on the secular dance arts of Central Asia is Chinese histori-

cal documents, especially those from the Tang dynasty (618–907). During this time, dances of Sogdian origin, which became popular in Chinese culture, were actively developed.

A striking archaeological confirmation of cultural connections in dance between China and Central Asia is the tomb of Yu Hun, discovered in 1999 (Komissarov, 2014). It is an invaluable monument reflecting the influence of Sogdian culture on Chinese art. The person buried in the tomb was a Sogdian who held a high-ranking position. Sogdians in China occupied high social positions and were highly respected, which is also reflected in the design of their tombs, which were decorated at the level of imperial burials.

The sarcophagus of Yu Hun is covered with bas-reliefs and painted stone panels. Nine main bas-reliefs depict 54 scenes of Central Asian origin, including banquets, musicians, dancers, costumes, hunting with nomads on horses and camels, and hunting Indian elephants.

A prominent place in Chinese sources is occupied by dances that came from Central Asia. One of the most famous is the “Huteng” dance (the nomadic leap dance). This acrobatic dance, which included leaps and backflips, appeared exotic and unusual to the Chinese audience. This energetic male solo dance was characterized by jumps, swift movements, and rapid changes of steps. “Huteng” was widely known and frequently mentioned by poets of the Tang period, which attests to its popularity at the imperial court (Aripjanov, 2024).

Alongside it was the “Huxian” dance (the Sogdian whirlwind), distinguished by rapid spinning and dynamic movements that highlighted the artistry of Sogdian dancers (Jalilova, 2024). These dances not only demonstrated physical agility and artistry, but also symbolized the cultural ties between China and Central Asia, which had a significant influence on the art and aesthetics of the Tang period.

Metalworking in gold, silver, and bronze was one of the craft fields in which Sogdian masters particularly excelled. In their artistic and everyday objects, zoomorphic motifs predominated, reflecting the complex worldview, religious beliefs, and aesthetic preferences of Sogdian society.

Located at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road and having access to artistic tradi-

tions from Iran, Byzantium, China, and India, Sogdian masters actively borrowed and creatively adapted motifs they found appealing, reproducing them in their own works. The local school of metalworking not only preserved its original features, but also had a noticeable influence on the development of Chinese craft art.

Archaeological discoveries confirm that the gold artifacts found in China demonstrate a variety of forms, sizes, and functions, reflecting the diversity of cultural interactions and integration processes between different regions, cultures, and ethnicities (Marshak, 1971). By the time of the Wei and Jin dynasties, the number of gold objects imported from the West had significantly increased. Their forms, ornaments, and methods of processing, which sharply differed from traditional Chinese styles, introduced new impulses into the development of Chinese jewelry, forming the foundation for its flourishing during the Sui and Tang dynasties.

During the Tang dynasty, significant changes took place in the development of gold artifacts: under the influence of foreign models, Chinese craftsmen gradually moved away from established traditions, mastering and integrating Western decorative principles. By the middle of the Tang period, the process of “Sinicization” of forms and technologies was completed, marking a new stage in the history of Chinese gold and silver craftsmanship.

As noted by B. I. Marshak, analyzing the interaction between China and Central Asia, close ties existed between Sogdian and Chinese art from the 7th to 9th centuries, with Central Asian traditions significantly impacting Chinese metalworking, while reverse influences appeared in ornamentation details – such as images of clouds, lotus buds, and other decorative elements (Marshak, 1971).

According to the typological analysis presented by B. I. Marshak in his seminal work *Sogdian Silver*, Sogdian metalwork is divided into three schools: A, B, and C. Among these, School C, based on ornamentation

style and technique, is the most closely related to Tang silver, created under Chinese influences (Marshak, 1971). The criteria for distinguishing the schools were based on a comparison of metal items with locally produced objects not intended for export, primarily ceramics that imitated silver embossing techniques (Xakimov, 2022). Among the most characteristic works are small cups with ring-shaped cast handles, decorated with figures of animals or humans.

A notable example is a silver cup with elephant heads on the ring handle, dating back to the 7th century CE, now housed in the Freer Gallery of Art (Washington, USA). During the Tang period, a “transformation and fusion” of Sogdian and Chinese artistic techniques occurred, embodied in the new forms of cups. The Chinese version retained the general shape of the Sogdian prototype, but was more compact with a simplified ring silhouette. At the same time, its ornamentation became more elaborate: instead of the abstract S-shaped lines typical of Sogdian vessels, chased images of wild animals frolicking among grapevines and foliage appeared, symbolizing the artistic synthesis of Sogdian and Chinese cultures.

Conclusion

The Great Silk Road was not only a trade route but also an important channel for the exchange of cultures and ideas between different regions. It connected the East and the West, allowing peoples to influence each other and enrich their traditions. A vivid example of this is the influence of Eastern cultures on China, where music, dance, crafts, and even metalworking techniques entered through cultural ties with neighboring countries. Over time, this exchange extended to knowledge, religion, and philosophy, which is reflected in Chinese art and decorations. In the end, the Great Silk Road played a major role not only in economic development but also in cultural integration, contributing to the creation of a rich and diverse heritage for future generations.

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