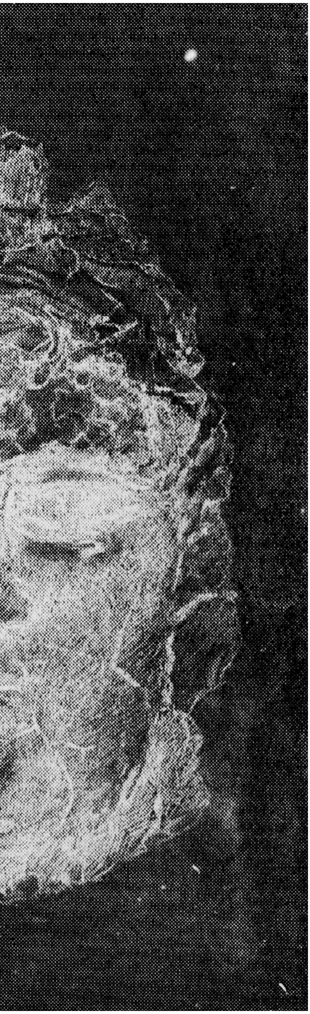
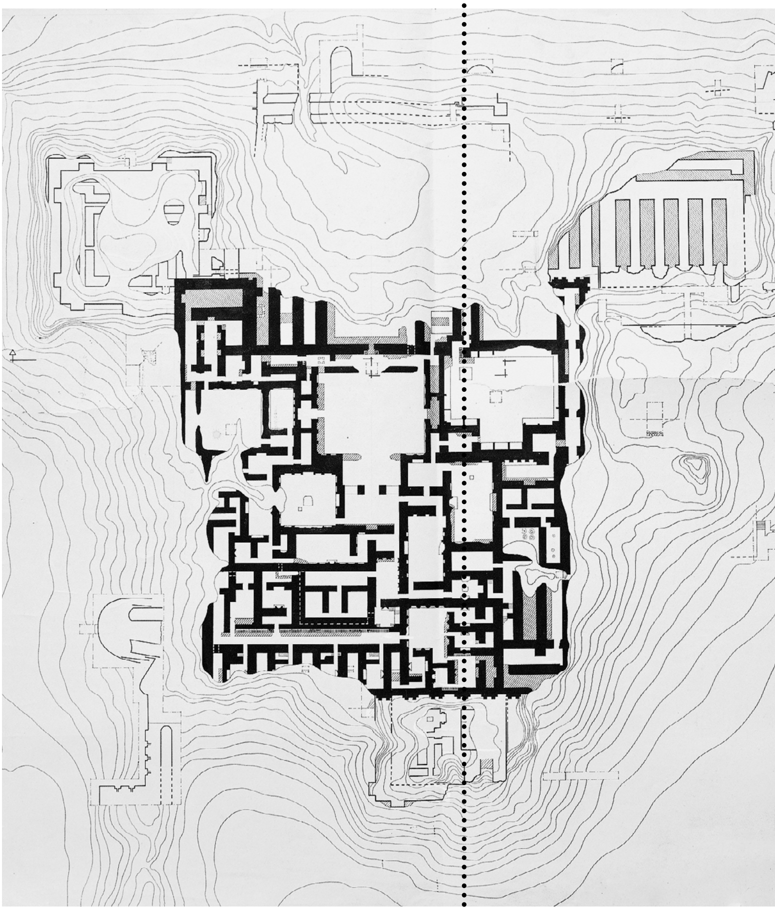
Split Together,

Authors
Irina Arzhantseva
Sergei Bolelov
Aleksandra Antonova
Anna Daumann
Tigran Mkrtychev
Yaroslav Aleshin
Katerina Chuchalina





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Marginalia Among the Layers

Merged Apart

fig. 1.12

Cover images:

Head, front view, 1940s
Photograph of sculpture
(copy of glass plate negative)
Shchusev Museum of Architecture

High Palace layout.
Toprak Kala, 1979
Paper, India ink
Miklukho-Maklay Institute
of Ethnology and Anthropology
Scientific Archive

Ali Cherri (b. 1976)
***The Digger*, 2015**
Video still
Courtesy of the artist
and Galerie Imane Farès

The miscellany you hold in your hands is different from the usual exhibition pamphlet, where the artworks are annotated in the order in which they appear in the galleries. This booklet is rather a gateway to the project's broader context, a vantage point on the story of the Khorezm Expedition and on history in general. It includes both commentaries by experts and testimonies by people whose professional and personal dialogue with the curators shaped their understanding of the subject itself and adjusted the optics of their perceptions, the intonation of their statements, and the nature of their contacts and connections.

