Arts Education in Central Asia

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Introduction

Central Asia is a region with a long history of art traditions, reaching as far back as the 2nd century AD. In this region of Asia, masters in the arts who wished to pass on their craft-skills and knowledge to students used the tradition of ustoshogird. This form of one-on-one apprenticeship between master and student was traditionally an oral form of teaching that was common in the sphere of arts and crafts, and has endured for many centuries. It remains popular in rural areas of Uzbekistan today. Baysun, the southern region of Uzbekistan, has been identified as a continuous centre for ustoshogird for nearly two-thousand years.

Influential European forms of art such as theatre, cinema, painting, sculpture, ballet and opera, became very popular in the 20th century and developed quickly alongside the more traditional forms of culture in Uzbekistan such as ceramics, weaving and textiles. These two branches of the arts follow very different methods of teaching. Ustoshogird persisted for the traditional forms of art whereas a European style of classroom-based mass education emerged for the newly introduced arts. The modern system of learning was introduced even though art teaching already had deep roots here. This mass education system was introduced in the region in the early 20th century after the formation of the USSR and the joining of the new states of Central Asia and Kazakhstan.

Education Reform in Uzbekistan

Before we can look at Art Education we have to examine the general situation and changes in the field of education in Uzbekistan. Following the collapse of the Soviet system in 1990 and after gaining independence, the young State of Uzbekistan faced the necessity of reforming its education system to meet international norms and standards. The modern system of education in Uzbekistan is based upon the “National Programme of Preparation of Human Resources and Education”, established on the initiative of President Islam Karimov and accepted as a Law of the State during the Independence period in 1997.

Education specialists who introduced the above new national programme studied the experiences of both domestic and foreign environments before implementing changes. These changes were designed to improve the quality of higher education and to provide qualified specialists to meet modern requirements.

The main changes were as follows:

- Beginning in 1998, basic schooling in Uzbekistan was set as a period of 11 years. However, after completing eight years students are able to enter specialist educational establishments for the remaining three years. This allows for specialisation to take place if it is appropriate.

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The three-year specialist secondary education takes place in two types of educational establishment: academic lyceums and professional colleges, which are organized along the lines of higher educational establishments.

A two-level system of achievement recognition was introduced for higher education; Baccalaureate (BA) for four years, followed by Master of Arts (MA) for two years.

When the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, was asked what realization of the new national programme will give, he answered that “the ... measures will positively affect the social-political climate and radically change the environment in the country”, and “the new model of education will speed up the process of individuals identifying their place in society”.

Art Education in Uzbekistan

These changes naturally also included art education. Therefore, today, art education in Uzbekistan has two parts: the teaching of art in schools and specialized training in the specialist art educational establishments (secondary schools, colleges and institutes) that prepare students to be professional actors, stage directors, dancers, artists and art teachers.

There are issues relating to the sphere of painting, sculpture and applied art in Uzbekistan during the Soviet period. During this period there were schools of painting and sculpture at educational institutes and colleges in Uzbekistan. However this higher level of education was only available in the cities of Tashkent, Moscow, Leningrad and other major cities of the USSR. This meant that smaller but culturally rich cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara did not benefit from the new training centres. In addition, Communist ideology strongly affected the methods of teaching and often only one method or style of art was recognized and followed. This method was determined centrally in Moscow. All art educational centres throughout the USSR had to adhere to the same principles. Use of any other methods was not permitted.

The prohibitions on different styles were removed after independence and more attention was paid to the uniqueness of national arts and styles. Interest in “Miniature Painting of the East”, a style of Islamic art from the Middle Ages, was reborn. In addition, Uzbek artists began to practice various forms of avant-garde art. Post-modernist, conceptual works and different installations began to appear in exhibitions more and more often. Nevertheless, the region’s traditional arts endured and the method of academic drawing remains the same. But whilst the forms of teaching in traditional kinds of applied arts remain effective, the teaching of fine art requires innovative change. The ‘Border’ project organized in 2003 by the Swiss Bureau for Co-operation for educational institutes and colleges at the Academy of Art was very interesting in this respect since it acknowledged this very fact.

The Academy of Art of Uzbekistan was founded in 1997 by the Decree of President Islam Karimov, and is considered a Government Ministry in its own right. One of the Academy’s priorities was to establish the system of ‘continuous art education’. As a result, educational secondary schools of applied and fine arts were opened in 12 regions.
of the republic. Three colleges were founded in Tashkent and one in Kokand. The First National Institute of Arts and Design was established on the basis of the art faculty of the Institute of Arts in Tashkent. The name of this Institute reflects the desire to develop what has been a weak area: design. The full cycle of art education is therefore now complete: the basic one (secondary school from 5th to 8th years), medium one (from 8 to 11th years and colleges from 1st to 3rd year) and the advanced (Baccalaureate 1st till 4th year in Institute and MA from 5th until 6th year).

The Academy has demonstrably widened the geographical spread of teaching of art and increased the number of students enrolled to study art. The results of this process, which has been going on over the last five to six years, have been very encouraging. One of the indications of success is the fact that students of these educational lyceums, from various regions of Uzbekistan, have begun to win major prizes and other big awards in prestigious international art competitions.

The state government has paid particular attention to the provision of technical infrastructure in specialized secondary education institutes, which has ensured that they are provided with up-to-date computers and equipment. Teachers often don’t have the skills, however, to work with this equipment or with the new media and Internet. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan is making attempts to use information technology in the field of art. In addition to electronic textbooks on the history of world art, multi-media programmes are being created for different types of the arts and culture. Programmes include: Eastern Miniatures, Blue ceramics of Samarkand, Baysun Folklore, Shashmakom, Culture and Art of Uzbekistan and others. The establishment in 2004 of the UNESCO Chair in Arts Management and Marketing at the Uzbekistan National Institute of Art and Design has been an important factor in the expansion of information technology in art education.

While the structure of education in Uzbekistan has changed significantly and improvements have been made, the reforms have not been complete and there have been drawbacks to the changes. For example, while the previous art curriculum took place over four years, now only three years are allocated for this curriculum. Only some disciplines (such as painting and sculpture) have retained the four years, by special dispensation of the government.

The topic of the role and place of art education remains a very important one and requires attention in Uzbekistan. In spite of a rich heritage of art, art education is not given a high priority in the modern education system of Uzbekistan. It is clear that the authorities do not appreciate the significance of art and its importance in child development and in forming the child’s view of the world. While much attention is dedicated to education in fields such as economics, foreign languages, and history, there is very little focused on the methods and theory of art (i.e. music or fine arts) or of art education. The option of using art as a tool for teaching other subjects has not even been considered. The situation is especially critical in rural and remote regions.

It is therefore vital that the republics of Central Asia are included in international discussions regarding the issues surrounding art education and are thereby in a position to find solutions and improve this situation of art in education in this region.