ANTHROPOMORPHISM AND ZOOMORPHISM
IN THE ORNAMENTAL ART OF THE CRIMEAN TATARS

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Abstract: The author of the article reveals the problem of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images in Islamic art, particularly in the Turkic ornamentation of the Crimea. Superficial, unscientific interpretations of motifs and ornamental compositions often lead to the search for and appropriation of anthropomorphism without appropriate research, loose interpretations of motifs, and the creation of a new mythology. Despite conservative views regarding the categorical denial of the permissiveness of the image of a person, there are many surviving works of fine and decorative art that confirm an opposite tradition. Currently, there are practically no studies of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism in the Turkic ornamentation of the Crimea, their typological and artistic features, and their symbolic context.

Based on the material of decorative and applied art of the Crimean Tatars from the fourteenth century to the present, examples of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic ornamental images are provided in the article. They are stylized objects – fully, partially, or in the form of a silhouette – reflecting the surrounding real world of living beings. Complete naturalistic images (birds, fish, animals, insects) are found on objects until the first half of fifteenth century, and then starting again from the second half of eighteenth century. From the sixteenth to the first half of eighteenth centuries, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs were depicted in a stylized form. The author of the study reveals the symbolism of the most common motifs, along with the typological and artistic features of the images. As a result of the study, it was revealed that the color, silhouette, and figurativeness of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic images in the Crimean Tatar decorative and applied art depend primarily on the material, technique, and functional purpose of the created object. In addition to images on objects, anthropomorphism is present as the silhouette of objects.

Keywords: Crimean Tatar decorative and applied art, ornamental art, motive, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, symbolism, features of the image


The interest in folk art is accompanied by a superficial, unscientific interpretation of motifs and ornamental compositions as well as appropriation of an arbitrary symbolic value. There are searches and appropriation of anthropomorphy without any relative investigation, which results in free interpretation of motifs and creation of new mythology. At the moment, there are practically no studies of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism in the Turkic ornamentation of Crimea, as well as typological and artistic features, symbolic context thereof.

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The artistic image of Islamic art has been developed over extended periods. This image contains a “prohibition” to depict living beings as an image of ornamental art that reflects the world, “embodying its wealth in its own way” and containing “in some cases quite a difficult symbolic, allegorical and associative meaning echoing with poetry images” [1, p. 25]. In modern discussions on the specifics of Islamic art, there are two opposite meanings on whether it is allowed to depict a human being. Conservative meanings come down to a categorical denial that contradicts the entire worldwide centuries-old history of Islamic art. Other researchers point out to the sources (Quran, sacred hadiths) indicating that there is no strict prohibition in Islam to depict living beings.

In the religious literature, there is a tendency to search for evidence that there are no traditions to depict living beings in Islamic art. But, there are lots of survived works of fine arts, such as sculptures, miniatures, drawings and portraits of famous people of the Muslim Middle Ages, images of animals and people on frescoes, coins, etc., confirming the opposite.

At the dawn of Islam formation, a lot of hadiths, narrating about the deeds of the prophet and reciting his speeches, reflected a polemics of monotheistic dogma against idolatry and pagan magic. “Unfortunate be that person who will depict a living being”, says the text of one of hadiths. “On the day of the Last Judgment those faces, represented by the painter, will come down from his pictures and come to him with a demand to give them soul. Then, this person, who will not be able to give soul to his creatures, will be burnt in the eternal flame” [2, p. 11]. In this saying, we can feel the protest against priestly and shamanic manipulations with images-souls, human sacrifices and other magical rites and pagan cults [3, p. 66].

A wide distribution of pre-Islamic beliefs, cults, customs and worldviews among many peoples that have recently joined Islam, is one of factors, essential for the art. Pagan spirit, pagan symbolism translates, first of all, into the ornamental and sign system, in ancient tamgas, in zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs of traditional folk art.

