

REDISCOVERING AZERBAIJANI ART

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*Decorative vase. 16–17th cc.
Izmir, Archaeological Museum*

IN THIS ARTICLE WE WILL TALK ABOUT ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE PARTS OF THE AZERBAIJANI CAPITAL, ITS SEA FAÇADE – THE BAKU EMBANKMENT, WHICH HAS BEEN THE ICONIC SYMBOL OF THE CITY FOR THE LAST TWO CENTURIES. IN 1865, THE MILITARY GOVERNOR AND DIRECTOR OF THE CIVILIAN PART OF BAKU, LT-GEN MIKHAIL PETROVICH KOLYUBYAKIN GAVE THE PERMISSION TO KNOCK DOWN THE USELESS OLD WALL THAT WAS SEPARATING THE CITY FROM THE SEA AND ALSO “HAMPERING THE FRESH AIR”.



*Decorative shield made by Mohammad Mumin.
Moscow, Armoury*

Museum exhibits may be completely different and have a different historical and cultural value, but they all have one common feature – people are trying to study and preserve them for future generations. Quite often it is only museum exhibits that can help restore a country’s past, disclose its secrets and understand its people. One way or another, mu-

seum collections are invaluable, and the more they are, the less likely it is that a country and its people will ever be cast into oblivion.

Nowadays, an ordinary man in the street in a foreign country will know very little about Azerbaijani culture. But there were times when works of Azerbaijani art were the source of many legends, people could pay a lot of money and want-



Rasim Babayev. Well-dressed Camel. 1997. California, private collection

ed to lay their hands on them. The reasons for the present-day “obscurity” are both the deliberate provocations aimed at undermining historical justice and the commonplace ignorance. Quite often Azerbaijani works of art are introduced as being Armenian, Turkish, Iranian or Caucasian, thus making the history of world art even more disorganized. Exhibits from Azerbaijan stored in various museums across the globe are not studied well enough, they are known only to a narrow circle of

specialists. However, even the few works of art represented in such exhibitions can significantly alter the perception about our country.

Hundreds of unique artifacts, including ceramic and metal items, art glass and thread, miniatures, carpets, embroidery, jewelry, etc., are displayed in the world’s best-known museums or are part of private collections. They enable much closer familiarization with Azerbaijan’s cultural heritage. The exhibits of the Victoria and Albert Museum

in London, the Louver in Paris, the Metropolitan Museum in Washington, the museums of Vienna, Rome, Berlin, Istanbul, Tehran and Cairo include marvelous items made by the skilled hands of craftsmen from Tabriz, Nakhchivan, Ganja, Gazakh, Guba, Baku, Sheki, Shamakhi and Ordubad. There are numerous unique collections of Azerbaijani art in Russia alone. The most artistic artifacts are currently stored at the Armory Chamber of the Kremlin, the Tretyakov Gallery, the library named after



Sheikh Safi carpet, Tabriz, 1539. London, Victoria and Albert Museum

Saltykov Shchedrin and the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The last museum on the list deserves special attention, given the diversity of Azerbaijani exhibits displayed in the museum's East section.

Metal items, daggers, axes, belts, jewelry, ceramics, earthenware products, glazed bricks, tiles, including the famous glazed tiles from the Pir Huseyn shrine that are rightfully considered to be the best in the Middle East, all made by Azerbaijani craftsmen at various periods in history, are on display here. They are gold-plated and play with dark-blue and turquoise cobalt shades. Most tiles are ornamented with luster which still remains a mystery for scientists. The skillfully made figure of a buffalo head, discovered in Nagorno-Karabakh and attributed to the second millennium BC, is also displayed at the Hermitage. Bronze Age monuments include attire, mostly beads of different colors and forms.

Medieval Azerbaijan is represented by amazing bronze figures of humans and animals. Particularly interesting to experts is a 7th century figure discovered in Nakhchivan. Scientists think this is the figure of Javanshir (638-670), the ruler of Caucasian Albania. The foundation of the figure is quite interesting from an artistic standpoint. Besides the conventional floral ornament, there are images of lions, a mountain goat, a hunter grappling with a lion, as well as an elephant and a fox on it.

