

"WOODEN PRODUCTS IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE KARAKALPAKS"

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Annotation: This article explores the significance of wooden household items in the daily lives of the Karakalpak people. Wood has historically played a vital role in Karakalpak culture, being used to create essential household objects such as furniture, kitchen utensils, and traditional tools. The craftsmanship of wooden items reflects the community's artistic heritage, with intricate carvings and patterns often adorning these objects. The study also highlights the sustainable use of natural resources and the traditional techniques passed down through generations. Wooden products not only serve functional purposes but also hold cultural and aesthetic value, showcasing the unique identity of the Karakalpak people.

Key words: Karakalpaks, wooden household items, traditional craftsmanship, wood carving, cultural heritage, sustainable materials, daily life, furniture, kitchen utensils, traditional tools, artistic heritage, natural resources, handmade objects, folk art, decorative patterns.

In the past and until recently, woodworking was one of the leading types of traditional craftsmanship among the Karakalpaks. Carpentry was divided into several specializations: eregenekshi – masters in door production, sandiqshi – chest makers, uyshi – yurt builders, ershi – saddle makers, arbashi – cart makers, and others. To this day, woodcarving masters continue to produce essential goods. However, compared to the past (pre-Soviet period), many professions have disappeared due to the emergence of factory-made goods. Nevertheless, some products remain in demand due to the preservation of traditions and childbirth rituals. One such item is the besik (cradle), made by besikshi craftsmen.

Woodworking masters, known as usta, produced various agricultural tools, the main ones being gunde (plow), mala (harrow), and shygyr (water wheel). They also made carts, qayiq (boats), and other items. Additionally, they crafted wooden objects used in household production, such as parts of weaving looms (kozak, ormek), grinding machines, manual cotton cleaners (shygyrshyk), wooden tableware, and more.

Some carpenters specialized in a wide range of wooden products, from gunde to more complex items requiring fine craftsmanship, such as musical instruments (dutar, kobyz). Many woodworkers were also skilled woodcarvers, decorating yurt doors, the front parts of chests (sabajak, sandyk), and mortars (keli) with artistic carvings. [1]

Masters still work in their workshops, called ustakhana, or at customers' homes, where they carry out their craft. Customers provide the masters with timber materials. Woodworkers traditionally used a lathe (górek), which allowed them to create handmade spinning wheels, weaving shuttles, шығыршық (a device for seed cleaning), cradles, rolling pins, chests, and other items.

Carving patterns on wooden objects was a distinctive feature of the everyday life of the Karakalpaks in the past. Many household items, yurt structures, and even carts were richly decorated with intricate designs. To this day, chests, cradles, kerege (yurt lattice walls), and other items are adorned with patterns during production.

Below is a description of how wooden handicrafts are made. One of the ancient items was the two-wheeled cart called arba. It was made from torangyl wood. Some sources state



Western European Journal of Historical Events and Social Science

Volume 3, Issue 03, March, 2025

<https://westerneuropeanstudies.com/index.php/4>

ISSN (E): 2942-1926

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that the height of certain wheels reached 2.5–3 meters. [2] The Karakalpaks had two types of arba: at-arba and telegen-arba, which have survived to this day with little change. The first was harnessed to a horse, while the second was attached to an ox or donkey.

The telegen-arba differed from the other type in that its wheel rim was made from three bent willow logs and was called төфүн. All components of the arba were assembled without a single nail or metal fastener, not even in the wheels. Because of this, the arba produced a loud creaking sound when in motion. The at-arba, on the other hand, was similar to the Khorezmian cart. Its large wheel was reinforced with a thin iron strip, and nails were used instead of bindings, ensuring durability. The at-arba's rim did not bend because it was composed of nine interlocking elements, secured by a nail. The rest of the cart was supported by the wheel frame, and the vehicle was slightly elevated using beams. The front part, altaqta, was shaped like a driver's seat (oblyuchok), positioned higher than the horses. The (oblyuchok) consisted of four support beams and was decorated with patterns. [3]

When making an arba, local materials such as willow (tal), elm (karaman), apricot wood (yerik), and Russian olive tree (zhiyde) were used. Different parts of the arba were crafted from specific types of wood. For example, some parts—gupshek and kiyda—were made from karaman or torangyl wood (gupshek was boiled in water for a day). The arys, altaqta, and wheels were made from aktal. The wheels were crafted from bent wooden arcs (togyn), which were smoked in special furnaces. The wheel spokes (kegey) were made from aktal, karatal, and other woods. Each part of the arba was prepared separately, and then the master would assemble them. It took about 30–35 working days to make a single arba. [4]

Nowadays, carts are still made from wooden materials, except for the wheels. Instead of traditional wooden wheels, modern car or airplane tires are used.

