

## Contemporary Fine Arts of Uzbekistan From realism to postmodernism

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**ABSTRACT:** At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the process of Europeanization of the Central Asian region began. A certain stagnation in the development of traditional culture in the changing socio-cultural conditions predetermined the need to introduce new European forms of painting, graphics, and sculpture into the culture of Uzbekistan, or rather Turkestan. In the 1920s, the national school of fine arts in Uzbekistan was formed. During this decade, a unique phenomenon known as the “Turkestani avant-garde” was born, almost all of whose representatives lived and worked in Uzbekistan.

In the 1930s-50s, the fine arts of Uzbekistan, developing in line with the trends of all Soviet art, did not avoid contradictory and dramatic processes. A narrow understanding of socialist realism not as a creative method, but as an artistic style, the assertion of normativity in art, which gave rise to a set of prescriptions for plastic vision, a limited understanding of the meaning of artistic tradition, reducing it primarily to the traditions of Russian culture of the 19th century, limited the full development of art. In the 1960s-80s, a search for new forms of artistic generalization took place, which led to the approval of completely different plastic ideas. From this period, a certain pluralism of various artistic trends in the painting of Uzbekistan sets in, which intensifies during Uzbekistan’s period of independence from 1991 to now.

This article analyzes and classifies the main trends in the contemporary fine arts of Uzbekistan. An important problem in the art of Uzbekistan is preserving national identity in the era of globalization while integrating into the modern world cultural space. The article has practical applications, as it can be used as material on the contemporary art of Uzbekistan and Central Asia

in art educational institutions and programs, as well as in the implementation of exhibition projects worldwide. Since the contemporary art of Uzbekistan was mainly covered from the point of view of the work of specific artists, many analytical generalizations were made on the basis of observations and of the author's own scientific research.

**KEYWORDS:** fine art, realism, modernism, postmodernism, humanization of art, national identity in art

**Аннотация:** В конце XIX-начале XX веков начинается процесс европеизации региона Центральной Азии. Определенная стагнация в развитии традиционной культуры в меняющихся социокультурных условиях в данный период предопределила необходимость внедрения в художественную культуру Узбекистана, а вернее Туркестана, новых европейских форм - живописи, графики, скульптуры. Именно в 1920-х годах происходит формирование национальной школы изобразительного искусства в Узбекистане. Это было десятилетие, в которое зародилось такое уникальное явление как «туркестанский авангард», почти все представители которого жили и творили в Узбекистане.

В 1930-50-е годы изобразительное искусство Узбекистана, развиваясь в русле тенденций всего советского искусства, не избежало противоречивых и драматических процессов. Узкое понимание социалистического реализма не как творческого метода, а как художественного стиля, утверждение нормативности в искусстве, породившее комплекс предписаний пластического видения, ограниченное понимание смысла художественной традиции, сведение его, по преимуществу, к традициям русской демократической художественной культуры XIX века ограничивали полноценное развитие искусства. В 1960-80-е годы происходит поиск новых форм художественного обобщения, утверждение совершенно иных пластических идей. С этого периода наступает определенный плюрализм различных художественных направлений в живописи Узбекистана, который усиливается в период независимости Узбекистана с 1991 года по современность.

В данной статье анализируются и классифицируются основные направления в современном изобразительном искусстве Узбекистана. Важной проблемой в искусстве Узбекистана является проблема сохранения национальной идентичности в эпоху глобализации и в то же время

интеграция в современное мировое культурное пространство. Статья имеет практическое значение, так как может быть использована как материал по современному искусству Узбекистана, региона Центральной Азии в художественных учебных заведениях и программах, а также в осуществлении выставочных проектов в зарубежных странах. Так как современное искусство Узбекистана в основном освещалось с точки зрения творчества конкретных художников, многие аналитические обобщения были выполнены на основе наблюдений, научного исследования самого автора.

**Ключевые слова:** изобразительное искусство, реализм, модернизм, постмодернизм, гуманизация искусства, национальная идентичность в искусстве

## 1. Introduction

This article analyzes the current situation and major development trends in the contemporary fine art of Uzbekistan—it is art rooted in ancient history and the product of Eurasian thinking. Art created in Uzbekistan is characterized by its rather complex and heterogenous stylistic vectors. Its contemporary art is represented by different generations of artists pursuing different directions of creative inquiry. With the establishment of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan in 1997, a new stage in the development of fine arts began. While the artistic traditions of the past decades continued, innovative processes in contemporary world art emerged. Along with the older generation of artists, new names come forth—names of young painters representing and exploring a diversity of artistic trends.