Yet another interesting exhibit of the Hermitage is the 1206 bronze Shirvan water carrier. The museum also has a rare and barely known piece of work by prominent Azerbaijani ornamental artist Mirza Gadim Irevani. The 1430 literary masterpiece by Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi, *The Khamseh*, is not only



Bronze cauldron. Shirvan. 12–13th cc.

St. Petersburg, the Hermitage

one of the poet's first manuscripts. It represents tremendous value also as a wonderful example of miniature art. The unique samples of carpet weaving art are an object of pride not only for the Hermitage but also for other leading museums of the world. In addition to carpets, many museums have collections of fabric and embroidery. In France alone there are hundreds of top-quality fabrics made in Shamakhi, Sheki, Ganja, Nakhchivan and Tabriz. Some amazing carpets are on display at the Louver and at the Paris museum of ornamental art. The latter has an exciting Tabriz carpet with images of slim cypresses, spring trees and various beasts and birds embroidered on it.

The carpet collections of the Budapest museums of Ornamental Art and the Art of the East deserve special mention. The Azerbaijani carpets stored there were woven at different times at such centers of carpet weaving craft as Baku, Guba, Shamakhi, Shusha, Gazakh and Tabriz. There is a unique carpet here a fragment of which was part of a private collection in Budapest. It has an image of people standing around a garden pavilion, tree branches in the background and birds sitting on

them. The images are believed to have been designed by Sultan Mohammed (1530-1540) or an apprentice working under his guidance in a Tabriz workshop.

In Germany, Azerbaijani carpets are represented quite extensively. Thousands of Azerbaijani carpets are currently stored in the museums, antique shops and private collections of Bonn, Hamburg, Munich, Cologne, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt, Mannheim, etc. Another Azerbaijani carpet with a bird composition is known in the world as the "Marbi carpet". It was

woven in the 15th century and belongs to the carpets of the Gazakh group. It received its name in 1925 after being discovered in a church in a same-named Swedish village. Today it is stored at the National History Museum in Stockholm. Carpets of this type are still made in Gazakh today. Thanks to their ornament, they have been labeled "Gushlu" (associated with birds).

But perhaps the most famous Azerbaijani carpet in the world is "Sheikh Sefi". It is currently stored at the Victoria and Albert Museum



Abdul Momin Mohammad al-Khoyi. Illustration for the Varga and Gulsha. 13th century. Istanbul, Topkapi Palace Museum.



Tiles from Pir Husein's tomb. Hajigabul District. Huseyn Khanega 13th century, St. Petersburg, the Hermitage

in London. It was woven in 1539 in Tabriz on order of Shah Tahmasib for a mosque in Ardebil. This is why it is still referred to as the "Ardebil carpet". Its size, 56 square meters, is truly amazing. The next thing that strikes the eye is the wonderful and solid composition of the pattern and the richness of the color scheme. A very subtle floral ornament consisting of flowers, leaves and intertwining stems is woven in the central part of the carpet. Also in the center is a star-like medallion of a golden tone with beams. Some motifs of the pattern on "Sheikh Sefi" carpet are re-

peated in the majolica ornament of the Ardebil mosque.

The most ancient Azerbaijani carpets are demonstrated in the Metropolitan Museum of New York and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Products of Azerbaijani craftsmen are also encountered quite frequently in the museums, art galleries and various collections in Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Houston, Cleveland, Detroit and Boston. It would take too much time to simply list Azerbaijani carpets displayed in the museums across the globe, but that is a sub-

ject for a separate fundamental research.

There are other unique exhibits in America, including ancient metal ware. At the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in New York, the attention of art critics of the world is drawn to a golden bracelet discovered among other decorations during excavations near Urmia. Of the Turkish cities, the biggest number of decorative, applied and figurative art samples are concentrated in Istanbul. The most ancient and beautiful artifacts are stored in three large museums of the city. These are the Topkapi Palace Museum, the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Art Compositions and the People's Museum. In addition to carpets, embroidery and other products, Istanbul museums also store bronze gonfalons made in Tabriz and Ardebil. They used to be installed at the highest points of mosques, medreses and minarets, and had hieratic importance. The upper section of the gonfalons is considered the most beautiful. The Azerbaijani gonfalons stored in the Turkish museums are of two forms: those with horns and pear-shaped. Some have prayers and names of prophets engraved on them, others bear symbolic images.

