

Development of The Art of Ganch Carving in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: The article discusses ganch carving, considered one of the most attractive types of applied decorative art in Uzbekistan. It analyzes its historical origins and the use of this art in the construction and decoration of historical monuments in various regions and cities.

Keywords: Ganch carving, folk-applied decorative art, decorative function, master craftsmen, composition, ornamental elements, islami pattern, girih pattern.

Introduction: Ganch carving is one of the ancient art forms that has long manifested its charm in world architecture, including in Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, Arabia, Afghanistan, and other Eastern countries. The works created in Central Asia are notable for their unique artistic value, composition, and techniques. Today, ganch is still valued in sunny Uzbekistan and continues to embellish many historical monuments, giving them elegance and beauty. It was used in the construction and decoration of architectural landmarks in Samarkand, Bukhara, Tashkent, Kokand, Margilan, Khiva, Shahrisabz, and other cities.

Fresh ganch mixture is soft and easy to cut, allowing craftsmen to create any desired shape; however, after hardening, it becomes as solid as stone. This unique property has been utilized by artisans since ancient times. Thus, this craft has been passed down from generation to generation, evolving as a historical tradition. Ganch art is a source of pride for our culture, an invaluable treasure, and undoubtedly worthy of scientific and practical study.

The art of ganch carving has developed over centuries in a unique style. If we examine its evolution from ancient times through the Middle Ages and into the 20th century, we can see clear distinctions in techniques and motifs. Early ganch carvings were volumetric and realistic, often depicting humans, animals, and birds. As early as the first centuries AD, people recognized the properties of ganch and began decorating fortresses, caravanserais, and other structures with it. Many of these monuments were later destroyed in wars, leaving only fragments.

By the 3rd century, luxurious reception halls of Tuproqqala Palace were decorated with carved ganch. At Varakhsha, samples dating back to the 3rd–4th centuries BC were discovered, featuring floral motifs, palmettes, and geometric ornaments. One remarkable find is a ganch relief depicting a fish. Discoveries from the remains of the Bukhara palace of the 7th–8th centuries also reveal images of birds, animals, fish, and plant-based motifs. After the Arab conquest, when Islam prohibited depictions of living beings, floral and geometric patterns became dominant in architectural decoration. This transformation can be observed in Central Asian monuments of the early Islamic period.

In the Ismail Samani Mausoleum in Bukhara, ganch decorations display wave-like motifs with islami (arabesque) patterns. In the 10th–11th centuries, ganch carving developed further, producing intricate abstract ornaments. These works adorned interior spaces and occasionally exterior surfaces protected from moisture. Excavations at Afrasiab revealed palace ruins decorated with deeply carved ornaments 2–3 cm thick, featuring geometric and floral patterns. Craftsmen of that era did not use templates; instead, designs were drawn directly on thick ganch layers.

The 12th century marked the introduction of mukarnas (stalactite-like elements), used as elaborate architectural ornaments, especially in interior spaces. In the 13th century, ganch carving reached new heights, as evidenced by masterpieces found in Afrasiab. From the 14th to 18th centuries, ganch decorations continued to enrich interiors, often combined with glazed tiles and stone ornaments.

During this time, Bukhara and Margilan became prominent centers for ganch carving.

The late 18th and early 19th centuries marked the golden age of ganch art. Its techniques became more complex, with polished finishes and bright colors enhancing ornamental beauty. Independent regional schools emerged in Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, the Fergana Valley, and Khiva. Renowned masters such as Abdurahim Khayotov, Usta Murod, and Usta Fuzayl worked during this period. In early 20th-century works, refined relief styles, colored ganch, and painted ornaments became widespread. Wealthy patrons commissioned lavishly decorated palaces and gardens.

Between 1918 and 1920, artisan associations were formed in Tashkent to preserve and promote traditional crafts, including ganch carving. A model workshop and museum of handicrafts were established, training instructors in woodcarving, pottery, textile weaving, leatherwork, and ganch art. By 1930, the Samarkand Handicraft Technical School opened, preparing numerous skilled artisans. Uzbek craftsmen presented their works internationally: Paris (1925, 1937), Leipzig (1927), and New York (1939), earning Grand Prix awards, gold, and silver medals.

Ganch masters also played a major role in restoring architectural monuments such as the Kalon Minaret, Magoki-Attor Mosque, Sherdor and Abdulaziz Khan madrasahs, and other heritage sites. Among the notable restorers were Usta Shirin Murodov, Shoir Ibodov, Abdurahim Khayotov, Rashid Jalilov, and many others from Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Khiva, Namangan, and Kokand.

A significant milestone was the decoration of the Alisher Navoi Theater during the poet's 500th anniversary celebrations. The building's interiors were adorned with exquisite ganch ornaments representing the traditional styles of different Uzbek regions—Khiva, Termiz, Samarkand, Fergana, Bukhara, and Tashkent.

In Uzbek folk art, ganch carving occupies a special place as an integral part of architectural aesthetics, particularly in interior decoration of homes and religious buildings. Ganch, with its plasticity and ease of carving, allows the creation of complex patterns, making it a preferred material for artistic expression.

In the Fergana Valley, including Andijan, ganch carving has been practiced since ancient times and flourished in the 19th–20th centuries. Andijan masters used ganch to decorate ceilings, walls, and arches with intricate designs, incorporating islami motifs, floral ornaments, and geometric patterns. While preserving tradition, they also introduced innovations, blending ganch with wood and metal elements—demonstrating creativity and adaptability.

Today, ganch art is not only preserved in historical architecture but also widely applied in modern interior design, maintaining national identity while creating an atmosphere of harmony and beauty.

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