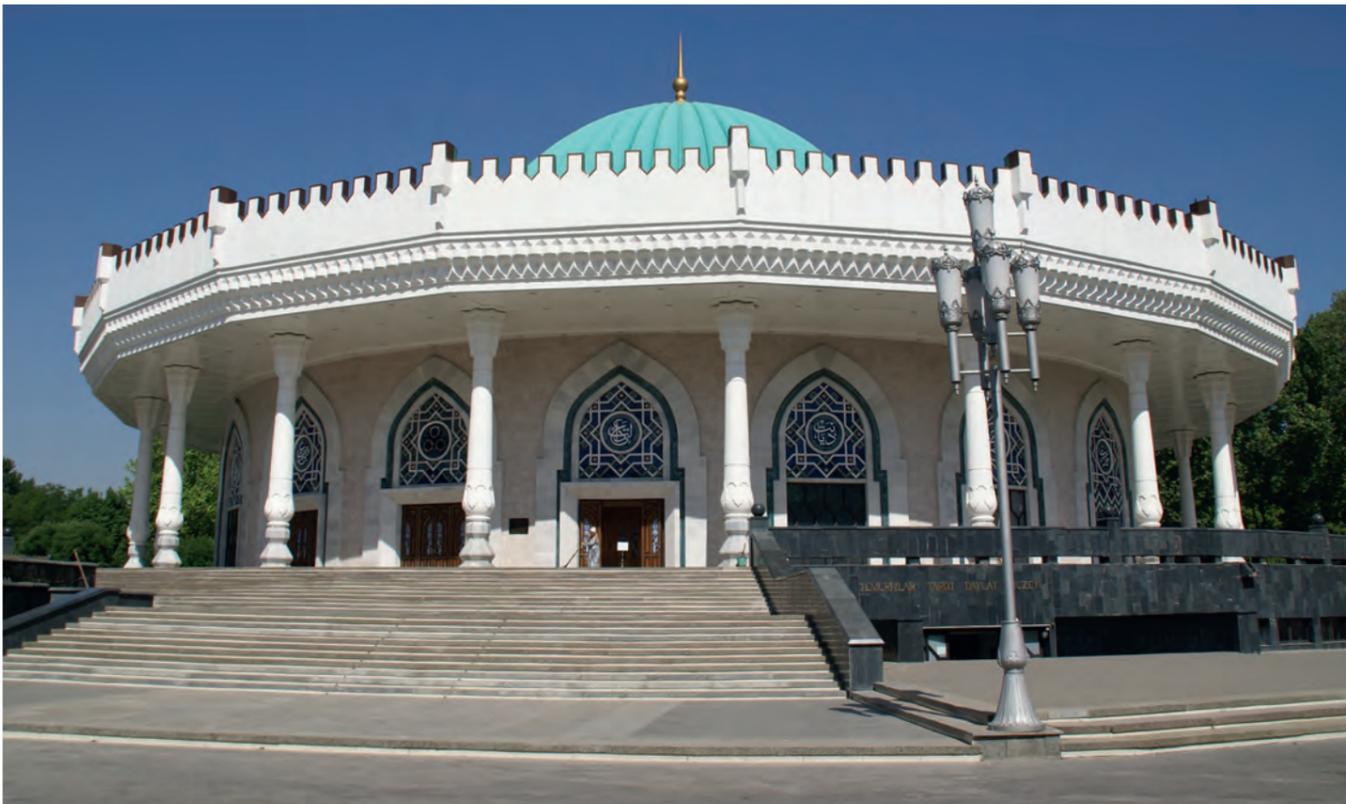


# Commemorating Tamerlane



One of the ‘great ancestors’ who has been consciously recognized and emulated by contemporary Uzbek elites is Amir Timur, commonly known as Tamerlane (d. 1405). The powerful personality of Timur and his grandiose architectural ambitions fostering state legitimation have made him the most popular symbol of post-Soviet political leadership in modern Uzbekistan. Maria Subtelny defines the rise and rule of Timur as “based on charismatic authority”.<sup>1</sup> Combined with bravery and the ambition to establish a powerful, centralized state, Timur used his charisma to create an entourage of trusted followers who belonged to leading families. In return, these loyal followers were rewarded with booty and high military positions. Although the material artefacts of the Timurid Empire have been widely acknowledged by the Soviet architectural historians, Timur as a state visionary, who created a powerful centralized empire based on a personal following,<sup>2</sup> was not generally recognized prior to 1991.<sup>3</sup> In the post-Soviet period, however, the Timurid legacy has been commemorated as the prototype of strong statehood, documented by Medieval emissaries from Spain to China.

