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Innovative approaches in form-making and painting of Semikarakorsk ceramics products: a historical retrospective

Abstract. The article examines the innovative approaches of Semikarakorsk ceramics artists in form-making and painting products from a historical perspective. For the first time, a detailed description of the artistic-stylistic and artistic-technological features of the products is provided. Examples of author's experiments and their integration with traditional techniques in Semikarakorsk ceramics works are given.

Keywords: traditional art craft, innovations, form-making, painting, Semikarakorsk ceramics.

Semikarakorsk ceramics is the only traditional art craft of the Rostov region in which traditional technological and artistic processes are implemented. The products reflect the culture of the Don cossacks, as well as the distinctive flora and fauna of the southern region. These traditional images are understandable to a modern audience, evoke interest and create a desire to purchase Semikarakorsk ceramics. For the further development of Semikarakorsk ceramics, it is necessary not only to carefully preserve the best traditions but also to adapt the forms and decorations to the demands of contemporary buyers.

The creation of new products is a pathway to preserving and developing the folk art of Semikarakorsk ceramics. A new product is often a variation of an existing form, its improved version or a continuation of a collection. The primary goal of artistic innovation is to ensure that the products meet contemporary market demands while maintaining historically established traditions. In order to remain competitive, the enterprise JSC “Semikarakorsk ceramics” expands and updates its product range. By developing new variations or transferring traditional floral patterns to new forms of tableware, artists strive to refresh classic motifs, giving them a modern interpretation. Innovations require artists to demonstrate professional courage, creativity and a willingness to take risks, as the success of an innovative product is not guaranteed. However, both traditional and innovative products share a common origin – the creative work of the artist, which includes certain stages that will be analyzed in this study.

Innovative solutions should not displace tradition; on the contrary, it is essential to take into account the historical context, creating a dialogue between the past and the present. As A.B. Gofman wrote, tradition in folk art crafts represents a cultural heritage that is transmitted over a long period from generation to generation and is reproduced in each type of art craft, relating to specific regional and historical characteristics: technologies, artistic and compositional, coloristic, constructive and aesthetic solutions that contribute to the preservation of national culture [1].

An important result of the synergy between tradition and innovation is the opportunity for artists to search for new forms of expression. In this context, innovation acts as a way to reinterpret tradition, when old motifs and forms are adapted to modern realities and expectations. The role of the artist in this process becomes increasingly active: they not only perceive tradition but also carefully transform it. Traditional art today is perceived simultaneously as an object of cultural heritage and as a living phenomenon capable of constant development and change. It is precisely the interaction of traditions and innovations in Semikarakorsk ceramics that opens up opportunities not only for preservation but also for the development of the unique artistic language of the art craft.

Semikarakorsk ceramics represents products made of white faience, decorated with hand underglaze painting. The technology for producing artistic faience was developed in the early 1970s. During the period from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, the artistic explorations of the creative team at JSC “Semikarakorsk ceramics” led to the formation of a recognizable painting style.

The historical development of certain artistic and stylistic features can be divided into several stages:

- 1970s – artistic explorations by the students of the school of mastery led by V.V. Tkach, work on form-making;
- 1980s – underglaze decoration of items with metal salts, engobes and the emergence of small sculptural plastic art;
- 1990s – the appearance of cut-through relief.

The initiator of these artistic explorations and the founder of new directions in the development of Semikarakorsk ceramics is Valentin Vasilyevich Tkach, head of the school of artistic mastery. He brilliantly organized the teaching process, passing on his knowledge of ceramics, acquired at the Abramtsevo art and industrial school. The institution provided an opportunity to identify the abilities and inclinations of students, working with them individually and guiding each one's interests into a fruitful direction [4]. Thanks to his talent and skill, Valentin Vasilyevich taught his students to think outside the box and seek original means of expression. The master's own works are distinguished by a variety of techniques and an exploration of the material's possibilities in form-making and decoration methods.

