

## Conference Paper

# Mythoecologization of Artistic Subjects and Themes in the Tapestries of Raushan Bazarbayeva

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## Abstract

Mytho-ecologization of tapestry subjects and themes in contemporary textile art is one of the most important trends in the future development of this art type. The masters of contemporary Kazakh tapestry imbue their works with the content that does not only depict one-dimensional beauty or ugliness of the environment but also transmit such meanings as the everlasting value, uniqueness, necessity, fragility and the vital need to reconsider human place in these circumstances. This paper provides an art historical analysis of the tapestries created by the famous Kazakh textile artist Raushan Bazarbayeva, whose work is characterized by the mythoecologization of compositional subjects, the poetic quality of her visual language and the veneration of beauty and promotion of a harmonious co-existence between humans and their environment. We demonstrate that the key to understand such works is to interpret them through the combined lens of rootedness in traditional past and sensitivity to current environmental challenges.

**Keywords:** contemporary Kazakh tapestry, Kazakhstan artistic textile, tapestries by Raushan Bazarbayeva, mythoecologization of consciousness, sustainability, decorative language of tapestry

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## 1. Introduction

In all historical epochs the task of understanding the world formed the nucleus of human existence. Nature, its changing and diverse image and its mysteries, has always inspired in humans reverent fear, amazement and admiration. All nuances of this rich powerful emotions had to be expressed, and they were expressed in individual creative endeavours. Prehistoric artists' imagination was probably the same as our own, since human minds and hearts, as well as our biological systems, have remained the same. What has changed is a quality of thinking, a level of abstraction, a symbolic and

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metaphorical language used to express our deepest experiences. The spirit of free creative expression, always insistent, tireless, ever-present and essential, as active now as in any other age, still requires its proper representation: then, structured aesthetically, re-thought and organized, newly expressed creative imagery becomes a concrete unique reality, i.e. an artwork.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Nomadic peoples, including Kazakhs, have always possessed particular inclination for everything new and unknown; the desire for movement, for dynamism. Therefore, this search for knowledge and understanding of the outside world always constituted an intrinsic quality of our ancestors, and its bearers chosen for this important mission were those individuals who possessed specific emotional perception – poets, artists, creative visionaries – those who

...have a soul not only capable of perceiving ideal in life but also to express it in clear, universally understandable glimpses. Such glimpses are parts of nature chosen and condensed into an idea expressed by an artist. This idea is clear, understandable; it can produce the same expression perceived by the poet through life that had given him this idea. [1]

This quotation by the art historian S.Kaplanova who wrote about Petrov-Vodkin illuminates the essence of artistic innovation brought in Kazakh tapestry by Raushan Bazarbayeva. Indeed, if we explore carefully the artist's tapestry canvases made from 2002 and later (the period of her artistic maturity), we immediately see the underlying common traits that distinguish her from other artists: the layering of different perspectives full of "clear, universally understandable glimpses" of the everlasting beauty and fragility of our complex and colourful world where we all exist "here and now". This is the main content of Bazarbayeva's works, the central leading theme of her art: to see within an ordinary everyday picture of nature its tremulous mysterious life, to experience the uniqueness of the moment, to comprehend its meaning and to express it through art, delicately and subtly, in measured, harmonious "glimpses" of a handmade artwork.

## 3. Discussion

Let us explore one of the artist's early works, *Shabyt (Inspiration)* (2002, 170 x 185 cm.). It shows two temporal layers, day and night, through the fragment of landscape with

flying birds. The temporal perspectives are clearly delineated – speaking in cinematic terms, they are presented as two “shots”: the dark night “shot” reflects the proportions of cinematic film shot with linear borders. As a result, it looks like a rectangular background with clearly delineated colours, from intense dark black-violet-blue to the dark shades of green and red. In the lower part of the tapestry this night space, heavy and mysterious, is cut into separate pieces resembling an aerial view of the earth’s surface. The central light shot overlay produces vivid contrast to the background: it shines because it is made in light grey-blue shades. Here a couple of birds soar with their wings spread widely along the snowy mountain tops and above them. The birds’ colours rhyme both with the background and with the central image – therefore, they become the compositional centre of the entire tapestry and its main content: a moment of epiphany, of inspiration.