The issues touched upon here follow the logic of the exposition and its structure or, rather, the stratification of historical and thematic layers. The narrative wanders from popular science to history and journalism, then to biography and back again.

The authors are members of the same professional circle but of different generations, and they work in adjacent but distinct fields. Among them are not only well-known and recognised figures, but also young researchers, whose involvement in the project has proven to be no less valuable. Tigran Mkrtychev is an art historian and archaeologist who headed the Savitsky State Museum of Art in Nukus, Uzbekistan, from 2021 to 2025. Sergei Bolelov is one of the last "Khorezmians" who has continued the excavations in the Expedition's footsteps. Anna Daumann is a research fellow at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and works alongside Bolelov in the digs at ancient Khorezm. Aleksandra Antonova is a restorer and a student of the specialists at the State Research Institute of Restoration who devoted many years to reconstructing the finds from Khorezm. Finally, Irina Arzhantseva is the preeminent historian of the Khorezm Expedition and a scholar of its massive archives.

Together, their articles aim to expand the multi-vector framework of ideas undergirding the project. What was Soviet Central Asian archaeology? What influenced the choices of people who decided to pursue it? What was the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition? What did it achieve? What role did reconstruction and restoration play in its work? How does the Expedition fit into the broader context of twentieth-century modernisation processes and concomitant strategies for managing resources and spaces? Finally, how can a simple thing like water shed light on this story?

Our exploration of archaeological research has taught us that every artefact is ultimately a testimony—an imprint, a plaster cast, an instrument of the historical relations which gave rise to it. The artefact is not impassive: it draws the researcher into the depths of time while also being willing to take part in a conversation about modernity. Sometimes, the chain of such artefact-human connections spans centuries, especially when it comes to archaeology as a science. Things that connected people hundreds and thousands of years ago find themselves at the centre of quite different, modern relations—scientific, economic, administrative, and interpersonal.

This short compendium of texts is meant not only to introduce readers to the range of stories presented herein, but also will be capable, we hope, of unlocking these transhistorical connections or to be embraced by all viewers?

Irina Arzhantseva
The Smell of Takyr

Irina Arzhantseva (b. 1956) is an archaeologist and orientalist, with a Ph.D. in history. She is a lead researcher at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, an associate professor at the Centre of Classical and Oriental Archaeology of the Institute for Classical and Oriental Studies at the Higher School of Economics, an honorary professor at Kyzylorda University, and the author of over 180 scholarly publications. She graduated from the archaeology programme at Moscow State University, where she specialised in early medieval settlements in Eurasia and interdisciplinary research. As an undergraduate, she took part in archaeological expeditions at such sites as Afrasiab (an ancient settlement in Samarkand), Akhsikath, and Poykent, and subsequently she organised five large-scale complex expeditions in the North Caucasus (at Zilgi, Kyafar, and Gornoe Ekho) and Central Asia (at Por Bazhyn Fortress in Tuva, and in the deserted town of Jankent in Kazakhstan, where work commenced in 2005 and is still ongoing). These expeditions also engaged in hard scientific research, which enabled Arzhantseva to put together a well-coordinated team of archaeologists, geophysicists, geomorphologists, and architects who have worked together for many years. Among Arzhantseva's scholarly interests is the history of the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition. She has published more than ten works on the Expedition and its unique archive, including three monographs.

A Turkmen proverb proclaims that a nation is rich if it has desert and water. Only when you first journey from Central Russia to Central Asia, do you begin to understand what this initially confusing proverb means. Everything is different in Central Asia: the colours of the earth and the sky; the unique smells of scorching-hot sand, warm loess dust, water in the aryks, smoke from saxaul-fuelled fires, and freshly baked nan; the noise of the bazaar and the cries of the donkeys. It is an utterly alien civilisation: luxurious, vivid, conjured up by an amazing synthesis of desert and water, and so fatally dependent on them.

