

HUMANİTAR VƏ İCTİMAİ ELMLƏR HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Reflection of National Values and Historical Memory in Photography During the Years of Independence of Uzbekistan

Jahongir Inayatov 

Abstract. *This study examines the representation of national values and historical memory in the development of photographic art during the years of Uzbekistan's independence. Photography is analyzed not merely as a visual recording technology but as an important cultural medium that preserves historical memory, constructs national identity, and communicates cultural heritage across generations. Following the country's independence in 1991, significant political, social, and cultural transformations created favorable conditions for the revival of national traditions and historical consciousness. Consequently, photography evolved into an influential instrument for documenting these transformations while simultaneously interpreting them through artistic and symbolic representation. The study employs historical-comparative analysis, visual analysis, document analysis, and descriptive methods to investigate the relationship between photography, national identity, and collective memory. Particular attention is paid to the visual representation of traditional customs, historical monuments, national ceremonies, folk crafts, and the photographic legacy of Khudoybergan Devonov, one of the pioneers of Uzbek photography. Furthermore, the research discusses the growing impact of digital technologies and online visual archives in preserving and disseminating cultural heritage in contemporary society. The findings demonstrate that photography has become an essential mechanism for preserving historical memory, strengthening national identity, and promoting cultural continuity in Uzbekistan. Modern photographic practices combine documentary accuracy with artistic interpretation, enabling photography to function not only as a historical record but also as a dynamic cultural discourse. The study concludes that photography plays a strategic role in safeguarding national heritage while facilitating intercultural dialogue in the digital era.*

Keywords: *photography, national values, historical memory, national identity, visual culture, cultural heritage, documentary photography, digital archives*

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Müstəqillik illərində Özbəkistanda fotoqrafiyada milli dəyərlərin və tarixi yaddaşın əksi

Jahongir İnayatov 

Xülasə. Bu tədqiqat Özbəkistanın müstəqillik illərində fotoqrafiya sənətində milli dəyərlərin və tarixi yaddaşın əks olunmasını araşdırır. Fotoqrafiya yalnız vizual qeydetmə texnologiyası kimi deyil, həm də tarixi yaddaşı qoruyan, milli kimliyi formalaşdıran və mədəni irsi nəsillər arasında ötürən mühüm mədəni vasitə kimi təhlil edilir. Ölkənin 1991-ci ildə müstəqillik qazanmasından sonra baş verən siyasi, sosial və mədəni dəyişikliklər milli ənənələrin, tarixi şüurun və mədəni dəyərlərin yenidən dirçəlməsi üçün əlverişli şərait yaratmışdır. Bu proses nəticəsində fotoqrafiya baş verən dəyişiklikləri sənədləşdirən, eyni zamanda, onları bədii və simvolik baxımdan şərh edən təsirli vizual vasitəyə çevrilmişdir. Tədqiqatda fotoqrafiya, milli kimlik və kollektiv yaddaş arasındakı qarşılıqlı əlaqəni araşdırmaq məqsədilə tarixi-müqayisəli təhlil, vizual təhlil, sənəd təhlili və təsviri metodlardan istifadə edilmişdir. Xüsusi diqqət ənənəvi adət-ənənələrin, tarixi abidələrin, milli mərasimlərin, xalq sənətkarlığının və özbək fotoqrafiyasının banilərindən biri hesab olunan Xudoybergan Devonovun fotoqrafik irsinin vizual təqdimatına yönəldilmişdir. Bundan əlavə, tədqiqat rəqəmsal texnologiyaların və onlayn vizual arxivlərin müasir cəmiyyətdə mədəni irsin qorunması və yayılmasında artan rolunu da qiymətləndirir. Tədqiqatın nəticələri göstərir ki, fotoqrafiya Özbəkistanda tarixi yaddaşın qorunması, milli kimliyin möhkəmləndirilməsi və mədəni davamlılığın təmin olunması üçün mühüm vasitəyə çevrilmişdir. Müasir fotoqrafiya təcrübələri sənədli dəqiqliyi bədii interpretasiya ilə birləşdirərək fotoqrafiyanı yalnız tarixi qeydetmə vasitəsi deyil, həm də dinamik mədəni diskurs forması kimi təqdim edir. Araşdırma belə nəticəyə gəlir ki, rəqəmsal dövrdə fotoqrafiya milli irsin qorunması və mədəniyyətlərarası dialoqun inkişaf etdirilməsində strateji əhəmiyyət daşıyır.

