



“SMALL-SCALE SCULPTURE AND ITS CONCEPT IN THE CULTURE OF PRE-ISLAMIC CENTRAL ASIA”

Kholida Khamidovna Tairova

Lecturer, Department of Sculpture, Faculty of Fine Arts, Kamoliddin
Behzod National Institute of Painting and Design
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Abstract: This article explores the phenomenon of small-scale sculpture within the cultural context of pre-Islamic Central Asia. It analyzes the artistic characteristics, functions, and symbolic meanings of these objects within the framework of religious beliefs, everyday life, and the aesthetic views of ancient societies in the region. Particular attention is paid to terracotta and bronze items and their role in ritual practices, decorative and applied arts, and educational traditions. The author emphasizes the importance of small-scale sculpture as a bearer of sacred and mythological meanings, as well as a valuable source for understanding the mentality and worldview of ancient peoples. Key challenges in the study of small-scale sculpture are identified, including insufficient research, the fragmentary nature of findings, and difficulties of interpretation. This work is intended for researchers, educators, and creative practitioners interested in art history, archaeology, and the cultural heritage of Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, pre-Islamic period, small-scale sculpture, terracotta, bronze, ancient art, religious symbolism, Zoroastrianism, Bactria, Sogdiana, archaeology, cultural heritage, artistic tradition, decorative arts.

Introduction:

The culture of Central Asia prior to Islamization is marked by an extraordinary diversity of forms, religions, ethnic influences, and artistic traditions. For centuries, this region served not only as a geographical crossroads between East and West but also as a space of vibrant spiritual and cultural exchange. Small-scale sculpture is one of the most vivid, yet least studied, aspects of pre-Islamic artistic heritage in Central Asia. It embodies a synthesis of religious, domestic, and aesthetic dimensions, acting as a mirror of both the sacred and everyday life of the people.

Unlike monumental forms, small-scale sculptures were intended for close, personal interaction. Often miniature in size, these objects became part of rituals, inhabited domestic spaces, served as amulets or talismans, or functioned as decorative elements. For those of us in the fields of art and education, studying this sphere means not only analyzing artistic form, but also striving to understand the mindset of ancient peoples—their beliefs, fears, desires, and worldview. In the modeling of small-scale sculptures and miniature forms, we see the spiritual and artistic essence of ancient Central Asian societies. This sculptural form weaves together aesthetics, sacredness, and craft tradition. In pre-Islamic Central Asian culture, it played an essential role in both daily and ritual life—not merely as ornamentation, but as a “vessel of meaning,” capable of conveying entire worldview systems in miniature.

The origins and cultural influences were of profound importance. From the early Iron Age and especially during the flourishing of centers like Bactria and Sogdiana, we see the emergence of a stable tradition of small-scale sculpture. This tradition absorbed local beliefs

(Zoroastrianism, nature cults), as well as external influences—Hellenistic (Greco-Bactrian Kingdom), Indian (Buddhism in Tokharistan), and Iranian (Achaemenid and Sassanid aesthetics). Figurines of nude female deities with emphasized fertility features trace back to the archetype of the Great Mother—a proto-image of nature and the feminine principle central to many pre-Islamic belief systems. Their presence in archaeological sites attests to the long-standing existence of fertility cults associated with agriculture and water, both vital elements for the region.

Typology of Small-Scale Sculptural Images:

The region's miniature sculpture and small plastic forms generally fall into the following main categories:

- **Anthropomorphic figures** – realistic (women, warriors, children) as well as stylized or mythological forms. Often associated with domestic altars, rituals, and funerary cults.
- **Zoomorphic figures** – depictions of bulls, sheep, birds, lions, and mythical creatures. These symbols may represent totems or deities and guardian spirits.
- **Masks and heads** – commonly made of terracotta, used to adorn vessels or ritual objects. They express emotion, sacred gestures, and divine imagery.
- **Amulets and pendants** – crafted from bronze, bone, or faience. They were worn for protection and prosperity, often carrying magical connotations.