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SEEKING WIDE INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION and trying to boost the sense of belonging within the newly independent state,<sup>4</sup> Timur was branded as the father of the Uzbek nation. At present, the historical provenance of Timur and the rich cultural production within the Timurid empire are narrated as apolitical, similar to the rhetoric of the *Ideology of National Independence* – ideology propagated by the official discourse as reflecting authentic Uzbek values and ‘high morality’, presumably widely accepted by the public at large. These virtues are not directly related to politics, but are regarded as elevating ideas that prescribe the ways for the Uzbek people to relate to the present and to aspire to the future.<sup>5</sup> Awareness of the historical glories will help the nation to achieve high goals; the legacy of the great ancestors will guide the nation. In modern Uzbekistan, Timurid heritage is seen as a representation of Timur’s humanistic achievements and state policy is re-enacted through the collective memory of Timur. As a result, one of the most characteristic post-1991 feature of the architectural boom in the Uzbek capital Tashkent is that the majority of the state-sponsored buildings draw inspiration from the glorious Timurid past.

## The Timurid Museum

Opened on 18 October 1996, the museum was built to celebrate Timur’s 660th anniversary. Situated in close proximity to the governmental quarters, its scale and design sets the pro-Timurid tone of Uzbek state ideology. The museum guidebook quotes the president on its front page:

Above:  
Timurid Museum  
in Tashkent.

*If somebody wants to understand who the Uzbeks are, if somebody wants to comprehend all the power, might, justice and unlimited abilities of the Uzbek people, their contribution to the global development, their belief in future, he should recall the image of Amir Temur.*<sup>6</sup>

Seen from the Timurid Square with the bronze equestrian monument of Amir Timur (1993), the museum is situated to the right of Timur’s horse statue and follows the line designated by his raised right arm. The orientation of the main staircase towards Timur’s monument creates a visual connection between the two. In this sense, the museum relates to the historical importance of the square, locally known as the *Skver*, which has been the ideological centre of Tashkent since 1882 and has been widely regarded as the primary locus of ‘civilized’ Russian rule.

The circle plan of the museum, designed by the architects Turdiev and Umarov in 1995, is based on the Mongol yurt (*ger*). Its architecture can be regarded as a modern shrine attesting the Turko-Mongol nomadic origin not only of Timur but of all Uzbeks. While in the Soviet nationalistic discourse nomadism was associated with backwardness, it was Amir Timur who combined nomadic military campaigns with a sedentary cultural production. In particular Timur’s son Shah Rukh and grandson Ulugh Beg created vibrant artistic centres in Herat and Samarqand respectively. Built to commemorate the achievements of the Timurid dynasty, the museum functions as a treasury of important Timurid artefacts and models of major architectural monuments. In particular, the curators of the permanent exhibition chose to present contemporary

Uzbek history and leadership in parallel to the achievements of the Timurid dynasty. Thus, one of the main purposes of the museum is to create what Laura Adams has described as the “continuity in the leadership of Uzbekistan”.<sup>7</sup> Portraits of the president narrating the historical virtues and values of his statecraft, a wall with personal testimonies by world leaders and a museum visit book, signed among others by Vladimir Putin, testify to the international recognition of Uzbekistan. The first page of the museum book was signed by Islam Karimov with the words “In this museum our past, present and great future are reflected as in a mirror.”

