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9-2012

## The Soviet "Invasion" of Central Asian Applied Arts: How Artisans Incorporated Communist Political Messages and Symbols

Irina Bogoslovskaya

Uzbekistan, bogira20071@yandex.ru

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Bogoslovskaya, Irina, "The Soviet "Invasion" of Central Asian Applied Arts: How Artisans Incorporated Communist Political Messages and Symbols" (2012). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 660.

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introduce the backward nations of the East to the socialist way of life.”<sup>4</sup> From the viewpoint of Moscow, the effort to propagandize the Muslims of Central Asia was not a distant sideshow but crucial to the Communist project. The struggle to build a new society among the “backward nations of the East” would serve as a showcase of the new Bolshevik order throughout the former Russian empire. In Lenin’s words, “In Turkestan, we must create an exemplary, cultural, socialist state, which must show the repressed nations... the difference between Czarist and Soviet power. [...] Our political success in the East depends on the tact and proper organization of our work in Tashkent.”<sup>5</sup> And a powerful way to show the difference between Czarist and Soviet power was through mass-propaganda art.

Art was the most direct form of revolutionary propaganda of Communism in Central Asia. As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the physical imposition of Communist rule in Central Asia was accompanied by politically-driven interference in the realms of aesthetics. However, the Sovietization of art had to be adjusted to local conditions. In a region with no tradition of fine arts, naturally the accent fell on its decorative and applied arts – textiles, carpets, calligraphy, wood carving, ceramics, even jewelry. This reality gave a unique and special color to the way that artistic expression developed in Central Asia under the influence of Communist ideology and politics.

This paper discusses how traditional forms of decorative applied arts were affected by the new political demands. Focusing on silk, cotton cloth and other textiles from the 1920s to the 1970s, the paper looks at how Soviet symbols and political messages were incorporated into traditional art production. (Figure 1) Just as Soviet power expanded into Central Asia, Soviet ideology “invaded” Central Asian textiles. However, the fate of invaders is not always only as conquerors. Sometimes invaders are subverted by the strength of local forces. Sometimes their original aims are modified by circumstances. Sometimes new and old elements combine to make hybrids. All of these things happened to various degrees when Central Asian decorative and applied arts were pressganged into the mission of communicating Soviet ideas and ideology.

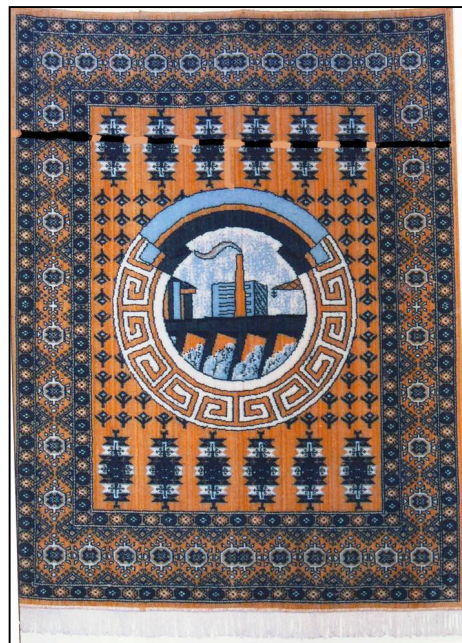


**Figure 1: Ikat. Bukhara, Uzbekistan. 2 m x 1.1 m. 1920s-30s. Private collection.**

<sup>4</sup> TsPA IML [Central Party Archive, Institute of Marxism-Leninism], f.583, op. 1, d. 65, l. 92. The other nine departments were the Kyrgyz, Tatar-Bashkir, Kalmyk, Azerbaijani, Caucasus Mountain People, Turkish, Persian, Arabic and Chinese.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in A. Akramov, K. Avliyakov, *V. I. Lenin, Turkkomissiya i ukreplenie sovetской vlasti v Srednei Azii* [*V. I. Lenin, The Turkkomissiya and the Consolidation of Soviet Power in Central Asia*] (Tashkent, 1991), p. 47

For revolutionaries like Lenin and Lunacharsky, to Sovietize Central Asia meant to modernize it, economically and socially. Consequently, at the most basic level, art needed to be employed to show and celebrate the modern achievements of the worker state (Figure 2.) On the economic front, there were grandiose factories to show off, as well as trains, airplanes, tractors, new kinds of agriculture, power plants and all the modern infrastructure of electrification. On the social front, there was the movement to liberate Muslim women from patriarchy. The Hujum or “Attack” campaign in the late 1920’s encouraged (and occasionally forced) Uzbek women take off their traditional covering – the *paranji*, or the full-body veil – and adopt more Western-style clothing (Figure 3.) One important side-effect of the Hujum, germane to the theme of this paper, was that women’s clothes under the *paranji* became visible for the first time in public. Since the textiles they wore could be seen at large, they became available for use as ideological billboards, to be decorated with patterns and designs that propagandized the successes of Communism.



