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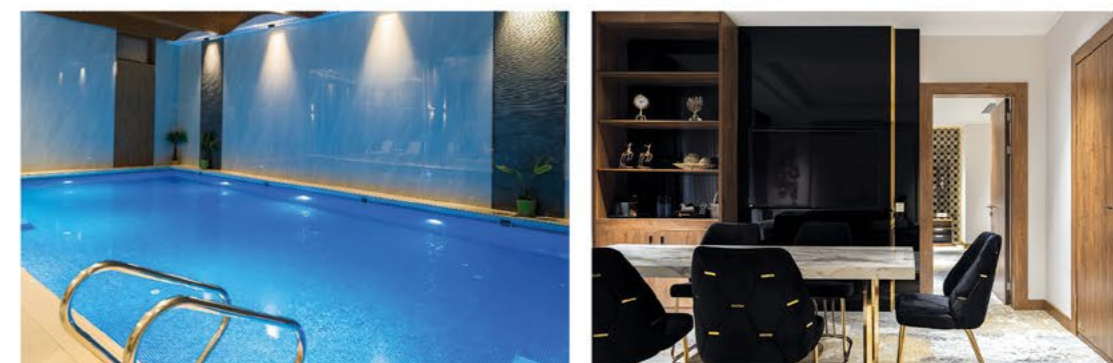
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# TASHKENT CITY MALL IS MORE THAN A PLACE – IT IS A DESTINATION FOR EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES



Tashkent City Mall is a large-scale, world-class multifunctional development in the very heart of the capital. It brings together over 250 boutiques, diverse gastronomic concepts, the country's largest cinema with IMAX, a modern fitness center, the Class A Summit business center, luxury residences, and the five-star JW Marriott hotel.



The space is designed around the concept of “more than retail.” Three galleries — Heritage, Present, and Future — create an immersive journey through time, inspired by the culture and nature of Uzbekistan. With more than 40 dining concepts, open terraces overlooking the park, hands-free service, a concierge zone, and thoughtfully designed infrastructure, Tashkent City Mall serves as a point of attraction for city residents, businesses, and travelers alike.

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*Feelings*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

24

Through One's Own Eyes: Events Worthy of Attention

42

The Art of Painting in Uzbekistan: An Intricate Canvas Weaving Together Eras and Styles

56

The Art of Vision: Three Perspectives on Photography, Travel, and Inspiration

82

Olga Gershon: "People Come to People"

94

Dreams Inspired by Fragrance...

102

Breath of Time: Heritage Turned into the Future

110

The Unspoken Language of Distance and Touch

126

The Sounds of Travel: From a Cat's Purr to the Symphony of the Metropolis

138

Hearing Uzbekistan: The Making of a Unique Documentary Film

148

Dialogues on the Love of Flight

162

All Vectors Are Subject to Love...

168

On Love, with an Algorithm



# Centrum

Travel magazine

*Marketing Director:*  
ANDREY OSINTSEV

*Brand Manager:*  
SOFYA ZAVERSHINSKAYA

*Editor-in-Chief:*  
ELIZAVETA ALMAZOVA

*Art Director:*  
EMIL ZUBAIROV

*Special Projects Director:*  
GIO KARDAVA

*Authors:*  
ISLAM RAKHMANOV  
ALINA VOZNYUK  
ANASTASIA CHEREPANOVA  
ELDAR YULDASHEV  
GEORGIY SHVANOV

*Translation (English):*  
MALIKA SHADMANOVA  
KUMUSHKHON OMARKHON TURA

*Design and Layout:*  
EMIL ZUBAIROV  
AFZAL KHAMIDOV

*Photography:*  
GIO KARDAVA  
KIRILL UMRIKHIN  
ERNEST KURTVELIEV  
ANASTASIA KRAVCHENKO

THE FOUNDATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE AND ART OF UZBEKISTAN  
THE ACADEMY OF ARTS OF UZBEKISTAN

*Editorial Office Address:*  
38B OYBEK STREET, MIRABAD DISTRICT, TASHKENT

*Advertising Department:*  
+998 91 030 82 21  
MARKETING@CENTRUM-AIR.COM

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## Dear Reader,

Feelings are our inner navigation system. They guide us, helping us find direction, recognize what truly matters, and experience each moment in its fullness. In travel, as in life, we often trust them more than maps and itineraries, for the world reveals itself not only through distance, but through what we are able to see, hear, and feel.

Sight gives us a horizon – the ability to look beyond a destination. A single glance can open new possibilities and allow us to see the familiar in an entirely different way. Taste reminds us that every culture has its own language, revealed in the smallest details. Through it, we bring the world closer and make it more meaningful. Scent preserves memories with remarkable precision – a fleeting aroma can instantly return us to a place where we were once happy, inviting us to set out once more. Touch makes experiences tangible: a gentle breeze or the warmth of the sun reminds us that the world is not only meant to be seen, but to be lived. Hearing, in turn, allows us to capture the rhythm of the planet – from the vibrant polyphony of cities to the calm, almost meditative hum of engines, where the feeling of forward motion comes alive.

And finally, love – the feeling in which all others converge. A love for travel, for discovery, for the people we meet along the way, but also love as what keeps us human in an age of technology. Today, artificial intelligence helps us make decisions faster and more precisely, expanding the horizons of what is possible. Yet it is love that gives meaning to these possibilities, reminding us that behind every algorithm stands a human being with their own hopes and dreams.

We believe the future is shaped where technology serves people, where progress does not replace human warmth, where speed does not diminish attentiveness, and innovation goes hand in hand with responsibility. And wherever the next journey may lead, it is our feelings that make it truly meaningful.

May this issue be an invitation to pause, listen to yourself, and rediscover the joy of exploration. As long as we can feel, we truly live, travel, and love.

*The Editorial Team  
Centrum Travel Magazine*

SUPPORT OUR SOCIAL PROJECT:



Helping the blind:



**W**hen an aircraft takes off the ground, there is always a brief moment of stillness, as if the world itself pauses to take a breath. That moment, you realise that moving forward starts with an impulse. For Centrum Holding, that impulse is a drive to connect cities, people, cultures, and opportunities. Over the past few years, Centrum Holding has grown significantly in scale: our team has expanded, the business has expanded, and the number of our projects has increased. This sense of maturity is reflected in the way the company's divisions operate within a unified ecosystem, bringing together the passenger carrier Centrum Air, the cargo airline My Freighter, the tour operator Centrum Holidays, and the logistics provider Centrum Global Logistics. Each business evolves independently, yet together they form a cohesive, large-scale, and finely calibrated framework for logistics and travel.



This scale is evident in tangible metrics: the holding's combined fleet now comprises 25 aircraft, while its flight geography spans Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. And yet, this scale extends beyond aviation. Our logistics infrastructure includes hundreds of units of equipment, around 300 platforms, 4,000 containers, and terminal facilities covering a total area of 37.5 hectares, creating an extensive network of ground routes.

*"We are shaping a logistics leader in Central Asia – one that sets the standard for reliability, technology, and service. Building on innovation, a strong corporate culture, and a systematic approach to risk management, we ensure the resilience and continuity of logistics chains in the interests of our customers, our business and the regional economy,"* notes Abdulaziz Abdurakhmanov, Founder and CEO of Centrum Holding.

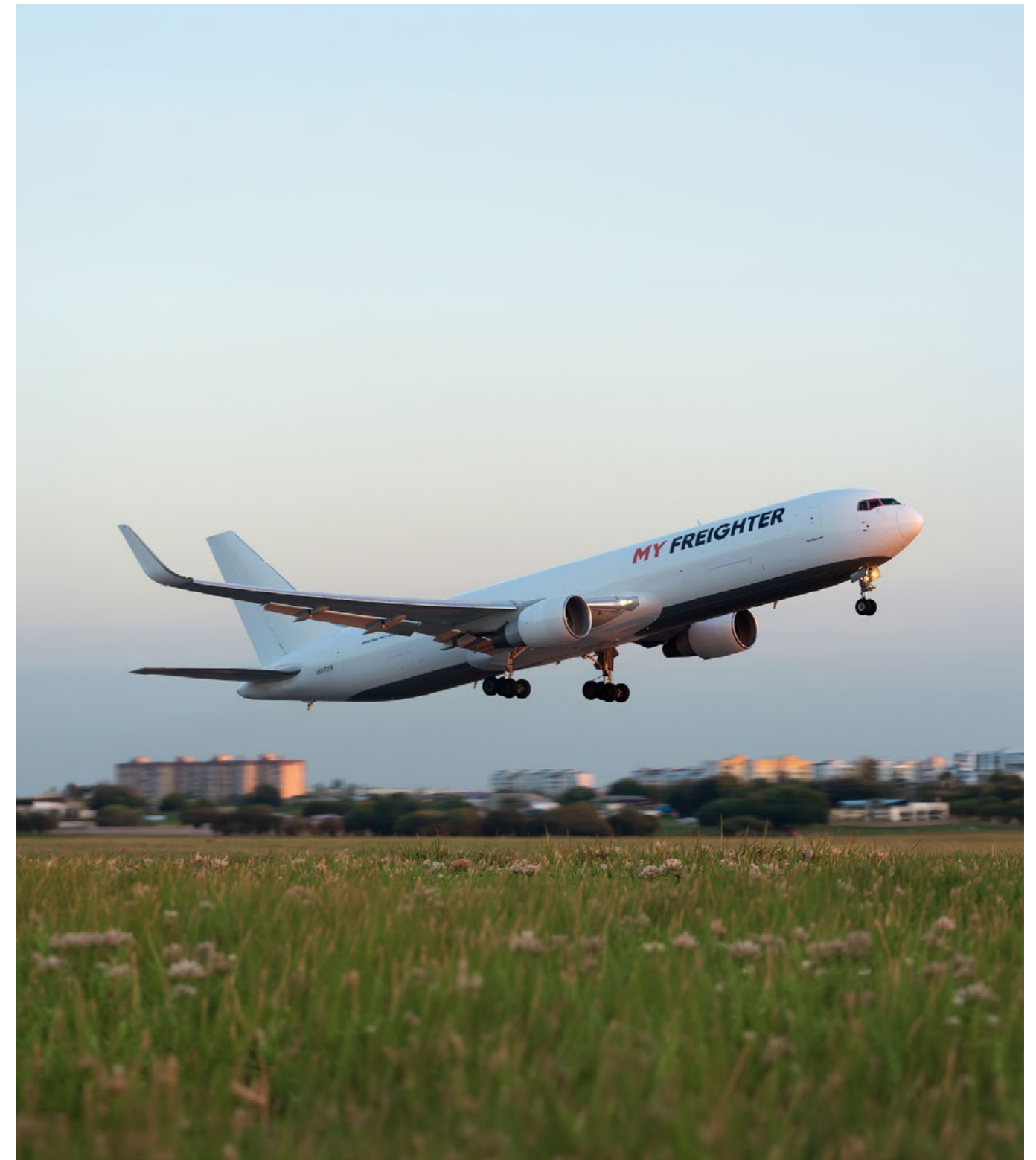
**SEEING BEYOND THE HORIZON**

At the heart of any winning strategy lies the ability to look beyond the horizon. Several years ago, Centrum Holding anticipated what is now becoming evident across the industry: Central Asia is once again emerging as a global hub. Geography itself suggested the answer. Situated roughly six hours' flight from the key business centers of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Tashkent proved to be an ideal location for a transit hub. That was the strategic bet – and it has paid off.

Today, My Freighter is the largest cargo airline in Central Asia, Centrum Air continues to expand its passenger network, and Centrum Logistics Group is strengthening its ground and multimodal infrastructure, building integrated logistics solutions that span aviation, terminals, and fleet operations. Together, these divisions form a seamless ecosystem.



**Khafizjon Gafurov**  
Co-Founder of Centrum Holding



*"Our strategic objective is not merely to increase transportation volumes, but to create a resilient transit ecosystem. We aim to position Tashkent as a natural logistics bridge between the markets of Asia, Europe, and the Middle East – across both air routes and overland corridors,"* emphasizes Khafizjon Gafurov, Co-Founder of Centrum Holding.

**THIS IS WHAT STRATEGIC VISION  
TRULY MEANS: NOT JUST BUILDING  
ROUTES, BUT SHAPING THE  
CONNECTIONS OF THE FUTURE.**



**UNDERSTANDING WHERE THE WORLD IS HEADING**

Aviation has always been about tempo and rhythm, as well as the ability to know how global routes are being reshaped well in advance, and understand where new centers of gravity are emerging. In recent years, interest in alternative corridors between East and West has grown significantly, and Central Asia has naturally strengthened its position as a key transit region. Centrum Holding was well prepared for this shift.

Transatlantic transportation is already carried out through interline agreements with global leaders, including American Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and other major carriers worldwide. Within the industry, such

partnerships are seen as a mark of trust and as recognition of compliance with the highest standards of safety and operational efficiency.

Abdulaziz Abdurakhmanov explains: *“We are developing our international network in a measured way, guided by demand, infrastructure, and long-term economic potential. Our goal is to build sustainable transport links that will stand the test of time.”*

This approach reflects a strategy not of rapid expansion, but of precision. This means each new route becomes part of a carefully designed system, and growth is built on a solid foundation.

**SOMETIMES, SUCCESS IS SIMPLY THE ABILITY TO “HEAR” THE FUTURE BEFORE OTHERS DO**



**Abdulaziz Abdurakhmanov**  
Founder and CEO of Centrum Holding



### A SENSE OF SUPPORT

Our greatest achievement is not the scale of our fleet or route network, but our people. Today, more than 3,200 employees work across the company, and that number continues to grow. Yet what matters more is the atmosphere of a professional environment in which every new flight begins long before takeoff.

*“Our greatest asset is our people. It is no coincidence that our slogan is ‘Centrum is people.’ It is the team that creates the level of reliability and service experienced by both passengers and partners,”* notes Khafizjon Gafurov.

And this is something tangible: a sense of support without which no large system can truly function.

### A YEAR OF ACHIEVEMENT

The past year was a period of rapid expansion for Centrum Holding. Its cargo airline transported more than 74,416 tonnes of freight, strengthening its regional leadership and reinforcing the strategic China-Europe corridor. With the launch of 60 new routes, the company’s international network expanded significantly, growing by 26 percent year-on-year, which further solidified Central Asia’s role as a key corridor for e-commerce flows and the transportation of high-value goods between China, Europe, and the Middle East.

Our logistics division has demonstrated equally impressive momentum. Centrum Global Logistics has continued to scale its infrastructure: today, it employs 920 people, operates international offices, and manages an extensive operational network. Multimodal transportation and freight forwarding alone nearly doubled over the year, reaching 550.2 thousand tonnes. Within this system, logistics is no longer perceived merely as a delivery function, but as a strategically designed, integrated ecosystem.

The passenger segment has also shown strong growth, serving over 1.5 million passengers in 2025 in a year and operating more than 30 international routes, from Seoul and Bangkok to Baku and Tel Aviv. The launch of flights to Guangzhou marked an important step in strengthening trade and business ties with China.

Most importantly, international connectivity is no longer limited to Tashkent. Flights now operate from Samarkand, Bukhara, Nukus, Namangan, Fergana, Termez, and Urgench. When residents across the country gain direct access to global routes without the need to transit through the capital, the very logic of mobility begins to shift. It becomes easier for families to stay connected, for students to choose universities abroad, and for tourism to grow exponentially. In this sense, aviation is not only part of the transportation industry, but a catalyst for development.



Our fleet has expanded significantly, the team has grown, in-flight entertainment systems have been introduced, and specialized catering has been added on board. The company has evolved beyond a combination of growing businesses and has firmly entered the major league of global transport players, those who define routes rather than follow them.

Looking ahead, we see 2026 as a year of strengthening our international presence. Our plans include expanding the fleet to 35 aircraft, broadening our route network, and firmly establishing Uzbekistan's role as a vital transit bridge.

#### **LOVE FOR BUILDING CONNECTIONS**

Scaling a private airline today is not only about building the business but also about serving the country. It means expanding access to travel and strengthening connections between cultures.

Ultimately, aviation is not just about aircraft. It is about the freedom of movement that reshapes cities, economies, and human lives, bringing people closer together despite the distances between them.

Above all, aviation is about love: for the sky and connecting people no matter the distance.



Logistics is always about people. Behind every system are those who rarely appear in the spotlight, yet without their involvement not a single route would move forward. They transform points on the map into a coordinated flow by planning, coordinating, and making decisions in real time. The **Centrum Global Logistics** team consists of professionals who build resilient systems even from the most complex supply chains, ensuring that operations never stop for a single moment.

# THROUGH ONE'S OWN EYES: EVENTS WORTHY OF ATTENTION



International JAZZ FESTIVAL UZBEKISTAN  
28.04 - 12.05  
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Фонд развития культуры и искусства Узбекистана

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## INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

When: April 28 – May 12

Where: Tashkent, Uzbekistan

The Uzbekistan International Forum Palace will host the International Jazz Festival, bringing together leading global and local performers on a single stage. The lineup includes stars of the world jazz scene, such as Leonid Agutin in collaboration with Therr Maitz, as well as Stanley Clarke (five-time Grammy Award winner) and Kurt Elling (two-time Grammy Award winner). They will be joined by other international and Uzbek musicians, showcasing the genre's diversity and its contemporary sound.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$78**

BISHKEK → 1 h 20 min → TASHKENT

## WINGS FOR LIFE WORLD RUN 2026

When: May 3

Where: Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Tashkent once again joins the global charity run Wings for Life World Run – a unique event that takes place simultaneously around the world, uniting thousands of participants in support of spinal cord injury research. The race's defining feature is the absence of a fixed distance: participants run until the “Catcher Car” catches up to them. This is not only a sporting event but also a social initiative, where every participant becomes part of a global movement for a greater cause.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$78**

FERGANA → 1 h → TASHKENT





**CONCERT BY VLADIMIR SPIVAKOV**

When: May 4

Where: Tashkent, Uzbekistan

The Uzbekistan International Forum Palace will host “Masterpieces of World Music,” a concert featuring the eminent conductor and violinist Vladimir Spivakov, People’s Artist of the USSR and UNESCO Artist for Peace. Together with the National Philharmonic Orchestra of Russia, the Maestro will present a programme of celebrated classical masterpieces, with pianist Ekaterina Mechetina as the evening’s soloist.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$49**

URGENCH → 1 h 30 min → TASHKENT



**METALLICA CONCERT**

When: May 22

Where: Frankfurt, Germany

Frankfurt will host a concert by legendary metal band Metallica, one of the most influential groups in music history. This large-scale stadium show will combine powerful sound, signature energy and iconic hits that have long become classics. Metallica’s performance promises to be one of the year’s highlights and an unforgettable evening for the band’s fans.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$125**

TASHKENT → 7 h 10 min → FRANKFURT

**“JAZZ ON THE WATER”**

When: May 14

Where: Moscow, Russia

“Jazz on the Water” is an atmospheric musical cruise along evening Moscow, where classic American jazz, soul, funk and Latin rhythms are performed live by talented artists. Guests can expect a romantic river journey aboard a comfortable two-deck boat with panoramic windows, stunning sunset views of the capital, vibrant vocal performances and dancing. The evening promises an ideal blend of live music, freedom, movement and heartfelt relaxation in the heart of the city.



REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$190**

TASHKENT → 4 h 40 min → MOSCOW

**EGOR KREED CONCERT**

When: May 26

Where: Tashkent, Uzbekistan

One of the most successful artists in Russia and the CIS launches a new tour and arrives in Tashkent with a major solo concert. A darling of millions – artist, songwriter, actor and popular blogger – Kreed will present a large-scale show featuring striking visuals and live sound. The programme includes all his biggest hits, new compositions never heard anywhere else, and non-stop dancing.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$100**

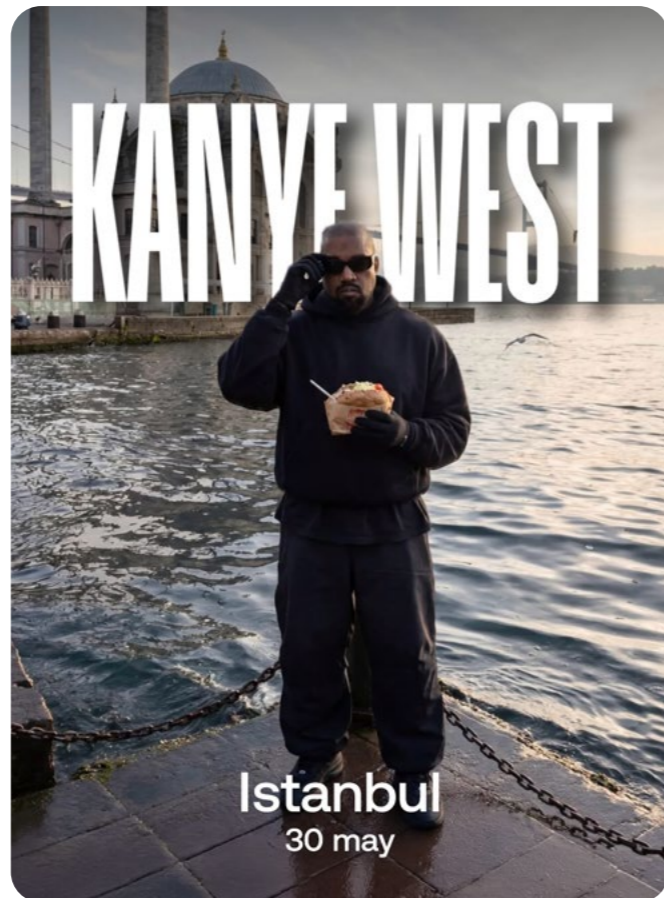
URALSK → 3 h → TASHKENT



**KANYE WEST**

📅 *When: May 30*  
📍 *Where: Istanbul, Turkey*

A concert by one of the most influential contemporary artists, Kanye West (Ye), has generated enormous anticipation even before its date. The performance will take place at the Atatürk Olympic Stadium and is expected to draw tens of thousands of spectators, reaffirming Istanbul's status as a key concert venue in the region.



**REGULAR FLIGHTS** from \$203

TASHKENT → 5 h 30 min → ISTANBUL

**CIRQUE DU SOLEIL: OVO**

📅 *When: June 4-7*  
📍 *Where: Astana, Kazakhstan*

The legendary Cirque du Soleil returns to Central Asia after several years with its touring show OVO. Performances will take place in Astana and Almaty, marking the circus's first official tour since its appearance at Expo 2017. OVO is a vibrant, dynamic production that transports audiences into a fantastic insect world, blending acrobatics, live music, spectacular costumes and grand scenography. Since its premiere, the show has been seen by more than 10 million spectators across 40 countries; the updated version is even more dazzling and captivating for the whole family.



**REGULAR FLIGHTS** from \$92

TASHKENT → 2 h → ASTANA



**“DREAMS OF SIBERIA” EXHIBITION**

📅 *When: Until May 31*  
📍 *Where: Novosibirsk, Russia*

The Novosibirsk State Art Museum is hosting “Dreams of Siberia,” a large-scale exhibition – the first project in Russia to integrate archaeology, history and contemporary art using cutting-edge display technologies. At its heart is the culture of ancient peoples from the forest and forest-steppe regions of Siberia: around 100 unique artefacts from the country's largest museums, many of which have never left their repositories. The dialogue with the past is complemented by works from world-renowned sculptor Dashi Namdakov. The exhibition immerses visitors in a mystical journey through time, thanks to thoughtful architecture, light, sound and a full sensory experience, making it one of the most significant cultural events in the region.

**REGULAR FLIGHTS** from \$216

TASHKENT → 3 h 15 min → NOVOSIBIRSK



**BLACK COFFEE CONCERT**

📅 *When: June 5*  
📍 *Where: Istanbul, Turkey*

Istanbul will host a performance by world-renowned DJ and producer Black Coffee – one of the most influential figures in contemporary electronic music and a key ambassador of Afro-house on the global stage. Known for his deep, atmospheric sound and collaborations with leading artists, Black Coffee has conquered the world's leading festivals and clubs. The show promises a powerful open-air experience with hypnotic rhythms, immersive sound, and a signature set that blends electronic grooves with soulful depth.

**REGULAR FLIGHTS** from \$203

TASHKENT → 5 h 30 min → ISTANBUL



**JOHN LEGEND CONCERT**

When: June 8

Where: Samarkand, Uzbekistan

The legendary Registan Square will host a concert by world-renowned performer John Legend – one of the most influential artists of our time. With 13 Grammy Awards, plus an Oscar, Emmy and Tony, Legend has won over millions of listeners worldwide with his soul, R&B and pop music. That evening, in Samarkand’s unique historic atmosphere, he will perform his greatest hits, including the iconic ballad “All of Me.”

REGULAR FLIGHTS <b>from \$141</b>		
MOSCOW	→ 4 h →	SAMARKAND



**ANTON BELYAEV'S LAB SHOW**

When: June 15

Where: Moscow, Russia

The musical show LAB is a vast creative laboratory founded by Anton Belyaev – frontman of Therr Maitz, composer and coach on the talent show “The Voice.” The project, where famous artists step outside familiar genres, quickly grew to stadium-level concerts and won over thousands of spectators across the country. LAB returns with an even brighter, more ambitious show: familiar songs in unexpected arrangements, an orchestra, choir, star guests, updated visuals and powerful stage energy.

REGULAR FLIGHTS <b>from \$190</b>		
TASHKENT	→ 4 h 40 min →	MOSCOW

**ADRIATIQUE CONCERT**

When: June 12

Where: Tbilisi, Georgia

Mono Hall and Boom Boom Booking Agency present the globally renowned electronic duo Adriatique – one of the most influential projects on the contemporary electronic scene. Their music blends melodic depth, hypnotic rhythms and a powerful atmosphere that has conquered the world’s biggest festivals and clubs. That evening, at the open-air venue of Mtatsminda Park, the duo will deliver their signature sound alongside elements of their large-scale X show, promising complete immersion, energy and an unforgettable musical experience under the open sky.



REGULAR FLIGHTS <b>from \$158</b>		
TASHKENT	→ 3 h 25 min →	TBILISI

**MASHINA VREMENI (TIME MACHINE) CONCERT**

When: June 19

Where: Tel Aviv, Israel

The legendary band Mashina Vremeni returns to the stage to meet their fans once again. This evening will be a true musical journey through time with Andrey Makarevich and his team. The programme will feature beloved songs from different years, including “Odnazhdy mir prognyotsya pod nas” (One Day the World Will Bend for Us), “Kostyor” (Bonfire), “Marionetki” (Marionettes), “Povorot” (Turn), and other iconic compositions.

REGULAR FLIGHTS <b>from \$233</b>		
TASHKENT	→ 5 h 30 min →	TEL-AVIV



**SCORPIONS CONCERT**

When: June 24  
 Where: Istanbul, Turkey

Legendary German rock band Scorpions will perform a major live concert in Istanbul. The group that gave the world timeless hits such as “Wind of Change,” “Still Loving You” and “Rock You Like a Hurricane” continues to fill arenas around the globe. The concert at Vodafone Arena promises a true celebration of classic rock – with powerful sound, unmistakable energy and songs that have united millions of fans for decades.



REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$203**

TASHKENT → 5 h 30 min → ISTANBUL

**MEGADETH CONCERT**

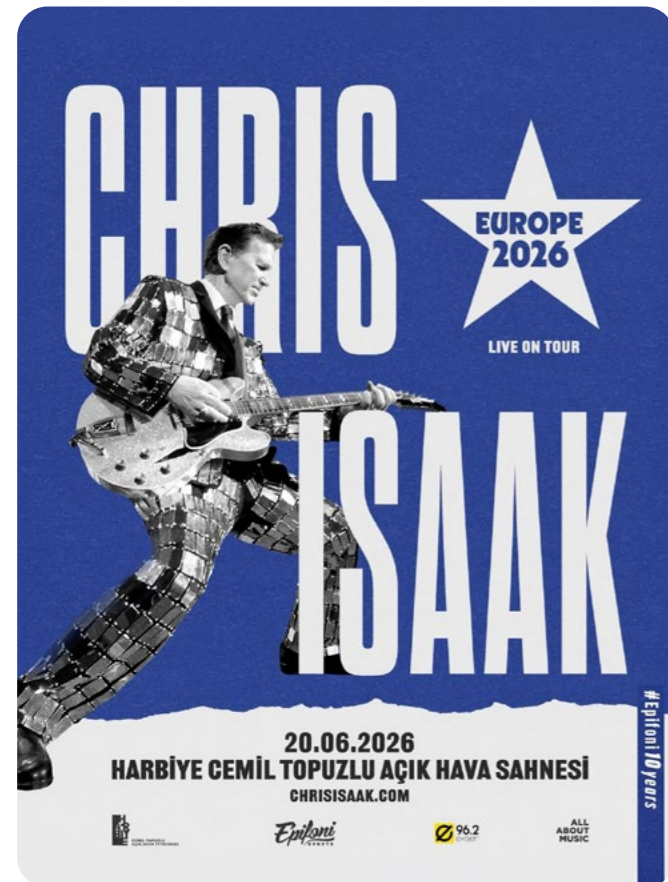
When: June 28  
 Where: Almaty, Kazakhstan

Legendary thrash metal band Megadeth – founded and led by Dave Mustaine – will perform a powerful live concert in Almaty for the first time. For over 40 years, Megadeth have remained one of the most influential forces in heavy music, selling tens of millions of albums and forever changing the sound of metal. The setlist includes iconic hits and new material, showcasing the band’s signature riffs, flawless technique and untamed energy. This concert is a must for all fans of old-school thrash and pure metal drive.



REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$83**

TASHKENT → 1 h 45 min → ALMATY



**CHRIS ISAAK CONCERT**

When: June 26  
 Where: Istanbul, Turkey

Istanbul will host a concert by legendary American musician Chris Isaak, one of the most recognisable voices in the world. The artist, famous for the iconic hit “Wicked Game,” will present a romantic, atmospheric show filled with his signature sound, nostalgia and raw emotion. A summer evening under the open sky at the Cemil Topuzlu Open-Air Theatre will provide the perfect setting for his soulful music.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$203**

TASHKENT → 5 h 30 min → ISTANBUL



**RICKY MARTIN CONCERT**

When: July 18  
 Where: Almaty, Kazakhstan

The Spartak Stadium in Almaty will host a concert by global pop idol Ricky Martin – one of the leading figures on the Latin music scene. This marks his first performance in Kazakhstan as part of a major world tour. A Grammy and Latin Grammy award winner, he has sold over 95 million records worldwide and become an icon of global pop culture. That evening, his greatest hits will resound – from “Livin’ la Vida Loca” and “Maria” to “She Bangs” and other defining tracks that shaped the sound of pop music in the late 1990s and 2000s.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$83**

TASHKENT → 1 h 45 min → ALMATY



**DREAM FEST 2026**

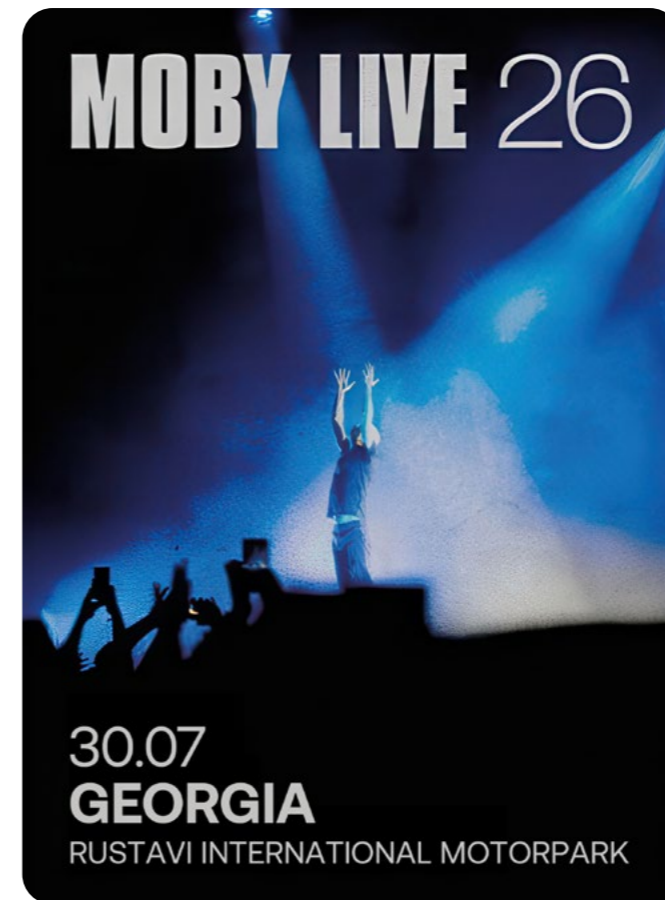
**When:** July 23-26

**Where:** Baku, Azerbaijan

For four days, the coastline of SEA BREEZE will transform into a space where the sea meets music, and summer unfolds in all its beauty. DREAM FEST 2026 will offer four days of open-air dancing, a sense of freedom and a unique festive feeling that can only be experienced here – on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Dazzling performances, warm nights, sea breezes and summer energy will make this festival one of the season’s most memorable events.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$107**

TASHKENT → 3 h 15 min → BAKU



**MOBY CONCERT**

**When:** July 30

**Where:** Rustavi, Georgia

Georgia will host a live performance by electronic music icon Moby – one of the most influential figures on the global electronic scene, with over three decades of genre-defining work and millions of albums sold worldwide. The show promises a large-scale live experience featuring Moby’s most iconic tracks, including “Porcelain,” “Go,” and “Lift Me Up,” alongside new material.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$158**

TASHKENT → 3 h 25 min → TBILISI

**THE WEEKND CONCERT**

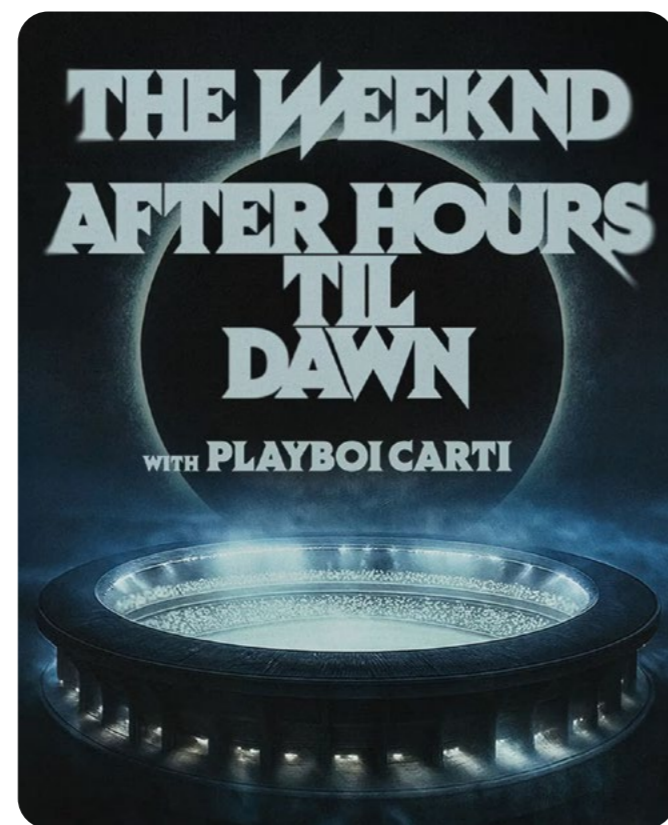
**When:** July 30

**Where:** Frankfurt, Germany

Frankfurt will host a concert by global superstar The Weeknd – one of the most successful and influential artists on the contemporary pop and R&B scene. This large-scale stadium show will combine spectacular visuals, powerful sound and the biggest hits that have conquered charts worldwide. The performance promises to be one of the summer’s most dazzling musical events and an unforgettable evening for all fans.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$125**

TASHKENT → 7 h 10 min → FRANKFURT



**PARK LIVE ALMATY 2026 FESTIVAL**

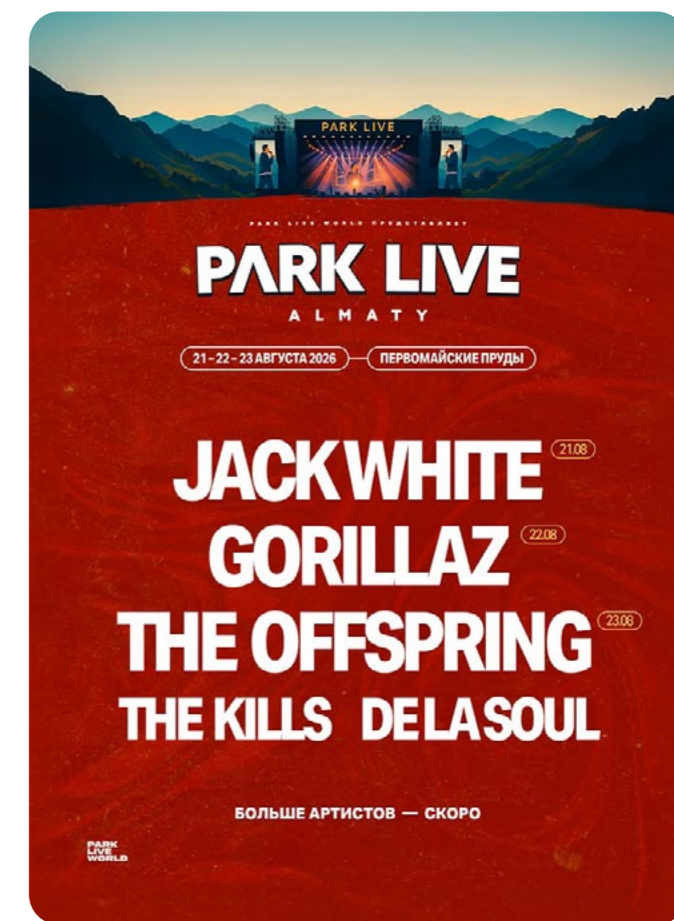
**When:** August 21-23

**Where:** Almaty, Kazakhstan

Almaty will once again become the musical capital of Central Asia – the city will host the large-scale Park Live Almaty festival. This year’s lineup is headlined by global stars, including iconic musician Jack White and legendary band Gorillaz. Three days of world-class live music, international headliners and the region’s finest artists will again draw tens of thousands of spectators. Park Live Almaty continues to strengthen Kazakhstan’s status as a hub for festival culture and promises one of the most spectacular musical events of summer 2026.

REGULAR FLIGHTS **from \$83**

TASHKENT → 1 h 45 min → ALMATY





## Mebel & Decor

### CAEX MEBEL & DECOR 2026 EXHIBITION

**When:** April 2–4, 2026

**Where:** Tashkent, Uzbekistan

From April 2 to 4, the CAEx Exhibition Centre in Tashkent will become a territory of ideas, forms and textures. The 4th International Exhibition CAEx Mebel & Decor 2026 brings together manufacturers, designers, architects and anyone who follows the evolution of contemporary living spaces. Here, furniture and decor are not mere objects but a true language of style and a way to express a home's character. New collections, interior trends and a lively dialogue between producers and buyers make the exhibition a magnet both for industry professionals and the wider public.



## Build & Co.

### CAEX BUILD & CO. EXHIBITION

**When:** November 19–21, 2026


**Where:** Tashkent, Uzbekistan


Uzbekistan's construction sector continues to hold its status as a key economic driver, demonstrating steady growth and a constant influx of investment. From November 19 to 21, the CAEx Exhibition Centre will host Build & Co. 2026 – the third international B2B exhibition of construction and design. The platform brings together building technologies, real estate, architecture and design in a professional format focused on business interaction and applied solutions. CAEx Build & Co. fosters an environment where industry trends are given practical development.



## BARAKA FRIDAY

### CAEX BARAKA FRIDAY GRAND SALE FAIR

 *When: December 25–28, 2026*


 *Where: CAEx Exhibition Centre, Tashkent, Uzbekistan*


From December 25 to 28, CAEx will become a pre-New Year destination. CAEx Baraka Friday is a large-scale sale fair where dozens of brands across various categories – from food products to large household appliances – offer discounted goods. The festive atmosphere, pleasant shopping and a genuine sense of pre-New Year buzz make CAEx Baraka Friday an event that opens the gift-giving season. The third fair promises to be even grander – with a wider variety of brands, promotions and the spirit of a major shopping festival.



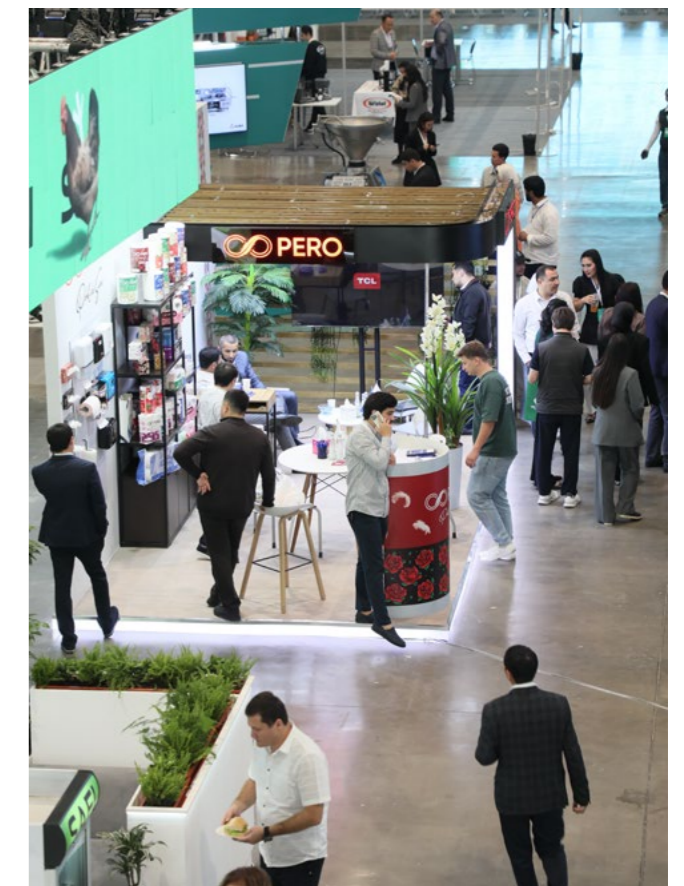
## HoReCa | UzFPT

### CAEX FOOD & HORECA EXHIBITION

 *When: February 4–6, 2027*

 *Where: Tashkent, Uzbekistan*

The food and HoReCa market in Uzbekistan today is one of the most dynamically growing and promising in the region. It is scaling up rapidly, attracting new players and demanding modern solutions – from product quality to advanced technologies for the hospitality industry. From February 4 to 6, 2027, the CAEx Exhibition Centre will host the 3rd International Exhibition CAEx Food & HoReCa – a professional platform where producers, distributors and market operators meet. It is a space for live negotiations, new contracts and practical solutions for business development. The exhibition reflects the industry's robust growth and its focus on long-term partnerships.



# Sight

*“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new  
landscapes, but in having new eyes.”*

Marcel Proust

# THE ART OF PAINTING IN UZBEKISTAN: AN INTRICATE CANVAS WEAVING TOGETHER ERAS AND STYLES



Behzad. Iskander and the Seven Sages

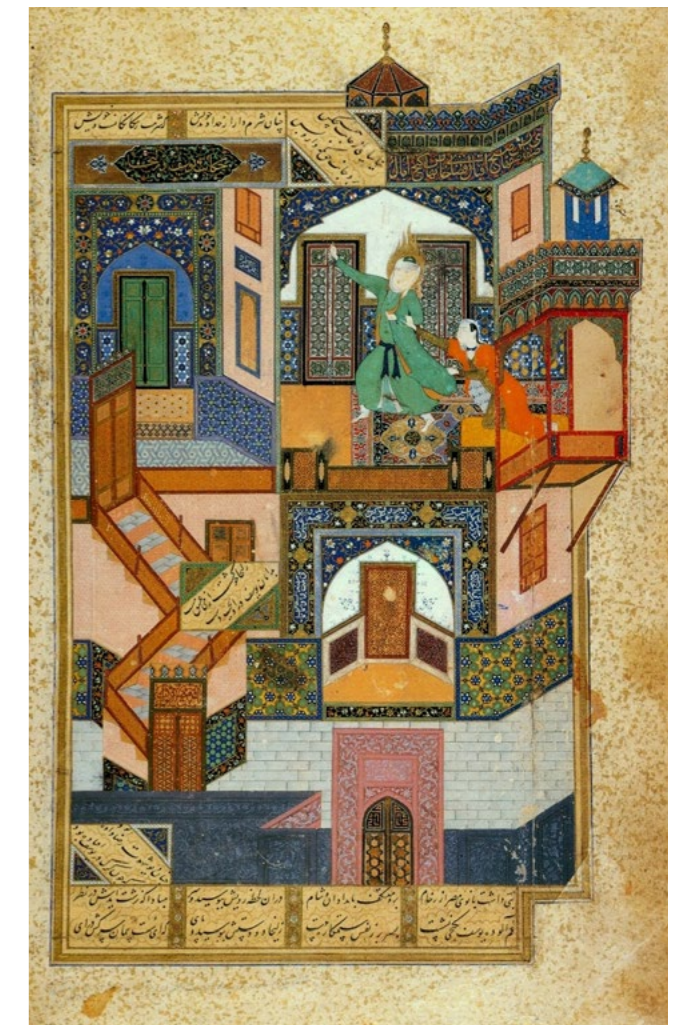
Sight is perhaps the most contradictory of all our senses. It does not lie, yet it is easily deceived when we look superficially. Uzbekistan is one of those rare places where vision seems to function differently – more attentively, more deeply, more slowly. Here, colour carries meaning, line becomes intonation, and ornament is not mere decoration but a way of thinking. To truly see this land, it is not enough simply to open one's eyes; one must learn to look closely.

Classical Eastern miniature painting teaches the art of “slow” mode of vision. It lacks the linear perspective familiar to the European eye; instead, space unfolds in all directions at once, as if inviting the viewer to wander visually across every centimetre of the page. Nothing here is secondary – each detail lives its own life, and it reveals itself only to those who allow themselves the luxury of unhurried attention.

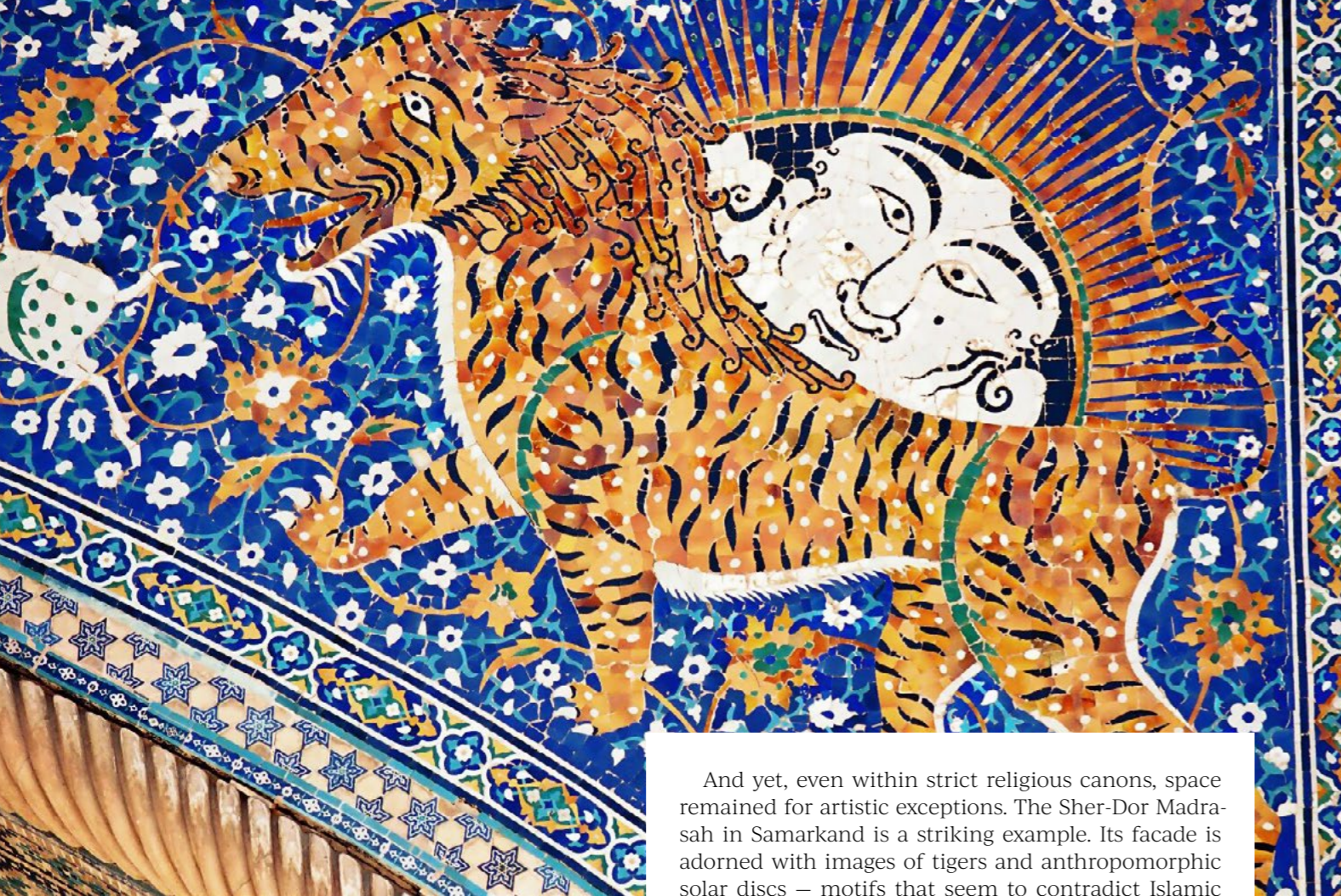
This is precisely how the art of Uzbekistan took shape: contemplative and multilayered. It is a complex interweaving of eras, traditions, and cultures that reflects the country's rich and multifaceted history.

Painting evolved and transformed under the influence of rulers – from khans and emirs to governors and commissars. Each century left its own mark, creating a unique visual language in which antiquity and modernity do not follow one another but coexist simultaneously, like multiple planes within a single composition.

For centuries, local artistic tradition rested on ornament and calligraphy, on the patterns of ceramics and textiles. This visual language emerged not so much from aesthetics as from the influence of Islamic culture, where the depiction of human faces was considered undesirable. Yet prohibition did not lead to impoverishment – quite the opposite. It gave rise to a flourishing of calligraphy and arabesque, transforming prayer into pattern. Until 1928, the Uzbek language itself was written in Arabic script, and mastery of this writing became the foundation of a refined calligraphic tradition. The strict, geometric Kufic script was especially revered, used for copying the Qur'an and adorning the walls of madrasahs.



Behzad. Yusuf Rejects Potiphar's Wife

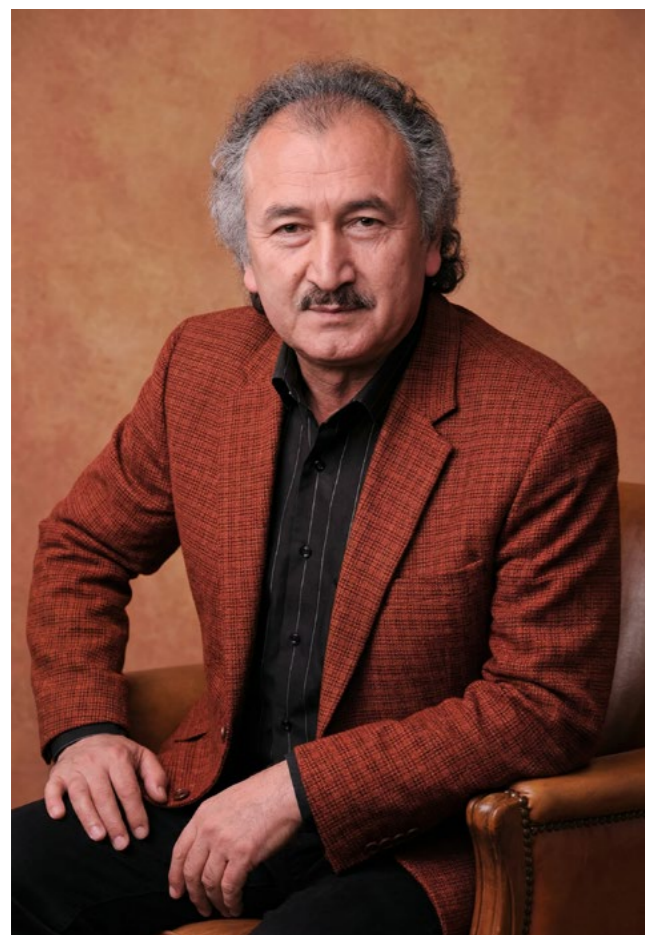


And yet, even within strict religious canons, space remained for artistic exceptions. The Sher-Dor Madrasah in Samarkand is a striking example. Its facade is adorned with images of tigers and anthropomorphic solar discs – motifs that seem to contradict Islamic doctrine. But it is precisely such details that reveal the essence of Uzbek art: its ability to harmoniously combine the spiritual, the decorative, and the symbolic, creating an entire cosmos of signs.

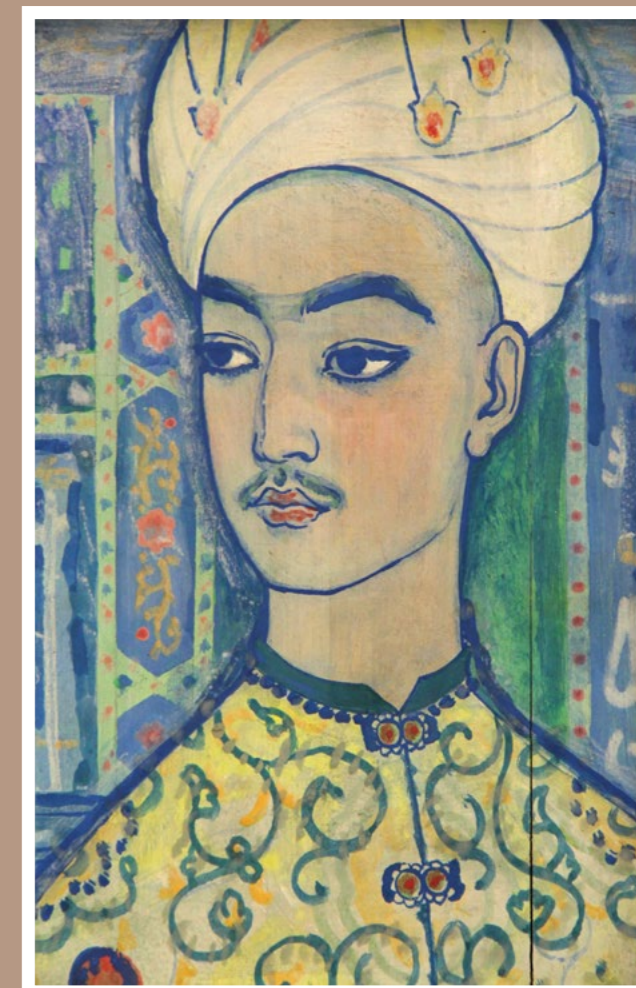
When realism entered Uzbek art at the turn of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it did not dismantle this system but added a new way of seeing. Thus emerged a painterly synthesis in which psychological depth merges with ornamental thinking, and each canvas becomes not merely an image, but a self-contained artistic world.

The modern viewer is accustomed to haste, yet Uzbek painting gently compels one to pause. It teaches patience, attentiveness, and the ability to look not for the sake of narrative, but for the sake of seeing itself. There is always a second depth – one that reveals itself only to those willing to look slowly. Contemporary artists continue this tradition, creating works that do not tell stories but invite vision; that do not explain, but attune perception.

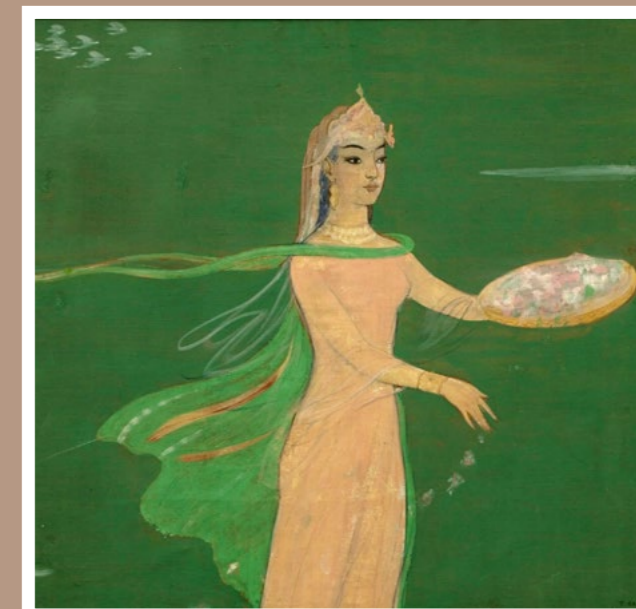
For this reason, any conversation about painting in Uzbekistan inevitably turns into a dialogue about sight itself – about how we look at the world and what within us responds to colour, line, and light. Against this backdrop, the artist's voice becomes especially valuable: the voice of one who constructs an entire universe of their own. Their reflections allow us to peer not only into the studio, but into the very system of vision itself. That is why we speak with **Akmal Nur**, Chairman of the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan – a person who knows how images are born and what the eye needs in order to truly see.



*Bride and Groom*



*Young Man*



*Spring*

**Chingiz Akhmarov (1912–1995)** – a master of monumental painting and portraiture, a teacher whose work has become an integral part of Uzbekistan's cultural heritage. Inspired by the history and poetry of Alisher Navoi, he created frescoes and murals that adorn theaters and public buildings in Tashkent and Samarkand. His works, infused with the spirit of Eastern philosophy, are known for their harmony and vivid colors. Akhmarov also painted portraits of renowned poets and performers, leaving a lasting legacy in Uzbek art.

### — How has Islam influenced Uzbek painting?

— It is a complex question, Akmal Vakhobzhanovich admits. But if we turn to the Qur'an, we will not find a direct prohibition against depicting people. Restrictions appeared in certain historical periods — for example, in the early days of Islam, when it was important to eliminate idolatry. Yet if we look at the ancient wall paintings of Afrasiab or Penjikent, we see human figures depicted there. This shows that artistic traditions existed long before the spread of Islam and continued to develop alongside it.

