



Article

Representing Kazakhstan's historical and cultural heritage in historical retrospective: A case study of an exhibition project¹

*A. Ibraeva^a, A. Temirkhanova^b, K. Zhunussov^c

^aNational Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan
(E-mail: akmaral1971@mail.ru). *Corresponding author: akmaral1971@mail.ru

^bM. Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University, Petropavl, Republic of Kazakhstan
(E-mail: asema_sko@inbox.ru)

^cNational Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan
(E-mail: zhunussov@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

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The article explores cultural artifacts from the National Museum of Kazakhstan that reflect the history and cultural code of the Turkic peoples, with a focus on medieval Kazakhstan. Presented in an immersive exhibition, these artifacts illustrate how advanced digital technologies have become a leading method in museum practice, showcasing national achievements in a global context. In the digital era, museums play a strategic role in enhancing national identity and recognition, acting as active agents of cultural exchange.

The aim of the article is to convey the historical and civilizational origins of the Turkic peoples' statehood, as well as the continuity and uniqueness of their cultural code, through their material culture. It also seeks to present to the European public the centuries-old history and rich cultural heritage of Kazakhstan, with a focus on historical facts relating to Kazakh statehood and its distinctive culture.

The scientific concept of the exhibition is based on a thematic and chronological approach, covering the most significant stages of Kazakhstan's history – from the Bronze Age, the Scythians and Huns, and the Turkic Khaganates to the Golden Horde and the Kazakh Khanate. Each stage is represented by emblematic items from the National Museum's collection, including: the Saka "Golden Man" headdress from the Issyk kurgan; the anthropomorphic figure of the Tobol Thinker (3rd-2nd centuries BCE); male and female stone statues of the 8th–13th centuries characteristic of the Eurasian Steppe; lamps from the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi dating to the Timurid era; and the chapman of Kazybek bi (Kazakh judge) – a traditional outer garment typical of Turkic peoples well into the modern period. These

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archaeological finds, monumental artifacts, ethnographic materials, archival documents, and photo-video resources collectively convey the customs, traditions, mentality, and cultural code of the steppe civilization. The selection highlights both their historical value and the potential of immersive formats to promote international collaboration. For comparison, the authors reference immersive exhibitions at the Louvre, the Guimet Museum, and the Hermitage, which showcase the effectiveness of digital and multimedia technologies. The National Museum's immersive project serves as a notable example of cultural cooperation between France and Kazakhstan.

***А.Г. Ибраева^a**

*^aҚазақстан Республикасының Ұлттық музейі, Астана, Қазақстан Республикасы
(E-mail: akmaral1971@mail.ru)*

**Байланыс үшін автор: akmaral1971@mail.ru*

Ә.С. Темірханова^b

*^bМ. Қозыбаев атындағы Солтүстік Қазақстан университеті,
Петропавл, Қазақстан Республикасы
(E-mail: asema_sko@inbox.ru)*

Қ.Қ. Жүнісов^c

*^cҚазақстан Республикасының Ұлттық музейі, Астана, Қазақстан Республикасы
(E-mail: zhunussov@gmail.com)*

Қазақстанның тарихи-мәдени мұрасын тарихи ретроспективада репрезентациялау (Көрме жобасының мысалында)

Аннотация. Мақала түркі халықтарының тарихы мен мәдени кодын, Қазақстанның ортағасырлық тарихын бейнелейтін мұражайдың мәдени артефактілеріне арналған. Экспонаттардың Қазақстан Республикасы Ұлттық музейінде өткен иммерсивті көрмеде ұсынылғаны туралы атап өтіледі. Соңғы жылдары иммерсивті формат пен цифрлық технологияларды пайдалану, ұлттық жетістіктер мен халықаралық тәжірибені ашуға мүмкіндік беретін, көрме қызметін ұйымдастырудың сұранысқа ие заманауи әдістерінің біріне айналды. Қазіргі музейлердің басты міндеттерінің бірі – цифрлық коммуникация жағдайында елдің бәсекеге қабілеттілігін және танымалдығын арттыру; бұл музейлерді жаһандық мәдени алмасудың белсенді қатысушыларына айналдырады.

Осы мақаланың негізгі мақсаты – түркі халықтарының заттық мәдениеті арқылы олардың мемлекеттілігінің тарихи-өркениеттік бастауын, мәдени кодтарының сабақтастығы мен бірегейлігін жеткізу; сондай-ақ еуропалық қауымға Қазақстанның көпғасырлық тарихы мен бай мәдени мұрасын көрсетумен қатар қазақ мемлекеттілігінің тарихи фактілеріне және оның бірегей мәдениетіне назар аудару.

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Көрменің ғылыми тұжырымдамасы тақырыптық-хронологиялық қағидаға негізделген және Қазақстан тарихының қола дәуірінен бастап сақтар мен ғұндар, түркі қағанаттары мен Алтын Орда, Қазақ хандығына дейінгі маңызды кезеңдерін де қамтиды. Бұл хронологиялық кезеңдердің әрқайсысы түркі халықтарының көпғасырлық тарихын бейнелейтін Ұлттық музей коллекциясындағы экспонаттар арқылы таныстырылған. Олардың қатарында Есік қорғанынан табылған сақ Алтын адамының бас киімі, Тобыл ойшылының антропоморфты мүсіні (б.з.д. III-II ғғ.); Далалық Еуразияда тараған, VIII-XIII ғасырларға тиесілі ер адамдардың және әйелдердің тас мүсіндері; Әмір Темір дәуіріндегі Қожа Ахмет Ясауи кесенесінің шырағандары; Қазыбек бидің шапаны, жаңа заманға дейінгі түркі халықтарына тән сырт киім үлгілері және т.б. бар. Осылайша, көрмедегі археологиялық олжалар, ауқымды артефактілер, этнографиялық материалдар, мұрағат құжаттары, фото және бейнематериалдар дала өркениетінің әдет-ғұрпын, салт-санасын және мәдени кодын бейнелейтіні сөзсіз.

Материалдарды іріктеу кезінде әр экспонаттың белгілі бір дәуірді бейнелеудегі маңызы мен ақпараттылығы, сондай-ақ, халықаралық ынтымақтастықты дамыту мақсатында ұйымдастырылған мұндай көрмелердегі иммерсивті контенттің рөлі де ескеріледі. Салыстыру үшін мақала авторлары Луврда, Ресей мемлекеттік тарихи музейінде және Эрмитажда өткен шетелдік иммерсивті көрмелерді мысалға келтіре отырып, цифрлық және мультимедиялық технологияларды қолданудың тиімділігін де көрсетеді. Қазақстан Республикасы Ұлттық музейінің иммерсивті көрмесі Франция мен Қазақстан арасындағы мәдени ынтымақтастықтың маңызды нәтижелерінің біріне айналды.