*Figure 2: Carpet showing a factory above a hydroelectric plant. Wool. 1m x 1.5m. Turkmen, 1930’s. Private Collection.*

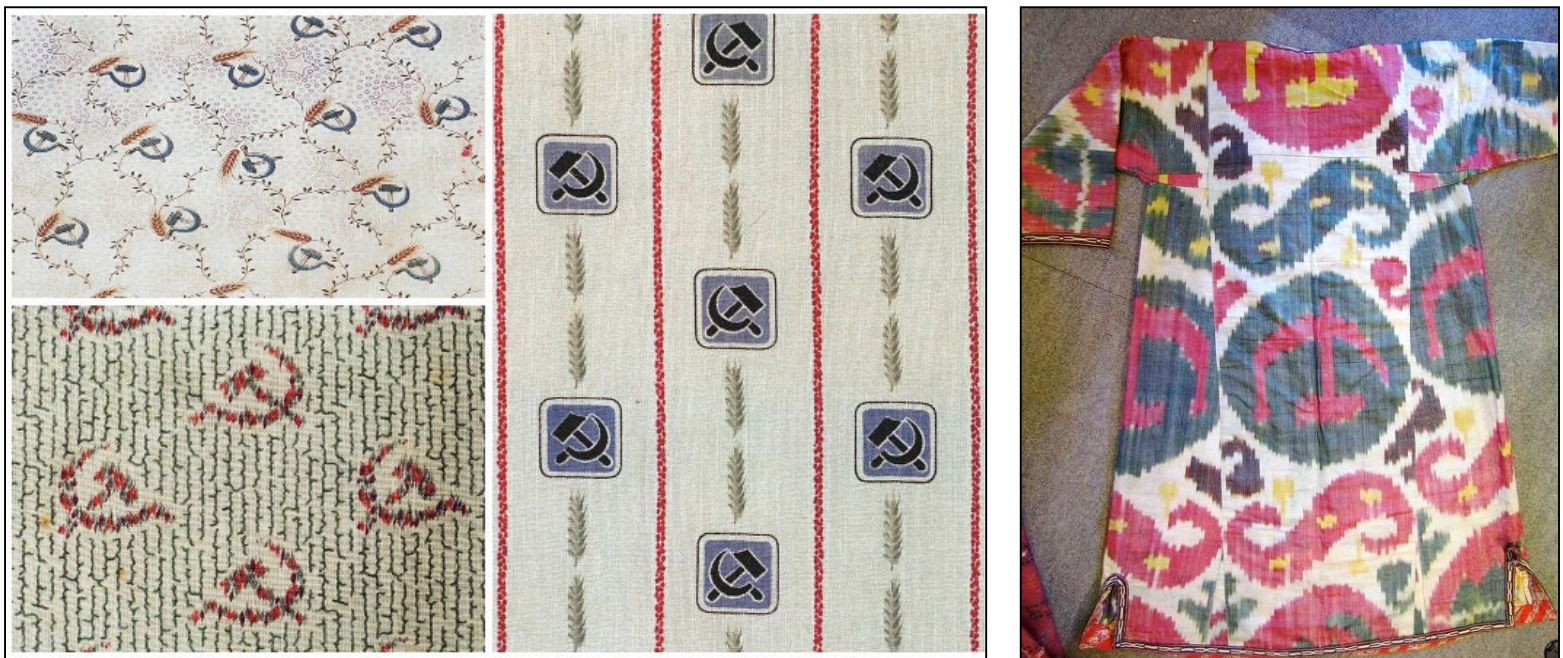


*Figure 3: Mothers Go to School. Uzbekistan, 1930s. Photographer Max Penson.*



To control the message, the government had to control the production. Therefore, the system of arts and crafts production, including textiles, was centralized. In 1920, there were 150,000 artisans registered in Turkestan alone. These included 62,000 textile producers, 24,030 shoemakers, 20,150 weavers, 8,680 tanners and 7,470 blacksmiths.<sup>6</sup> On 16 March 1920, the Turkestan government issued Decree No. 259 by which artisans became state workers. State enterprises and local organs were ordered to give the workers assistance with necessary supplies and means of production. What this meant in practice was that henceforth artisans should receive their materials from the government, and should return their finished products to the government. The process of control had begun.

