

## FROM ANCIENT TRADITIONS TO MODERN DESIGN: INTERPRETATION OF SOME ORNAMENTS ON LEATHERCRAFT ITEMS

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**Abstract.** Information about the art and design of Tatar footwear, revealed in different historical records, travel diaries, and descriptions of museum collections, is of great importance. It allows us to assume a strong traditionalism of leather mosaic in the Tatar folk decorative and applied arts. This assumption is also supported by the stylistic uniformity of a large number of decorative motifs, the similarity of principles in composition and colour solutions identified with the comparative analysis of leather mosaic and other traditional types of national applied art. The development of style and technical methods of leather mosaic can be assessed by retrospective comparison with later monuments. Wise selection of innovations has always been a wizard of classical folk art. Folk craftsmen had an amazing intuition and only features suitable for adaptation and standardisation were included in the traditional art set. Due to the historical succession, the art of leather mosaic stepped over the centuries, perfecting and improving its distinctive features.

**Keywords:** Tatar boots, chitek, kəwesh, saure, leather mosaic, Tangre, Umay.

## NUO SENOVĖS TRADICIJOS IKI ŠIUOLAIKINIO DIZAINO: KAI KURIŲ ODINIŲ DIRBINIŲ ORNAMENTŲ INTERPRETACIJA

**Santrauka.** Kazanės raštuota oda užima ypatingą vietą tarp nuostabių įvairių tautų taikomosios dailės kūrinių ir objektų. Raštuota avalynė yra viena iš seniausių tradicinio Kazanės totorių, Volgos bulgarų įpėdinių, amato rūšių. Dėl savo meninių savybių, polichromijos ir kompozicinių ypatumų Kazanės odiniai batai išgarsėjo visame pasaulyje. Rytų tautų menui būdingas augalinis ornamentas, Saulės, dangaus dievo Tanrės (Tangrės) ir Žemės atvaizdai atsispindi odiniuose batuose, pagalvėse, dekoratyvinėse plokštėse, pagamintose iš įvairiaspalvių odos gabalėlių, susiūtų šilko, aukso ir sidabro siūlais. Totorių ičiigo, šlepečių ir kitų gaminių ornamentikos technika, susidedanti iš raštuotų įvairiaspalvės odos gabalėlių siuvinėjimo ir susiuvimo tuo pačiu metu, yra unikali, neturinti analogų pasaulinėje meno praktikoje.

Tolimoje praeityje visose tautose ornamentas atliko ne tik dekoratyvinę funkciją. Naudodami tam tikrus motyvus ir įvairias jų ritmines kompozicijas, senovės meistrai puošė rankdarbius, išreiškė savo pasaulėžiūrą. Deja, atskleisti ornamentų semantiką yra sunkesnė užduotis nei iššifruoti senovinius raštus. Daug

kas lieka neatskleista, nes bėgant amžiams, nors ir pamažu, bet keitėsi raštų modelis, buvo permąstomas motyvų turinys, o svarbiausia, užmiršus pagoniškus tikėjimus, tarp žmonių pamažu ėmė vyrauti ornamento kaip dekoratyvinės priemonės suvokimas. Suprasti primirštą ornamento kalbą, suvokti originalų vaizdinį raštų turinį kai kuriais atvejais padeda kitos folkloro rūšys (poetinė, muzikinė), liaudies papročiai, ritualai, taip pat terminologinė medžiaga. Kai kuriuose liaudiškuose raštų pavadinimuose dar galima aptikti senovinių maginių jų reikšmių, simbolinės reikšmės pėdsakų.

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** totoriški batai, čitekas, kevišas, odinė mozaika, Tangrė, Umai.

Kazan's patterned leather takes a special place among the magnificent works and objects of applied art of different nations. Patterned shoes are one of the ancient traditional crafts of the Kazan Tatars – heirs of the Volga Bulgars. Kazan leather shoes gained world fame due to their artwork qualities, polychrome decorations and complex design solutions. The leather boots (*chitek*) craft and the art of leather mosaic are characterised with its specific ornament originality. The floral ornament, that is typical for the Oriental art, the images of the Sun, the heavenly god Tengri and the Earth are stylised in the adornment of leather shoes, cushions, decorative panels made of coloured leather pieces sewn together with silk, golden and silver threads. Ornamentation technique of Tatar boots (*chitek*), shoes and other items, consisting of simultaneous stitch-embroidering of colourful leather pieces, cut to fit the pattern, is unique and has no analogue in any other craft practice.

