



Talgatkyzy Dilnaz

The History of Design in Kazakhstan

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Dilnaz T.

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Kazakhstan is a country where Eastern and Western traditions intertwine, and the architecture of its capital reflects this synthesis. This book explores the evolution of the country's architectural landscape since gaining independence, the influence of national identity on urban planning decisions, and the symbolism of iconic structures. The book combines historical analysis, urban context, and an assessment of these structures' significance for future generations.

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Introduction

The theme of Kazakhstan's history captivated me while working on the project to create a cultural museum. I truly discovered amazing and unique things as I delved into the rich and multi-layered history of this country. Each page of its past is an inexhaustible source of inspiration and wonder.

In this book, I describe the history of design development in Kazakhstan, starting from ancient times up to the present day. Design in our country has always been closely intertwined with its history. Every era, every change in the life of the people influenced the appearance of objects, spaces, and architecture. The history of Kazakhstan is marked by numerous transformations that altered the lives of millions, and as a result, their lifestyles and behaviors changed, which directly impacted the evolution of design.

When you look at ancient yurts, you are struck by their simplicity and yet profound ingenuity – the round shape, perfectly fitting into the vast steppes, was not only practical but also harmonious with the surrounding world. The nomadic lifestyle, filled with constant movement, freedom, and closeness to nature, found its reflection in their dwellings, clothing, and decorations. Every line, every ornament told a story – a story of love and suffering, victories and losses, faith in the future, and hope for a new day.

And when you gaze upon these symbols, you realize: they are not just artifacts left by our ancestors; they are living memories. Memories of how they lived, how they perceived the world, how they found and created beauty even in the harshest conditions.

Today, when looking at modern Kazakhstan with its rapidly developing cities, futuristic skyscrapers, and dynamic lines reaching for the sky, it is impossible not to feel this connection across time. The same aspirations that our ancestors had are evident in the light installations and urban architecture: a yearning for something greater, a desire to leave a mark, to contribute to the endless melody of time.

This connection of generations, culture, and history is etched in every element of the country's design.

Ancient Traditions and Culture

Ancient traditions and culture in Kazakhstan

Exploring the design elements during the Saka and Guna periods

Imagine a time when every object had a story to tell, a purpose that went beyond utility. In the lands of Central Asia during the Saka and Guna periods, craftsmanship was not just a skill – it was an expression of identity, belief, and connection to the world. From the glow of intricately worked gold to the vibrant patterns of handwoven textiles, every creation was a testament to the artistry and spirit of its maker.

The Glow of Metal: Artistry and Symbolism

The Saka and Guna artisans were masters of metal. Picture a skilled craftsman hunched over his tools, meticulously hammering a sheet of gold into a delicate bracelet. Each curve and pattern carried meaning – geometric designs symbolized harmony, while animal motifs told stories of strength and survival. These objects were more than ornaments; they were talismans, connecting the wearer to nature and the divine.

Weapons, too, bore the mark of artistry. A warrior's sword, inlaid with silver and adorned with scenes of mythical beasts, was not only a tool of defense but a representation of his lineage and honor. The glimmer of these objects, unearthed centuries later, continues to captivate us, revealing the sophistication of their makers.

What ties all these crafts together is their deeper purpose. For the Saka and Guna peoples, every item – from jewelry to carpets to carvings – was more than an object. It was a bridge between the earthly and the divine, between the past and the future. Craftsmen were not just creators; they were keepers of tradition, ensuring that their knowledge and values were passed down.

Centuries have passed, but the legacy of these artisans endures. Their creations, unearthed in archaeological sites or preserved in museums, continue to inspire and teach. Modern craftsmen in Central Asia still draw on these ancient techniques and motifs, merging them with contemporary design to create pieces that honor the past while embracing the future. As we look back on this rich heritage, we see that the Saka and Guna periods were not just times of survival – they were eras of profound creativity and connection. Through their craftsmanship, these ancient peoples left us a language that transcends time, speaking to us of their lives, their beliefs, and their enduring spirit.