Кілт сөздер: Қазақстан Республикасының Ұлттық музейі, мәдени артефактілер (экспонаттар), иммерсивті көрме, цифрлық технологиялар, тұжырымдама, мәдени код, тарихи-мәдени мұра, артефактілерде тарихи дәуірлердің бейнеленуі, экспозиция, бейнеконтент, ынтымақтастық.

***А.Г. Ибраева^a**

*«Национальный музей Республики Казахстан, Астана, Республика Казахстан
(E-mail: akmaral1971@mail.ru)*

**Автор для корреспонденции: akmaral1971@mail.ru*

А.С. Темирханова^b

*^bСеверо-Казахстанский университет им. М.Козыбаева, Петропавловск,
Республика Казахстан
(E-mail: asema_sko@inbox.ru)*

К.К. Жунусов^c

*«Национальный музей Республики Казахстан, Астана, Республика Казахстан
(E-mail: zhunussov@gmail.com)*

Репрезентация историко-культурного наследия Казахстана в исторической ретроспективе (На примере выставочного проекта)

Аннотация. Статья посвящена культурным артефактам музея, в которых запечатлена история и культурный код тюркских народов, средневековая история Казахстана.

Отмечается, что экспонаты были представлены на так называемой иммерсивной выставке Национального музея Казахстана. Иммерсивный формат, использование цифровых технологий в последние годы стал одним из востребованных современных методов организации выставочной деятельности, позволяющий раскрыть национальные достижения и международный опыт. Одной из ключевых задач современных музеев является укрепление конкурентоспособности и узнаваемости страны в условиях цифровой коммуникации, что превращает музеи в активных участников глобального культурного обмена.

Основная задача данной статьи – посредством и через предметную культуру тюркских народов передать историко-цивилизационные истоки государственности тюркских народов, преемственность и уникальность их культурного кода; а также продемонстрировать европейской публике многовековую историю и богатое культурное наследие Казахстана, акцентируя внимание на исторических фактах казахской государственности и его самобытной культуре.

Научная концепция выставки построена на тематико-хронологическом принципе и охватывает важнейшие этапы истории Казахстана – от бронзового века, саков и гуннов, тюркских каганатов и Золотой Орды до Казахского ханства. Каждая из этих хронологических периодов представлена экспонатами из коллекции Национального музея, символизирующими многовековую историю тюркских народов. К их числу относятся: головной убор сакского Золотого человека из Иссыкского кургана, антропоморфная фигура Тобольского мыслителя (III-II вв. до нашей эры); женские и мужские каменные изваяния VIII-XIII веков, распространенные в Степной Евразии; светильники мавзолея Ходжи Ахмеда Ясави эпохи Тимуридов; чапан Казыбека бия (казахского судьи), верхняя одежда, характерная для тюркских народов вплоть до нового времени и т.п. Таким образом, археологические находки, масштабные артефакты, этнографические материалы, архивные документы, фото- и видеоматериалы выставки отражают обычаи и традиции, ментальность и культурный код степной цивилизации. При отборе материала внимание уделяется значимости и информативности каждого экспоната, отражающего ту или иную эпоху, а также роли иммерсивного контента в подобных выставках в целях организации международного сотрудничества. Для сравнения авторы статьи приводят зарубежные иммерсивные выставки, проводимые в Лувре, Гиме, Эрмитаже, демонстрирующие эффективность применения цифровых и мультимедийных технологий. Иммерсивная выставка Национального музея Казахстана стала одним из значимых результатов культурного сотрудничества между Францией и Казахстаном.

Ключевые слова: Национальный музей Казахстана, культурные артефакты (экспонаты), иммерсивная выставка, цифровые технологии, концепция, культурный код, историко-культурное наследие, отражение в артефактах исторических эпох, экспозиция, видеоконтент, сотрудничество.

Introduction

The article examines the contemporary features of exhibition development in museums at the present stage. The mission of the museum is to create modern historical narratives through the representation of cultural values from the past. This objective is primarily achieved through exhibitions, which serve as the main medium for promoting the historical

and cultural heritage preserved in museum collections. Today, the creation of immersive exhibitions has become a significant innovation in museology. One of the key pathways through which Kazakhstani museums are gradually integrating into the global cultural sphere is by promoting national cultural values and the rich history of the Great Steppe to international audiences through exhibition practices.

In this context, traditional exhibitions continue to hold significant importance. However, in response to evolving contemporary demands and expectations, immersive exhibitions—now widely adopted—are gaining increasing popularity. The term ‘immersive’ derived from English and means ‘to enter into’ or ‘to be submerged.’ At present, a global wave of immersive experiences is spreading, accompanied by the growing use of LED displays. With the rapid advancement of digital multimedia technologies, exhibition spaces are increasingly incorporating high-tech, digital, and interactive elements. Among these, LED-based immersive environments have emerged as a leading format, characterized by impressive visual effects and a fully integrated sensory experiences (Yin & Jin, 2022: 442-453).

In recent years, the National Museum of Kazakhstan has gradually adopted the practice of organizing immersive exhibitions. For instance, in June–July 2024, the museum hosted an immersive exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci’s “La Bella Principessa”, organized with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Italian Institute of Culture, and Forte Bank. The exhibition was initiated by the Embassy of the Italian Republic in Kazakhstan and the publishing house Scripta Manent. The uniqueness of the exhibition lay, firstly, in its immersive format and, secondly, in the fact that it was presented to the public of Central Asia for the first time. Leonardo da Vinci, a towering figure of the Renaissance era, worked across various disciplines including painting, science, engineering, and anatomy. The singular value of “La Bella Principessa”, considered a jewel of the Renaissance, lies in its exceptional beauty, the mastery of its execution, and its significance as part of the shared cultural heritage of humanity (Leonardo da Vinci, 2024: 101).

Another example of Kazakhstan's international exhibition practice in this direction is the immersive exhibition “Kazakhstan: Treasures of the Great Steppe”, held in November 2024 in Paris, France. Organized with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in France, this collaborative project between the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Guimet Museum of Asian Art in Paris marked a significant milestone in the advancement of contemporary exhibition practices.

The aim of the exhibition was to present to European and particularly French audiences the centuries-old history and rich cultural heritage of Kazakhstan, highlighting the historical and civilizational roots of Kazakh statehood, and the continuity and distinctiveness of the cultural code of the Kazakh people, accompanied by immersive technologies. One of the key strategic priorities for ensuring the country's sustainable development is the study, promotion, scholarly examination, and public presentation of these cultural values (Ibraeva & Sydykov, 2024: 122-138).