Tatar shoes craft has maintained its characteristics up to the present time – polychromatic style, special patching cut and unique stitching seam. Leather mosaic is a modern and more accurate definition for the designing technique of Tatar's traditional craft of ornamented shoes: *chitek*, *bashmak*, *kawesh*. “Kazan ‘stitched-in’ work”, “Tatar seam”, “leather appliqué” are the historical names of the manufacturing technique<sup>1</sup>. All of them have originated in an attempt to explain how the items are being sewn by means of a special stitching from multicoloured pieces of leather that are cut out pieces of pattern, which are an accessory of the national costume as well as a work of folk art at the same time.

The unique samples of shoes stored in the museums are an evidence of the high development of leather production and skills of *chitek*, *bashmak*, *kawesh* makers. The earliest surviving examples of Tatar mosaic shoes date back to the late 18th – early 19th centuries. They are in the collections of the State historical and ethnographic museums of Kazan, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Orenburg, Kasimovo,

1 A. G. Khayrullina-Valieva, 2019, p. 88.

Kaluga, Saransk, Bishkek, Tobolsk, Torzhok, as well as in private collections and funds of foreign museums of Istanbul, Ankara, Dobruja, Bucharest, Offenbach, Paris, Toronto, New York, Boston and others.

The Lithuanian Statute of 1588 indicates one type of their occupation – “tanning leather”, and important sources of the 16th and 17th centuries claim that tanning was a popular and main occupation of the Lithuanian Tatars. In this area, they had a good reputation, skilfully mastered production techniques. Lithuanian Tatars were also engaged in horse breeding. The lucrative source of income for the Lithuanian Tatars was carriage. In this respect, they managed the matter so well that the carriage became almost a monopoly of the Lithuanian Tatars.

As for clothing, the following is written about it in the Acts of the Lithuanian Tatars:

*“It is no different from the clothes of their neighbours, Belarusians and Lithuanians, only women prefer more variegated colours for their dress. Their comparative prosperity is expressed in the fact that they do not use bast shoes, as Belarusians almost entirely do, but always wear boots, and women and girls in shoes with red and yellow heels.”<sup>2</sup>.*

Interesting information can be found in Shimelevich’s notes. His essay contains many valuable observations made during his travels to Tatar villages, as well as information regarding the economic and legal situation of the Lithuanian Tatars:

*“In the past, among the local Tatars, a transport trade was developed, but with the construction of railways, this trade fell. In some localities (for example, in Butrimantsy of the Troksky district), leather production is flourishing among the Lithuanian Tatars. Tatars usually make horse skins and sheepskins. Leather dressing is done in a simple, homemade way and is one of the types of handicraft industry. Difficult material conditions of life forced some Tatars to take up saddlery, blacksmithing and other crafts.”<sup>3</sup>.*

The originality of the traditional costume is the result of the reflection of the ethnic history of the people in it. The national costume is called traditional because some of its elements are characterised by high stability of the material, manufacturing technique, shape and decorative solution. However, they have not remained unchanged for centuries. Let slowly, but some materials are replaced by

2 Акты литовских татар, 1906, с. 66.

3 М. Шимелевич, 1905, с. 63–74.

others, the technique of making things is being improved, their form and decor are changing. The above is confirmed by the example of the Tatar national costume – leather boots (*chitek*) and shoes (*kawesh*).

The traditional leather shoes of the Tatars in the presence of some signs of similarity with the same type of shoes of other peoples, primarily the Turkic and Mongolian peoples, are marked by a bright individuality. The main ethnic feature of Tatar shoes is a unique manufacturing technique. The illusion of the absence of seams connecting individual parts of the shoe is basically associated with the figured cut of the main blanks in the areas of their subsequent connection. The masking of the connecting lines under the contours of ornamental motifs predetermined the appearance of the legend about the seamlessness of Kazan boots.