A telling example is the teapot «Youth», created by V.V. Tkach in 1978 (Fig. 1⁸⁹). The shape of the piece is inscribed within a pyramid with rounded, smooth lines at the bottom, characteristic of faience. The decoration of the spout, lid and handle is executed in the form of multitone triangles that harmonize with the overall



Fig. 1. V.V. Tkach.
Teapot “Youth”. 1985.
Museum of JSC “Semikarakorsk
ceramics”

⁸⁹ Figs. 1-7. Photo by the author of the article.

shape: such lines seem to unite the elements of the piece into a single whole. The decoration is rendered in close tones using metal salts from the traditional salt palette of Semikarakorsk ceramics. The geometricity of the elements is emphasized by thin “mottling” lines with the use of dark pigments. The figural depiction of female busts on each side of the teapot varies. The stylization of the image is masterfully executed through a breakdown into geometric forms with tonal variations. The work shows the influence of the early 20th-century avant-garde artists K. Malevich and P. Filonov.

On the one hand, the piece is noticeably different from traditional faience items, yet it retains the general principles of decorative techniques, form-making, and stylization methods. The teapot “Youth” represents a successful example of creative innovation harmoniously combined with tradition. It is noteworthy that demand for this item has increased among buyers in recent years: for over 30 years, the piece remained on a museum shelf, but now its production has been resumed and sales volumes exceed those of many traditional landscape-decorated variants.

Current trends in contemporary decorative and applied arts require a bold approach to innovation and the work of V.V. Tkach serves as a demonstrative example. The master’s innovative techniques do not destroy traditions but establish a dialogue with them. Such a process requires a balanced approach and a sensitive attitude toward the cultural characteristics and traditions of the region.

V.V. Tkach’s students continued to explore expressive means, striving to find ways of conventionally and generally depicting human figures, inspired by the aesthetics of Russian avant-garde. An example of this direction is the tea set “Youth”, created by V.L. Ovchinnikova (Fig. 2). In it, the shape of the objects is simple, rounded and harmoniously combined with the chosen decor. The images of people are conventional, without faces, with cheerfully tousled hair; the costumes are rendered schematically, with a few brushstrokes, and are decorated with geometric ornamentation created by scratching through paint applied to the raw (pre-fired) form.



Fig. 2. V.L. Ovchinnikova.
Tea set “Youth”. 1987.

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The arrangement of the figures is asymmetrical, mainly in a three-part composition – a male figure surrounded by two female ones. The work creates a sense of lightness, simplicity and naivety. The color palette is restrained: it is dominated by lilac and blue tones, accented by brown and ochre elements. The white faience background highlights and gathers the color spots, while the delicate ornamental decor unifies the objects and creates a strict rhythm. V.L. Ovchinnikova’s work demonstrates an obvious influence of the artistic principles of K. Malevich and N. Goncharova, which is manifested in the artist’s approach to depicting the figures and costumes of the characters.

The introduction of original artistic solutions into traditional art crafts underscores their ability to evolve and adapt to changing cultural conditions [2]. The creative explorations of artists and their pursuit of self-expression are the key to developing the creative potential of the craft, which became the foundation of the pedagogical training system at the school of mastery led by V.V. Tkach. He successfully transmitted his unique experience, sense of proportion and technique for creating faience sculpture to his students.

One of the first graduates of V.V. Tkach's school of mastery was Pyotr Antonovich Kunakhovets, a hereditary cossack and native of the stanitsa Semikarakorskaya. He infused his works with a unique Don flavor. His somewhat rugged plastic interpretations resonated with the artist's personality and the culture of the region, emphasized by folkloric details in the imagery. The Don theme became central to his oeuvre.

A characteristic example is the series of small sculptures from 2007: "Antonovich", "Gavrilovich", "Prokofievich" and "Petrovna" (Fig. 3). All the pieces are executed in the same style, with a common color palette, form-making, proportions and degree of generalization of the image. At the same time, each sculpture has an individual character and its own story.