Already in the Middle Ages, some thinkers allowed the possibility of various deviations from the strict rules of depicting people and animals without falling into the “greatest sin”. Thus, the Arab thinker, al-Ghazi, presumed that it is possible to depict anthropomorphic motifs on “cushions and rugs… plates and bowls” [4, p. 149], with a broken head, erased facial features or a line, cutting the neck, for the purpose of destroying the sinful magical power.

Crimean Tatars also preserved anthropomorphic images in medieval decorative art, a few of which have survived to the present day. Folk masters did not always take into account Sharia rules prohibiting the depiction of living beings, and reflected the real world around them in a stylized, full and partial manner. We can see full images, close to natural on objects until the first half of the fifteenth century, and then, starting from the second half of eighteenth century. According to Giosafat Barbaro [5, p. 56], already after official conversion to Islam of Crimean Tatars, there were images of people and animals in the Tatar environment until the middle of fifteenth century. We can get an idea on the content and nature of zoomorphic motifs from the eighteenth to first half of twentieth century on some survived examples of embroidered, jewelry, stone-carving items, as well as sketches of Tatar embroideries of the Staro-Krymsky region, performed by A.M. Petrova, as
well as the ornaments collected throughout the territory of Crimea by V.V. Kontrolskaya.

In these products, there are full images of birds: eagle, owl, pigeon, singing, decorative and exotic, as well as domestic and water birds. Among the patterns you can see the some stylized images of horses, fish, insects, as well as partial elements of animal images (a bird tail, paws, claws, an eye, etc.).

The bird motif is the most persistently preserved motif in the people’s art. The most ancient birds’ image found so far is a pair of pigeons, facing each other with their heads tilted to the ground (as a sign of sadness), placed on a fifteenth-century tomb found in Eski-Yurt. In sketches of V.V. Kontrolskaya, there are ornaments with the image of “an eagle sitting on a branch” and an owl (image 1), dated by the eighth and fourteenth centuries correspondingly. The eagle in the form of the presiding deity, sitting on the tree of life, is known in the religious views of many peoples of the world [6]. As it is known, the owl was adored by Chinggis Khan and was depicted as his tamga or emblem. Tamga in the form of the same bird, carved on the stone of the fifteenth and sixteenth century, was found by Pallas in the walls of the Perekop fortifications [7, p. 18–19]. Probably, images on the goods, from which they were redrawn by V.V. Kontrolskaya, have been copied and repeated by a Tatar master from all samples, which was a frequent practice in the Middle Ages. Therefore, the dating of the motifs may well correspond to the specified time [8].

In most cases, the embroideries contain images of birds (song and domestic, peacocks) in a pair heraldic composition, sitting on branches of trees or flowers. According to B.A Kuftin, in such compositions the zoomorphic ornament is absorbed by the plant one [9]. Images of peacocks appear in embroidery until the middle of the nineteenth century. Peacock has the meaning of the world spirit in Iranian-Sufi mythology. In Islam, two peacocks, symmetrically located near the world tree, symbolize a person’s mental duality, deriving their life force from the principle of unity [10]. This image came to Muslims from Persia. Heraldic compositions of paired figures of birds and animals refer to typical medieval motifs and are typical for the tradition of professional art of Transcaucasia, Middle and Near Asia.

In embroideries and decoration of copper utensils of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, images of domestic birds are not very artistic, probably due to the prohibition of these themes for a number of generations. Their generalized outlines are stylized. However, they produce the feeling of desire to perform realistic conveyance of living images by means habitual for folk art creators. A large image of a grain picking rooster or a chicken was supplemented by a moon-like vase with a very simple three-part plant element on the back of the bird. Images of eggs or chicks were nearby or at the border (image 2).