## 2. History and Trends of Contemporary Fine Art in Uzbekistan

The contemporary fine art of Uzbekistan possesses a special spiritual dimension where historical traditions, innovative searches, different styles, and trends intersect. Just as the contemporary artistic culture of Uzbekistan at large, it is nourished by spiritual traditions, the origins of which go deep into ancient times. For many centuries, the culture of Uzbekistan has been synthesized from a diversity of religious beliefs, cultural strata of Turkic

and Persian tongues, and different types of economy. The natural and cultural landscape, too, has influenced the content and form-figures in the representational arts of Uzbekistan (e.g., Aini, 1980; Ashrafi, 1987; Askarov, 1977; Chepelev, 1935; Denike, 1927; Ismailova, 1982; Pugachenkova & Rempel, 1965; Pugachenkova & Xakimov, 1988; Rempel, 1987, 1983, 1978, 1976; Stavisskiy, 1974; Vasiliy, 1968, 1963; Xakimov, 2022).

In Uzbekistan, professional pictorial art in all its forms and genres took shape mostly in the 20th century as the product of Eurasian thinking, its genesis driven by both objective and subjective factors. By the start of the 20th century, the traditional artistic culture of Uzbekistan, which had been evolving for several millennia, was a unique phenomenon reflecting the complex historical, geopolitical, ethnocultural, religious, and socio-economic identity of the region.

The dynamics of civilizational shifts (the development of industry, transport, and communications, the arrival of innovations and scientific discoveries, the development of new energy sources, transformations in daily life, information sharing, etc.) and major social upheavals of the early 20th century created the background for the genesis of the European fine art forms, which, however, was not just an automatic transfer of European or Russian art to the local region. Right from the start, this genesis involved a symbiosis of creative inquiry into European art and the 'genetic code' of the Asian artistic worldview, which was reflected in the work of Uzbekistan's artists (Akilova, 2021, p. 561).

The contemporary fine art of Uzbekistan has furthered the attainments of the preceding stages. The country's independence since 1991 has sharpened its people's artistic perception of the world, giving a significant impetus to the conceptualization of the nation's historical and cultural heritage, its unique artistic traditions, and creative genius embodied in the monuments of material and spiritual culture.

The establishment of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan in 1997 played a major role in galvanizing art life, raising the status of artists as a social intellectual class, promoting the country's fine art overseas and integrating it into the international cultural domain, as well as in supporting different contemporary art currents and styles. Along with the older generation of artists, new names have emerged—of the young painters representing and exploring a diversity of artistic trends: realism, decorativeism, associative, metaphorical, avant-garde, and postmodern art.

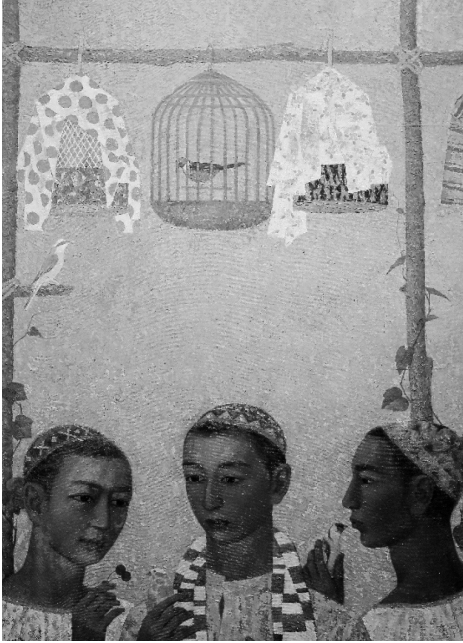
Art created in Uzbekistan is a rather complex and heterogeneous phenomenon in terms of its stylistic vectors. The contemporary art of Uzbekistan is represented by different generations of artists pursuing different directions of creative inquiry. The establishment of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan surely opened a new phase in the development of fine arts, encompassing both the logical continuation of artistic traditions of the past decades and innovative processes in the contemporary world art in the context of finding a new identity in the transformed historical, political, and socio-cultural environment.

