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Crimean clay toy as a carrier of cultural memory: traditions and transformations

Abstract. The article analyzes the current state of the Crimean clay toy as a significant phenomenon of regional art crafts. It examines the regional and historical artistic traditions, their transformation in the 20th–21st centuries, and the contribution of leading masters – toy makers. Particular attention is paid to the figurative system, plasticity, technological aspects and the role of the toy in preserving cultural memory, as well as the synthesis of traditional craft principles and individual authorial style.

Keywords: Crimean clay toy; cultural heritage, traditional crafts, Crimean Tatar art, material culture, artistic originality, ethnographic tradition, hand-modeling techniques.

The modern Crimean clay toy occupies a stable place in the structure of regional art crafts, serving as an important bearer of cultural memory and artistic originality. Its development takes place within the multilayered historical and cultural space of the Crimean Peninsula, which for centuries has been a zone of intense interethnic and interfaith interactions. The region's multicultural nature has determined the diversity of folk art forms and shaped the specific syncretic character of craft practices [4]. In this context, the modern author's clay toy functions not only as an object of artistic production, but also as a significant carrier of cultural memory. It represents the processes of preservation, transformation and creative reinterpretation of traditional heritage within the framework of contemporary artistic discourse, acting as a mediator between historical experience and modernity.

The relevance of studying the modern Crimean toy is determined by the need to analyze the mechanisms of preservation and transformation of local traditions in the context of globalization processes and the unification of visual culture. In these conditions, it is authentic craft practices that become carriers of stable cultural meanings capable of resisting the leveling influence of mass culture. The Crimean author's toy is an example of an organic synthesis of tradition and individual artistic expression, which makes it a significant object of interdisciplinary research.

The clay toy in the Crimean Tatar cultural tradition has deep roots dating back to the 14th–17th centuries. Archaeological materials from the Bakhchisarai, Belogorsk and Sudak districts, as well as the territory of medieval Solkhat, attest to the widespread use of small clay plastic art [3]. Among the finds are zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines, as well as various types of whistles made from local

red clay with the addition of grog and decorated with engobe painting or engraving (Fig. 1⁶⁹).



Fig. 1. R. Yakubov. The screaming Tatar whistle. Reconstruction.

In addition to their play function, these items served a sacred and protective role: whistling was considered a means of expelling evil spirits, while animal images symbolized fertility, protection of livestock and family well-being. Traditional production centers – Alushta, Balaklava and Old Crimea – were distinguished by a developed ornamental culture and a high level of decorative expressiveness [7, p. 162].

The modern stage of development of the Crimean clay toy is characterized by a rejection of mechanical reproduction of tradition. Masters interpret it as a dynamic system, open to renewal and dialogue with contemporary artistic trends. The main directions of development include:

- free work with form: from archaic silhouettes to avant-garde solutions;
- expansion of scale: from miniatures to large decorative objects;
- broadening of the thematic spectrum: images and symbols reflecting the modern cultural environment;
- preservation of basic plastic principles: integrity of the silhouette, generalization of form, and symbolic richness of the image.

In the works of contemporary Crimean masters, the key formal and plastic characteristics of the archetypal folk toy are preserved; however, their development takes place within the context of complex cultural transformations. The experience of the Crimean Tatars living in Uzbekistan had a significant influence on modern Crimean Tatar toys, leading to the incorporation of elements of Central Asian plasticity, decorative motifs and color schemes. This enriched their own tradition with new intonations and enhanced its intercultural expressiveness [1, pp. 148-149].

The artistic level of contemporary Crimean Tatar clay toys is largely determined by the creative work of leading ceramists who operate at the intersection of deep ethno-cultural tradition and contemporary authorial art. In the context of the evolution of Crimean ceramic toys in the 20th–21st centuries, the artistic practices of Abdyul' Seit Ametov, Rustem Yakubov, Eldar Gusenov and Shamil Ilyasov are of particular importance. These authors have shaped new directions in the interpretation of traditional plasticity and expanded its expressive possibilities.

Abdyul' Seit Ametov is one of the key creators of the modern authorial direction in Crimean Tatar ceramics. His toys are miniature genre scenes depicting craftsmen from the early 20th century. The characters are distinguished by vivid individualization, expressive facial expressions and characteristic ethno-cultural details. A special place is occupied by compositions of potters, executed with high plastic dynamism, characterized not only by the virtuosity of the plastic solution but

⁶⁹ Figs. 1-13, 19. Photo by the author of the article.

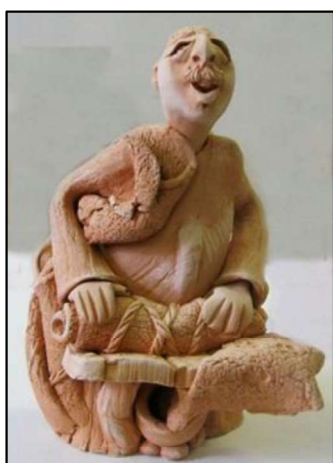
also by a deep knowledge of the craftsmen's daily life, transformed into an artistic image (Figs. 2-7).