In the process of the historical development of mosaic footwear, the most significant changes have been made in the shape of the toe and its sole. Sharp and sometimes bent up toes, soft, thin soles are typical for ancient shoes. Over time, the shoemakers began to produce shoes with hard soles, and the toe of the shoe took on a more rounded shape. In the second half of the 19th century, widespread export of goods, increased competition from imported and local industrial products, and the “europeanisation” of the Tatar costume caused not only the disappearance of archaic models of national footwear, but also contributed to the emergence of new models of it.

Women’s boots and high-heeled shoes (*ukchale chitek*, *ukchale bashmaq*) were considered a fashionable novelty of that time. Some of them were also produced without back. Leather shoes made of extra thin and soft leather were called “sleeping shoes”. But even more interesting is their other name – “*voyazherki*”, confirming the purpose of this product for those who like to travel with comfort. Kazan Tatars continue to call shoes made of thin leather “*voyazherka*” – a borrowed word from the French language *voyageur* – “traveller”. The back of ancient *chitek* was cut out of the material that was brought from Central Asia. It was *saur* – rough shagreen<sup>4</sup>. *Saur* is highly durable. Its advantage is not only strength, but also decorativeness. The *saur* has a beautiful and grainy surface, the texture and colour of horse or donkey skin acquired after special processing. The back of shoe made of *saur* is a characteristic detail of the traditional footwear of the eastern peoples, with which the Kazan Tatars have maintained close cultural and economic contacts from time immemorial.

In terms of the colourful design, rare shoes can compete with Kazan shoes, in which both colour and ornament are truly harmoniously combined. The basis

4 A. G. Khayrullina-Valieva, 2011, p. 56–57.

of the traditional ornament of the Tatars is floral and plant motifs, curvilinear geometric shapes. They are also typical for the decor of *saffian (morocco) shoes*. The mosaic ornament is based on three- and two-leaved plants, palmettos, rosettes, heart, wave, zigzag, and spiral motifs. With their help, relatively simple and very complex patterns are created. The circle of favourite patterns includes tulip-shaped, palmetto-shaped, lotus-shaped, horn-shaped, cloud-shaped, heart-shaped, wavy images.

The closest parallels to the ornamental compositions of the leather mosaic can be found in the *tambour embroidery*. The artistic and expressive means of these two traditional types of national art are in many ways similar. For example, the relief framing of the contours of patterns with coloured threads, the inscribing of some ornamental motifs into others, the two-dimensionality of the ornament are equally inherent in embroidery and mosaics. But if we compare the same type of floral-plant motifs in tambour embroidery and leather mosaic, we will see that they are interpreted differently, namely, with a greater degree of conventionality and stylization in the leather mosaic. Tambour is a loose, light embroidery with a needle (or crochet) on fabric, while the mosaic technique on leather is more complicated. In addition, the bulk of the footwear itself dictates a large generalized ornament. Therefore, with a rich choice of floral motifs in the folk ornament, the shoemakers prefer relatively simple and slightly dissected forms. So in the leather mosaic there are no images of a carnation, cornflower, chrysanthemum, the pointed petals of which would be difficult to carve in the skin. But on the other hand, a bluebell flower (*kyngyrau chachak*), a tulip (*lalə chachak*) are presented in many options, because the soft bend of their petals can be expressively depicted in such material as leather. Floral motifs are depicted in the form of buds extended upward or in breadth, and as blossoming flowers.

Before proceeding to the characteristics of individual ornamental compositions, we note that the ornament performed among all peoples in the past not only a decorative function. Using certain motives and their various rhythmic compositions, the ancient masters decorated hand-made products and expressed their worldview. Unfortunately, revealing the semantics of the ornament is a more difficult task than deciphering the ancient records. Much remains unsolved, for over the centuries, though slowly, the pattern of ornaments changed, the content of motives was rethought, and most importantly, with the oblivion of pagan beliefs, the perception of ornament as a decorative means gradually began to prevail among peoples. In some cases, materials from other types of folklore (poetic, musical), folk customs, rituals, and terminological material help to understand the forgotten language of ornament, to comprehend the original figurative content of the patterns.

Mosaic patterns of archaic origin can be roughly divided into two groups. In the first group we will include patterns built using a spiral curl, and in the second – patterns in the creation of which rosettes or semi-rosettes play an active role.

