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Kazakh Carpets: Artistic Heritage and Cultural Memory

Abstract. This article examines the artistic and cultural significance of the Kazakh carpet in the traditional society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The study aims to determine how the carpet's materials, weaving techniques, compositional structure, ornaments, colour harmony, and context of use shaped its artistic meaning. The sources include historical documents, travellers' accounts, materials related to Kazakh customary law, examples of oral literature, and published descriptions of carpets held in museum collections in Kazakhstan. Kazakh carpets were analysed using formal-stylistic, comparative-typological, semantic, and historical source-analysis methods. Particular attention was paid to the structure of the central field and borders, the arrangement of ornaments, the repetition of geometric and zoomorphic motifs, and the artistic functions of red, yellow, green, and dark colours. The weaving characteristics of pile and flatwoven carpets were also considered. The findings demonstrate that the Kazakh carpet was not merely a household object or a work of decorative art. As an important part of a bride's trousseau, it reflected the social standing of her family; it was also used as a valuable object in gift exchange and customary compensation practices and functioned as a symbol of prestige at ceremonial gatherings. The carpet embodied women's collective labour, craftsmanship, and artistic experience. It therefore served as an artistic heritage object that preserved the cultural memory of the family, lineage, and community. The scientific novelty of the study lies in interpreting the Kazakh carpet not simply as a collection of ornaments but as an integral work of art in which artistic composition, weaving technology, social function, and cultural memory are closely interconnected.

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Keywords: Kazakh carpet, decorative and applied art, artistic composition, cultural memory.

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Қазақ кілемі: көркем мұра және мәдени жады

Аңдатпа. Мақалада қазақ кілемінің XVIII–XIX ғасырлардағы дәстүрлі қоғамдағы көркемдік және мәдени маңызы зерттелді. Зерттеудің мақсаты – кілемнің материалы, тоқу әдісі, композициялық құрылысы, ою-өрнектері, түс үйлесімі мен қолданылу ортасы оның көркемдік мазмұнын қалай қалыптастырғанын анықтау. Зерттеу барысында тарихи құжаттар, саяхатшылардың жазбалары, қазақтың әдет-ғұрып құқығына қатысты деректер, ауыз әдебиеті үлгілері және Қазақстан музейлеріндегі кілемдер туралы жарияланған материалдар пайдаланылды. Қазақ кілемдері формалық-стильдік, салыстырмалы-типологиялық, семантикалық және тарихи-деректанулық әдістер арқылы талданды. Кілемнің орталық алаңы мен жиектерінің құрылымына, ою-өрнектердің орналасу тәртібіне, геометриялық және зооморфтік

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сарындардың қайталануына, сондай-ақ қызыл, сары, жасыл және күңгірт түстердің көркемдік қызметіне назар аударылды. Сонымен бірге түкті және тақыр кілемдердің тоқылу ерекшеліктері қарастырылды. Зерттеу нәтижесінде қазақ кілемінің тек тұрмыстық бұйым немесе сәндік өнер туындысы болмағаны анықталды. Ол қыз жасауының маңызды бөлігі ретінде отбасының әлеуметтік жағдайын танытқан, сый алмасу мен дәстүрлі құқықтық өтем кезінде құнды зат ретінде қолданылған және салтанатты жиындарда беделдің белгісіне айналған. Кілемнің жасалуына әйелдердің ұжымдық еңбегі, шеберлігі мен көркемдік тәжірибесі жинақталған. Сондықтан ол отбасы, әулет және қауым туралы мәдени жадты сақтайтын көркем мұра қызметін атқарған. Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы қазақ кілемін ою-өрнектер жиынтығы ретінде ғана емес, оның көркемдік құрылысы, тоқу технологиясы, әлеуметтік қызметі және мәдени жады өзара байланысқан тұтас өнер туындысы ретінде қарастырудан көрінеді.