The building is crowned with a modern rendition of the ribbed turquoise Timurid dome, iconographically referencing the wooden frame structure of the yurt. The main exposition area is enclosed by an open *ayvan* (portico) with twenty white marble columns, replicating the craftsmanship of Uzbek carved capitals. The exterior walls are decorated with pseudo-portals, topped by eight-pointed stars with Arabic inscriptions in glazed tiles. While exterior epigraphy and exquisite tile revetments were widely used in Timurid monumental architecture, the inscriptions spelled out the names of God and the Prophet. However, the present texts at the Timurid museum reveal keywords of the *Ideology of Independence* such as: submissiveness, justice, renewal, conscience, mercy, dignity, success, faithfulness, stability, courage. According to Aziz Sharipov, a historian working at the museum, these words reflect “the core and the importance of the politics, exercised by the head of our state, the benevolent goals of the Uzbek people” (2014). The museum is thus conceived as a shrine to contemporary Uzbek politics rather than a commemoration site.

## Iconography of the triptych

The centrepiece of the museum is a monumental stucco triptych based on a modern rendition of Persian miniature painting featuring the life of Timur. The triptych, called ‘The Great Sakhibkiran – The Great Creator’, was painted in 1996 by a team of Uzbek artists collectively called *Sanoi Nafis*. The first panel is dedicated to the heroic birth of Timur, the Lord of the Fortunate Conjunction. According to Persian historiography, Timur adopted the imperial title of *sahib-qiran*, the world-conqueror, professing that his destiny is governed by the auspicious conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Venus. The astrological sign of Aries refers to Timur’s presumed birthday on 8 April 1336. However, there is no direct historical testimony confirming the exact date.<sup>8</sup> Beatrice Manz has pointed out that the year 1336 was perhaps chosen to stress the dynastic succession of the Ilkhanid and Timurid dynasties, whereby Timur chronologically followed the last Ilkhan Abu Said, who died in 1335. The Ilkhans were a Mongol dynasty, founded by Genghis Khan’s grandson Hulegu, that ruled in Iran from 1256 to 1335. Throughout his military campaigns Timur aimed at recreating the Mongol empire and achieving recognized primacy over the Islamic world.

The lower scene of the triptych depicts a cradle (*beshik*) surrounded by young women singing a lullaby and embroidering the cradle curtain for Timur. The idyllic landscape is marked by a poplar tree that refers to the birth of a son. The royal tent, symbol of power and prosperity at Islamic courts, makes up most of the background. It is festooned in gold and turquoise blue, with decorative motifs used in Timurid miniature painting and architecture. Yet, Timur did not have a royal origin. He was a member of the tribal aristocracy, but he was neither a descendant of Genghis Khan, nor a chief of his own Turkic Barlas tribe. That is why Timur could not claim the title of khan, a mark of sovereignty among the steppe nomads, and could not call himself a caliph, the supreme title of the Islamic world. Instead, he established himself as a supreme military leader, proud of his valour and audacity, symbolized in the triptych by a falcon perching on top of the royal tent.

The central panel, called *Rising*, reveals Timur as a just leader, strong statesman, wise diplomat and as the founder of a mighty dynasty. The scene is framed as a majestic *iwan* (ceremonial gate used in Timurid architecture). The text in the cartouche just above the pointed arch is in Persian and reads: “If you are truthful, you will be saved”. Timur is seated on a gilded Solomon throne, surrounded by astronomers, scholars, poets and military chieftains. Four selected members of the Timurid dynasty are represented in the lower tier of the composition. These are (from left to right) Sultan Muhammad (1383-1403), Timur’s grandson and heir presumptive, who died before Timur but is remembered for building the ensemble at Gur-i Amir that would become the Timurid dynastic mausoleum; Ulugh Beg (d. 1449), renowned astronomer and ruler of Samarqand; Sultan Husayn Bayqara (d. 1506), governor of Herat, known as one of the most influential artistic patrons in the fifteenth century; and Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur (1483-1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India. They sit around a wooden bookstand and revere the Timurid codebook (*Malfuzat-i Timuri*: The autobiography of Timur, known in Russian as *Ulozhenie Timura*). The work is widely regarded in post-1991 Uzbekistan as the basis of statehood; it consists of two parts: Timur’s (incomplete) biography between 1343 and 1381 and guiding principles for successful governance

# Ideological and iconographical approaches at the Timurid Museum

and military tactics. It is remarkable that the artists of the triptych chose to portray not the four sons of Timur but four members of the Timurid dynasty whose accomplishments are widely known and recognized worldwide. They venerate a book that was compiled and cherished by Timur's descendants and has been propagated throughout the Mughal and local dynastic courts as the epitome of ingenious statecraft.