The cock is usually associated with the wishes of abundance in the culture of Crimean Tatars. It is personified with the sun, the light, it is like the sun. Its earthly image is a zoomorphic transformation of heavenly fire. That’s why the symbol of the resurrection from the dead, the eternal rebirth of life is associated with the cock. At the same time, it is a symbol of the spirit awakening [11]. A chicken was associated with the ceremony of letting it into the house before the bride entered it. The image of a chicken on wedding towels is also known among the peoples of the Balkan group, primarily among the Bulgarians [12, p. 156] and Pontic Armenians [13, image 6].
Image 1. Image of an owl on a head cover. Khazushi-Sola Village. Drawing by V.V. Kontrolskaya

Image 2. Chicken. Embroidery on a towel

Image 3. Flower petals in the form of dolphin heads. The reverse side of the mirror

Image 4. Heads of horses on a metal plate on lock chest
Image 5. Batyrova E. Tree. Oyma

Image 6. Anthropomorphic image on the head cover. Khazushi-Sola Village. Drawing by V.V. Kontrolskaya

Image 7. Anthropomorphic image on the head cover. Embroidery
Image 8. Ornamental motives on the head covers:
a) “Umai-ana”, b) “Humayun” (goddess-bird Umai). Weaving

Image 9. Wedding pouch for the groom in the form of a silhouette of a girl’s torso

Image 10. Pillar on the sarcophagus of Mehmet Girey Sultan
There are contour images of frolicking fish in the decoration of the bottom of water basins and trays of ornamental fountains of the eighteenth century as well as in various copper containers for water (gugums, jugs, etc.) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Fish, as a sacred symbol, is correlated in Islam with the idea of the birth of life [12, p. 156], the universe made of the cosmic waters of the World Ocean, since they inhabit the water. The ornament on the reverse side of the hand pearl-encrusted mirror (Bakhchisaray, 1905), stored in the funds of Russian Museum of Ethnography (No. 803-84), is interesting. Points of a many-petaled flower are depicted in the form of a dolphin’s head (image 3).

Some rare, rather schematic images of horses or deers, appearing in embroideries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are also of some interest. The shape of old earrings preserved in the funds of Russian Museum of Ethnography under No. 7484–77, and a metal plate of the lock on the trunk from the funds of Bakhchisaray State Historical and Cultural Sanctuary looks like mirror-symmetrical horses with riders (image 4). E.Y. Spasskaya, describing the sketches of A.M. Petrova, points at one drawing (No. 18) with a red horse under a tree. The most ancient image of the “centaur doing archery” was found and sketched by U. Bodaninsky from the tombstone of the fifteenth century at Kirk-Azizler cemetery. Zoomorphic images are continued in the art of the Crimean Tatars in the first half of the twentieth century among plant motifs of paper “oimas” (image 5).

In addition to full images of the animal world forms, partial images were also used. So, for example, a round breast medallion-ornament with six sheep heads of the end of eighteenth or of the nineteenth century is stored in the Crimean Ethnographic Museum. A similar image can be observed on the plate pendant from the jeweler set of the Golden Horde horse’s harness, dated by the fourteenth century, from the collection of the State Hermitage in St. Petersburg. Probably, such a picture was more broadcasted in the distant past. The shape of ram horns forms the ornament of the cornice board of the Tatar dwelling, as well as the curls of the columns capital supporting the terrace shed. According to the statement of the archaeologist-orientalist A.N. Berentshtam, “the curls of the capital and the curvature of the ornament forms leave no doubt about the connection between the totem cult of ram – the main economic base of Tatars during the nomadic period – with devotion to the sacred ram head cut during the (Kurban) Bayram holiday, and the reflection of the latter in ornamentation of the dwelling, which is first of all not a decoration, but a purely religious motif” [14, p. 32]

Most often, masters appealed to the stylization of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images, which made it possible to convey the semantic content of the ornamental motif or a trope. The hadith, which traces to Ibn Abbas (the Prophet’s uncle), refers to a Persian artist who asked Ibn Abbas: “So, may I not paint living beings anymore? May I not practice my profession any more?” “You may”, said Ibn Abbas. “But take away their faces and try to make them look like flowers” [15, p. 106–110]. With all the apparent simplicity, these judgments, in their fullness, express the whole aggregate of Muslim medieval visions, reflecting the ontological separation of existence into evident and sacred [3, p. 64].