Алғыс: Автор осы зерттеуді жүзеге асыруға негіз болған жарияланған каталогтар мен ғылыми еңбектерді ұсынған музейлер мен зерттеушілерге алғысын білдіреді. Зерттеу сыртқы қаржыландырусыз орындалды.

Кілт сөздер: қазақ кілемі, сәндік-қолданбалы өнер, көркем композиция, мәдени жады.

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Казахский ковёр: художественное наследие и культурная память

Аннотация. В статье исследуется художественное и культурное значение казахского ковра в традиционном обществе XVIII–XIX веков. Цель исследования – определить, каким образом материал, техника ткачества, композиционное построение, орнаментальные мотивы, цветовая гамма и сфера использования ковра формировали его художественное содержание. В ходе исследования были использованы исторические документы, путевые записки путешественников, источники по казахскому обычному праву, образцы устного народного творчества, а также опубликованные материалы о коврах, хранящихся в музеях Казахстана. Казахские ковры проанализированы с применением формально-стилистического, сравнительно-типологического, семантического и историко-источниковедческого методов. Особое внимание уделено структуре центрального поля и каймы ковра, принципам расположения орнаментов, повторяемости геометрических и зооморфных мотивов, а также художественной функции красного, жёлтого, зелёного и тёмных цветов. Кроме того, рассмотрены особенности изготовления ворсовых и безворсовых ковров. Результаты исследования показали, что казахский ковёр являлся не только предметом быта или произведением декоративно-прикладного искусства. Будучи важной частью приданого невесты, он отражал социальное положение семьи, использовался как ценная вещь при обмене дарами и выплате возмещения в рамках традиционного права, а также служил символом престижа во время торжественных собраний. В создании ковра воплощались коллективный труд женщин, их мастерство и художественный опыт. Поэтому ковёр выступал художественным наследием, сохраняющим культурную память о семье, роде и общине. Научная новизна исследования заключается в рассмотрении казахского ковра не только как совокупности орнаментальных мотивов, но и как целостного произведения искусства, в котором взаимосвязаны художественное построение, технология ткачества, социальные функции и культурная память.

Благодарность. Автор выражает благодарность музеям и исследователям, чьи опубликованные каталоги и научные труды послужили источниковой основой для данного исследования. Исследование выполнено без внешнего финансирования.

Ключевые слова: казахский ковёр, декоративно-прикладное искусство, художественная композиция, культурная память.

1. Introduction

The study of Kazakh material culture has long been shaped by ethnographic description and the classification of craft techniques. Felt objects, leatherwork, jewellery and woven textiles were commonly discussed in terms of use, regional distribution and ornament. This scholarship documented an endangered visual tradition, but it also encouraged a division between the object's form and its social biography. For art history, the key problem is not simply what a carpet was used for, but how weaving structure, proportion, rhythm, colour and motif transformed wool into an image-bearing surface. The carpet should therefore be read as a designed visual whole: a central field framed by borders, organized through repetition and contrast, and activated by the conditions in which it was displayed. Material-culture theory remains useful here because artistic value was produced not only in making but also in circulation, ceremony and recollection (Mauss, 1925; Appadurai, 1986).

Kazakh carpets include pile and flatwoven forms produced from wool and, in some examples, cotton threads. They insulated and articulated the interior of the dwelling, covered floors, hung on walls and accompanied movement between seasonal settlements (Alimbay, 2012a: 302). Yet these functions were also visual. A carpet created a bounded ornamental plane within the flexible architecture of the yurt; its scale, dense surface and chromatic contrasts reorganized interior space. Pile structure intensified colour and tactile depth, while flatweave emphasized linear rhythm and the clarity of stepped geometric forms. The main centres of production were associated with the Syr Darya, Southern Kazakhstan and Jetisu, where settled and semi-settled environments supported specialist weaving practices (Zhanibekov, 2011: 31).

