



POST-SOVIET CHANGES IN SAMARKAND MUSEUMS

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Abstract

This article explores the transformations in the museum landscape of Samarkand following Uzbekistan's independence from the Soviet Union. It examines how these changes reflect broader shifts in national identity, cultural policy, and historical narrative. Drawing on scholarly literature, museum collections, official websites, and news sources, the study categorizes the main institutional, architectural, and ideological developments that have shaped museum practices in the post-Soviet period. It highlights the growing emphasis on national heritage, the marginalization of minority histories, and the role of modernization and state investment in redefining cultural memory. The findings demonstrate how museums in Samarkand have become key instruments in the construction of a new national identity and collective memory in independent Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Samarkand, museums, post-Soviet Uzbekistan, cultural heritage, national identity, collective memory

INTRODUCTION

1990-2000 were the years when Uzbekistan gained its independence and conducted an independent policy in all spheres of social life, particularly, in the field of artistic culture [17, 324]. The transformations in Samarkand's museums in the post-Soviet period show how memory and identity are shaped in independent Uzbekistan. Museums, as places that collect and show history, have an important role in influencing what people remember and believe about the past. They decide which stories are told and which ones are left out, helping to support certain political ideas. In Samarkand, these cultural sites have become



arenas where the city's complex past is reinterpreted to align with new national ideologies and political priorities, continuing the processes of remembering and forgetting described by scholars such as Herzfeld and Connerton [6, 226], [5, 59-71]. The reconfiguration of museum exhibits, alongside the renaming of streets and monuments, illustrates how post-Soviet cultural policy seeks to reaffirm a specific vision of Samarkand's heritage – one that integrates its diverse historical layers while emphasizing elements that support the nation-building project under Uzbekistan's independence [18, 534], [3, 318], [1, 318].

Before becoming part of the Russian Empire, Samarkand was the capital of the independent Emirate of Bukhara (1756–1868), ruled by the Uzbek Manghyt dynasty. During this time, the city's population included diverse ethnic groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, Ironi, Jews, Hindus, and Afghans [9, 162]. Samarkand was known as a holy Islamic city and the legendary home of Amir Timur (Tamerlane). Local historical narratives, like those found in *Samariya* By Abu Tahir Khoja (1899) and *Qandiya*, emphasize the city's connection to mythical and historical rulers, including figures from the *Shah-nameh* by Persian poet Ferdowsi, such as Faridun, Tur, Kay-Kavus, and Alexander the Great, with a special focus on Timur and his impact on the city's development. These sources also provide detailed accounts of Islamic shrines, mosques, and madrasahs in the city.

In 1868, Samarkand was incorporated into the Russian Empire, which introduced its own memory politics. The city developed two main districts – Muslim and Russian – and became home to various religious communities, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews [10, 132]. Russian influence reshaped the city's architecture, urban layout, and public rituals. The local administration emphasized Samarkand's dual identity as an administrative center and the former capital of Timur's empire, symbolized by Timur's tamgha featured on the official emblem approved in 1890 [13]. Streets and public spaces in the Russian part were named after political and cultural figures significant to Russian Turkestan, reflecting a layered and contested cultural memory.

This complex history of Samarkand, marked by diverse cultural influences and changing rulers, set the stage for the significant changes that took place after Uzbekistan gained independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In



the post-Soviet period, Samarkand's museums became important places for rethinking and presenting the city's past. These museums started to highlight new historical narratives, choosing which stories and figures to celebrate in a way that reflects the country's emerging national identity. Through their exhibitions and collections, the museums showcase not only Samarkand's rich heritage but also the vision of Uzbekistan as a modern, independent nation.

This article examines the changes in Samarkand's museums as a way to understand how the city's historical and cultural identity has been reshaped since independence. By looking at how museums preserve monuments, display artifacts, and tell stories, the study reveals how the past is represented and valued today. The transformations in these cultural institutions connect deeply with Samarkand's long history as a cultural and political center, shaped by many different peoples, empires, and traditions

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a qualitative and analytical approach, focusing on the post-Soviet transformations of museums in Samarkand. The study was carried out through a comprehensive review and analysis of various sources, both primary and secondary. It includes a review of academic works by both local and international scholars, as well as materials from the collection of the Samarkand State Museum-Reserve. Additional information was gathered from the official websites of museums, which provided historical data and updates on exhibitions, the information from the Wikipedia, and from news websites that reported on museum-related events, restorations, and government initiatives. Together, these sources helped to identify key changes and trends in the post-Soviet museum landscape of Samarkand.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the collected materials reveals a broad range of changes that have taken place in the museum landscape of Samarkand since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These transformations reflect not only shifts in cultural policy and national identity but also practical responses to institutional, architectural, and economic challenges. Based on the study of literature, museum collections, and



official sources, the following table summarizes and categorizes the major developments observed in Samarkand's museums during the post-Soviet era. These changes are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1. The list of changes occurred in the museums of Samarkand in the post-Soviet era