Figs. 2, 3. A. Seit Ametov. Clay toys “The craftsmen”

Fig. 4. A. Seit Ametov.
Whistles

Exhibition “Crimean style” 2009. Exhibition Hall of the Artists' Union, Simferopol



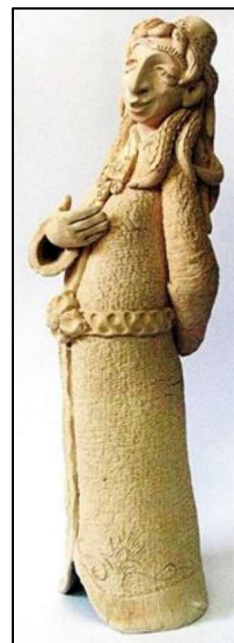
Figs. 5-7. A. Seit Ametov. Clay toys “The craftsmen”

Exhibition “Crimean style” 2009. Exhibition Hall of the Artists' Union, Simferopol

The works of R. Yakubov are characterized by ethnographic authenticity and authorial plasticity. The ceramist created a recognizable image of the 19th-century Crimean Tatars, drawing on ethnographic sources. His works are distinguished by psychological expressiveness, soft plasticity, restrained natural color palette and texture, which allows them to transcend the boundaries of conventional folk plasticity and approach chamber genre sculpture. The master combines ethnographic authenticity with authorial interpretation, forming the visual canon of the modern toy (Figs. 8, 9).

For many years, R. Yakubov worked at the Crimean engineering and pedagogical university, where, in addition to teaching contemporary decorative ceramics, he paid significant attention to the study of folk toys.

Fig. 8. R. Yakubov. Clay toy “Crimean Tatar woman”



Under his guidance, students completed coursework and thesis research dedicated to Crimean Tatar folklore and ethnic souvenir toys. This work contributed to the formation of a scientific base for the further study of regional traditions in art crafts (Figs. 10-13).

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Fig. 9. R. Yakubov. Clay toy "The Crimean Tatar"



Figs. 10, 11. S. Pashenko. Toy series "Crimean souvenir". Graduation thesis, 2011



Fig. 12. R. Gafarov. Genre decorative composition "Khydyrlez" Graduation thesis, 2008



Fig. 13. S. Adzhimamutov. Clay toy based on Crimean Tatar fairy tales Graduation thesis, 2013

The work of Sh. Ilyasov is dedicated to the preservation and the most consistent development of the stylistics of Central Asian folk toys. His characters – the “sunny” figurines of people and animals – are distinguished by their soft plasticity, emotional expressiveness and vivid everyday imagery [7, p. 165]. The master actively employs traditional techniques of hand-molding, engraving and glazing (Figs. 14-18⁷⁰).



Figs. 14-16. Sh. Ilyasov. Small-scale clay plastic in the style of Central Asian folk toys

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Fig. 14. URL: https://sun9-17.userapi.com/s/v1/ig2/XD2f4xBaYm88EDyFbLoKJPpnxdHacz7iax96vaUIDiX4c9-afoMOTD2WQl79LHjRwNCGnvZkT2gjG3_1XirTdU.jpg?quality=95&as=32x29,48x44,72x65,108x98,160x145,240x218,360x326,480x435,540x490,640x580,720x653,1080x979,1280x1161,1440x1306,1630x1478&from=bu&cs=1630x0 (date of access: 20.02.2026) ;

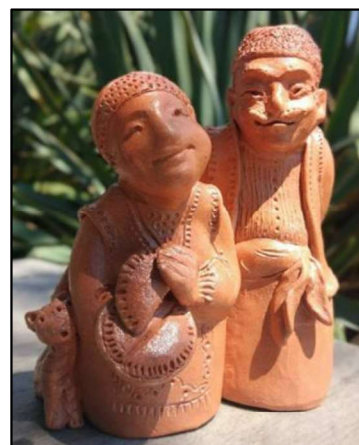
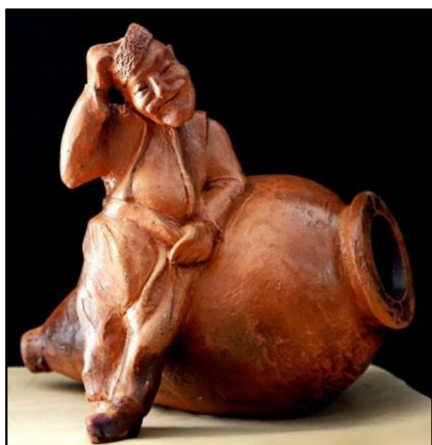
Fig. 15. – URL: https://sun9-53.userapi.com/s/v1/ig2/9DE4XeGKA6ZyLGJxl_Svo63dMiu3DiWbOA9gLx-OhANWA9fFP8xFUQ4199wYm8O_VHR0NZrFhwOrXtthhc7xZwol.jpg?quality=95&as=32x43,48x64,72x96,108x144,160x213,240x320,360x479,480x639,540x719,640x852,720x959,1080x1438,1280x1705,1440x1918,1922x2560&from=bu&cs=1922x0 (date of access: 20.02.2026) ;