Given that the exhibition was developed through the application of immersive technologies, this article focuses on its organizational stages, particularly the processes of artifact selection and attribution. Since the launch of the scientific project “The Life in Motion: The Cultural Code of the Kazakh Steppe Civilization” in 2024, the project team has been engaged in studying practices of French museums in organizing both permanent and temporary exhibitions, selecting artifacts, and integrating contemporary technologies at both national and international levels. In addition, the team aimed to expand its knowledge base and

incorporate best practices by identifying and synthesizing recent scholarly literature in the field of museology. This accumulated expertise is intended for use in the development and implementation of a future national exhibition of Kazakhstan at the Louvre Museum.

Through bilateral negotiations and exchanges of professional experience, a number of preparatory objectives were accomplished for the future exhibition. These included: familiarization with exhibition development practices (formulation of the exhibition concept, thematic-exposition planning, and methods of artifact selection); study of methods and technologies used in exhibition-making; understanding the principles of curating both permanent and temporary displays; identification of artifacts related to the history of Kazakhstan in French museum collections; and exploration of scientific literature and contemporary museum technologies applicable to exhibition design.

As a result, the project team thoroughly examined the experience of French museums in the development of exhibition concepts, the structuring of thematic-exposition plans, and the methodologies for selecting artifacts. Special attention was given to strategies for creating visually compelling and narratively coherent presentations for visitors.

Materials and Research Methods

In the creation of museum exhibitions and displays, key roles are played by design, multimedia, and sensory methodologies. The growing trend of immersion within contemporary society – driven by the rapid development of multimedia technologies – has led to the development of immersive exhibitions, programs, and museum environments. In this context, immersive formats serve several key functions with regard to the audience, including aesthetic, communicative, modeling, subject-representational, and creative-constructive roles.

The application of immersive technologies in museum exhibitions often involves the method of ‘immersion.’ This technique allows viewers to experience historical periods or events as if they were transported to another time or place. The significance of this approach lies in its capacity to create an evocative atmosphere. A.V. Khutorsky, who proposed the ‘heuristic immersion’ method, conceptualized participants within an immersive environment as a part of a visual product (Khutorsky, 1999: 220).

Researcher S.F. Sergeev introduced the concept of an ‘immersive educational environment,’ which, according to him, enables the individual to become deeply engaged with an external environment while remaining an active participant within it (Sergeev, 2009: 350). In the context of museum exhibition development, this method allows for the creation of an artificial environment that immerses the viewer’s consciousness into a specific historical period, thereby generating a virtual reality.

Scholars often associate immersive technologies with the concept of empathy. In the museum context, audience empathy toward historical periods is understood to involve the following components: a) the ability to place oneself in another’s position and adopt their perspective; b) the development of compassion and sympathy toward others; c) the experience of emotional discomfort in response to another’s distress; and d) the formation of a historical consciousness, even when the individual belongs to a different era (Bakin, 2020: 16-19). Empathy, as Karyagina defines it, is the conscious understanding of a given situation and the ability to adapt to it through interpersonal relationships and knowledge (Karyagina, 2013: 282).

Immersive gigapixel imaging technology, which is widely used in international museum practice, is a method of creating ultra-high – resolution images that enable viewers to explore

exhibits and scenes in details. It is used to create visual content, allowing users to view objects in remarkable precision and realism. This technology is often used in museums and exhibitions to create interactive, immersive effects, where viewers can virtually ‘approach’ objects and observe them from multiple angles, thereby simulating the sense of physical presence. This method was successfully implemented in the development of the exhibition “Kazakhstan: masterpieces of the Great Steppe” at the Guimet Museum. The gigapixel imaging process involved several stages: preparing both the artifacts and the location for shooting; using specialized equipment to produce high-resolution gigapixel images; processing the data and developing an interactive user interface for viewing; and integrating content into virtual or physical exhibition spaces to enhance audience engagement. Sylvain Rocca, who directly contributed to the project, remarked: “To create something is to give it life” – a phrase embraced in his studio. “By using new technologies to animate content, we aim to make it more accessible and engaging for visitors” (Roca, 2024: 10).

In assessing the artistic quality of a museum exhibition, the fundamental principles are unity of spatial composition and content. Neglecting the artistic dimension often negatively impacts the attractiveness and interpretive depth of the exhibition. The most effective form of contemporary exhibition design is the creation of a cohesive, thematically integrated ensemble. Such an ensemble is characterized by spatial compactness, compositional harmony among all elements, and a coherent conceptual structure.

Through comprehensive analysis, the methodological principle of “Kazakhstani museums as custodians and promoters of national historical and cultural heritage” was identified as a guiding concept within the broader global context of cultural integration.

Research background

At present, both theoretical and practical aspects of museum exhibition organization and design are actively addressed in scientific and methodological literature. Russian scholars such as L.M. Shlyakhtina (Shlyakhtina, 2022: 248), A.D. Telcharov (Telcharov, 2021: 184), and E.A. Shulepova (Shulepova, 2015: 43) define exhibitions as “the most dynamic form of museum exposition activity.”

Meanwhile, museologists such as J. Davallon, G.E. Burcaw, and J. Herreman offer more nuanced perspectives. For instance, Jan Herreman, professor at the National University of Mexico, characterizes the exhibition as “a means of communication, based on a predetermined spatial presentation of artifacts and their supplementary elements, and aimed at transmitting and communicating concepts, values, and knowledge using specific interpretive and educational methods” (Herreman, 2004: 92-101).

In recent years, a growing body of research has focused on immersive processes within the fields of culture and museology. Immersive experience in cultural practice is gaining increasing interest and is emerging as a key research area. The proliferation of such immersive practices in artistic and museum contexts contributes to their theoretical and methodological analysis and reveals new directions in the study of immersion.

According to L. Marks, the author of the 21st-century theory of the *aesthetics of sensation*, one of the key directions in the scholarly study of contemporary artistic culture is the analysis of haptic and immersive experience. Marks argues that “aesthetic perception involves not only seeing and hearing but also sensing and experiencing through the body.” Haptic analysis emphasizes the perception of artistic experience through tactile and bodily sensations, which are particularly relevant in contemporary installations and virtual environments. In contrast,

immersive analysis explores the viewer's full engagement and emotional immersion into the artistic space. In this approach, the artwork envelops the viewer, transforming them into an active participant in the aesthetic experience (Marks, 2019: 61).

