

Zardozi Artifacts and Their History in the Bukhara Museum

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Abstract

This article explores the rich artistic and historical heritage of Bukhara's gold embroidery art - *zarduzi*, one of the most exquisite and ancient forms of applied decorative art in Central Asia. It examines the evolution of gold embroidery techniques such as *zarduzi-zaminduzi* and *zarduzi-gulduzi*, highlighting their aesthetic sophistication and social significance within the Emirate of Bukhara. The study traces the craft's development from the medieval period through its flourishing during the reigns of Emirs Muzaffar Khan and Abdulahad Khan, to its decline and revival in later centuries. Special attention is given to the organization of palace and private workshops, the socio-economic status of artisans, and the luxurious garments produced for the Emir's court. The article also discusses unique surviving examples of *zarduzi* masterpieces preserved in the Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa Museum and the Bukhara State Museum-Reserve, emphasizing their exceptional craftsmanship, historical authenticity, and cultural symbolism. Through this analysis, the paper demonstrates how Bukhara's *zarduzi* tradition continues to serve as a vital expression of Uzbekistan's national identity and intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Bukhara Emirate, *zarduzi*, gold embroidery, decorative art, cultural heritage, applied arts, Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa, Emir Abdulahad Khan, Muzaffar Khan, traditional crafts, Uzbekistan.

Introduction

The Bukhara art of gold embroidery — *zarduzi* — is one of the most ancient and refined forms of handicraft that developed in Central Asia, renowned for its intricate designs stitched with silk, gold, and silver threads. With its deep historical roots and rich traditions, it has become an inseparable component of Uzbekistan's cultural heritage.

The national garments of the Bukhara Uzbeks represent unique examples reflecting the social status of each stratum of society. The influence of neighboring cultures can also be observed in traditional attire, whose main forms and individual elements

evolved and were refined over the centuries. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, gold embroidery — a branch of decorative needlework — became a distinctive hallmark of Bukhara. Over centuries, this spiritual treasure enriched in meaning and aesthetic value came to form a significant part of the people's applied art heritage. The elevation of such crafts to the level of high art is the result of continuous creativity and dedication passed down through generations. Zarduzi garments, created from luxurious fabrics and deeply imbued with folk spirit, were more intricate than ordinary silk embroidery and required exceptional craftsmanship. These garments were primarily produced for the needs of the Emir's court and, on rare occasions, for the city's wealthy nobility.

In the art of gold embroidery, the *zarduzi-zaminduzi* technique was widely used, in which the decorative patterns were sewn directly onto the fabric base. In the 20th century, the *zarduzi-gulduzi* technique flourished: here, the floral patterns were cut out of thick paper or cardboard, placed on the fabric, and covered with gold thread. Men's garments — such as gold-embroidered robes (*ton*), jackets (*kamzul*), overcoats (*chakmon*), trousers (*chalvor*), shoes, belts, turbans, and headdresses — were produced exclusively by order of the Emir or his close relatives for special family celebrations or state festivities. Even the highest officials were not permitted to commission such attire for themselves; they could only wear gold-embroidered garments when gifted by the Emir. The zarduzi costumes belonging to the last Manghit dynasty, which ruled Bukhara from 1785 to 1920, are now the only surviving relics of that era¹.

Most of these items belonged to Emir Abdulahad Khan (r. 1895–1911), as it was during his reign that Bukhara's gold embroidery reached its peak. Administrative and military officials traditionally wore robes made of fine silk or half-silk fabrics, adorned with gilded and silver-plated decorations, and fastened with wide belts featuring embossed silver ornaments.

The robes (*ton*) of the Bukhara Emirs were almost always embroidered in the zarduzi style. For example, a single *zarduzi-zaminduzi* robe belonging to the Emir took five months to complete, being hand-stitched by three master craftsmen working in perfect synchrony. The finished robe weighed more than 10 kilograms and was worn over multiple layers of clothing.

The craft of Bukhara gold embroidery, deeply rooted in traditional local techniques of ornamental needlework, has preserved its importance up to the present day. The medieval period marked the flourishing of Bukhara's zarduzi art. However, in the

¹ Гончарова П.А. Бухоро зардўзлик санъати. Тошкент, 1986 йил.

late 17th and early 18th centuries, under Emirs Shohmurod and Haydar, this art temporarily declined, as these rulers strictly opposed extravagance. In later periods, the craft revived and blossomed once again. By the late 19th century, Bukhara's gold embroidery had reached European markets, attracting great interest through the Emir's opulent household items, garments, and ceremonial accessories.

Gold embroidery workshops were traditionally dominated by male artisans, though women also practiced the craft at home, usually producing embroidered items for their families and neighbors. The main *zarduzi* workshops were located within the Emir's palace. During the reign of Emir Muzaffar Khan (1860–1885), the principal embroidery workshop was situated inside the Ark citadel. Under Emir Abdulahad Khan (1885–1910), there were workshops in the royal palace, the *qushbegi*'s (chief minister's) courtyard, and the *qozikalon*'s (chief judge's) estate. In the time of Emir Alim Khan (1910–1920), the main workshop fulfilling palace commissions operated in the courtyard of the chief *zakot* collector².