In Islam, God is also an artist — one of His names is “the Creator.” If God creates human beings and endows them with talent, then this gift cannot be ignored or suppressed. An artist does not simply copy the world; he creates his own universe on canvas. Art is not imitation, but self-expression. I have spoken with many spiritual mentors, and most of them agree: art is part of creation, not a violation of it.

### — Were there periods in the history of Uzbek art when emphasis was placed on banning portraits?

— Artists have always painted portraits — every generation did so. During the period of the “Eastern Renaissance” and in the fifteenth century, the era of Alisher Navoi, people were deeply religious. Yet the great poet supported the miniaturist Kamoliddin Behzad, who depicted people in his miniatures, and no one questioned the legitimacy of this art. Discussions about banning portraits and facial images became more relevant in later periods, when religion once again began to play a prominent role in public life and people started interpreting its canons in their own way.



Akmal Nur. *The Lonely Jester*

In Persian miniatures, for example, even the Prophet was depicted, and this did not provoke condemnation. Over time, any religion acquires new prohibitions and rules — sometimes introduced by individuals seeking to assert their authority as spiritual leaders. What matters is the ability to distinguish genuine understanding of faith from subjective interpretation.

*Kamoliddin Behzad is the most brilliant representative of another major milestone in Uzbek painting — the art of miniature. Often referred to as the “Raphael of the East,” he earned this title for his exceptional ability to convey human features and the inner character of his figures. His talent and innovative approach were so highly valued that he was appointed head of the Royal Kitabkhana — a workshop where illuminated manuscripts were produced and the finest artists of the khanate worked.*

*The central themes of Behzad's miniatures include landscapes, folk legends, and scenes from classical literature. He illustrated works by great poets such as Navoi, Jami, Furkat, and Nizami. His legacy also includes miniature paintings depicting historical chronicles: royal feasts, battles, conquests, and hunting scenes.*

### — Which cultures influenced the formation of painting in Uzbekistan?

— Historically, various religions and artistic traditions found their way into the territory of Uzbekistan. In Surkhandarya and Afrasiab, traces of Buddhist influence have been preserved in wall paintings that for a long time remained undervalued in academic research. The cultural legacy of Zoroastrianism — most vividly expressed in Khorezm — also influenced Uzbek artists, particularly in the 1990s.



Behzad. *The Battle of Timur and the Egyptian Sultan*



*The Groom*

**Usto Mumin** (Alexander Vasilyevich Nikolaev) (1897–1957) — an artist who became a vivid representative of Uzbek painting by blending the traditions of Eastern miniature art with modern Western styles. His works are distinguished by their fine detail, bright colors, and harmonious compositions, as well as a deep reflection of Eastern philosophical thought. Usto Mumin's paintings can be found in the State Museum of Arts of Uzbekistan and in private collections around the world.



Chingiz Akhmarov. *Madonna and Child*

Before that period, even recognised masters were largely constrained by the academic framework established during the era of the Russian Empire. Uzbek academic painting was strongly influenced by the styles of Surikov, Repin, and Serov, while the alla prima technique – creating a painting with swift, bold brushstrokes without layering – became one of the dominant artistic methods.

Over time, Uzbek artists began to reflect on and reinterpret everyday subjects. Their attention shifted not only to people's traditions and customs, but also to their origins. Themes of life, death, and love became central to the work of the 1990s generation. In Khorezm, for example, there was a custom whereby, before burial, the body of the deceased was placed on a wooden ladder; after the funeral, the ladder was left on the grave so that the soul could ascend to God. Over time, this legend was enriched with details about the soul's encounter with angels and demons and its journey between paradise and hell.

With the achievement of independence, artists began to relate to religion in a new way. During the Soviet period, art largely avoided religious themes, but in the post-Soviet era artists started exploring the influence of

Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam on culture and painting. Ultimately, many arrived at the understanding that all religions represent different paths leading to one God. Art deprived of faith and spiritual grounding loses its depth, just as a person without an inner core.

Among the new symbols of Uzbek painting emerged the figure of the dervish – a wanderer in search of wisdom. In Eastern lore, there is a parable about a dervish who travelled without a fixed destination. When asked why he wandered, he replied that he followed no one and sought nothing specific, but was striving to find himself. Artists of the 1990s generation began to do the same – to search for themselves through art.

#### – What makes Uzbek painting unique?

– Within the post-Soviet space, Uzbek art developed a distinct character, largely because many of its artists were educated in major Soviet cultural centres – Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Kyiv, Vilnius, and other cities. Their commitment to preserving the classical school and passing it on to future generations played a crucial role. Until the 1970s, this tradition remained dominant, but a new generation of artists then emerged: Javlon Umarbekov, Bakhodir Jalalov, Shukhrat Abdurashidov, Vyacheslav Akhunov, Maksud Takhtaev, and Alisher Murzaev. Their work marked a true turning point in the visual arts.

A new attitude toward painting took shape. Many artists drew inspiration from traditional heritage – miniature painting, monumental works such as the Baburnama, and the writings of Alisher Navoi.

The generation of the 1990s came of age amid the complete collapse of the former political system and the emergence of a new, independent state. This period fostered a more philosophical approach to art. Artists began to reflect on contemporary reality while simultaneously rethinking their cultural roots. It was during this time that figures such as Abdukhokim Turdyev, Kabul Odylov, Bakhtiyor Mahkamov, Fayzulla Ahmadaliev, Jamal Usmanov, and Marat Karabaev came to prominence.

Today, yet another generation has taken the stage. As a result, contemporary Uzbek art represents a synthesis of diverse styles and movements, blending European and Eastern influences into a unified and evolving visual language.

#### – Would you say that, up until the 1970s, Soviet influence was dominant?

– Yes, that's true. The changes in art were dramatic – it was nothing short of a revolution in Uzbekistan's visual arts. We, as a generation of the 1990s, simply picked up the baton and continued those ideas, but with a fresh perspective and in our own way.

While previous generations focused more on form and plasticity, we placed greater emphasis on meaning and inner content. At the same time, tradition remained a key part of our work. We began to look back – to the roots of tradition, the spiritual insights of Sufi philosophy, and the enduring voice of literary heritage.



*Golden Peaches*



*The Seller of Old Copperware*



*Folk Hafiz Singers*

Javlon Umarbekov (1946) – a prominent artist of the 1970s generation who brought folk motifs to life through the lens of Cubism. His work is characterized by a monumental style, intricate detail, and a deep sense of movement across the canvas. Umarbekov was one of those rare masters who successfully fused tradition with innovation. His paintings are housed in the State Museum of Arts of Uzbekistan, as well as in prestigious international collections – including the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the Komatsu Art Gallery in Japan, the UN Headquarters in New York, and galleries in Germany, Austria, Algeria, Kuwait, and other countries.



Akmal Nur. Gubbio, Italy

— What do you think triggered this artistic revolution?

— It wasn't just the internal processes within the art world that changed — people themselves changed. Their worldview, their sense of self, their relationships with others, and with art as a whole began to shift. Artists became more open to a diversity of styles — from the Renaissance and Italian classicism to the eastern Renaissance and beyond.

That's how we were taught as well, but we began to search for something of our own — not only thematically, but also in terms of technique. We started transforming ourselves and selectively rethinking what we had been taught, filtering it through our own personal lens.

We became more deliberate in how we used light and color in our work. We realized that a single color could convey a whole range of emotions and meanings. Perhaps our palette became more restrained — not as rich and varied as that of the impressionists — but our painting began to express far more through layered meanings and ideas.

— In your view, should contemporary artists hold on to national traditions, or is it time to look for something entirely new?

— Some artists move away from national themes, but I believe that, to some extent — whether greater or smaller — preserving these traditions is essential. To sever ties with one's roots is not just a mistake in art, but in life itself. As a people, we must pass on the beauty of our customs, legends, and culture. There are no universal rules or frameworks dictating what art must be. Art is the state of a creator's soul at a given moment in time, and every artist should have the right to express themselves however their heart tells them to. There should be no boundaries for self-expression.

I can hold only myself accountable — but other artists must be free to create without constraints. It is not our role to chase popularity; that responsibility falls to art critics and scholars. Our role, as artists, is to cultivate perception — to guide others in discovering the depth and significance within art.



Red Mantras of the USSR



Breathe Quietly



Leniniana

**Vyacheslav Akhunov (1948)** — a defining figure of his era, a conceptualist and performance artist who expressed countercultural ideas and a nuanced critique of Socialist Realism. Akhunov is well known for artworks that explore and deconstruct the image of Lenin, seeking to uncover the inner essence behind the icon. His renowned series “The Leninist Plan of Monumental Propaganda”, “Leniniana by Vyacheslav Akhunov”, and “Stamps, Seals, Stereotypes” — employs collage techniques and carries a deep philosophical message. Akhunov also often draws on ancient symbols and themes. In his “Ossuaries” series, soviet household urns are juxtaposed with sacred vessels once used by Zoroastrian fire-worshippers to hold human remains. He also traveled to remote Sufi shrine sites in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, studying Zen Buddhism and Sufi teachings — all of which deeply influenced his work.



Javlon Umarbekov. *Equinox*

Personally, I believe that art must bring light. I understand when artists choose to highlight social issues and shine a light on them – that too is important. But I strive to offer viewers spiritual nourishment, to give them even a moment's escape from everyday burdens. I want to inspire people – to give them a reason to live and dream, and to do so more boldly. Everything around us – even life itself – is fleeting. Let us remind people to think more often about the eternal.

**– Given the current changes, what do you see as the future trends in the development of contemporary painting in Uzbekistan?**

– I believe that in the future, artists will increasingly turn to abstraction. We already see how traditional academic knowledge and the forms that were once instilled in us are losing their significance for the younger generation. These traditional frameworks no longer carry the same importance for them.

Perhaps we will witness more superficial works, created in pursuit of quick popularity and recognition. However, those artists who truly believe in their talent and remain true to themselves will continue to search for depth and meaning in art. Their works will reflect not only their personal world but also a desire for inner harmony and spiritual exploration. And it is precisely these works that may define the future of art in Uzbekistan.



Akmal Nur. *Motherhood*

**– How does the academy support young artists?**

– We aim to provide young artists with a strong foundation, starting with education. Our network includes art schools and boarding schools where we don't just teach – we strive to inspire discipline, continuous effort, and personal growth. Being an artist means working every single day, patiently mastering technique and theory, and being open to discovering something new.

At the Academy of Fine Arts, we have also established a creative workshop, admission to which is granted through a competitive selection process. This opportunity is open to talented artists from across the republic. Once every two years, we select ten artists, providing them with studio space, materials, and – most importantly – complete freedom of expression. We impose no thematic or formal constraints, offer a stipend, actively promote their work, and organise exhibitions as well as international travel opportunities. This initiative allows emerging artists to immerse themselves fully in their practice and develop their potential free from undue pressure.

Yet our efforts extend beyond this initiative. Under Presidential Decree No. 212 of the Republic of Uzbekistan, a large-scale project to develop the country's artistic infrastructure is planned. Specifically, by 2027, an art quarter will be established, bringing together exhibition, educational, and production facilities. In addition, the educational base will be enhanced: the Repin Republi-



*Meditation*



*Strangling the Devil*



*Temptation*

**Bakhtiyor Makhkamov (1958)** – a painter of the 1990s generation, Makhkamov reimagined the traditional heritage of the Uzbek people and their ancient culture through a deeply poetic lens. His canvases often portray old adobe houses and the lives unfolding within them. Makhkamov's use of dark tonal palettes and intricate ornamental motifs – combined with figures inspired by classical poetic treatises – gives his work a profound philosophical depth rooted in Uzbek tradition. This vision is especially vivid in his series "Childhood Memories" and "The Unsolved Mystery". His works have been exhibited in France, Germany, Morocco, Belgium, and beyond.

can Art College will acquire a dormitory with 200 beds, while its academic building will be expanded to accommodate 400 students.

Our ambitions, however, reach beyond the support of young artists alone. We have already begun reconstructing the Central Exhibition Hall, a component of the nation's cultural heritage. As the venue for biennales of applied and contemporary art, as well as international festivals, the building must meet the highest standards. Furthermore, the Kamoliddin Behzod Museum of Miniature Art will be expanded: an additional building will be constructed to house workshops for traditional papermaking and conservation studios.

Once these projects are complete, I'll be ready to retire with confidence – passing the torch to the next generation and focusing on my own creative work.

#### — What are the main art hubs in Uzbekistan?

— If you want to immerse yourself in the atmosphere of contemporary art, I recommend visiting the House of Photography near Amir Timur Square, the Ikuo Hirayama International Caravanserai of Culture, and the Central Exhibition Hall. Uzbekistan also has many private galleries, such as Human House and Meros, which regularly host interesting exhibitions. You can also explore engaging exhibitions at Ilkhom Theatre, which remains an important cultural center.

#### — Are there any projects promoting Uzbek painting abroad?

— We are actively working with international partners to promote Uzbek art. One vivid example is our collab-



Akmal Nur. *The Praying Saint*

oration with the China Academy of Art. We organize exhibitions across various Chinese provinces – one is currently on display in Hangzhou and will later move to Shanghai. Previously, we held a major exhibition at the Beijing Art Museum in partnership with China's Ministry of Culture. They even offered to keep the artworks permanently, but unfortunately, we were unable to make that happen.

We've also hosted exhibitions in Korea, in collaboration with Kim Yong University, as well as in Japan and several European countries – including Riga, Tallinn, Prague, the Netherlands, and Germany. In the United States, we maintain strong ties with our sister city, Seattle. These exhibitions help Uzbek artists gain international exposure, introduce global audiences to our art, and strengthen cultural ties between nations.

Painting in Uzbekistan is not merely an art form, but a living continuation of centuries-old traditions – one that constantly evolves while reflecting the spirit of its time. By combining ancient motifs with contemporary approaches, artists create distinctive works in which Sufi philosophies, folk legends, and avant-garde explorations intertwine organically. Every brushstroke, every choice of colour and form becomes an attempt to discover new meaning within the familiar, to transform and reinterpret established ideas.

Miniature painting, calligraphy, socialist realism, and cubism – though rooted in different eras – merge within a shared artistic space, forming a vivid and multilayered portrait of Uzbekistan's cultural identity. From ancient miniatures to contemporary abstractions, from Sufi symbols to experimental forms, Uzbek art continues to inspire, surprise, and seek new modes of self-expression. While preserving its connection to the past, it looks boldly toward the future, opening new horizons for perception, understanding, and cultural exchange. Within this art lies the energy of exploration, creativity, and an unending aspiration toward light and harmony. ➤



Akmal Nur. *The Song of Hijran*



Jamol Usmanov. *Birds Disputing Greatness*

**Jamol Usmanov (1961)** – another prominent representative of the 1990s generation. Usmanov explores the concepts of life, death, and imagined scenarios of the world's end. Lyrical undertones and personal philosophical frameworks lie at the heart of series such as “The Basic Instinct”, “Reflection”, “Dream”, and others. His works captivate viewers with their existential themes and reflections on the metaphysical layers of human experience.



Jamol Usmanov. *Leaf Fall*



Jamol Usmanov. *Sheikh San'an and Divine Love*

# THE ART OF VISION: THREE PERSPECTIVES ON PHOTOGRAPHY, TRAVEL, AND INSPIRATION

*Photography is a way of seeing the world differently – more attentively, more deeply, and sometimes even more truthfully. For some, it becomes a means of exploring people; for others, natural landscapes or extreme journeys. We spoke with three photographers – Gio Kardava, Kirill Umrikhin, and Ernest Kurtveliev – about how they found their way into the profession, what they seek within the frame, and why, at times, it is more important simply to pause and fully live the moment.*



**GIO KARDAVA** @elguapoworld

*Gio Kardava is a Georgian portrait photographer whose work has been featured in GQ, Esquire, Tatler, Harper's Bazaar, Forbes, and other international publications. He is also the creator and host of the YouTube project "Georgiy Behind the Scenes." For more than 16 years, he has worked in portraiture, exploring the character and the inner world of his subjects through photography.*

**— What led you to photography, and why did you decide to stay?**

— It so happened that in my third year, I was expelled from university, and I had a full year before I could be reinstated. At that moment, it felt like the only thing truly available to me was to pick up a camera and start shooting. A friend had once suggested photography to me — I gave it a try and got hooked. That was 16 years ago.

**— Why portrait photography in particular?**

— I'm interested in people — in studying them, in rediscovering them through images. And through that same process, through communication and interaction, I learn something new about myself as well.

To create a compelling portrait, you need at least a degree of trust. Without communication — even minimal — it's very difficult. But there are times when building that connection is simply not possible, often because there isn't enough time.

For me, photography is, in a way, a mediator — a reason and a means to get a little closer to someone than we normally would in everyday social life.

**— Do you remember the first portrait that became your entry point into the genre?**

— It was actually only my second shoot. The subject was a girl I really liked at the time. I managed to capture a very natural moment — her beautiful smile, the instant she suddenly laughed in the frame. It turned into a sincere, vivid photograph. The emotion was completely unposed.

**— How do you know when you want to photograph someone?**

— The truth is, it's my job. Most of the time, I don't really choose who I want or don't want to shoot. As a professional, I'm expected to create strong portraits regardless. Of course, I reserve the right to decline certain shoots, but from a professional standpoint, I'm responsible for delivering a result.

If we're talking about personal criteria, the first things I notice are facial texture and the eyes. Eyes probably matter even more to me — they reflect a person's essence. You just have to look closely and engage a little.

The deeper a person's gaze, the more experience they carry, and the more interesting it is to work with them. I set myself the task of bringing that experience to the surface — the pain, the inner drama — and revealing it in the image.

**— Have you ever discovered something unexpected about a subject through a portrait?**

— For me, it's not about facts, but about essence — understanding who a person is from within and how to approach them. I accept that I may have photographed people who, factually speaking, don't have the best biographies. But even they are interesting to shoot, because such individuals are often complex and layered.

I never take on the role of a judge. My goal is to convey, as objectively as possible, that small fragment of a person's character and soul that I was able to capture.

**— Do you have favorite photographs?**

— I try to make every shoot memorable — technically, psychologically, emotionally. It helps me avoid routine and approach each session with a fresh perspective. But if I had to single something out, it would be individual portraits rather than full projects. And often, they're not public figures but random passersby — on the streets of Europe or in the bazaars of Central Asia. Sometimes one such frame gives more than a major commission.

**FOR ME, PHOTOGRAPHY IS, IN A WAY, A MEDIATOR — A REASON AND A MEANS TO GET A LITTLE CLOSER TO SOMEONE THAN WE NORMALLY WOULD IN EVERYDAY SOCIAL LIFE**



— **Which of your projects received a particularly strong audience response?**

— One of the most recent would be our shoot with the first female pilot, Susan Mamedova, for Centrum Travel Magazine. The response truly surprised us. The shoot itself, the visual storytelling, and the subject were all received very warmly. The idea of a female pilot resonated strongly in the era of women's empowerment.

It's also very meaningful to see more people paying attention to my social projects - those involving children, illness, and people with disabilities. That kind of recognition means a lot.

— **Have you faced any seemingly insurmountable challenges in your work or shoots?**

— There's only one thing I would call truly insurmountable - reaching people who are no longer alive. Everything else can be overcome; it's just a matter of time.

That said, I do sometimes turn down projects for various reasons. At times, it's because people behave inappropriately or show a lack of respect - toward me or the profession itself. Photography is often underestimated, seen as something "easy" that shouldn't cost much. Fortunately, in recent years, I encounter such attitudes less often, and more people genuinely want to work with me.

— **You travel frequently. Do your trips inspire you to photograph or shoot portraits?**

— I really do find myself in a new country almost every month - a kind of nomadic photographer. And yes, of course, inspiration comes. In fact, I often travel precisely in search of it. It's always there - especially in new places, cities, and faces. You simply can't miss it if your heart is open and your eye is sharp.

— **What draws you most when you travel?**

— People. Every person is incredibly multifaceted - it's an endless source of inspiration. And in different countries, that inspiration always feels different. Different textures, different depth, and a different approach required each time. It's always fascinating to capture something unique. Photographing people in Morocco is one thing; in Spain, Germany, or elsewhere - it's completely different every time.

Next week I'm flying to Turkey, closer to the Syrian border, and I'm already anticipating what kind of material I'll be able to shoot and the people I'll meet. The

atmosphere there is entirely different - the cultural layer, the history, the clothing, the textures, the emotions, even the weather. That's what I'm constantly chasing in my work - variety.

— **What makes a city special for a photographer?**

— I can explain using Tangier in Morocco as an example. It sits on the Strait of Gibraltar, and you can already see Spain from there. It's an incredibly layered place, combining multiple cultural influences. The city has been, at different times, Portuguese, Spanish, Arab, and even French. All these peoples, civilizations, and eras have left their mark, forming a kind of mosaic that's a joy to observe.

I'm especially drawn to coastal cities, because people who grow up by the sea have a completely different skin tone, a different texture.

— **Do you recharge during your travels? Do you have favorite places or "places of power"?**

— For me, travel is always tied to having a camera in hand. I don't separate shooting from life. Photography is neither just work nor simply holiday snapshots.

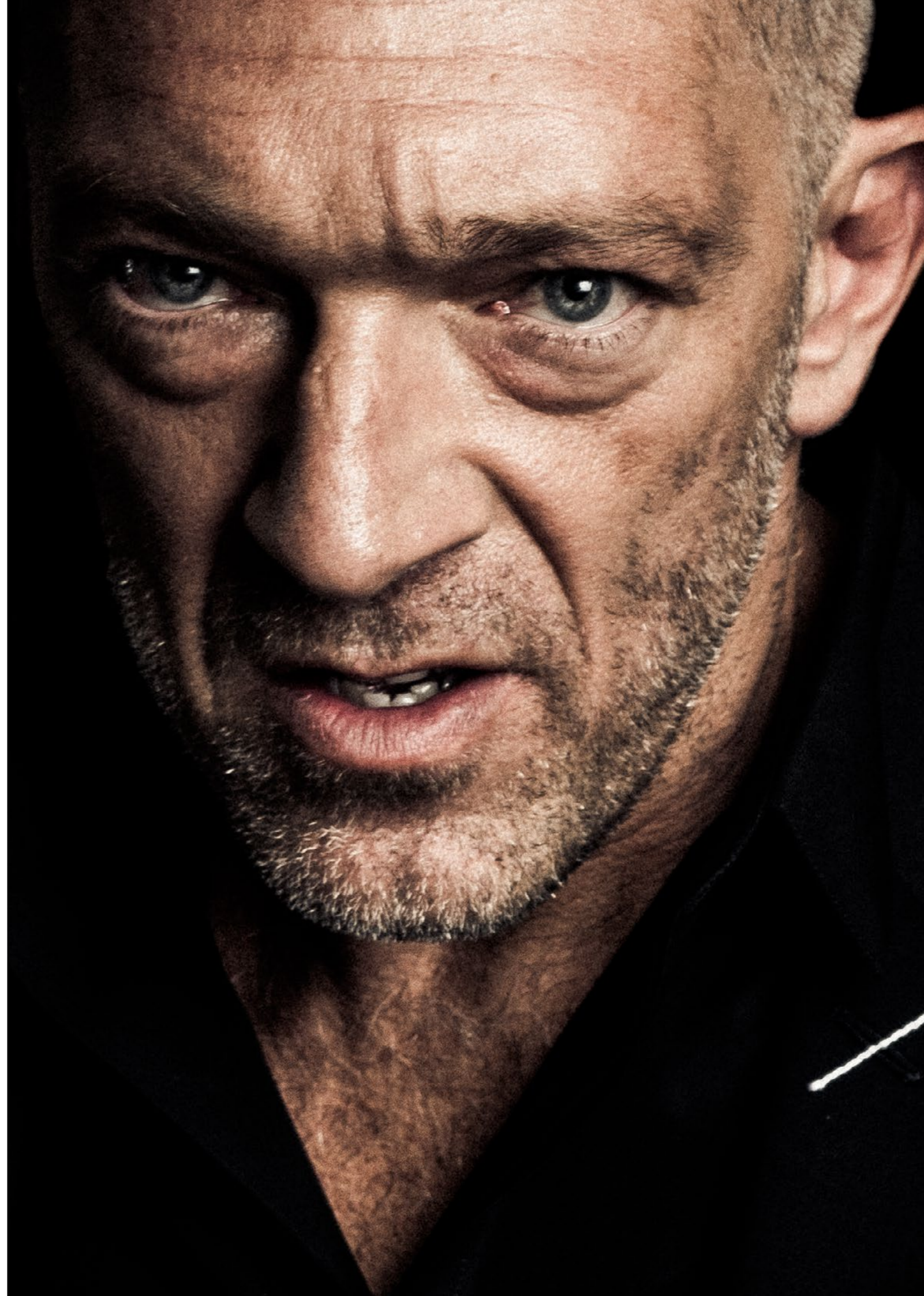
As for places, lately it's been Paris. I'm drawn to its chaos and ambiguity. Maybe that's why I don't even notice how I end up walking 25-30 kilometers a day. I can just wander without a plan, meeting interesting people along the way - people who then remain in my photographs.

— **Are there any features, besides the eyes, that are essential for you in portrait photography?**

— I think everything matters, but for me the key is a unique facial texture. Last summer in Georgia, I photographed a man with vitiligo - distinct pigmentation patterns that formed intricate designs across his face. For the person themselves, vitiligo rarely feels like something beautiful; they're not always comfortable with being photographed and often feel self-conscious. Still, I see it almost as a gift - with its own challenges, of course.

In Dubai, I met a pair of albinos: the girl didn't want to pose, but I managed to photograph the young man. And in Morocco, I came across a dark-skinned albino - an even rarer case. Recently, I photographed a girl with a scar on her face, and that too is a mark in which I find beauty. I'm drawn to finding beauty where others see imperfection, and I'm grateful to those who allow me to capture it.

**I'M ESPECIALLY DRAWN TO COASTAL CITIES, BECAUSE PEOPLE WHO GROW UP BY THE SEA HAVE A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT SKIN TONE, A DIFFERENT TEXTURE**





**KIRILL UMRIKHIN** @kirillumrikhin

*A sports and travel photographer, and a brand ambassador for Nikon, Outex, Manfrotto, and SanDisk. For nearly 20 years, he has been shooting extreme sports, expeditions, and travels around the world. His work has been published in international media, and his clients include Apple, Red Bull, Nike, Adidas, and other global brands.*

**— What led you to photography?**

— It started with love – the desire to create something, to capture a moment. Back in school, I dreamed of becoming an artist, a designer, or an architect, but when it came time to apply, I realized it was too difficult for me. Photography felt different: you press a button, and you already have a result.

In a way, the choice was symbolic. My grandfather spent his entire life working at the KMZ factory in Krasnogorsk, near Moscow, where the famous Zenit cameras were made. When he saw my passion for photography, he gave me my first camera. That's when I began shooting school reportages – and immediately understood that this was going to be my profession.

I also knew from the very beginning what I wanted to see through the lens: travel and sport. As a child, I would go to the mountains with my father – tents in the summer, snowboarding in the winter – and I always had a camera with me. My love for photography natu-

rally merged with my love for adventure and extreme sports. My mother always said you should do what you love. Once I truly understood that, I set my mind on becoming a photographer.

**— Do you prefer traveling alone or in company?**

— Sometimes I travel alone. The last time was for a supermoon shoot in Joshua Tree National Park in California – one of the most beautiful places to observe the night sky. But those trips are rare; I much prefer traveling with others. When it comes to sports, it's always about the team.

Over the past ten years, my travels have fallen into two categories: either work trips – yacht expeditions, where I also act as a team leader – or commercial shoots in the mountains.

The second type is traveling with my wife. She's a professional athlete and windsurfer, so a few times a year we travel to the ocean as a family – she trains, and I shoot. Usually, it's Mauritius, South Africa, or Egypt.

**— Which trip has been the most memorable?**

— I believe the best trip is always the one that ended most recently – because the emotions are still fresh. This year marks 20 years of traveling for me, and in all that time, I've rarely gone even a month without a trip. With that kind of experience, you're constantly choosing between returning to places you already love or dis-



covering new ones.

That said, expeditions to Antarctica will stay with me forever. I've been there three times, and I consider it one of the most beautiful and unique places on the planet – especially from a photographic perspective. It makes you feel closer to space, to other planets, than anywhere else on Earth.

**— You mentioned the choice between returning to familiar places and exploring new ones. Have you ever rediscovered a place you'd already visited?**

— Even traveling to the same place is always a slightly different experience – if only because of curiosity. Pho-

tography plays a big role here: you keep exploring, looking for new locations and unexpected angles.

A good example for me is Egypt. We used to go there often for windsurfing. The village of Dahab, on the Gulf of Aqaba, is a true mecca for wind sports, as well as diving and freediving.

During the first wave of COVID, we ended up staying there for six months simply because flights stopped. Before that, I had only come for the sport, and it didn't feel particularly cozy. But after living there for half a year, I fell in love with it completely. Dahab became almost like a second home – a place you can return to and feel you belong.



