

## Views on National Art in the Turkestan Region at the Beginning of the 20th Century

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### Abstract

This article provides an in-depth exploration of the views on national art in the Turkestan region at the beginning of the 20th century, a period marked by profound cultural transformation and national awakening. Drawing on archival materials, historical documents, and existing scientific literature, the study examines how intellectuals, artists, and educators of the time perceived and defined the concept of national art. The research identifies that these views were shaped by a combination of traditional cultural heritage, Islamic aesthetics, and the growing influence of modernist reform movements. Particular attention is given to the interaction between indigenous artistic values and the modernization processes that emerged under the colonial administration. The article also analyzes the role of art as a tool for preserving national identity and promoting social consciousness during a period of political change. It concludes that early 20th-century Turkestan witnessed a unique synthesis of spiritual tradition and modern creativity, where art became a means of expressing both cultural continuity and aspirations for renewal. These findings contribute to understanding how national art served as a reflection of the intellectual and moral revival that laid the foundation for the cultural development of modern Central Asia.

**Keywords:** 20th Century, Turkestan Region, National Art, Culture, Russian Colony

### 1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, the issue of theater in the Turkestan region became a significant subject of public and intellectual discussion, reflecting the broader cultural and political transformations of the period. During this time, the region experienced a growing interest in national enlightenment, education, and the arts, which were increasingly viewed as powerful instruments for shaping public consciousness [1]. The press, which played a central role in the dissemination of modern ideas, began to devote considerable attention to theatrical activities from brief news reports about performances to analytical and theoretical articles that explored the meaning and social role of theater. The emergence of theatrical culture in Turkestan was not only an artistic phenomenon but also a reflection of the society's search for identity, self-expression, and reform [2].

In the early decades of the century, local intellectuals, reformers, and educators recognized theater as an effective means of moral and educational influence. Performances were used to address pressing social issues, promote enlightenment ideals, and strengthen a

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sense of national unity among the people of Turkestan. Many articles and commentaries in contemporary periodicals emphasized the importance of developing local drama and creating theaters that would reflect the traditions, language, and worldview of the indigenous population [3]. Theatrical art was thus seen as both a cultural necessity and a tool for modernization, capable of bridging the gap between traditional life and the rapidly changing modern world.

However, it is also important to note that the Russian colonial administration perceived theater through a different lens. Officials and cultural policymakers recognized the theater's potential to shape public opinion and sought to use it as a medium for influencing the consciousness and thinking of the local population. In some cases, they encouraged the creation of folk theaters and performances that would align with colonial objectives, presenting loyalty to the empire and moral discipline as desirable social values. This dual character of theater as both a vehicle of national awakening and an instrument of colonial control made it a central arena in the cultural life of early 20th-century Turkestan. The study of these dynamics reveals how theater became a site of dialogue and contestation between local aspirations for cultural revival and the imperial strategies of governance and influence [4].

## 2. Research Method

In particular, in an article by Ya. Polyudov, while discussing the influence of the Russian administration on national culture, he mentions several measures: "the opening of Russian-native schools; the publication of a newspaper in the local language ('Turkiston viloyati gazet'i' is meant here – N.M.); sending local youth to Russia for education; and organizing public readings among the native population". However, he notes that these efforts did not produce the results expected by the administration and therefore proposes the use of local folk theaters. According to him, "these theaters serve as a kind of school, and are attended by people of all ages and both genders".

Providing information about jesters who performed at large fairs and weddings, Ya. Polyudov notes that "each of them has their own special place." He positively evaluates the fact that the performances staged in these shows reveal existing social shortcomings and expresses the opinion that "through this sphere, it is possible to promote European culture and progress," suggesting that local intellectuals should be involved in this endeavor.

A positive attitude toward local actors can also be seen in N.S. Likoshin's article "Local Actors." The author provides information about performances held during Ramadan evenings in the old city of Tashkent. He writes that along with local artists, acrobats, musicians, and imitators also served the public. Furthermore, he highly praises an acting troupe that came to Tashkent from Samarkand, noting that "they were far ahead of their Tashkent colleagues," and attributing this to the troupe leader's willingness to spend generously on costumes and stage decorations.

The critical stage scenes performed by local actors depicting characters such as mirob (water master), eshon (religious figure), and scenes of trade and commerce are evaluated by Likoshin as "a great step in the development of satirical dramatic art, even if these attempts appear simple, since they reflect daily life".

## 3. Results and Discussion

Likoshin's article "Local Music" also holds significant importance in the historiography of cultural studies [5]. In it, he provides information about Uzbek folk musical instruments as well as the participation of Tashkent musicians in the All-Russian Exhibition in Nizhny Novgorod.