The artistic language of these textiles was inseparable from their movement through society. A technically accomplished and visually coherent carpet could form part of a bride's trousseau, enter ceremonial gift exchange, accompany prizes at feasts and horse races, or appear in compensation practices. Such contexts gave the ornament visibility and made quality publicly legible. Composition and colour therefore did more than decorate a useful textile: they communicated the household's labour resources, the weaver's mastery and the prestige of those who owned, displayed or presented the object.

The relevance of this study lies in bringing the analysis of visual form into closer relation with production and social use. Technical classification and motif cataloguing document important features, but do not by themselves explain how artistic qualities acquired meaning in exchange and display. Combining formal-stylistic analysis, source criticism and ethnohistorical reconstruction offers three advantages: it relates texture and technique to compositional choices; distinguishes documented uses from symbolic interpretation; and explains how the same object could acquire different meanings in domestic, ceremonial and legal settings. The methodological contribution lies in this integration, rather than in the invention of new individual methods. It also provides a basis for museum descriptions that connect formal features with provenance and contexts of use.

Cultural memory is understood here as the transmission of shared knowledge, values and obligations through material forms and repeated practices. This perspective helps explain how carpets connected inherited visual patterns with weaving skills and social relationships. Composition and colour provided a repertoire for reproduction; collective

making transmitted practical knowledge; and trousseau preparation, ceremonial giving and compensation associated objects with kinship and honour. Studying these relationships makes it possible to examine the carpet's role in cultural transmission without assigning a fixed symbolic meaning to every motif. In this article, cultural memory serves as an interpretive framework for the published material and historical accounts, rather than as a claim that each carpet preserves a recoverable record of particular events.

The aim of this article is to interpret the Kazakh carpet as an artistic system and a medium of cultural memory in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traditional society. Four objectives follow from this aim: to identify the relationship between weaving technique and visual form; to analyse the organization of field, border, motif, rhythm and colour; to determine how ceremonial and legal circulation affected the perception of artistic value; and to trace the late nineteenth-century shift from socially embedded textile to market commodity and heritage object. The article's contribution is an integrated reading in which formal qualities and social functions are treated as mutually constitutive rather than as separate subjects.

The chronological scope of the study covers the period from the early eighteenth century to the final decades of the nineteenth century. This period was marked by post-Dzungar recovery, the continued vitality of traditional institutions and their gradual transformation under imperial influence (Kasenova, 2018: 31). Geographically, the study focuses on historical Southern Kazakhstan, including Turkistan, Shymkent, Kyzylorda, Taraz and Zhetisu. The carpet-weaving traditions of these regions make it possible to examine Kazakh material culture and social history in close connection with one another.

2. Research Methods and Materials

The source base of the study consists of several groups of materials. The first group includes works by nineteenth-century Kazakh intellectuals. Among them are Y. Altynsarin's essay on Kazakh matchmaking and marriage customs (Altynsarin, 1870), as well as Sh. Valikhanov's ethnographic notes and historical-cultural observations (Valikhanov, 1985). These sources are important for understanding family relations, customary norms and social obligations in traditional Kazakh society.

The second group comprises the writings of Russian imperial officials, travellers and researchers. In particular, the study draws on A. Dobrosmyslov's work on the Turgay region (Dobrosmyslov, 1904), A. Levshin's three-volume description of the Kazakh steppe (Levshin, 1832), and materials of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society. These works contain valuable information on Kazakh everyday life, economy, customary law, material culture and exchange practices.

The third group consists of Kazakh oral and literary traditions. Special attention is given to the political and social poetry of Bukhar Zhyrau, preserved in the collection *Bes Gasyr Zhyrlaidy* (1989: 384). The study also draws on Makhambet Otemisuly's poem "Qaly kilem, qara nar" (Otemisuly, 2002: 60). Materials of oral tradition help to reveal traditional ideas about honour, obligation, gift-giving, prestige and social relations.