P. Chepurina mentions the stylized image of the bird, describing the original embroidery acquired in the Otuz area as “... bearing in its composition memories of Persia and even Assiro-Babylonia with its tree of life and a prophetic bird, in the form of a trefoil, sitting on this tree – this bird was subsequently named Rukh by
A peacock tail or a bird, which looks like a half of the opened flower, an eye, claws that look like narrow sharp leaves, a cock’s comb, chicken legs, mutton horns, etc. can be referred to stylized partial zoomorphic images.

Crimean Tatar ornament often includes such elements. Its names contain the “eye” word: пота козь (camel’s eye), огюз козь (ox’s eye), туурлык козь (un-backed colt’s eye), etc. The image of the eye symbolizes a spring, a source. The word чешме (cheshme), which means a source, a drinking fountain in Crimean Tatar language, is of Persian origin. The root чашм (chashm) means “an eye”. The Tajik word чашма (chashma) means a spring. There is an expression козь ачмакъ (kоз ачмакъ) in the Crimean Tatar language, which means “to open the eye”. It means to clean the spring from debris. In Turkey, up to the seventeenth century, the Arabic word “ain”, which also means “an eye”, was used along with the word “cheshme”. Thus, there is a Turkic, Arab and Iranian tradition to compare natural sources with the eye. Two figurative parallels are relevant here: the eye, from which tears drop, and the spring as the transparent eye of the Earth. The combination of the village name (Kokkoz) and the source (in the form of an eye) in the artistic image can be seen through the example of a drinking fountain under the entrance in the form of an arbor in the Yusupov Summer Palace. Ornamental motifs depicting the eye were used in the weaving technique on patterned towels, and were also widespread among the Nogais in felt applications.

The advancement of Islam promoted the development of a conventional art system, which corresponded to the principle of medieval thought with its symbolic understanding of the surrounding nature. The last circumstance caused the development of art outside the realistic relation to existence. Depiction or reflection of reality within the framework of certain canons led to its expression in art through ornamentality and conditional decorativeness. In this regard, anthropomorphic images often became conventional, in the form of a stylized figure, resembling the contours of a person. Drawings of V.V. Kontrolskaya, made from Crimean Tatar embroidery (warriors on both sides of a sailing ship, a man in the form of a highly stylized flower) may be taken as such examples (image 6). Based on a legend known to P.Y. Chepurina, she called by the name of “a guardian of the mihrab” a motif that looks like a man with raised arms or a candlestick [17, p. 41]. One can see a figure of a man with raised arms and a flower instead of a head in some highly stylized patterns, for example in a “tree” (image 7).

During my study of head mantles of the Bakhchisarai Museum Reserve in 2015–2016, I drew attention to three identical images of anthropomorphic ornaments of various stylization degree, made in alternating black and white colors (image 8). It was suggested that these are images of Umai (Umai-ana) Goddess of the Mongol-Turkic world. According to beliefs of modern Turkic peoples (the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Altaians, Khakass, Crimean Tatars, etc.), different states of children are associated with the actions of Umai-ana – her presence or absence near a child. V.G. Kotov recorded two varieties of the deity – White and Black Umai. The former gives life, the latter takes it away [18]. The Shors also had ideas about Kar-a-Umai – the evil spirit who was associated with illness and death of children. Umai is not only the patroness of mothers and children, but also the death angel who takes away the soul of a dying person.

Many nations represent Umai Goddess as a beautiful woman in rich clothes. A three-horned headpiece (crown), an arrow with a three-pointed tip (the pantheon of
ancient Altaians), a small cup with the children’s souls in holy milk (Siberian Turks) are her symbolic attributes. Peoples of Altai, Central Asia, and Kazakhstan represent her as a fairy bird, which allegedly nests in the air. Umai is called the “mother-bird” in the sacred texts of the Altaians, and “Humai” – the maiden-swan, the bird of happiness – in the Arabized world [19]. The Turks of Siberia and the Shors represent her as a beautiful woman with golden hair and wings descending from the sky [20]. A comparison of the Turkic semantics and folkloric vision of the goddess allows one to find a three-horned crown on the head, wings and an arrow behind the back with a triple tip in ornamental motifs of mantles. An octopetalous flower, located in the lower part of the body, may be interpreted as the woman’s womb giving rise to a new life. The representation of ornamental motifs in black and white colors can also mean White and Black Umai (image 8). And finally, the image of Umai Goddess on the head mantle may mean that such mantle was worn by women, somehow related to infants (those who gave birth, lost or have no children) [21].