In line with its revolutionary ideals, Soviet art policy in the 1920s set out to be bold, optimistic, radical and modern. This spirit extended to new outlooks on textile. “Instead of bourgeois, philistine flowers and *putti*,” the newspaper *Izvestia* announced in 1923, “there must be new textile designs, which will beat the international competition, with their daring and with the revolutionary beauty of their ideas.”<sup>7</sup> Soon the hammer and sickle, symbolizing the union of workers and peasants, was appearing not only in fresh designs and combinations (figure 4), but also began to invade traditional Central Asian ikat patterns (figure 5.)



**Figure 4, left: Hammer and sickle patterns. Cotton prints. 1925-28. Artist S. Burylin.**

**Figure 5, right: Chapan. Ikat. Bukhara, Uzbekistan, 1920s-30s. Private collection.**

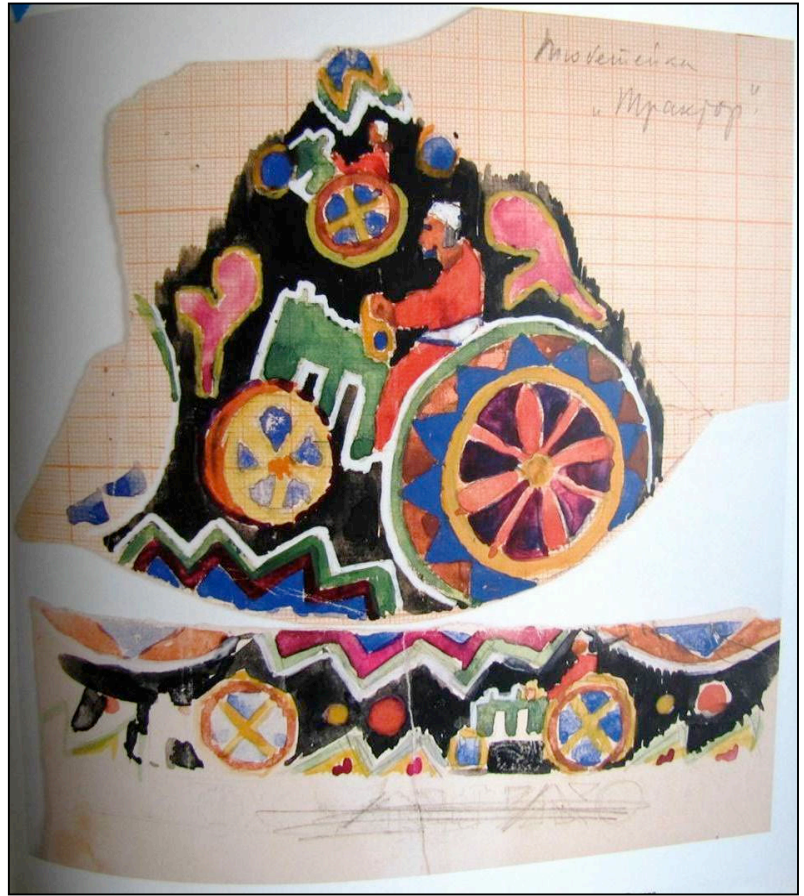
A signature policy of the Soviet state was the reform of agriculture – the expropriation of private holdings and the creation of the collective farms. And the supreme symbol of the collective farms, supposedly ushering in a new era of modern, well-planned agriculture, was the tractor. The tractor developed into a favorite motif in Soviet textile designs, specifically the American Fordson tractor,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> A. Karabanov, “Novie sittsy” [“New Cotton Printed Fabrics”], supplement to *Izvestiya tekstil'noi promyshlennosti* 6 (1923), p. 1.



which was the most popular tractor of the USSR in the 1920s (figure 6.) It was later produced locally in Leningrad as the Fordson-Putilovets tractor. The Fordson-Putilovets appeared on countless Soviet fabrics, posters, paintings and stamps. There even is a design called “Tractor” for an Uzbek skullcap, painted by the famous Russian artist Zinaida Kovalevskaya (figure 7.) Unfortunately, it is unknown whether the skullcap was ever produced.