The material corpus consists of published descriptions and reproductions of carpets in the collections of the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Alimbay, 2012b; Alimbay, 2020). Because inventory-level technical data and provenance are

unevenly published, the article does not claim a complete catalogue or direct attribution of individual objects. Instead, it analyses recurrent formal features documented across museum-based scholarship: pile and flatwoven structures, field-and-border organization, modular medallions, horn-derived and geometric motifs, and dominant colour relationships.

Methodologically, the study combines formal art-historical analysis, comparative-typological analysis, semantic interpretation and critical source analysis. Formal analysis addresses scale, proportion, field-border hierarchy, symmetry, repetition, contour, colour contrast and surface texture. Comparative-typological analysis distinguishes pile and flatwoven solutions and considers regional preferences without assigning a motif mechanically to a single clan. Semantic interpretation relates recurring forms to culturally documented concepts while avoiding fixed one-to-one readings unsupported by provenance. Critical source analysis assesses the date, authorship and colonial or institutional viewpoint of written evidence.

Ethnohistorical reconstruction is used to place visual objects within the settings in which they acquired meaning: the yurt interior, a bride's trousseau, compensation, gift exchange, migration and public ceremony. This contextual approach helps explain why the same carpet could operate as furnishing, image, valuable property and mnemonic object. It also prevents ritual references from being reduced to decorative symbolism alone.

The unit of analysis is therefore not an isolated motif but the relationship among technique, composition, colour and use. Density, pile height, dimensions and material composition indicate labour and tactile effect; the arrangement of the central field and border reveals visual hierarchy; repetition generates rhythm; and display or exchange converts these formal properties into socially recognized value. This method aligns the article with ethno-art studies at the intersection of art history and ethnography.

2.1 Materials

The historiography of Kazakh carpet weaving may be divided, in broad terms, into three main periods. The first is the period of Russian imperial ethnography, from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century. During this period, the earliest systematic written accounts of Kazakh material life were produced. Members of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society and other Russian imperial researchers, including A. Dobrosmyslov (1904), left valuable descriptions of Kazakh everyday life, customary practices, legal norms and material culture. The importance of these sources lies in their contextual character. Imperial observers did not describe the carpet only as a handicraft object; they often mentioned it in connection with blood compensation, bride-price, a bride's trousseau, gifts presented at feasts and weddings, and prizes awarded in horse races. For this reason, their materials make it possible to consider the economic, legal and status-related functions of the carpet within a wider social setting. At the same time, these works must be used critically, since they were written within the framework of colonial administration and often reflected Orientalist assumptions and the perspective of an outside observer.

The second period is associated with Soviet ethnography. In this period, Kazakh handicrafts, including carpet weaving, were studied more thoroughly from technical, typological and artistic perspectives. The work of M. Mukanov (1979), as well as O. Zhanibekov's studies (1982; 2011), occupy an important place in describing carpet-

weaving techniques, the continuity of craft traditions, ornamental systems and regional features. However, under Soviet ideological conditions, scholarly attention was directed mainly toward artisanal labour, folk creativity and the artistic qualities of the object. As a result, the role of the carpet in customary law, prestige economy and the regulation of social relations remained outside the main focus of analysis.

Research since independence has increasingly reconsidered Kazakh textiles through symbolism, regional specificity, museum heritage and living craft. Alimbay's museum-based typology clarified the relationship among type, composition and semantics (Alimbay, 2020). Studies of ornament have also emphasized the transformation of inherited forms in contemporary decorative art (Zhubanova, 2021). More recent scholarship has sharpened the art-historical agenda. Shaygozova's study of endangered pile-carpet weaving connects artistic continuity with safeguarding and intergenerational transmission (Shaygozova, 2023). A semiotic analysis of Kazakh ornament treats recurring forms as an ethno-symbolic code but also cautions that meaning emerges within a broader visual system (Shaygozova et al., 2024). In 2025, regional and intraethnic studies proposed a differentiated approach based on technique, compositional structure and colour rather than motif names alone (Shaygozova, 2025a; 2025b). These works make it possible to move beyond a purely socio-economic reading. The remaining gap concerns how formal organization and social circulation jointly generated artistic authority in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the present article addresses that relationship.

3. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the artistic and social dimensions of the Kazakh carpet are analytically distinct but historically inseparable. Technique transformed fibre into a textured surface; composition transformed that surface into a coherent image; and circulation made artistic quality publicly meaningful. In a bride's trousseau, the carpet embodied value within marriage exchange and made women's collective labour visible. In compensation and gift exchange, its portability, durability and visual distinction made it suitable for restoring relations or confirming honour. At feasts, weddings and horse races, display turned pattern, colour and scale into a public language of prestige.

The historical evidence helps distinguish the carpet's different contexts of value. Altynsarin describes a wealthy bride's trousseau containing up to fifty carpets, including twenty large, particularly valuable pile carpets (Altynsarin, 1870: 105). Read alongside Levshin's account of marriage exchange, this example connects textile wealth with relations between affinal lineages (Levshin, 1832: 99–100). Zhanibekov's observation that a pile carpet was rarely completed by one woman alone further links its value to the organisation of collective labour (Zhanibekov, 2011: 31).

Compensation offers a different context. Accounts of *qun* describe restitution as part of the regulation of relations between lineages (Kenzhaliev, 1996; Levshin, 1832: 174). Dobrosmyslov records a carpet among the objects included in *suiek qun* in the Turgay region (Dobrosmyslov, 1904: 67). This establishes its inclusion in a documented compensation practice; the interpretation of that inclusion as a means of restoring social balance is the present study's reading of the evidence.

The place of the carpet in the trousseau can also be interpreted through the theory of gift exchange. Drawing on M. Mauss's theoretical framework, the carpet in the trousseau

may be understood as a form of "total prestation": it represented economic value, social status and a material means of strengthening relations between affinal lineages at the same time (Mauss, 1925: 38). Thus, the meaning of the carpet was not measured only by its price. It functioned as an object that strengthened new kinship ties, defined social obligations between two families and displayed the honour of the bride's side.

The display of carpets as prizes and gifts at feasts, weddings and horse races is close to what T. Veblen described as "conspicuous consumption", since the carpet functioned as a means of publicly displaying wealth and confirming social status (Veblen, 1899: 68). In Kazakh society, however, such display did not refer only to an individual. It represented the prestige of an entire family or lineage. The women's labour invested in the carpet, the wealth that made its public display possible and the ability to present it as a gift or prize all demonstrated the social strength of a lineage. In this way, the carpet became a material sign through which prestige was both displayed and publicly recognised.

The political and symbolic meaning of the carpet is also reflected in Kazakh oral and literary traditions. Bukhar Zhyrau, the counsellor of Abylai Khan, presents the qaly kilem as a sign of high status in his poetic description of migration: "Kosher edin kosht bastap / Koshkeninde qigashtap / Qatar-qatar nar tirkep / Qaly kilem zhaptıryp" ("You would lead the migration, moving along a winding course, lining up the camels in rows and covering them with fine pile carpets") (Bukhar Zhyrau, 1989: 384). A similar association appears in Makhambet Otemisuly's poem: "Qaly kilem, qara nar / Zharasady qatarga / Aruana zhisan zharasar / Uly kunde saparga" ("A fine pile carpet and a black camel make a fitting pair; gathered female camels are well suited for a journey on a great day") (Otemisuly, 2002: 60). In both poetic descriptions, the qaly kilem is presented not as an ordinary household textile but as a visible sign of ceremonial migration, prosperity and social prestige.

This integrated interpretation helps explain how carpets could transmit cultural memory as their contexts of use changed. The expansion of market exchange introduced new forms of circulation, while earlier associations could remain attached to the objects. The transmission of weaving skills could preserve knowledge of motif construction, counting, colour sequence, tension and proportion, together with the occasions for which carpets were made. Cultural memory can thus be understood as sustained through visual forms, practical skills and social use.

