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## Uzbekistan's Strategy of Preserving and Displaying the Afrasiab murals “Development for Sustainable Preservation”

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**Abstract:** *The country owns a rather diverse experience of establishing the antiquities and museums and according to it, the museum is the place that accumulate the quantity of the exhibits and valuable things, and it serves as the keeper of cultural values and achievements of the peoples through the centuries. Uzbekistan has a rich collection and many options to exhibit its antiquities and history and since the museums play a crucial part in exhibiting the antiquities and human history especially in context with Afrasiab museum in Samarkand which has many artifacts along with the methods of preserving the murals of Afrasiab. Considering the technological development in this era, there is a need to more development in a future strategic vision for the project to sustainable preserving and displaying Afrasiab murals in the Afrasiab museum in Samarkand according to international standards.*

**Key words:** Uzbekistan, Samarkand, Afrasiab, Soghdian, Murals, Preserving, Displaying, Development for Sustainable Preservation

### Introduction

It is among all this activity in the silk road trade that lived the Sogdians, inhabitants of city-states comprising Samarkand, Bukhara, Khujand, and Panjikent found in present day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The mentioned cities, as well as merchants, contributed a lot to the growth of international relations and interpersonal meetings on the Silk Roads. To such an extent where they involved in terms of trade that the Sogdians' language was used as the medium of exchange in some parts of Asia from the 4th century CE onwards.<sup>1</sup> The painting of Afrasiab, which is sometimes called the Painting of the Ambassadors, is rightfully considered one of the best and most remarkable examples of the Sogdian painting. It is dated from the 7th century CE

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<sup>1</sup> Kageyama, 2003; de la Vaissière, 2005: 15-18; Daryaei, 2010; Rezakhani, 2010; Hansen, 2012; Maksymiuk, 2021.

and found on a private building that belongs to the ancient city of Afrasiab, close to the present city of Samarkand in Uzbekistan [Fig. 1].<sup>2</sup>

The Afrasiab Museum of History of Samarkand was established on October 24, 1970. This Museum is located in the ancient settlement of Afrasiab [Fig. 2] and has 2,320 artifacts in total, of which more than 800 are in exhibition halls.<sup>3</sup> Challenges in the preservation and display of the Afrasiab Murals, also known as Ambassadorial Panels, at the named museum in Samarkand exist [Figs. 3-6]. In 2014, under the initiative of the French-Uzbek archeological mission of Sogdiana and within the framework of an agreement with the Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Uzbekistan, an “Association for Preserving the Afrasiab Painting” was established. The project is being executed with the support of the UNESCO Bureau in Tashkent.

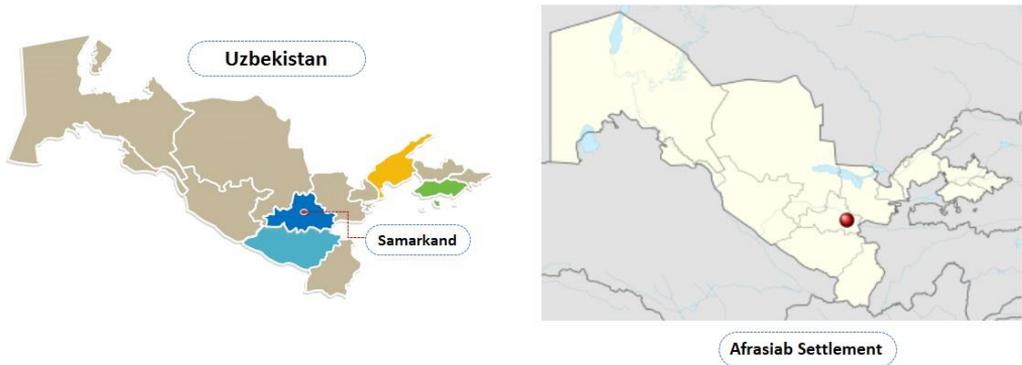


Fig. 1. The localisation of the Afrasiab site.



Fig. 2. Afrasiab site and museum (Source: Google earth satellite imagery).

<sup>2</sup> Yatsenko, 2004; de la Vaissière, 2006; Marshak, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Bulatova & Shishkina, 1986.



Fig. 3. The main entrance of the Afrasiab Central Hall of murals (Photo by I. Bakry).



Fig. 4. Afrasiab, South Wall (Photo by I. Bakry).