The same multi-screen technique is successfully used by the artist in a number of her other works: *Moonlight Sonata* (2001, 100 x 120 cm.), *Still Life with Flowers* (2006, 120 x 160 cm.), *Evening Panorama* (2002, 100 x 165 cm.), *At the Spring* (2003, 180 x 200 cm.).

In nomadic culture a water spring is associated with the “primordial beginning”. Finding it within the huge arid expanses of the steppes is notoriously hard. This task requires effort, diligence, knowledge and luck. These are the references found in *U rodnika (At the Spring)* tapestry. Bazarbayeva goes further in her work: she uses multiple screens. Layered one upon another, they create a labyrinthic effect where the spring-well constitutes the goal of search, the core of the labyrinth. It shines somewhere close by, among the thousand hills...

Thus, the author of these ostensibly simple subjects has enriched her range of expressions by using technique usually encountered in screen culture: the result is highly convincing.

It is important to note that this “layered” and “translucent” compositional principle in tapestry has not been invented by the Kazakh artist. It was first used long before, in 1960s, in the works of Belgian artists (Van Vlasselaer’s tapestry *Flanders*); later the “poly-screen” technique was borrowed by the Baltic tapestry artists. Here is a description of one of such works:

Complex interconnections between the background and the compositional drawing appear as tonal, chromatic and textural relationships between the two or more surfaces. These surfaces are dynamic; they flow into each other; the shape is similarly designed, it is divided optically, being located at the various level of tonal and chromatic depth. [2]

Although this quotation describes tapestries from Latvia, this description could be equally applied to the works by the Kazakh artist. However, this is not a criticism: art is a unique way of creating connections between people leading them to universal human values; enriching others and becoming enriched itself, it embraces the depth of general experience and the richness of individual phenomena.

Among other early works of the artist we can highlight a 2003 tapestry titled *Moonlight Sonata* (170 x 185 cm). This picture has two characters: the brightly shining moon and a naked tree silhouettes against the nocturnal backdrop. In this work the artist strives for a different goal. Avoiding her favourite poly-screen technique, she creates a unified visual field but with “optical divisions” across the entire surface. The result is the visual impression of “puzzle”, as if the tapestry were made of different pieces with different colour schemes, somewhat resembling a patchwork quilt. Such an approach could have easily destroyed unified effect, but this does not happen – on the contrary, the picture is surprisingly well integrated. It seems that no one before has ever felt so deeply this special hidden quietly moving charm of such prosaic natural feature as a naked tree trunk. Through interweaving threads of wool, the artist creates a fairy tale, a new saga, a myth.

Similar impression is produced by the *Tree Metamorphoses* tapestry (2013, 180 x 240 cm). This genuinely monumental work, both in form and in content, again depicts the images of trees, this time against the winter landscape (the trunks are covered with snow, and there are snowy mountains and hills at the background). Each tree – eight in all – is placed within its own rectangular niche of grey-white, green, orange or blue-violet colour. Inside the vertically oriented rectangles live subtle chromatic nuances of the four seasons. The colour scheme of the tapestry is full of half-tones; it is colourful and sometimes ascetically severe.

Balanced and strict rhythm used to organize the picture’s space, as well as thoughtful and exquisitely elongated vertical lines and vibrant background lighting imbue this work with a special charm. The regular rhythm of tree branches achieves a kind of musical expressiveness. Raushan possesses an incomparable ability to depict winter trees; her trees are living beings with souls, dreaming about spring, summer, autumn and winter. The trees are full of longing: between them the leaves are falling in narrow rectangular niches. The overall impression is one of fragility and vulnerability. The artist seems to be trying to say: nature is endless in its manifestations, and we human beings are tied to it with complex nuanced relationships. A tree needs attention and protection as much as a fragile flower. Russian and Soviet painter Pyotr Konchalovsky (1876–1956) once said that

In art the most important thing is the artist's perception of life that he transmits to the viewers through his works. This perception of life determines the quality of an artwork. Thus, this perception can be: subtle, vulgar, banal, deep, cold, fiery. This is very important in art. This is what creates charm, uniqueness, individuality, as well as small-mindedness, pettiness, falsity. [3]