He notes that they performed hundreds of melodies, that each musician could play two or three musical instruments, and that each musical motif had a special meaning. The author concludes by suggesting that this field requires separate and detailed research [6].

In general, it would be appropriate to include N. Likoshin among the authors who provided the most extensive information on the history of cultural and social life in Turkestan.

Reflecting on the spiritual life of the local population, the author known as "M.G." expressed his views, stating that "among Russian Muslims, the most progressive are those from the Volga region, followed by the Crimean Tatars and the peoples of the Caucasus." In his opinion, "despite certain reforms in the spiritual life of the Sarts, particularly in primary education, they continue to demonstrate their conservatism (fanaticism), thereby proving themselves to be true and faithful descendants of their ancestors" [7].

Emphasizing the loyalty of the Central Asian local population to their traditions, the author notes that "new ideas penetrate this region with great difficulty." He adds: "Of course, there are progressives among the Sarts," but, he continues, "they consist mainly of young people, and their influence among the general population cannot be considered strong." However, he also acknowledges that "culture and progress are not alien to the Sarts," and that "although innovations are entering slowly, they are indeed taking place." The author concludes that "no matter how strong fanaticism may be, it will eventually have to give way to a new way of life," and notes that "this is a natural process, since they have lived side by side with highly cultured people for more than half a century."

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Turkestani reformers (Jadids) emphasized that the development of national culture depended primarily on the reform of education, the establishment of reading rooms and publishing houses, and the modernization of all branches of the economy. They repeatedly stressed that in order to realize these goals, financial resources were necessary, and that wealthy patrons should allocate a portion of their capital for this purpose. They often cited examples of benefactors from other nations who generously spent their wealth for the benefit of their own people.

At the same time, it was increasingly emphasized that in addition to relying on the generosity of rich patrons, it was necessary to unite young people, engage them in useful activities, and ensure their active participation in cultural and educational events. In this context, the emergence of educational societies was of great importance, as they set themselves the goal of ensuring both the moral and material continuity of the enlightenment movement.

These ideas are clearly reflected in the article "The Muslim Society in Tashkent" by Munavvar Qori Abdurashidkhanov. The article discusses an organization (or union) established in Tashkent at the initiative of a group of wealthy individuals and describes how the young people involved in it spent their free time.

Through the efforts of this organization, the funds collected from wealthy patrons were distributed as donations to the poor and needy, and were used for the support of schools and madrasahs, as well as for the education and upbringing of orphaned children. However, the members of this society were not content with these charitable activities alone they sought new ways to raise money. They purchased a gramophone, played records featuring songs by several singers for the public, and even staged theatrical performances in the summer theater of the city garden. Moreover, as the article notes, "on the eighth day of August, on the occasion of Ramadan, they organized for the first time a 'Night of Entertainment' (Tomosha kechasi) in the Shaykhontohur Garden" [8].

Undoubtedly, this movement can be explained by the fact that it served the progress and benefit of the people and society, and most importantly by the growing trust in the younger generation. It was emphasized that “these performances brought not only material benefit to society but also great spiritual value”.

In his article “How Societies Are Founded”, Munavvar Qori Abdurashidkhanov sought to explain the role and importance of societies in providing both moral and material support to education and culture. According to him, “The duty of a society is to raise funds, increase its membership, and, within the bounds of law, serve the common good through perseverance, zeal, and self-sacrifice. Once the work reaches such a stage, several devoted national workers will gather around the founder, and little by little, they will begin to achieve their goals” [9].

Among the activities of these societies, the organization of theater groups held the foremost place. As he pointed out, “In every part of the Caucasus, charitable societies have been established, and their theater branches have been formed. The most famous of these is the ‘Najot Society’ in Baku, which, through theater, significantly improved the morals of the Caucasus peoples, awakened them from ignorance, and increased their enthusiasm for progress and education.” [10]

Munavvar Qori noted that through theater, Muslims of the Caucasus not only gained financial benefit but also supported the poor and the weak, and even opened schools in villages surrounding the city where hundreds of national children were educated.

In his speech delivered on February 27, 1914, at the official opening of the “Turon” troupe in the “Coliseum” theater in Tashkent, Munavvar Qori addressed the energetic youth and wealthy patrons, urging them “not to view theater merely as play and jest, but as a most instructive scene from the perspective of national and moral development, a useful school for the noble-minded.”