**Figure 6, left: Tractor pattern. Cotton print. 1930. Artist S. Burylin. State Russian Museum. St. Petersburg.**  
**Figure 7, right: Zinaida Kovalevskaya, skullcap design. 11x20 cm; 5.5x19 cm. Watercolor on paper. Early 1930s. Private collection.**

Meanwhile in Russia the Ivanovo textile factory produced a dedicated series of fabrics for Central Asia called “Turksib.” These celebrated the construction of the Turkestan-Siberia railroad, crossing Kazakhstan, built in the years 1929 to 1932 as part of the first Five-Year Plan. One of the thematic designs created as part of the “Turksib” series was called “Eastern roads,” an elaborate and almost pictorial pattern that combined a caravan of camels and a train engine (figure 8.)

But as the propaganda designs grew more and more elaborate, a counter-reaction set in. By the 1930s, even official channels were expressing misgivings that the ideologues were laying it on too thick, at least where textiles were concerned. In 1933, the newspaper *Pravda* published an article called “Tractor in Front, Combine Harvester Behind” which subjected the latest “revolutionary designs” to withering criticism. It asked whether the artists responsible for them might not secretly be “class



*Figure 8: The Turkestan-Siberia Railroad. Cotton print. Early 1930s. I. Yasinskaya collection.*

enemies, who are attempting with calico and flannelette to make us into laughing-stocks. Nobody has the right to turn you, the honest worker, into a walking picture gallery,” the newspaper said:

Here’s a brand new, brightly colored cotton fabric with pictures of big tractors and big combine harvesters. As you walk down the street, your body is tightly wrapped in a collective farm with an agricultural motif. You meet someone on the street dressed like that – with a tractor in front, combine harvester behind – and you immediately mobilize yourself to go off to the fields and battle for your crops.

And here’s a nice fabric for pajamas. Once again: not some objectless pattern, not just idealistic nonsense, but the whole story of Turksib. A camel caravan wanders over the yellow sand. A herd of sheep shows up black in the background. In the middle, a train steams by. How nice to sleep in such pajamas. You sleep, and a train steams over you. You turn over, and sheep are grazing. You lie on your stomach, and camels march on top of you. You’re lying down but you’re not wasting time – you’re learning about the distant lands which used to be oppressed by czarism. What an educational sleep!”<sup>8</sup>

When even *Pravda* starts mocking Communist propaganda, you know something is wrong. The fact was that the zealous artists behind the textile designs had gone too far. The complaint in *Pravda* was that fabrics had become overloaded with messages to the point of ridicule. But another line of possible criticism was that some of the patterns were so *avant-garde* that they were far ahead of popular taste (figure 9.) In either case, the designs were losing popularity. More to the point, the fabrics were losing

<sup>8</sup> G. Ye. Rylkin, “Vpered i traktor, szadi kombayn” [“Tractor in Front, Combine Harvester Behind”], *Pravda*, 6 October 1933.



buyers, especially in Central Asia. The textile expert N. Sobolev detected the problem already in 1929, when he wrote a review of an exposition entitled “Everyday Soviet Textiles.” This was a display of Russian fabrics intended for export to Eastern nations such as Persia, Afghanistan, Mongolia and Central Asia. “We must take care not to ruin our exports by abandoning the established ‘classic’ designs for the East,” Sobolev wrote. He warned that “revolutionary” fabrics would not sell in Eastern markets if their new look veered too far from traditional expectations: “Eastern customers frequently refuse to buy an item if there is the slightest deviation on the merest fragment of the material from the conventional pattern.”<sup>9</sup>



*Figure 9: Gathering Cotton. Sateen. Early 1930s. Artist M. Nazarevskaya. I. Yasinskaya collection.*

Consequently, in the course of the 1930s there can be observed a return to more conservative textile designs in Central Asia. Soviet motifs did not go away, but there was a more conscious effort to integrate them into traditional patterns. It must be said that some of the resulting combinations were strange and artistically unsuccessful. For example figure 10 shows a Bukhara piece in which a realistic portrait of Stalin has been framed by gold embroidery in a typical plant design that has a long history in Uzbek art. Such a juxtaposition of styles from two very different cultural traditions was always likely to result in kitsch. The same must be said for the many examples of Turkmen carpets which were pressed into service as “portrait carpets” featuring Communist leaders or other high dignitaries (figure 11.) The political requirements of the USSR to portray its leaders on works of decorative and applied art both cheapened the art, and demoralized the artists, whose work was carefully controlled: “Pictures intended

<sup>9</sup> N. N. Sobolev, “Vystavka ‘Bytovoi sovetskii tekstil’” [“The Exhibition ‘Everyday Soviet Textiles,’”], *Izvestiya tekstil’noi promyshlennosti i trgovli* 140 (February 1929), p. 56.