Another highly interesting early work by Bazarbayeva is titled *River of Time* (2003, 170 x 185 cm). Here the narrow linear current of the river with round stones inside is placed within the strict confines of the technocratically imagined embankments: the mounds of bright powerful cement shafts tied by wires, together with the dark wall, embrace the river from both sides (from upside and downside) producing claustrophobic impression. But the river survives despite this depressing situation. The rounded stones in the water evoke impression of an endless flow of time. For the stone's natural shape is not round: it becomes round only after being polished by water for a long time. Philosophically, the concept of this image is clear: the stone remain still while the water moves. What a length of time must have passed in order to produce such immaculately shaped stones. What an incredibly long way this water went – a diligent labourer! But... all of this could disappear... Tragically, the modern world shows us many examples of dwindling rivers and lakes, disappearing natural ecosystems, dying animal and plant species – all of this caused by human activity. Let us remember the ecological manifesto of Jean Lurçat who wrote bitterly:

I believe that the human being, who had been selected and shaped so slowly by this world, these stars, these ever-changing oceans, the human being still destined to destroy his neighbour and at the same time help his fellow beings, deserves to be feared. At the same time, we live on this planet created by our thoughts, we are the leaves, the flora and the fauna. Our components are the minerals, fire and water. Material matters – copper, iron, wool, granite – possess their pure spiritual qualities. They may be heavy, rounded, transparent or light – these qualities undoubtedly influence the spirit itself... [4]

Based on this, it is important to turn to the concept of “ecology”. This world comes from the Ancient Greek *oikos*, a word that encompasses the meaning of home, house, dwelling place, and *logos* meaning teaching, science. This term was introduced by the German biologist Ernest Haeckel in the latter half of the 19th century, when the unprecedented surge of scientific and technological progress and the subsequent destructive encroachment upon the natural order brought humanity to its challenges of destruction.

Since then, ecology as a science of our common earthly home has been asking the questions of survival. Predictably, the thinking part of the population – scientists, artists, creative figures – were the first to raise the alarm. A wide network of grassroots environmental organizations has emerged. In the artistic world we witness the development of an entirely new trend: mythoecological consciousness. What does it mean? It seems that to better understand these trends we should explore their ancient origins, in our case the Tengri worldview, when earth was believed to be Ana-Zher (Mother Earth) and sky Ata-Tengri (Father Sky), when the entire environment was perceived as imbued with soul and worshiped, when “humans embraced nature as a whole, saw beauty in harmony perceiving himself in inner balance with the external world, vividly experiencing its beauty”. [5]

For Raushan Bazarbayeva, Tengri world-view is natural. She has her own relationships with nature, her own immense creative abilities. The artist believes that nature embodies the most important thing, that it is divinely beautiful, being our common wonderful cosy home. While the prehistoric artists imbued nature with divinely human qualities because of inability to explain mysterious natural phenomena rationally, while they mythologized to understand hidden meanings, our contemporaries do it so that “society could answer the major questions of world being and organization by appealing to nature as the highest value and the only template of order... This we may term a mythoecological consciousness. [6]

Mythoecological consciousness, as it is developed by our contemporaries, is a relatively new concept. But it is deeply rooted in history. The Greek word “myth” means “tale” and signifies an entire system of fantastic concepts of the universe. They reflected self-awareness of archaic humans who believed that nature was an inexhaustible source and a giver of life. At the same time, ancient world-view envisioned built-in limitations to human intervention in the natural world, since the act of breaking natural laws could be dangerous not only for an individual but for an entire community. Is it not the same idea that governs modern progressive individuals? Therefore, it is plainly wrong to believe that “myth” is something static, something from the past. The Tengri philosophy of the cycle of life, unlike its linear and finite counterpart (the idea of the world end in world religions) eliminates this possibility. “For those who possess mythoecological consciousness, the eternal return to the starting point of the primordial creation makes life infinite,” writes M. Eliade, “producing a cyclical understanding of time, annulling its irreversibility... actualising mythic moment in which the archetypal action was disclosed, it holds the world indefinitely in the same initial moment of the dawn” [7].

This “initial moment of the dawn” creates a mythoecological pathos of Bazarbayeva’s works, whether the artist herself consciously knows it or not: this is our interpretation. As a carrier of the traditional worldview that she had inherited at the deepest “genetic” level through the generations of ancestors, the Kazakh artist does not engage in critical rethinking of today’s environmental reality – rather, she is, so to say, working on interpreting and translating everything felt and intuited by her sensitive artistic soul. We may say that her main goal, as she sees it, is to preserve through her art an internal indissoluble connection between humankind and nature, a connection that is eloquently expressed in Kazakh traditional sayings and proverbs: “Zher men el bir tutas” (“The land and the people are one”), “Zher shezhiresi – yel shezhiresi” (“History of the land is history of its people”).

