

# POWER OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

*Shah Ismail I Khatai.  
 Portrait of Venetian artist of the 16<sup>th</sup> century*



**T**he early years of Azerbaijan's independence after the collapse (1991) of the Soviet Union, were a very challenging time of instability with various crises in the country. Educating and learning the nation's history and culture with its inherited traditions in tough times help to conserve the national environment as these are the fundamental components of national identity. A strong sense of national identity enables a

nation to stay strong even when surrounding political forces challenge that nation and its right to exist.

In the history of Azerbaijan the most eloquent expression of Azerbaijani identity came with the rise of Shah Ismail Safavi (1487–1524) during the Safavid era. The Safavids were linguistically and politically Azerbaijani dynasty upon their rise to power in the beginning of 16th century. For the first time in history, by a decree of Shah Ismayil Khatai, the Azerbaijani language was elevated to the status of an official language of court and military in the Safavid Empire.

In the 20th century, the Azerbaijani language twice became an official language for a short period of time. The Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan, which existed for about two years (1918-1920), is characterised as a period of formation of political consciousness and national self-consciousness of the Azerbaijani people. By a special law, the Parliament of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan declared the Azerbaijani language as official state language. In 1945-1946, when the Azerbaijan People's Government was established in the South Azerbaijan (Iran), the parliament of the new Azerbaijani government announced Azerbaijani as an official language which was taught at schools and university, replacing Farsi.

Of course, the usage and official status of the native language is one of the main factors in nation-building. In 1991, when Azerbaijan regained independence, Azerbaijani was declared the state language and Latin the official alphabet. However, a decade after independence people still continued using the Cyrillic alphabet and the Russian language in government institutions. President Heydar Aliyev, who came into power after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was keen to ensure that

*Artist Hans Memling (1430 -1494).  
Still Life. Jug with Flowers, late 15<sup>th</sup> century*

Azerbaijani was the state language in actual practice. To strengthen the use of the Azerbaijani language he made a deadline and issued a presidential decree that all official documents in all of the governmental offices must be written in the Azerbaijani language using the modified Latin alphabet. In his decree President Aliyev stated that first time in Azerbaijan's history it was Shah Ismayil Khatai early in the 16 century who passed a decree that the Azerbaijani language should be used as an official language in his state of Safavids. By mentioning Shah Ismail Khatai, President Aliyev wanted to show the importance of reviving the national, historical and cultural identity of the Azerbaijanis, as Shah Ismail Khatai is viewed as one of the greatest personalities in Azerbaijan's glorious history for his political, military, scholarly and poetic competences.

Today cultural heritage is defined as "the contemporary purposes of the past" or "that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, be they economic, cultural, political or social." Apart from material aspects and social practices and values the main expressive forms of cultural heritage are language, arts, handicrafts and music.

For centuries, the Azerbaijani carpets have accurately represented our nation's great past, unique culture, and its origin. They have always been the most popular in the world's most famous auction houses, such as Sotheby's, Christie's or Bonhams. These precious carpets were woven in different parts of Azerbaijan and the weavers used the traditions dating back at least to the 11th century and used designs that belonged to their tribe and village. They generally inserted their own ornaments and tribal symbols in the empty areas of the carpet. In Europe and in the world as a whole, these carpets with various designs historically representing different regions of Azerbaijan – Baku carpets, Tabriz carpets, Ganja carpets, Ardabil carpets, Garabagh carpets, Shusha carpets, Guba carpets, Gazakh carpets, Shirvan carpets, Derbend carpets and carpets from other parts of Azerbaijan – were called "Caucasian" or "Persian" depending on whether the carpet was woven north or south of the Araz river which currently divides the Republic of Azerbaijan and Iran. As a matter of fact, 95 percent of Caucasian labelled carpets and perhaps up to half of the so-called Persian carpets are actually Azerbaijani. The map published in every Sotheby's Auction catalogue showing the classic oriental carpet weaving



*Mugan carpet, Karabakh school,  
late 14<sup>th</sup> - early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Azerbaijan Carpet Museum*



areas clearly shows Azerbaijan as the name of the area where most of the so-called Caucasian and many of the so-called Persian carpets originated.

Azerbaijani carpets were also used as decorative features in Western European paintings from the 14th

century onwards. These carpets woven by Azerbaijani weavers were exported to Western Europe, and consequently were available to the Renaissance artists.

However, the Azerbaijani carpets needed better recognition in the world, which for various twists of history

*Sheikh Safi (Ardabil) carpet. Victoria and Albert Museum, London*



generally are not attributed to Azerbaijan. And it started with Heydar Aliyev who was one of the most influential leaders of the Soviet Union. As first deputy chairman of the USSR Council of Ministers, he supported the holding of an international symposium on Azerbaijani car-

pets under the auspices of UNESCO in Baku in 1983 and personally attended this symposium representing top Soviet leadership, thus reinforcing the importance of this event for uncovering and preserving Azerbaijan's cultural heritage. This was the first biggest event on



*President Heydar Aliyev and Jeffrey Werbock*

correcting the historical record by adding the name of Azerbaijan to all the carpets made by Azerbaijani people living in both the Republic of Azerbaijan as well as the carpets made in Iran by ethnic Azerbaijanis. The famed Azerbaijani carpet expert Latif Kerimov had played a fundamental role in this recognition presenting all statistics related to Azerbaijani carpets to this international forum. In Kerimov's in-depth research presented in his three-volume book 'Azerbaijan Khalchasi' - 'The carpet of Azerbaijan' published in 1983, one can find the analysis of ornamental elements of more than 1,300 Azerbaijan carpets, indicating the regions of Azerbaijan where these exquisite carpets were woven.

