

TURKIC ART

Early Postclassical (Pre-Islamic) Period

Overview

The art of the Gök Türk empires and the subsequent Uighur states constitutes the earliest examples of art by Turkic peoples. Much of it exhibits a high level of sophistication in its execution and, unsurprisingly, shows the influence of neighboring cultures.

Gök Türk Art

The surviving art of the Gök Türk is almost entirely from the period of the Second Gök Türk Empire, and consists primarily of sculpture in various forms. Perhaps the best-known examples of Gök Türk art are the stelae containing the Orkhon Inscriptions. While the inscriptions in Chinese and the Old Turkic script themselves have artistic merit, both the Bilge Kaghan and Kül Tigin stelae contain sculptural elements. Both were originally erected on stone turtles and depict a twisted dragon and ibex at the top of the stela. In addition, the funerary complexes in which these monuments were originally situated included a number of smaller sculptures that are more crudely carved than the stelae. Some of these figures may depict the deceased ruler and his spouse, while others may represent those who will serve the ruler in the afterlife. One of the most finely rendered sculptures is the head of Kül Tigin, brother of Bilge Kaghan. He is shown wearing an elaborate headdress which has a bird, possibly a raven, with outspread wings on the front.

However, sculpture may not have been the only art produced by or for the Gök Türk. The Bilge Kaghan inscription states not only that the stelae were carved by Chinese artists, but also indicates that some Chinese artists were commissioned to produce paintings as well. Unfortunately for modern scholars, the text does not mention the subjects of these paintings and no Gök Türk painting appears to have survived to the present day.

The only other examples of Gök Türk artistic tastes are found in some of the grave goods that have been discovered in archaeological excavations. These consist primarily of gold and silver drinking vessels, animal figurines and jewelry. The quality of workmanship is quite high for all of these objects, but whether they were domestically produced or were imported prestige goods is not clear.

Uighur Art

In contrast to the Gök Türk, there is virtually no Uighur sculpture to discuss, but numerous examples of Uighur pictorial art in the form of murals and manuscript illustrations. This may be due to the fact that the Uighur became adherents of two major religions that both had a rich tradition of religious painting – Manichaeism and Buddhism.

The majority of the surviving Uighur paintings are frescoes in cave shrines depicting scenes of the Buddha and the donors who contributed to the construction and decoration of the caves. The most famous of these is the Bezeklik Thousand Buddha Caves near Qocho. Constructed between the 5th and 14th centuries, the 77 individual caves contain numerous depictions of the Buddha executed in styles ranging from relatively naïve to highly complex. Stylistically, the paintings are eclectic, displaying strong Iranian and Chinese influence as well as some Indian influence to a much lesser degree.

Depictions of the donors are particularly valuable for the information they provide on the appearance, dress and, sometimes, the ethnic origin of the donors. Uighur nobles, both men and women, are depicted among the donors in some scenes, while in other paintings Sogdians are shown among the donors. In addition to information about people, the murals occasionally provide some details on Uighur architecture.



(L) An Uighur prince, Bezeklik Caves 8th-9th c. – (R) Uighur Princess, Bezeklik Caves, 9th-12th c.
(Wikicommons)

The other major source of Uighur art is manuscript illustrations. Numerous illustrated Uighur texts, primarily Buddhist and Manichaeian, were discovered at Turfan and Dunhuang. They reveal a sophisticated tradition of manuscript illustration, and, like the cave murals, provide information on religious practices as well as the dress and appearance of religious leaders. The Manichaeian texts are particularly valuable in this regard due to the limited surviving sources of information about Manichaeism.



Fragment of a 10th century Manichaean text (Wikicommons)

Readings

Golden, Peter. *Central Asia in World History*, Oxford, 2011.

Sinor, Denis and Klyashtorny, S. G. "The Turk Empire", in Harmatta, János et al. *History of civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol 3. Paris, 1994, pp. 327-347.

Sinor, Denis, Geng Shimin and Kychanov, Y. I. "The Uighurs, the Kyrgyz and the Tangut (Eighth to the Thirteenth Century)", in Harmatta, János et al. *History of civilizations of Central Asia*, Vol 4, Part 1. Paris, 1998, pp. 191-214.

Sinor, Denis (ed.). *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*. Cambridge, 1990.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did the Uighurs produce more art than the Gök Türks?
2. What were the stylistic influences on Uighur art?
3. What is the historical value of Uighur art?