Immersive shifts in the cultural sphere have transformed the traditional museum relationship of "viewer and object" into a visually mediated interaction grounded in multisensory engagement. Recent studies indicate that the core of the multisensory turn is the immersive phenomenon – an experience of deep engagement or "entry" into the perceived environment. With the rise of new forms of mediality, aesthetic and perceptual distances have diminished. Scholars such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari emphasize the concept of "close seeing" in this regard (Deleuze, 2010: 837). Globally recognized theories in the fields of culture and art, such as those addressing haptic and immersive experience, can serve as a scientific and practical foundation for the development and promotion of Kazakhstan's immersive exhibitions. A compelling example is the exhibition "Kazakhstan: Treasures of the Great Steppe", held at the Guimet Museum, which employed narrative and visual techniques to represent millennia of history – from the Botai culture to the Kazakh Khanate – through five key artifacts. This approach utilized AR/VR technologies to create a sensory link between the artifact and the viewer, enabling not only visual observation but also a sense of entering and experiencing the historical space directly.

Sylvain Rocca, a research associate at the Louvre Museum and an active contributor to the organization of the Kazakhstan exhibition in France, noted in an interview: "This was my first visit to Central Asia and Kazakhstan, and the experience has been truly inspiring. My goal is to demonstrate that, today, the use of digital and immersive technologies in exhibition design can offer visitors the most compelling and meaningful experiences." (Sylvain, 2024: 10).

In the course of implementing this project, a number of theoretical and practical outcomes were achieved. Among them were the publication of two academic collections: "Issues of Originality and Reproduction in Museum Exhibition Design" (Ibrayeva, Abdukhamalova, Gizzatov, 2024: 90), and "Methodological Foundations of Interdisciplinary Research in Museology" (Gizzatov, 2024: 76), prepared within the framework of the international seminar held during the II Kazakhstan Museum Congress, dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan. compiled during the II Kazakhstan Museum Congress, which was dedicated to the 10th anniversary of the National Museum of Kazakhstan. The relevance of this seminar lies in its role as a platform for the exchange of advanced ideas and methods among museum professionals from various countries, the development of joint strategies to address global challenges in the museum sector, and the strengthening of international collaboration between museum institutions. The seminar featured participation from both international and domestic scholars, including Rocco Rante – scriptwriter, designer, and director of the Atelier Sylvain Rocca project. For museum professionals, the continuous enhancement of qualifications, the adoption of new trends and techniques, the integration of innovative technologies into museum practice, and the advancement of research in museology are of critical importance.

The seminar also covered a wide range of topics, including: the application of high technologies in the Azerbaijan National Museum; the ethnological archive at the Museum of Ethnography in Hungary; the role of information technologies in the development of museums in Yerevan; forms of studying and presenting architectural heritage at the A.V. Shchusev State Research Museum of Architecture; museum marketing; the documentation, conservation, and exhibition of ancient Turkic stone sculptures in Kazakhstani museums; the specifics of inter-museum cooperation between Kazakhstan and France; the semiotic dimensions of museum symbolism; and the challenges involved in constructing immersive exhibitions.

In recent years, the immersive format of museum exhibitions has become increasingly integrated with newly emerging scholarly discoveries in the field of historical and cultural heritage studies. Since Kazakhstan's independence, archaeological expeditions have uncovered thousands of unique artifacts from the Berel burial mounds. These findings provide a phenomenal scientific basis for the analysis of early nomadic art and constitute a significant contribution to the broader understanding of the cultural and artistic legacy of the ancient steppe civilizations. (Samashev, Zhang So Kho, Bokovenko, Murgabayev, 2011: 380).

Analysis

An immersive multimedia exhibition represents a new format in museum practice, based on replacing the physical artifact traditionally used in exhibitions with its perceptive and interactive digital equivalent, enabled through advanced technologies. Research indicates that the origins of the immersive approach can be traced to the creative team of the British company Punchdrunk, who rented a warehouse in New York and staged the performance *Sleep No More*. This production offered an immersive interpretation of Shakespeare's "Macbeth", transforming the audience into active participants by dissolving the traditional boundary between stage and spectator, thus embedding the theatrical experience into a virtual realm.

In the second decade of the 21st century, immersive digital exhibitions began to gain traction in public cultural spaces. Initially, they were conceived as "*exhibition-events*" focused on the work of iconic artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Caravaggio, Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Gustav Klimt, René Magritte, Salvador Dalí, and Banksy. The growing interest from audiences during these early showcases prompted the expansion of immersive exhibitions beyond the domain of fine arts to include new content and narrative strategies. For example, the Uffizi Virtual Experience held in Italy in 2016 and the Bologna Experience exhibition in 2017 presented interactive narratives centered around the city of Bologna. In 2021, the exhibition "Palace of Gallipoli – A Rich History" was launched, telling the story of Gallipoli's golden age through immersive rooms and the perspectives of three historical figures: Francesco di Giorgio Martini, Jakob Philipp Hackert, and Catherine II.

Similarly, exhibitions of this kind were presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 2016 under the title "Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905-2016" and at Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin in 2018 with the exhibition "Welt ohne Außen. Immersive Spaces since the 1960s" (A World Without an Outside. Immersive Spaces Since the 1960s). These exhibitions featured artworks that employed immersion as the primary expressive modality of artistic discourse, seeking to engage the recipient on psychological, cognitive, and somatic levels.

The term "exposition" derives from the Latin word "expositio", meaning "to display." In a broad sense, it refers to the intentional presentation of a collection of objects. In contemporary museological discourse, one of the concise definitions of an exposition is: "The portion of a museum collection intended for public display." A more comprehensive interpretation defines a museum exposition as an integrated material-spatial system in which museum objects and other exhibition materials are conceptually unified to convey a specific message or narrative (Ibraeva, 2013).

The prominent museologist Jean Davallon asserted that "only the exhibition is real, as it is constructed through the presentation of original artifacts from the museum collection." He emphasized that the term "exposition" refers to both the result of curatorial activity and the process of displaying an object within a designated space. In his view, the term

“exhibit” encompasses both the artifact and the location of its presentation, constituting the communicative act of showcasing items to the public (Davallon, 1986). For G.E. Burcaw, exhibition means “presenting objects in response to the audience’s interest,” while exposition is seen as “a more significant and professionally curated form of display” (Burcaw, 1997).

The design of an exhibition involves scientific, artistic, technical, and operational planning stages. Initially, the exhibition concept and a thematic-expositional plan are developed. The scientific concept serves as the foundational document guiding the architectural and artistic design of the exhibition and functions as the central framework for its development. This concept is typically prepared by an authors’ collective, which selects the physical and documentary materials for the exposition and determines its guiding principles and methods. Based on this concept, a comprehensive design solution is developed and must be approved by the museum’s Scientific or Curatorial Council.