For museum and heritage studies, the implication is practical. Catalogues and exhibitions should document not only object name, material and approximate date, but also structure, knot or interlacing technique, field-border scheme, palette, motif transformation, repair history, provenance and contexts of use. Digital enlargement can reveal technical details, while oral testimony from living weavers can reconnect museum objects with embodied knowledge. The safeguarding perspective developed by Shaygozova (2023) is crucial: preserving a carpet without supporting the skills and vocabulary that produced it protects the object but not the full artistic tradition.

4. Results

The analysis identified five recurrent relationships between the visual structure of Kazakh carpets and their contexts of use.

First, weaving technique shaped texture and pattern definition. Pile weaving produced a dense surface with saturated colour and softened contours; flatweaving favoured sharper

transitions and stepped geometric forms. The contrast concerned the visual treatment of motifs as well as the physical structure of the textile.

Second, field-and-border organisation established compositional hierarchy. Central medallions, modular units, lattices or directional rows organised the field, while borders framed it. Symmetry and repetition maintained order; variations in spacing, contour and colour differentiated repeated units.

Third, ornamental meaning depended on compositional relationships. Horn-derived forms could be mirrored, joined or adapted into angular units. Their placement, scale and repetition shaped their visual role, so a motif name alone did not explain its function within the carpet.

Fourth, colour contrast reinforced the legibility of the pattern. Red-dominated fields were articulated by yellow and green accents and dark outlines that separated adjoining shapes. These relationships coordinated attention with ornamental rhythm (Mammadsadigova, 2020).

Fifth, social circulation gave carpets distinct forms of recognised value. In bridal trousseaux, they represented household resources and textile labour (Altynsarin, 1870: 105). Their documented inclusion in *suiek qun* connected them with compensation practices (Dobrosmyslov, 1904: 67), while ceremonial gifts and coverings for prize animals made prestige publicly visible (Zhanibekov, 2011: 65). In the second half of the nineteenth century, these uses increasingly coexisted with market exchange and formal craft instruction (Kasenova, 2018: 61; Asanova et al., 2012: 10). Together, the findings support an interpretation of cultural memory as transmitted through visual patterns, weaving knowledge and recurring practices of exchange and display.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that the Kazakh carpet of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should be understood as a unified artistic system. Pile and flatwoven techniques generated different textures and formal possibilities; field-and-border organization created hierarchy; modular repetition established rhythm; and the interaction of saturated colours with dark contours secured visual clarity. Ornament operated relationally, acquiring meaning through composition and use rather than through isolated motif names.

The historical accounts link carpets with bridal trousseaux, compensation, ceremonial gifts, migration and public competitions. In these settings, textile labour and artistic quality contributed to family standing and lineage honour. Their growing market circulation in the nineteenth century added another context of value alongside established uses.

With regard to cultural memory, the analysis supports three connected conclusions. Visual memory was sustained through recurring compositional patterns and colour relationships; practical memory through the transmission of weaving skills; and social memory through the carpet's participation in trousseaux, ceremonial exchange and compensation. These findings suggest that cultural meanings could persist as the contexts of use changed. They do not establish uninterrupted continuity for every object or region. The study's contribution is to relate these forms of transmission to the carpet's artistic structure and documented social uses, with implications for preserving both objects and craft knowledge.

The scientific novelty of the article lies in combining formal-stylistic analysis with the social biography of the object. This approach avoids two reductions: treating the carpet only as an ethnographic household item or treating ornament as a self-contained symbolic code. For future research, inventory-based comparison, dye and fibre analysis, high-resolution documentation and recorded interviews with weavers are needed. Such work would support more reliable attribution, clarify regional clusters and strengthen the presentation of Kazakh carpet weaving as living artistic heritage.

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