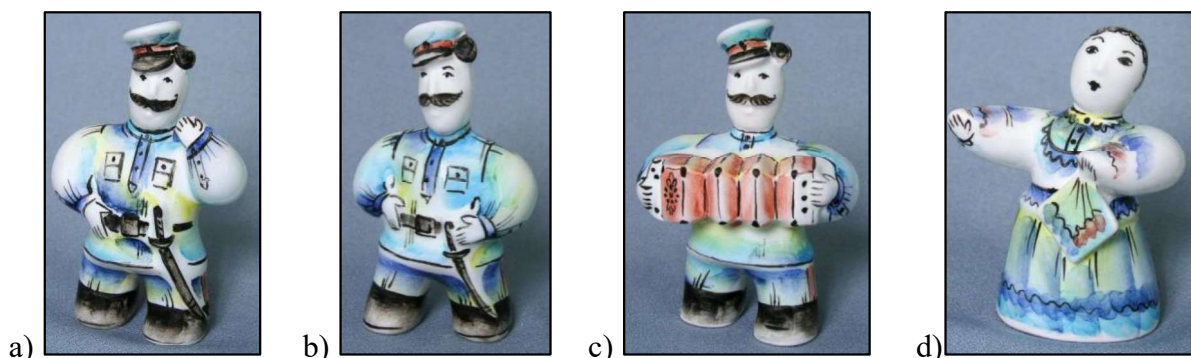


Fig. 3. P.A. Kunakhovets. Small sculptures: a) "Antonovich", b) "Gavrilovich", c) "Prokofievich", d) "Petrovna".

Museum of JSC "Semikarakorsk ceramics"

The male trio reveals three Don cossack archetypes, each with distinct features and temperaments. Antonovich is a serious, warlike cossack, slightly leaning on his hip, with a saber hanging at his belt. Gavrilovich is kind and welcoming, with a dashing curly mustache hiding a smile. Prokofievich is cheerful, holding an accordion, having stretched the bellows as if a cossack song is about to pour forth. Complementing the male trio is the female figure – Petrovna, a stately, cheerful cossack woman, as if twirling in a dance.

These images reveal not only vivid and diverse characters but also stories from the life of the cossack stanitsa, its traditions and daily life. The viewer can easily relate these images to themselves and their acquaintances. This was the author's intention – to engage the viewer, evoke a sincere smile, spark interest in Don culture and inspire a desire to bring a piece of it into their home. The works of Pyotr Antonovich, reflecting local culture, play a significant role in preserving traditions

and their contemporary reinterpretation. His creative approach became the foundation for a new stage in the development of Semikarakorsk ceramics.

The sculptural images of Semikarakorskaya ceramics reflect the traditions and customs of the local population, which is especially close to the worldview of the artist Larisa Leonidovna Zolotykh. Her first achievement was the Honorary diploma of the All-Russian exhibition “Revival of traditions” (Moscow, 1992) for the set “Maslenitsa” (Fig. 4), decorated with small-scale sculpture. The sculptural forms reveal the author’s concept. The rounded lids of the set’s items are associated with snowdrifts, on which carefree children are frolicking.

The sculptural miniatures are distinguished by their organicity and generalization; the variety of poses adds dynamics and develops the storyline. The artist’s fantasy is supported by a decorative effect achieved through the harmonious combination of blue, gray and lilac tones on the white faience background. From the genre scene of a winter day on the Don, there emanates joy and a festive mood. In these images, the author embodies a love for native nature, revealing the theme of childhood in an amazingly warm and vivid manner, close to every viewer.



Fig. 4. L.L. Zolotykh. Pancake set “Maslenitsa”. 1992.
Museum of JSC “Semikarakorsk ceramics”

Small-scale sculpture in Semikarakorsk continues to evolve, with each figurine, pattern or floral motif preserving a memory of the past and reminding us of the value of cultural heritage. The interaction between the old and the new, tradition and innovation, allows local artists to shape a unique artistic identity while simultaneously embedding Semikarakorsk ceramics within the rich cultural context of the Don region.