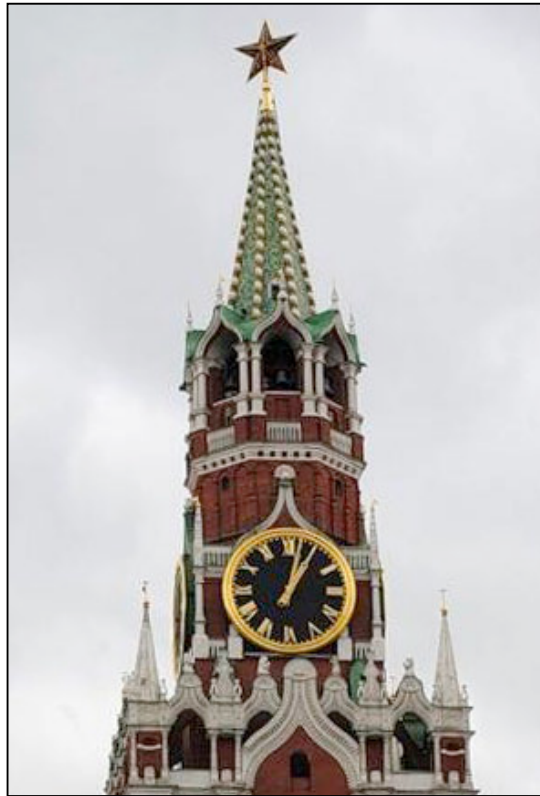
for political agitation underwent thorough censorship, since they often were enlarged copies of official photographs of party and government leaders. The one thing that attracted artists to this routine work was that they were paid half the cost of the commissions. Any attempt at independent or authorial style was a dangerous and profitless business.” No wonder that many Soviet artists lived schizophrenic lives – doing propaganda “for the masses,” while fencing off private spaces where they created “for themselves.”<sup>10</sup>



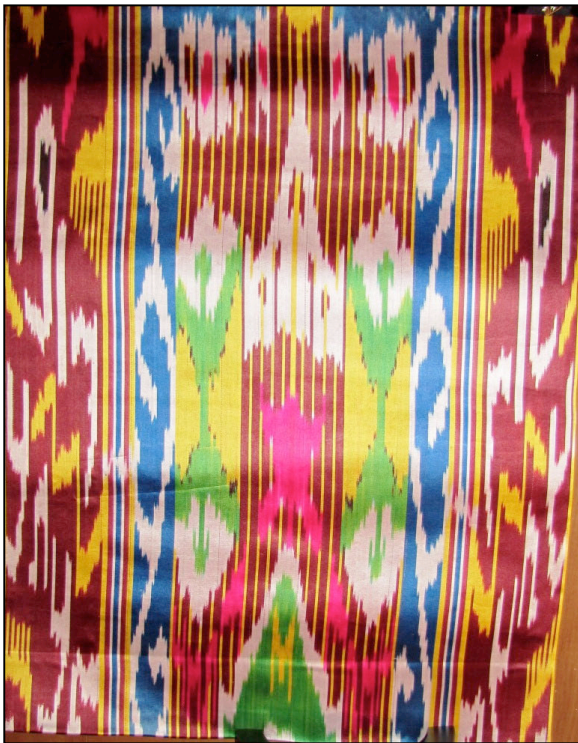
**Figure 10, left: Embroidress. Bukhara. 1950s. Photographer Max Penson.**  
**Figure 11, right: Carpet showing Lenin and Stalin. Turkmen, 1930s. Private collection.**

On the other hand, there were also many instances where Central Asian styles were successfully fused with Soviet symbols in attractive new combinations. One motif whose shape and color suited it well for incorporation in ikat technique was the Moscow Kremlin tower, representing the seat of Soviet power (figure 12.) In figure 13, the red and white tower is flanked by the word *Ulug*, meaning “Great” in Uzbek, and date 1917 (reversed on the right border). The reference is to the Great October Revolution of 1917. In fact, the Kremlin tower can be found across a spectrum of Central Asian textiles. It appeared on dresses (figure 14) and even on women’s pants (figure 15) where the design would not have been seen as they were worn as an undergarment beneath the dress. In Turkmenistan, the Kremlin inspired a unique category of textiles. The Spassky Gate – distinguished by its clock tower and ruby star – decorated a range of ties, which seem to have enjoyed a particular vogue in the 1960s (figure 16.) As far as the author knows these ties were only made in Turkmenistan.