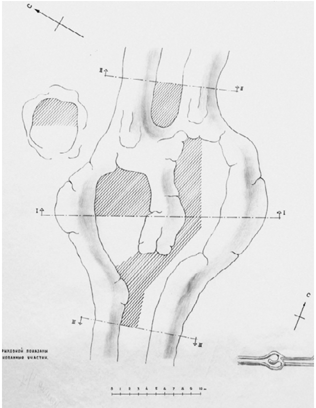
The romantic vibe which emerged during the Russian Empire's conquest of Turkestan has persisted to the present day. The colonisation of those distant lands caused orientalism to bloom in many branches of scholarship, art, and culture, also giving rise to a "yearning for the east" among impressionable folk with a penchant for changes of scenery, travel, creativity, and exoticism.

The outward appearance of "oriental" archaeologists is particularly pronounced: after the field season, they sport sun-scorched hair and a so-called farmer's tan (meaning only their necks and the exposed parts of their arms and legs are copper-brown). They speak a peculiar tongue, chock-a-block with Turkic phrases—*hop mayly*, *hozer*, *alyanai* ("okay, fine," "right away," and "you shall be the centre of my rotation," meaning "I shall treat you as an honoured guest")—as well as the tongue-twisting names of their excavation sites and their obscure terms of art: *angob*, *khum*, *aryk*, *pakhsa*, *sufa*, *kubur*, *badrab*.[1] And they particularly pine for "the field," a feeling that deepens as the new season approaches.

But every decent archaeologist yearns for the "field," no matter where it is situated, albeit in Moscow's inner-ring suburbs. An archaeologist working in Central Asia usually picks up a distinctive professional trick—the ability to identify traces of water in cultural layers. It is no problem to do this by looking at the surface and taking the lay of the land, but try and detect water amid the small flakes of loess in an excavation pit, the thin films of clay the barely discernible differences in colour in greyish-yellow raw bricks, and the remains of countless contrivances capable of holding that most valuable treasure of ancient eastern cities.

The waterways—the rivers, delta channels, and numerous canals—were the lifeblood of Central Asia's cities.

1 *Angob* is a "slip," a watery suspension of clay applied to an already-fired pot; *khum* is a large ceramic vessel; *aryk* is a small aqueduct or irrigation canal; *pakhsa* is the compacted clay and straw mixture which has served as Central Asia's main building material from



Sarykamysh. Canal no. 21, basin excavation, 1952
Paper, ink
Miklukho-Maklay Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology Scientific Archive

They were built not on their shores but at a safe distance, since their builders were painfully aware of the ferocious and unpredictable temperament of desert rivers, with their sudden floods and abrupt, instantaneous changes of course, or *degish*. The Amu Darya was notorious for its unpredictable meanderings. In 1942, it washed away half of the city of Turtkul and huge collective farm fields in a single night and, a thousand years earlier, Kyat, Khorezm's capital city. During palace ceremonies and public prayers in the Khanate of Khiva, the phrase "May the Darya be abundant, may it flow in its own channel" was de rigueur. This wish reflects both the age-old fear of the absence of floods, on which the irrigation canals were completely dependent, and the fear of another *degish*.

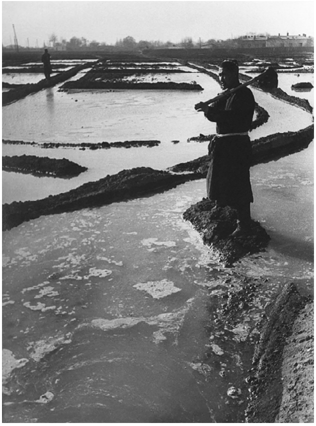
But when the waters retreated because of natural disasters or the deliberate destruction of canals and dams, so did the people, deserting their cities and once impregnable fortresses. The abandoned settlements would be covered by sand, and the fields and dried-up lakes and riverbeds would be replaced by takyrs—a hard, smooth clay surface crosshatched with deep, dry cracks. Whether a small patch a single metre in diameter or a kilometre-long platform, takyrs are a clear indication that a place had once held water. Only in the desert can you encounter this amazing terrain: echoing and smooth as parquet, dazzling in the sun, a peculiar odour issuing from the crevices. The odour is stronger in the evening and at night: a barely perceptible whiff of dampness mixed with the faint, bitter smell of camelthorn.