Timur's three-circle seal (*tamgha*) is depicted to the right of his throne; the three circles are also situated above the main entrance to the museum. Initially, they adorned the entrance portal to the Aq Saray palace (1379-1396) in Shahr-i Sabz – the bastion city of Timur's Barlas tribe.<sup>9</sup> The panel reveals further key Timurid monuments such as the Bibi Khanum Mosque in Samarqand and the Ahmad Yassawi Shrine in Turkestan (Kazakhstan). Two angels descending from the Heavens bestow a heavenly mandate to Timur. The left one is carrying a sword, celebrating Timur's military power and prowess; the right one is offering him the Koran. These two symbols are essential to Timur's Empire, implying that he ruled with a just, firm hand by observing the Koran. In the didactic sense, Timur is portrayed as an exemplary ruler, enacting the will of God. The same idea of a just statesman, postulated in *Ulozhenie Timura*, is reiterated in the slogan "Strength is in Justice", inscribed on the equestrian statue on Timur's Square.

The third section of the triptych, entitled *Pride*, is dedicated to the last stages of Timur's life. Timur died on 18 February 1405 near Utrar (in Kazakhstan), which is why the panel depicts the astrological sign of Aquarius. The star of *sahib-qiran* is metaphorically shining in the centre of the composition and lights up the future. The sage in the white robe bequeaths Timur's testimony to the young generation. The book in his hands might also metaphorically refer to the Sunni orthodoxy (Timur was a Hanafi Sunni), implying that the state-approved Sunni Islam is a religion learned by reading books. The water-mill wheel alludes to the repetition of historical events, i.e., the historically attested might and glory of Uzbekistan achieved during the Timurid period, is now being reinstated and reconfirmed in the years of independence. Science (exemplified by the sextant, referencing Ulugh Beg's observatory in Samarqand) is also the pride of modern Uzbekistan. The third panel ends with a poem by the celebrated poet Alisher Navoi (d. 1501) entitled 'My era!'. Navoi was a distinguished member of the Timurid court in Herat and is generally considered as the father of Uzbek literature.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to note that part of the triptych also depicts some Shaybanid monuments, such as the tympanum of the Shir Dar Madrasa on Registan Square revealing a solar disk. This detail, placed next to Timur's throne, is endlessly multiplied on textbook covers, tourist brochures and billboards. Although the Shaybanid dynasty, and in particular its importance in Tashkent, has not been widely spread in the Soviet period,<sup>11</sup> I think that the architectural legacy of the khans in the Uzbek capital and their intrinsic Uzbek roots have been artistically reinstated in recent years.<sup>12</sup>

The triptych can be interpreted as a Timurid manifesto that underlines the socio-political and cultural agenda of the Uzbek state. Furthermore, it sets the tone for architectural production

with Timurid monumentality as the best example to follow. The text, "If you have doubts about our grandeur, look at our edifice", supposedly inscribed on the Aq Saray palace in Shahr-i Sabz, has been incorporated as one of the main guiding principles of *Ulozhenie Timura*. Even though there is no actual material evidence verifying the existence of this inscription, Timurid architecture is undoubtedly exquisite and inventive, and Timur has been widely praised by court chronicles and by foreign ambassadors for the initiation and sponsorship of opulent and grandeur buildings. The ruler as a builder and creator of the material world is one of the main prerogatives of his divinely bestowed mandate. Although in independent Uzbekistan the political elite is allegedly elected, the ambition to follow the ancestral testimonies of leadership is paralleled with the commission of lavish contemporary architecture, which only the state can afford to finance.

## The Uthman Koran

A huge Koran reading stand is situated at the centre of the main museum hall. At present, a 1905 copy of the Uthman Koran rests on it. The vertical axis of the museum is accentuated by the Koran reading stand on the ground floor, the Swarovski chandelier hanging from the inner dome, covered with thin sheets of gold, and the green outer dome, representing the celestial sphere. All these attributes underline the profound influence of Islamic heritage.