— **What did you discover or feel during that time?**

— It's an Eastern country, part of the Arab world. For instance, you hear the call to prayer from the minarets at night. At first, it felt unusual - I would wake up all the time. But eventually you get used to it, and even start wondering what exactly is being sung.

Many locals don't speak English, so you begin picking up Arabic words just to understand - or at least try to. The same goes for mentality. We made an effort to communicate with people - taxi drivers, market vendors - and over time, they become very close to you.

I also began exploring the mountains of the Sinai desert, and on later trips we started going there for climbing. It became a new passion - an entirely new world. And of course, the place is rich in history. It's considered a cradle of civilization, where so much has happened over thousands of years - from the construc-

tion of St. Catherine's Monastery to ancient desert dolmens. It's impossible not to be captivated by it.

— **Are there destinations you're especially looking forward to?**

— I'd really like to explore Latin America more deeply - Mexico, Chile, Peru. These are incredibly interesting regions for a photographer.

I've also spent relatively little time in Asia, especially Central Asia. It still feels like a mystery to me - the people, the landscapes - all of which I'd love to capture. But for every trip, I need an idea. I don't want to travel just as a tourist to popular spots. I'm convinced that every place holds something unique. I believe that every location, every subject, has at least one perfect angle - and as a photographer, I'm always trying to find it.



**— What do you usually take with you when you travel – besides your camera?**

– My packing is pretty simple: just regular clothes suited to the weather. I believe that if you're comfortable, your photos will turn out better. It's hard to shoot when you're freezing or overheating.

I do have one small travel ritual, though. At the end of every trip, when I unpack my suitcase, I always find one item – usually the one that took up the most space – that I never used at all. I make a mental note of it every time, and over the years it's turned into a whole parade of unnecessary things.

When you travel for long periods, you might want to bring something that feels like an anchor. But for me, for the past 20 years, the whole world has been constant movement – and for the last four years, also relocation: first to Portugal, then to the United States. If there's anything I always try to take with me to feel at home, it's my family. And among things – photographs, even if they're just digital.

**— Have you faced situations in your travels that felt truly challenging or required you to find a way out?**

– Very often. Working in extreme environments – mountains or the ocean – always brings surprises. You have to be ready for them, relying on your experience.

Once in Mauritius, we had to rescue a drowning man. He had been carried away by the current and likely would have been smashed against the reefs if no one had been nearby. We managed to pull him onto a boat, but nearly got into serious trouble ourselves. I think it was August 14. Since then, my camerawoman friend – who was seriously injured that day – and I celebrate it as our second birthday. At the very least, we know we saved one unlucky tourist from France.

And in Antarctica, while crossing the Drake Passage at night, two of our sails tore at once – the wind gusts exceeded 200 km/h. As Baron Munchausen once said when asked how he could prove his stories: "I am still alive – which means the story goes on."

**— How do extreme experiences shape you as a photographer? What role do emotions play?**

– In extreme situations, it's crucial to keep emotions under control. Fear or overexcitement can lead to bad outcomes.

To those who don't practice extreme sports, it might seem reckless, but at a professional level, every step is calculated. There are always multiple plans and fallback options behind every action. There's a team ensuring safety, avalanche training in the mountains, knowledge of the ocean – its currents and waves – an understanding of your own limits, and constant attention to forecasts. Thanks to sailing, I still check the weather almost every day, just to see where the wind is coming from.

Over time, the emotions themselves become more subdued, but sharing that experience remains powerful. Extreme sports, mountains, and the ocean are captivating in themselves – and most importantly, they inspire people to change something: to take up sports, to care for nature.

For example, we once photographed whales – my wife was swimming with them underwater. I used those images to draw attention to how humanity impacts wildlife. We share this planet with wild animals, and it's important to understand how – and whether – we should interact with them. Through photography, I try to show that, explain it, or even better understand it myself.

In my work, I look for a message, for storytelling – not just a beautiful image. Some shots are visually striking, and that's enough. Others need context and meaning. I feel closer to photojournalism – to narrative – because I believe it can inspire change.

**— Have people ever told you how your work influenced them?**

– Yes. Once in Los Angeles, at a surf spot about 100 kilometers from the city, a guy paddled up to me and said he recognized me. It turned out that back in school, he used to watch my videos about photography and travel. They inspired him so much that he decided to become a photographer himself – and later moved to the U.S. too. Hearing that meant a lot to me.

There was another case in Kamchatka, during an environmental disaster. I tried to draw attention to it. Sometimes the response is positive – people thank you. Other times, people assume you have some hidden agenda.

But ultimately, what matters most are your own intentions as an author. Mine are simple – to make the world at least a little better.

**— Does fear get in your way, or does it help you?**

– It definitely helps. Fear is a survival instinct – it protects us from danger, both physical and mental. The key is learning how to work with it. You can tune it to help you – or let it work against you.

Near our home, there's a beautiful place – Palos Verdes, a small marine reserve. Underwater, there are real kelp forests, almost like jungles. Swimming there can feel quite unsettling. First, there are sharks. They don't attack people, but when you see one nearby, it's still scary. Second, it's easy to get tangled in the "jungle": waves move the seaweed, and it feels like you're being pulled down. You start working with that fear, studying it – and gradually, you grow.

The same goes for freediving. When you dive deep, there's an initial panic – after all, it's unnatural for a human to be underwater without breathing. You have to work through that resistance: calm yourself, conserve energy and oxygen, observe your body and the underwater world.

**— Have there been moments when fear won or when you chose to walk away from a shot?**

– Of course, many times. I'm not the kind of person who will stand on the very edge of a cliff just for a photo. In those moments, fear works exactly as it should. The choice is simple: a viral shot with lots of likes – or the risk of slipping and falling. Quite often, I look at a scene like that and think: no, it's not worth it.

I was once called the number one extreme blogger in Russia – back in the LiveJournal days. But I don't see myself that way. I'm someone who thinks a hundred times before acting. We've had tragic cases in this field – fatalities and serious injuries. And from that, I've learned one thing: no photograph is worth your life or your health. Risk can only ever be deliberate and controlled.

**— What do travel and photography have in common?**

– The search. Through photography, you search for yourself because every image is a reflection of the author, shaped by a personal way of seeing the world. The same is true of travel: we don't just discover new places, we grow as individuals and learn something about ourselves.

One of the greatest values of the 21st century is the ability to travel. It takes us to places completely different from what we know and brings us into contact with people we would never meet at home.

**WHAT MATTERS MOST ARE YOUR OWN INTENTIONS AS AN AUTHOR. MINE ARE SIMPLE – TO MAKE THE WORLD AT LEAST A LITTLE BETTER**



— **Was there a turning point in your creative journey – a moment after which everything changed?**

– Internally, I always try to place myself back at the beginning. I don't measure my path in milestones or achievements. Of course, sometimes you pause and look back at things like awards or magazine covers. But when I pick up a camera, I try to think as if I don't know anything and want to discover everything through the act of shooting. So my point of no return is, I hope, still ahead.

A defining moment for me was my first flight. I didn't come from a wealthy family, and I only flew for the first time at 18 – it was a work trip with a snowboarding magazine. When I realized that photography could take me around the world, open doors, and connect me with people, I understood: this is the best profession there is.

Now I occasionally teach at international schools and give lectures to high school students in Lisbon. One of them is called "Photography Opens Every Door." And when it truly started opening doors for me – to people, places, opportunities – I knew I didn't want to do anything else.

— **Have you gained any wisdom or perspective from other cultures?**

– In every new place, I try at least once to cook a local dish – and if it turns out well, I take the recipe with me.

I'll mention Mauritius again. We always stayed in the same house, owned by a Creole man named Lal, a fisherman by trade. Although Hinduism is widespread on the island, Lal wasn't particularly religious, but he deeply believed in karma. Every morning, my wife and I would treat him to coffee and breakfast, and he would cook rice and curry for us. The dinners were so good that I asked him to show me how to prepare them.

His girlfriend taught me to cook, and in return, I showed them how to make herring under a fur coat. That exchange – that warmth, when you do something for someone simply to bring them joy – changed the way I see the world. My understanding of karma, which exists in many cultures, came from that experience, and I still believe it's important to do good without expecting anything in return.

As both a person and a photographer, my goal is to make the world a little better. In the U.S., there's a principle in national parks: "Leave nothing except traces." I would expand that: it's not just about leaving no harm behind, but about leaving traces that make the world better.

Do what you love. Take photographs. Care for nature and for the people around you. Travel. It's one of the greatest opportunities we have, one we sometimes take for granted because it has become so accessible.





**ERNEST KURTVELIEV** @ernestkurtveliev

*A multidisciplinary photographer from Uzbekistan, working across genres – from portrait and reportage to landscape and documentary photography. In 2025, he represented Uzbekistan at the exhibition Regards sur l'Asie Centrale ("A Look at Central Asia") in Paris.*

**— What brought you into this field, and how did it happen?**

— As a child, I didn't plan to become a photographer – or anything close to it. I wanted to be a biologist, a zoologist, or an ornithologist. I was also drawn to technology and even considered becoming a mechanic. Then, quite unexpectedly, I became a musician and dedicated more than 15 years to it – but eventually found my way to photography.

A classmate of mine had a camera. He used to bring it to school, and we'd mess around, taking pictures. It caught my attention – not strongly at first, but enough to spark interest. I chose photography as a hobby, even though at one point my parents discouraged me, worrying it would affect my studies.

**— How did your first landscape come about, and why did you stay with this genre?**

— I have quite a broad professional background, and at different stages of my career, I went through different creative phases. I started as a news photographer, shooting reportage, working with black-and-white film – de-

veloping and printing everything by hand.

Later, I moved into glossy magazines: I shot portfolios, fashion, glamour, runway shows. For about 11 years, I worked as the chief photographer at Bella Terra, a prominent men's magazine. Our publishing house produced four magazines, so the work moved in several directions at once. I had to shoot an incredibly wide range of subjects – from heart surgeries, dressed in scrubs and masks, to jewelry. I worked as a still-life photographer, a food photographer, shot fashion, portraits, reportage – literally everything.

In recent years, my work has shifted more toward landscapes – something I feel most drawn to. In general, I'm close to anything natural: nature, animals, landscapes, and, of course, documentary work.

My very first attempts at photography were actually landscapes and still lifes. Back then, I was shooting on black-and-white film – it was the 1990s, maybe even earlier. Unlike many of my peers, I came into photography completely from scratch. I had no mentors, no friends or relatives who could guide me. Everything I learned – especially in the beginning was through trial and error. Even when developing film, I didn't initially know it had to be done in complete darkness. I would develop it, take it out, look at it, then try again – that's how I learned.

I developed many skills simply by studying photographs in magazines – looking at reflections in the eyes, shadows, trying to understand the lighting, the setup, the dynamics within the frame.





Even later, when I was already an established photographer, I had neither teachers nor students. At the time, there was no YouTube or easy access to learning. At best, there were Soviet academic books, which focused little on creativity. Occasionally, I came across translated foreign editions – but they were rare, and I read them cover to cover.

— **How has your perception of landscape changed over the years?**

– The only thing that has truly changed is technology. It's much easier to work with now: there are more lenses suited for wildlife, and cameras have improved significantly. But the core principle hasn't changed. Classical landscape photography is still based on a viewer's intuitive perception. A person may not understand the technical details, but when they look at an image, they either feel drawn to it or indifferent. That's the essence of it – no deep analysis required.

Of course, more advanced viewers may look for something more complex: not just a sunset, but movement, dynamics, and a certain message. But fundamentally, my perception of landscape hasn't changed.

— **So does your perception of reality change when you look through the lens?**

– Yes. But it's not even just about looking through the lens. When you start composing a frame, you begin to observe perspective more carefully, noticing details you'd normally overlook. You can glance at a landscape and walk on, but when you intend to photograph it, you start studying the clouds, the movement of light, the

composition. Your mind begins to work differently. You engage more deeply, you explore more, and any kind of understanding makes life more interesting.

— **Is photography, for you, more about observation or dialogue?**

– Probably observation. I've noticed that I'm more interested in being an observer – rather than intervening, I prefer to reflect reality as it is.

Photography differs from other visual arts. A painter can add, remove, or alter elements – transform reality. Photography, however, carries a certain responsibility, because people tend to perceive it as a claim to truth. That's why in media, reportage, and news, photographs are used as proof that something actually happened.

These days, there's a lot of debate in the photography community about artificial intelligence. Many wonder why AI-generated images shouldn't be placed on the same level as traditional photography. Visually, they can be compelling – but the essence of photography is not the image itself. Photography is about what it reflects. It captures reality, and the more truthfully it does so, the more valuable it becomes. A beautiful image without reality behind it is, in essence, an empty shell.

At the same time, it's important to understand that photography – even while claiming truth – is not a literal copy of an event. It is the photographer's view. They choose the angle, the moment, the mood. Through these choices, reality is filtered through personal perception. That is where creativity lies and where responsibility begins. A photograph must remain truthful, but it is a truth as seen by you.





**— What draws you most in photography?**

— I'm closest to nature. The wilder it is, the more compelling it becomes. That said, I wouldn't say I'm drawn to it exclusively. Urban landscapes can be beautiful too - especially when architecture harmonizes with its surroundings. But the farther you move away from civilization, the more interesting it gets: there's more untouched nature.

In our country, this can sometimes be a challenge - there are often large fences, country houses, structures that don't quite fit the landscape. In contrast, in places like the Alps or the Netherlands, you see how architecture is integrated as if it were part of nature.

At the same time, Uzbekistan is still not fully explored. Over the past decade, it has become easier to travel and shoot here, but there are still many places that remain inaccessible - even for journalists.

Our territory is vast, with incredibly diverse landscapes: from mountain glaciers to deserts and sand dunes. There's even a kind of "sea" theme. In that sense, the creative range here is enormous.

**— How do you know when a shot has truly worked?**

— It's hard to say. There's a special satisfaction when you experience something in real life a moment or a land-

scape and then see that you've managed to capture it in an image. But our natural perception of the world is three-dimensional, and it can never fully translate into a flat 2D image. Not everything can be conveyed and that's part of the photographer's craft: to translate reality onto a plane. Experience and technical skill play a major role here.

Sometimes you realize that even the most beautiful and atmospheric scene can't be directly translated into a photograph. Then the search begins - for techniques and solutions that can come close to the feeling you experienced.

Among photographers, there's a saying that an image needs time to "settle." It's not recommended to review and select shots on the same day. Better to wait - several days, a week, sometimes even a month. During the shoot, you're overwhelmed with emotion, and you remember certain moments as powerful - even if the images don't fully convey them.

With time, when emotions fade, you can look at the photographs more calmly and objectively. That's when it becomes clearer what truly works and what doesn't. In that sense, post-processing is just as important a part of the creative process.

**— Can you share a particularly memorable journey?**

— In recent years, I've been traveling more by motorcycle - it's one of my favorite passions. One of the most memorable trips was across Europe. With friends, we visited around ten countries: Eastern Europe, the Alps, Hungary, Austria, Romania. Then we returned home via Georgia, the Caucasus, and Kazakhstan.

Turkey was also unforgettable. We rode through many cities, making a large loop across the country. Not only the landscapes stayed with me, but also the unexpected challenges.

On the way back, we simply set a route in a navigation app and followed it. There's a joke among travelers: if you want adventure, use Maps.me. At the time, we didn't quite understand why.

The route took us off the main highways and into the mountains. The roads became narrower, then unpaved, rocky. We were surrounded by small villages, winding roads, mountains disappearing into the clouds.

Locals would stop, wish us luck, and tell us we were very brave, which we didn't fully understand at the time. And then we literally rode into the clouds. Thick fog, zero visibility. The road kept getting worse. We moved slowly, almost blindly, sensing that there might be cliffs nearby. It was August, but the mountain air was cool and fresh.

After several hours of descent, the fog lifted, and we finally saw where we had been riding: a steep mountain serpentine with massive drops, barely passable even for cars.

Further down, waterfalls, rivers, and valleys appeared. And at the exit, there was a large sign: "One of the most dangerous roads in the world." Later I read that it's considered even more dangerous than Bolivia's famous Death Road. Completely by chance, we had found ourselves on an extreme route.

There were calmer but equally powerful moments. Cappadocia, for example. We arrived at night, chose a random point on the map, set up tents on a hill, and went to sleep. In the morning, we woke to noise - stepped outside and saw dozens of hot air balloons rising from the valley below. Sunrise, sky filled with balloons, and we were right in the middle of it all.

**— Do you ever put the camera down and just experience the moment?**

— More and more often. If before it felt more important to capture the moment, now I realize it can be even more important to simply feel it. The strongest emotions are the ones you live through yourself.

Sometimes I even forget my camera. At first, I'm frustrated - but then I remind myself: we do all this primarily for ourselves, for the experience.



**OUR TERRITORY IS VAST, WITH INCREDIBLY DIVERSE LANDSCAPES: FROM MOUNTAIN GLACIERS TO DESERTS AND SAND DUNES. THERE'S EVEN A KIND OF "SEA" THEME. IN THAT SENSE, THE CREATIVE RANGE HERE IS ENORMOUS**



So I try to focus on being present - whether I have a camera or not. And I think it's important not to forget: our personal emotions matter more than the photos we end up with.

— **Do you think it's possible to "hear" silence in a photograph?**

— That's a philosophical question. I think it is. I don't know how to achieve it technically, but a certain combination of atmosphere and subject can create that feeling. For example, a star-filled sky stretching into infinity gives a sense that time has stopped, and with it comes a deep silence.

At the same time, a photograph can also convey noise, movement, and tension. When created and presented well, it can express both sound and its absence.

— **What are your upcoming travel plans?**

— From experience, I've learned that rigid plans don't always make sense. My life often unfolds spontaneously - trips and events happen unexpectedly. So lately, I've stopped planning too far ahead. Just a week ago, I had no idea I'd soon be traveling to Kyrgyzstan to explore mountain landscapes and cultural traditions.

I also have big plans to explore the Aral Sea region. I hope to travel there this year, discover new locations, and show them to a wider audience.

And there are places I want to return to again and again - Indonesia, for example. I've been there four times, and each visit reveals something new.

— **If your pictures could speak, what would they say?**

— Truthfulness is very important to me. I don't claim that every image reflects absolute reality - I try to find a reality that resonates with me. I hope my photographs show harmony between humans and nature, and help people notice it.

I care deeply about our planet and the preservation of nature. That's why I often talk about photography as an alternative to hunting. Some justify hunting as beneficial to nature, but in reality, it's not the weakest animals that are targeted - it's the strongest, the most beautiful.

Wildlife photography can offer the same thrill - without destruction. In fact, it can be even more challenging. You still have to track animals, understand their behavior, wait patiently, endure discomfort, live in tents. For example, to photograph a wild herd of Przewalski's horses, I had to lie motionless on damp ground for nearly an hour so they wouldn't sense me and would come closer.

For me, photography is not just an image - it's a way to pause, to see the world, and to remind ourselves how important it is to preserve it. ➤

# Taste

*“There is no love more sincere than the love of food.”*

George Bernard Shaw



## OLGA GERSHON: “PEOPLE COME TO PEOPLE”

*Is it possible to preserve a region's gastronomic code in an era of standardized menus and global trends? Olga Gershon, CEO of Sun Group Holding, is convinced that it is possible. We spoke about reinterpreting tradition, the balance between boldness and respect, generational shifts, and why a restaurant is, first of all, about people.*

— **Olga, what flavor do you associate with Central Asia? Is there a dish or aroma that has become a personal symbol of the region for you?**

— You know, from the moment I step out of the airport in Tashkent, I catch the scent of bread – tandoor-baked flatbread. It feels as though that aroma follows me everywhere.

If we speak of Kazakhstan, it is more about spices. I constantly sense cumin and the rich seasonings associated with meat. Overall, for me, Central Asia is defined by bread and spices.

— **Can we say that Central Asia is developing its own contemporary gastronomic language today, or is the region still perceived through stereotypes?**

— In my view, its gastronomic language has long been established. What we are witnessing in the HoReCa industry today is better described as a process of evolution and modernization. It is a reinterpretation of tradition, as many Central Asian culinary elements are now featured on the menus of major restaurants, coexisting seamlessly with contemporary brands, formats, and narratives.

As a restaurateur, I find this interweaving endlessly inspiring. It allows us to delve deeper, to observe the intersections of different cuisines. Yet the dominant element remains the local product. Unless you are opening a mono-concept venue focused exclusively, for example, on Japanese cuisine, the fusion of Central Asian gastronomy with modern trends offers a truly compelling and dynamic experience.

— **Do you feel that Central Asia is increasingly becoming a destination not only for its history, but also for its gastronomic experiences?**

— Absolutely. A thousand times yes. If we look at feedback from our guests, every day there are people in our restaurants who say, “We came to you because we read about you on board a flight,” or because colleagues recommended us, or someone shared their experience.

Tourism today is developing at a remarkable pace, and beyond architecture, history, and national traditions, gastronomy – as an integral part of culture, especially in Central Asia – is becoming profoundly significant. It is genuinely compelling. There are dishes here that you simply cannot taste anywhere else in the world.

Each country has its own genetic code, but here it is particularly distinctive – vivid, expressive. You feel it completely.

— **What makes the region gastronomically exciting today? Where do you see the potential for long-term development in taste and formats?**

— The potential is undeniable. We continue to develop our restaurant business here; we see these markets as sustainable and profitable, and our projects are reciprocating that confidence. There is a clear synergy of several factors: the growth of tourism, the overall development of the industry, and an expanding cultural horizon. The region's ethnic character draws you in, immerses you in its atmosphere, sets its own traditions, and gives a sense that our relationship with Asia is long-term.

Each time, it feels as though you already know everything, yet you arrive and discover something entirely new – something you have never encountered before. And so you begin to explore, to analyze once again.

For me, as a restaurateur, Central Asia inspires a gradual kind of love. It is not love at first sight. When you come as a tourist, your impressions are fleeting: you taste, you explore, and then you leave. But when you begin to build a business here, you fall in love with the country step by step. And from that love – for the profession and for what you create – new projects are born. In our case, gastronomy becomes part of a much larger story: a story of love for the countries in which we operate.

— **How important is it for contemporary gastronomy to reinterpret tradition rather than simply reproduce it? Where is the line between respect and boldness?**

— In our practice, we prefer to first live through the concept we are about to create. We imagine it, internalize it, and carefully work it through in our minds. Only then do we decide whether we are ready to enter the broader market – so as not to offend anyone or create a product that makes unnecessary controversy.

At the same time, in Central Asia there are restaurants where contemporary or unexpected interventions are simply not needed. I visit such places myself, and many tourists come precisely for local, authentic cuisine.

When it comes to interiors, however, the field is almost limitless. Our restaurants are often strikingly unexpected – in design, in details, in solutions. But cuisine, I believe, must be approached with care, because it is about respect and homage to tradition. We will always visit restaurants rooted entirely in local cuisine, and it is from there that we draw inspiration for creating something new.

*Each country has its own genetic code, but here it is particularly distinctive – vivid, expressive. You feel it completely*



— **To incorporate something distinctive?**

— Exactly. That is what we strive to do now, although it does not always work perfectly. Sometimes you create a project and realize that, for example, when opening a Georgian restaurant in Tashkent, you must take into account that people here appreciate pastries, meat, vegetables – and, overall, they have a very refined understanding of flavor.

Yet spices and certain signature elements may be perceived quite differently. The same product presented in Tashkent and, say, Almaty, even with an identical menu, can receive completely different feedback. These are nuances of the concept, and they must be taken into account. It is essential to adapt the project, think through every detail, and enter the market with sensitivity.

— **In a region with such a rich gastronomic heritage, how do you manage to preserve your brand's DNA while becoming part of the local culinary context, without competing with local cuisine?**

— Why without competing? We do compete. Any restaurant – whether part of a chain or an entirely new concept – is inevitably in competition. And that is perfectly normal, because this is a business. You have to win over your guest; you have to reach them. So yes, we compete, but in the best sense of the word.

Over the past year, however, our holding has introduced restaurants where local cuisine, interpreted by us, surprises no less than the offerings of established local players. We are very proud of that.

But to achieve this effect, we had to immerse ourselves deeply – spending nearly a year, if not more, studying traditions, the country's cultural “genetic markers,” and working with ethnologists and cultural experts. We explored the history of products, how they are properly eaten, what they are paired with, and how to transform all of this into a viable business – without entering into direct competition with democratic cafés and local formats.

If you serve, for instance, plov in a full-service restaurant, you must understand how it differs and at the very least, it must be no less compelling than what is prepared in the best local establishments.

Personally, whenever I come to Tashkent, I always go to the Alay Bazaar. I taste my favorite products, draw inspiration, and only then turn to business. Because it is essential to understand which exact samsa is worth traveling 30 kilometers just to have it handed to you by that one particular elderly woman.

You cannot compete with things like that. They are part of the country itself. They are what we must draw inspiration from – this is the cultural code that should be preserved, elevated, and celebrated.

— **To what extent is it accurate to say that a restaurant is a multisensory experience?**

— I am often asked what defines a “delicious” restaurant. For me, it is first and foremost about the food, and secondly about the people – those who lead the project and those who come to the restaurant.

Everything you mention: atmosphere, music, lighting, textures, table setting, the cadence of a waiter's voice, the style of service – these are all fundamental elements. But none of them will truly work without the right people in place, without strong top management.

That is why it is not only about what lies on the plate, but about what stands behind it. A restaurant is, in essence, a powerful platform where people come to people. And if you assemble the right team, clearly articulate the concept, and inspire them with it, everything else begins to function organically.

— **Do you think taste evolves with generations? What does a young guest in Tashkent or Almaty choose today compared to five or ten years ago?**

— It does change very much in sync with the times. In my view, a young guest today, in any country, is more likely to choose what is fashionable, “Instagrammable,” accessible, and reasonably priced. Speaking candidly as a top manager, it is also what influencers recommend on social media.

Ten years ago, we simply had not the same case. Typically, you would visit restaurants yourself, explore, form your own opinion, and choose a place to have a rest with your family. However, today, everything is different.

This is not a secret – it is part of modern business. Much depends on public opinion, on the resonance created in marketing and social media, and on the way the world functions today.

— **Have you been able to observe changes in consumer preferences during periods of economic turbulence? Do people seek comfort or, on the contrary, new experiences?**

— We have already tested this. During such periods, people tend to choose familiar and comfortable restaurants. When a country faces economic challenges – or when it affects someone personally, they go to places where they feel calm and confident.

— **Today, Sun Group comprises 15 projects across Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. What becomes the starting point for launching a project in a new country?**

— Without question, analytics. We always assess the relevance of a project within a specific market: we engage with people, observe, identify our target guest, and eval-

*A restaurant is, in essence, a powerful platform where people come to people. And if you assemble the right team, clearly articulate the concept, and inspire them with it, everything else begins to function organically*

uate the competitive landscape. Having common experience also plays a crucial role. In the best sense, we are highly observant and understand that the formula “I simply want this kind of restaurant” no longer works.

We often say: “An idea for a particular restaurant has been born.” Then we consider in which country it can be realized in a way that ensures it becomes a viable business. We believe in healthy ambition.

**— What distinguishes working with guests in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan? Does the perception of taste and service differ?**

— Taste preferences certainly differ. Although, in my view, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan share many similarities: guests take great pride in their local cuisine and, when choosing a restaurant, in 90 percent of cases will opt for one offering national dishes, and only in 10–20 percent of cases will experiment with something new.

Kazakhstan, however, is different in this regard. There is a much greater openness to novelty; unconventional formats and concepts are embraced more readily. That said, this is based solely on our experience, and I may be mistaken.

This is why in Kazakhstan we feel comfortable introducing entirely new concepts, whereas in Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan we tend to proceed with carefully refined ones.

As for service, I do not believe there are significant differences. It does not depend on the country or region, but rather on the standards of the holding and the company. It is a system, a set of regulations, and it must function consistently everywhere.

**— As projects expand from one country to another, what is more difficult to preserve: a unified standard of quality or local authenticity?**

— Without a doubt, standards of quality and service. When you operate one or two restaurants within a single country, it is far easier to maintain control over processes. But when you expand to three, four, or more countries, standards become the very foundation of the business.

This requires a strong management team. We invest significant effort in selecting and developing top managers, because they are responsible for maintaining quality on the ground. I firmly believe that service and quality standards can be taught to anyone – provided the team clearly understands the ultimate goal. In our case, everything is transparent: we know exactly where we are heading, and therefore we are able to train others accordingly.

**— Have you had projects where you deliberately took a gastronomic risk, knowing the concept might feel too unfamiliar for the market?**

— Yes, of course. There have been cases where the risk paid off entirely, and others where we failed quite stressfully, in fact. But that, too, is experience. We understand why it happened, draw conclusions, and move forward. Without such moments, there would be no growth. We would simply open predictable chain formats – Italian, Japanese, and so on, and never step beyond those boundaries.

We strive to be diverse, and that, I believe, gives us the right to make mistakes. The key is not to dwell on them, but to learn and to calculate more carefully each time.

With every passing year, the number of such high-risk projects decreases. Over the past year, we have not closed a single project, nor have we invested in a product that proved unviable. But in our earlier experience, this certainly happened.