Fig. 5. Afrasiab, West Wall (Photo by I. Bakry).



Fig. 6. Afrasiab, North Wall (Photo by I. Bakry).

From the scenes illustrated on these 7th-century CE Sogdian artifacts – China, Samarkand, India, and diplomatic relations – they are very brittle because of their age and the original raw materials they were made from. Relative humidity, variation of temperature, and their exposure to light affect their degradation, and the preservation practices applicable in the museum may be restricted. To convey more of the history or the cultural meaning behind the murals, to highlight and stress the educative nature of the artwork to the visitor, the museum needs to update its technology and ensure adequate funding for conservation. To conserve and present these rare artifacts to the future generation, there is an essential need for multi-faceted conservation approaches that embrace modern conservation technologies, better environmental management systems, and value addition.

### **Research Delimitations**

Time limits: A proposal for enhancement display systems in accordance with international regulations of heritage preservation in the central hall of Afrasiab murals in Afrasiab museum.

Spatial boundaries: Central hall of Afrasiab murals in Afrasiab museum.

Objective limits: Present a proposal for the sustainable preservation of Afrasiab murals display in the central hall of Afrasiab murals in Afrasiab museum.

### **The execution of the mural exhibits from concept to display**

In 1965, there happened a sensational event of the last century in the research of the history of the material culture not only of the peoples of Uzbekistan, but of the whole world. In Samarkand, on the site of Afrasiab, archaeologists discovered a palace complex with wall paintings.<sup>4</sup>

Polychrome story paintings adorned all four walls of a large square hall measuring 11x11 meters and remained at a height of 2.5-2.7 meters. This discovery was a sensation in archaeological science and therefore immediately attracted the attention of the world community. The murals presented in the central hall of the museum in the ancient city of Afrasiab, unique for their time, decorated the reception hall in a house located a few hundred meters west of the museum. The represented hall with paintings faithfully reproduces the proportions and orientation of the excavated hall. Excavations opened a large aristocratic house. Rather, it is the palace of the king himself (which was supposed to be located in the north of the Afrasiab settlement at the foot of the citadel), perhaps this is the residence of the family of King Varhunan, who reigned in the 3rd quarter of the 7th century CE. We have the opportunity to find

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<sup>4</sup> Mustafokulov, 2021.

out who ordered the mural. Murals are made, if not by one artist, then in one workshop, inspired by one idea and possessing one perfect technique. The painters, of course, had a prescription in the form of a scroll with instructions, or notebooks with sketches on how to depict scenes in China. In comparison with the immeasurable mass of murals from Penjikent (60 km east of Samarkand), the character of the Afrasiab painting is distinguished directly by its original and innovative character. If in Penjikent, with its three major genres: religion, heroics, fables, each plot has its own place in the mural composition, on Afrasiab the plots mix freely and have no specific place in the mural space.<sup>5</sup>

### **Murals Description**

They were preserved and displayed in the central hall, which was dedicated only to these murals.<sup>6</sup> Each of the interior walls of this reception room portrays a different society, with whom the Sogdians had mercantile ties and interactions. They include China, laid out on the northern wall [Fig. 7], Samarkand and the Iranian world's southern wall [Fig. 8], and the Indian Subcontinent's western wall [Fig. 9].<sup>7</sup> The most ruined of the four is actually the eastern wall [Fig. 10], which nonetheless has figures in robes and hairstyles from the Indian Subcontinent.. Unfortunately, enough of the wall's painting survives to render just about any interpretation open.

Besides, the whole exegete of the scene on the west wall is still varied among the scholars up to the present. In spite of this, the saddle still seems to depict a long cortège of individuals of Turkish and probably Chinese and Korean rank and file. The varied group of people, and many of them carrying exotic gifts from the ends of those freights and in rich dress with taffeta silks and necklaces, seem to be converging to the upper part of the painting, where unfortunately its decay makes it difficult to discern with certainty. There is one interesting idea that this part of the murals shows a series of ambassadors bringing offerings to the King of Samarkand.<sup>8</sup>

The south wall of the panel portrays Samarkand proper; the art work shows members of the king's entourage in brightly colored clothes and preceded by sacrificial animals such as a horse and geese. This scene is believed to depict a Nowruz, the New Year ritual served in most of the regions that the Silk Roads covered since at least the 6th century BCE.<sup>9</sup>

On the north-facing wall, the other one depicts people in Chinese attire or gowns; it depicts several rioters hunting wild cats and several ladies rowing a boat.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Antonini, 1989; Mode, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Compareti & de la Vaissière, 2006; Compareti, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Al'baum, 1975.

