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SYMBOLS AND SIGNS IN THE ORNAMENTATION OF THE ALTAI PEOPLE

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Abstract: The ornamental art of the Altai Mountains is an epic encrypted in lines, spirals, and horns, narrating cosmology, faith, and the harmony between humans and nature. It is a code that can only be deciphered by one who touches the spirit of this ancient land. The Altai ornament is fundamentally triune. This triad reflects the foundation of the universe in the worldview of the indigenous peoples: the upper world (sky, deities) – often denoted by solar signs and celestial bodies; the middle world (earth, people, nature) – symbolized by motifs of plants, animals, and mountains; the lower world (subterranean, ancestors) – depicted more geometrically, sometimes with wavy lines. Ornamentation initially served as a talisman; by applying it to clothing, utensils, or dwellings, a person erected a magical boundary between themselves and hostile forces, attracting luck and well-being.

Keywords: Symbols, signs, Altai culture, ornament, motifs.

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Introduction

The ornamentation used in contemporary Altai creativity is purely aesthetic, with the signifying function of the ornament being lost. Ornament is a pattern intended to decorate various household items, clothing, horse gear, and structures. Studying folk ornamentation is inextricably linked to the labor activities and centuries-old traditions of the Altai people, offering the opportunity to understand the history, life, development paths of their artistic creativity, and the problem of preserving their cultural heritage more deeply.

To date, there is no specialized scientific research on the national ornamentation of the Altai Mountains. At the same time, a significant amount of factual material on the ornamentation of peoples living in earlier times and the Middle Ages is contained in the scientific works of S.I. Rudenko, M.P. Gryaznov, L.L. Barkova, N.V. Polosmak, dedicated to the history of Southern Siberia and the Pazyryk archaeological culture. A certain place for Altai ornamentation and tamgas is allocated in the works of G.I. Choros-Gurkin, L.P. Potapov, E.E. Yamaeva. The most fruitful research on Altai ornamentation on applied art objects was conducted in the 20th century. In 1930, the Altai Ethnographic

Expedition of the "Society for the Study of Siberia and its Productive Forces" was organized, comprising staff from the Oiro Museum, ethnographers from St. Petersburg, A.V. Anokhin, and G.I. Choros-Gurkin. In the 1920s, D.A. Klements collected the first collections of folk art and culture for the State Russian Museum. He was assisted in this by the Altai patron A. Kuldzhin.

The first attempt to uncover the semantics of Altai narrative ornamentation was undertaken by the artist G.I. Choros-Gurkin in his ethnographic collection. L.P. Potapov, in his work "Essays on the History of the Altai People" (1953), undertook a study of Altai applied art. In the following years, several works on ornamentation appeared, mainly of a general nature. In 1971, the album "Altai Ornament" edited by N.P. Kuchiyak was published. In the scientific works of V.I. Edokov, a scientific elucidation of the fine arts of the Altai Mountains was first provided (1981). A significant contribution to the study of the architecture of the Altai Mountains is the monograph by O.P. Ilyina (2010) "The Origins of the Architecture of the Altai Mountains," which examines in detail the architectural decor of wooden and stone monuments of traditional Altai culture. Among the studies dedicated to the issues of decorative and applied art of the Altai people and the reflection of the semantics of folk ornamentation in items made of wood, felt,



bone, and stone, the works of A.V. Edokov (2010) are of great importance. Analyzing the available literature, it is also necessary to focus on the scientific works of E.M. Toshchakova, N.I. Shatinova, V.Ya. Kydyeva, containing rich ethnographic and art historical material on the material and spiritual culture, various types of applied art of the Altai people. Individual types of Altai applied art are considered in the work "Mysteries of National Clothing" (compilers T.K. Babrasheva and A.N. Bokonokova). Among the least studied problems in the history of the Altai Mountains are the evolution of Altai ornamental art in the second half of the 20th – early 21st centuries and the formation of innovative forms of Altai ornamentation in architecture, applied art, and folk crafts.

One of the sources in the formation of the ornamental complex of the Altai people is the ornamentation of Scythian (Pazyryk) and Turkic cultures. The motifs of the Altai ornament – circles, squares, rhombuses, triangles, ovals, zigzags, and spirals – represent the oldest archetypes of universal human culture.

Altai Ornamentation.