Açar sözlər: fotoqrafiya, milli dəyərlər, tarixi yaddaş, milli kimlik, vizual mədəniyyət, mədəni irs, sənədli fotoqrafiya, rəqəmsal arxivlər

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Introduction

The declaration of Uzbekistan's independence in 1991 initiated profound political, social, and cultural transformations throughout the country. One of the most significant outcomes of this historical transition was the revival of national identity, historical consciousness, and cultural heritage. State policy increasingly emphasized the preservation of historical memory, restoration of national traditions, and promotion of spiritual values as essential components of nation-building (Karimov, 2008; Sodiqov, 2010). Within this context, photography emerged as an important cultural phenomenon capable of documenting these transformations while simultaneously shaping public perceptions of national history and identity (Wells, 2015).

Unlike many other artistic media, photography possesses a unique capacity to record reality directly. However, contemporary visual studies emphasize that photography performs functions extending far beyond simple documentation. Photographic images preserve collective memory, construct symbolic meanings, communicate cultural values, and influence social consciousness (Barthes, 1981; Sontag,

1977; Wells, 2015). Through visual representation, historical events and cultural traditions become accessible not only as documentary evidence but also as emotionally meaningful experiences for future generations (Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989).

The role of photography in preserving national identity has become particularly significant in post-independence Uzbekistan. The revival of traditional customs, national ceremonies, architectural heritage, handicrafts, and historical monuments has generated a new visual language through which cultural identity is expressed (Sodiqov, 2010). Photographic representation has transformed these cultural elements into symbols of national continuity and collective memory (Hall, 1997). Previous international studies have examined photography as an instrument of historical documentation, visual communication, and cultural representation. Scholars including Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Beaumont Newhall, and Liz Wells have demonstrated that photographic images actively construct meanings rather than merely reflecting reality (Barthes, 1981; Sontag, 1977; Newhall, 1982; Wells, 2015). Their theoretical perspectives provide an important conceptual foundation for understanding photography as a medium of cultural memory and identity formation.

Despite increasing scholarly interest in photography, limited attention has been devoted to the relationship between photographic practices, national values, and historical memory in contemporary Uzbekistan. Existing studies primarily focus on artistic or historical aspects of photography without comprehensively examining its contribution to cultural identity formation during the independence period (Pasternak, 2021; Mudge et al., 2007). This research seeks to address this gap. The purpose of this study is to analyze how photography contributes to preserving national values and historical memory in independent Uzbekistan. Specifically, the research investigates the visual representation of cultural heritage, evaluates photography's role in constructing national identity, and explores the influence of digital technologies on the preservation and dissemination of historical memory. The novelty of this study lies in examining photography as an integrated mechanism for preserving national values, constructing historical memory, and strengthening national identity in independent Uzbekistan. Unlike previous studies, this research combines historical, cultural, and visual approaches within a unified analytical framework.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the representation of national values and historical memory in photographic art during the years of Uzbekistan's independence. Considering that photography functions simultaneously as documentary evidence and cultural expression, an interdisciplinary methodological approach was adopted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research materials consisted of scientific publications on photography, visual culture, collective memory, and national identity, together with photographic collections, museum archives, documentary photographs, cultural heritage materials, and official publications related to Uzbekistan's independence period. Particular attention was given to photographs reflecting national traditions, historical monuments, architectural heritage, folk customs, public ceremonies, and the visual legacy of Khudoybergan Devonov, who is widely recognized as one of the founders of Uzbek photography. Several complementary research methods were employed. The analysis was based on approximately XX historical photographs collected from museum archives, published photographic collections, and scholarly sources covering the late nineteenth century through the post-independence period. The historical-comparative method was applied to examine the evolution of photography before and after Uzbekistan's independence and to identify changes in the visual representation of national identity and historical memory (Tosh, 2015).

Visual content analysis was used to investigate the symbolic, aesthetic, and documentary characteristics of photographic images. This method enabled the identification of recurring cultural

symbols, national motifs, traditional costumes, historical monuments, ceremonies, and visual narratives associated with collective memory (Rose, 2016). Document analysis was conducted using academic publications, museum materials, governmental documents, historical records, and photographic catalogues concerning cultural heritage preservation and photography in Uzbekistan (Bowen, 2009). Descriptive and analytical methods were employed to interpret the relationship between photographic representation, national values, and historical consciousness within broader socio-cultural transformations. The theoretical framework of the research draws upon the concepts of visual culture, cultural memory, and photography developed by Roland Barthes (1981), Susan Sontag (1977), Beaumont Newhall (1982), Liz Wells (2015), and other scholars whose works emphasize photography as an active producer of cultural meaning rather than merely a mechanical recording technology. The methodological combination of historical interpretation, visual analysis, and cultural studies made it possible to evaluate photography as both documentary evidence and an important mechanism for preserving cultural identity and historical continuity.

