

TERRA INCOGNITA

Editorial note. If journal's issue is devoted to Samarkand, then of course, in this column we had to tell you something about Samarkand. But what? After all there have been so many stories about this city: about its unique architecture, science, culture, different traditions and handicrafts. Nevertheless, we found one topic very interesting and less known to people. It is Samarkand paper.

The text of the article is written, generally using internet sources.

SAMARKAND PAPER

Paper production has a significant place among unique handicrafts that brought a worldwide reputation to Samarkand on trade routes of the Great Silk Road, crossing whole Euroasia. It is an indicator of not only a mastery of craftspeople, but is the reflection of an important role of the ancient city in development of science and culture of Medieval Orient.

As is well known, it was China where people started to prepare the paper, strictly



guarding the manufacturing secret until 7th Century. Only in 610 buddhist monks Doi Cho and Godza uncovered this secret to Korea and Japan.

According to a legend, in 650 escaped from Chinese captivity, soldiers, who previously worked in paper “factories”, began manufacturing paper in Samarkand. Samarkand or Khorosan paper was made from linen cloth and its production was quite successful and even it started to oust all other sorts of paper.

As Adam Metz, famous orientalist emphasized, production of Samarkand paper in 3-4th Centuries of Hegira (9-10th Century AD) revolutionized people's

lifestyle in the East, relieving this popular at that time handicraft from the monopoly of one country – Egypt that produced costly papyrus. Medieval author As Saalibi informed that the paper produced in China and Samarkand ousted the papyrus and parchment which ancestors had used. Subsequent explorations of



cheaper linen usage as a raw material, that set the manufacturing free from bamboo reed and silkworm, let Samarkand paper become the number one by quality and cheapness in Medieval East.

It is a fact that in Samarkand first-ever in the Orient people produced the handmade paper with the help of watermill. To get rid of the roughness of the paper masters polished them on a marble desk, using a piece of marble or horn of an animal, due to which Samarkand paper gained its smoothness. Polishing of the paper sheets with seashells was the innovation Samarkand people introduced in the past, because traditional Chinese paper used to be rough and not polished. In South East Asia, including China, Japan and Thailand people wrote with brush, while Central Asians used plume (Qalam (pen)) for writing. This tradition required soft paper, that is why people started to polish the sheets in Samarkand. Later, thanks to Arabs and culture of Islamic world, this know-how extended to the West – from Middle East (11th) to Spain (12th), and then across Europe.

The paper was the subject of exploitation for everyone, from commoners to scholars and statesmen. One could often see such kind of scene in multicolored bazaars of Middle Asian cities: a clerk manufactures the paper before client's very eyes and putting yet wet sheet of the paper on client's back and wrote a complaint or denunciation.

Samarkand paper was in requisition due to its smoothness and color and importantly, it absorbed less ink. However, its main feature was its durability. Plenty of documents written on Samarkand paper lasted out in good condition and today is kept in various museums of the world. This very paper was the object on what calligraphers created their masterpieces and artists painted their miniatures. Those who wanted to make book would prefer using Samarkand paper.

Literature of that age tell about the high quality of the paper produced in Samarkand. As Maksidi, Arabic historian of 10th Century stated, Khorezm's bows, Shash's crockery and Samarkand paper stood alone.



Medieval masters got an appreciation in Zakhridin Babur's in his famous *Baburname*: "...The best paper in the world is made in

Samarkand, all the water for paper mills comes from Konigil. Konigil is located in on the bank of Siyah-Ab, this stream is also known as Abi Rakhmat..."

Abu Mansur as-Saalibi emphasized the high quality of the paper made by Samarkand masters, mentioning that it was better than the one made in Egypt. Famous calligrapher Sultan Ali Meshhedî advised to write only on Samarkand paper:

"...How good Samarkand paper is!
If you are a man of sense, do not reject it:
The writing on it is flat and nice..."

Many years later A.Vamberi, famous scholar, orientalist, traveler, ethnographer and linguist, who visited Central Asia in 1863, mentioned about the excellence of Samarkand paper. “The paper made in Bukhara and Samarkand, - he wrote, holds in estimation all over Turkestan and neighboring countries”.

According to German artist Wolfgang Timman the very Samarkand paper



became the main factor of development of literature, typography and exchange of information in many countries of the world.

During the rule of Tamerlane, the paper production remained one of the main fields of workmanship. There is an information that earlier in the beginning of 18th Century, in Samarkand and its suburbs 42 mills worked to manufacture paper. They functioned in Kokand, Bukhara and Tashkent.

Samarkand paper was very expensive and had different sorts. The best one of them was Sultan paper, which ousted Medieval papyrus and leather from European markets. It was thin, white and soft. “Silk” sort followed it, standing out with its smoothness and light yellow color. The “worst” of all these sorts was “Nimkanop” that was in almost brown. It used to be made from waste silk and admixtures.

To get white paper, masters used whitened linen, filling it with green starch. Colored paper was in vogue, too. For example, the paper in blue, the color of grief and mourning was used to write death sentences; red color stood for the happiness and humanness, so red paper sheets contained proclamations of compassion; saffron dyed yellow paper was also highly esteemed, as used for decrees and



special orders. People would rather use colorful paper, just like nowadays, for different kinds of decoration.

On account of internal wars that quaked the Central Asia in 16-17th Century, masters were bound to leave their workshops and move to safer areas. Gradually, in 19th Century Samarkand paper production started to die away. Since handmade paper got brownish as time passes, people preferred white and cheaper paper imported from Russia.

Only at the end of 20th Century the UNESCO initiative resumed the manufacture of Samarkand paper. To the date, “Meros” paper mill functions in Konigil village in Samarkand’s countryside. Famous masters — brothers Mukhtarovs founded this mill and due to their efforts ancient tradition of manufacturing paper revived in this local mill.

Paper is made from mulberry silkworm, cotton, as well as the waste of cotton and silk production, silk fibers and other ingredients.



The production process starts with grinding the tree barks or other raw materials until they result into a pappy mass and then follows with their maceration in water. Then masters add a special sticking solution, made from natural glue of barks of apricot and cherry trees.

The next step is to pour the prepared mass to special containers and to extract layers of laden-down material – future paper with the instrumentality of the net (a type of mat made from cane and tail-and-mane hair). The paper sheet’s thickness is subject to vary, as masters can press them with different volume of squeezer. After pressing the drying and starching stage come. The next stage is then squashing and glossing (to get smooth and shining surface) and this is totally handmade. Later craftsmen use a polisher made from semiprecious stone – agate to smoothen the

paper. There are some more raw materials to manufacture the paper, including henna, rose leaves and rosewater, colorful silk thread. All of this not only creates a unique harmony of nice color and smell, but lets the product look quite presentable. This is a waste-free production and a very environmentally-friendly one. Whole process of production of one sheet from the initial stage – rawness to the ready product stage takes about an hour.

Contemporary masters not only produce high quality paper, but other products from mulberry tree: dolls, notebooks, purse, masks, postcards, bags, diaries and even men's shirts.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS:

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