From the outset, Central Asian archaeologists were largely focused on finding and studying the irrigation systems without which any eastern civilisation would have been inconceivable. In Soviet times, an ideological component was added to their mission in keeping with Stalin's Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature. Archaeologists were tasked not only with researching and reconstructing the ancient irrigation systems, but also with identifying the areas which were most suitable for constructing new irrigation systems and, where possible, restoring the old systems using new technologies, for subsequent agricultural and industrial exploitation.

Sergei Tolstov's Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition was a unique collaboration among archaeologists, geomorphologists, hydrologists, and geologists, who compiled volumes of reports containing invaluable information and drafted maps of the region pinpointing lands which had either been under irrigation in ancient times, were irrigated in the present day, or could be irrigated in the future.

But we know where roads paved with good intentions lead. The country wanted cotton and rice, and water was needed to grow them. The intensive and often haphazard construction of canals, dams, and hydroelectric power

antiquity to the present; *sufa* is an earthen bed in a room; *kubur* is a ceramic water pipe, a telltale sign of municipal improvements; and *badrab* is a rubbish pit.



Max Penson (1893–1959)
***Soil Irrigation. Accumulation Field*. Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, 1937**
Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow

facilities in the basins of the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, and the deliberate policy of diverting water from the Aral Sea for irrigation resulted in a man-made disaster and the almost complete disappearance of one of the bluest and most fish-rich seas on earth.

In the late 1950s, the Khorezm Expedition operated in Karakalpakstan, on the southern shore of the Aral Sea, near the southern *chink* (cliff) of the Ustyurt Plateau. Describing the new socialist lifestyle and customs of the people who inhabited the Amu Darya delta and the southern coast of the Aral Sea, which was still awash with water at the time, the Expedition unwittingly captured in its reports, diaries, and photographs the last days of the Aral Sea region's equivalent of Venice—the port town of Muynak and the fishing village of Urga, where instead of streets there were river channels, which the inhabitants plied on boats, pushing aside the thick green reeds with their hands. Life was indeed sometimes hard in Muynak and Urga, but people had inhabited that shore for two thousand years, making a living by fishing and trading. Although obtaining fresh water had always been a problem, that problem had also been solved. Flat-bottom barges bearing fresh water regularly passed by the villages. The local population would come out in kayaks to meet the barges and transfer the water into wooden barrels. On shore, the water from the barrels would be poured by bucket into smaller containers and transported to the farms on donkeys. This chore was mainly considered women's work.

The Aral Sea began to recede in this very place. Scientists had repeatedly predicted that it would shallow: they assumed that the water level would drop by six to seven metres within two to three hundred years. They were wrong. Forty years after their first calculations, the water level had dropped by twenty-two metres.

According to eyewitness accounts, the first time the sea receded thirty metres overnight was in 1962. Panicked, the residents dug canals to save at least part of their fishing fleet, which had suddenly found itself literally grounded. In an attempt to reconnect the port of Muynak to the open sea, they dug a twenty-two-kilometre-long canal in a matter of days, refusing to believe that the process was irreversible. Ultimately, the sea quickly receded more than 180 kilometres. It is hard to imagine how the people felt when they came out of their houses in the morning and did not see the sea on whose shores they and their ancestors had always lived. Now instead of the Aral Sea there is a huge takyr with the skeletons of dead ships glued to it. The water has retreated, taking an entire civilisation with it.