The contemporary representational art of Uzbekistan with its diversity of forms holds an important place in the system of the nation's cultural values. This varied and harmonious world of artistic culture harbors the traditions of historical and cultural heritage, the creative work of many generations, the ideas of humanism, its philosophical content, and the original system of visual and expressive means. It is an asset not only to be treasured and taken good care of but also to be studied comprehensively as a national cultural phenomenon.

Amidst the renewal trends in modern-day Uzbekistan, there is a growing interest in understanding artistic experience in the broadest sense, considering all possible aspects, perspectives, and relationships from the standpoint of new thinking. The key figure in this subject matter is the artist himself and his work.

The contemporary fine art of Uzbekistan is a multi-colored mosaic composed of differently talented creators. In the work of modern Uzbek artists, different art schools, traditions, and directions intersect, cumulatively shaping the national identity of an integral modern Uzbek culture. In the work of some artists, one can more clearly sense the totality of national features coming from the depths of centuries. Others explore not only the experience of the past but also things new, born equally out of the global art practice of the 20th century and modern reality (Akilova, 2016b, p. 9).

The realistic trend is still firmly entrenched in the country's contemporary fine art; it is represented by the art of Sagdulla Abdullaev, Akmal Ikramjanov, Sobir Rakhmetov, Muhammad Nuridinov, Valeriy Yenin, Mukhamadiyor Tashmuradov, Alisher Alikulov, Azamat Atabaev, Victoria Troshina, and others. Realism still firmly holds its position in the art of Uzbekistan, because the system of educational institutions of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan rests on realism.



(▲)Illustration 1: I. Shin. *Gilan.Kashkadarya* (2012)

(◄)Illustration 2: A. Ikramjanov, *Blue Bird* (2016)



(▲)Illustration 3: V. Yenin, *Winter* (2014)

(►)Illustration 4: J. Umarbekov, *Tahir and Zuhra in Their Youth* (2010)



The decorative vector is developed in the works of Alisher Mirzaev, Iskra Shin, Imyar Mansurov, Rakhmon Shadyev, Ludmila Sadykova, Yanis Salpinkidi, and Rustam Khudaibergenov. The decorative direction is due to centuries-old artistic traditions, reflecting the bright sun, bright colors of nature and traditional culture. In the 1930s-50s, during the period of socialist realism, the decorative works of artists were criticized. It was believed that art should be understandable to the people, that it should only be realistic (Chepelev, 1935, pp. 31-32).

The situation changed radically in the 1970s and 80s, when the freedom of artistic creation arose, and artistic traditions began to be understood more broadly. Artists began to look for new thematic and stylistic devices. An associative-metaphorical direction appeared, which is preserved even now in the art of Uzbekistan.

In the meantime, associative and metaphorical artistic thinking tends to increasingly expose its inner potential in the work of very different artists, in every individual instance refracted through the prism of their vision of the world and their pictorial and figurative searches. Examples can be found in the art of Javlon Umarbekov, Bahadir Jalalov, Asliddin Isaev, Babur Ismailov, Murad Karabaev, Rikhsitilla Akramov, and others.

The continuity of generations, insightful spiritual inquiry, and the conceptualization of artistic attainments of the preceding stage are also characteristic of the generation of Uzbek artists who entered the art scene

**Illustration 5: A. Nur, *Melody* (2011)**



or found their style in art in the 1990s. Lekim Ibragimov, Akmal Nur, Gafur Kadyrov, Nodir Imamov, Mukhtar Isanov, Faizulla Akhmadaliev, Bakhtiyor Makhkamov, Hurshid Ziyakhanov, Shavqat Khakimov, Shakhnoz Abdullaeva, and others turn to tradition not only as stylistic features but as a moral and spiritual connection with the native land, people, culture, psyche, and mentality (Akilova, 2016b, p. 11).

Since independence in 1991, historical and cultural heritage is conceptualized more profoundly, in many aspects and dimensions, in the form of (a) interest of contemporary Uzbek artists in specific historical periods and great figures of national culture; (b) interpretation of philosophical and ideological currents and vectors that existed in the history of national culture; and (c) representation of a modern era in the work of Uzbek artists. Cultural codes that can be discerned in contemporary art gain particular significance.