In November 2024, the “Kazakhstan: Treasures of the Great Steppe” exhibition at the Guimet Museum in Paris was guided by the following scientific concept: “The exhibition’s idea is to present the centuries-long historical and civilizational origins of Kazakh statehood and the continuity and uniqueness of the Kazakh cultural code to European and French audiences through immersive display of museum artifacts, utilizing modern technologies. The goal is to highlight the richness and longevity of Kazakhstan’s cultural heritage.” Regarding methods: “Each section of the exposition contains selected key artifacts representing significant historical periods in Kazakhstan’s past. Each object is accompanied by a video sequence providing historical context. The exhibition employs immersive technologies such as video, light, and sound design to enhance the viewing experience” (Scientific Concept, 2024: 10).

Given the objectives outlined in the exhibition’s scientific concept, it is essential to evaluate whether the exhibition successfully achieved its intended immersive quality and fulfilled its curatorial goals. According to the concept, the exhibition was structured into five historical periods: 1. The origins of Steppe civilization; 2. The material culture of nomadic tribes in the Early Iron Age; 3. The Great Steppe in the Early Middle Ages; 4. The culture of the medieval Ulus (Golden Horde); 5. The Kazakh Khanate. One of the exhibition’s key features was its ability to present these centuries-spanning periods through a relatively small number of carefully selected artifacts from the museum’s collection.

In line with the requirements set forth by the French side for the exhibition’s design, the introduction to the scientific concept (limited to 1500 SSI) was expected to begin with a geographical contextualization that positioned Kazakhstan within the broader history and culture of East-West exchange. This introductory section was intended to frame the exhibition by highlighting the main cultural and artistic phenomena from prehistory to the present. Additionally, the exhibition was structured around five episodes or narrative segments, each corresponding to one of the five historical periods represented by key artifacts and accompanying content. These guidelines were carefully followed in the development of the final exhibition concept.

Section 1. The Origins of Steppe Civilization

One of the most pivotal developments in the historical evolution of societies across the Eurasian space was the advent of horseback riding and the emergence of nomadic cultures. This was an exceptionally long and gradual process spanning nearly a millennium, involving the domestication of the horse, the refinement of equestrian equipment, and the development of horseback riding techniques. Ancient written and visual sources attest that nomadic people were pioneers in utilizing the horse primarily as a draft animal and were among the first

to invent wheeled carts. Within the collections of the National Museum of Kazakhstan is a petroglyph depiction of the Koibagar-I chariot, dated to the 2nd-1st millennia BC.

The richness of Kazakhstan's subsoil in polymetallic deposits – particularly tin and copper – was one of the key factors behind the emergence of a powerful metallurgical center in this region. Among the National Museum's most unique artifacts related to polymetallic craftsmanship is the anthropomorphic sculpture known as the "Tobyl Thinker" (ҚРҰМ уқ ТК-2-1408), which dates to the 3rd-1st millennia BCE (Fig. 1,2).

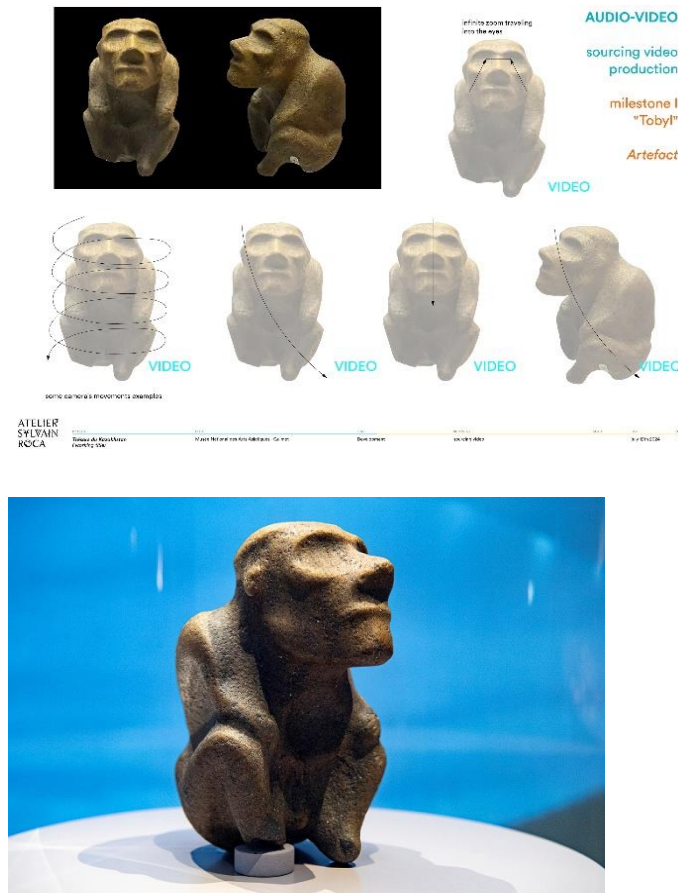


Figure 1, 2. The Thinker of Tobyl, Kostanay Region. 3rd–2nd millennia BC. National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Section 2. The Material Culture of Nomadic Tribes in the Early Iron Age

This section presents artifacts uncovered during archaeological excavations at some of Kazakhstan's most important Early Iron Age sites, including Issyk and Berel. In the early centuries of the 1st millennium BC, the transition of part of the population to nomadic pastoralism gave rise to new archaeological cultures.

According to archaeological and written sources, the Saka occupied the entire territory of present-day Kazakhstan from the 7th to 4th centuries BC. During this period, large tribal confederations began to form. In 1969, a team of Kazakh archaeologists led by K. Akishev excavated the Issyk burial mound, revealing to the world the distinctive material culture of

the Saka people who inhabited Zhetysu in the 4th–3rd centuries BC. One of the key highlights of this section is the reconstruction of the “Golden Man”, an iconic symbol of Kazakhstan’s ancient heritage, along with a silver bowl bearing an inscription in runic script – both emblematic of the intellectual and aesthetic achievements of the early nomads.

The section also featured artifacts from the Taksai burial mound, dated to the 6th–5th centuries BC. In 2012, excavations at Taksai No. 6 in the West Kazakhstan Region uncovered the burial site of a noble Sarmatian woman from the aristocracy of early nomadic society. Over 80 gold ornaments were discovered in the mound, including sewn appliques featuring rams’ and griffins’ heads, biconical gold beads twisted from fine wire, pendants and amulets set with wolf teeth framed in gold and sewn into the sleeves of his robe, and intricately designed gold bracelets. A full display of the regalia from the Golden Man’s headdress is included in the exhibition (Fig. 3,4), offering a rare glimpse into the ceremonial aesthetics and elite craftsmanship of the Saka culture.