Small-scale sculpture was deeply embedded in the fabric of human culture. It was not created “for the museum,” but as a functional part of life. These objects were not just artworks—they were interactive elements between humans and the spiritual world. Their role was particularly significant in the lives of women and children: terracotta figurines could serve both as dolls and as ritual items teaching familial, natural, or ancestral symbolism.

The craftsmanship aspect is also noteworthy: although many artisans worked from molds, each figurine retained individual features reflective of local schools and eras. Despite their size, these objects conveyed remarkable artistic expressiveness, often marked by:

- **Geometric simplification** (a trait of archaic art),
- **Emphasis on faces or hands** (gestures as ritual language),
- **Ornamental elements** as part of a sacred visual code.

Thus, small-scale sculpture represents an ideal blend of craft, spiritual content, and aesthetic refinement, making it especially compelling for creative analysis and contemporary art education.

Historical and Cultural Context:

Pre-Islamic Central Asia encompassed territories of present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, southern Kazakhstan, and northern Afghanistan. Flourishing historical regions such as Sogdiana, Bactria, Margiana, and Khorezm have left a rich archaeological legacy, including numerous examples of small-scale sculpture.

The materials used were diverse: terracotta, bronze, bone, semi-precious stones, and glass. Terracotta objects were the most common—accessible, malleable, and easy to mold. These figurines were often hand-shaped or cast in molds and then fired. Artisans paid close attention to detail, frequently highlighting eyes, hair, headdresses, and jewelry to create distinctive and recognizable characters.

Bronze items are less common but of particular interest from a craftsmanship perspective. These include small statues of animals or deities, protective pendants, and ritual

objects. Archaeologists have also found miniature vessels, decorative horse harness components, and weapon elements with ornamental designs.

Function and Symbolism:

One of the key aspects of small-scale sculpture is its rich symbolic meaning. These objects served as mediators between humans and the invisible world—between the sacred and the mundane. Their primary functions included:

1. **Ritualistic and cultic** – Figurines were used in both domestic and temple altars. Especially prevalent are female figures, often nude or with exaggerated fertility features, linked to fertility cults, water, earth, and the goddess Anahita.
2. **Amuletic** – Small animal figures (rams, birds, lions) were worn around the neck or attached to belts for protection from evil spirits, illness, and misfortune.
3. **Decorative and applied** – Many items served as home décor, clothing accessories, or household ornaments. Bronze lions, for example, could be part of furniture; female heads might adorn ceramic vessels.
4. **Educational and cultural** – Figurines depicting mythological scenes, masks, or characters often visualized cultural heritage, transmitting ideas and stories to future generations.

What is especially valuable is that small-scale sculpture often reflects a synthesis of cultural influences. For instance, Sogdian artifacts show elements of Greek plasticity (Hellenism), Iranian tradition (Zoroastrianism), and Indian Buddhism. These connections are evident in the modeling technique, composition, and iconography.

Challenges in Study and Interpretation:

Despite its significance, small-scale sculpture long remained outside the main focus of art historical research, due to:

- The **fragmentary nature** of archaeological finds—often discovered without inscriptions or in damaged condition;
- Their **small size**—such items were often deemed secondary to monumental sculpture, architecture, or murals;
- **Interpretive difficulties**—without written records, determining purpose or mythological meaning is complex;
- **Colonial and Eurocentric biases**—early Western scholars often saw Eastern art as derivative or peripheral.

However, in recent decades, interest in this area of material culture has been revived. Growing attention to anthropology, everyday life, and visual practices allows for new interpretations of the role of small-scale sculpture in the cultural landscape of the region.

Conclusion:

The small-scale sculpture of pre-Islamic Central Asia is a kind of “portable myth,” preserved in clay, bronze, and bone. It conveys a unique blend of beliefs, styles, and symbols native to the region. Through these miniature artworks, we touch the fine fabric of ancient spirituality—a form of sculpture that speaks not in the grand gestures of monuments, but in the quiet, intimate voice of the sacred.

For the creative mind and art educator, this field is not only a subject of research but also a source of inspiration. It brings us back to the origins of the artistic image—its ability to serve as a bridge between the visible and the invisible, the material and the spiritual.



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