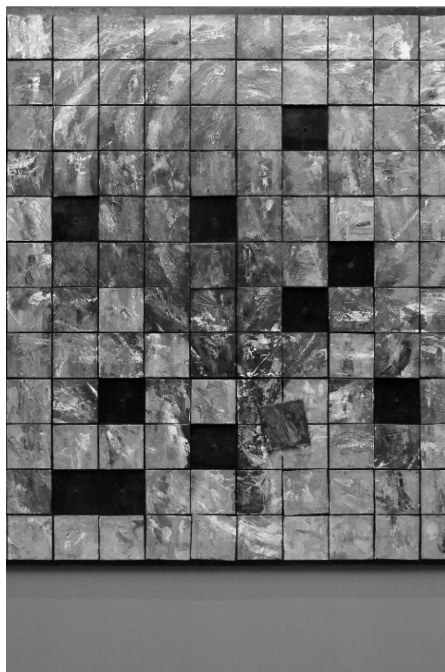
In the second half of the 1980s and through the 2000s, new postmodern trends appeared and evolved in the art of Uzbekistan: pop art, installation, video art, performance, spatial designs expressing a particular concept. We can say that postmodernism in Uzbekistan has its own characteristics. The features and style of European post-modernism cannot always be seen in it.

As renowned contemporary art curator Germano Chellant said: . . . a new sensibility is emerging that artists can now use a wide variety of materials, . . . all four elements—water, air, earth and fire—and I also wanted to emphasize

**Illustration 6:** A. Nikolaev, *Sniper* (installation, in memory of Joseph Beuys, 2018)



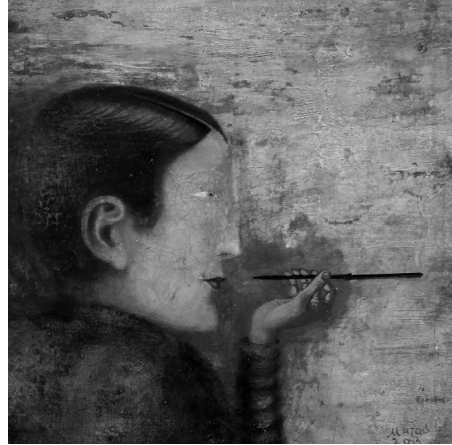


Illustration 7: D. Razikov, *Mosaic* (2022)Illustration 8: Y. Safardiya, *New Hope* (2022)

that this art is not ‘anti-art’, not anti-painting (Smith, 2021, p. 222).

For instance, in the figurative structure of the works by Jamol Usmanov, Faizulla Akhmadaliev, Sanjar Jabbarov, Muhammad Fozili, and Maria Soshina, the dominant key is not sarcasm or playing with traditions, but genuine spiritual traditionalism inherent in the Asian culture, expressed through conceptualism. Here comes to mind the art of Alexander Nikolaev, Vyacheslav Useinov, Shukhrat Abdumalikov, Diyor Razikov, Sharifa Sharafkhojaeva, and Babur Muhamedov who also seek to explore new technology and new aesthetic techniques of contemporary Western art. Their creative inquiry goes beyond national poetics, pushing the boundaries of artistic perceptions.

Digitalization in culture also takes place in the art of Uzbekistan. Uzbek artist Yunus Safardiya (now living in London) who works in sculpture, video art, and installation, has gained recognition in contemporary European art circles. His works create an amazing sensation of the world real and virtual, of mysticism and material domain breathing the spirit of hope and light. Turning to rather complex problems and challenges facing humankind at

Illustration 9: I. Valikhojaev, *Miraki* (2016)Illustration 10: M. Karabaev, *Untitled* (2003)

the current stage of development, he creates the illusion of being static and dynamic at the same time, where the spirit of harmony and conciliation nevertheless prevails (Yunus Safardiyar, personal communication, Tashkent, 2022).

The art of the 20th century is known to be a synthetic one, in the sense that it synthesizes the art of different nations, eras, schools, traditions, and styles while remaining an art that is specific to the 20th century, expressing the worldview and perceptions of modern man.

The art of Nodir Shoabdurahimov, Babur Ismailov, Seiran Kurtjemil, Timur Akhmedov, Inna Sandler, Alexander Tyurin, Murad Karabaev, Ibragim Valikhojaev, Rikhsitilla Akramov, Mikhail Antonov, Florida Gambarova, and others, brings to life the themes and stylistics of the European art of different periods. The work of these talented artists gives evidence of a natural synthesis of East and West, of an evolution of a kind and symbiosis of the typological features of the academic school and modernism, which allows attributing it to the universal transnational culture, the language, and content of which can now be understood in any part of the globe.

