

# Scientific Analysis of Folk-Art Forms in Karakalpak Museums

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**Abstract:** This article provides a scientifically grounded analysis of the major types of folk arts held in Karakalpak museums, focusing on both material culture and associated intangible elements. By combining object-level analysis with museum practice perspectives, the paper shows how museums mediate meanings, preserve fragile materials, and engage communities. Concrete examples are given for each art form, and a comparative table summarizes core characteristics, museum tasks, and conservation challenges. Finally, recommendations are offered to strengthen the interpretation, conservation, and living transmission of Karakalpak folk arts.

**Keywords:** Karakalpak, folk art, material culture, museum studies, conservation, textiles, intangible heritage.

**Introduction:** Folk arts in Karakalpak culture embody intertwined threads of aesthetic practice, social identity, and ritual meaning. Consequently, Karakalpak museums play a pivotal role not only in preserving objects but also in interpreting the social lives those objects once served. Moreover, because many Karakalpak art forms are both materially fragile and embedded in living practices, museums face the dual challenge of physical conservation and intangible transmission. This article therefore examines the principal types of folk art commonly represented in Karakalpak museum collections, gives concrete object examples, and evaluates how museum practices either support or hinder cultural continuity.

For clarity, the term folk art here covers everyday and ceremonial material culture produced by local artisans — including textiles, carpets, jewelry, ceramics, woodwork, and musical instruments — together with the social practices that give them meaning. Museums are treated as active agents that perform four interrelated functions: preservation, documentation, interpretation, and facilitation of continuity (for instance through workshops). The analysis uses a material-culture approach (object description + context) and a museum studies lens (display logic, conservation, and audiences) [4, 27-32].

Textiles constitute a central corpus in Karakalpak collections. They vary from floor carpets and saddle

covers to embroidered dowry cloths and felt mats. Textiles commonly employ wool, natural dyes, and hand-spun warp/weft, and their iconography often includes stylized flora, the “tree of life,” and geometric border motifs that encode family or clan identity.

Concrete example: a mid-19th century wool carpet used as a bridal carpet, showing a dense field of stylized vegetal motifs framed by multiple guard borders. The carpet’s weave density and knot type provide data on regional workshop practices, while wear patterns reveal use as a sleeping surface and ritual object.

Scientific implications: textile analysis should combine macroscopic object description, dye analysis (to identify natural vs. synthetic dyes), and fiber microscopy. In addition, contextual interviews can recover lost knowledge about weaving guilds and seasonal working cycles.

Embroidered dowry pieces and wall hangings carry both aesthetic and social information; for example, stitch types and motif placement may indicate the object’s role in marriage rituals.

Concrete example: a heavily embroidered dowry cloth whose central medallion depicts a stylized “tree of life,” surrounded by animal symbols — a typical composition used during wedding rites. Stitch cataloguing (chain, satin, cross) permits reconstruction of workshop lineage.

Museum practice: since embroidery is light-sensitive, rotation and low-light display, together with high-resolution digital surrogates, preserve both object and its communicative function.

Silver and copper jewelry — bracelets, earrings, and neckpieces — reveal technical skill (filigree, granulation) and social stratification (the richness of a bride's trousseau).

Concrete example: a late 19th / early 20th-century silver earring set with granulated drops and stamped repoussé panels, likely associated with bridal attire. Patina and wear indicate prolonged use rather than merely ceremonial display [2, 40-43].

Conservation note: metal corrosion control and careful mounting are essential; moreover, jewelry is an excellent medium for telling stories about mobility and trade (metals and forms often travel across regions).

Pottery shows both everyday utility and symbolic decoration. Burnished jugs, water vessels, and storage jars commonly carry incised or painted motifs that echo textile patterns.

Concrete example: a hand-thrown water jug with burnished surface and incised looping motifs consistent with textile border designs — suggesting visual continuity across crafts.

Scientific approach: ceramic petrography and thermoluminescence (where permitted) can support provenance assertions, while residue analysis can reveal usage (e.g., fermented dairy vs. water storage).

