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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT, ARTISTIC CHARACTERISTICS, AND SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF SHAHRISABZ EMBROIDERY MOTIFS: A HISTORICAL SOURCE-BASED AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract
This article examines the historical development, regional characteristics, artistic composition, and symbolic meanings of Shahrisabz embroidery on the basis of scholarly sources. It reviews academic literature, dissertations, and contemporary studies devoted to Uzbek folk decorative arts, Central Asian suzanis, and embroidery traditions of southern Uzbekistan. Drawing particularly on the works of O. A. Sukhareva, Z. Kh. Nasirova, Y. Mamadiyorova, E. Gül, and other scholars, the study identifies distinctive features of the Shahrisabz embroidery tradition. Historical-comparative, source-critical, visual, and compositional methods are employed. The analysis leads to recommendations for scholarly documentation of Shahrisabz embroidery heritage, classification of local motifs, and preservation of these traditions under contemporary conditions.

Keywords: Shahrisabz, embroidery, Iroqi embroidery, suzani, traditional motifs, symbolism, ornament, artistic composition, folk decorative arts, ethnography, cultural heritage.

Introduction

Uzbek folk decorative arts constitute an important component of national culture, embodying the historical memory, worldview, aesthetic values, and ways of life of the people. Among these artistic traditions, embroidery is particularly significant for its expressive possibilities, diverse motifs, and practices transmitted across generations.

Embroidery traditions that developed in different regions of Uzbekistan are distinguished by their ornamental compositions, color harmonies, stitching techniques, and decorative elements. Bukhara, Samarkand, Nurata, Tashkent, Jizzakh, Fergana, and Shahrisabz are prominent centers reflecting this regional diversity. Abdullaeva (2023) classifies Uzbekistan's embroidery centers from a historical and geographical perspective and identifies Shahrisabz as one of the country's traditional embroidery centers.

Shahrisabz embroidery is particularly notable for the Iroqi stitching tradition. The distribution of motifs across the textile surface, color harmony, and execution of stitches constitute important artistic characteristics of this technique. Mamadiyorova (2025) specifically examined the historical development of Shahrisabz embroidery, examples preserved in museums, and the artistic characteristics of Iroqi embroidery.

From this perspective, Shahrisabz embroidery should be studied not merely as a handicraft product but as an art form expressing the historical and cultural identity of the region.

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Research Methodology

This study adopts historical source-based and comparative art-historical approaches.

Research design: A qualitative, historical-descriptive, and comparative study.

Research object: Traditional embroidery practices developed in the Shahrisabz region and the historical artifacts associated with them.

Research subject: The historical origins, artistic composition, stitching techniques, color systems, and symbolic meanings of embroidery motifs.

Research objective: To identify the distinctive historical and artistic features of the Shahrisabz embroidery tradition through existing scholarly sources and assess its place within the national cultural heritage.

The following methods were employed:

1. Historical analysis: Examination of scholarly and historical sources concerning the development of embroidery.
2. Comparative analysis: Comparison of Shahrisabz embroidery with the embroidery traditions of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Nurata.
3. Source analysis: Examination of dissertations, scholarly articles, books, and museum materials.
4. Compositional analysis: Study of motif forms, arrangements, and color harmonies.
5. Ethnographic analysis: Assessment, on the basis of scholarly literature, of the functions of embroidered objects in everyday life and ceremonial practices.

The principal source base consists of works by O. A. Sukhareva, Z. Kh. Nasirova, and Y. Mamadiyorova, together with recent scholarly publications on traditional Uzbek embroidery.

This article does not present survey findings collected from new respondents. Accordingly, its findings are presented not as original fieldwork but as a comparative analysis of previously published scholarly sources.

Historical Development of Shahrisabz Embroidery

As an ancient cultural center, Shahrisabz is known for its architectural, craft, and decorative-art traditions. The historical development and cultural connections of the region have influenced the formation of its local handicrafts.

The scholarly works of O. A. Sukhareva are particularly important for studying the historical development of embroidery. Her 1937 study of Samarkand decorative embroidery is among the early significant scholarly contributions to the historical and ethnographic investigation of Central Asian embroidery. Her subsequent work, “Suzani: Central Asian Decorative Embroidery,” addressed regional characteristics of embroidery and the evolution of decorative arts more extensively (Sukhareva, 2011).