He further emphasized that “the true meaning of theater is ‘a house of enlightenment’ or ‘a school for the wise.’ The theater stage resembles a house surrounded by mirrors on all sides whoever enters it sees his beauty and ugliness, his virtues and faults, and takes heed. Witnessing his own vices and immoral habits on stage, one strives to correct himself” [11].

Similar ideas take a central place in Mahmudhoja Behbudi’s article “What Is Theater?” [12]. In the piece “Theater in Europe,” published in the journal *Oyna*, detailed information was given about the theaters of major Western countries and their numbers. It was noted that hundreds of theaters operated in these countries and that alongside them, the cinematograph was beginning to emerge and develop [13].

The publication and staging of Mahmudhoja Behbudi’s play “Padarkush, or The Fate of an Uneducated Son” in 1913 became a major event in the cultural and educational life of Turkestan. Indeed, this work gave a strong impetus to the creative unity of emerging theater enthusiasts and to the development of their activities in the form of organized troupes.

The play was widely promoted throughout Turkestan and achieved such great success that “so many people came that tickets ran out and there were not enough seats, forcing three to four hundred people to turn back.” It was reported that “tickets were sold out a day or two in advance through the enthusiasm of young people. Some even resold their tickets at double price. From seven o’clock, thousands of people rushed toward the house of enlightenment (the theater)” [14].

An article in the *Turkiston viloyati gazeti* titled “A Cultural Movement Among the Sarts” was dedicated to the performance of *Padarkush*. However, critical responses also appeared. For instance, *Ibrohim To’hiriy*, in his article “The Press and Reform,” wrote that “*Padarkush*

lacks linguistic correctness and purity... its structure is Persianized, and its sentences lack expression" [15].

In response, an article titled "Boast" (Lof) was published in the Oyna journal, arguing that such criticism was unfounded. Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that Padarkush holds an exceptionally important place in the history of Uzbek culture an event that requires no exaggeration to recognize its significance. Following Padarkush, new works appeared in national dramaturgy. Notably, plays such as "The Wedding" (To'y) by Hoji Muin and Nusratilla Qudratilla, "The Unfortunate Bridegroom" (Baxtsiz kuyov) by Abdulla Qodiriy, and Abdulla Avloniy's "Is It Easy to Be a Lawyer?" and "Pinak", as well as "The Oppressed Woman" (Mazluma xotin) by Hoji Muin, became part of theater troupes' repertoires. The plots of these plays were drawn from local life and sought to convey the pains and problems of social reality to the audience.

At this point, it is appropriate to analyze Abdulla Avloniy's article "A Discussion About Theater." This article uses one of the most interesting techniques of journalism—dialogue, or the presentation of a conversation between two people—to explain to the reader what theater is and why it matters.

Of the two interlocutors, "one was a modest cleric, a person aware of worldly affairs, as could be seen from his words and appearance. The other was an uneducated, simple, and somewhat humorous man." Both had attended theatrical performances. Through their dialogue, the author conveys that "theater is a mirror through which every nation observes itself, seeking to correct its flaws and eradicate harmful customs and habits."

He further emphasizes that the funds earned from these performances were "spent for the benefit of the nation, that is, for the needs of charitable societies." Addressing those who regarded theater as "a religious innovation (bid'a)," the author points out that theaters in Kazan, Egypt, and Istanbul were already developing successfully, and that such performances should help the Muslims of Turkestan understand the meaning and essence of the word "nation."

The article lists the full names of the members of the society, explains its purpose and functions, and describes the importance of theater in simple and accessible language.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus, from the perspective of the reformers, the theater was above all regarded as a "school for the wise" or a "house of enlightenment." Like schools and the press, it propagated the ideas of education and knowledge. At the same time, the funds collected through theater served the needs of cultural and educational development. Moreover, theater played an important role in the emergence of modern theatrical art in Turkestan and in the formation of national dramaturgy.

In the national literature of the early 20th century especially in articles published in the press the coverage of cultural and educational processes in Turkestan was directed toward several key areas. These included:

- Raising the social and political awareness of the population;
- Promoting the economic and cultural development of Turkestan;
- Training national specialists for a region that urgently needed skilled, educated, and socially active individuals;
- Meeting this need through modern educational institutions or by sending students abroad for study;

- Reforming educational institutions fundamentally;
- Ensuring the in-depth teaching of natural sciences;
- Educating women as national educators and enlighteners;
- Encouraging the study of multiple languages, especially Russian, as a key to modern education and progress;
- Expanding cultural and educational initiatives.

Why did they choose precisely these directions? The reason lies in the fact that most of the national intellectuals had traveled abroad, observed the level of cultural and educational development in various countries, and, after comparing them, sought to introduce these achievements of progress into Turkestan.

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