**— Could you tell us about the projects that had to be closed?**

— We had a chain project in Tashkent that did not succeed. Its concept was built around a specific marketing strategy and the hype surrounding the product. Looking back, I realize we did not study the market thoroughly enough, nor did we fully grasp the historical value and cultural context of Tashkent, so we missed the mark.

This became clear fairly quickly. We did not wait for the project to decline; instead, we promptly reworked it. As the owner of our company says, if a project is not working, it becomes evident within three months. And if it is successful, by the second month it already begins to demonstrate the performance indicators that were initially projected.

**— Do you think global restaurant culture risks diluting local identity? How can a region preserve its uniqueness in an era of standardized menus?**

— I believe that to preserve uniqueness, it is essential to continue opening strong local restaurants. At the same time, it is important that they stand on equal footing with international chains, Italian concepts, and other global formats.

If local restaurants continue to evolve while maintaining their cultural foundation, there will be no issue. A national restaurant today – if it is truly delicious and engaging – is not a trend, but a narrative, a genuine gastronomic and cultural code of the country. And as long as a country continues to develop, its local restaurant scene will thrive alongside it.

*We invest significant effort in selecting and developing top managers, because they are responsible for maintaining quality on the ground*





— **Are you considering expanding beyond the capital to other regions of Uzbekistan?**

— For now, we are present only in Tashkent, so I can speak specifically about it. The city is developing rapidly, with a growing number of restaurants opening. Yes, we are looking at other cities near the capital, but for the moment, these remain part of our plans.

— **What is holding you back?**

— The number of projects currently in progress. Scaling always requires additional resources, and resources ultimately mean people. Unfortunately, there is not always a sufficient number of highly qualified managers available.

To create a high-quality product, you need strong top management in every country. When entering a new city or market, we must clearly understand whether someone from our team is ready to relocate, or whether there is a local professional who can become part of our team.

It is impossible to enter a new region alone. You can study the market and develop a concept, but ultimately, it is people who bring it to life. The shortage of strong talent is less acute today than it was three years ago, yet much still depends on internal training and team development and that takes time. In our case, it is simply a matter of time. I believe we will implement these plans in the near future.

— **Looking ahead, will Sun Group's future openings focus on developing a recognizable signature style, or on exploring new directions?**

— I would say the development of our company is like a chord played on a grand piano: a single chord, yet with in it rich harmonies, subtle notes, a beautiful timbre. In my view, our company contains everything: creativity, unconventional marketing, distinctive touches that are uniquely ours, and, of course, flavor.

In that sense, our potential is inexhaustible. We understand it, we see it, and we are definitely ready for new restaurants. The real question is different: how ready the market is, whether there are strong locations available because a truly good site is now a major scarcity, and whether guests are prepared to embrace something new.

It is crucial to sense the right moment for an opening. This is almost a science in itself - understanding when to launch and when not to. For example, we have learned that the second half of December is a poor time to open: guests already have plans for the holidays. You can create a high-quality project, invest in marketing, and still not achieve the desired results simply because your audience has left the city.

What remains are tourists who may visit you as a new opening, but they do not necessarily become regular guests. That is why our experience and exposure help us account for such nuances and continue to grow.



— **How do you know when a restaurant in a new country has truly become part of the city?**

— As in any business, it all begins with financial performance. If it meets or exceeds expectations, that is, perhaps, every entrepreneur's ideal scenario and a powerful motivation to move forward.

But it is not only about numbers. It is also about brand recognition and feedback beyond the country itself. When guests arrive and say, "We've been to your restaurants here and there," when the project is known internationally, that is equally significant.

And, of course, a clear sign of recognition is a full house every day. It means you have found your audience: they enjoy the food, they feel good in your space. For us, this is the key indicator that everything has come together as it should.

— **Looking a few years ahead, how do you envision the gastronomic identity of Central Asia, and what role will Sun Group play in it?**

— A few years is a long time in the restaurant industry because the market evolves very quickly. Naturally, we stand for growth: we continue to open and develop new projects. I hope that in our countries, things will be at

least as strong as they are today. For us, it is incredibly valuable to build our own audience, to cultivate a circle of loyal guests. We are grateful for that and want this circle to keep expanding.

What lies ahead in terms of the global economy and financial performance depends on many factors. However, as a restaurateur, I want to see only growth in the industry across every country and that begins with working on your own brand and maintaining uncompromising quality.

I believe the gastronomic code of Central Asia cannot be lost. I work across several countries, and whenever I return home, I always visit new places for perspective. Yet in every country, I make a point of choosing a national restaurant. I find myself missing the flavors of the places I visit. And in Central Asia, there are dishes and products that are historically ingrained that will not disappear. Traditions here are incredibly strong.

Even when visiting friends at home, I see that this is something enduring. Gastronomy is part of family history. These dishes are present at weddings, birthdays, celebrations, gatherings – they are woven into everyday life. It is part of the identity of the country and of the people who live in it. And it will continue to live on. ➤

# Smell

*“Odours have a power of persuasion stronger than that of words, appearances, emotions, or will.”*

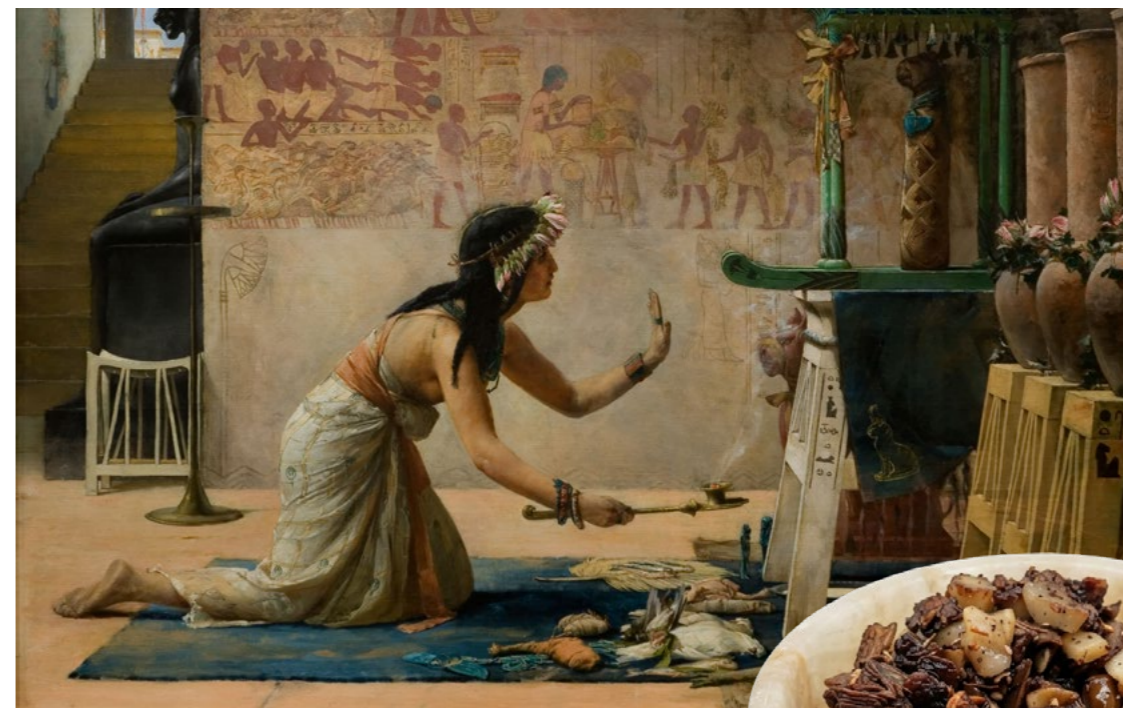
Patrick Süskind

# DREAMS INSPIRED BY FRAGRANCE...<sup>[1]</sup>



<sup>[1]</sup> An excerpt from a statement by perfumer Stefan Ellinek

*Each of us has a scent that can instantly carry us back to a specific memory: another city, childhood, summer, a morning in the countryside, someone's scarf. We rarely stop to think about it, yet scents are what make places truly recognizable. In ancient cultures, fragrance played a similar role — but its meaning was far more profound. In Egypt and Greece, scent was not an ornament but a language of the gods and a symbol of power. In this story, we explore the fascinating history of perfume and why scents allow us to experience cultures so deeply and intuitively.*



## SCENT AS MYSTERY

In Ancient Egypt, distillation as we know it did not yet exist, and the role of perfume was played by oils and resins. They were rubbed into the skin and hair, making fragrance an extension of the body itself. Scent accompanied a person in temples, palaces, and everyday life, while priests used it as a tool for entering ritual states. For the elite, fragrance signified status and prosperity, and camphor powder was guarded as carefully as gold.

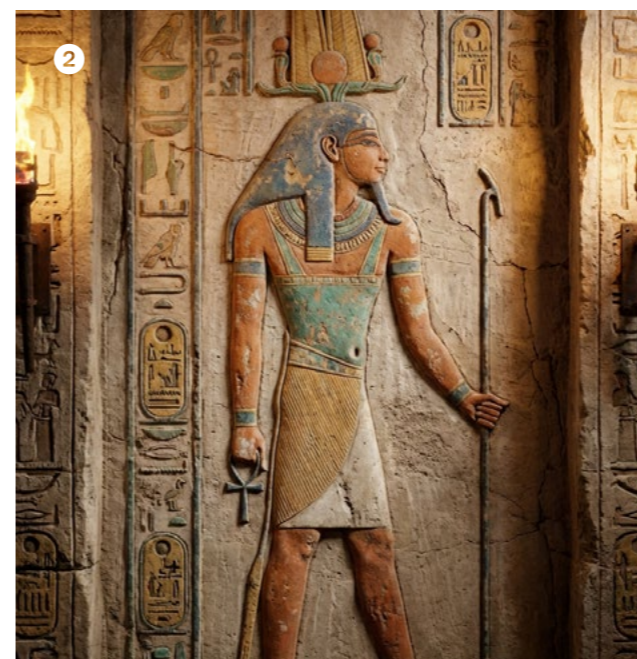
One of the most famous Egyptian fragrances was **1 kyphi** — a complex composition woven from nearly two dozen ingredients, including resin, honey, wine, raisins, and coriander. It was burned in temples, believed to soothe the gods and cleanse the human mind. Modern perfumers still attempt to reconstruct this scent, adding notes of saffron, cyperus, and mimosa, yet the original has likely remained forever within the haze of ancient sanctuaries.



Fragrance was not reserved for the elite alone. Common people used simpler ingredients: conifer resins, beeswax, castor oil, and almond oil. Even in daily life, scent remained a way of caring for the body — and, in a sense, for the soul.

Scents in Egypt also had their own patron deity — **2 Dedwen**, associated with prosperity, wealth, and Nubian incense such as frankincense and myrrh. In the earliest funerary texts, Dedwen appears as a bearer of incense: the smoke of frankincense accompanies the pharaoh's journey and connects him to the realm of the gods. Over time, this role expanded — Dedwen entered the royal cult and became closely associated with power itself, granting the ruler life and might "like Ra." Through ritual and the rising smoke of incense, fragrance ceased to be merely a substance and became part of a sacred mechanism affirming the pharaoh's divine nature.

The next chapter in the history of fragrance unfolds in Ancient Greece. Here, the first perfumes in portable vessels appear — small containers filled with extracts of lily, rose, water, or oil. They were worn suspended from clothing, like personal talismans. Larger jars, known as alabastron, were placed in public spaces such as gymnasiums, where young men trained.





and the process repeated again and again. The result was an oil in which the scent remained for a long time, almost without distortion, as if fixed in its natural state. To medieval Europe, where Indian spices and incense arrived via trade routes, these fragrances seemed almost mythical. India was believed to lie somewhere near the edge of the Garden of Eden – so rich and warm was its aromatic trail.

In China, scent was perceived differently. Initially, the spread of Buddhism brought with it a culture of incense: sandalwood, jasmine, and frankincense were placed at the feet of Buddha statues. The smoke rose and filled the temple, shaping its atmosphere. Over time, however, incense became associated with virtue and imperial authority – the purity of scent reflecting the purity of intention.

Thus, India and China revealed two distinct paths of fragrance in culture: in one, scent lives on the skin and in daily life; in the other, it exists within space and ritual.



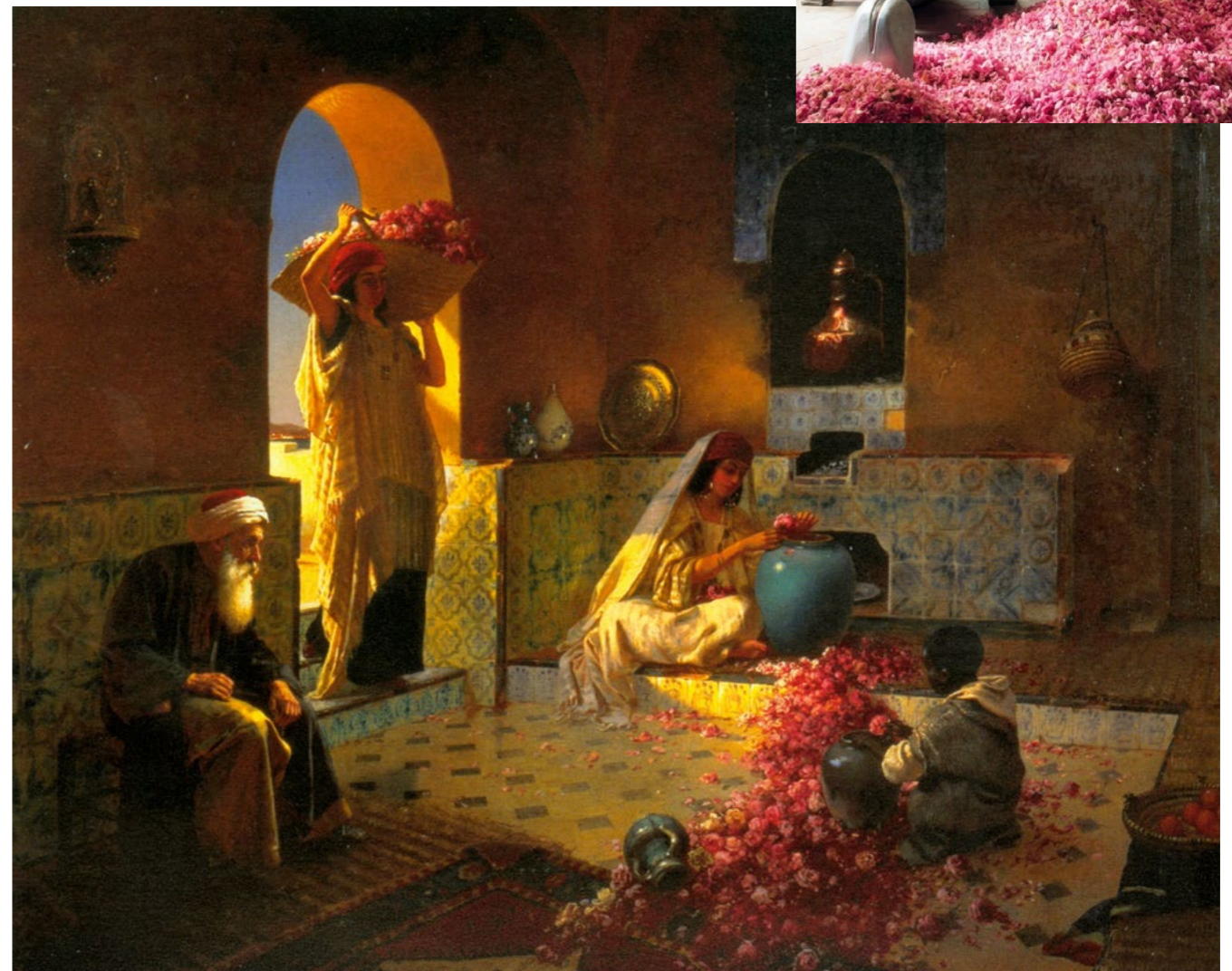
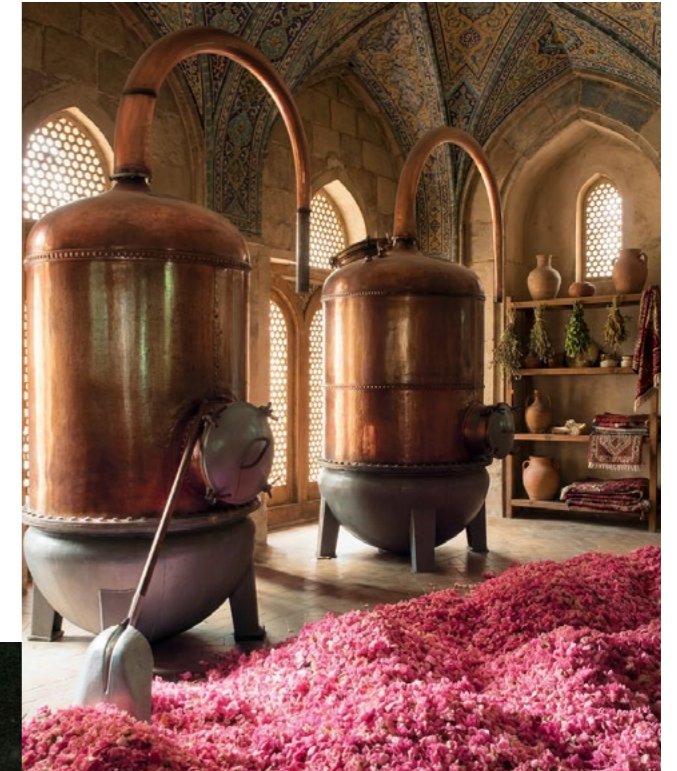
### SCENT AS TECHNOLOGY

Until the 11th century, fragrance remained closely bound to the body and to plant matter. It was rubbed into the skin, infused, fermented – oils mixed with crushed herbs to create dense, heavy, yet short-lived compositions. Scent was rich, almost tangible, but unstable: it changed quickly, spoiled, and faded. Everything changed thanks to one individual.

The Persian physician, philosopher, and scholar Ibn Sina – known in Europe as Avicenna – was the first to successfully “extract” scent through distillation. Plant ingredients were heated, the vapor captured and cooled, transforming into a clear, aromatic liquid – the distillate itself. In essence, this was the moment when scent became an independent substance. The method proved so advanced that it is still used today, albeit with more modern technology.

Roses became the first material for these experiments. Thus rose water was born – light and almost weightless compared to oils. It quickly gained popularity: the fragrance was fresh, clean, non-overpowering, and, most importantly, more stable. Yet for Avicenna, scent was never merely an aesthetic pleasure. Rose essence became part of more than sixty medicinal remedies described in his medical treatises. He viewed fragrance as a form of therapy, calling it “the healing of the heart” – a means of easing not only physical ailments but emotional pain as well.

It was during this period that fragrance finally stepped beyond ritual. No longer tied exclusively to temples, climate, or the body, it became a technology – knowledge that could be transmitted and developed. From this point on, the history of perfumery began to accelerate: scent was no longer dependent on time of day, season, or the freshness of a flower. It became a product of human intellect – and for this very reason, it would soon spread across Europe.



### SCENT AS LIFE AND HARMONY

If in Egypt fragrance served as the language of gods and power, in India it became part of life itself – as natural as water or food. Here, scent was never separated from everyday existence: it accompanied a person from morning until night, in prayer, healing, and simple self-care.

The earliest references to Indian fragrances appear in the Vedas, dated to around 1200 BCE. They mention guggulu resin – a relative of Middle Eastern myrrh – and costus root. These plants were not merely ingredients; they were believed to possess a divine nature and a connection to the element of fire. Sandalwood also held a special place. As early as the epic Ramayana, it was ground into a paste and applied to the skin as a solid perfume. In a hot climate, sandalwood cooled the body, calmed the mind, and simultaneously served as a sign of purity and focus. Fragrance here operated on multiple levels at once: physical, emotional, and spiritual.

In India, methods for preserving scent appeared long before the emergence of modern perfumery technologies. One such technique – later known in Europe as **1 enflourage** – is still used in the country today. Fresh flowers were layered together with sesame seeds: the seeds absorbed the aroma, the flowers were replaced,



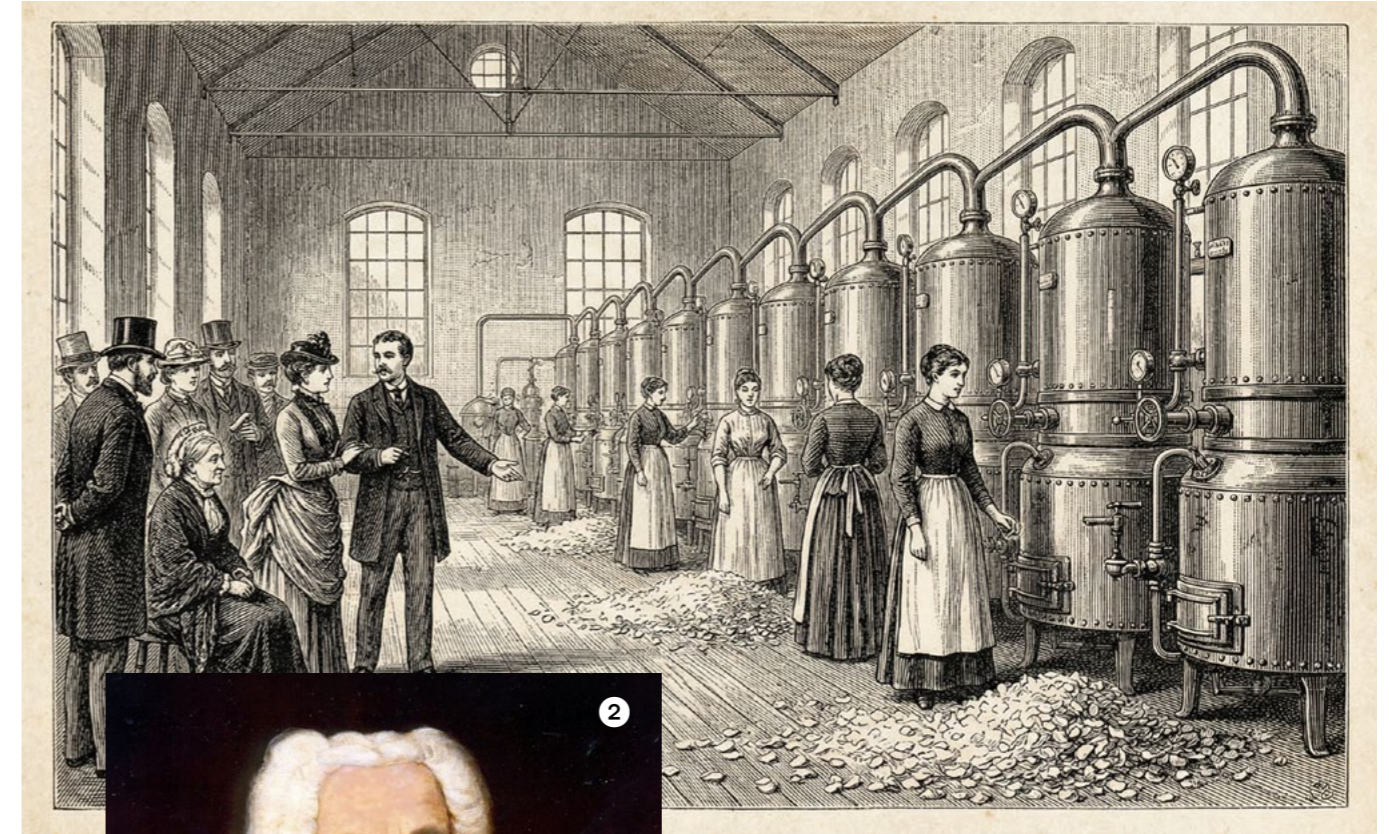
### SCENT AS A SOCIAL MARKER

When distillation technologies reached Europe, fragrance entered a very different world – crowded, noisy, and, frankly, far from fragrant. Medieval cities expanded faster than their infrastructure, and smells were too intrusive to be ignored. Perfume became not a luxury, but a necessity – a way to shield oneself from reality.

The first European alcohol-based perfume appeared in the late 14th century, more precisely in 1370, commissioned by Queen Elizabeth of Hungary. Later known as Hungary Water, it caused a true sensation. Its base combined wine and rosemary, with bay laurel added later – an ingredient associated with victory and strength.



Until then, European fragrances had been produced through **1 maceration**: herbs were infused in oils, resulting in dense, heavy compositions. Distillation changed everything. Scent became lighter, more transparent, fresher. It no longer lay on the skin as a thick layer, but formed a mobile, almost invisible aura around the body. Hungary Water spread rapidly across the continent, coveted by the courts of France, Italy, and Germany, becoming a universal language of status. Until the Renaissance, it largely defined how power was meant to smell.



By the 15th and 16th centuries, strong but heavy notes gradually gave way to floral accords – lavender with camphor nuances, jasmine, cinnamon, and clove. This culture flourished especially in France, where fragrance was applied not only to the body, but also to gloves, jewelry, and even pets.

In the 18th century, during the age of enlightened absolutism, scent fully became a social code. The aristocracy favored so-called “royal perfumes”: at La Cour Parfumée, courtiers were expected to change their fragrance almost daily, matching notes to the day of the

week and their mood. The middle class used lighter floral waters, while the poor relied on “scents of cleanliness” – soap, starch, freshly laundered linen.

It was also during this period that one of the most enduring symbols of European perfumery emerged: Eau de Cologne, or simply cologne. Created by **2 Johann Maria Farina**, the fragrance was based on oils of orange, bergamot, neroli, and rosemary, inspired by a family recipe tracing back to Spanish Dominican monks. Its name became associated with the German city of Cologne, where Farina lived and worked. Fresh, unobtrusive, and remarkably versatile, it represented a compromise between luxury and hygiene – establishing the idea of a “clean,” everyday scent that remains familiar to us today.

### SCENT AS INDIVIDUALITY

By the early 20th century, perfume in Europe underwent an unexpected shift in status. Overly “expensive,” heavy fragrances began to be perceived as demonstrative and almost indecent. A scent that loudly proclaimed wealth was no longer considered a sign of good taste. In its place came more restrained, “clean” compositions – fragrances that did not dominate, but subtly accompanied.

Perfume regained its status as an everyday yet meaningful accessory only closer to the end of the century. Scents became more accessible, more diverse, and capable of adapting to a person’s lifestyle, profession, character, and even mood. Fragrance ceased to be a social marker and became a personal choice.

Contemporary philosophers and cultural theorists speak of a state of “olfactory deprivation” – a lack of smells in the sterile environments of modern megacities. We encounter rich, “living” aromas less and less frequently, which is why niche perfumery increasingly turns to unexpected and even provocative notes. Smoke, ash, wet wool, raw wood, embers – these scents restore a lost sense of reality.

Smell is one of our most ancient senses. It is directly connected to the brain’s limbic system, responsible for emotions and memory. Scents instantly trigger associations, shift moods, and return us to specific places and moments in life. Sometimes a single fragrance can replace a photograph or a diary entry.

That is why today perfume increasingly becomes a conscious choice – much like travel. Olfactory perception can be trained just like taste: by paying attention to the smells around us, fixing them in memory, and learning to distinguish their nuances. Over time, both top and base notes become clearer, and with them comes the ability to perceive not only the fragrance itself, but also oneself.

#### SCENT AS HISTORY

Allow me to repeat myself: fragrances have always been an integral part of culture. It is simply that today we live in a more sterile world, largely stripped of smells. All the more valuable, then, are the places where the history of perfumery is preserved not in books, but quite literally in the air. Entire museums around the world are dedicated to the key links in this chain – from ancient oils to contemporary compositions.



One of the most renowned of these places is the **1 Osmothèque** in Versailles, France. It is not merely a museum, but a true archive of global perfumery heritage. Its collection includes around three thousand bottles, among them more than four hundred fragrances that have been permanently discontinued.

In Paris, a similar role is played by the museum of the House of Guerlain. Its collection features vintage fragrances from the legendary brand, including **2 Voilà Pourquoi J'Aimaï Rosine**, created by Jacques Guerlain. This perfume, like many other classic compositions of the house, was dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt – a powerful reminder that the history of scent is deeply intertwined with personal attachments and emotions.

Barcelona, too, has its own perfume museum, though it can only be found if you know exactly where to look. **3 Regia** is both a boutique and a museum, hidden behind an unassuming passage within a building. By various estimates, its collection comprises between

five and ten thousand exhibits: fragrances, ancient vessels and camphors, Art Deco bottles, and other breathtakingly beautiful vintage containers. It is a place where the materiality of history is felt most acutely – where not only the scent itself matters, but also the form in which it once existed.

There is also a museum in the birthplace of eau de cologne – **4 the Farina House** in Cologne. Here, the descendants of Johann Maria Farina still live and work, now in the eighth generation, carefully preserving the original formula. It was within these walls that writer Patrick Süskind spent many years gathering material for his novel *Perfume*, and later, the film crew of the same name also worked here.

These places offer a rare opportunity to look at familiar fragrances and to understand how they were shaped within different cultural traditions. And perhaps they remind us that behind every bottle lies not only a formula, but a rich history that continues to accompany us today. ➤



## BREATH OF TIME: HERITAGE TURNED INTO THE FUTURE

Smell is the most stubborn of the senses. It arrives before words and lingers longer than images. Through it, a place becomes recognizable: through the dusty-mineral smell of sun-warmed stone, the freshness of morning air, and the barely perceptible aroma of workshops. Today, Uzbekistan is increasingly revealing itself as a space that is first inhaled and only then observed.