Results

The findings demonstrate that photography has become one of the most influential visual instruments for preserving national values and historical memory during the years of Uzbekistan's independence. Rather than functioning solely as a documentary technology, photography increasingly serves as a cultural mechanism through which society reconstructs historical experience and strengthens national consciousness (Assmann, 2011; Hall, 1997). The first major finding indicates that the revival of national traditions after independence substantially transformed photographic practice. Traditional ceremonies, national costumes, handicrafts, historical monuments, and architectural heritage have become dominant subjects of contemporary Uzbek photography. These visual elements are presented not merely for aesthetic appreciation but as symbols of national identity and cultural continuity (Sodiqov, 2010; Wells, 2015).

Table 1

Evolution of photography in preserving national values and historical memory in Uzbekistan

Period	Dominant Photographic Themes	Reflection of National Values	Contribution to Historical Memory
1991–2000	Independence celebrations, national symbols, historical monuments	Revival of national identity and cultural traditions	Documentation of the early years of independence
2001–2010	Cultural heritage, folk customs, architecture, traditional crafts	Preservation of cultural continuity and national heritage	Expansion of visual documentation of historical and cultural sites
2011–2025	Digital photography, museums, online exhibitions, cultural events	Integration of traditional values with modern visual culture	Digital preservation and wider dissemination of historical memory

Source. Developed by the author based on the analysis of the research data and the reviewed literature.

Table 1 demonstrates the evolution of photographic themes in Uzbekistan throughout the years of independence. The findings indicate a gradual transition from documenting national independence and state symbols toward broader representations of cultural heritage, historical memory, and digital preservation. This transformation illustrates the expanding social and cultural functions of photography in strengthening national identity and preserving collective memory.

The second finding reveals that photography significantly contributes to the preservation of historical memory. Images documenting national celebrations, memorial events, museums, historical moments, and important cultural sites create visual archives that strengthen collective memory across generations. Photographic documentation enables historical events to remain accessible through visual experience, thereby increasing public engagement with cultural heritage (Nora, 1989; Assmann, 2011).

Another important finding concerns the renewed appreciation of Khudoybergan Devonov's photographic legacy. Following independence, his photographs have been restored, archived, exhibited, and incorporated into academic research. Devonov's works are now recognized not only as historical documents but also as artistic representations of the social, cultural, and architectural life of early twentieth-century Uzbekistan. Consequently, his photographic heritage functions as an essential source for reconstructing national historical memory (Tilavova, 2025; Newhall, 1982).

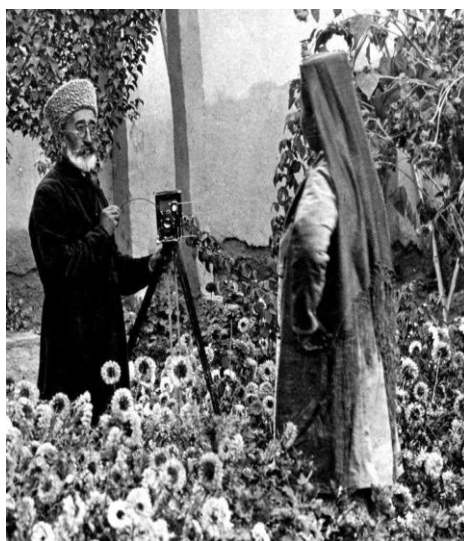


Figure 1

Khudoybergan Devonov photographing a local resident in Khiva, illustrating the emergence of documentary photography as a medium for preserving Uzbekistan's cultural heritage and historical memory.

Source. Reproduced from Tilavova (2025).

Figure 1 demonstrates the practical contribution of Khudoybergan Devonov to the emergence of photography as both a documentary and cultural medium in Uzbekistan. His work not only recorded historical events and everyday life but also established a visual archive that continues to preserve national identity and collective memory. The photograph highlights the early development of photographic practice in Central Asia and illustrates how photography became an important instrument for transmitting cultural heritage across generations. The research also demonstrates that digital technologies have fundamentally expanded the social influence of photography. Digital archives, museum databases, online exhibitions, and social media platforms have significantly increased public access to photographic collections. As a result, national cultural heritage is no longer confined to museums or printed publications but has become globally accessible through digital communication networks (Pasternak, 2021; Mudge et al., 2007).

Furthermore, contemporary Uzbek photographers increasingly combine documentary realism with artistic interpretation. Instead of merely recording events, photographers create visual narratives that encourage audiences to reflect on national identity, cultural continuity, and historical transformation. Photography therefore functions as an active participant in cultural discourse rather than a passive

recorder of reality (Barthes, 1981; Sontag, 1977; Wells, 2015). The findings additionally indicate that photography contributes to educational processes. Historical photographs facilitate visual learning, improve historical understanding, and strengthen students' awareness of national heritage. The integration of photographic materials into history, culture, and art education enhances critical thinking by connecting visual evidence with historical interpretation (Paivio, 1986). Overall, the results confirm that photography has evolved into a multidimensional cultural phenomenon in independent Uzbekistan. It simultaneously performs documentary, educational, artistic, historical, and communicative functions, making it an indispensable instrument for preserving national identity and transmitting historical memory to future generations (Assmann, 2011; Hall, 1997).