The 20th century has pushed the usual bounds of conceptualized traditions, involving the culture of different nations and eras in the interpretative processes. In this respect, contemporary Uzbek artists also possess a kind of ‘planetary consciousness’ when categories such as “mine” and “others” lose their habitual outlines.

The fine art domain covers not only the city of Tashkent but almost

**Illustration 11: A. Isaev, *My Childhood* (2018)**



all province centers of the country through the operations of branches and training institutions of the Academy of Arts. Urban centers such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, and the Autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan remain major cultural hubs where artists create. Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva are the ancient historical cities of Uzbekistan, along which the Great Silk Road passed. They are over 2,500 years old. Samarkand is said to date from the same era as Rome and it preserves architectural monuments, centuries-old traditional crafts, and, in general, traditional culture.

The region of Karakalpakstan has an ancient history associated with ancient Khorezm, the unique culture of the Karakalpak people. However, at present, due to the drying up of the Aral Sea, it represents a zone of ecological crisis.

Themes related to regions of Uzbekistan are reflected in the works of today's artists. For instance, quite interesting and remarkably original is the work of artists Zelimkhan Saidjanov and Muzaffar Abdullaev from Bukhara; Asliddin Isaev, Turkman Esanov, Tulagan Erkulov, and Nuriddin Kalanov from Samarkand; Otakhan Allabergenov from Khorezm; and Zholdasbek Kuttymuratov, Zhollybai Izentaev, Sarsen Baibasinov, Bakhtiyar Serekeev, and

**Illustration 12:** J. Mirtadjiev, *Zahiriddin Muhammad Babur* (2010)



**Illustration 13:** Sh. Sharafkhojaeva, *ART Mobilization* (2022)



Daribai Tajimuratov from Karakalpakstan.

The last two decades have seen some major developments in monumental sculpture, as evidenced by monuments to the heroes of national history and culture: Amir Timur (Tamerlane), Mirzo Ulugbek, Alisher Navoi, Kamaletdin Bekhzod, Babur, Alpomysh, Jalaliddin Manguberdy, Al-Fargoni, and Fitrat; as well as to Chulpon, Abdulla Kadyri, Gafur Gulam, Zulfiya, and other prominent figures in Uzbek culture who contributed greatly to its development. Indicative of this period is the art of Ilkhom Jabbarov, Jalaliddin Mirtajiev, Anvar Rakhmatullaev, and others. The problems of the monumental art of Uzbekistan in this period are strongly associated not only with the ideological paradigm but also with the important issues related to urban development and the synthesis of arts in a modern-day urban environment, with searching for ways to express individual identity.

Currently, the indoor sculpture is also evolving dynamically in the art of Damir Ruzybaev, Azamat Khatamov, Tulagan Tajikhodjaev, Saidolim Sharipov, and others. Nation-specific and universally relevant themes, the search for new media of figurative expression, the enrichment of metaphor

Illustration 14: A. Khatamov, *Rider* (2022)Illustration 15: M. Borodina, *Surge* (2013)

and high professionalism are characteristic of these artists' creative pursuits. Their indoor sculpture acquires a certain "picturesqueness" and plasticity. This quality is consonant with a particular state of mind, sentiment, private experiences, and barely identifiable stirrings of the soul. These are the artists of great creative potential, inextricably connected with their native land, its culture and traditions. Typical of their art is an extensive associative field and soft plastic form, which can be seen in the choice of subjects and character types, and in the overall optimistic metaphorical shape of their sculpture pieces.

The avant-garde trend is also evolving in Uzbek sculpture. The art of Marina Borodina, Robert Avakyan, Bayat Mukhtarov, Vasiliy Popov, Albert Ovsepyan, Abdugafur Isanoliyev, Kurban Norkhurozov, and Ulash Urakov demonstrates research in new expressive means, the employment of non-traditional materials, and ultimate conventionality in the translation of figurative content.

Important and interesting in the development of Uzbek sculpting art

is the folklore vector typified by the interpretation of oral tradition subjects and stories, sometimes with a touch of mild humor. This trend is explored by Kurban Norkhurozov, Ulash Urakov and Bakhrom Gulov from Bukhara, as well as by Gulzor Sultanova, an artist from Tashkent. Zholdasbek Kuttymuratov, the Karakalpak sculptor of the independence period, is a versatile and fascinating artist; while his work is rooted in folk art, he is sensitive to the rhythms of modernity.