The work of gold embroiderers was labor-intensive: completing a single robe with complex patterns required around 200 working days. Each artisan possessed an individual technique and unique motifs, making their craftsmanship distinct.

Every workshop was managed by a *ustakor* (master supervisor), chosen by the *qushbegi* from among the most skilled *tarhkash* (pattern designers). Palace workshops were centers of intensive activity, where masters worked from dawn to dusk. Payment was distributed according to skill level, and artisans received warm meals from the state. They used wooden meal tokens called *khatchubi non* (bread token) and *khatchubi gosht* (meat token) to obtain provisions. Wages were paid weekly on Thursdays based on accounts prepared by palace clerks (*mirzos*). Apprentices could take food home or sell it to the poor and divide the proceeds among themselves. On occasion, masters worked at night and received additional pay known as *qori shab* ("night work"). Urgent commissions were sometimes completed at home under contract. When additional craftsmen were needed, the *qushbegi* requisitioned the best artisans from city neighborhoods, summoning them to the Ark for royal service.

Apart from the palace workshops, there were also about 25 private embroidery studios in Bukhara. The years 1885–1911 marked the height of the *zarduzi* craft's prosperity³.

² Ремпель Л.И. Далёкое и близкое Страницы жизни, быта, строительного дела, ремесла и искусства Старой Бухары Ташкент.: Гафур Гулям, 1981 год. – С.245.

³ Гончарова, П.А. Золотошвейное искусство Бухары. Ташкент.: Издательство литературы и искусства, 1986. – С-4.

During different reigns, workshop operations varied: under Emir Muzaffar Khan, private workshops enjoyed more freedom and could replicate royal designs. However, under Emir Abdulahad Khan, it was forbidden for private artisans to produce clothing identical to that of the nobility.

Various private workshops in Bukhara frequently fulfilled orders from the Emir's palace. The craftsmen were provided with pre-cut fabrics and embroidery patterns from the state treasury, while the workshop owners purchased the remaining minor materials themselves. The expenses for such orders were paid by the *qushbegi* (the chief administrative officer) to the workshop. Along with the royal workshops, private masters also had the right to receive cash payments for their family's needs. The gold embroiderers (*zardozi*) also carried out minor repair work. They restored worn-out skullcaps, women's forehead bands (*peshonaband*), and other items. When refurbishing an old forehead band, the embroidered design was carefully cut out and transferred onto a new scarf. To conceal the seams formed in the process, an additional fine border was stitched along the edges of the pattern. Gold-embroidered skullcaps required regular cleaning: well-soaked *shiroch* (a special soft cloth) was gently rubbed over the soiled area to remove dirt. The master cleaned the gold threads using soft cotton dipped in gold solution.

The embroidered patterns used for men's robes, women's dresses, small pouches, children's jackets, skullcaps, pillow covers, and turbans were also adapted to create motifs for scarves and forehead bands⁴. Artisans occasionally brought their works to the market and sold them directly to merchants. They also sold unfinished products, such as *abra* (partially completed embroidered fabric). The merchants purchased these unfinished pieces, either completing them with the help of their own families or entrusting the work to women who specialized in such tasks. The merchants provided the craftsmen with the necessary materials under favorable conditions, supplying goods on credit and later reclaiming payment with a certain profit margin. Through this system, the merchants managed to keep the artisans economically dependent on them for extended periods of time.

By the mid-19th century, large gold embroidery (*zardozi*) workshops in the Emirate employed between 300 and 350 craftsmen. To produce a single *zar chapon* (gold-embroidered robe) decorated with complex patterns and designs, a master embroiderer would spend around 200 working days. As a result of their laborious craftsmanship, the price of one gold-embroidered robe in local markets ranged from 1,500 to 10,000 *tanga* (silver coins). Such luxurious items were mainly produced by

⁴ Жаббарова Д. Технология золотого шитья. Ташкент, 2004.

artisans working in the Emir's palace workshops, where they received a modest daily wage of only 2 to 5 *tanga*. Numerous examples of these exquisite gold-embroidered robes, as well as embroidered boots, slippers, *mahsi* (soft leather shoes), shirts, scarves, skullcaps, cushion covers, and other items made for the Emir, his family members, and court officials, are now preserved in museum collections. In the exhibitions of the Museum of Applied Decorative Arts located in the Manghit rulers' summer palace, *Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa*, nearly one hundred gold-embroidered (*zardozi*) items are on display. These include primarily the embroidered robes, trousers, turbans, and caps of the emirs, as well as women's and children's garments, scarves, forehead bands, waistcoats (*peshkurta*), and *mahsi* (soft leather shoes). The palace halls are further adorned with period gold-embroidered wall hangings, prayer rugs (*joynamoz*), floor coverings (*joyposh*), *suzani* embroideries, and *zinposh* draperies. The gold-embroidered garments belonging to the last Manghit dynasty, which ruled Bukhara from 1756 to 1920, represent the only surviving authentic examples of this magnificent artistic tradition preserved to the present day.