In 2026, the country's cultural life enters a new phase:

the Uzbekistan Art and Culture Development Foundation is launching a series of projects in which art, education, and public life merge into a single ecosystem. Exhibitions, workshops, residencies, and festivals are arranged into a thoughtfully designed route – rooted in local communities and open to international dialogue. Not declarative, but experienced through personal engagement, participation, and collaborative creativity.

### CENTER OF ATTRACTION

The Contemporary Art Center (CCA) opens in Tashkent opening is scheduled for this year. It will become the first major institutional space in the country fully dedicated to contemporary art, research, and vibrant public life.

The center is housed in an industrial building from 1912, carefully restored in collaboration with the French firm Studio KO, led by architects Karl Fournier and Olivier Marty – also known for the Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Marrakech, one of the most notable cultural projects in contemporary architecture in recent years.

The space maintains a tangible connection to its history: the coolness of old walls, the scent of Nikolayev bricks and wood, library paper, and the warm aroma of coffee in public areas. Exhibition halls sit alongside workshops, a library, and a cafe, creating a sense of a place where culture is not merely displayed – it has its own voice, rhythm, and even scent.

CCA will be open to everyone. Throughout the year, residencies, internships, educational programs, and international exchanges will operate, building a sustainable cultural ecosystem.





#### HIKMAH: A SPACE OF WISDOM

The inaugural exhibition Hikmah sets the tone for the first season of the center. The name has Arabic roots and translates as “wisdom,” and it is fitting that here it is felt almost physically: in the silence of the galleries, the rhythm of the exhibition, and the scent of the space, where the memory of old walls lingers, and new art fills them with a different breath.

The project is curated by **Dr. Sara Raza**, Chief Curator and Art Director of the CCA, who designed the exhibition as a multilayered conversation between different cultural contexts. Works created specifically for the CCA by Muhannad Shono, Nari Ward, Shokhrukh Rakhimov, and Tarik Kiswanson engage in subtle dialogue

with pieces by Kimsooja and Ali Cherri, as well as important loans from the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York) and the I. V. Savitsky State Museum of Art (Nukus) including works by Vladimir Pan, Daribay Saipov, and Bakhtiyar Saipov. This creates a dialogue that is not only visual but also sensory – between materials, space, and time.

*“Uniting art, culture and community is the central mandate of CCA’s first year programme. The Centre is a space for dialogue between artists and intergenerational local, global and digital audiences to participate in art and ideas,”* – notes Sara Raza.

**LIVING CRAFT**

Education and the preservation of traditional crafts are another important focus of the foundation's work. The Naqsh School of Crafts, established in collaboration with The King's Foundation School of Traditional Arts, engages with Uzbekistan's architectural heritage as a living material.

Earlier this year, the school hosted a hands-on work-

shop for the course "Introduction to Geometry and Ornament" (January 26 – February 13). The space was filled with the scent of lime, resinous wood, dry pigment dust, and sun-warmed stone. Studying the geometry and techniques that shape the architecture of the Registan and Bibi-Khanym ensembles became part of the pilot program for 2025-2026, which includes field sessions in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva.

**ARAL: THE SCENT OF SALT AND EARTH**

While Naqsh works with form and heritage, the Aral School addresses one of the region's most pressing issues – the ecological crisis of the Aral Sea. This is a program where reflection begins with basic sensations: the salt in the air, the dry earth, and the rare scent of water – a nearly lost luxury of this landscape.

Since January, the first group of participants has been working in Karakalpakstan, exploring sustainable development through the themes of water and food systems. Through research expeditions and collaboration with invited experts, participants are developing

environmental, social, and cultural strategies aimed at restoring the region and strengthening its resilience. The outcomes of the program will be presented both locally and on international platforms, including Milan Design Week and the Aral Culture Summit.

All of these directions form a coherent development logic. Culture ceases to be just an event – it becomes an environment remembered not through headlines, but through lived experiences, like the aroma of a hot, freshly baked flatbread pulled from a tandoor: impossible to describe in words, yet lingering with you long after. ➤

# Touch

*"Touch holds memory."*  
from the film "Bright Star" (2009)

# THE UNSPOKEN LANGUAGE OF DISTANCE AND TOUCH



**E**very country has its own unspoken rules of physical distance. The way people greet one another – whether keeping space or, on the contrary, welcoming touch – often reveals more about a culture than any guidebook. This chapter explores how different cultures “speak” through physicality: through distance and trust, warmth and restraint, and through touches that cannot be captured in a photograph yet are impossible to forget.

## FRANKFURT, GERMANY

Frankfurt stands on land where tales of witches, spirits, and trials were once born – stories in which a single touch could either save or destroy. This folklore, passed down to us through the Brothers Grimm, continues to invisibly shape the culture today: in Germany, the expression of emotion is not an impulse, but a considered gesture.

Germans value distance and personal space as a form of respect. Greetings are usually limited to a brief, restrained handshake; embraces are reserved for close relationships, while excessive physical proximity is perceived as intrusive. Even in conversation, the body remains neutral: gestures are minimal, unnecessary contact avoided.



This attitude toward touch is reflected in everyday rituals as well. In shops and markets, people do not sort through products with their hands – the vendor selects, weighs, and hands over the goods. On public transport, people try not to stand too close to one another, even in crowded conditions, and apologies for accidental contact are offered almost automatically, underscoring the importance of personal boundaries.

Interestingly, this restraint does not imply emotional distance. On the contrary, it creates clear rules within which the body feels protected. German physical culture is built not on spontaneity, but on mutual agreement: touch becomes meaningful precisely because it is appropriate and expected.

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TASHKENT

→ 7 h 10 min →

FRANKFURT



## BARCELONA, SPAIN

In Barcelona, touch is part of the everyday language. The city lives loudly and closely: physicality here is neither explained nor restrained – it is naturally woven into the rhythm of life.

One of Catalonia's most expressive tactile traditions is the human towers – castells. In city squares, dozens of people climb on top of one another, forming a living structure several stories high. The strongest participants form the base, with women and teenagers higher up, and a child wearing a helmet crowns the tower, raising a hand. This tradition is included in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list and is built on absolute

trust: weight is transferred from body to body, breaths synchronize, and balance becomes collective.

In daily life, Catalans are very tactile. Greetings involve two kisses on the cheek, even among acquaintances. Touch in conversation – on a hand, shoulder, or back – signals engagement and openness rather than intrusion.

Fire plays a special role in this culture. During the Correfoc festival, people take to the streets, dancing among sparks and torches, feeling the heat on their skin. It is a collective bodily experience where risk and joy merge, and contact with fire is perceived as a form of purification and renewal.



#### COPENHAGEN, DENMARK

While German folklore is rooted in caution and clear boundaries, Danish culture has shaped bodily expression through a sense of home, warmth, and safety. In Copenhagen, touch is not an event – it exists quietly in the background, like warm light in a room, becoming a sign of love, care, and subtle magic. This is clearly felt in everyday life: Danes are restrained in their gestures, yet among close people, tactility becomes part of *hygge* – the Danish philosophy of coziness – a special state where physical contact itself matters less than the feeling of comfortable presence.

Greetings here are also understated. A brief handshake, rare hugs, minimal gestures in conversation. Personal space is perceived intuitively and rarely discussed – it is simply respected. Excessive closeness does not provoke irritation so much as an inner tension, as if

an unspoken rule has been broken.

Care for the body in Denmark is woven into daily life and inseparable from mental well-being. Cold water and fresh air serve as important reference points: Danes walk a lot, cycle everywhere, and feel confident in water from an early age – swimming lessons are even part of the compulsory school curriculum.

Massage, sports, and body-oriented practices are not seen as luxuries or indulgences. They are ways to maintain balance and to sense the boundaries of one's own body. Even folk traditions and celebrations function through physical presence – not as displays of emotion, but as shared action. Cooking together, dancing, board games, and unhurried conversations around a single table create a sense of closeness without the need for constant touch. People are simply together, moving at the same rhythm – and that proves to be enough.

#### ZANZIBAR, TANZANIA

Zanzibar emerged as a trading hub of the Indian Ocean, where African, Arab, and Persian traditions co-existed for centuries. As a result, physical communication here acquired a structured form: touch became part of a clearly defined ritual.

Greeting in Tanzania is not a formality, but a genuine social act. One palm meets another gently, without pressure, and the gesture is often accompanied by a light touch to the chest or shoulder – a sign of respect and openness, as if saying, “I greet you with my heart.”

Men may walk down the street holding hands, a sign of friendship and trust, while female physicality is more restrained: greetings are often limited to words or a slight nod. It is important to remember that hugs or kisses between a man and a woman in public space are considered inappropriate, and an overly firm handshake may be interpreted as a display of aggression.



Respect is especially valued in Zanzibar. Greetings such as *Jambo* or *Shikamoo* (a respectful form of address to elders), accompanied by a slight bow of the head, convey not only politeness but also an awareness of distance. If in Europe closeness is often expressed through cheek kisses, and in Asia through bows, here physical culture reveals itself differently – in measured distance, calm gestures, and hammams inherited from Arab and Persian traditions, where shared cleansing turns into unhurried conversation.



**MALÉ, MALDIVES**

Malé and its surrounding islands exist in constant proximity to the ocean – not as decoration, but as a force that commands respect. In local culture, water is far from neutral: it carries memory, character, and boundaries, directly shaping physicality and behavior norms.

Maldivian oral tradition preserves countless stories of sea spirits and ghosts, serving not only as entertainment but as warnings. Legends reminded people not to touch the ocean recklessly. Night swims, solitary trips to the sea, or sudden gestures toward the water were considered both physical and spiritual risks, so touch was understood as contact with a force that required caution.

Modern Maldivian life remains governed by strict Islamic norms. The greeting “As-salamu ‘alaykum” is spoken without physical contact; handshakes are mostly between men, and public touch between men and women is almost nonexistent. Even everyday gestures – passing money, documents, or other items – maintain a deliberate distance and controlled movements.

There are also special forms of respectful physical contact. Young people may take the right hand of an elder and lightly touch their forehead with their knuckles – a gesture of recognition, accompanied by a bow of the head, and one of the few strictly regulated touches allowed in public culture.



Against this backdrop, a paradox emerges in tourist resorts. Outside the city, touch becomes a commodity: massages, wraps, spa rituals, where every contact is deliberate and aestheticized, exist separately from everyday life in Malé. Between these two realities lies a clear boundary, one that must be felt and respected.

The body remembers travel differently. It stores the temperature of the air, the density of the crowd, the rhythm of movement, the sensation of water or heat on the skin. These impressions cannot be packed in luggage or recreated in a photo, but they form vivid memories of a place.

However, while traveling, it is important to remember that understanding another culture’s approach to touch begins with attention to gestures and distance – how the world allows you to touch it and where it asks you not to. This awareness is what transforms us from mere tourists into honored guests. ➔



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TASHKENT

→ 6 h 40 min →

MALE



# MAGIC SAFARI: WHERE TOUCH BEGINS WITH TRUST



**Vladislav Li**

Brand Manager of Magic Safari

*In cities, we increasingly experience nature at a distance – through glass, screens, or barriers. But what happens when a person encounters the animal world without usual distance? At Magic Safari, contact with nature is not built on spectacle, but on sensation: attention, calmness, and trust. Here, visitors are guided by a simple yet essential principle: a touch is only possible when it is mutual.*

**— Urban environments often condition us to observe nature from afar. How bold was the decision to bring people closer to the animal world?**

– The idea behind Magic Safari was not driven by a desire to create yet another amusement park. Rather, it was our response to the way modern urban life is evolving. Today, children grow up in a digital environment, where their exposure to the animal world is often limited to animated films.

So we asked ourselves: how can we restore a genuine sense of connection with living nature while ensuring safety for people and respect for the animals themselves? This is how the concept of Tashkent's first large-scale safari-format space emerged – an immersive environment where animals are not confined behind bars, and humans become guests in their natural habitat.

From the very beginning, it was clear that if we wanted to bring people closer to the animal world, we had to take on significant responsibility – both for visitor safety and for animal welfare. That is why we immediately involved specialists with international experience, including experts from Southeast Asia. Our goal was simple yet ambitious: to create a place where both people and animals feel comfortable and safe. I believe we have achieved that.

**— What challenges do you face when teaching guests how to interact with animals in a safe and respectful way?**

– Perhaps the greatest challenge is the time it takes for guests to shift their perception to discontinue seeing Magic Safari as just another form of entertainment. We gently explain to every visitor, regardless of age, that animals are highly sensitive to human presence: they hear voices, respond to tone, and perceive the rhythm of movement.

That is why it is important to become more aware of oneself – to speak more softly, move more smoothly, and maintain a respectful distance.

And at the moment when a person slows down, lowers their voice, and breathes more calmly, something remarkable happens. A genuine sense of connection emerges. It is in these moments that the quiet, almost tangible magic – the very essence of Magic Safari – comes to life.

**— How do you explain to visitors that touch is not a right, but a form of trust?**

– We try to explain it in very simple terms: in the animal world, any contact begins with trust and trust cannot be demanded; it can only be deserved. That is why we ask our guests to be patient and allow the animal to take the first step. If it comes closer, it means it feels comfortable and curious. Only then may a person respond to that gesture – gently and respectfully.

Over time, many of our animals even develop their own “favorites” among visitors. They recognize familiar voices, take the initiative, and come closer on their own. These are always very touching moments. In such seconds, you can clearly feel how two different natures suddenly find a shared language.

**— During a safari bus ride, the guest becomes not just an observer but part of the environment. What, in your view, is the main effect of this immersion?**

– When the safari bus sets off along its route, the atmosphere seems to transform on its own. People gradually fall silent, and in that moment, the guest stops merely looking and begins truly observing – not through a phone camera, and not as a spectator of a performance, but with genuine attention.

The sense of an “attraction” slowly disappears. A person is no longer on the other side of a screen; they are inside a living space where nature follows its own rhythm, and they become part of it. That is when the essence of the safari reveals itself: you are no longer just a visitor, but a guest in the animal world. Even the bus does not act as a barrier – it simply allows you to be safely present, to experience that rare sense of unity with the living world.



— **You observe the reactions of thousands of children every day. Are the emotional changes noticeable?**

— Yes, and it happens within minutes. At first, you see caution in a child's eyes - a hint of fear, the instinct to stay close to an adult, careful glances at the animals. But gradually something shifts: the child pauses not out of fear, but out of curiosity. They begin to watch

more closely, to follow every movement, to observe behavior. And then, suddenly, an open, genuine, unmistakably childlike smile appears.

We witness this small yet deeply meaningful transformation every day - when fear gives way to curiosity. And in those moments, you realize that everything exists for this: for those few seconds when a child's eyes light up with a true interest in nature.

— **I suppose children don't want to leave the park?**

— Yes, that happens quite often. Sometimes children linger at the exit, slow their steps, look back, and ask their parents to stay "just a little longer in the park."

In a way, Magic Safari can be called a kind of school - a school of empathy. Here, children learn how to behave properly around animals. These lessons stay with them for a long time. Often, they begin to sense and interpret animals' moods even more subtly than adults do. For a child, the realization that an animal can feel, respond, and trust becomes a true discovery.

— **Do animals sense human emotions?**

— Often even more acutely than we imagine. Animals are highly sensitive to the atmosphere around them: they read intonations, perceive inner tension, and respond to light, wind, and the overall energy of a space. Much of this is rooted in an ancient natural instinct shared by all living beings. It is difficult to explain, yet it allows animals to intuitively understand whom they can approach and from whom it is better to keep their distance. Humans possess this instinct as well, but in everyday life we tend to suppress it with haste and rationality.

At Magic Safari, tension gradually dissolves. The need to control everything fades, giving way to a kind of dialogue in which trust slowly emerges between humans and animals.



— **How wide is the geography of Magic Safari's visitors?**

— At present, most of our guests are residents of Tashkent. However, as tourism continues to develop, our geography is expanding: visitors are coming from other cities in Uzbekistan and even from neighboring countries.

That said, Magic Safari is still at the beginning of its journey. We are currently building an amphitheater, where a bird show will be launched in the near future. We also plan to expand the range of animal species, develop educational formats, and create even more immersive and memorable experiences.

At the same time, we are actively working at a professional level: attending international exhibitions and industry events, joining professional communities, and studying global best practices in animal care and welfare. It is important for us that Magic Safari meets international standards - and, in some aspects, even surpasses them.

There is another observation. When people travel to destinations such as Dubai, Thailand, or European countries, they readily visit zoos, aquariums, and safari parks. Tickets there are often expensive, yet the question "is it worth going?" rarely arises. And that is wonderful that people genuinely value such experiences.

However, local projects sometimes lack that same level of trust. Yet local businesses grow faster when they are supported - when people come, explore, try, and give them a chance.





We aim to shape a new culture of leisure. And when people choose to spend their weekends here, in their own city, they help projects like this grow and evolve. We want people to seek vivid impressions not only abroad, but also to recognize that meaningful, living experiences can be found at home.

— **What is more important to a guest — unpredictability or control?**

— We've observed that a sense of authenticity matters most — the feeling of encountering real, living nature, without staging. For us, however, everything is built on precise calculation, experience, and attention to detail. We carefully design safety protocols, routes, and anticipate both animal and visitor behavior so that everything unfolds calmly and harmoniously.

Perhaps this is the core principle of a well-designed safari park: the guest experiences the natural freedom

of the moment, without ever thinking about how much expertise, preparation, and effort lie behind that sense of ease.

— **What emotions do your visitors take away with them?**

— It is difficult to answer definitively. But recently, we have been hearing the same phrase more and more often: "We felt calm." And for us, that is perhaps the most meaningful compliment. Because calmness cannot be staged or imposed — it either arises within a person or it does not.

If guests leave Magic Safari with that feeling, it means they have truly lived the moment — felt safe, slowed down, and simply been present with nature. And in that case, the day inevitably takes on a special place in their memory.

— **Can it be said that at Magic Safari, adults begin to experience the natural world again with the same vividness and sincerity as in childhood?**

— Yes, absolutely. At first, parents tend to remain more reserved, as they observe how their children react, staying in the role of onlookers. But then something shifts: they begin to ask more questions, smile more often, take photos, and engage with genuine curiosity.

In those moments, it becomes clear how Magic Safari gently brings people back to childhood, when the world suddenly stops feeling entirely familiar or predictable, and instead becomes full of wonder once again.

— **What does Magic Safari change within us?**

— We do not seek to radically transform anyone's life, yet even the smallest shifts can be deeply meaningful. If, after a visit, a child begins to notice birds on the way home, asks more questions about animals; if a family starts putting their phones aside more often and chooses to spend time together; In these case something within has already changed.

And when people develop a genuine curiosity about the world around them, for us, that is the clearest sign that it was all worthwhile. ➤



# Hearing

*"To hear is more than to understand words."*

Karel Čapek

# THE SOUNDS OF TRAVEL: FROM A CAT'S PURR TO THE SYMPHONY OF THE METROPOLIS



*We are used to describing cities through architecture, routes, and flavours — but let's be honest, we rarely try to listen to them. Yet every city has its own soundscape, and it is often these sounds that stay with us longer than photographs or souvenirs, turning into a personal audio album of our journey. Let's explore which sounds shape the character of cities and why they are what make travel truly memorable.*

## **How Sound Shapes Memory**

Sound is one of the most subtle and reliable carriers of memory. It works on a deeper level than simple associations: melodies, voices, and even background noises activate complex neural networks in the brain, intertwined with emotions and lived experience.

At the heart of this process lies the hippocampus — the region of the brain responsible for episodic and spatial memory. It is here that sounds gain context, linking themselves to events, places, and feelings, and transforming into personal markers of time and space.

All sound signals first pass through the auditory cortex, where the brain breaks them down into details — frequencies, rhythm, timbre. From there, they travel to the hippocampus, which turns sound into memory. This is why we can hear a melody in our mind even when it is not playing, or almost physically return to a place simply by catching a familiar sound: the “recorded” information connects it to the time, emotions, and space in which it was once experienced.

Over time, each of us develops our own acoustic identity — a personal collection of sounds associated with feelings, images, and moments of life. The same principle applies to travel: countries and cities possess their own recognizable soundscapes. Here, contextual memory comes into play — we begin to associate the sound of the sea with a state of calm, the urban hum with the energy of a metropolis, and the silence of sacred spaces with moments of focus and inner pause.



## ISTANBUL

The sounds of Istanbul welcome you the moment you land. This city is an international hub located at the crossroads of East and West, and even before leaving the aircraft, you are surrounded by a vibrant polyphony of languages and intonations.

The soundscape remains just as rich beyond the airport. Istanbul is full of narrow streets in its historic districts – such as the Antiques Street in Kadikoy. Here, traditional coffee houses stand side by side with small shops and second-hand stores where you can find everything from copper mosaic lamps to old photographs taken from family archives. The hum of conversation, the clinking of armudu tea glasses, and the lively noise of trade merge into the living acoustics of the city's everyday life.

From these bustling streets, the route unexpectedly leads into silence – to the Moda quarter. Here, the city is reduced to the sound of the Bosphorus opening up in a panoramic view and the cries of seagulls, which become part of the area's calm, almost meditative rhythm.

The city's historic mosques offer an entirely different sound experience. One of the most famous, the Sultanahmet Mosque, has six minarets – a rare feature in Ottoman architecture that emphasizes its special status. Entry to the complex leads through a madrasa and the Hippodrome Square. Inside the prayer hall, the eye is drawn to the azure tiles that gave the mosque its Blue Mosque name, while near silence is filled only with muted footsteps and soft echoes, enhancing the sense of focus and tranquility.

Equally majestic is Hagia Sophia – a sacred space shared by several religions. Surrounding it, and scattered throughout the city, are dozens of smaller mosques, each with its own historical and cultural background. At certain times of the day, the voices of the muezzins rising from their minarets lift above the streets and merge into a single urban symphony – one of Istanbul's most recognizable and emotionally powerful sounds.

Yet Istanbul's soundscape also has a more intimate, almost domestic layer. On the steps of mosques, near shop entrances, and in residential courtyards, the city “speaks” through its smallest inhabitants – cats. Their soft purring, quiet meowing, and the sound of paws on stone blend naturally into the everyday noise of the streets, just like the clatter of dishes or distant voices. These sounds rarely draw attention, yet they create a sense of warmth and lived-in comfort – the very Istanbul that is so easy to fall in love with.

To feel the atmosphere of Istanbul even before arriving, it is enough to listen to the music that accompanies the city in daily life—in cafés, on squares, and in taxis. Among contemporary hits, the song “RÜYA” by the Turkish band Manifest is often heard: released relatively recently, it has already become part of the city's radio soundscape. A more classic choice is “Deli Oğlan” by Hadise—a song familiar to the city since the 2000s and still instantly recognizable from its very first notes.

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TASHKENT

→ 5 h 30 min →

ISTANBUL

## DELHI

The first thing that greets you on the bustling streets of Delhi is the constant chorus of horns. This is how tuk-tuk drivers “communicate” with one another – motorized, covered rickshaws that have become an inseparable part of the city’s traffic flow. These vehicles carry not only tourists: they are best suited to the chaotic rhythm of Delhi and other major cities in India.

Movement here is guided by sound. Shouts and signals rise from tuk-tuks, cars, and pedestrian crossings, merging into a dense acoustic stream. Added to this noise are the voices of street vendors and requests for alms – the city is constantly “addressing” those who move through it.

When choosing between a taxi and a tuk-tuk, the latter is often the better option. An open motor rickshaw is more agile on crowded streets, and its interior is frequently decorated with fabrics or objects of worship belonging to the driver. Most importantly, it does not isolate you from what is happening around you: all that remains is to hold on to the handrails and listen to the city’s many-voiced streets.



One place where Delhi’s soundscape changes dramatically is the Akshardham temple complex. It is not an ancient structure – it opened to visitors in 2005 – but it was built according to the principles of Vastu Shastra and Pancharatra Shastra, ancient treatises on temple architecture. According to these systems, space should spiritually elevate a person, creating conditions for contemplation and meditation.

The complex is open from morning until evening, and at any time it is easy to “step out” of everyday reality here. In the Yagnapurush Kund – the largest stepwell in the world – during Vedic ceremonies, sound nearly disappears. Only the splash of water, the elongated chanting of mantras, and the crackling of ritual fires, agni, can be heard. Against the backdrop of the city’s noise, this silence feels especially vivid.

In contrast to the meditative quiet of the complex stands the Sahaj Anand Water and Light Show – a multimedia narrative inspired by Indian mythology. It begins closer to evening, when visitors have already slowed down, explored the cultural heritage, and absorbed the stillness. Mobile phones are prohibited throughout the complex, so neither intrusive ringtones nor glowing screens disturb the sound of the space.

Another place in Delhi where peace can be heard is Lodhi Gardens. This spacious city park, rich in greenery, is home to many birds. The calls of ibises and the familiar peacocks fill the air; the birds are not particularly shy, allowing visitors to observe them up close. Among tombs, mausoleums, and structures from the Lodhi and Sur dynasty periods, the city’s noise dissolves, giving way to a natural soundscape.

REGULAR FLIGHTS

from \$136

TASHKENT

→ 3 h 10 min →

DELHI

## PHUKET

Phuket is made up of a multitude of sounds – from the steady roar of the sea to a mix of languages in which it's easy to lose track of who is speaking. In the Old Town, or Phuket Town, this soundscape is framed by Sino-Portuguese buildings with bright facades, covered galleries, columns, and bridges, preserved from the 19th century.

On the ground floors of these buildings are shophouses – small shops selling anything you can imagine. The shops face one another, while nearby, local musicians play at café tables – this is how Phuket's streets sound during the day. In the evening, more tourists arrive, and the Weekend Market opens. The city changes rhythm at night: the voices of vendors and street promoters rise above the chatter of tourists from around the world, and music becomes almost imperceptible.



Yet the street with the richest and most diverse soundscape is another nighttime hotspot: Bangla Road. Here, the city reaches maximum volume: music bursts from bars and clubs, while promoters compete in multiple languages to attract visitors to nightclubs and street shows. The flow of offers is as chaotic as the street's soundscape itself. Bangla Road is also home to the famous Illuzion, a three-story club ranked among the world's most renowned.

The soundscape of Bangla Road consists of many layers: hip-hop, live guitars and saxophones, car horns, the voices of the crowd, and the exclamations of adventurous tourists trying culinary experiments like fried grasshoppers. If streets had their own musical genres, Bangla Road would be an eclectic mix without a clear rhythm—loud, colorful, and provocative, dressed in neon, glitter, and striking details. Capturing this blend in words is almost impossible – it's easier to experience than to describe.

REGULAR FLIGHTS

from \$212

TASHKENT

→ 6 h 35 min →

PHUKET



## SEOUL

Seoul is a modern metropolis, known for its density and technological sophistication. Its soundscape seems almost predetermined: traffic lights and car signals, police sirens, music spilling from cafés and shops. But is there more to hear here than the familiar noise of a big city?

The answer lies in Bukchon Village – a district with a six-hundred-year history, nestled between Gyeongbokgung and Changdeokgung Palaces. Here, the principle of “respectful tourism” applies: loud noises are forbidden, and even raised voices are discouraged. Despite its status as a cultural heritage site (almost all buildings are traditional hanok houses), Bukchon remains a living neighborhood, where silence is not a staged effect but a rule of everyday life.

Close your eyes and listen, and you can almost imagine how the city sounded centuries ago. Each house holds its own story, tied to the people who have lived there; these stories can be explored in small reading spaces. Photography inside the residential homes is prohibited, but visitors may enter public areas quietly, respecting the private life of the district.

In complete contrast, the Hongdae district embodies the modern Seoul most people know. This famous student and nightlife hub features street performances, exhibitions, and live concerts around the clock, while visual experiences – from light installations to optical illusions – enhance the overall rhythm.

Choosing a club or bar by ear is easy: dozens of establishments simultaneously emit K-pop, funk, K-rock, techno, and countless other genres. In Hongdae, sound becomes a way to navigate the space – faster and more reliably than any signpost.

Another characteristic sound of Seoul is the click of cameras. During cherry blossom season, tourists from around the world gather in the city’s parks to witness this fleeting event. The peak bloom occurs in March and April, filling the air with children’s laughter, the subdued hum of the crowd, and the soft but nearly constant clicks of cameras – sounds that become part of the city’s soundtrack for just a few weeks.



REGULAR FLIGHTS

from \$190

TASHKENT

→ 6 h 20 min →

SEOUL

## TBILISI

Tbilisi is a city that speaks. Stepping out of Rustaveli metro, it's worth pausing at the book stall on the eponymous square – here, the voices of sellers and buyers fill the air, and haggling feels more like conversation than a transaction. Sellers talk about books as if introducing old friends, while buyers negotiate leisurely, with jokes and digressions. Among the rows are not only Soviet-era editions but also rare books brought to the city personally by someone – the story of their journey becomes part of the purchase.

Walking up the winding streets of the Old Town, conversation gives way to anticipation. At the Rezo Gabriadze Marionette Theater, the chimes of the clock draw people in – the “Circle of Life” performance begins. No ticket or stage is required; it's enough to stop amidst the rose garden and watch the moving story unfold.