Saddle makers, known as "ershi," made saddles for horses and donkeys. The saddles were crafted from aktal (white willow) and kegeiterek (poplar). The materials were usually sourced by the master himself, though sometimes the customer provided them. The saddle maker had special equipment, including the so-called at arka kelip (wooden molds shaped like a horse's back) in different sizes.[5]

First, the craftsman prepared and processed the main parts of the saddle, then assembled and glued them together using sturgeon glue. Once the saddle tree was ready, its individual parts were wrapped with rawhide leather straps. After that, the surface was smoothed with a knife and finally covered with leather, usually from a camel or a calf. Sometimes, the craftsman would decorate the saddle's headpiece with bone inlays.

According to reports, saddles are still made today, but they differ from the traditional ones, as specialized saddle makers no longer exist as they did in the past. Some villagers who own donkeys and horses make saddles themselves, mostly using leather and hides.

Karakalpak woodworkers who made the frames of yurts were called uyshi. The yurt frame of the Karakalpaks, like those of other Central Asian peoples, consists of lattice collapsible walls (kerege), made up of individual segments (kanat), followed by dome rods (uyk), the upper ring (shangarak), and the yurt door (ergenek).

In the past (and even today), Karakalpak uyshi craftsmen made yurts of various sizes. The size of a yurt was typically determined by the number of kanat (segments). During the production of a wooden yurt frame, uyshi precisely calculated the proportions of all its parts. Experienced uyshi could determine how many dome rods were needed for a given number of



Western European Journal of Historical Events and Social Science

Volume 3, Issue 03, March, 2025

<https://westerneuropeanstudies.com/index.php/4>

ISSN (E): 2942-1926

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wall segments and what their length should be. They also knew the exact height of the lattice walls, the dimensions of the ring, and the number of holes required in it for the dome rods.[6]

One of the most common yurt components was the ergenek—the yurt door. These doors were always double-leaved, with each leaf measuring between 125 and 140 cm in height and between 42 and 48 cm in width, depending on the size of the yurt frame. The leaves were inserted into a door frame consisting of an upper and lower lintel (manglaisha), shabaksha, tabaldyryk, and vertical supports (tayanish). At both ends of the lintels, there were two holes each, designed for the ends of the door frame supports and the side posts. In the lower lintel, the holes for the post ends were not drilled all the way through; instead, the rounded base of the post could rotate freely in a recess.

According to archival materials from Central Asia, the door leaves consisted of a frame and the panels fitted within it. The frame was made of sturdy, round-section vertical posts: zhaklau (the outer side posts) and tulga (the central post). The plank connecting them was called manzhara, ortalyk takta, balashyn, or gebze. There were no regional or clan-based differences in these terms—masters used different but always logically appropriate names for the same parts. The panels inserted into the grooves of the posts and planks were called orta takhta, koz, ulken takhta, and ulken koz. The upper and lower planks were secured to the posts with wooden pegs, which were hammered through holes drilled in the posts and planks.

The panels (panels) are elongated horizontal or square rectangles, measuring between 35 and 41 cm in length and between 17 and 30 cm in height. They are made from a single, or rarely two, well-fitted planks up to one centimeter thick. The panels are always recessed relative to the front plane of the planks by 1.5–2 cm. The planks, in turn, are recessed relative to the posts. This gives the door a certain depth, creating a decorative effect. Additionally, this design protects the surfaces of the panels and planks from potential damage during transportation.

Each leaf of the door contains three to five panels of approximately the same size, though the outermost ones are sometimes smaller. The connecting planks are often arranged in pairs with a small gap between them, into which a narrow panel called kishkene koz or decorative balusters (garrek) is inserted.

The craftsmen skilfully integrated carved ornaments with the shape of the decorated objects. When arranging the ornamental design, they took into account the practical use of the item. The side posts of the ergenek doors were not decorated with carvings because they were prone to damage during transportation and daily use. The panels usually had patterns on only one side—the exterior. Carving on both sides would have negatively affected the panels' strength. In the rare cases where a carved pattern was applied to both sides of the door, the outer side had deep carvings, while the inner side featured shallow incisions.