All of this the artist has expressed in her next work titled *Faster than Wind* (2012, 100 x 200 cm). The tapestry is made in picturesque and expressive style; its main characters are a herd of horses, the sun and a featherglassed steppe. Here again we see an “optically divided” background: the spherical quants of solar energy delineated with stipple lines embrace in their measured and active movement the sky and the earth (black upper and lower parts) and the feathergrass steppe (middle part) with the galloping fast as wind akhal-teke horses. The galloping horses have been always and everywhere associated with freedom. In this case they are shown against the boiling hot sun disk merging together with silvery feathergrass, so that it is hard to tell where the manes end and the strands of grass begin: black, white, blue and brown horses are frozen in their exquisite headlong run-flight.

Again, the artist’s monumental work creates an effect uniquely belonging to her artistic language – this time through the images of horses. Just like in the tree tapestries, these fast-moving creatures are shown not as the powerful horses in the full flowering of their strength and vigour, but as young, full of fragile and tender beauty, in their “spring beginning” – therefore producing inescapable association with the young Republic of Kazakhstan where the artist lives.

## 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is important to note that, while at its early stages national self-identification was performed only by an artist depicting an external setting with obligatory signs of environment and characteristic features in portraits, in everyday items, clothes and other attributes, later such stylistic approaches become less important. The artistic task of today is to express inner underlying essence of life phenomena,



to provide deeper understanding of the nature of the problem through its symbolic and visual interpretation. Today's artist is engaged in a certain de-materialization of the external reality, in erasing the borders within the constant interplay of spirit and matter.

This idea is succinctly, deeply and persuasively explored in the fundamental work of Kazakh art historian Raykhan Yergaliev *Etnicheskoye i epicheskoye v iskusstve Kazakhstana (The Ethnic and the Epic in Kazakhstan Art)*. In this book the author devotes an entire chapter titled *From the Epic to the Metaphysical* to this subject, writing: "Painting is surprisingly good at depicting the human condition. It records and preserves in the system of its codes and techniques the transformations in its nature and existence..." [8, p.253]. R.Yergaliyeva insists that at a certain point of creative ecstasy "...the artist stops being an exalted worshipper of nature, a pantheist, an idolatrist kneeling in front of the altar of the universe and becomes an initiate... capable of dissecting and synthesizing the reality in any way he or she desires. [8, pp.254–255]

Indeed, Kazakh tapestry artists play a special part in the search for ethno-national identity. To express a worldview in a woven canvas using the external events of traditional life is not enough. As we have said already, it is important to see and understand its hidden nature, and then to translate this inimitable quality of steppe perception and world-view by using tapestry techniques: composition, colour, texture and images. This is how R.Yergaliyeva interprets this process:

...analysing transformation of national identity in the 20th-century Kazakh visual art from the initial appearance of national mentality through its romantic and epic interpretation and finally to the conceptual design of a visual language suitable for the national mentality, we have to note the overall positive influence of the transformation of ethno-national context. [8, p.285]

Living and working within the unified layer of time and space, imbued with the holistic traditional worldview, Kazakh tapestry artist Raushan Bazarbayeva could not ignore the most relevant modern spiritual mythoecological trend. Indeed, when looking at her tapestries under this angle, it becomes obvious that they reflect the main paradigm of the environmental concept, that is, that "nature is the highest value and the only template for order". Looking at her canvases, an attentive viewer will first and foremost perceive the deepest silence and peace that imbue the soul with the exalted joy, with profound serenity or, on the contrary, with a certain touch of anxiety and disquiet. If the viewer is prepared enough, he or she will experience the harmony between the whole and its parts, a deep connection between the roots (tradition) and the new leaves (modernity). The artist's mythopoetic perception of reality miraculously intertwines with



the environmental thinking. At the same time, a world-view begets mythoecological consciousness required by our time. And, as a result of this tireless search, we witness the unveiling of new facets in the endless play of fantasy and imagination, the main tools of all artists of all times.

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