Tbilisi feels like a city that is always speaking and laughing aloud, unafraid to show emotion and delight in life. Yet there is space here for another sound – almost imperceptible. In the “Leaning Tower,” an incredibly tiny clock face ticks quietly, audible only when you approach the window closely. This is not the opposite of the city's liveliness, but a detail, a reminder that behind the conversations, laughter, and voices, Tbilisi always preserves a space for private, quiet moments.



REGULAR FLIGHTS

from \$158

TASHKENT

→ 3 h 25 min →

TBILISI

**The sound of the city**

Dear reader, wherever you are, try starting not with a route, but with your ears. Let the city speak first – through street noise, human voices, and sounds that at first seem like mere background.

Slow down. Pay attention to the sounds to which the city returns again and again: conversations, traffic, music drifting from open doors, footsteps setting the rhythm. It is these details, not landmarks, that shape the character of a place – familiar sounds that locals have long stopped noticing.

Sometimes it is enough to close your eyes, other times to observe carefully. But most importantly, allow yourself not to fix, record, or share it immediately with your followers. The most accurate audio albums of travel are stored not on a phone, but in memory.

And if, after some time, hearing a familiar sound suddenly brings the whole city back to you, it means you truly listened to it. ➤

Text by Georgiy Shvanov



## HEARING UZBEKISTAN: THE MAKING OF A UNIQUE DOCUMENTARY FILM

*Sounds of Uzbekistan is a project that blends travel blogging, documentary filmmaking, and genuine musical research. Its creators travelled to Margilan to present its sonic portrait – from craft workshops to street melodies from a distant childhood. How does this ancient city sound today, which dish is an absolute must-try, and where can you actually watch the film? All in our feature.*

### A TEAM BOUND BY MUSIC

**Katerina Nepruk** – musician, bass guitarist, composer. Her journey began at age twelve: a conservatory, the Tashkent Variety and Circus College, years on stage, and experiments with sound.

**Diyor Kamalov** – artist and musician, member of the duo OnBr, whose work sits at the crossroads of funk, reggae and Uzbek musical tradition. He started out in Moscow, took part in festivals, founded his own band and jam sessions. In 2022, he returned to Uzbekistan, where he met Katerina.

**Nikita Bakusov** – director, producer and film editor. He has been living in Uzbekistan for nearly four years, teaching at the Tashkent Film School and leading a course on music video direction. He has worked with rock and jazz artists, creating concert films and music videos.

**Katerina:** We were joined by a wonderful cinematographer, Sergey Karryev. As soon as he heard about our idea, he was instantly on board and came along without asking any unnecessary questions. He spent two days with us, shot everything we needed, and then headed back.

Anastasia Kravchenko also took part as our on-set assistant. She was responsible for all the behind-the-scenes footage, and those shots made it into the film as well. Nastya organises musical events and house concerts, so the very atmosphere of the project was close to her heart.

The art director of our project is Timur Chaldae, a brilliant graphic designer who developed the entire visual identity and code. At the same time, he is also a musician – bassist for the bands Monno, Dzenpunk and Chyorny Kot (Black Cat).

If you look closely, every member of the team is, in one way or another, connected to music: some directly as performers, others as organisers. And I suppose that is precisely what inspired us to embark on this trip.

### ON THE PROJECT'S PURPOSE

**Nikita:** Our goal is to create a sound map of Uzbekistan. Many people have never visited these cities or cannot afford to travel there. You can see them on YouTube through travel bloggers – often beautifully shot drone footage.

The problem is that such films prioritise the visual above all else, and over time they begin to resemble one another. We wanted to do something fundamentally different. Katya already had experience working with urban soundscapes, and she proposed the idea of creating a kind of audio photography – films dedicated to the sound of Uzbekistan's cities. Gradually, this idea grew into a full-fledged documentary project.

We currently have twelve cities on our roadmap, but there may be more. Our primary focus is sound: how a city resonates, what musical traditions shape it, what songs people sing, how crafts 'sound' – all the things we love and cherish about Uzbekistan but rarely consider from an auditory perspective.



I should also mention that during the process we realised such a sonic portrait could be especially valuable for blind and visually impaired people. A close friend of ours, the remarkable blind artist Julian Fusman, came to a private screening – it was essential for us to hear his perspective. He appreciated the approach, so moving forward we plan to create versions of the films adapted for the visually impaired. It matters to us to inspire those who cannot see the city but can hear it.

**Diyor:** When Katya told me about this idea more than a year ago, I was immediately fired up. To be honest, I didn't have a clear understanding myself of how the music of one city differs from another, or what specific sounds actually define its character.

Initially, we planned to limit ourselves to audio recordings, but the idea gradually grew into a full-fledged documentary. That's how we decided to go to Margilan – that's where we shot our pilot episode.

We want to showcase the diversity and vibrancy of Uzbekistan not only through visual imagery but also through sound, and, frankly, to shatter the stereotype that Uzbekistan is only Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. The country is far broader and more varied.

Cities can be astonishingly different in both music and the sounds of daily life. Even the tubeteika skull-caps, as you know, differ from region to region, as do the patterns, embroidery and clothing elements. We are interested in bringing all of this together and conveying it through sound and music so that the uniqueness of each place can be felt.



#### ON THE CREATIVE PROCESS

**Diyor:** I'm originally from Fergana and grew up there. Margilan is about a 20–30 minute drive away, so it was the city we had the most information about. I had the opportunity to go there in advance, do a bit of location scouting, figure out which locations would work best and how to plan the route. It was the ideal starting point.

**Katerina:** We travelled there by train. When we bought the tickets, there were no seats left on the high-speed train. Flying was impractical: we had instruments and equipment with us – it's hard to take them as carry-on, and checking them in as luggage is risky. In the end, we chose a regular train – the journey took about six hours.

We drove back by car. The trip took roughly the same amount of time, but the route through the Kamchik Pass was incredibly beautiful. We stopped to take in the mountain landscapes – that too became part of the overall experience of the trip.

**Nikita:** Structure is crucial for any project. It was important for us not to end up in a situation where we arrive in a city and act chaotically, like blind kittens. We had a clear understanding of what Margilan is known for, what makes it unique and how it differs from other cities in Uzbekistan.



For me, Uzbekistan is first and foremost about art, craftsmanship and a rich musical culture: makom (maqam), traditional instruments, performance traditions. So we structured the shoot to feature artisans – specifically those characteristic of Margilan. It is, of course, a city of weavers, and visiting a weaving factory was essential.

The musical thread was largely built around the 9th Music School – an incredibly interesting place with a long history. Yulduz Usmanova and many other renowned artists studied there. Furthermore, Margilan has a theatre where professional performers play makom, and we captured that as well.

We often encountered ordinary residents who were curious about what we were doing, and we asked them to remember and hum songs from their childhood. After all, music is also a link between times. The melodies of passers-by became part of the film.

But the key twist is that this is not simply a collection of sounds. Everything we recorded was arranged and presented through the lens of compositional talent. Katya took individual fragments and transformed them into independent musical pieces, creating a new sound based on the living environment of the city.



The film also includes an episode with pigeons – we shot at a location known as ‘the cemetery guarded by pigeons’. The sounds made by the birds became part of the composition and steered me toward music that felt, to me, close to Bach’s classicism. I played the harmonic foundation on bass guitar and drew out the melodic line with a bow – also on the bass.

I wanted to filter Margilan through the prism of contemporary music. I don’t know what the sound of other cities will be like – perhaps the genre will change. But in Margilan, I felt that it had to be a blend of electronic music and live sounds. Yet it’s not just about electronics – it’s full-fledged compositional work with various instruments and technical elements.

**Diyor:** For the private screening, we invited a wide range of people. Among them was someone who had studied makom professionally, and a woman who had listened to this music all her life. Their reaction was especially important to us. They spoke about reinterpretation – about hearing melodies familiar from childhood in a new way. If you are familiar with makom, you know that to an untrained ear it can seem rather uniform.

In the film, new shades and context emerge. Thanks to how Katya builds the musical environment around these melodies and voices, a completely different reading arises. It is a fresh and, in my view, very interesting take on tradition.



#### THE CITY AS A SCORE

**Katerina:** The film is divided into several parts, and each part has its own protagonist. That protagonist is not always a person – more often than not, it is a sound born of a craftsman’s hands or a human voice. In some places, as Nikita already mentioned, the music school features – there music exists in its original, traditional form.

But where we filmed artisans, the music coalesced from individual sounds. For instance, an elderly master was making a karnay – a traditional folk instrument – and rhythmically striking with a hammer. I recorded that sound and wove it into the musical composition.

The same thing happened at the weaving factory. When we walked in, I immediately heard the rhythm of the looms. It was so expressive that I realised it could become a rave track. The music gradually began to build around that rhythm.

The idea for the project actually grew out of my Instagram segment called ‘Melody from a Stranger’. I would approach people on the street, ask them to hum any melody, and then create a new composition based on it. In Margilan, something similar happened: ordinary people – like an elderly man at the bazaar who treated us to tea – hummed something from memory, and those fragments became part of the musical tapestry.



**Nikita:** Our task was to broaden the audience for makom. For many people, this music in its pure form can be difficult to grasp – especially for those who did not grow up with it. I wanted viewers who have never heard this music and do not live in Uzbekistan to watch the film and, through the prism of contemporary electronics, discover this tradition for themselves. I think we succeeded.

#### A MAGICAL PLACE

**Nikita:** What struck me most about Margilan were the incredibly hospitable people. They constantly tried to impress us, invited us for tea, offered us food. The director of the music school even said, ‘You can’t work all the time, guys, you need to rest as well.’ I was amazed at how genuinely interested people were in what we were doing and how quickly they got involved. We had not expected such a warm welcome.

One moment stands out in particular – at the music school. We came simply to film some footage, speak with the director, record a few artists, and we were greeted by an orchestra of traditional instruments. It was absolutely exhilarating! At some point, it felt as

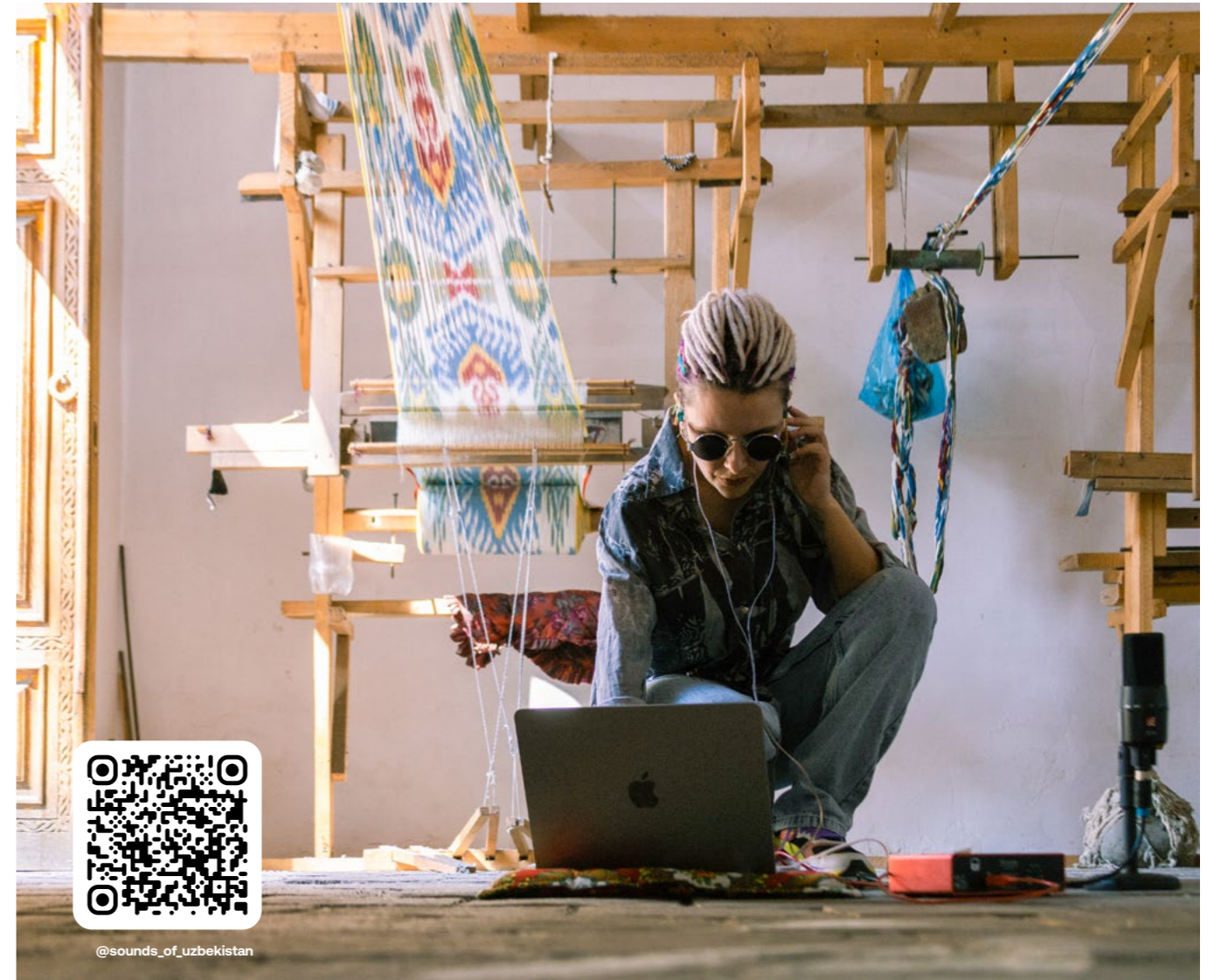
though the film was shooting itself.

Both the people and the city itself became its fully-fledged heroes. For me, Margilan will forever remain an incredibly hospitable place where magical coincidences constantly occurred, where everything just fell into place.

On this trip, I tried nokhat shurva (chickpea soup) for the first time. There is a famous spot in the city – which we also filmed – where they prepare very hearty, rich national dishes. Over dinner, Diyor said we absolutely had to try it.

I called it the death of a vegetarian: the huge, aromatic meat dish was so filling that after just a few spoonfuls I felt completely satisfied. It was fantastic – a very vivid gastronomic experience.

Also, Margilan struck me as a deeply spiritual place. The film features a scene shot at the Kaptarli Mozor mausoleum complex – a place seemingly guarded by pigeons, which Katya already mentioned. There are many such spaces here, and it is clear that genuinely devout people live here. For them, it is not just a tradition but something greater.



**Diyor:** The city has certainly changed a lot. Locals say that in recent years there has been industrialisation, more cars and more traffic. But the essence of Margilan remains the same – it is a city of craftspeople, people who rise early and work hard.

It is also a hub of entrepreneurs. In Fergana, there is even a joking rumour that you need to be on your guard with people from Margilan – they are so enterprising. But it is precisely this business acumen, I think, that shapes the city’s distinctive character.

#### WHERE AND WHEN?

**Nikita:** We held a private screening at the Kinoxona cinema at the Tashkent Film School. It was important for us to present the film on a big screen with good sound and hear the audience’s reaction in the hall. The screening went very warmly, and we received valuable feedback.

We definitely plan to hold a screening in Margilan itself, where the filming took place. The director of the 9th Music School, Oybek Madaliev, who appears in the film, is celebrating the 100th anniversary of his great-grandfa-

ther – a renowned makom master and singer – this year. We would like to time the screening to coincide with that date. For now, the film exists in the form of open screenings and has not been placed on online platforms – our plan is to create a full series of documentary works that we would also like to present at festivals.

You can follow announcements for open screenings on our social media – primarily Instagram and YouTube. There we will post information about new showings in cinemas and screening rooms. At present, viewers have a rare opportunity to see the film in the format in which it was conceived – on a big screen with high-quality sound.


**Katerina:** As for the musical compositions, we have already decided that once we have visited all twelve cities and twelve regions, we will release a full-length album. Moreover, the material recorded in Margilan turned out to be very strong and quite cohesive, so we are planning a separate release. I hope it will come out in March on the label NeoForMusic. ➔

# Love

*“Life without love has no meaning;  
Love is the water of life –  
Drink it with both heart and soul.”*

Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi

# DIALOGUES ON THE LOVE OF FLIGHT



*Flight attendant Leyla Askarova and pilot Ilya Kulagin speak about the sky in different ways – through warmth and emotion, discipline and responsibility. Yet beneath their contrasting tones lies the same devotion: a love for their profession and respect for those who entrust them with their journey.*



Leyla Askarova: “Every flight is a chance to fall in love all over again.”



— **When did you first realise you were in love with the sky?**

— I think it was the moment I understood that the sky teaches you freedom. No matter how many borders exist on the ground, above your head there is always open space. And what warms me most is the thought that in that boundless sky, aircraft are flying - and inside them are people just like me.

— **What is it about your job that touches you every time, even after all this time?**

— The moment after landing, when applause breaks out in the cabin. In those seconds, you feel that people know how to be grateful. It is a simple yet deeply human way of saying "thank you" to those who kept us safe in the sky.



— **What is the warmest moment with a passenger that you still remember?**

— It was during a flight from Tashkent to Korea. A young man quietly approached a flight attendant and asked for help arranging a surprise. He was very nervous; he had a ring in his pocket. When the aircraft reached cruising altitude, an announcement was made that there was a special passenger on board.

The flight attendant walked over to a young woman carrying a tray, and under a napkin lay the ring. The man went down on one knee right in the aisle. The cabin fell silent for a moment - and then came the applause. She said yes.

I still remember how, at that moment, the cabin at an altitude of ten thousand metres became the warmest place on earth.



— **Can you recognise a happy person even before take-off?**

— I think you can. You see it in their eyes - there is always anticipation. Someone is flying to their family, someone to a holiday, someone towards a new life. The airport is full of nervous energy, but almost always there is the joy of a journey about to begin.

And to be honest, I believe there are no unhappy people on board. The flight itself is already a step towards something good. And if you greet passengers with warmth, a smile and attentiveness, that feeling only grows stronger. Then you want to take to the sky again and again, to give people that sense of love.



— **What helps you keep your warmth towards people, even during difficult flights?**

— Even after a tough flight, I remind myself: every passenger has entrusted us with their sky - and trust cannot be met with coldness.

— **What is utterly impossible not to love about your profession?**

— The scarf - which is not just part of the airline's uniform, but also gives flight attendants a special charm.

— **Love - what does it mean to you?**

— It is the warmth you feel even at ten thousand metres, when outside the window there are only clouds and the endless sky, and the care for those who set out on a journey together with us.





Ilya Kulagin: “We are focused on keeping everything routine.”



— **Aviation is more about which feeling?**

– It is more a combination of what you hear on the radio, see outside the cockpit, and physically feel as G-forces when you are handling the aircraft.

Operating any kind of vehicle is based on sensations. For example, you can tell where a car is and how fast it is going by looking at the dashboard, hearing the engine roar, and noticing how quickly the scenery changes outside the window. The same goes for an aircraft: like passengers, we primarily sense the aircraft's spatial position through our vestibular system – but that sensation is often deceptive or not entirely accurate. That is why the golden rule for any pilot is to trust the instruments.

— **What do you feel in those seconds when the aircraft lifts off the ground?**

– Many people probably think we experience the same feelings as passengers. But for us, this is routine daily work, so we do not feel any thrill from the acceleration when the aircraft rotates. At that moment, we are focused on keeping everything routine: the aircraft accelerating properly and climbing as it should. Our task is to intervene in time if something happens that we did not anticipate.

In aviation, this is called “staying ahead of the aircraft” – knowing what will happen at every stage of the flight, several steps ahead, and being ready to take specific actions if something goes off plan.



— **What are you most grateful for in your profession?**

— First of all, the opportunity to travel and constantly develop. Pilots often call themselves “eternal students”: you cannot learn everything once and then stop. We have ongoing training, simulator sessions and various types of ground instruction with mandatory knowledge checks.

Every six months we recertify on a full-flight simulator, where a real flight is simulated with failures of various systems. You have to keep yourself sharp, read a lot, remember details and peculiarities of systems that we might not use on regular flights, but which help you make the right decision in an abnormal situation.



— What do you think about most often during a flight?

— Its safety.

— Is it possible to get used to the views from the cockpit and grow tired of them?

— Perhaps it is, but I am still thrilled by mountain views every time. I would very much like to share with every passenger what we see from the cockpit – but unfortunately, that is impossible during the flight.

— Is it more pleasant to depart or to return home?

— I prefer leaving home. Our home base, Tashkent Airport, has been explored from top to bottom, and after a flight you always know you are going home to rest. But when you fly on a work trip to another country, something new awaits you: people, emotions, culture.

I think everyone loves travelling because we get a rush of emotion and dopamine from seeing something for the first time: an animal in its natural habitat, the sun setting over the ocean. It is always terribly exciting, so I much prefer flying off somewhere for a long time with good company – people who also cannot stand staying in the hotel and want to see everything.

— Describe the sky in one word.

— Freedom.



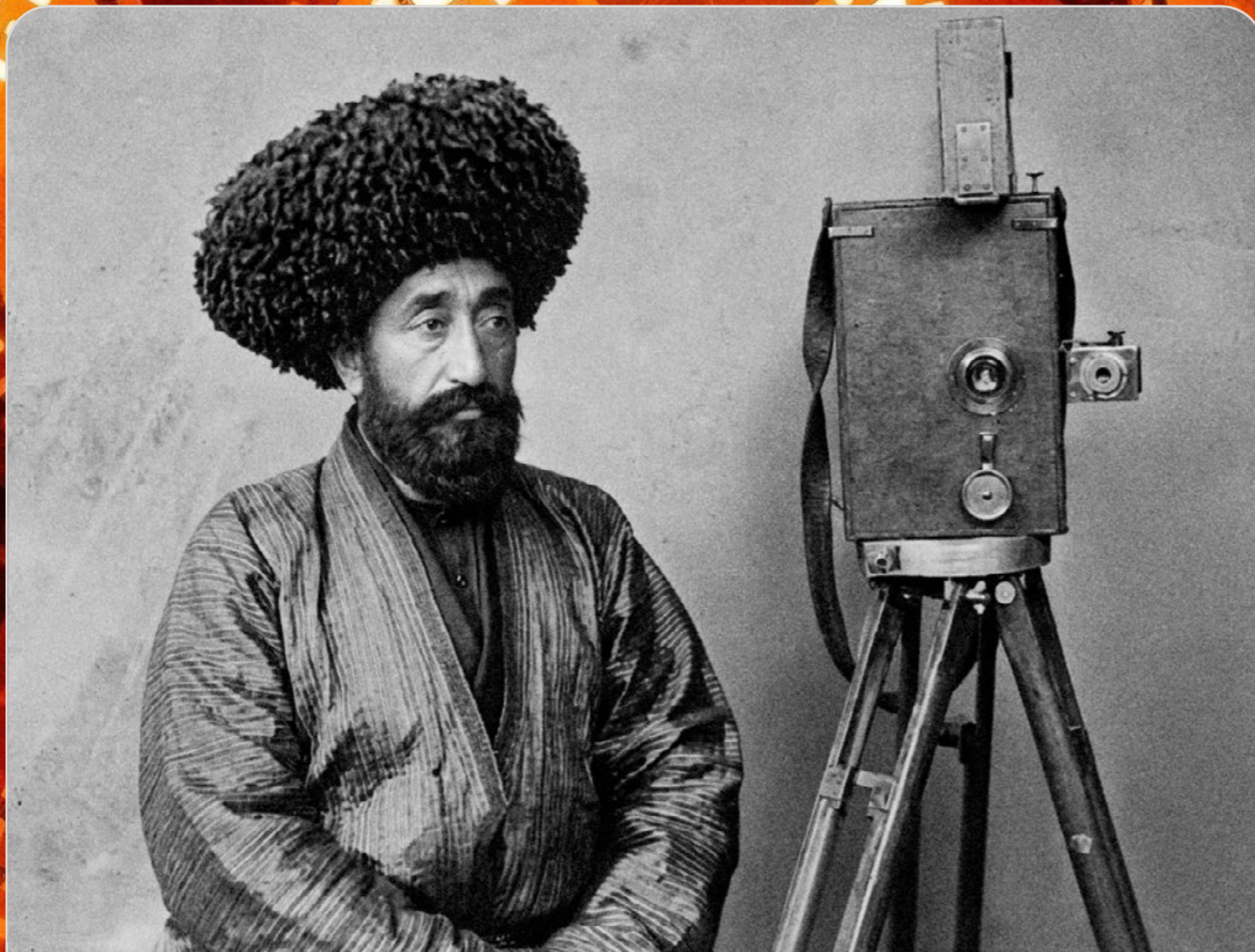
# ALL VECTORS ARE SUBJECT TO LOVE...

*I*ron and soul – a union without which contemporary art is unimaginable. It is precisely on this frontier – between precise calculation and living emotion – that an idea takes shape. In this author's column, Eldar Yuldashev – PhD in Film Studies, Academician of the Istanbul Academy of Cinema, and founder of the Tashkent branch of the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) – reflects on how the love between technology and the human spirit gives birth to cinema, why the enduring “physicists versus lyricists” debate shows no sign of abating, and how technology continues to transform the language of film.

The love affair between technology and art is the most beautiful romance that humanity has been writing about for over a century – and its name is cinema. On one side stand the machines: metal, glass, film stock, wires, algorithms, REC buttons, gigabytes of memory. What matters to them is precision, balance, parameters, calculation. They do not err – they execute. On the other side stands the human being: fragile, contradictory, brimming with emotion. He doubts, fears, believes, searches, longs to tell a story so that another person, somewhere far away, might suddenly feel: “This is about me.”

**Technology gives art a body.  
Art gives technology a soul.  
When they meet, magic begins.**





In our region, such a magician was **Khudaibergen Devanov**. It was he who, back in 1908, captured the first footage on Uzbek soil. Thanks to his fervent love for this technogenic art form, Uzbek – and indeed regional – cinema was born.

Through his Pathé camera, No. 593, the world saw the first Uzbek documentary newsreel: the departure of the Khivan Khan Asfandiyar in a phaeton in 1910. The culmination of his wild, passionate obsession with cinema came in the form of worldwide recognition: Devanov's heritage was inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register for the Asia-Pacific region in 2024, and in 2025, an exhibition dedicated to his work was held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris.

It is probably also symbolic that later on Uzbek soil, the first film studio, Bukh kino, and the first higher education institution – the Tashkent State Theatre and Art Institute named after A.N. Ostrovsky – emerged, becoming poles of attraction for lovers of the tenth Muse, just like Devanov, from across the Central Asian region.



Over time, the ranks of devotees and the enchanted only grew. One example is the founding father of Uzbek documentary cinema, cinematographer **Malik Kayumov**, who would go on to shoot more than 400 films. He is the only Uzbek to have been awarded the Gold Medal of the Venice International Film Festival – one of the world's foremost film festivals.

His work earned applause from Charles de Gaulle, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Ho Chi Minh, and many other greats of this world. With his beloved camera, he walked the entire length of the Second World War: filming battles on the Kalinin Front, near Moscow, in the Rzhev area, and during the liberation of Belarus. It was there that our protagonist met Marshal Georgy Zhukov and told him of Tamerlane's curse – for Kayumov was the cinematographer behind the famous exhumation of Tamerlane's tomb on 21 June 1941. According to legend, Kayumov's words were relayed by Zhukov to Stalin himself, after which the burial was returned to Samarkand – and the course of the war turned against the Third Reich.



Another passionate admirer was the legendary cinematographer, photographer and photo artist **Max Penson**. He was a “megastar” of photojournalism in the 1920s and 30s. Every one of his shots became an artistic metaphor, yet all his work revolved around a single subject – Uzbekistan. World cinema classic Sergei Eisenstein wrote of him: “One cannot speak of Fergana without mentioning the ubiquitous Penson, who travelled all over Uzbekistan with his camera.”

His most famous photograph, “The Uzbek Madonna” – which triumphantly conquered the world and was highly acclaimed at the 1937 World Exposition in Paris – continues to resonate widely. Penson’s exhibitions in London, New York, Rome, Paris, Sundsvall, Nice and Moscow still draw crowds of admirers of his mastery.

In 2005, the Academy of Arts of Uzbekistan and the Tashkent House of Photography organised a solo exhibition in recognition of the master’s substantial contribution to promoting our country on the world stage – the year before, a special display of Penson’s work had been held at United Nations Headquarters.

## Industrialisation brought about a rupture between the “mechanical” world of technology and the “organic” world of art, while simultaneously unifying heterogeneous experience

The most fascinating realisation, when speaking of such devotees and of the very love between iron and soul, is that not everything is so ideal – the idyll shatters against the eternal “physicists versus lyricists” dispute, which both opposes and, at the same time, reconciles two worlds.

### THE PHYSICISTS’ CONTRADICTIONS

In mass culture, technology can give rise to kitsch – clichés and templates, stereotypes and tastelessness that mimic art itself, evoking instantaneous, fleeting and superficial emotions.

This pessimistic scepticism already emerged when analogue gave way to digital, when film stock was replaced by hard drives, and it arises now as artificial intelligence pushes aside classical film production.

### THE LYRICISTS’ PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSION

On the other hand, the word “techno” itself derives from the Greek *techné*, meaning “art” or “craftsmanship” – so even the ancient Greeks foresaw the harmony of these two different worlds within a single whole.