Z. Kh. Nasirova’s dissertation, completed in 2010, is particularly relevant to the history of Shahrisabz embroidery. Entitled “Traditional Embroidery of the Southern Regions of Uzbekistan in the Twentieth and Early Twenty-First Centuries,” it examines traditional embroidery centers in the Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions. The research analyzes local embroidered objects, artisans, pattern designers, stitching technologies, and compositional characteristics (Nasirova, 2010).

Nasirova’s study provides an important methodological basis for comparing Shahrisabz embroidery with traditions in other southern regions. In particular, it demonstrates the need to consider stitching methods, motif placement, and local craft practices together when identifying regional traditions.

Y. Mamadiyorova's 2006 article "Shahrisabz Iroqi Embroidery" is also a direct source on this subject. In the article "Shahrisabz Embroidery," published in 2025, the author again discusses embroidered objects from the region, museum collections, and the technical characteristics of the Iroqi style (Mamadiyorova, 2025).

These sources indicate that the historical development of Shahrisabz embroidery warrants investigation not only within the broader context of Uzbek embroidery but also as a distinct regional artistic tradition.

Artistic Characteristics of Shahrisabz Embroidery Motifs

One of the defining features of the Shahrisabz embroidery tradition is the Iroqi stitching technique. In this style, motifs are formed through small stitches, producing dense and continuous compositions across the textile surface.

Mamadiyorova (2025) identifies Iroqi embroidery as an important form of Shahrisabz decorative art. According to the author, the Iroqi technique is also found in Andijan, Urgut, and other parts of Central Asia. Nevertheless, local differences can be observed in motifs, color choices, and stitching practices.

This suggests that superficial similarities between motifs alone are insufficient for distinguishing regional embroidery traditions. Stitching techniques, color systems, repetition of motifs, and the intended functions of objects must also be considered.

Color harmony is another important artistic feature of Shahrisabz embroidery. Mamadiyorova (2025) documents the use of red, pink, orange, golden yellow, brown, green, and indigo. The interaction of these colors lends embroidered objects a vivid and distinctive aesthetic appearance.

From a compositional perspective, embroidery motifs may be classified into the following groups:

- Geometric motifs;
- Floral and other plant-based motifs;
- Motifs based on fruits and natural elements;
- Repetitive rhythmic compositions;
- Central and peripheral decorative elements.

This classification is an analytical grouping developed for the present study and could be further refined through examination of Shahrisabz museum exhibits and works by local embroiderers.

Symbolic Meanings of Embroidery Motifs

In Uzbek embroidery, motifs have often conveyed particular cultural and symbolic meanings in addition to their aesthetic functions. O. A. Sukhareva's research on the ornaments of Samarkand decorative embroidery and their connections with popular beliefs and conceptions provides an important theoretical source for examining this question.

Sukhareva's research demonstrates that motifs cannot be studied in isolation from everyday life, customs, and traditional understandings (Sukhareva, 1983).

E. Gül's 2013 monograph "Sady nebesnye i sady zemnye: vyshivka Uzbekistana: skrytyy smysl sakralnykh tekstov" examines the concealed symbolic and cultural meanings of Uzbek embroidery motifs. The author interprets these motifs not simply as decorative elements but as artistic expressions associated with historical worldviews and spiritual conceptions.

Mamadiyorova (2025) notes that pomegranates, peppers, almonds, flowers, and bouquet forms carry particular symbolic meanings in Shahrisabz Iroqi embroidery. Specifically, the author associates

pomegranates with abundance, peppers with protection against evil, and almonds with sustenance and prosperity. Blooming flowers are interpreted as symbols of love, while bouquets joined by branches represent a prosperous life.

Such interpretations require further verification through local embroidery examples and explanations provided by artisans, since the same motif may acquire different meanings across regions and historical periods.

Consequently, the symbolic content of Shahrisabz embroidery motifs should be examined through a combined analysis of historical objects, local terminology, oral accounts from artisans, and ethnographic sources.

Comparative Analysis of Shahrisabz Embroidery and Other Regional Traditions

Identifying similarities and differences among Uzbekistan's embroidery traditions helps establish the distinctive characteristics of Shahrisabz embroidery.

M. A. Bikjanova's 1948 study "Tashkent Embroidery, 19th–20th Centuries" contains important historical materials on Tashkent embroidery of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It addresses regional differences in motifs and colors and the role of embroidery in everyday life and wedding ceremonies.

G. L. Chepelevetskaya's "Suzani of Uzbekistan," published in 1961, is likewise an important source for examining the artistic and regional characteristics of Uzbek suzanis.