The art of textiles held a significant place in the lives of the Saka and Huns, serving as both practical items and carriers of cultural meaning. Textile production during these periods was highly sophisticated, reflecting the creativity and craftsmanship of these nomadic peoples. For example, woven fabrics were used not only for clothing but also as wall hangings and coverings for yurts, adding warmth and beauty to their portable homes. Rugs and carpets, crafted with extraordinary skill, were essential for insulation against harsh weather conditions and were also symbols of status and wealth.

The ornaments adorning these textiles were deeply symbolic, often incorporating motifs with cultural and spiritual significance. Patterns featuring animals were especially common. For instance, the depiction of deer or horses symbolized vitality and strength, key traits revered by these nomadic groups. The snow leopard, another popular motif, represented courage and resilience, while birds often symbolized freedom and spiritual connection. These animal motifs reflected the Saka and Huns' close relationship with the natural world, as well as their reliance on animals for survival and mobility.

Floral and plant-based designs also played a prominent role. The use of lotus flowers, for example, symbolized purity and renewal, while vines and leaves represented growth and continuity. These motifs were intricately woven into fabrics to reflect the community's appreciation of nature's cycles and their dependence on its resources.

Geometric patterns were another defining feature of Saka and Hunnic textiles. Shapes such as triangles, diamonds, and interlocking spirals often had protective meanings, warding off evil spirits and bringing harmony to the home. These designs were not arbitrary but followed a consistent set of cultural codes that were passed down through generations. For example, a repeated diamond pattern might signify the unity and balance of the cosmos, while circular motifs could symbolize eternity and interconnectedness.

Historical evidence from archaeological excavations, such as findings in the Pazyryk burial mounds in the Altai Mountains, reveals the exceptional quality and artistry of Saka textiles. These discoveries include intricately woven rugs with rich red and blue dyes, believed to be created using natural pigments derived from plants and minerals. The rugs often featured border designs filled with animals in motion, showcasing the dynamic and vibrant aesthetic of the time.

The textiles of the Saka and Huns were not merely functional or decorative; they served as a vital medium for storytelling and cultural expression. By weaving complex designs, artisans conveyed myths, values, and social hierarchies, embedding layers of meaning into every thread. These creations bridged the practical with the symbolic, leaving a legacy of craftsmanship that continues to inspire admiration and study today.

Wood and stone carving, though not as widespread as textile production, held significant cultural importance for the Saka and Huns. These artistic crafts were used to create both utilitarian and decorative objects, reflecting the deep spiritual, social, and functional needs of these nomadic peoples. The art of carving was more commonly found in the construction of everyday tools, architectural elements, and sacred objects, such as furniture, ritual items, and stone monuments.

Wood carving, in particular, played a vital role in the design and construction of dwellings. The Saka and Huns were known for their portable homes, the yurts (known as "ger" in Mongolia), which were decorated with intricate wooden elements. These elements included carved wooden beams, doorframes, and columns. Some of the carvings featured symbolic animal motifs or geometric patterns, which were believed to provide spiritual protection for the inhabitants. The patterns, often formed from repetitive, angular shapes, held deep meanings, symbolizing protection, strength, and harmony with nature. The presence of carved animals, such as horses, eagles, and stags, indicated the central role these creatures played in the nomads' daily life, both in terms of practical use and symbolic significance. Horses, for example, were not only central to the Huns' mobility but also symbolized freedom, power, and a connection to the divine.

Furthermore, wood carvings were found in household furniture such as chests, stools, and tables. These items were often adorned with carved representations of mythical creatures, such as griffins and dragons, which were believed to have protective qualities. The dragon, for example, symbolized power, strength, and the ability to ward off evil spirits. These carvings were not just ornamental; they played a role in the spiritual and daily lives of the Saka and Huns, integrating the sacred with the mundane.

Stone carving, while less common, was particularly significant in the creation of monumental sculptures and stelae. These large, carved stones were often used to mark important burial sites, commemorate victories, or honor deities and ancestors. One of the most famous examples of Saka and Hunnic stone carving is the Pazyryk burial mounds, where stone stelae were discovered bearing detailed carvings of animals, warriors, and mythical beings. These stelae were used as part of the funerary rituals, possibly to mark the tombs of important individuals or leaders. The detailed

depictions of warriors in battle or on horseback on these stelae emphasize the martial prowess and heroism valued by these cultures.