Gold-embroidered (*zardozi*) items belonging to representatives of the first Manghit dynasty have almost entirely failed to survive to the present day. In the *Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa* branch of the Museum of Applied Arts, a single pair of gold-embroidered *mahsi* (soft leather shoes) from the reign of Amir Haydar (1800–1826) is exhibited as the only surviving artifact of that period⁵. According to the Inventory Book, this footwear is registered under auxiliary research fund number 3037 and is identified as a woman's boot. It is made of green velvet and embroidered in the *zardozi-guldozi* (gold and floral embroidery) style, with a heeled sole. The women's boot was crafted in 1812, during the reign of Amir Haydar. The main decorative motif of the embroidery features floral compositions dominated by blooming *butagul* (flower) patterns arranged along upward-growing branches. The number "1224" is stitched onto the *mahsi*, corresponding to the years 1809–1810 in the Gregorian calendar. The presence of such a date inscription is a unique occurrence among all known examples of gold-embroidered garments.

The gold-embroidered (*zardozi*) robe displayed in the History Department exhibition of the Bukhara State Museum-Reserve is recorded in the museum's earliest inventory book⁶. Like other furnishings registered as part of the Emirate's treasury, this robe also bears a seal on its lining. Although the inscription on the seal has faded and can no longer be read, its outline remains clearly visible. Based on

⁵ КК (музейнинг илмий ёрдамчи китоби) № 2, Инв:3037/нвсп.

⁶ КК (музейнинг бош инвентар китоби) № 2, Инв:1791/9.

this evidence, it can be reasonably assumed that the robe once belonged to the Emirate's treasury.

Currently exhibited in the *Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa* branch of the Museum of Applied Arts, this robe is made of dark brown velvet with white borders and decorated in the *zardozi-guldozi* (gold and floral embroidery) technique. Gold, silver, and silk threads were used in its embroidery. On the back of the robe, at the shoulder area, there is a medallion embroidered with gold thread. The edges of the robe and the cuffs are trimmed with decorative braid, and the lining is made of silk fabric. The robe measures 148 cm in length and 91 cm across the shoulders.

Another robe, also registered in the museum's inventory book under the name "Property of the Emirate Treasury," is likewise currently on display in the *Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa* Museum of Applied Arts branch⁷. "Joma" – Men's Robe This robe was crafted during the reign of Amir Muzaffar Khan (1861–1885) by palace gold embroidery (*zardozi*) artisans. It is made of green velvet and decorated in the *zardozi-guldozi-buttadozi* (gold, floral, and paisley embroidery) style. A gold-embroidered border runs from the collar down to the hem, within which ornamental motifs in the *qubbadozi* (domed relief) technique are stitched. The border and cuffs are edged with a hand-embroidered *qur* made of silk thread, executed in the *yo'rma* style. The recurring *butta* (paisley) motif is rendered in gold embroidery throughout the robe, and the floral designs are executed in raised *qubba* technique, giving them a three-dimensional appearance. This garment served as Amir Muzaffar Khan's ceremonial robe, worn during festivals and official celebrations.

Although the velvet pile has worn away over time, the gold threads have retained their luster, as they contain between 7% and 25% pure gold. The robe, dated to the early 20th century, has a silk lining. Like the previously described robe, it bears traces of a seal on the inner lining. Over the course of a century, the gold threads have oxidized and darkened. The robe measures 141 cm in length and 88 cm across the shoulders. Studies of garments from this period show that most robes ranged in length from 140 to 150 cm, with shoulder widths between 80 and 95 cm. This indicates that the *joma* was worn as an outer garment over several layers of clothing, covering the wearer from the wrists to the ankles.

In the unique photographic collection of N. Orda, who visited the Emirate of Bukhara in 1880, there are portraits of Amir Muzaffar Khan, Amir Abdulahad Khan, as well as members of the royal family and court officials. In one photograph depicting the 30-year-old Amir Abdulahad Khan together with *Qushbegi Durbinbiy*,

⁷ КК (музейнинг бош инвентар китоби) № 2, Инв:1795/9.

both figures are shown wearing luxurious garments. Their outfits, from head to toe, are made in the *zardozi–guldozi* (gold and floral embroidery) style. The Amir's robe features fur-trimmed cuffs, while the belts, made of velvet, are adorned with silver ornaments. This conclusion is supported by the fact that during this period, the belts of the nobility's attire were typically crafted in such a manner⁸.

A number of research studies have also been conducted on the gold-embroidered (*zardozi*) works produced in the workshops of the Bukhara Emirate and private ateliers. In the comprehensive ethnographic and art-historical study of *zardozi* embroidery, both museum collections and literary sources have been effectively utilized⁹. Today, this field attracts numerous researchers, designer-art historians, and tourists interested in the history of our country with its rich heritage and exquisite ornamental designs.

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⁸ KK (музей ашёларини фото фонд таркибига рўйхатга олиш китоби) № 1, Инв:864/фф.

⁹ Гончарова П.А. Бухоро зардўзлик санъати. Тошкент, 1986 йил.