The ideological paradigm shift, greater focus on the thorough study of the local historical and cultural heritage, the search for national identity, and the entry of Uzbek art into the global art scene have formulated new objectives for the domestic sculptors. Overall, the contemporary monumental and indoor sculpture of Uzbekistan is going through a new, productive stage of development, which has highlighted both the artistic achievements and development problems to be addressed in the future.

Artists who have contributed to the development of graphic arts during the independence period are Viktor Apukhtin, Ilkhom Vakhidov, Alexander Li, Anatoliy Bobrov, Anvar Mamadjanov, Marat Sadykov, Dilyus Mirsalimov, Dmitriy Akhunbabaev, Gulzor Sultanova, Radik Azizov, and others. Book illustration keeps evolving, too, although perhaps not as dynamically as it used to in the earlier days. The easel works of Uzbek graphic artists also demonstrate great thematic, generic, and stylistic diversity. Regrettably, over the last two decades, graphic design techniques such as lithography, linocut, etching, and woodcut have nearly disappeared. This can be partly explained by the fact that many graphic artists began to paint.

Generally speaking, the current stage is distinguished by the reciprocal permeation of different forms of representational art. For instance, some painters explore sculpture or contemporary art, while graphic artists engage in painting; theatre and film artists “invade” the field of design. This is yet another specificity that describes the current stage in the development of fine arts.

After achieving independence, photo art began to gain a prominent position in the contemporary artistic culture of Uzbekistan. The regularly held international photo biennials in Tashkent, the opening of the Tashkent House of Photography, and learning about modern photography art of other countries have motivated Uzbek photography artists.

In the works of Viktor An, Abdugani Jumaev, Vladimir Kaverin, Vladimir Zhirnov, Konstantin Minaichenko, Vladimir Sokolov, and

Alexander Shepelin, one can see the world of diversity. Some of the artists are inspired by the wonderful nature of Uzbekistan, some by the portrait characters, some raise environmental issues or the theme of local traditions, while others experiment with the dimensions of photography and its media. Contemporary Uzbek photo art covers it all: series and panels, large-scale and medium-size images, shot combinations and collages, process technology and the so-called 'defect', the subtlest nuances of color, promotion techniques. The works of the photo artists support the idea proposed by the German artist Martin Kippenberger that photography, as a means of expression, has the right to awaken thought.

In its spirit and content, the art of Uzbekistan is a heterogeneous and complex phenomenon. On the one hand, and to a greater extent, humanization is strong in it, expressed in the preservation of true traditional values that ennoble man and his life: Kindness, beauty, love, mercy, forgiveness, creation, morality, freedom, and wisdom.

Humanistic values in the Uzbek art of the 21st century manifest themselves through an aspiration to preserve and express national identity and conceptualize the unique historical and cultural traditions of the land, in the original artistic "picture of the world", in the philosophy and poetics of Asia. And now this is communicated through the language of avant-garde, modernism, and postmodernism, which nowadays are not just styles or trends in the art of the West, but transnational forms of artistic expression in contemporary art, understandable all around the planet. The inclusion of symbols and motifs from different cultures (archaic, medieval, Asian, European, African, etc.) becomes a kind of universalization of artistic language.

On the other hand, though to a lesser extent, some artists make a man lose his individuality, presenting him as an impersonal element in the system of technical devices, whose purpose is to perform certain functions. Alternatively, one can see an aspiration to find the artistic language that can reflect human sensations and experiences at the subconscious level.

### **3. Conclusions**

The contemporary art of Uzbekistan is like a mosaic of different directions and names. This is a dynamic process in which time, communication with society, various thoughts and feelings pulsate. It is a search for national

identity through the preservation of style, cultural codes, traditions. This is of particular importance in the era of globalization.

Altogether, the contemporary art of Uzbekistan can be regarded as a kind of a crossing—not only of different generations, stylistic currents, themes, and artistic personalities but also of spiritual inquiries of East and West, civilization and culture, globalization and national identity, the focus of which remains, as it has always been on Man (Akilova, 2016a, p. 91).

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## Professional Profile

Kamola Akilova is the Director of the Fine Arts Gallery of Uzbekistan. After receiving her PhD in art history in 2003, she worked as the Chief Scientific Secretary of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan (2005-2010) and as the Deputy Minister of Culture of Uzbekistan (2017-2021). A Professor at the National Institute of Arts and Design since 2021, she is the author of more than 150 scientific articles published in domestic and foreign publications.