The inner-facing long side of the upper lintel (manglaysha) was decorated with carvings inside the yurt. Occasionally, flat, decorative wooden plaques were mounted on top, resembling the shape of a chest ornament (haikel), a musical instrument (kobyz), or other traditional designs.[7]

Another wooden household item was the sabayak—a low stand with four legs. It was used to store daily food supplies such as flour, grains, salt, and dastarkhan (a cloth or tray with bread). Some sabayak had a bottom shelf for storing small kitchenware. The sabayak was placed in the household section of the yurt, to the right of the entrance. Three types of sabayak are known:

1. A simple frame with a carved decorative pattern on the front panel.
2. The front panel of the frame contains recessed decorative panels (panels).
3. A sabayak with a shelf at the level of the lower frame plank, with the back and sides enclosed. In another version, only the front is enclosed with panels, while small kitchenware is inserted and removed from the side. Sometimes, instead of panels, decorative balusters (kerege koz) are used. There are also sabayaks with a single carved panel (birkos sabayak). It is believed that sabajak meant "a structure for wooden dishes" (sabat—woven basket + ayak—dish + posuda—wooden dish). [8]

Another essential household item and the main symbol of a bride's dowry was the sandyk (chest). The word sandyk originates from the ancient Turkic word sandyk. [9] The sandyk consists of four posts (called tuyak, syyrak, tulga), horizontal and vertical connecting planks (zhaklau, shabaksha). The sides, back, top, and bottom of the sandyk are enclosed with fitted wooden panels. The front side contains one to three rows of slots for panels, with three slots in each row. The sandyk is up to 80 cm in height, up to 130 cm in length, and 30–40 cm in depth.

Sometimes, carved panels are replaced with a solid lattice. A sandyk from the Kegeyli district features plant-patterned carvings on the posts, vertical and horizontal planks, and the solid lower board. The upper row is given the most decorative emphasis, consisting of three different square compartments with tall, vertical, ornamental balusters. The lower row is also decorated with balusters, but they are three times shorter and divided in the middle by a rectangular plank with a smooth surface.

At the front, along the upper edge of the sandyk, there is a turned, semi-circular molding. This molding extends along the side edges, gradually narrowing. Some sandyks taper towards the top, giving them a monumental appearance. Possibly for the same effect, a board called tomenge takhta is added to the lower connecting plank, remaining flush with the front plane and featuring a semi-circular decorative cutout in the center.

The decorative design of the sandyk often includes inlays, with geometric divisions of the surface being the preferred style. A soft storage bag called karshyn, with an ornate pile fabric front, is placed on top of the sandyk, followed by a neatly stacked pile of blankets and pillows. This justifies the massive and sometimes monumental appearance of the front panel, as it aligns with its function.

At the same time, the sandyk served as a storage unit, often limited to the upper row of panels, though some had two or even three tiers. The right panel functioned as a sliding door, moving to the right. In two- and three-shelf sandyks, each tier had its own door, often positioned in the center. In such cases, the door was double-leafed, opening outward and secured with two hinges—this design was particularly common in sandyks with lattice-style panels.

Nowadays, sandyks are still made from wooden planks but in various sizes and shapes, mostly with low legs. Sometimes, the front panel is covered with a metal sheet decorated with colorful patterns, while in other cases, the wood is simply painted, featuring modern designs with carved ornaments.

Carved patterns are also applied to the back side of the astakhta—a small table used for rolling out dough. The round astakhta consists of four wooden planks. On the underside, between the legs, there is a large ornamental composition. At the center, on either side of the central leg, is a pair of kosmuyiz (horn-shaped motifs). Similar horn-like figures are positioned



Western European Journal of Historical Events and Social Science

Volume 3, Issue 03, March, 2025

<https://westerneuropeanstudies.com/index.php/4>

ISSN (E): 2942-1926

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along the vertical and horizontal sides. The composition is completed with a double ribbon featuring a dotted pattern inside and curved arches on one side.

The ornamentation of Karakalpak wood carving can be divided into several groups: geometric, floral, zoomorphic, and object-based patterns.

Geometric ornamentation consists of straight, broken, and wavy lines, spirals, rhombuses, rosettes, circles and semicircles, hexagons, octagons, almond-shaped figures, crosses, triangles, and hatching. Geometric patterns are often combined with zoomorphic and floral motifs.

Floral ornamentation includes depictions of iris and tulip flowers, four-, five-, and multi-petaled flower corollas, shoots, buds, leaves, and aquatic plants. I.V. Savitsky classifies Karakalpak floral ornamentation into two groups. According to him, one group emerged as a reworking of old traditional floral compositions or later Khivan variations. The second group resulted from the transformation of geometric and zoomorphic elements into floral patterns.