<sup>8</sup> Azarpay, 2014: 49-50.

<sup>9</sup> Compareti & de la Vaissière, 2006: 185.

<sup>10</sup> Compareti & Cristoforetti; 2007; Azarpay, 2014: 51.



Fig. 7. Afrasiab, North Wall (Public Domain: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/cultural-selection-afrasiab-paintings>).



Fig. 8. Afrasiab, South Wall (Public Domain: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/cultural-selection-afrasiab-paintings>).



Fig. 9. Afrasiab, West Wall (Public Domain: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/cultural-selection-afrasiab-paintings>).



Fig. 10. Afrasiab, East Wall (Public Domain: <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/cultural-selection-afrasiab-paintings>).

## Current Challenges

Refers to the environmental concerns related to some challenges resulting from temperature and humidity and other factors relating to the museum environment. Material Deterioration in greater details concerning the allied risk, including pigment fading, weakening of the plaster work, and the physical contact and possible real damages by close visitors. As well as the knowledge gaps, which based on determining where convergent analytical methods can help to improve understanding of the chemical makeup of the murals as well as the mechanisms of their decay.

### **Proposal to Develop the Display Method in Afrasiab museum**

The Author claims some Perspectives for using modern museum techniques to enhance the preservation of the murals: Museum Techniques in the Context of the Contemporary Museum, such as follows:

#### ***Environmental Control and Preservation***

Climate Control Systems: Incorporation of modern HV-saving utilities for maintenance of steady temperature and humidity. Management of environmental variables with the help of smart sensors and real-time corrections on their basis.<sup>11</sup>

Lighting Innovations and Energy-Efficient: Use non-UV emitting lamps brightly red, blue, green, and for this, the most effective one is LED lamping. Use lighting or dimming technologies that are sensitive to young people's movements and switch off or dim to preserve mural quality for as long as possible.<sup>12</sup>

Protective Barriers and Controlled Viewing: Widespread use of tempered glass or any other transparent barriers having low light reflection and glare. Augmented reality to provide close-up views for the audience to get up and view murals without the need to get nearer to them.<sup>13</sup>

Digital Preservation and 3D Imaging: Photography at the highest, possible quality and eventual 3D scanning in order to document the murals in the broadest manner in preparation for scholarly study and subsequent conservation work.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Brown *et al.*, 2002: 6, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Ault *et al.*, 2001: 3.

<sup>13</sup> Baghirzade, 2024: 28.

<sup>14</sup> Gomes, Pereira Bellon & Silva, 2014; Milosz *et al.*, 2020.

## *Interactive and Immersive Experiences*

Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR): AR and VR technologies enable engagement with artifacts and/or contexts while providing a reconstructed perception of the field, and, unlike art, does not give individuals the capability to manipulate the objects and scenes, which may longer exist. These technologies have the advantage of making learning more fun as a visitor can “step inside” different periods in histories.<sup>15</sup>

Interactive Screens: These days, museums have expanded the use of touch screens and Kiosk to reach beyond basic texts and offer high-definition pictures, videos, and additional information, including detailed descriptions of the exhibit. These devices can develop a learner-centered experience which can fit the learner’s learning ability and learning preferences.<sup>16</sup>

Audio-Visual Technology: Current audio guide systems are usually connected to GPS and/or application technology, providing visitors with individual multilingual tour commentaries as well as individualized information depending on visitors’ interest. This kind of customization enhances access to the information by the international tourists and at the same time can be presented in graduated form.<sup>17</sup>

Projection Mapping: It is a technique in which images and videos are cast on to walls/faces/shadows or any artefact and brings any exhibit alive. It is often applied to reconstruct historical events or make the features of ancillary objects more immersed emotionally and intellectually.<sup>18</sup>

Immersive Storytelling: Museum utilizes video, animation, and sound to present the display and history or any culture. By using these multimedia approaches, storytelling becomes more personal, as does the overall viewing of exhibits in which history is contextualized and becomes more personal than historical.<sup>19</sup>

3D Holograms and Animated Displays: Historical information can be introduced in an exciting way by means of holographic models of historical characters or replicas of the items in question. These exhibits increase social access and make otherwise non-moving objects appear animated.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Magnenat-Thalman & Papagiannakis, 2006: 419-430.