<sup>10</sup> G. A. Yankovskoi, *Iskusstvo, den'gi i politika: khudozhnik v gody pozdnego stalinizma* [Art, Money and Politics: The Artist in the Years of Late Stalinism] (Perm, 2007), p. 167.



*Figure 12: Spassky Tower, Kremlin, Moscow.*

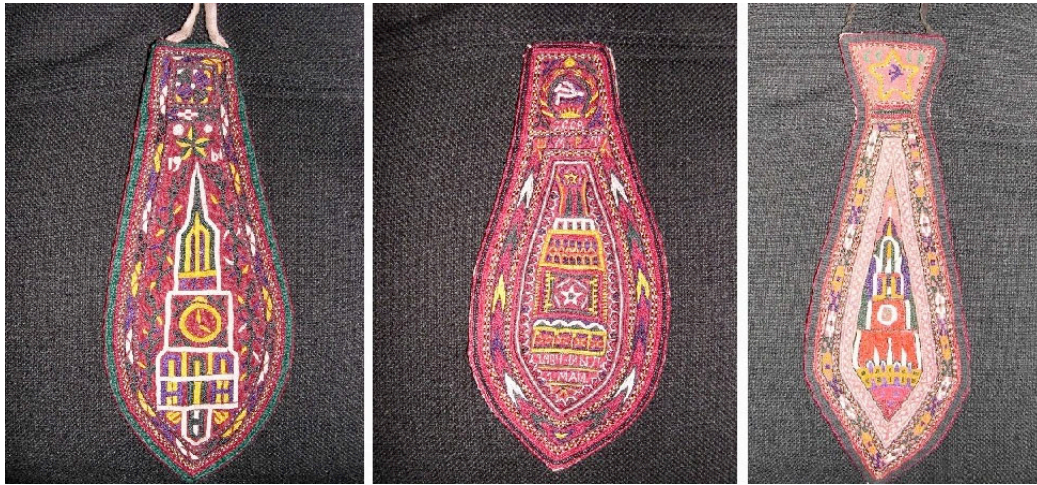


*Figure 13, left: Khanatlas. Uzbekistan. 1970s. Private collection.*

*Figure 14, center: Women's dress. Khanatlas. Marghilan, Uzbekistan. 1970s. Private collection.*

*Figure 15, right: Lozim (women's pants). Khanatlas. Marghilan, Uzbekistan. 1970s. Private collection.*





**Figure 16: Ties. Cotton, silk threads. Turkmen, 1960s. Private collection.**

Thanks to the prominence of the Kremlin in Soviet iconography, the ruby star became a symbol of Communism almost as common and universally recognized as the famous hammer and sickle. It was adopted into Central Asian artistic productions as a popular design element, featured for instance on items of jewelry (figure 17) as readily as textiles. In Uzbekistan it was employed as a central or supporting design element in suzanis, with the letters “USSR” between the vertices to confirm both the physical and symbolic reference to the Kremlin and the guiding stars of Communism (figure 18.) Over time, however, such a widespread and easily reproducible shape as the Kremlin star began to take on a life of its own in Central Asian art. It is not that the star became de-ideologized; rather, it simply lost its primary identification as a symbol charged with Communist propaganda, and was taken over into works of art as an independent decorative item (figure 19.)