The stylized depiction of ram's horns constitutes the primary repertoire of zoomorphic patterns in Karakalpak wood carving. In addition, in some ornamental motifs, I.V. Savitsky identifies stylized representations of bull horns or a bull's head with horns, branched deer antlers, fish, bats, and turtles.

Depictions of objects are relatively rare. Simple carvings in the spaces between ornamental compositions sometimes feature individual household items, tools, or jewellery. However, these elements are generally not integrated into the overall ornamental design.

One of the most common geometric figures in Karakalpak wood carving is the rosette. Rosettes are often inscribed within a circle or within several concentric circles of increasing size. The space between them is filled in various ways: with a star-like band, broken lines, notches, triangles, or hatching. Some rosettes feature radial wavy rays, cross-like figures, horn-shaped, or trefoil-shaped endings. A particularly interesting composition is the whirlpool rosette, which appears without additional elements.

The construction of ornamental motifs in wood carving is highly diverse. On door panels, compositions are built along vertical, horizontal, or diagonal axes of symmetry. Some designs involve repeated elements along vertical or horizontal axes, grid-like structures, or even deliberate deviations from these patterns.

A distinct group of compositions features diagonal dominance. These designs divide the space into triangles filled with intricate ornamentation. In some cases, the diagonal composition is emphasized by the arrangement of ornamented masses. The second variation is more subtle, hidden from the casual observer but appearing richer and more cohesive in decoration.

In compositions based on horizontal or vertical repetition, elements are combined in different ways. The simplest approach is to link the elements through a unified rhythm, filling the spaces between them with connecting shapes. Four large elements may be centered around a smaller square or another shape, which is also repeated between the larger elements. This arrangement gives a sense of completeness within a single panel while allowing for horizontal and vertical expansion of the design.

Some elements are particularly well-suited for horizontal friezes and could be effectively used in modern decorative design.



Karakalpak Woodcarving: Traditions and Artistic Features

Ornamental Compositions

The centric compositions in Karakalpak woodcarving exhibit a wide variety of designs, including cross-shaped and star-shaped figures, medallions, and rosettes. The central cross-shaped figure and its additional elements are formed from sprouting leaves, buds, or trefoils. This type of composition serves as the basis for many decorative solutions and exists in multiple variations.

In addition to cross-shaped patterns, plant motifs also create grid-like, radial, and vertically oriented compositions. While geometric figures are predominant in the decoration of chests (sandyq) and stands (sabayaq), they are also found on door panels (panels).

Zoomorphic elements in compositions are usually simple, likely to emphasize their symbolic significance, as they once functioned as protective charms or totemic signs. In some cases, the ornamental composition based on paired horns becomes more prominent and monumental, occupying the entire surface of the panel. The completeness of such compositions is often highlighted by a frame of double lines with triangular divisions or corner triangular shapes.

Conclusions

Art historians identify several key features of Karakalpak woodcarving:

1. Connection to Lifestyle and Economic Activities

Karakalpak woodcarving is closely linked to the semi-nomadic way of life, which determines both the range of carved items and the nature of their artistic treatment, ornamentation, and structural design.

2. Ethnocultural Influences

Karakalpak woodcarving reflects influences from both the steppe pastoralist culture (carved yurt doors, wooden furniture, household items) and the sedentary agricultural tradition (carved architectural columns similar to those of Khiva).

3. Ancient Traditions and Symbolism

The use of inlays with bone and cloth, as well as archaic patterns such as paired spirals, horns, zigzags, palmettes, and leafy stems, demonstrates the centuries-old tradition of woodcarving among the Karakalpak people.

4. Modern Applications

The traditions of Karakalpak woodcarving can be actively incorporated into contemporary decorative arts, enriching them with unique ornamental designs.

Thus, Karakalpak woodcarving masters used all available tools and techniques. The construction of yurts, in particular, was a highly labor-intensive process. However, due to the scope and limitations of this work, we were unable to cover this aspect in detail.

The list of wooden items presented here is also not exhaustive, as many of them have not survived to the present day. Nevertheless, the traditions of Karakalpak woodcarving continue to thrive: even today, craftsmen create carved items, preserving cultural heritage and emphasizing its significance.

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Western European Journal of Historical Events and Social Science

Volume 3, Issue 03, March, 2025

<https://westerneuropeanstudies.com/index.php/4>

ISSN (E): 2942-1926

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