**1. Horn-like compositions.** Some of them were named by the shoemakers: *təkə mōgeze* “ram’s horn”, *əilənmə mōgez* “inverted horn”, *əzek mōgez* “forked horn”, *kechkenə mōgez* “small horn”. In general, for all Turkic peoples, the term “ram’s horns” (*kuchkar* or *təkə*) confirms the connection of the considered ornament with the ancient culture of the Turkic-speaking tribes. The ambiguous archaic content of the horn-like motif has been partially deciphered. Once this motif served as a generic sign, a talisman against evil spirits, the vicissitudes of fate. The horn-shaped motif is obligatory in the decor of old men’s Tatar boots (*chitek*). In our opinion, this is a trace of the ancient tradition of the Turks to include in the ornament of a man’s costume an image that personifies strength and courage. Let’s point out one more shade of its magical meaning for ancestors. But first let us recall the old and widespread custom – to exhibit the horns of animals in barnyards, apiaries, in dwellings. This custom, supposedly contributing to the fertility of livestock, the well-being of the family, has survived to this day in some Tatar villages. This popular belief helps to reveal the emphasis of the ancient benevolent meaning of horn-shaped compositions in a woman’s suit, in particular, in the decor of mosaic shoes, associated with the eternal desire of a woman for family happiness, the happiness of motherhood (see Annexes No. XI–XIV).

The lotus-like ornament is also richly represented in the decor of leather shoes. The patterns located at the junction of the front and bootlegs are called “*tamak avyzy bizəkləre*” – “patterns for the neck”. Heraldic compositions of lotus-like forms called “*sauri bizək*” are a characteristic decoration of the back parts of ancient boots. For some eastern peoples to this day, the lotus remains a sacred flower, a symbol of purity. In the process of historical cultural contacts between peoples, not only the image of an exotic flower, but also its symbolic meaning could penetrate into the ornamental art of the ancestors of the Tatars. Based on the fact that the Tatar woman often wore patterned boots (*chitek*) for the first time on her wedding day, it can be assumed that in ancient times a symbol of purity and innocence of the bride was also distinguished in a wedding boot.

**Wave-like and cloud-like patterns.** The spiral curl is the main rhythmically repeating motif of the “oncoming wave” ribbon composition, which often surrounds the top of the *chitek*. The wavy borders of the *chitek*’s bootlegs have the general name “*chitek itəge*”, which literally means “chitek’s hem”, but this means the upper edge of the chitek’s bootleg. It is known that in pagan cultures wave-like

compositions were the ideogram of water and rain. The worship of water is recorded in the history of all peoples. The Tatar folk tale “Su anasy” which became widely known in the poetic arrangement of G. Tukay, is nothing more than an echo of an ancient cult that deified one of the most important sources of life. Cloud-like compositions in their original content could also have a certain connection with the cult of water.

Concluding a brief overview of the group of traditional mosaic patterns, in the construction of which the spiral plays the main role, we will mention another interesting hypothesis about the origin of this motif. The spirals in the past were stylised images of snakes, and among the Volga Bulgars the sign of a snake meant longevity, wisdom. In the spiral, as well as in the complex mosaic compositions formed with its help, there could once have been a wish for a happy family health and well-being.

2. The second group of traditional patterns of leather mosaic is united by the presence of a **rosette (or semi-rosette)** motif in their composition. “No Sun, no light, no life,” says the Tatar proverb. The cult of the life-giving Sun was once associated with a large circle of ornamental motifs, which included a rosette, as well as a pattern derived from it in the form of a circle with a dot. The image of a circle with a dot, which is usually called a circular or eye ornament, in archaic art was an ideogram of a sown field, i.e. was associated with the cult of the land. In addition, in that, and in another sense, the eye ornament symbolised for the ancestors the beginning of life, immortality. However, its ancient metaphorical meaning has already been lost. For modern masters, this element is notable only for its resemblance to the shape of the eye, therefore it is known among them under the name “*kuz*” (eye).