Wood items — carved door panels, yurt poles, and household boxes — often combine functional and symbolic carving. Painted doors serve as both protective and identity markers.

Concrete example: a painted wooden yurt door fragment with geometric bands and a central rosette; traces of pigment indicate original polychromy.

Museums must balance conservation (preventing insect damage and shrinkage) with opportunities to show three-dimensional context (e.g., reconstructed yurt alcoves).

Instruments such as two-stringed lutes, drums, and frame instruments are integral to folk performance and often stored poorly despite their cultural importance.

Concrete example: a carved wooden lute with gut strings and evidence of repair; contextual information links it to a particular musical repertoire used at harvest festivals.

Interpretive strategy: audio recordings, accompanied by instrument displays, restore intangible dimensions and invite visitor engagement.

**Table 1. Comparative overview of Karakalpak folk-art forms in museums**

| Art form                 | Materials & techniques                                  | Social/ritual function                 | Museum tasks (display & documentation)                 | Conservation & interpretive challenges                     | Representative object (typical)       |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Carpets & woven textiles | Wool, natural dyes, hand-weave                          | Sleeping, bridal, status markers       | Long-term storage, low-light rotation, digital imaging | Light/dye fading; insect damage; loss of weaving knowledge | Bridal carpet with tree-of-life motif |
| Embroidered cloths       | Cotton/linen ground, silk/wool threads; varied stitches | Dowry, wall hangings, ritual use       | Textile mounts, stitch diagrams, community provenance  | Fragile threads; hidden use contexts                       | Heavily embroidered dowry panel       |
| Jewelry & metalwork      | Silver, copper; filigree, granulation                   | Adornment, social signal, bridal hoard | Secure display, metal conservation,                    | Corrosion; decontextualization from wearer                 | Silver earring set with granulation   |

|                                                     |                                      |                                                       |                                                                           |                                                         |                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
|                                                     |                                      |                                                       | typology<br>cataloguing                                                   |                                                         |                                                  |
| Ceramics                                            | Clay<br>(local),<br>burnishing, slip | Daily<br>use, storage,<br>ritual libation             | Stable<br>display, residue<br>sampling,<br>typology                       | Breakage;<br>undocumented<br>use residues               | Burnished<br>water jug with<br>incised motifs    |
| Woodwork &<br>architectural<br>elements             | Local<br>timber;<br>carving, paint   | Household<br>old identity,<br>protective<br>symbolism | Environmental<br>control,<br>3D mounts,<br>reconstruction                 | Woodwork;<br>shrinkage;<br>paint flaking                | Painted<br>yurt door<br>fragment                 |
| Instrument<br>elements &<br>performative<br>objects | Wood,<br>gut strings,<br>leather     | Music-<br>making, ritual,<br>oral<br>transmission     | Audio<br>archives,<br>handling<br>protocols,<br>demonstration<br>programs | Fragile<br>components;<br>loss of playing<br>techniques | Carved<br>two-stringed lute<br>with repair marks |

The table highlights several convergent patterns. First, textiles and textiles-related motifs recur across media (for instance, carpet motifs reappear on pottery and doors), which suggests a region-wide aesthetic grammar that museums should emphasize in comparative displays. Secondly, conservation challenges are largely parallel — light sensitivity, biological deterioration (insects, mold), and mechanical fragility — thus museums benefit from coordinated preventive conservation strategies (e.g., integrated pest management, climate control, and rotational displays). Thirdly, decontextualization is a frequent interpretive problem: objects displayed without information on use, makers, or accompanying ceremonies lose meaning. Therefore, museums must pair material conservation with documentation and living interpretation (audio-visual materials, maker demonstrations).

## CONCLUSION

In sum, the scientific analysis of Karakalpak folk arts in museum settings must balance rigorous material study with attention to intangible context. Furthermore, museums should move beyond static display to embrace co-curation, living transmission, and multimedia documentation. By doing so, they will not only protect fragile material heritage but also sustain the cultural practices that give those materials meaning. Consequently, Karakalpak museums can become active sites of cultural continuity rather than passive repositories of objects.

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