In addition to these monumental carvings, smaller stone items, such as figurines and amulets, were also crafted. These were often shaped into forms of animals or human figures and were believed to have protective or magical qualities. The Saka and Huns believed that carving these objects imbued them with spiritual power, linking the physical world with the spiritual realm. The ability to carve these objects with such intricate detail was a mark of the artisan's skill and an indication of the deep symbolic relationship between the people and their environment.

While the Saka and Huns were nomadic and their lives were often centered around mobility, their art and craftsmanship reflected a deep connection to the land, the natural world, and the spiritual realm. The wood and stone carvings they left behind provide a window into their worldview, where the natural and the supernatural coexisted, and where art was not only a means of personal expression but also a tool for preserving and communicating cultural values.

Research into the Saka and Hunnic cultures has shown that these carving traditions were likely passed down through generations and were deeply intertwined with other aspects of life, including their religious beliefs and social structures. The animal motifs, in particular, suggest that the Saka and Huns viewed the animal world as both a source of sustenance and a realm of spiritual significance. Through their carvings, they sought to maintain a harmonious relationship with the natural world and its divine forces. These cultural practices not only survived in the art they created but also contributed to the shaping of the nomadic identity that continues to influence the region today.

The craftsmanship of the Saka and Huns was far more than just technical proficiency; it was a creative expression deeply embedded with cultural and spiritual significance. Each object, from jewelry to clothing, from furniture to everyday tools, was not only designed for practical use but was also imbued with symbolic meaning that reflected the beliefs, values, and worldview of these ancient peoples. In this way, craftsmanship became a powerful language through which cultural and spiritual traditions were communicated and passed down through generations.

Jewelry, for example, was not merely an adornment but served as a symbolic marker of status, identity, and spiritual protection. The Saka, in particular, are known for their elaborate gold jewelry, which often featured intricate animal motifs, geometric patterns, and depictions of deities or supernatural creatures. These designs were not only aesthetically pleasing but also carried deeper meanings. Animals, such as horses, stags, and eagles, were often used in jewelry because they symbolized strength, courage, and connection to the divine. For example, horse motifs were particularly significant, as horses were central to the nomadic lifestyle of the Saka and Huns, representing freedom, power, and a bridge between the physical and spiritual realms.

Similarly, clothing was crafted with both practical and symbolic purposes. The materials used in the garments, such as wool, leather, and fur, were chosen for their functional properties, ensuring warmth and durability in the harsh climates of Central Asia. However, the designs and embellishments on these garments also carried symbolic significance. Embroidered patterns, often inspired by nature and animals, were thought to offer protection and strength to the wearer. For example, embroidered belts or cuffs featuring motifs of wolves or bears were believed to bestow the wearer with the animal's strength and courage. In some instances, clothing served to distinguish the wearer's social status, with elaborate designs signaling a person's role in society, whether they were a leader, warrior, or spiritual figure.

The interior elements of their homes also carried deep symbolic meaning. The nomadic lifestyle of the Saka and Huns meant that their homes were portable, often in the form of yurts or tents, but the decorative objects inside these dwellings were carefully crafted with spiritual and cultural significance. Carpets, wall hangings, and wooden furniture often featured symbolic motifs, such as spirals, animals, or plants, each carrying its own meaning. Carpets, in particular, were not just used

for warmth or comfort but were seen as representations of the cosmos. The designs on these textiles mirrored the natural world and the relationship between the physical and spiritual realms, symbolizing protection, fertility, and the cycle of life. These items were also designed to create a harmonious environment, with the patterns serving to ward off evil spirits and attract positive energies.

The creative process behind these objects, whether functional or decorative, was an act of great spiritual significance. The Saka and Huns believed that the act of crafting imbued objects with energy and meaning. This was not simply the making of useful items but a sacred practice that connected the creator to the divine. The artisans who crafted these objects were seen as skilled and wise, capable of channeling the forces of nature and the spiritual realm into their work. By crafting beautiful, meaningful items, they were not only fulfilling a practical need but also honoring the spirits of nature and their ancestors.

Today, the artifacts that have been discovered through archaeological excavations stand as unique testaments to the skill and creativity of these ancient peoples. The objects that have survived – whether they are intricately designed weapons, tools, jewelry, or ceremonial items – serve as windows into the past, offering us glimpses into the culture, beliefs, and daily life of the Saka and Huns. These artifacts demonstrate the sophistication and artistry of these cultures, highlighting how they seamlessly integrated functionality with symbolism.

