DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF CHUST KNIFE-MAKING

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Abstract: This paper examines the historical roots, technological and artistic characteristics, master-apprentice traditions, and current state of development of the knife-making school that emerged in the city of Chust—one of the ancient craft centers of the Fergana Valley. It analyzes the processes of crafting the blade, handle, and sheath of the Chust knife, as well as the materials and decorative techniques employed, and offers proposals for the preservation and further development of this craft.

Keywords: Chust, knife-making, blacksmithing, blade, handle, sheath, maker's mark, carving, master-apprentice, craft dynasties, folk applied arts.

Knife-making—one of the ancient forms of Uzbek folk applied art—is not merely a craft that meets everyday needs; it is also an expression of national culture, customs, and values. In Uzbek households, the knife is cherished as an integral part of dining culture, a source of pride worn at a young man’s waist, and a valued gift presented to guests. While Uzbekistan boasts several centers of knife-making—such as Bukhara, Kokand, Shahrikhan, and Karasuv—the city of Chust in the Namangan region holds a special place among them. Today, the term "Chust knife" has become synonymous with quality, sharpness, and elegance.

The history of blacksmithing and knife-making in Chust stretches back centuries. The city’s location along key trade routes of the Fergana Valley, combined with the abundance of local mountain and river resources, created favorable conditions for the development of this craft. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, knife-makers in Chust lived in dedicated quarters and neighborhoods, maintaining their own professional guilds. As the craft was primarily passed down from father to son, dynasties of artisans emerged in Chust that have produced knives across multiple generations. Although artisans were organized into cooperatives and manufacturing complexes during the Soviet era, many masters continued to work at home using traditional methods, which helped preserve the continuity of the craft.

The first distinctive feature of the Chust knife lies in its blade. The blade is crafted from high-quality steel through a multi-stage process involving manual forging. The master shapes the steel by hammering it on an anvil, then tempers it using a special technique (hardening it in water or oil) and sharpens it. A properly tempered blade retains its edge for a long time and does not break easily. Traditionally, the blade is broad with a tip that curves slightly upward, making it convenient for cutting meat, bread, and vegetables, as well as for serving at the table. The master’s personal mark is stamped onto the section of the blade near the handle. This mark serves as the knife’s "passport": it identifies the maker or the artisan lineage and signifies the master’s personal responsibility for the product's quality. Some blades are adorned with elegant engraved patterns, lines, and inscriptions.

A second key feature is the art of crafting the handle. Traditionally, Chust knife handles were made from materials such as cattle or sheep horn, bone, and hardwoods like apricot or walnut. In more recent times, colored plastic, acrylic (organic glass), and other materials have also come into use. The handle often consists of several colored layers separated by copper or brass plates and secured with silver or brass pins. The junction where the handle meets the blade is adorned with a metal ring or ferrule. The handle must fit comfortably in the hand, provide a secure grip, and ensure the knife remains well-balanced. It is in this element that the artisan’s artistic taste and skill are most clearly revealed; the harmony of colors, the placement of patterns, and the decorative details constitute each craftsman’s unique "signature."

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A third feature is the knife sheath. The sheath is typically crafted from leather and embellished with embossed patterns, colored threadwork, or metal inlays. Beyond merely serving as a protective case, the sheath is considered an integral artistic component of the knife. Thus, the Chust knife has evolved into a unified work of art that embodies multiple crafts—including blacksmithing, jewelry making, carving, and leatherworking. Another significant aspect of Chust knife-making is the master-apprentice tradition. Over the years, an apprentice begins with basic tasks in the workshop and gradually learns the secrets of forging, tempering, sharpening, and handle-making. The master imparts not only technical skills but also moral values such as honesty, diligence, and respect for the craft. Traditionally, once an apprentice had fully mastered the trade, they would receive the master's blessing and approval—a ritual known as *fotiha*—before embarking on independent work. This tradition is still preserved in Chust workshops today.

Chust knives also vary according to their intended use. Makers produce broad-bladed knives for dining and kitchen use, long and sturdy knives for butchers, compact sheath knives for hunters and shepherds, and specially decorated commemorative knives for gifts and collections. The blade length, thickness, handle shape, and ornamentation of each type are tailored to its specific function. Specific customs and etiquette regarding knives have also developed among the people; these include practices such as not handing a knife to someone with the blade facing them, not placing it on the table with the blade pointing upward, and "inaugurating" a new knife by cutting bread with it for the first time. This demonstrates that, in Uzbek culture, the knife holds a significance that extends beyond that of a mere tool.

Since the attainment of independence, supporting craftsmanship has become a key priority of state policy. The establishment of the "Hunarmand" Association, the granting of tax incentives to artisans under the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (No. PF-5242, dated November 17, 2017), and the encouragement of master-apprentice traditions have revitalized the activities of Chust knife makers. Today, while preserving traditional forms, Chust craftsmen utilize modern equipment, new types of steel, and contemporary handle materials; they showcase their products at domestic and international exhibitions and sell them to tourists and foreign buyers. At the same time, the sector faces certain challenges, including competition from cheap industrial knives and counterfeit products marketed as "Chust knives," a shortage of high-quality steel and materials, and declining interest among young people in this labor-intensive craft. In our view, to address these issues, it is advisable to register and protect the "Chust knife" name as a geographical indication, expand vocational training schools attached to workshops, scientifically document the dynasties and maker's marks of Chust artisans, and incorporate knife-making into craft tourism itineraries.

In summary, Chust knife-making stands out as a distinct school within Uzbek folk applied arts, characterized by its refined techniques, the art of crafting multi-layered handles, the artisan's personal mark, and the master-apprentice traditions passed down through generations. Preserving and developing this craft is of great importance—not only for economic reasons but also for the sake of transmitting national cultural heritage to future generations.

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