Partial anthropomorphic images were used as a product form. Thus, for example, the contours of wedding suits for a groom were made in the form of a silhouette of a girl’s torso (image 9). Wedding female temple decorations often resembled a stylized image of a woman with wide hips.

It is interesting that the Crimean Tatars performed grave monuments by gender, often expressed through the figure’s silhouette (male – in the form of a pillar and female – in the form of a flat plate). An anthropomorphic origin can be traced in the outlines of stone steles [22]. Monuments in the form of round or faceted stands were completed with pointed caps in the form of a skullcap тақ’ие (tak’ie, thirteenth century), or smooth or ribbed hemispheres (after the thirteenth century) [23]. Such stand completion creates the effect of the silhouette of a human figure. Such monuments have been preceded by tombstones with тамга signs that arose in the cemeteries of the steppe part of Crimea in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They were vertically standing steles, rectangular or square in plan view, the upper part of which was carved in the form of a trapezoid, an oval, a truncated cone, a rhombus, etc. Thus, a visual effect of a “head” was created. Since the seventeenth century the frontal steles of the supermodal sarcophagi take the shape of a turbine, then – a turban or a woman’s cap. A stone pillar, crowned with a headdress, looks like a standing figure, but at the same time it is not an image of any person [24]. The oval pillar ends with a head with painted hair without an image of facial features on the monument belonging to Mahmud Girei Sultan (1688–1689) (image 10).

Thus, there are full, partial, and stylized zoomorphic and anthropomorphic images in the typological series of Crimean Tatar ornamental motifs. Apart from images on objects, anthropomorphic elements are present as silhouettes of various items. Depiction of motifs depends primarily on the material, technique, and functional purpose of the item. The motifs were colored, full, and stylized in the embroidery of towels and head mantles. They were conventional, geometrical, shaped in the form of partial elements in weaving; figurative, linearly engraved – on copper vessels; and realistic, stylized, and silhouetted – on other household items.
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Цель исследования: раскрыть традиции изображения антропоморфизма и зооморфизма в тюркской орнаментике Крыма, их типологические и художественные особенности, символический контекст.

Материалы исследования: проблема антропоморфных и зооморфных изображений в тюркской орнаментике Крыма рассмотрена на материале декоративно-прикладного искусства крымских татар с XIV века по настоящее время. Примеры орнаментальных изображений исследовались автором на основе фактологического материала, собранного в музеях России и Крыма. Семантика вышеперечисленных мотивов рассматривалась в работах Д.В. Черемисина, В.Г. Котова, С.М. Червонной.

Результаты и научная новизна: изучение орнаментики в крымскотатарском декоративно-прикладном искусстве показало, что в типологическом ряду орнаментальных мотивов на протяжении XIV – первой половины XX вв. присутствуют зооморфные и антропоморфные изображения: полные, частичные и стилизованные. Кроме изображений на предметах, элементы антропоморфности присутствуют в качестве силуэта предметов. Изображение мотивов зависит в первую очередь от материала, техники исполнения и функционального назначения вещи. В вышивке полотенец и головных покрывал мотивы выполнялись в цвете, полными и стилизованными, в ткачестве – условными, геометризованными в виде частичных элементов, на медной посуде – фигуративными, линейно выгравированными, на остальных предметах домашнего обихода – реалистичными, стилизованными и силуэтно.

Ключевые слова: крымскотатарское декоративно-прикладное искусство, орнаментальное искусство, мотив, антропоморфный, зооморфный, символика, особенности изображения


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