The Golden Man (ҚРҰМ нқ 1788). One of the most valuable artifacts presented in the exhibition is the headdress of the Golden Man. This item embodies the cosmic worldview of the Saka people, who inhabited the Great Steppe during the Early Iron Age. Their cosmology divided the universe into three realms: the underworld, the earthly world, and the celestial sphere. The headdress symbolizes this tripartite division and is structured to reflect four cardinal directions – left, right, front, and back – with the latter two representing east and west, respectively.



Figure 3,4. Headdress of the Golden Man, Zhetysu, Issyk Burial Mound. 4th–3rd centuries BC. National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Section 3. The Great Steppe in the Early Middle Ages

The early medieval period in the history of Kazakhstan is marked by the rise of powerful Turkic tribes – descendants of the Huns – on the historical stage. In the mid-first millennium CE, major ethnic transformations took place across the steppe zone of Kazakhstan. The period from the 6th to the 12th centuries is known as the Turkic era. Contemporary historical scholarship identifies the Altai region as the ancestral homeland of the Turkic peoples. One of the earliest and most powerful states to emerge on the territory of present-day Kazakhstan during the early Middle Ages was the Turkic Khaganate, which existed from the 4th to the 7th centuries CE.

The exhibition includes stone statues (balbals), considered to be monumental sculptures belonging to the mortuary-ritual complexes of the Turkic tribes from the 6th to 13th centuries. According to scholars, these statues were created in honor of deceased individuals – often prominent figures and served as commemorative monuments carved from stone.

Balbals, or anthropomorphic stone stelae, are among the most distinctive monuments of the Turkic nomads. These stylized sculptures – often differentiated by gender – are found throughout the Steppe region. A stone statue of a man (ҚРҰМ № 24619), carved from yellow-grey stone, depicts a mustached figure with an intense, forward-facing gaze – a common feature of balbal statues that signals the subject's significance. He is shown wearing a large-collared robe and holding a ritual vessel between his thumb and forefinger near his chest, possibly symbolizing an offering or memorial rite. In his left hand, he clutches an object resembling a weapon. While minimal details are rendered on the statue's sides and back, long engraved lines representing a braid are visible on the back, which researchers interpret as a typical male hairstyle of that era (fig 5).

A second statue depicts a female figure (ҚРҰМ № 24640), carved from monolithic grey granite. The woman holds a bowl with both hands (a characteristic suggesting it was made after the male figure) and has clearly delineated breasts. The facial features are minimal, with the eyes and nose represented by a simple T-shaped incision – a stylistic trait typical of Kipchak nomadic sculptures. This minimalist style emphasizes the symbolic, rather than realistic, representation of the subject. The pointed top of the statue evokes a headdress and is reminiscent of the traditional saukele, a ceremonial headdress worn by Turkic women (fig 6).



Figure 5. Stone sculpture of a Woman (Balbal). 9th–11th centuries.
National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan.



Figure 6. Stone sculpture of a Man (Balbal). 9th–11th centuries.
National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Section 4. The Culture of the Medieval Ulus of Jochi (Golden Horde)

The medieval state of the Ulus of Jochi (Ulug Ulus), more widely known as the Golden Horde, can be regarded as a direct precursor to present-day Kazakhstan. Established in 1266 following its secession from the vast Mongol Empire founded by Genghis Khan, the Golden Horde adopted Islam as the state religion in the early 1320s and maintained sovereignty for approximately 260–280 years. The Ulug Ulus played an important role in the history of world civilization. The rulers of the great Ulus ensured the uninterrupted safe functioning of trade routes on the Great Silk Road, built large cities, created conditions for the dialogue of Western and Eastern civilizations, the exchange of goods, knowledge, ideas, and accelerated global development. Archaeological excavations of Golden Horde cities on the territory of Kazakhstan have yielded rich material evidence illuminating the culture of the Ulus. This section of the exhibition presents a wide array of objects reflecting the urban and ceremonial culture of the nomads, including festive tableware, jewelry, and traditional clothing items (Fig. 7).

Candlesticks of the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. Among the remarkable artifacts featured in the exhibition is a pair of bronze candlesticks commissioned by Amir Timur to adorn the interior of the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. In total, Timur ordered six chandeliers, crafted from metal and richly decorated with gold and silver inlays. These chandeliers exemplify the refined decorative arts of the Timurid period and were considered luxurious and highly valued objects. Inscriptions engraved on their surfaces typically include the name of the commissioner or the artisan, along with the date of production.

The first candlestick, made of bronze and weighing 41 kg, is adorned with vegetal motifs, ornamental inscriptions, and gilded silver embellishments. It was specifically commissioned by Amir Timur for the mausoleum and bears the date 17 June 1397, likely marking the date of its completion and delivery. The name of the artisan, Izz al-Din ibn Taj al-Din Isfahani, is also inscribed, identifying him as a master craftsman from Isfahan, Iran.

The second candlestick, also bronze, weighs 31.5 kg and is hollow inside. Its lower section comprises two circular tiers, while the upper part tapers upward, ending in a small tubular structure adorned with latticed, ring-like motifs. Its surface is decorated with circular patterns,

and it too bears the inscription of the same craftsman, Izz al-Din ibn Taj al-Din Isfahani, reaffirming his origin from the city of Isfahan. An inscription on the object notes that it was made or inscribed on 17 June 1397 by order of Amir Timur. Additionally, both candlesticks bear a series of grand honorific titles reflecting Timur's intellectual and spiritual authority, including: "King of Kings, scholar, a man whose actions match his words, just and fair, the iron pillar of religion and the world, protector of Islam and Muslims, guarantor of peace." These chandeliers stand as masterpieces of Islamic metalwork and symbols of political and religious power during the Timurid era.



Figure 7. Candlesticks. 14th century. State Historical and Cultural Reserve “Aziret Sultan”, Turkistan Region.

Section 5. The Kazakh Khanate

The Kazakh Khanate was established in 1465 on the territory of present-day Kazakhstan following the disintegration of the Golden Horde. The emergence of Kazakh statehood is closely linked to the historical events, political dynamics, and socio-economic processes that took place in the mid-15th century across the Eurasian steppe. The founders of the Kazakh Khanate were Kerei Khan and Janibek Khan, descendants of Jochi and Genghis Khan.