Fig. 16. URL: https://sun9-42.userapi.com/s/v1/ig2/ryHGuL3lkHoVbHPwSKt1NemCcSK0JcxOz9jP6EzByzyNwC74xaEGriuOK6exk3RYJbSHsjD_CnRfFltnZL93EX1F.jpg?quality=95&as=32x36,48x54,72x80,108x121,160x179,240x268,360x402,480x536,540x603,640x715,720x805,1080x1207,1280x1430,1440x1609,1531x1711&from=bu&cs=1531x0 (date of access: 20.02.2026) ;

Fig. 17. URL: <https://sun9-55.userapi.com/s/v1/ig2/2DyUvEqUeD3hh1pZReaKXxwDnsaKR-pGLvs3opHjG1VuubPmu4lZt3LLuerbGn7h68G5aQoE0ISpPVwWijhOYtwc.jpg?quality=95&as=32x32,48x48,72x72,108x108,160x161,240x241,360x361,480x482,540x542,640x642,720x723,1080x1084&from=bu&cs=1080x0> (date of access: 20.02.2026) ;

Fig. 18. URL: https://sun9-17.userapi.com/s/v1/ig2/Z3v9F6DV7T5Uk__XJeg8z20OySnt_vXdlv-vvgCqKDaQdcDbVjV9K7jz9bV9LJ-plwynmUcdyvrQ3Rtrj4ZZn_md.jpg?quality=95&as=32x24,48x36,72x54,108x81,160x120,240x180,360x270,480x360,540x405,640x480,720x540,1080x810,1280x960,1440x1080,1896x1422&from=bu&cs=1896x0 (date of access: 13.02.2026).

The figurative system of the modern Crimean toy in the form of zoomorphic whistles is created by E. Gusenov. The artist focuses on the purity and expressiveness of the silhouette, the rhythmic organization of the form and the use of laconic ornamental elements such as cutouts and imprints. At the same time, the master consciously avoids excessive detailing and illusionistic rendering, which aligns with the principles of folk artistic thinking. This approach is oriented not toward a literal reproduction of nature, but toward its metaphorical and symbolic interpretation. His works continue the tradition of the symbolic understanding of animal imagery (Fig. 19).



Figs. 17, 18. Sh. Ilyasov. Small-scale clay plastic in the style of Central Asian folk toys



Fig. 19. E. Gusenov. Whistles. Exhibition “Crimean style”. 2010. Simferopol

A significant contribution to the study and reconstruction of the historical forms of Crimean ceramics is made by A.I. Cheremisov. He investigates the interrelation between form, ornament and technology, creating authorial interpretations of archaeological samples and developing toys based on materials from various epochs – from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. His works demonstrate a scientifically grounded approach to reconstruction and a creative reinterpretation of tradition. For instance, Slavic bird-shaped toys in his execution gain a “voice”, transforming into whistles [6] (Fig. 20⁷¹).

⁷¹ Fig. 20. “My element is ceramics”: the works of master Alexander Cheremisov introduce the artistic ceramics of Crimea. – URL: https://промыслы.рф/history/view/1178?utm_medium=organic&utm_source=yandexsmartcamera (date of access: 12.02.2026).

The modern Crimean toy retains the traditional zoomorphic and ornithomorphic types, yet it acquires a distinctly decorative character. Masters pay attention to the purity and expressiveness of the silhouette, the rhythmic organization of form, laconic ornamentation and a rejection of excessive detailing. Hand-molding remains the key technology, ensuring the individuality of each piece. The use of local clays strengthens the connection to the regional environment and forms a characteristic color palette [8]. These technological features maintain a link with tradition and ensure the authenticity of the items. The transformation of the toy's functional status reflects the general trends in the development of art crafts, in which traditional forms acquire a conceptual and artistic dimension.



Fig. 20. A.I. Cheremisov. Old Slavic plastic art. Whistles

The transformation of the functional and sociocultural status of the clay toy logically leads to an expansion of its artistic tasks. The modern toy is increasingly losing its utilitarian function and becoming an independent art object intended for exhibition and collecting. This leads to higher requirements for compositional integrity, plastic expressiveness and the conceptual justification of form. The tradition does not disappear but becomes a source of creative dialogue and cultural interpretation.

The modern Crimean clay toy is a complex artistic phenomenon that combines traditional craft principles and individual authorial strategies. Its development occurs in the context of Crimea's multilayered cultural environment, which determines the syncretic character of its figurative system and plasticity. Leading masters – A. Seit Ametov, R. Yakubov, Sh. Ilyasov, E. Gusenov and A. Cheremisov – have made a significant contribution to the formation of the modern artistic language of the toy, expanding its thematic and plastic range.

The Crimean clay toy remains an important object of cultural memory and the artistic identity of the region, which necessitates further research within the framework of interdisciplinary and multicultural reflection.

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