Through the study of these objects, we can begin to understand the deep connection between art, life, and spirituality that existed among the Saka and Huns. The patterns and symbols they used in their crafts were not arbitrary; they were carefully chosen to reflect and honor the natural world, their gods, and the forces that governed their lives. For example, the motifs of animals that appeared in jewelry and textiles were not only representations of the animals themselves but also embodied the qualities and powers attributed to those creatures. By wearing or using these objects, the people of the Saka and Hunnic cultures were aligning themselves with the power and spirit of nature.

These objects also served as cultural markers, helping to define identity and social roles. Jewelry, clothing, and household items not only conveyed personal beliefs and values but also signified one's place within the social hierarchy. For instance, certain types of jewelry or ceremonial items may have been reserved for elites or leaders, while others were used by common people. The differentiation of these items reflected the social structure and the importance of maintaining social order within these nomadic societies.

In modern times, these artifacts continue to provide us with valuable insights into the rich cultural heritage of the Saka and Huns. By examining their craftsmanship, we not only appreciate the technical skill of these ancient artisans but also gain a deeper understanding of how material culture was intertwined with spiritual life. The survival of these objects offers us an opportunity to connect with the past, allowing us to understand the beliefs, practices, and values of the people who created them.

The masters of the past left an indelible mark on the history of Central Asia. Today, the craftsmanship of these eras continues to inspire modern artists and artisans. Ancient ornaments and techniques blend seamlessly with contemporary design approaches, while the symbolism embedded in these objects still influences today's culture. The craftsmanship of Central Asia's ancestors was more than just an art form – it was an expression of the inner world and a spiritual connection to nature, time, and the cosmos. Through the artifacts crafted during the Saka and Hunnic periods, we gain a deeper understanding of the importance of preserving and transmitting knowledge, skills, and symbolism to future generations. The Saka and Hunnic eras represent crucial stages in the history of Central Asia, profoundly influencing the culture and art of the time. These epochs, spanning the centuries before and at the dawn of the common era, left a lasting imprint on the architecture, art, and design of their time. Despite the millennia that have passed, their influence continues to resonate in the modern art and architecture of the region. It was during these periods that the defining

features of Central Asia's cultural landscape took shape, encompassing the territories of present-day Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and beyond. This enduring heritage stands as a testament to the creativity and spirit of these ancient peoples, inspiring both admiration and a renewed appreciation for the cultural treasures of Central Asia.

The Saka and Gūn peoples made a substantial contribution to the early evolution of design in Kazakhstan. Despite the considerable temporal distance, their influence on culture and art, particularly in design, continues to resonate in contemporary contexts.

A key aspect through which the Saka and Gūn impacted the early stages of design development is their distinctive use of ornamentation. The patterns adorning textiles, carpets, wood, and stone carvings not only embodied a profound connection to the natural and spiritual realms but also conveyed deep symbolic meanings. These motifs, often representing protection, fertility, the forces of nature, and spiritual affiliations, transcended mere aesthetic appeal. They laid the foundation for a broader understanding of art that was imbued with meaning, a concept that continues to influence design practices, including those in Kazakhstan, where such symbolic elements are still evident in both folk craftsmanship and contemporary art.

Moreover, the exceptional craftsmanship and artistry of the Saka and Gūn cultures extended beyond purely functional objects, encompassing items that integrated both utility and aesthetic value. Objects such as jewelry, garments, interior elements, and architectural structures exemplified a harmonious combination of practical function and visual beauty. This principle established the basis for design in the region, where every object, whether functional or decorative, carries both a utilitarian and aesthetic significance. In Kazakhstan, where many of these ancient artistic traditions have been preserved, their influence is visible in the use of local materials and the intricate ornamentation found in contemporary design solutions.

The nomadic lifestyle of the Saka and Gūn, which demanded mobility and adaptability in the construction of dwellings such as yurts, also significantly shaped the development of architectural and interior design principles. Characteristics such as simplicity, functionality, and portability became integral, principles which continue to inform modern Kazakhstani interiors. These values are reflected in contemporary design, where efficient use of space is paramount while maintaining a cultural and traditional connection to the past.