Today you can see the new carpet-shaped carpet museum as a landmark of Baku. And it was Heydar Aliyev who first opened the Carpet Museum in Baku, the first carpet museum in the world, in 1972. As a result of this policy, "The Traditional Art of carpet-weaving in the Republic of Azerbaijan" was included on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, showing Azerbaijan's historical and continuing role as one of the world's major carpet production centers.



*Invitation to Jeffrey Werbock's concert in Baku*

During the dark times after the collapse of the USSR, President Aliyev used every opportunity to promote Azerbaijani culture which gives dignity and pride to the people. He wanted people to understand that he supported cultural heritage and traditional values of Azerbaijan, and that traditional culture is important because it is an essential ingredient to national identity and plays an important role in nation-building. When he learned that an American kamancha player Jeffrey Werbock had been invited to perform a concert at the newly renovated Opera House in Baku he wanted to meet with him in his office. Heydar Aliyev had himself played the tar in his youth and meeting with American kamancha player was a good opportunity to convey his messages on traditional culture to greater audience.

In a moment Jeffrey became conscious of what he had offered while the President had a hearty laugh over it, and I was among witness to this exchange and tell this story in every our gatherings how my "strange" American friend invited the now iconic President Heydar Aliyev to his concert, saying he could bring anyone he liked!

The meeting with Jeffrey Werbock was very inter-

*Jeffrey Werbock*

*Mugham singer Alim Qasimov*

esting lasting more than half an hour despite the President's busy schedule. There was a very curious moment near the end of the conversation when Jeffrey Werbock invited President Aliyev to the his concert the same evening handing over the concert invitation and pointing out that the invitation ticket was actually for two people, as if he needed to be informed that he could bring a guest with him and needed an invitation ticket!

Of course, President Aliyev greatly appreciated the idea of inviting the American who loves mugham and promotes Azerbaijan music in the USA and other Western countries bringing this to the attention of the public.

Azerbaijan's musical heritage mugham is truly of a great cultural phenomenon. Mugham has a thousand years of musical tradition and is a highly complex art form that weds classical poetry and musical improvisation. Mugham is not only an ancient art and a part of Azerbaijan's musical and cultural heritage but it is also a constantly developing tradition.

Alim Gasimov - a "living national treasure" of Azerbaijan, has played a great role in spreading this cultur-

al heritage in the world. His unique performing style combines deep knowledge of centuries-old rules of mugham with challenging innovations. The world's appreciation of Azerbaijan's musical riches was poised to change due to Alim Qasimov's performance.

According to *the New York Times*, Alim Qasimov is one of the greatest singers alive, with a searing spontaneity that conjures passion and devotion, contemplation and incantation. *Le Monde* described him as a virtuoso possessing 'one of the most beautiful voices of our era'. *The Guardian* claimed him to be "one of the most thrilling, unashamedly emotional performers on the planet".

In recognition of Alim Qasimov's musical contributions to world peace, he was awarded the coveted International IMC-UNESCO Music Prize. With this prestigious award - the 'Nobel Prize for Music', Alim Qasimov joined a select company of musical genius, such as Yehudi Menuhin, Dmitri Shostakovich, Leonard Bernstein, Ravi Shankar, Olivier Messiaen and Daniel Barenboim.

Now, looking back you get a great sense of pride that Azerbaijan has achieved tremendous successes



in building a prosperous nation. Azerbaijan's economy has become the faster-growing economy and today it is known as a successful model in the world. Today a good number of Azerbaijan's cultural heritage elements – the Azerbaijani mugham, the Azerbaijani ashig art, the Novruz holiday, the national musical instrument 'tar', the traditional headwear 'kalagayi', the Azerbaijani carpet, the traditional Karabakh horse-riding game 'chovqan', the copper craftsmanship of Lahij village, were included in the honor roll of UNESCO's world masterpieces and this process will continue enrich the corresponding lists of UNESCO in future. Azerbaijan certainly ranks at the top of the world's most tolerant societies and today this small country with rich cultural heritage is viewed as a model for ethnic and religious tolerance. Just recently rankings site 'Venividi' included Azerbaijan into the list of five most tolerant nations in the world along with Canada, Australia, Argentina and Sweden. Azerbaijan was the first republic in the Muslim world, proclaimed in 1918 and was the first Muslim state to have provided suffrage to women in 1919. It is a multi-ethnic state with various and unique ethnic groups within its boundaries. Respect and tolerance for national minorities has played a vital role in the development of this country from old times to modern days. Azerbaijan was able to protect it-

self from the triggers of religious extremism - dangerous threat of the modern world amid the clashing cultures and religions and successfully promotes the values of multiculturalism. 🌸

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