In the early 1990s, a new direction in the decoration of Semikarakorsky faience emerged – the artistic cut-through relief. The first artist to apply this technique was K.N. Kikhaidi. The lacy edge of the decorative plate added lightness and airiness to the faience body (Fig. 5). The geometric arrangement of the openwork ornament, combined with a wavy border, creates a sense of dynamics and

movement, which is echoed by the depiction of a dancing couple. The application of the cut-through relief is done exclusively by hand.



Fig. 5. K.N. Kikhaidi.
Plate “Cossack”. 1985. Museum
of JSC “Semikarakorsk ceramics”

The artisans of the artistic faience workshop created a simple but effective tool, which is a metal tube, one end of which has an opening in the shape of a diamond, circle, drop, etc., and the other end has a rod with a spring mechanism for ejecting the faience mass. In production, this tool is called a “puncher” and it significantly simplifies the work of creating artistic cut-through relief. It is used to cut through the raw faience body and then, by pressing the rod, the mass is ejected from the tube, allowing for a geometrically precise cut-through element. Needles of various diameters and special knives are also used to create cut-through forms. The creation of cut-through relief is

only possible when the body's moisture content is between 20–35%, so this operation is performed immediately after shaping, often wrapping the form in plastic film to prevent the item from drying out.

This artistic technique has gained recognition among many masters. In addition to decorative plates, lamps and boxes, cut-through relief is used as an element of tableware decoration. For example, T.Yu. Tokarenko created the “Retro” collection with artistic cutwork (Fig. 6). In this work, the cut-through relief emphasizes the character of the winter landscape, imitating winter snow lace and, in combination with the wavy edge, gives the piece a refined character. This method of decoration is characterized by high labor intensity and its application is difficult to automate; therefore, it is not widely spread in modern production. JSC “Semikarakorsk ceramics” is the only producer of faience decorated with cut-through relief in Russia.



Fig. 6. T.Yu. Tokarenko.
Coffee set “Retro”. 2026.
Rostov regional museum
of fine arts

The innovative nature of form-making and painting is evident in the works of Semikarakorsk masters associated with religious themes. The religious narrative direction, which emerged in the mid-1990s, continues to develop to this day: stylized images of saints or the architecture of churches, which hold special significance for the local orthodox population, appear in the items. These works become not only objects of decorative and applied art but also part of the spiritual life of the Don cossacks, reflecting their faith and traditions.



Fig. 7. L.V. Aldoshina.
Souvenir egg “Pussy willow”.
2005. Museum of JSC
“Semikarakorsk ceramics”

A characteristic feature of Semikarakorsk ceramics is the use of Easter symbolism. Well-known religious souvenirs, such as painted Easter eggs, are not merely decorative items – they are imbued with deep meaning, symbolizing resurrection and new life (Fig. 7). The work by L.V. Aldoshina is executed in accordance with tradition and emphasizes the significance of Easter in the life of the orthodox cossacks. Each souvenir egg becomes a unique work of art thanks to variations in execution and the warm energy of hand painting.

The compositions and symbols that artists employ in their works often become part of a broader dialogue about religious identity. They demonstrate how ceramics can serve as a channel for transmitting spiritual values and stories significant to the local population. Each piece becomes a kind of narrative about the life, faith and hopes of the people, emphasizing the importance of Semikarakorsk ceramics as an integral part of Russia’s cultural space. Semikarakorsk ceramics are not merely a unique folk art but also a part of the country’s cultural heritage, reflecting the centuries-old spiritual journey of the cossacks.

Considering the retrospective of new methods of decoration and form-making, as well as the themes and storylines that emerged at the end of the 20th century, one can conclude that there is a synthesis of innovation and tradition. As noted by V.F. Maksimovich, tradition can manifest itself in certain works of traditional art crafts, ideas and professional artistic skills of artists [3]. Semikarakorsk ceramics becomes a link between the past and the present, contributing to the preservation and development of traditions and becoming a true bearer of cultural memory.

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