The history of the Khanate's formation and development is inseparable from the legacies of prominent historical figures such as Kasym Khan, Khaknazar Khan, Yesim Khan, Tauke Khan, Abylai Khan, and others who played significant roles in consolidating Kazakh statehood and shaping its political structure.

By the 14th-15th centuries, a unified economic region had emerged, underpinned by a natural integration of various sectors – nomadic pastoralism, sedentary agriculture, urban life, and crafts and trade. This economic synthesis laid the foundation for the eventual unification of the region's territories into a single political entity.

Chapan of Qazybek Biy Keldibekuly (ҚРҰМ № 5336). The emergence of the Kazakh Khanate marked a pivotal moment in the history of Kazakhstan, signifying the formation of a unified ethnic and cultural identity for the Kazakh people. While honoring the legacy of existing political alliances and states, the Khanate implemented a judicial system led by elected biys – judges chosen by the people. This legal tradition, adapted to the nomadic and semi-nomadic

way of life, remained in effect until the early 19th century. One of the most prominent biys was Qazybek Biy Keldibekuly (1667–1764), a distinguished diplomat and statesman. The exhibition features his ceremonial chapan, a traditional robe widely worn by the peoples of Central Asia. This voluminous quilted garment fastens asymmetrically across the front, creating a V-shaped closure. Qazybek Biy's chapan (fig. 8) is richly decorated with golden embroidery in floral and vegetal motifs—symbols of prosperity and flourishing characteristic of the era. Such opulent robes were typically worn during official meetings, travels, and ceremonial gatherings, reflecting both the wearer's high status and the aesthetic values of the period.



Figure 8. Chapan of Qazybek Biy Keldibekuly, 17th–18th centuries.
National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

As Rosenblum (Rosenblum, 1997: 177-195) observes, in the development of any exhibition concept, at least half of the key artifacts relevant to the exhibition's theme must be available from the outset. The remaining elements can typically be supplemented during the exhibition construction phase. In the case of this historical exhibition, however, the millennia-spanning history of Kazakhstan – from prehistoric times to the late medieval period – was effectively communicated and enhanced through the use of immersive content.

Since ancient times, these lands have been inhabited by nomadic peoples who mastered the vast steppe and established major urban centers. Owing to abundant natural resources and strategic placement along international trade routes, economically prosperous hubs began to flourish rapidly. These cities have preserved their shared linguistic and spiritual heritage to this day. Throughout various stages of historical development, this crossroads of civilizations witnessed the passage of Eastern nomadic cultures such as the Saka, Scythians, Huns, and later Turkic peoples. The region also experienced the arrival of Arab missionaries who introduced Islam, followed by the Mongol invasions in the 13th century. After the gradual decline of empires such as the Golden Horde, local rulers known as khans came to power, fostering trade and culture and laying the foundation for the traditional Kazakh civilization.

It is the responsibility of historians to consider the uninterrupted historical and cultural values of our people—from antiquity to the present—as a rich heritage passed down to future generations. Museums of Kazakhstan play a crucial role in uncovering, evaluating, and

scientifically systematizing these legacies, presenting them in their exhibitions to showcase the nation's history and culture to the global community. Kazakhstan's engagement in organizing exhibitions at the international level is rooted in the understanding that, in the era of digital communications, authentic culture serves as a vital resource for enhancing the country's competitiveness and visibility as an active participant in global cultural exchange.

At present, based on the collected research materials, a scientific concept for an exhibition has been developed, aiming to illustrate the historical stages of the formation and development of steppe civilization. In this context, a selection of significant objects from the collections of Kazakhstan's museums is underway, representing the key historical periods of Kazakhstan from antiquity through the post-medieval era.

Results

Kazakhstan, located at the crossroads of Asia and Europe, is distinguished by its unique historical and cultural development. The exhibition "Kazakhstan: Treasures of the Great Steppe", presented in the heart of Paris, is dedicated to narrating pivotal moments that have shaped the country's civilizational legacy. Through five exceptional cultural and historical artifacts – spanning from the 3rd century BCE to the late Middle Ages – the exhibition illustrates key phases of Kazakhstan's cultural evolution.

The core innovation of this exhibition lies in the extensive use of immersive technologies throughout its development. The outcomes demonstrate the effectiveness of these methods in promoting Kazakhstan's cultural heritage on the international stage and presenting national historical and civilizational values to foreign audiences through contemporary approaches. These techniques allow visitors to perceive and internalize the historical and cultural content in a deeper, more experiential format, surpassing the limitations of traditional static displays.

The exhibition space was reimaged through immersive technologies, offering a new format that vividly portrays five historical periods – from the Botai culture to the era of the Kazakh Khanate. Each period was represented not only by carefully selected artifacts but also enhanced through light and sound effects, creating a multisensory historical atmosphere. This approach enabled visitors to transcend the constraints of time and space, offering a journey into the past. As a result, immersive technologies facilitated a more profound comprehension of the exhibition's content, enabled the audience to grasp the historical and cultural context of the artifacts, and strengthened the emotional connection between the viewer and the exposition.

For instance, in the section dedicated to the Turkic period, the visual imagery of the steppe and ethnographic soundscapes immersed viewers in the nomadic way of life. In the sections on the medieval period, the spiritual ambiance was created through the lighting design of mosque interiors and the musical backdrop of Islamic civilization. The immersive content was developed with the participation of French specialists. In particular, the sound director Christian Oll and his team composed the audiovisual elements for the exhibition, integrating musical themes with national motifs that emotionally resonate with visitors. The integration of video, music, and various ambient sounds (such as river currents, horse gallops, wind, and fire) contributed to a cohesive immersive experience. While such approaches are increasingly common in global exhibition practices, this marked the first time they were implemented at the National Museum of Kazakhstan.

The semantic representations explored and presented in the exhibition materials are framed within the broader processes of cultural genesis and the formation of different forms

of statehood. The primary cultural markers – connections, beliefs, and traditions – were analyzed to reconstruct historical narratives. Both existing and newly discovered artifacts, including recent finds unearthed in Kazakhstan, demonstrate the diverse aspects of life, spiritual beliefs, interrelations, and customs of the peoples who once inhabited the region.