Altai ornamentation presents key motifs of the **upper world**: solar signs – the circle, circle with a dot inside, sun, which personify eternity, the cyclical nature of life. Sometimes the sun is represented as a rosette or a circle with radiating sun rays, symbols of the celestial body, supreme power, the center of the universe. The cross-shaped ornament is a symbol of sunlight. According to Altai beliefs, the cross-shaped ornament shows the division of space into four parts (east-west, south-north). The cross-shaped ornament serves as a symbol of protection and salvation, a talisman for guarding the home and human soul from the four cardinal directions. Therefore, it is used in decorating horse gear, wooden beds, dishes, as well as footwear and clothing. The moon is depicted as a circle and a semicircle; usually, the new moon is represented by its right side. In the "piyala" (bowl) ornament, the reflection of the sun, moon, and stars is shown. It expresses wishes for family happiness, well-being, and wealth. The "Piyala" ornament is used for decorating household utensils.

Key Motifs of the Middle World:

Horn-shaped or scroll (curl): one of the most common and sacred elements in ornamentation, it personifies strength, abundance, development, and eternal movement. The curved horn of an argali or maral symbolizes not just the animal, but vital energy, fertility, and connection with the riches of the mountains. Often appears in the form of S-shaped or spiral curls. Represents ideas of well-being and prosperity, human fertility and livestock fecundity. A wish for wealth and sufficiency. According to an ancient saying, it means "many horns mean lots of cattle." Applied in the decor of items for newlyweds: chests, felt carpets, bedding, jewelry, horse gear. Often placed in the center of a composition as a source of life. Plant patterns: branches, leaves, flowers (often stylized trefoils) symbolize the tree of life, growth, prosperity, and immortality of the soul. Plant patterns. The "flower in a rosette" ornament is interpreted as a depiction of the sun and its rays. The flower-in-circle ornament connects a person with the environment, personifies wealth and strength, and serves as a sign of belonging to the solar world. The flower depicted on a tinder steel, on items made of iron, brass is also used as a talisman against the influence of various negative forces of nature.

The floral motif of ornament – twisted ornaments with shoots, symbolizing a peaceful life, continuation of the family. It is

part of complex ornamentation on felt items, clothing. Used in the decor of gold and silver jewelry. Four horn-shaped patterns: branches, leaves, flowers (often stylized trefoils) symbolize the tree of life, growth, prosperity, and immortality of the soul. Bai Terek – an ornament depicting the sacred tree. Bai Terek acts as a connecting link between phenomena occurring in nature and society. The roots go into the Lower World, the trunk – into the Middle, and the crown – into the Upper. A symbol of growth, the inseparable connection of the past, future with the present, the connection between generations. A wish for prosperity, well-being, sufficiency, and fertility. A mandatory tradition in applying this ornament to an item is its symmetry and vertical arrangement. Applied to felt carpets, horse gear. Four horn-shaped patterns connected by trefoils symbolize the depiction of the earth in a state of peace and harmony, earth giving life to all living things: animals and vegetation. A wish for wealth and sufficiency. Used in the decor of felt carpets, jewelry, horse gear. Zoomorphic elements: stylized figures of deer, rams, horses, birds (more often griffins or eagles). The horse – companion of the hero and shaman, a sacred animal. The bird – an intermediary between worlds, a guardian spirit. The "Umai" ornament resembles a fairytale bird, a deity of fertility, patron and protector of children, women in childbirth, and the hearth, serving as a talisman against evil spirits, protection from evil forces. Items intended for children and their mothers are decorated with it.

Key Motifs of the Lower World:

The Lower World (subterranean, ancestors) – depicted more geometrically, sometimes with wavy lines. Water – the basis of life, a symbol of purification, variability, and the passage of time. Mountains in schematic form – stability, support, connection of generations. Meander (hammer ornament) – a symbolic image associated with the cult of nature – veneration of sky, earth, and water. Expresses the idea of eternal movement, symbolizes the winding course of a river. A wish for protection and safeguarding, continuation of the family, a strong bond between generations. Especially valued items made of wood, felt, leather, clay, carpets, clothing, dishes, dwellings, musical instruments are decorated with it.