<sup>16</sup> Hornecker & Stifter, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Beneš, 1976.

<sup>18</sup> Tosa, Yang & Nakatsui, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Cesário & Campos, 2024: 66-67.

<sup>20</sup> Pietroni, d’Annibale & Pagano, 2019: 3-7.

## *Digital Engagement and Accessibility*

Museum Apps: These applications offer location-based details, text and maps, and video and audio information about the exhibits, as well as lead the visitors through a museum space, individualizing the visitation experience. Apps can also have AR elements that render artifacts interactive using mobile device displays.<sup>21</sup>

Instagrammable Exhibits: Some museums try to create very appealing objects so that people will take pictures and share them on social networks, thus publicizing the museum and, at the same time, creating a bond based on personal interest for those who visit it. Instructions also involve creating Hashtags, selfie areas and other interactive features and installations that can propagate after-museum experiences.<sup>22</sup>

Live Virtual Tours: Another important aspect is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, museums connected with viewers online using live stream and virtual tour outputs: this practice also continues the experience of presenting the museum to global audiences.<sup>23</sup>

Feedback Integration: Feedback can be instantaneous and are useful for museums so that they can consider their visitors' choices, and the satisfaction level, with the purpose of altering exhibitions.<sup>24</sup>

### **Recommendations**

Uzbekistan has a great history that reflects a blend of cultural influences from Persian, Turkic, Mongol, and Islamic civilizations, making it a unique environment of the evolutionary history of “Art” Technology. Present-day technology has been unable to convey the uncertainty concerning the civilization of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan also enjoys many of the traces that have been discovered and continue to be discovered every day by the organization of monuments; thus, the researcher's recommendations are as follows:

- Studying and developing methods of presentation in Afrasiab museum including the central hall of the murals.
- When a given museum houses many monuments, such museums have to be shared among other museums.
- Colleges of Fine Arts are conducting students into projects to re-conceptualize museum display strategies and submit their ideas through contests of beautiful Arts Colleges in Uzbekistan.
- The relevance of incorporating technology into supply modes.

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<sup>21</sup> Sandvik, 2011: 188-191.

<sup>22</sup> Budge & Burness, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Li, Nie & Ye, 2022: 15.

<sup>24</sup> Stylianou-Lambert, 2010: 136.

- Establish the agreements with museums of other countries to provide the people with the theoretical idea of what we can see in Uzbekistan museums for those who have no chances to come to Uzbekistan.

## **Conclusions**

History was chronological time before it was the object of reflection and before there was history, and so the counter-hegemonic counterculture of today's generation overtook the proud patriarchal legacy of the earlier generations. To this extent, we cannot afford to lose history and heritage and ensure that all the possible solutions that could enable one to get through ages are given, bearing in mind the culture and ethics of a civilization. Art also answers to it and reproduces reality art is the looking glass; art is the eyewitness. Each subject knows that a museum is a place where all the ancient concealed secrets are hidden in the past; therefore, the evolution of methods as well as approaches that will enable us to preserve and protect our heritage, which is the Afrasiab murals, will be the unique informational and historical source.

Actually, there are several hundred festivals held annually along the lines of the Silk Roads up to the present time. These include social cultural functions and religious activities, sporting activities, and artistic performances. Such idioms, some of which have been taught from childhood, are characteristic of the inhabitants of countries bordering the Silk Roads. In unity, at these symbolic parts of the year, the communities demonstrate traditional costumes, food, rhythms, dances, and kinds of equipment and manufacturing. They are still, as they were before, a chance to trade, as one can see in the present example of the surviving Sogdian art.

No matter what certain particular aspects of the painting scene are to be understood, it is beyond doubt that its purpose was to present that impact and connections of this Sogdian city state. From the paintings, we are able to understand one interdependent world that influenced one another perfectly. The murals have used the calendar-type system of depicting different locally and regionally observed festivals, some of which are still practiced to the present day, such as Nowruz. But they offer a glimpse at a common civilization and etiquette of gift-giving, feasting, and ceremonialism, and a benignant reinforcement of the rich and pervasive cultures handed down by the folk who inhabit these lands of the Silk Routes today.

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