**Figure 17: (a, left) Bracelet. Silver. Uzbek, 1930s. (b, right) Gulyaka (brooch). Silver, gilt, glass. Turkmen, 1949. Private collection.**





*Figure 18, left: Suzani. Cotton, silk threads. Samarkand. 1973. Private collection.*

*Figure 19, right: Embroidery. Samarkand. 1970s. Cotton, silk threads. 40 cm x 40 cm. Private collection.*

The ruby star is only one example of how Central Asian artisans re-worked Soviet symbols, using them in new ways without their original political meaning. Instead of being experienced as radical propaganda, Soviet slogans and symbols became part of the everyday vocabulary of design elements used in Central Asian art. Thus the “invaders” were domesticated. For sure, the new designs initially ruptured the structure and balance of traditional ornamental composition. But in the course of decades they entered into those compositions and became a new tradition – not so much focused on the visions of Communist grandeur, which characterized the design ideals of 1920s and 1930s, as reflective of ordinary life in the USSR. This paper concludes with some examples from one of the most interesting and visible forms of Central Asian embroidery art – the skullcap.

A comparison of two skullcaps from Tashkent (figure 20) neatly demonstrates the hybridization of old and new approaches, yielding a fresh and interesting product. The skullcap on the left was executed in traditional style with a classical flowers-and-peacock motif. The skullcap on the right has employed the same age-old template, including the same stitches and an almost identical palette of colors, yet managed to incorporate a hammer and sickle, a waving banner and “USSR” in a manner that fits the traditional garden tone of the piece. The mound in the center has been retained, but with a banner planted in it to replace the peacock of the original. Nevertheless there is still an allusion to the peacock in the stylized sickle, whose dark green color and curved blade is reminiscent of the peacock and its curved neck.



*Figure 20: Men's skullcaps. Tashkent, 1930s. Cotton, silk threads. Private collection.*



The ubiquitous political slogans and signboards in the Soviet Union naturally found their way into decorative and applied arts as well. Embroidered by village women in Central Asia who may have known Russian poorly or not at all, the misspellings and idiosyncratic use of Cyrillic letters have a charm all their own – as in the decision to embroider a fish with the acronym “USR,” where one ‘S’ is missing, (figure 21) or to enhance a bed of red roses with a wish for “Cominisim” [sic] (figure 22.) Occasionally the embroiderer was more ambitious (and more literary), such as the woman who constructed a skullcap with alternating tiers of floral abstractions and Communist slogans (figure 23.) It reads, in Uzbek, “Proletarians of the world, unite! Long live the party of Lenin and Stalin! 25 October 1941.” 25 October was the anniversary of the Russian Revolution (according to the old-style Julian calendar).



*Figure 21, left: Man's skullcap. Marghilan, 1970s. Cotton, silk threads. Private collection.*  
*Figure 22, center: Girl's skullcap. Ferghana Valley, 1980s. Cotton, silk threads. Private collection.*  
*Figure 23, right: Man's skullcap. Tashkent, 1941. Cotton, silk threads. Private collection.*

Citizens of the USSR were proud of their country, and their patriotism was reflected in art no less than in other mediums. On the one hand, state-enforced propaganda was a reality and it would be a mistake to believe that the artistic production celebrating Communism was always genuine. (Indeed, as we have seen above, artists often agreed to political-agitation hack work for the money.) On the other hand, it was be equally wrong to assume that the pride and optimism which Soviet people expressed through their art was always faked. Beside the USSR's victory in World War Two, the event to generate the most general enthusiasm for their country's accomplishments was probably Yuri Gagarin's orbiting the Earth in 1961. When Gagarin's rocket Vostok-One was depicted on an Uzbek skullcap (figure 24) it



*Figure 24: Man's skullcap. Tashkent, 1961. Cotton, silk threads. Private collection.*

reflected the excitement and patriotism in the air at the time. It would be inappropriate to dismiss it as a work of Soviet propaganda (even though Gagarin's spaceflight was certainly used by Soviet politicians to urge the superiority of Communism to capitalism). The spirit of the design is far different from the compositions of tractors, trains and factories from the 1920s and 1930s: devoid of politics, it communicates the spontaneous pride that an ordinary woman in Uzbekistan felt in this achievement of her country.

Finally, the more mundane aspects of Soviet life could also be shown on a skullcap: not a hydroelectric station, not a rocket, but the aspiration of many a Soviet citizen in the late 1940s and 1950s – the latest kind of Soviet car, the “Pobeda,” meaning “Victory” in honor of the conquest of Nazi Germany (figure 25.) Lenin wanted art-as-propaganda to point the way to the utopian horizons of Communism. A skullcap showing a Pobeda automobile represents a more humble dream. But it still embodies the same basic idea that an artistic product can proclaim a vision of a better and happier life.



*Figure 25: Man's skullcap. Tashkent, 1950s. Cotton, silk threads. Private collection.*