D. A. Fakhretdinova's "Dekorativno-prikladnoe iskusstvo Uzbekistana" (1972) discusses the broader development of decorative and applied arts in Uzbekistan.

Comparison of these works with the studies by Nasirova and Mamadiyorova highlights the importance of the following dimensions:

1. Technical characteristics: In Shahrisabz Iroqi embroidery, stitching techniques are an important marker of regional distinctiveness.
2. Colors: Local traditions are reflected in the selection and combination of colors in each region.
3. Composition: Motif placement, repetition, and the manner in which the textile surface is covered help distinguish regional traditions.
4. Type of object: The function and context of use of embroidered objects also influence their artistic development.

Abdullaeva (2023) likewise identifies historical and regional differences among Uzbekistan's embroidery centers and notes the position of Shahrisabz within this system.

Preserving Embroidery Heritage in the Contemporary Period

Transmitting traditional embroidery to future generations should not be limited to preserving historical objects in museums. Craft knowledge, local names of motifs, stitching techniques, and symbolic interpretations also require documentation.

S. T. Davlatova's 2019 doctoral dissertation on traditional handicrafts in southern Uzbekistan is an important source for studying craft traditions in relation to historical processes.

R. Sh. Khalilov's 2024 article "Uzbek Suzane – From Tradition to Modernity" explores the role of suzani art in contemporary design, fashion, and international cultural exchanges. The author emphasizes the

need to preserve the historical characteristics of traditional embroidery while adapting it to contemporary needs.

On the basis of these studies, the following practical measures are proposed to support the development of Shahrisabz embroidery:

- Developing a digital catalogue of Shahrisabz embroidery motifs.
- Producing scholarly descriptions and photographic records of historical embroidery examples.
- Conducting interviews with experienced embroiderers.
- Developing master–apprentice programs for younger generations.
- Promoting local embroidery through exhibitions.
- Integrating Shahrisabz embroidery into cultural tourism offerings.

Research Findings and Discussion

The analysis of scholarly sources indicates that Shahrisabz embroidery constitutes an important regional tradition within Uzbekistan's folk decorative arts.

First, the works of Sukhareva, Chepelevetskaya, and Bikjanova provide a theoretical foundation for the historical and ethnographic study of Uzbek and Central Asian embroidery.

Second, Nasirova's dissertation is an important scholarly source for identifying the local characteristics of embroidery in the Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions.

Third, Mamadiyorova's studies directly address the technical, chromatic, and symbolic characteristics of Shahrisabz Iroqi embroidery.

Fourth, the works of E. Gül and Khalilov help elucidate the symbolic meanings of embroidery motifs and their significance in contemporary cultural settings.

The comparative analysis of sources identifies three principal dimensions that should be considered together in studying Shahrisabz embroidery heritage: technical characteristics, artistic composition, and symbolic meaning.

However, the existing scholarly literature does not provide a comprehensive catalogue of all local Shahrisabz motifs, their names, or their changes across generations. This gap highlights the need for further fieldwork based on museum collections and materials obtained from local artisans.

Conclusion

Shahrisabz embroidery represents an important regional tradition within the folk decorative arts of Uzbekistan. Its historical development, Iroqi stitching technique, color harmonies, ornamental compositions, and symbolic meanings demonstrate the distinctiveness of local cultural traditions.

The scholarly sources reviewed confirm the importance of an integrated historical, art-historical, and ethnographic approach to Shahrisabz embroidery. In particular, the studies by Z. Kh. Nasirova and Y. Mamadiyorova are directly relevant to the scholarly analysis of the region's embroidery heritage.

The study yields the following conclusions:

1. Shahrisabz embroidery merits scholarly examination as one of Uzbekistan's historical regional embroidery centers.
2. The Iroqi stitching technique is an important artistic characteristic of Shahrisabz embroidery.
3. The symbolic meanings of motifs are associated with the historical conceptions and cultural values of the people.

4. Regional embroidery traditions should be distinguished not only by their motifs but also by stitching techniques, colors, and the functions of embroidered objects.
5. Digital documentation of Shahrisabz embroidery heritage, recording the knowledge of local artisans, and transmitting it to younger generations are pressing priorities.

Overall, scholarly investigation of Shahrisabz embroidery can contribute not only to a richer understanding of the history of traditional handicrafts but also to broader international recognition of local cultural heritage.

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