In summary, the Saka and Gūn not only influenced aesthetic and cultural traditions but also provided the foundational principles for the early development of design in Kazakhstan. They demonstrated the potential of art to serve both expressive and practical purposes, to integrate functionality with spirituality, and to maintain an enduring connection to nature and the world around us. Their legacy continues to inform and inspire contemporary design practices in Kazakhstan today.

Design can be found everywhere – in architecture, clothing, interiors, and even in the everyday objects that surround us. It permeates every aspect of our lives, reflecting cultural and spiritual values, as well as the level of technological advancement. However, among all the examples of design that have reached us through the centuries, the most magnificent and truly unique evidence of art that combines beauty and functionality is the Golden Man. This stunning artifact, discovered in Kazakhstan, is not only an important historical legacy but also a vivid example of how design and craftsmanship were integral parts of Saka culture. The Golden Man is not just a costume; it is an entire era frozen in golden details, confirming that design can be deeply symbolic, aesthetically perfect, and functionally rich.

The Golden Man is one of the most significant archaeological artifacts that demonstrates the high craftsmanship and unimaginable beauty of the design during the Saka era. It was discovered in 1969 in Kazakhstan, near the city of Issyk, in a burial mound that belonged to a member of the Saka elite. This unique artifact represents a warrior's costume adorned with golden elements and symbolizes the high culture and artisanal traditions of the Sakas. The Golden Man proved that during the Saka period, there were already complex and sophisticated methods of creating items that

combined not only functionality but also deep aesthetic and symbolic meaning. The costume of the Golden Man is one of the best examples showing how the Saka culture integrated elements of art and craftsmanship into daily life and religious practices. It reflects not only the high level of technical skills of the craftsmen but also the importance of symbolism in the culture of this people. The complexity and beauty of the costume demonstrate that design at that time was not merely a practical tool, but an important part of sacred and cultural rituals.

The costume of the Golden Man, made with gold, silver, gemstones, and other materials, carries profound symbols reflecting the spiritual and cultural world of the Sakas. These elements not only served a practical function but also expressed high social status, strength, and protection. Key elements of the costume include a golden helmet, decorated with images of animals and mythical creatures, which symbolized protection and a connection with the spirits. The cloak, armor adorned with precious stones and metal plates, bestowed grandeur and status upon the wearer, while the weapons and gold jewelry showcased power and authority. The Golden Man became a symbol of the Saka elite, and his costume was likely part of a burial complex designed to demonstrate greatness and might in life and the afterlife.

Today, the Golden Man's costume is housed in the State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Almaty, where it is a source of pride and an integral part of the collection. This artifact not only holds historical significance but also demonstrates the craftsmanship and high-quality design inherent in Saka culture. The costume has become a cultural heritage that continues to inspire contemporary generations of designers, artists, and architects. It illustrates the harmony between aesthetics, functionality, and symbolism, which in turn became the foundation for the development of design, including in Kazakhstan.

The influence of the Golden Man on the development of design extends beyond architectural or decorative elements, touching all aspects of cultural heritage, including the traditions of crafts and adornments. Its significance lies in that it embodies the synthesis of art and craftsmanship, in which not only objects were created but also the values and worldview of the people were expressed. This costume is not just an archaeological find but also a crucial element in studying how design was connected to spiritual practice, social structure, and cultural traditions.

The Golden Man is not only a remarkable testament to the advanced craftsmanship and design of the Saka period but also serves as a powerful symbol of the cultural, spiritual, and social values of ancient Kazakhstan. Through its intricate craftsmanship, aesthetic beauty, and rich symbolism, the Golden Man exemplifies how design was deeply integrated into daily life and religious practices, reflecting the profound connection between art, functionality, and spirituality. The costume not only represents the high artistic achievements of the Sakas but also highlights their worldviews, values, and traditions. It stands as a pivotal symbol of their elite society, an enduring icon of the region's heritage, and a key influence on the development of design in Kazakhstan. In this sense, the Golden Man is not merely an archaeological artifact but a symbol that continues to shape and inspire the cultural and creative landscape of modern Kazakhstan.

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