Numerous compositions of inscribed rosettes in a leather mosaic have a common name *kunych bizage* – “bootleg pattern”, indicating their location on the shoe. Some of them also have their own names. The pattern, the outer contour of which reproduces the shape of a regular circle, and scalloped rosettes prevail among the inscribed motifs, is called “*charyk*”, which literally means “wheel with blades”. The name is given by its resemblance to a clock gear or mill wheel. Patterns lined up with semi-rosettes are mainly used to decorate the front of leather (saffian) shoes. Hence their common name – *bashmak bizaklare* – “patterns for shoes”.

The flowering plant is one of the most common patterns on the Bulgar-Tatar patterned boots. For women’s and children’s boots the dominant pattern was a heart sign – a symbol of virginity and purity. This is one of the most ancient signs found often in folk art. Sometimes this sign was double: two hearts in one. This pattern

meant a sign of love and reciprocity. However, it was indication of something more – by this shoes pattern, it was possible to determine that the owner was not married. In addition, this sign was considered as a symbol of ultimate purity and decency. The worship of deities-guardians of family happiness was expressed also in symbols and ornaments. Ritual folk costumes, that have survived to this day, keep these secret signs. The “heart” motif (*yörək*) is a traditional element of the mosaic ornament. The heart-shaped figure is often found in the patterns of the first and second groups. It can be seen as a figure enclosed or embedded in the field of another more complex pattern, as well as in the form of a frame for one or another ornamental composition. In addition, the heart sign is used independently. Compositions of two or three inscribed hearts look expressive. Note that the heart motif retained its ancient symbolism in folk applied art – the sign of life and love for much longer.

It is difficult to list all the patterns, the important compositional element of which is the rosette or semi-rosette. It is even more difficult to describe all the variety of mosaic patterns. The creation of an integral ornamental composition of leather shoes is not an easy task. Only under the condition of harmonious coherence of the patterns-components with each other, their correspondence to the shape of the cut of the shoe, the beauty of the product arises, which, in undivided fusion with functional expediency, is the main measure of the artistry of applied products. The authors of these products were true masters of their craft, they subtly felt the specifics of the material. They had a sense of proportion, expressed both in the ability not to overload shoes with a full pattern with ornaments, and in the ability to prevent excessive prevalence of the background in semi-patterned shoes. “Shoes with a full pattern”, “semi-patterned shoes” – these terms are taken from the professional vocabulary of the shoemakers. For a long time, Tatar shoemakers have distinguished footwear by the degree of filling with ornaments. *Chitek* boots with a rich ornament, the tops of which are entirely decorated, are called “*tuly bizəkle chitek*”. Boots with a more modest decor are accordingly called “*yartylash bizəkle chitek*”. The works of shoemakers of the last century are high examples of not only ornamental, but colouristic solutions. Unknown authors of these colourful boots were gifted painters. The leather goods created by them are multicoloured, bright, but not variegated, and made with taste.

Multicolour is still a distinctive feature of women’s and children’s shoes, and men’s shoes are usually made of leathers of two or three colours, and a material dyed in no more than three different colours is used for stitching its patterns. For men’s shoes, as a rule, a dark base is selected. Black, dark green, dark brown, dark blue background of male boots masters enlivened with turquoise *saur* inset on the back part of boots. The tradition of cutting the border trim, the lapel of the

tops made of leather of a different colour than the background of the shoes, has been carried on since the time when the tradition had not so much decorative as a magical protective meaning. In any case, the framing of the outer contours of the folk costume with red embroidery and applique goes back to the form of amulet, which was widespread in the past. In the view of ancient people, the colour red, the colour of fire, had a wonderful property to scare away evil spirits that could bring diseases and ailments to a person.

The Tatars have a special fondness for the green colour, so the shoemakers received numerous orders for making leather boots on a green basis. Especially great was the demand for green boots with a thin, curly pattern, embroidered with a golden yellow silk thread. Having examined the ornamental and colour structure of the Tatar national footwear, we would like to once again emphasise its harmonious relationship with other elements of the traditional costume – with a headdress, dress, jewellery. Headdresses, various jewellery and mosaic shoes are a good addition to the relatively modestly decorated Tatar dress.