The items by Azerbaijani craftsmen stored at Swiss museums, in private collections and antique shops of Bern, Geneva, Basel, Lausanne, etc. represent a remarkable page in the history of Azerbaijani arts. The collection of the Bern history museum contains daggers, sabers, guns and powder flasks produced in Shamakhi, Goychay, Ganja, Sheki, Baku, Tabriz and Ardebil in the 18-19th centuries. The guns on display have artistic ornaments in the form of geometrical patterns, small compositions of narrative nature

and expressions in Arabic engraved among various ornaments. Besides being reminiscent of a fanciful ornament themselves, these engravings also provide valuable historical information. The names of craftsmen and owners of the items can be read on the surface. The Eastern section of the Bern history museum also have samples of household items made of copper that were widely used in the 18-19th centuries.

Azerbaijan handicraft arts are extensively represented in the museums of Iran as well. Particularly valuable exhibits can be found in the capital Tehran – at the museums of Basitan, Gulistan, as well as the Archaeological and Carpet Museum. The last of the said museums has a collection of metal products discovered in the excavations at the Hasanlu burial mound where, among other things, an amazing golden bowl was found. In the lower part of the bowl there is an image of a hunter whose body is entwined by a snake, a naked woman standing on two sheep and a man stretching his hands to an athlete who has been attacked by a three-headed dragon. Another scene depicts an elderly man sitting on a shelf and a woman stretching a child to him.

Such items are unique. The inimitable artifacts colorfully illustrating Azerbaijani history and culture are kept in the museums of dozens of countries around the world. It is practically impossible to calculate how many masterpieces of Azerbaijani national art are displayed in museums alone, not to mention private collections. This, however, does not matter much. What does matter is that they have survived to the present day having passed through centuries. And it remains to be hoped that they will continue to live for

many more centuries and millennia to come. It is therefore our obligation to carry on studying the rich national heritage through unique samples of Azerbaijani art.

An incomplete list of foreign museums in which exhibits from Azerbaijan are displayed:



Decorative bowl depicting three human figures, probably characters from “Khosrov and Shirin” by Nizami Ganjavi. 13–14th centuries. London antique shop

USA:

Museum of Fine Arts
Collection of the Institute of Fine Arts
Collection of the Institute of Art
Pennsylvania Museum of Arts
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco
Museum of Harvard University
The Fogg Museum of Arts
Metropolitan Museum
Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum
Museum of Textile

United Kingdom

Chester Beatty Library
National Library
British Museum
Victoria and Albert Museum
Imperial War Museum
Gallery of Victoria Frances
Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery

Turkey:

Ethnographic Museum in Ankara
Ethnographic Museum in Bursa
Topkapi Palace Museum
Museum of works of Turkish and Islamic Art
Carpet Museum of Waqf
War Museum
Anatolian Carpet House
Carpet Palace
Istanbul University
Library
Erciyaz University of Kaiseri
Mevlane Museum in Konya
Seljuk University

Switzerland:

Museum of History in Basel
Museum of Musical Instruments
Museum of History in Bern
Carpet Museum
Museum of Ceramics in Geneva
Museum of Ceramics in Lausanne
Museum of Applied Arts in Zurich

Hungary:

Museum of Arts of Oriental People in Budapest
Museum of Decorative Arts
Nadteten Palace Complex
St. Matiush Church Collection
Collection of the Diord Feshtetich Palace Complex
Hasan Pasha Mosque Collection in Pees

France:

Museum of Decorative Arts in Lyons
Museum of Fine Arts in Marseille
The Louvers Museum
Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris
National Museum the Versailles Palace
Museum of Man

National Library
Collection of the Notre-Dame Cathedral
Alexander Dumas House Museum