In recent years, post-Soviet countries have intensified collaborations with world-renowned museums to promote their cultural heritage by implementing joint exhibition projects. For example, in 2022, neighboring Uzbekistan organized the international exhibition “The Splendors of the Oases of Uzbekistan. At the Crossroads of Caravan Routes” at the world-famous Louvre Museum. This exhibition spanned the period from the 5th–6th centuries BCE to the Timurid era, narrating the history of the Silk Road and showcasing cultural artifacts from the reign of Amir Timur. It featured 138 items from 16 museums of Uzbekistan, and 31 artifacts from institutions such as the Louvre Museum, the National Library of France, the British Museum, the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Cabinet of Medals in Paris, and the Musée Guimet. The exhibition’s outcomes were consolidated through a dedicated catalog published by the Louvre (*Splendeurs des oasis d'Ouzbékistan*, 2022). This experience of uniting and promoting Uzbek cultural heritage through collaboration among various institutions represents a valuable model for Kazakhstan.

Currently, Kazakhstan is preparing to organize a large-scale exhibition of similar significance. Through the national exhibition “The Cultural Code of the Steppe Civilization”, there is a unique opportunity to present to Western European audiences with the rich historical and cultural heritage of the Steppe, while also highlighting its socio-economic, scientific, and ideological dimensions via modern technologies and multimedia tools. The necessary conditions have been established for an immersive presentation of the exhibition. Immersive experiences, through integration of diverse technological advancements, impose high standards on the development of creative content. Through such methods, Kazakhstan not only constructs a discourse of regional identity but also showcases the territorial characteristics of the Steppe civilization – its natural, material, and spiritual resources – as well as its historical development experience. The ultimate outcome of such major initiatives lies in recognizing museums as pivotal resources for shaping international relations between nations and cultural communities.

Furthermore, many objects belonging to the Kazakh people are preserved in museum and library collections in France, including in private collections. For instance, the Louvre Museum houses the upper and middle parts of a candlestick from the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi (Turkestan, 14th century), a sword with an inlay (Turkestan, 17th–18th centuries), a dagger (Turkestan, 17th–18th centuries), as well as tiles, and ceramic vessels. We hope that these artifacts will find their rightful place in the upcoming national exhibition proposed by Kazakhstan.

In conclusion, the application of immersive technologies marks a new chapter in the international promotion of Kazakh culture. By combining tradition with innovation, this approach has proven effective as a creative tool of cultural diplomacy. Such initiatives may serve as models for future historical and cultural projects.

Conclusion

Organizing exhibitions that promote national values in globally renowned museums such as the Louvre, the Musée Guimet, and the Hermitage is of great significance for Kazakhstan. These projects aim to demonstrate that the millennia-spanning nomadic civilization of the

Great Steppe, with its distinctive culture and art, forms an integral part of world civilization. An equally important aspect of such initiatives is the opportunity they provide to present, catalogue, and conduct scholarly research on the material and spiritual heritage of the Kazakh people that has been preserved for centuries in international museums and academic-cultural institutions.

In summary, the immersive exhibition “Kazakhstan: Treasures of the Great Steppe” has achieved several key outcomes:

First, it contributed to the global recognition of Kazakh culture. The exhibition offered rich visual representations of Kazakhstan’s centuries-old history, archaeological artifacts, fine arts, and cultural codes to the audiences of France and across Europe. This significantly enhanced the international visibility of the country and facilitated the integration of its national cultural heritage into the broader European cultural space.

Second, the use of immersive technologies in the creation of the exhibition’s design proved highly effective in deepening the interpretation of its content and enhancing visitors’ emotional engagement. This approach facilitated the interactive and dynamic presentation of the exhibition’s narrative, offering a new experience beyond the traditional museum format.

Third, the exhibition strengthened cultural cooperation between Kazakhstan and France, serving as a successful example of cultural diplomacy. It underscored the significance of intergovernmental cultural initiatives and demonstrated the capacity of national heritage to foster international dialogue.

Fourth, by adopting an immersive format, the exhibition effectively conveyed the cultural and historical continuity of the Kazakh people within the contemporary context, thereby validating the application of innovative strategies. This contemporary method highlighted not only the scientific and practical dimensions of heritage preservation and promotion but also emphasized the essential role of technological tools in these processes.

The artifacts featured in the exhibition served as a foundation for constructing a historical continuum of various epochs that shaped the cultural code of the Steppe civilization. This approach provided foreign visitors with a comprehensive understanding of the key events, cultural developments and civilization processes associated with the history of the Great Steppe, thereby enriching their appreciation of its enduring legacy.

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Information about authors:

Ibrayeva Akmaral, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor, Deputy Director, National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 54 Tauelsizdik Ave., Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan.
ORCID: 0000-0002-7556-7779
Scopus ID: 56610233200

Temirkhanova Assemgul, PhD, Scientific Secretary of the M. Kozybayev North Kazakhstan University, Petropavlovsk, 86 Pushkin Str., Republic of Kazakhstan.
ORCID: 0000-0002-3231-5141
Scopus ID: 57195783015

Zhunussov Kumar, Master of Socio-Cultural Activities, Head of the Department of International Relations, National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 54 Tauelsizdik Ave., Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan.
ORCID: 0000-0002-0762-4591

Авторлар туралы мәлімет:

Ибраева Ақмарал, тарих ғылымдарының докторы, профессор, директордың ғылыми жұмыстар жөніндегі орынбасары, Қазақстан Республикасы Ұлттық музейі, Тәуелсіздік даңғ., 54, Астана, Қазақстан Республикасы.
ORCID: 0000-0002-7556-7779
Scopus ID: 56610233200

Темірханова Әсемгүл, PhD, М. Қозыбаев атындағы Солтүстік Қазақстан университетінің ғылым хатшысы, Пушкин көш., 86, Петропавл, Қазақстан Республикасы.
ORCID: 0000-0002-3231-5141
Scopus ID: 57195783015

Жүнісов Құмар, әлеуметтік-мәдени қызмет магистрі, Халықаралық қатынастар бөлімінің жетекшісі, Қазақстан Республикасы Ұлттық музейі, Тәуелсіздік даңғ., 54, Астана, Қазақстан Республикасы.
ORCID: 0000-0002-0762-4591

Сведения об авторах:

Ибраева Акмарал, доктор исторических наук, профессор, заместитель директора, Национальный музей Республики Казахстан, пр. Тауелсиздик, 54, Астана, Республика Казахстан.

ORCID: 0000-0002-7556-7779

Scopus ID: 56610233200

Темирханова Асемгуль, PhD, Северо-Казахстанский университет имени М. Козыбаева, ул. Пушкина, 86, Петропавловск, Республика Казахстан.

ORCID: 0000-0002-3231-5141

Scopus ID: 57195783015

Жунусов Кумар, магистр социально-культурной деятельности, руководитель Отдела международных отношений, Национальный музей Республики Казахстан, пр. Тауелсиздик, 54, Астана, Республика Казахстан.

ORCID: 0000-0002-0762-4591