

PHOTOETHNOGRAPHY

THE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CRAFTS OF THE EURASIAN PEOPLES

MODERN ALTAI CRAFTS

Since the 1920s, attempts have been made in various regions of Siberia to set up craft centers. In the Altai, similar experiments were unsuccessful for a long period of time. Circumstances only began to change in the 1980s. At that time there were eight craft centers with 66 craftsmen based in Gorny Altai. The 1990s were marked by the revival of ethnic traditions and values in post-Soviet Russia. In the early 1990s, the first project aimed at restoring and developing traditional crafts was carried out in the region. In 2005, the program “Restoration, Preservation, and Development of Handicrafts and Folk Decorative Art in the Altai Republic (2005–2010)” was endorsed by the government of the Republic. The program promoted the development of handicraft centers the most popular being “Kezer” and “Turina Gora.” Despite technical and stylistic differences, both strive to achieve a creative synthesis. Developing a new artistic language, the modern craftsmen of the Altai are looking for ways to unite the epochs and cultures of all Eurasia.

Key words: *Crafts, Altai, traditions, cultural innovations, New Paganism.*

The reforms of the 1990s led to a period of renewal of ethnic identity, the partial restoration of traditional cultures and the revival of traditional crafts. In addition to well-known traditional centers of folk art and crafts, new establishments were created. In Siberia, vitality in local art is sought at the meeting place between indigenous and Slavic artistic traditions.

The sources of the “Siberian motif” in the applied art of the region go back to the 19th cent. At that time, the search for vitality and the creation of an original artistic culture represented part of the movement to transform the Asian part of Russia. At the threshold of the 19th and 20th cent., the future development of Siberia was seen to be based on a synthesis of the achievements of Europe and Asia. At that time the first attempts to promote crafts were made. However, due to the nature of the development of the region such initiatives remained undeveloped.

In Siberia in the late 19th – early 20th cent., craft products were designed for utilitarian purposes as no market for folk decorative art existed.

From the 1920s onwards, the government began supporting the creation of craft centers in various regions of Siberia. In the Altai, these attempts were unsuccessful for a considerably long period of time. Circumstances changed only in the 1980s. According to the Regional Department for Culture reports, at that time there were

eight craft studios and 66 craftsmen based in Gorny Altai. In 1988, the “Golden Summer of the Altai Mountains” festival was established with the goal of enhancing public interest in folk art and activating efforts to preserve cultural heritage. Particular attention was paid to the expression of ethnic ideas in art. Nonetheless, the general development of art remained limited by ideological and political frameworks.

In the 1990s, the Association of Folk Art and Crafts of Russia was established. The Association united approximately 250 organizations from 64 regions. Among them were many world renowned centers for traditional art and crafts producing painted and lacquered wooden ware in Khokhloma and Gorodets, porcelain in Gzhel and Kislovodsk, enamel in Rostov, lace in Vologda and Elets, wooden carving in Bogorodskoe and Belomorsk, jewelry in Kubachi, carved bone in Kholmogory and Tobolsk, painted trays in Zhostovo and Nizhni Tagil, ceramics in Skopino and Pskov, gold embroidery in Torzhok, weaponry in Zlatoust and Tula, and weaving and embroidery in other parts of the country.

During the 1990s, a conceptual program for the revival and development of crafts in the Altai Republic was elaborated. The program was called “Sartakpai” after an epic hero and creator of the World. Unfortunately, this program was not implemented in full-scale. However,

increased attention to cultural heritage in the region coincided with similar worldwide processes. In 2003, acknowledging that globalization processes create conditions favorable for inter-community dialogue but threaten the preservation of tradition, UNESCO developed the “Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage” that was adopted and inured in 2006. The convention includes issues of the preservation and development of traditional crafts (<http://www.ntrust.ru/public.cms/?eid=689705?>, 28.11.2008).