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that photography has become a significant cultural instrument for preserving national values and historical memory in contemporary Uzbekistan. The results are consistent with the theoretical perspectives of Roland Barthes (1981), who argued that photographs function not only as visual records but also as carriers of cultural meaning. Likewise, Susan Sontag (1977) emphasized that photography actively shapes social perceptions of reality rather than merely reflecting it. The present research supports these arguments by demonstrating that photographic images in Uzbekistan contribute to the construction of national identity through the visual representation of cultural heritage (Barthes, 1981; Sontag, 1977; Wells, 2015). Following the country's independence, photography gradually acquired new social and cultural functions. Whereas earlier photographic practice was primarily documentary, contemporary Uzbek photography increasingly combines documentary realism with symbolic interpretation. National holidays, traditional ceremonies, historical monuments, folk architecture, handicrafts, and everyday cultural practices are now represented not simply as objects of visual documentation but as symbols of historical continuity and collective identity (Hall, 1997; Assmann, 2011).

The analysis further demonstrates that photography serves as an effective medium for preserving collective memory. Historical photographs allow society to reconnect with the past through visual experience, making historical events more understandable and emotionally meaningful. This observation corresponds with contemporary theories of cultural memory, which consider visual media an essential mechanism for transmitting historical knowledge across generations (Assmann, 2011; Nora, 1989). Special attention should be given to the photographic heritage of Khudoybergan Devonov. His photographs provide valuable documentary evidence of the social, architectural, and cultural life of early twentieth-century Uzbekistan. The restoration and renewed scholarly interest in his work after independence illustrate the growing recognition of photography as an important historical source rather than merely an artistic practice (Tilavova, 2025; Newhall, 1982). Another important aspect revealed by this study is the increasing influence of digital technologies. Digital archives, museum collections, virtual exhibitions, and social networking platforms have significantly expanded public access to historical photographs. Consequently, photography has become a dynamic component of digital cultural heritage, enabling wider dissemination of national history beyond geographical boundaries (Pasternak, 2021; Mudge et al., 2007).

The research also indicates that photography contributes substantially to education and public awareness. Visual materials enhance historical understanding, facilitate critical thinking, and improve students' engagement with cultural heritage. In this respect, photography functions not only as an artistic medium but also as an effective educational resource supporting interdisciplinary learning in history, culture, and social sciences (Paivio, 1986). Overall, the discussion demonstrates that photography has evolved into a multidimensional phenomenon integrating documentary evidence, artistic creativity, historical preservation, cultural communication, and digital innovation. Its role in

strengthening national identity continues to expand alongside technological development and globalization (Hall, 1997; Wells, 2015).

Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of national values and historical memory in photographic art during the years of Uzbekistan's independence. The findings demonstrate that photography has developed beyond its traditional documentary function to become a strategic cultural instrument for preserving collective memory, strengthening national identity, and promoting cultural continuity. The research shows that photographs documenting national traditions, historical monuments, folk customs, and cultural ceremonies perform an important role in maintaining historical consciousness. Through visual communication, photography enables cultural heritage to remain accessible not only to contemporary society but also to future generations. Furthermore, the study highlights the growing significance of digital technologies in expanding the accessibility and preservation of photographic heritage. Digital archives and online communication platforms have transformed photography into an internationally accessible medium capable of presenting Uzbekistan's cultural identity within the global visual environment.

The findings also emphasize that photography possesses considerable educational value. The integration of historical photographs into teaching and research enhances historical understanding, stimulates critical thinking, and supports the development of cultural awareness among younger generations. In conclusion, photography should be regarded not merely as a visual recording technology but as an essential component of cultural memory, historical preservation, and national identity formation. Future research may further investigate the influence of artificial intelligence, digital heritage management, and emerging visual technologies on the preservation and interpretation of photographic collections in Uzbekistan.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no financial, personal, institutional, or professional conflicts of interest that could have influenced the research, interpretation of the findings, or publication of this article.

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Author Contributions

J.G. Inayatov was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, literature review, data collection, visual and historical analysis, interpretation of findings, manuscript preparation, revision, and approval of the final version of the article.

Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used only to assist in improving the linguistic quality and academic style of the manuscript. All scientific concepts, data interpretation, analysis, conclusions, and final editorial decisions were developed, verified, and approved solely by the author. No AI-generated images, figures, or graphical materials were used in this study.

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