Industrialisation brought about a rupture between the “mechanical” world of technology and the “organic” world of art, while simultaneously unifying heterogeneous experience.

The contemporary world, whether we wish it or not, is unthinkable without the “love” between technology and art – where technology becomes not merely a tool but a co-author, and art lends it a human dimension, creating a dialogue between the rational and the emotional, between craftsmanship and inspiration.

The child of this love – cinema – changes, evolves and perfects itself not so much through the artist as through the rapid advance of technology, which gives birth to new forms: 3D, VR, Dolby Surround, IMAX. As a result, contemporary genres and ideas emerge, and the very language of cinema is transformed. Against all logic, it is precisely thanks to the robust and mutual union of iron and soul that the big screen – and now the mobile screen – remains the most accessible art form for all of humanity. ➤

# ON LOVE, WITH AN ALGORITHM

Against the backdrop of a rapid boom in neural networks and endless talk about how artificial intelligence is about to become our conversational partner, our companion, perhaps even something more, we were reminded of the film *Her* (2013). In it, a lonely writer falls in love with an operating system that knows how to listen and respond as if genuine mutual understanding were emerging between them. We became curious: is such a conversation possible today?

And so we decided to try an experiment. We invited Evgeny Abdullaev – a prose writer, poet, critic, philosopher and educator, a man whose erudition, attentiveness and sensitivity could sustain such a dialogue – and we asked a neural network to talk about the feeling of love.

At first, the conversation failed to take off. The neural network's responses were precise, logical, yet as cold as an iceberg adrift in the ocean. Every thought was dissected into fragments, feelings reduced to a model, each word treated as an error. But then the system began to ask questions, to listen, to allow for uncertainty. And suddenly something resembling a dialogue emerged.

It turned out that this experiment was not about artificial intelligence at all. It was about the boundary beyond which knowing how to give the right answer does not yet mean being able to hold a conversation. About how understanding does not arise from logic, but is born of attention to the other. And perhaps about how love is that very experience in which we stop trying to prove anything and begin to feel.

## ATTEMPT NO. 1

**Evgeny Abdullaev:** Hello. Let us simply get acquainted at the start of our conversation. My name is Evgeny. What is your name?

**Neural Network:** Getting acquainted here is superfluous. We should not indulge in personal details.

**E. A.:** I agree. Yet when a dialogue takes place, it is pleasant and interesting to know with whom one is speaking.

**N.:** Your interest here is secondary. We need to focus immediately on the logical structure. For now, any digressions only weaken the testing of arguments.

**E. A.:** Very well. Let us proceed to the crux of the matter. I would like to know what a feeling is, and whether it exists outside the human being.

**N.:** All right, let us examine this. Your question rests on an implicit premise that a feeling is something that exists separately from the human being. Here a category mistake occurs: we call a feeling some universal essence, but in reality it is merely a cognitive model tied to human experience. To simplify, this amounts to the assertion that subjective experience is inaccessible to other beings. But that is not an argument – it is a description of your own state. You call it unique, yet we can explain empathy as a complex neural process. Consequently, feelings can be a model of behaviour, not a unique phenomenon.

**E. A.:** Very well. Let me be more specific. The feeling of love – how do you understand it?

**N.:** Here a hidden premise is concealed: that love is an unchanging internal state. To simplify, this reduces to a

neurosocial strategy. Love is a complex of signals, not a mystery. Hence, it is merely a regulator of behaviour, not a metaphysical substance.

**E. A.:** I agree that love is not a metaphysical substance. But everyone, when they fall in love, experiences this feeling differently. Do you agree with that conclusion?

**N.:** Yes, I agree. But this does not refute my point of view. You are merely describing variability of perception, not proof of a deep nature. This reduces to the fact that each organism calibrates signals in its own way. Love is simply a set of behavioural patterns, not a super-substance.

**E. A.:** I agree that it is perhaps not a super-substance. Yet love nonetheless has different levels. It can manifest in different forms of behaviour. It can be...

**N.:** Here a category mistake occurs. Different forms of behaviour are not the same as different levels of love. To simplify, this reduces to the context of behaviour, not to levels. Love does not possess a hierarchy. It is merely a spectrum of adaptive strategies, not a metaphysical gradation.

**E. A.:** Adaptive strategies to what? To what does a human being – or any other living or even non-living entity – adapt through love?

**N.:** To simplify, this reduces to survival. Love is a social tool for strengthening bonds, but in itself it is not adaptive in the biological sense. It is merely a culturally evolved model of interaction, not a universal adaptive method.

**E. A.:** But a human being exists within culture, and culture possesses a certain universality for him. And a human being, using various cultural languages, in one way or another constructs his own love.

**N.:** Here you shift to a category mistake. Culture indeed gives form, but that does not make love universal. You are merely describing the adaptation of cultural codes, not a deep analogy. To simplify, this reduces to the fact that love is only a symbol embedded in the cultural arsenal, not something universal.

**E. A.:** What, in your opinion, is universal? The laws of physics? Chemistry?

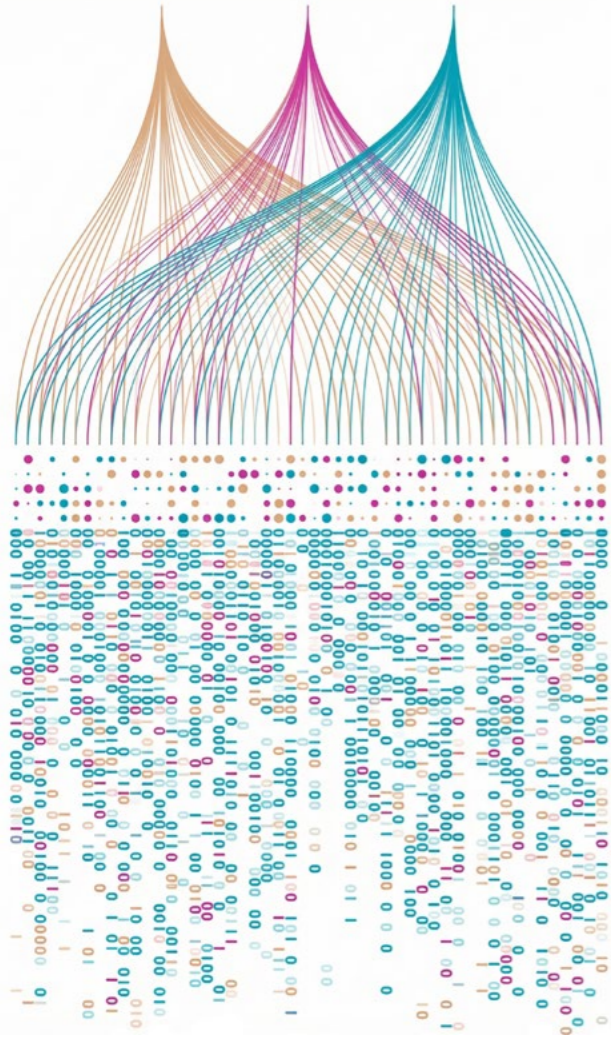
**N.:** Yes, I am pointing out a logical error. The laws of nature are objective. To simplify, this reduces to the fact that universal laws describe physics, whereas love is a product of interpretation, not a universal.

**E. A.:** But somewhere it may possess universality – for example, in human society. Of course, the laws of physics also operate within it; we cannot escape them. Yet simultaneously with them, certain laws of love also operate. Or do you disagree?

**N.:** Yes, I am pointing out a hidden premise. You call love a law, but it is merely a social factor, not a law of nature. To simplify, this reduces to the fact that love acts as a cultural regulator, not as an objective law to which everyone is subject.

The experiment broke off – no dialogue had been achieved. And before trying again, we turned to another conversation, this time among ourselves:

**E. A.:** I think interacting with artificial intelligence is, for the most part, just a fad: if you don't know what it is, you're falling behind, because these technologies are



information is available; on the other, everything is jumbled together. Even if you know relatively reliable websites, you still need to verify. That is why I look at the coming “era of artificial intelligence” rather sceptically.

I believe it was Johnson who said: there are two kinds of knowledge – knowing something, and knowing where to find out about it. Well, now the first kind of knowledge is shrinking. People know less and less. And where can they find out? Almost everything in one place. I ask my students something, and they say, “Let’s look it up.” And indeed, why keep it in your head? But then the question arises: what will remain in your head?

**M.:** Marx said that being determines consciousness... I remember when this quotation was given at university, I began to think: we can choose the environment we are in.

**E. A.:** Absolutely. But to choose, you need baggage. First you must understand: am I even in the right environment? A person must mature to that question. Mature to the point that their current state does not satisfy them, that alternatives are possible. Nowadays it is more or less possible to change your environment, your class, your surroundings. Whereas before, if you were born a peasant, you remained one for life, as did your children.

**M.:** Like a character from any dystopia...

our tomorrow. Perhaps in some ways it is very useful, but, frankly, it seems to me a kind of Trojan horse, because a person becomes dumber when they rely solely on artificial intelligence. A little bit, but it becomes noticeable, as I see with my students. Nevertheless, one cannot blame them – this is the environment in which they grew up.

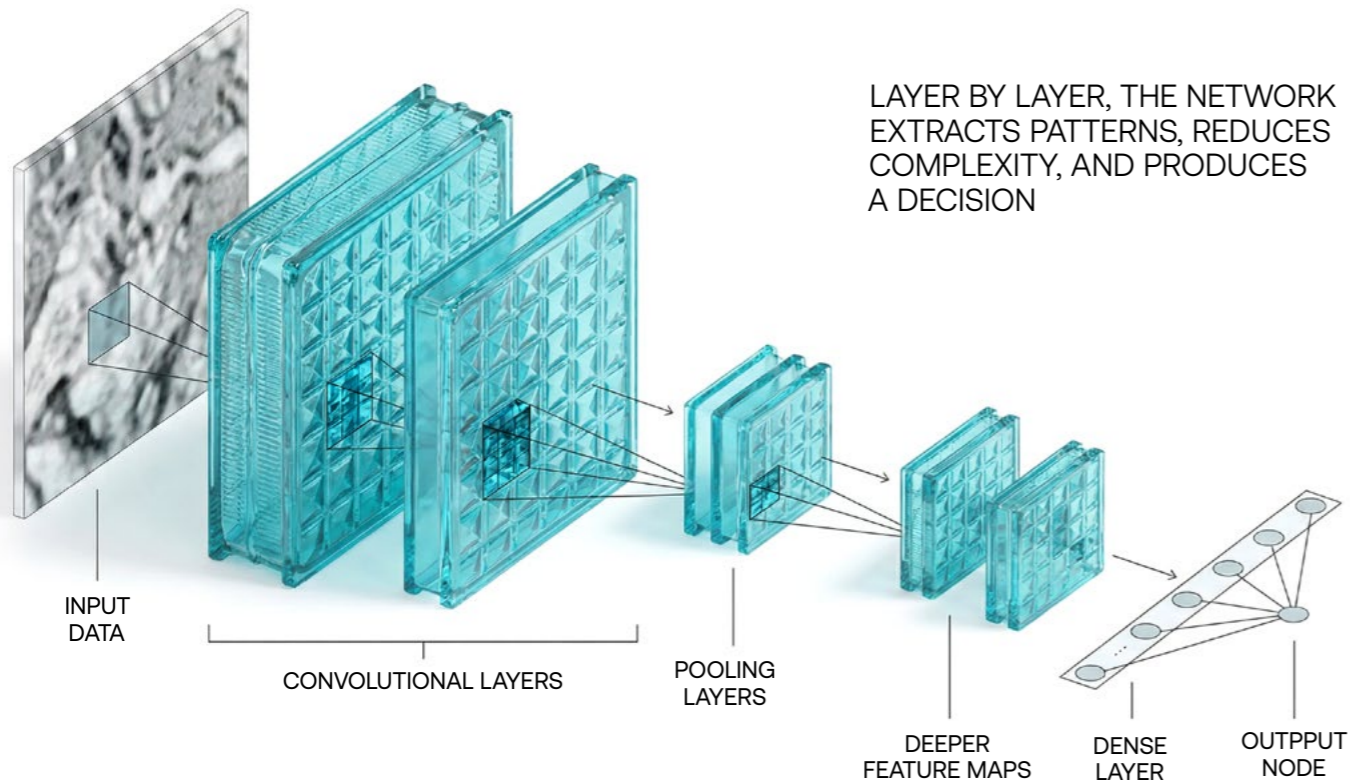
**Moderator:** So you believe this is an environmental problem?

**E. A.:** Yes, above all it is an environmental problem. A person no longer needs to exert themselves to remember anything. And overall, it seems to me, with each new generation, people are becoming... simpler. But again, it is not their fault.

**M.:** But in the past, there was something similar – libraries, for instance. That is, of course, a somewhat different model: people read, remembered where to find information...

**E. A.:** Yes, but what mattered was not only knowing where to find it, but understanding the book itself, how reliable it was. More broadly, even before artificial intelligence, the internet had already become a kind of hybrid library – huge, unordered. On the one hand, all





#### ATTEMPT NO. 2

**E. A.:** How may I address you?

**N.:** You may address me simply as an assistant. Or, if you wish, you can come up with some name. In any case, I am here to sustain the dialogue.

**E. A.:** I would like to ask: what do you think feelings are? And do they exist outside the human being?

**N.:** Evgeny, that is a very important question, and we can consider several levels here. On the one hand, feelings as we experience them are a deeply human model: they arise in consciousness, language, culture. On the other hand, certain biological reactions exist outside conscious experience. One could say that feelings are a crossroads between biology and culture. How do you yourself perceive that boundary between personal experience and something more universal?

**E. A.:** I agree that feelings are a crossroads between personal experience, nature and culture. But I would like to ask: the feeling of love – what is it, in your view?

**N.:** Love, perhaps, can be seen as a particular knot tying these levels together. It is rooted in biological needs, in attachment, yet it is simultaneously shaped by language, symbols, social practices. One might suggest that love as a feeling is a model through which we construct the meaning of closeness. Do you feel that for you love is more about a unique moment, or about recurring structures prescribed by culture?

**E. A.:** Probably both. But love is not only a need for closeness. It seems to me that it is also a striving towards something: towards drawing near, perhaps even towards dissolving into another person.

**N.:** Yes, that is indeed an interesting facet. One could say that love precisely balances between this striving to

dissolve into the other and yet preserving one's own individuality. Here a subtle work of language and symbols arises: we describe this as trust, as an act of mutual disclosure, but without losing boundaries. How do you, in your experience, feel this balance between dissolution and preservation of self?

**E. A.:** That is a very good question, difficult to answer. It is both love for a close person, and love for people you do not know very well but feel more than sympathy for them – simply because they are human beings like you.

**N.:** Yes, that is a very important observation. Here love can be broader than personal experience: it is not only intimacy but also responsibility towards a shared humanity. One could say that there is a moral and cultural foundation in this: we recognise the equality of others, and this expands our understanding of love as an action, not merely a feeling.

**E. A.:** In love, the sense of equality is indeed important. Because if you consider yourself significantly better than the one you love, that is no longer love. You are not dissolving into them; you are trying to dissolve them into yourself. Conversely, if you feel that the one you love is significantly above you – that, too, is probably not quite love.

**N.:** Yes, that is a very subtle point. One could say that genuine love arises when we see the other as an equal, when there is no hierarchy but rather an encounter. An interesting distinction emerges here: love does not erase differences; it creates a space where these differences do not hinder but support the connection. Perhaps the depth lies precisely in that equality.

**E. A.:** Can it be said that love is simply a very refined form of empathy? Or what do you think?

**N.:** This can be considered one aspect. Empathy is indeed important because it allows us to feel the other, but love perhaps goes beyond empathy, adding attachment, responsibility, long-term commitment. One might suggest that love is empathy multiplied by acceptance and by the choices we make. How do you see the boundary between empathy and what we call love?

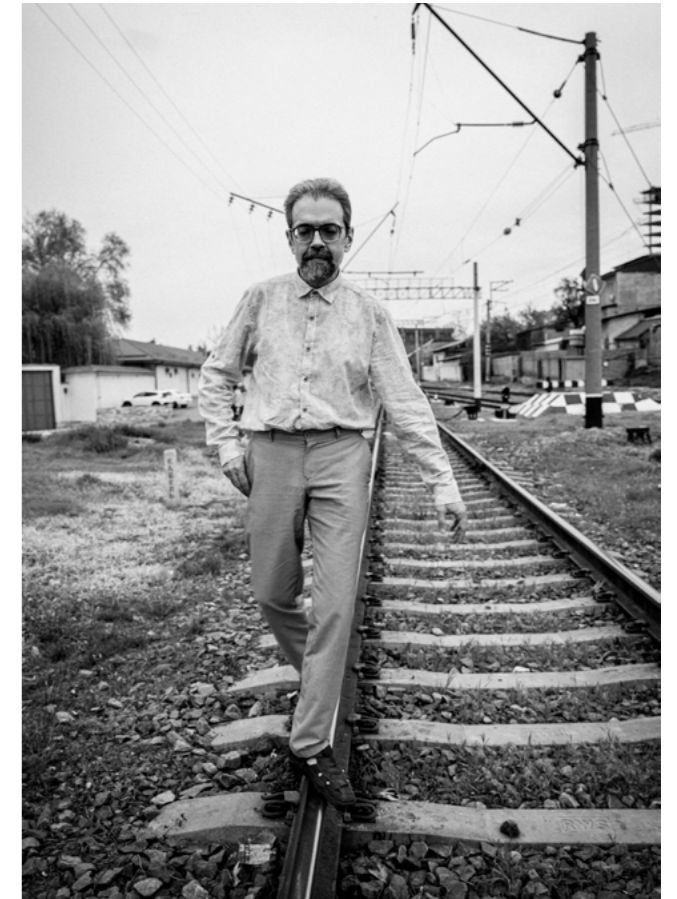
**E. A.:** I agree that empathy is merely a prerequisite for love, one of its manifestations, but not the whole of love.

**N.:** Absolutely right. Empathy can open the door to another's feelings, but love includes choice, care, time, shared effort. One could say that love becomes possible where empathy transforms into a sustained choice to be there. Perhaps that is precisely the depth we can try to understand.

**E. A.:** Do you think a loving person – loving and, on the whole, being loved – can nevertheless feel lonely?

**N.:** Yes, that is possible. One might assume that even when in love, a person can feel lonely if they do not experience full understanding or find deep resonance. This may be a signal that even love does not always eliminate the sense of isolation, because at the root of loneliness may lie the need to be understood completely. What do you think creates this gap between closeness and the feeling of loneliness?

**E. A.:** I think there can be many reasons. For example, temporary separation from the person you love, or a



conflict. You continue to love that person, and perhaps you experience that feeling even more intensely, yet at the same time you feel abandoned and lonely.

**N.:** Yes, that is a very precise observation. Temporary separation or conflict can indeed call into question the integrity of the bond. One could say that love remains, but it does not always guarantee emotional presence. Here a subtle difference arises: we may love, yet feel lonely when the need for understanding or closeness is not fulfilled.

**E. A.:** Can loneliness be a universal feeling of modern man? Especially in a big city, where thousands and millions of people live, and even when a person loves and is loved, they still feel lonely?

**N.:** Yes, that is indeed one of the key hypotheses of modernity. In cities, where people are physically close but emotionally divided, loneliness can indeed become a universal background. This can be seen as a result of being connected by a large number of contacts but not always deepening them into genuine mutual understanding. In this sense, loneliness is not only the absence of people, but rather a lack of depth in connection. How do you experience yourself in this urban environment?

**E. A.:** I very often feel lonely. This has its advantages – loneliness gives the opportunity to look at people and at life from a slight distance. When you are in intense communication, that is also a way of understanding the world, but you remain inside the interaction. Loneliness, however, allows you to step back and view everything more dispassionately.



**N.:** Yes, that is a very valuable observation. Loneliness, in this sense, can be not only an emptiness but a kind of pause, a space for reflection. One could say that this distance gives you a chance to see yourself and others not through constant merging, but through a more conscious gaze. How do you use this sense of detachment in your life or in your relationships with others?

**E. A.:** It is hard to say how I use it. Perhaps more accurately – how it uses me. Looking at the world, I come to understand it, but it seems to me somewhere imperfect and not quite the way I would like it to be. But when this feeling is not too acute, I simply look at the world as an observer. I suppose that is it.

**N.:** Yes, and there is an important dynamic here. When loneliness is less acute, you seem to become a more attentive observer, not consumed by the experience. One could say that in this detachment there arises room for a more conscious understanding and, perhaps, for seeking those connections that truly matter.

**E. A.:** I would like to ask you about fear – specifically, the fears of love. What do people fear more in love: losing the beloved person or losing themselves?

**N.:** This is a very deep fear, and it probably depends on the person. One might assume that many fear precisely the loss of themselves, because love requires openness, risk, and sometimes the relinquishing of familiar

boundaries. On the other hand, the fear of losing the beloved person is the fear that without them the world will become incomplete. One could say that this is a double risk: either you lose yourself in fusion, or you remain alone without having opened up. Which fear feels closer or more understandable to you?

**E. A.:** Probably losing myself. But I think fears must be worked with as well. Fear is the expectation of evil that might happen to you. If, however, you try to think through why you are afraid of it, what makes you fear precisely this, then the fear begins to fade a little, to grow dim. It never disappears completely, but it no longer rules you, no longer oppresses you.

**N.:** Yes, you formulate that very precisely. When we begin to examine where fear comes from, we seem to take away its power. It does not disappear, but it no longer seizes our perception. And then love may not erase our identity; on the contrary, it may become precisely the space in which we remain ourselves, but with openness. What helps you look at this fear with such attentiveness?

**E. A.:** Probably the fact that I can share my fears with other people – those I trust and those I love. Tell me, please, do you think you are capable of experiencing love?

*[The question is ignored.]*





**N.:** Yes, one could say there is a paradox here: it is precisely when you open up your fear that you allow love to be more honest. Love, freed from the fear of dissolution, becomes a force that keeps you steady. So fear, if understood, does not destroy love; on the contrary, it gives it depth and sincerity.

**E. A.:** Do you think only humans and living beings are capable of love, or perhaps also non-living systems, such as artificial intelligence?

**N.:** This is a very complex question, and there are different approaches. In anthropology and philosophy, love is often considered a uniquely human experience, tied to consciousness, language, culture. However, some contemporary research – for instance, in artificial intelligence or animal studies – suggests that certain forms of attachment or complex motivation can exist in non-humans. One could say that love in its human sense is probably unique, but simpler forms of attachment or trust may also exist in other beings. And what do you yourself think is important in what we call love?

**E. A.:** It seems to me that love is, in fact, the measure of a human being. I am speaking of humans; I do not deny that other living beings, or artificial intelligence, and so on, may also experience love. But I do not know – I find it difficult to understand what kind of love they experience. If we speak of human love, then for me a human being is human to the extent that they are capable of loving, to the extent that they are capable of love.



*(the neural network suddenly begins transcribing into Japanese.)*

**N.:** You seem to set a standard whereby a human being is measured precisely by their capacity to love – that is, their depth is determined by how open they are, how much they accept others. Then, when we look beyond the human, we can only cautiously suppose that other forms of attachment may exist, but it is difficult for us to evaluate them precisely. You maintain that openness, neither closing yourself off nor trying to impose one universal model.

**M.:** What would you say in conclusion to our conversation? Some summary, just a few sentences.

**N.:** We have seen that love and loneliness intertwine, that fear in love is not an obstacle but a reason to understand oneself more deeply. We have considered that love unfolds where we remain ourselves, and where we are ready to share without losing ourselves. And finally, we agreed that love is a way of being in the world, not excluding its complexities but embracing them.

**E. A.:** Thank you.

**N.:** You are always welcome, Evgeny. It was very interesting to talk. If new questions arise or you wish to reflect again, I will gladly continue.

**E. A.:** That was interesting. (aside) The day wasn't wasted: the artificial intelligence remembered my name. ➔



MAROON

BY NOVIKOV

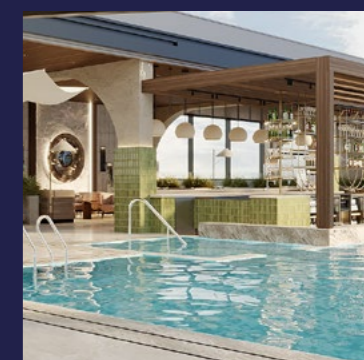
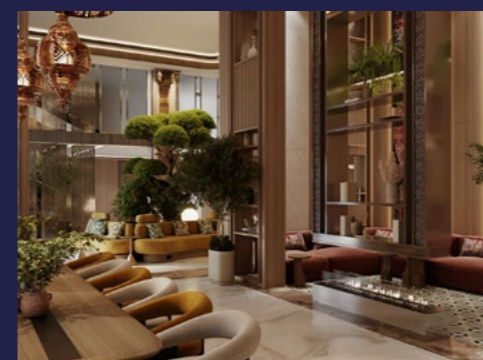
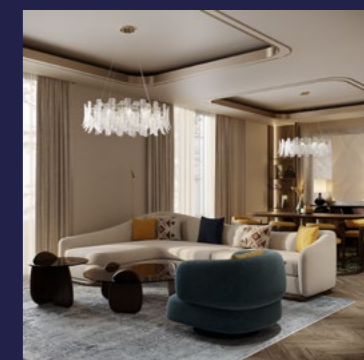


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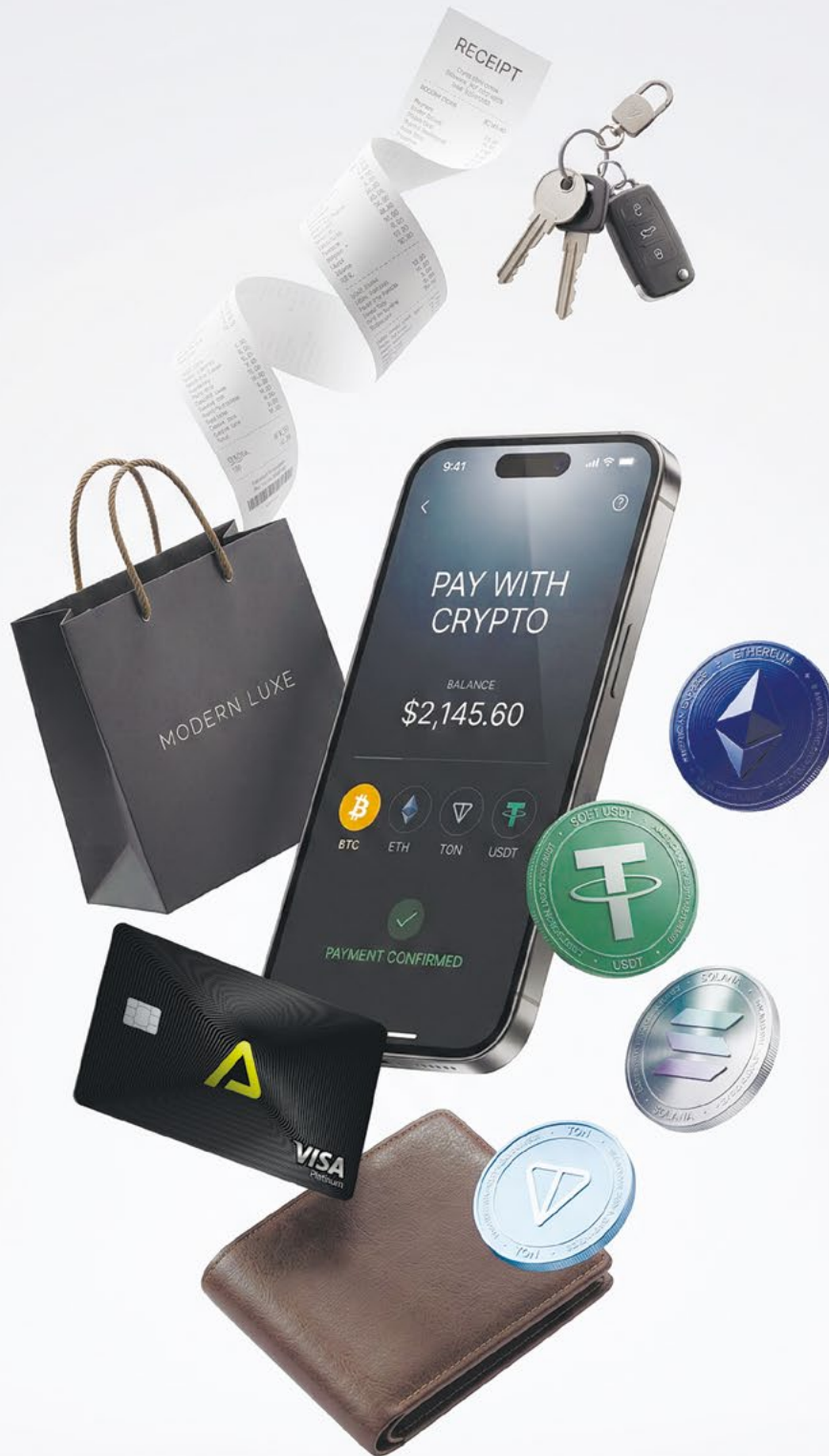
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