Sergei Bolelov
The "Discovery" of Ancient Khorezm

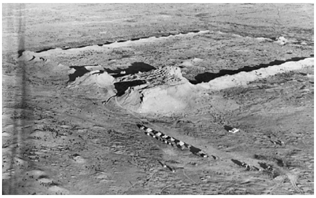
Sergei Bolelov (b. 1958) is a historian and archaeologist. In 1980, he graduated from the archaeology of Central Asia programme at Tashkent State University. From 1980 to 1983, he was a senior laboratory assistant at the Hamza Institute of Art History under the Ministry of Culture of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic and took part in excavations at Dalverzin Tepe, Shurob Kurgan, and Kampir Tepe, in southern Uzbekistan. In 1983, he was appointed a junior researcher at the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences, where he worked until 1997. From 1983 to 1991, Bolelov was a permanent member of the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition, during which time he worked at various sites in ancient Khorezm and the southeastern Aral Sea region, including Toprak Kala, Ayaz Kala, Kalaly Gyr 2, Kurgashin Kala, Little Kyz Kala, the so-called Tolstov Camp (a Neolithic settlement), and the burial mounds of the Dzhetyasar Culture, in the lower reaches of the Syr Darya River. Since 1997, he has been a researcher in the Department of the History of Material Culture and Ancient Art at the Museum of Oriental Art, and its head since 2018. In 2005, Bolelov defended his Ph.D. thesis, "The Pottery of Ancient Khorezm Based on Archaeological Findings," at Moscow State University's Department of Archaeology. As a museum researcher, from 2000 to 2011 he headed a team of the joint Russian-Uzbekistani Tokharistan Archaeological Expedition, which excavated the fortress of Kampir Tepe in the south of Uzbekistan. Since 2007, he has been permanently involved in the work of the Chirik Rabat Archaeological Expedition at the Margulan Institute of Archaeology (Kazakhstan), studying the desert areas in the ancient delta of the Syr Darya River. Since 2019, Bolelov has conducted archaeological research at Great Kyz Kala as part of the Southern Aral Sea Region Joint Karakalpak-Russian Complex Archaeological Expedition. He has authored over one hundred articles on the archaeology and history of Central Asia.

Khorezm is an ancient historical and cultural region, surrounded by desert on all sides, in the delta of the great Central Asian river Amu Darya. Khorezm is mentioned in the Avesta, the compilation of the sacred Zoroastrian texts, and the ancient Greek, Arab, and Persian historians and geographers also wrote about it. From the geographical point of view, Khorezm was not terra incognita. Nobody discovered it, and so I have put the word "discovery" in quotation marks in the title of my essay. The culture of Khorezm, especially its ancient culture, is another matter altogether. It actually was unknown for a long time, concealed under the barchan dunes of the Kyzylkum and the Karakum deserts, sometimes in the most direct sense.

The livelihood of the people who inhabited the Amu Darya's lower reaches depended entirely on the river. As the Persian geographer Istakhri wrote in the tenth century, "Khorezm is a country that derived all its benefits from the Jayhun (Amu Darya)." It was not for nothing that the Arabs dubbed the river Jayhun, or "Mad." The Amu Darya could change its course literally overnight, leaving vast expanses of cultivated fields, settlements, and towns waterless for centuries. People would leave, and once-flourishing oases would be swallowed up by the desert. Thus, until the late 1930s, little was known about the ancient culture of the Khorezmians, a people who had established an independent state as early as the fourth century BCE and spoke an Eastern Iranian language.

Little was known, that is, until almost a hundred years ago Sergei Pavlovich Tolstov (1907–1976), an outstanding historian, orientalist, archaeologist, and ethnographer, whose name is inextricably linked with the true discovery of ancient Khorezm, or rather, of the region's unique ancient culture, first set foot in its long-deserted, once-irrigated lands on the Amu Darya's right bank.

Tolstov first travelled to Khorezm in 1929 as an ethnographer researching the tribal structure and material culture of the Yomut Turkmen. It was then that he first saw the magnificent ruins and mausoleums of Kunya Urgench, the medieval capital of the Khorezm Shahs, where a USSR Academy of Sciences expedition led by Alexander Yakubovsky (1886–1953) was at work. From that time on, Tolstov's entire life was bound up with the southern Aral Sea region and Khorezm.



High Palace. Aerial view.
Toprak Kala, 1949
Black and white print
Miklukho-Maklay Institute
of Ethnology and Anthropology
Scientific Archive