Thus, horn-shaped and cross-shaped figures combined Altai totemistic beliefs and ideas about the "world tree." The traditional ornament of the Altai people of the second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries is divided into four main groups. The first group includes geometric figures: circles, squares, triangles, rhombuses, zigzags, ovals, etc. The second group consists of palmettes, half-palmettes, cross-shaped and horn-shaped motifs, "wave" with scrolls. The third group includes floral-plant patterns and complex rosettes. The fourth group is characterized by Central and East Asian signs: meander, whirlwind rosette. It has been established that most patterns of the first group belong to the most ancient ornamental motifs, reflecting the oldest cosmogonic ideas of farmers and nomads. Circles, rhombuses, squares, triangles, zigzags, spirals, and ovals are known on applied art objects from the Scythian period and date back to the 4th–2nd centuries BC. Ornamental motifs we have identified as the second group of Altai ornamentation entered applied art during the developed Middle Ages under the influence of the ancient Turks. Such types of decor as "wave" with scrolls, palmettes, half-palmettes, and the S-shaped motif are associated with the veneration of the "world tree." Horn-shaped and cross-shaped figures encapsulate Altai totemistic beliefs and worldviews. The use of horn-shaped motifs, along with

circles and crosses, as clan and tribal tamgas emphasizes the important significance these symbolic signs held for the Altai people. Motifs belonging to the third and fourth groups enriched the Altai ornamental system during the Middle Ages and Modern times thanks to the interaction of the Altai people with the settled agricultural peoples of Central Asia, Mongols, and Chinese. Floral-plant motifs, complex rosettes, meanders, could be perceived as symbolic images associated with the cult of nature. Ornamentation in the nomadic dwelling (kiyis aiyy), represented on applied art monuments, was collected in the territory of the Altai Mountains. The second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries was a period of flourishing for Altai ornamentation. Motifs of national ornamentation are ubiquitous in yurt interiors, decorating items of Altai applied art. At this stage, carpet weaving, leather embossing, and wood carving achieved significant success. Essential features of Altai ornamentation in the second half of the 19th – early 20th centuries are symmetry, the presence of a central field and borders, mirror reflection of patterns, and the transformation of background parts into an independent pattern. All the variety of ornamental forms can be reduced to three categories of symmetry: rosette, border, and grid. The pattern grid, representing a closed figure (square, rectangle, rhombus, etc.), is characterized by an axis of symmetry and a plane of symmetry passing through it. A border elongated along the axial line has an axis of translation and a plane of gliding reflection. In side borders, usually with identical patterns translated along the translation axis, there is a mutual mirror reflection of the right and left parts of the pattern. Grids used in Altai ornamentation differ from each other in their node system: square, rhombic, triangular, etc., with patterns inscribed within them. The names of ornamental motifs, their resemblance to natural phenomena, household objects, and decorations indicate that they have varied semantic meanings. At the same time, the decorative aspect becomes highly important in the Altai ornamentation of the modern era. Depictions of specific objects undergo significant stylization, or conversely, geometric figures are given names of objects, natural phenomena, body parts, or things related to animals (horseshoe, moon, cloud, head, horn, etc.). Folk craftsmen invest many poetic thoughts into the content of ornamental patterns, closely linked to folklore ideas, economic and cultural life in the past. In the ornamental embodiment of these ideas, the decorative-artistic aspect is of paramount importance. Thus, the aesthetic role of the pattern is enhanced thanks to the poeticized life material.

Altai ornaments in the works of contemporary folk craftsmen are characterized by zoomorphic, plant, and geometric motifs. These motifs are widespread in various types of Altai applied art – in items made of metal, wood, wool, clay. In zoomorphic ornamentation, traditional motifs predominate, primarily large horn-shaped patterns – *kuchanyng müüzi*, *kulja* (ram's horn) and their various variations: horn-shaped scrolls arranged into cross-shaped figures (*tört kulya*) or included within circles, ovals, and rhombuses; scrolls with forks and offshoots. Among other motifs that can be attributed to zoomorphic ornamentation are paired almond-shaped figures – *kushtyng kanady* (bird's wings), *kas* (goose). The application of ornamentation showed that all positions are demonstrative in nature; therefore, the ornament had its own semantics, understandable to those who lived in the cultural space of nomads. To determine the semantics of the ornament, a comparative analysis of ornament elements and the system of runic graphemes can be applied. Traditional ornaments used to decorate felt items

are symbols of wishes for longevity, happiness, and well-being. Tradition knows several methods of ornamenting felt, of which the method of patterned through-stitching of several layers is the most popular. The most popular patterns: meander, running waves, lotus flower, thread of happiness, ram's horns, zigzags, braiding, etc. All of them act as symbols of luck, happiness, well-being, wealth, and wishes for success.

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