Category	Change Description	Details / Examples
1. Relocation and Spatial Transformation	Relocation of museum buildings	- 2005: <i>Chorsu</i> shopping center turned into an art gallery. - 2010: <i>State Museum of Cultural History</i> moved from Registan to Mirzo Ulugbek Street.
	Transfer of architectural elements	- Early 2000s: <i>Chingiz Akhmarov's</i> mural panels (1963–1965) moved to the <i>Ulugbek Museum</i> .
2. National Identity and Cultural Revival	Expansion of national heritage collections	- more than 1500 items added to <i>Samarkand State Museum-Reserve</i> , including bridal wear, carpets, gold embroidery.
	Celebration of achievements and figures	- <i>History Museum</i> displays achievements in culture, science, and economy. - <i>Pakhtachi Museum</i> : Re-exposition with state symbols and portraits of the first president. - <i>Ishtikhan Museum</i> : Updates about development achievements.
	Highlighting cultural figures	- <i>Pakhtachi Museum</i> : Exhibits on <i>Cho'lpon</i> , <i>Fitrat</i> , and classical singers (<i>J. Sultonov</i> , <i>Y. Rajabiy</i> , <i>M. Uzoqov</i>).
	Regional art and crafts exhibitions	- <i>Afrosiyab Museum</i> : Jewelry, embroidery, and gold-threaded clothing from major Uzbek regions.
3. Decline of Peripheral Institutions	Deterioration of smaller museum facilities	- Post-1991: Peripheral branches suffered due to lack of funding and were damaged or demolished.
	Closure of historic museum spaces	- Soviet-era museums on Tsarist and minority histories closed or demolished.
	Displacement of archival materials	- Archival documents crated and stored in warehouses, limiting research access.
	Marginalization of minority histories	- Decline in representation of <i>Bukharan Jews</i> , <i>Russians</i> , and other minorities.
4. Ideological & Historical Reorientation	Shift toward national-Islamic narratives	- Increased focus on <i>Timurid</i> and <i>Islamic heritage</i> , diminishing Soviet narratives.
	Return of religious sites to sacred use	- Former museum-shrines restored as active pilgrimage sites.
	Creation of Imam al-Bukhari Memorial Complex	- 1997: Decision made to celebrate his 1225th anniversary. - 1998: Complex built with artisans from 8 regions, includes a library-museum with <i>rare Qur'ans</i> and <i>Kaaba covering</i> gifted to President Karimov.



5. Modernization & State Investment	Development of legal framework	- By 2019: 35 laws and regulations passed, including presidential decrees and cabinet resolutions.
	Reconstruction of key museums	- <i>Ishtikhan History Museum</i> (2014) - <i>Cultural History Museum</i> (2014) - <i>Afrosiyab Museum</i> (2016–17, 2nd floor restored for Samarkand's 2750th anniversary).
	Establishment of new museums	- 2022: <i>Archaeological Museum</i> founded at <i>Samarkand State University</i> .
	Government investment in cultural sites	- 2018: 300 million soums invested in <i>Sadriiddin Ayni Museum</i> reconstruction for his 140th jubilee.
	Reconstruction and modernization of Ulughbek Observatory Museum	- In 1994, on the occasion of <i>Ulughbek's 600th birth anniversary</i> , major restoration work was carried out at the observatory, and new exhibitions were created. - In 2010, a <i>new museum building</i> was constructed to replace the old one, which did not meet seismic standards.
6. Reform of Archive Systems	New management system in state archives	- 1995: Economic management system introduced. <i>Tashkent region</i> archives adapted successfully, while regions like <i>Samarkand, Fergana, Bukhara, Andijan</i> , etc., faced serious challenges and transitioned very slowly.

The changes in Samarkand's museums after the fall of the Soviet Union show a complex process influenced by political, cultural, and economic shifts in Uzbekistan. These changes can be grouped into several main areas: relocation and space changes, strengthening national identity, decline of smaller institutions, shifts in ideology and history presentation, modernization, and reforms in archives.

First, many important museums experienced significant **relocation and rebuilding** to fit new priorities. For example, the State Museum of Cultural History moved from Registan to Mirzo Ulugbek Street in 2010 [17, 17], and the "Chorsu" shopping center was converted into an art gallery [4]. Valuable artworks, such as murals by Chingiz Akhmarov, were also moved to more appropriate locations like the Ulugbek Museum to better protect and display them [17, 326]. A strong focus on **national identity and cultural heritage** shaped many museum collections and exhibitions. Museums added traditional Uzbek costumes, carpets, and gold embroidery to highlight the country's rich history [17, 17-18], [19]. Exhibitions also began to showcase achievements in culture,



science, and politics since independence. Important historical figures and artists were featured more prominently, helping to build a shared national story [20], [21].

At the same time, many smaller museums and archives, especially those preserving minority histories or Soviet-era collections, faced neglect and closure due to lack of funding. This caused some histories, particularly of minority communities, to be less visible and made it harder for researchers to access archival materials [2, 15].

There was also a clear **shift in museum themes** toward celebrating Uzbekistan's Timurid and Islamic heritage. Religious sites that had been turned into museums during Soviet times were often returned to their original spiritual roles. For example, the Imam al-Bukhari memorial complex was built as part of this focus, combining a museum and library with rare religious manuscripts and artifacts [11, 156].

Significant **modernization efforts and government support** helped restore and improve major museums. The Afrosiab Museum was renovated [19], new museums like the Archaeological Museum at Samarkand State University were established [22], and important buildings like the Ulughbek Observatory Museum were rebuilt with safety in mind [12]. Laws and regulations introduced over the years have helped organize and support museum activities [7, 48].

Lastly, the reform of archive management in the 1990s showed mixed results. While archives in some regions adapted well, others, including Samarkand, faced difficulties, showing uneven progress in preserving and managing historical documents [8, 196].

CONCLUSION

The post-Soviet period has brought significant and multifaceted changes to the museum sector in Samarkand. These transformations go beyond institutional or architectural developments – they represent deeper shifts in how the past is remembered, presented, and used to shape a national narrative. The relocation of museums, creation of new exhibitions, and restoration of historical sites all reflect a conscious effort to construct a cultural identity rooted in Islamic, Timurid, and national symbols, while distancing from Soviet and minority narratives. At the



same time, increased government investment and legal reforms have enabled the modernization of key institutions, though regional disparities and challenges in archival management remain. Overall, Samarkand's museums have become central to Uzbekistan's broader project of nation-building and cultural revival in the decades following independence.

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