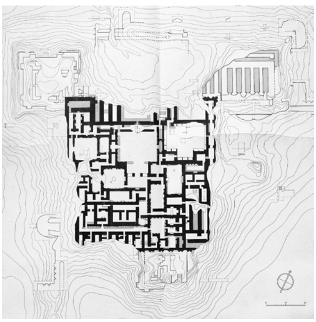
The Khorezm Archaeological Expedition (later known as the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition) was launched in 1937. The same year, Alexei Terenozhkin (1907—1981) almost single-handedly undertook the first archaeological reconnaissance and small-scale excavations in the Right Bank Khorezm. The Soviet authorities had not yet embarked on their large-scale "transformation of the desert into a flowering garden," and so the ancient anthropogenic landscape was virtually untouched. Tolstov described his first impressions of what he saw from the walls of the fortress Guldursun Kala, "at the gates of ancient Khorezm, on the threshold of a journey into the unknown": "Everywhere among the frozen waves of barchans were countless ruins of castles, fortresses, fortified farmsteads, and entire large cities in dense clusters or lonely islets."[1] Systematic research into the ancient culture of Khorezm commenced in the years prior to the Second World War. It is surprising how much was done in just a few years by a small group travelling across the desert on camels and more often on foot. They surveyed hundreds of monuments, drafted topographical maps, collected archaeological objects, and identified artificial irrigation systems. Sergei Tolstov's brother, the artist Nikolai Tolstov, produced beautiful sketches of almost all of Khorezm's fortresses and large settlements. But what is most striking is the intuition and erudition of Tolstov himself, who was able to comprehend and systematise completely fresh, comparatively scarce archaeological finds. Archaeological sites unique in their state of preservation and informational richness and the talents of an outstanding scholar crossed paths at a single point in space and time in the late 1930s. The result of this encounter was the publication in 1948 of the fundamental scholarly work *Ancient Khorezm: A Historical and Archaeological Study*,[2] which played an outsized role in the growth of not only the archaeology of Central Asia, but also of Soviet oriental studies as a whole. According to the outstanding orientalist and archaeologist Boris Litvinsky (1923—2010), *Ancient Khorezm* was a supremely important milestone: Central Asian archaeology finally exited the backwaters of local lore and joined the main current of Eurasia's archaeology and cultural history.

The Khorezm Expedition, which Tolstov organised and headed for almost thirty years, operated in Khorezm and the entire Aral-Caspian region for over half a century. The last season when work was carried out under its auspices ended in autumn 1991. During this time, the Khorezm Expedition went from the relatively small team of the pre-war period into one of the largest and best-equipped expeditions in the Soviet Union.

The significance and results of the archaeological and ethnographic research conducted during this period are enormous. The Khorezm Expedition were pioneers in many

1 S. P. Tolstov, *Po sledam drevnekhorezmiiskoi tsivilizatsii* [On the tracks of the ancient Khorezmian civilisation], (Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1948), 20.
2 S. P. Tolstov, *Drevnii Khorezm: opyt istoriko-arkheologicheskogo issledovaniia* [Ancient Khorezm: A Historical and Archaeological Study], (MGU, 1948).

Masked male head. Sculpture fragment. Toprak Kala, 2nd–3rd centuries
Clay, paint
State Museum of Oriental Art
Photo: Evgeny Zheltov



High Palace layout. Toprak Kala, 1979
Paper, India ink
Miklukho-Maklay Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology Scientific Archive

respects. For example, the Expedition made broad use of aerial photography for the first time in the Soviet Union. It even had an aerial wing: in the late 1940s and 1950s, its Polikarpov Po-2 biplanes were able to photograph almost the entire southern Aral Sea region, leading to the discovery of new monuments. The data also enabled the head of the archaeological-topographic detachment, Boris Andrianov (1919—1993), to research and make a detailed reconstruction of the region's ancient artificial irrigation systems, both for separate oases and entire areas.

Almost from its outset, the expedition's research was comprehensive, an approach that was the cornerstone of Tolstov's method. The ethnographic detachments were organised and supervised by Tatiana Zhdanko (1909—2007), the expedition's long-term deputy head. Under the leadership of the outstanding Soviet geographer and geomorphologist Aleksandra Kes (1910—1993), geomorphological studies were carried out, resulting in a significant historical profile of hydraulic engineering in the ancient delta of the Amu Darya and Uzboy. Palaeobotanists, palaeozoologists, and soil scientists worked in separate groups.