Special programs for the development of folk art and crafts have been elaborated in many regions of the Russian Federation and such programs are based on the local peculiarities of given regions. In 2005, the Government of the Altai Republic adopted the program entitled “Revival, Preservation and Development of Folk Art and Traditional Crafts in the Altai Republic (2005–2010).” The program was aimed at creating economic, social, and other conditions essential for the development of folk art and crafts and the production of souvenirs of an authentic ethnic nature. However, at that time the condition of traditional handicraft production was at a critical stage with the majority of traditional folk crafts being on the verge of disappearance. The program highlighted that folk art and handicrafts should be considered symbols of the peoples of the Altai, the symbols that reflect their historical development and huge cultural experience. Folk art products represent the national culture and demonstrate a combination of ancient tradition and innovative development.

The State Trade and Exhibition Center of the Traditional Folk Art of the Altai Republic “Enchi” (Heritage) took upon itself the responsibility of fulfilling the program. “Enchi” aims to restore and promote cultural traditions and competitive values of the Altai traditional crafts by enhancing technologies that lead to increased sales. The “Enchi” Center was established in 2001 but only later in 2003 was it included in the Republic’s Governmental structure and financed by the Committee for Tourism. A data base on traditional and existing folk art was created and members of the “Enchi” Center carry out seminars and workshops. An arts school has also been established. The Center publishes information and advertizing materials. Special studios produce souvenirs and goods in the traditional folk art style for sale. The “Enchi” Center has become an integral part of the cultural life of the Altai today.

Exhibitions and competitions of traditional folk art are included as a component of all holidays and cultural festivals in the region. Exhibitions have been organized within the framework of El Oiyn, the official holiday of the Altai Republic. Artisans from all regions of the Altai participated in an exhibition and crafts fair under the title “Artisans of the Altai.” They represent various trades of traditional handicrafts and folk art: wood carving

and painting on wood, beadwork, weaving, textile and traditional costumes, ceramic toys, birch-bark work, traditional dolls, fur and leather items, etc. Artisans from the Ust-Kan Region are well-known masters of leather ware, national costumes, souvenirs made of Siberian pine, straw, and wool. The Maima Region is famous for its coopers and artisans working with birch-bark and fur. The leading handicrafts of the Ust-Koksa Region are straw and wickerwork, wood carving, and jewelry. The Turachak Region displays fantastic panels of carved wood and household items made of pine – spoons, dippers, and small barrels as well as wooden figurines and containers made of birch-bark. Artisans from the Chemal Region are gifted potters; the region is also renowned for producing souvenirs in leather, wood, fabric, and glass. The Ulagan and Kosh-Agach Regions demonstrate the felt carpet making tradition *syrmak* and leather flasks *tazhuur*. In the Ongudai Region, national Altai clothes and blankets of goat skin are produced.

In addition to the unique artifacts displayed at the “Artisans of the Altai” Fair and souvenir shops in the Republic mass production is being witnessed on another level. As the tourist industry in the Republic grows, the local population is becoming more engaged in handicrafts as a means of earning a living relying on the demands of visitors. The general trend in the development of souvenir production is that the images and symbols are taken from various cultural and ethnic traditions of different periods. These include Altai shamanic attributes, symbols of Slavic mythology, and modern political realia. Altai artisans decorate their products with motifs in the Pazyryk style which has become particularly popular after the archaeological discoveries made in the 1990s. The Ukok Princess (a reconstructed image of a woman from the nomadic population inhabiting the Altai during the Scythian period) is among the most popular heroines of folk art. Her image is reproduced in wood carvings, ceramics and beaded embroidery. However, the artisans themselves believe that the traditional art of the Altai has largely disappeared, whereas modern art is simply stylization.

Several different trends can be traced in the development of folk art and handicrafts in the Altai. Some artisans attempt to produce new images on the basis of ethnic artistic tradition. For example, folk artists from Biysk successfully apply folk traditions in painting on wood and stone. This artistic trend has been developing in the local art school since the late 1990s headed by V. Yagodzinsky. Young artists combine the artistic traditions of the Slavic and indigenous peoples of the Altai. Their products are wooden and stone panels showing compositions with magic symbols and animistic cult signs. Their works are based on contemporary interpretations of archaeological and folklore research. The artistic interpretation of archaic prototypes creates

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