The original Uthman Koran (also known as the Samarqand codex) was compiled in Medina under the third Sunni caliph Uthman (r. 644-656) and is considered to be one of the oldest in the world. The original is kept at the Hazrat Imam Complex in the old part of Tashkent; it is believed to be one of six surviving copies, the other ones were sent to Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Kufu and Basra.<sup>13</sup> The blood of the caliph stained the Koran and legend has it that the blood stains on the Tashkent copy can be related to Uthman. Some historians believe that Abu Bakr Muhammad Kaffel Shashi brought the Koran from Baghdad to Samarqand in the tenth century. However, the majority of scholars agree that Timur captured it during his military campaigns either in Syria or Iraq and kept it in the main sanctuary of his Bibi Khanum Mosque in Samarqand. Known ever since as the Samarqand codex, the Koran was further preserved at the madrasa of Khwaja Ahrar in Samarqand. In 1863 the Hungarian orientalist Vamberi visited Samarqand and saw it on a giant stand at Gur-i Amir.<sup>14</sup> He suggests that Timur took the Koran from Bayezid after defeating him in the battle of Ankara in 1402.

In 1869, after the Russian conquest of Turkestan, the governing general of the Zeravshan region, Abramov, handed the manuscript to general Konstantin von Kaufman, who sent it to the Imperial Public Library in Saint Petersburg. In the late nineteenth century, the Koran was extensively studied by Shebunin and in 1905 Pisarev published a facsimile edition, of which fifty copies were made. The present copy at the Timurid museum is one of these facsimiles. After the revolution in 1917, the Soviet authorities returned the Koran to the administration of the Muslims in Russia, located in Ufa. Later on in 1923 it was transported to Tashkent by a special train. In Tashkent,

it was initially kept at the Kukeldash madrasa. Prior to 2007, the Uthman Koran was exhibited in a glass safe at the Library of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. The Russian building of the library was demolished during the recent reconstruction of the Hazrat Imam Complex. Since 2007 the Uthman Koran has been preserved in the Muiy Mubarak madrasa. Built by the mayor of Tashkent Mirzo Ahmad Kushbegi between 1856-57, the madrasa apparently houses a hair of the prophet Muhammad. The Koran is kept in a glass case in the middle of the centrally domed space, the hair is underneath it. During the restorations in 2007, only the building of the Muiy Mubarak madrasa was adorned with a blue ribbed dome, denoting its primary importance within Hazrat Imam and directly relating it to Timurid architecture.

With its long history, the Uthman Koran has always been a major trophy in the hands of the ruling elites, whose buildings were regarded as proper commemoration sites attesting its religious importance. The Koran at the Timurid museum unveils the state tolerance towards Islam. As pointed out in *Ulozhenie Timura*, Timur understood that society cannot live without religion. The fact that, although being illiterate, Timur knew the Koran by heart and engaged in theological disputes testifies to his "elevated spirituality, the purity and firmness of his faith".<sup>15</sup> However, Timur also recognized the division between the secular state and religion, which is clearly manifested throughout the independence discourse. In modern Uzbekistan, Timurid cultural heritage is seen as a representation of Timur's humanistic achievements.

## Concluding remarks

The post-independence building activities in the Uzbek capital have been characterized by the Timurid (and partially Shaybanid) heritage used as an iconographic source for the formation of the architectural landscape of modern Tashkent. The state as the main commissioner of all major construction sites aspires a material recognition of its policies through elevating the cultural and religious heritage of great ancestors. The *Ideology of National Independence* created by the political and intellectual elite has pledged for shared goals and ideals stemming from the Uzbek collective memory. Architecture is used by the present regime as a tool to profess ideological power and prompt respect and recognition at local and international level.

**Elena Paskaleva is a lecturer in Critical Heritage Studies at Leiden University. Her current research focuses on material culture of Central Asia and in particular on the history and socio-political importance of Timurid architecture in Uzbekistan. At present, she is also involved as a post-doctoral researcher in an initiative to strengthen the study and teaching of Central Asia in Leiden. In 2014 she was an associate at the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University. Her latest interests involve urban developments across Central Asia (elpask@gmail.com).**

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Below: Triptych in the main museum hall with the Uthman Koran facsimile in the foreground.

All photographs are by the author.