The Khorezm Expedition's main asset was, of course, its staff, the members of the Khorezm archaeological school, whose core, Tolstov's "first draft picks," was made up of student interns from the Moscow State University archaeology department. Having joined the expedition as undergraduates, they forever linked their lives with the beautiful ancient country of Khorezm. Undoubtedly, a great role was played by ancient Khorezm itself as a genuine archaeological reserve filled with fortresses, castles, cities among the dunes, and settlements on salt flats, but one cannot ignore Tolstov's outstanding personality. According to Elena Nerazik (b. 1927), who worked in the Khorezm Expedition all her life, beginning in the early post-war years, the first group of undergraduates and postgraduates, who went on to become outstanding researchers, were stunned by Tolstov's unconventional and sometimes unexpected pronouncements on various wide-ranging but sometimes surprisingly complementary subjects, and they found his emotional stories and short lectures thought-provoking. And yet Tolstov never restricted the initiative of his students, giving them the opportunity to pursue any research area or topic of interest. Marianna Itina (1922—2004) thus focused on the Bronze Age, while Yuri Rapoport (1924—2009) studied pre-Islamic cults and the history of religion in Khorezm. Nerazik became a specialist in the history of dwellings, the family, and social structures in the ancient southern Aral Sea region, while Aleksandr Vinogradov (1931—2004) devoted his career to Stone Age monuments not only in the Aral Sea region, but also in the entire Middle East.

Shuyi Cao (b. 1990)
***She from the Sky*, 2025**
Still from a video installation
Commissioned and produced by GES-2 House of Culture

Despite the differences in their scholarly interests, all members of the Khorezm Expedition, from its first decade to its last, were united by a sincere love for ancient Khorezm, which enabled them to deal with the difficulties that inevitably arose working in the desert, often hundreds of kilometres from civilisation. Their thirst for knowledge helped them to overcome the most difficult challenges. Thus, amid extreme heat in July and August 1952 on the Uzboy, where only bitter salty water was to be found in the infrequent wells, the expedition discovered Stone Age monuments along the proposed route of the Main Karakum Canal.

It was extremely difficult to get to Toprak Kala for the first time, and the expedition's guide had assured them that there was "nothing interesting" there. The site of the ancient settlement was surrounded by lifeless, muddy salt marshes, in which the camels fell through up to their ankles. The excavations at this "uninteresting" monument laid the foundation for the study of ancient Khorezm's material culture and art. It was at Toprak Kala, which had been the sacred religious centre of the Khorezm Shahs in the early first millennium CE, that monumental sculptures and fragments of polychromatic wall paintings produced by Khorezmian masters were discovered. We can imagine how much these first finds amazed the archaeologists. The poet Valentin Berestov (1928—1998), who as a graduate of the Moscow State University archaeology department worked on the Khorezm Expedition for many years, wrote quite vividly about these finds:

> In the clay and the dust, amidst the ruins,
> Archaeologists came upon a smile.
> From the shards, which were scattered all around,
> Suddenly emerged a beautiful face...

But Toprak Kala had been hiding more than just works of art. Documents written in Khorezmian script on leather and wooden boards—part of the archive of the Khorezm Shahs — were found in an ordinary household pot in one of the rooms. The three-towered castle, raised on an eighteen-metre brick plinth—the citadel of Toprak Kala—proved to be a monumental palace-temple complex, a dynastic centre dedicated to the ancestors of the Khorezmian rulers. The so-called Hall of Kings featured sculptures, most likely, of the gods in the Khorezmian pantheon. In the central niche opposite the entrance to the hall apparently stood a statue of the great goddess Anahita, the giver of life and victories. The throne room was surrounded by ceremonial rooms decorated with narrative wall paintings and bas-reliefs. For example, the so-called Hall of Dancing Masks depicted pairs of masked characters dancing. According to researchers,

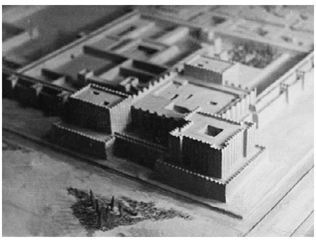
Ossuary fragment. Koy Krylgan Kala, 1st century BCE–1st century CE (?)
Fired clay
State Museum of Oriental Art
Photo: Evgeny Zheltov

they were an artistic reflection of festivals associated with a Dionysian cult. The sculptures and paintings of Toprak Kala opened a previously unknown page in the multi-volume history of ancient Eastern civilisation.

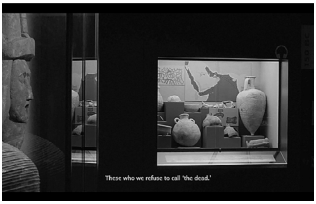
The Koy Krylgan Kala fortress, discovered in 1938 among seven-metre-high barchan dunes, is considered one of the Khorezm Expedition's landmark sites. Before the Second World War, Tolstov could only travel there by camel. Later, when it was decided to start excavations, the first party of archaeologists landed on the nearest salt flat in an airplane. Only a few days later was a road through the sands laid, along which vehicles were able to haul in equipment and tents.