The first principle in decorating postulated that patterns on the toe, the upper part, and the sole of the boot should be protected from the evil forces of the lower world. While decorating the garments with images of deities, their owner metaphorically secured their power for countering the evil. Another special protective ploy was the masking of the connecting seams. According to ancient peoples' beliefs, evil forces, bringing with them disease and failure, could take possession of a person, penetrating even through a barely noticeable hole (slit) in the clothes<sup>5</sup>. To enhance the protective properties of shoes, the ancient masters sought to create a vision of a continuous, seamless look that had no joins, no beginning and no end. Perhaps this is the reason for the rich ornamentation that transformed this element of clothing into a work of art.

The image of flowering plants has always been a favourite motif in decorating a person's life – his clothes and household items, his house with carved shutters, paintings, embroidered towels and curtains. The desire to inform your world with the code of well-being was the main idea of the masters of the past, who firmly believed in the miraculous power of amulet patterns. Similar ornaments adorned the toe. One of its more archaic varieties is the three-part composition of a pattern, consisting of separate parts, with an upward movement. Conventionally, they can be designated as sprouted seed (the male sign, depicted as an elongated sprout or leaf), flower bud (the female sign) and a full-blooming flower. Above them, a patch of leather of a different colour – sign of the upper world – was sewed in a compulsory wavy line – sign of the heavenly God *Tangre*. The three stages of

5 A. G. Khayrullina-Valieva, 2019, p. 96.

human life – birth, growth and flourishing – and their imagery have very ancient roots. An image of a growing and blooming flower, consisting of a three-part composition, can be seen on ancient women's boots found in the Pazyryk boroughs.

The sign of a bird, as symbol of goddess *Umay*, was one of the most beloved images of folk art. Paired drawings and wings exist in almost all leather boots. Like all other ornaments, it is not accidental. In the folklore of the Turkic peoples this image has a very interesting reflection. Young girls gave goose wings to their chosen one. The figurative expression "I have wings" meant that the woman was married. The phrase "do not break your wings" meant that you should not part with your loved one. When one reached the age when the woman could no longer have children or lost her husband, she said that her wings "fell". Stylized image of childbirth – in the form of a flying bird – is central to the ornament of the upper part of women's boots. This is one of the most beautiful and ancient patterns embroidered on the boots of married women who have children. This sign is found also in cloth ornamentation of other Turkic peoples<sup>6</sup>.

Of interest is also the most archaic and key in value pattern on the heel and a symmetrical ornament at the junction of the upper part of the boot and the toe. The shape of the heel is almost the same in all samples of leather shoes of the Volga Bulgar Tatars. This pattern is considered as a symbol of the horn of plenty – a sign of the abundance and well-being of the tribe. Since ancient times, special attention was paid to the birth of children, because it was abundance of the tribe that guaranteed its future prosperity. This image is common in the embroidery of many nations. In the old embroidery, the progeny of the family – "mothers" – are depicted in the form of a tree. The guardian of women, the goddess of happiness and well-being – *Umay* – is depicted as a two-headed bird sitting on the tree of life. The stylised image is completed with heads bowing in different directions, resembling two horns. This sign is most vividly represented in the embroidery of the Danube Bulgarians, the Chuvash, and in the embroidery of some ethnographic groups of Tatars. The similarity of signs that existed in many nations and with the same meaning is a mark of the antiquity of their presence.

## Conclusion

The antique art of patterned shoes associated the physical qualities of workmanship, beauty, and comfort with the unique metaphorical symbolism of ancient ornaments imbued with carefully guarded secrets. Despite the certain similarity of the Tatar national and ancient Altay shoes, despite the popularity of the art of

6 A. G. Khayrullina-Valieva, 2019, p. 98–99.

mosaic selection of leather, fur, felt in many peoples of the world, the ornamentation technique of Tatar ichigi, consisting simultaneously in a stitch-embroidery of patterned cut pieces of coloured leather, is unique in the world art practice. Therefore, Kazan patterned leather can undoubtedly become a brand of the Republic of Tatarstan. The art of leather mosaic experienced periods of prosperity and decline because it went along with the sophisticated history of the Tatar people. However, even when the Bulgar-Tatar people had the most difficult times, folk artisans did not let fade away the rare skills inherited from their ancestors. They constantly improved, perfected their skills and passed them on to the younger generation.

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