Koy Krylgan Kala is a round monumental structure surrounded by residential and maintenance buildings, which were hidden behind a fortress wall topped with massive towers. Early on in their investigation of this unusual complex, the archaeologists realised that it was a cult building, most likely serving as the central temple of the state that existed on the right bank of the Amu Darya River in the fourth to second centuries BCE. Koy Krylgan Kala was excavated in its entirety. The central building was first considered a mausoleum for Khorezmian kings which also served as an observatory, judging by the plan. A little later, when mathematical and astronomical computations were made, the researchers unequivocally concluded that Koy Krylgan Kala had been a temple-observatory, where priests had observed the motions of the stars and predicted the times when the Amu Darya would flood. The hypothesis that the complex had been a mausoleum was not corroborated: no traces of burials were found, and the ossuaries that were discovered, in which pre-cleaned bones of the dead had been placed in keeping with the Zoroastrian rite, date to a later period than the construction of the temple. During excavations, a large number of terracotta statuettes were found, mostly images of the great goddess and patroness of the waters Anahita, as well as fragments of decorative ceramics, including relief images on clay flasks and jugs. Finally, the earliest artefacts of ancient Khorezmian writing were found at Koy Krylgan Kala. Dating to no later than the second century BCE, the inscriptions were written in black ink on ceramic shards.

It was during the excavations of these two archaeological sites, where young undergraduate and postgraduate students came into daily contact with majestic ruins, that the Khorezm Expedition was forged into a team. The characters and attitudes of future scholars were moulded daily and gradually amid the harsh conditions at the excavation sites. It was at the excavations of Toprak Kala and Koy Krylgan Kala that the unique community we call the



Toprak Kala. Architectural reconstruction of the site. View from High Palace, 1949
Black and white print
Miklukho-Maklay Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology Scientific Archive



Ali Cherri (b. 1976)
***Petrified*, 2016**
Video still
Courtesy of the artist
and Galerie Imane Farès

Khorezm Expedition was created. This community consisted not only of staff members but also of dozens of volunteers—people, initially far from archaeology, who, having gone to the desert for the first time, sometimes even by chance, kept going back for many years. Apart from the picturesque ruins of ancient fortresses and the engaging, even fascinating process of cleaning and clearing rooms, hearths, and burials, a large role was played of course by the expedition's moral climate, established in its early years, of free, unrestricted fellowship. Among the dunes, in tarpaulin tents on salt flats, with a clearly regimented daily schedule—excavations, lunch and relaxation, excavations, dinner, and the long-awaited evening get-togethers by the fire—people felt surprisingly free. They left behind the everyday problems of their lives in cities and led completely different lives in the desert, consisting of new people, new impressions, fortresses, shards laid out on salt flats, and all of ancient Khorezm around them.

In 1956—1958, Tolstov gave a series of lectures on the history of Khorezm and the southern Aral Sea region at major European universities, including Cambridge, Oxford, and the École nationale des langues orientales vivantes in Paris. The published findings from the excavations of these and many other remarkable sites taught the world about the culture of ancient Khorezm, which was acknowledged as one of the great agricultural civilisations of the Ancient East.

The Khorezm Expedition's last official season was 1991. But did the Expedition as a unique phenomenon end then? It seems it did not. Many of the people who toiled in the desert as part of different expedition teams are still alive. The Expedition has also left behind a huge scholarly legacy in the form of archives and collections housed in museums in Russia and the former Soviet republics. Not all the artefacts and other material obtained during the excavations have been properly processed and studied, and some of them have not been made public at all. Researchers from Russia and other countries constantly reference them in their own work. The time has seemingly come for the next, qualitatively new phase of the expedition, a time to "gather stones," that is, to systematise and often to reinterpret, using the latest means and methods, the huge array of information we have inherited from the unique Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition.

Aleksandra Antonova
Fragile and (Im)mortal?

Aleksandra Antonova (b. 1999) is a restoration artist in the department of restoration and archaeological documentation at the Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow. In 2024, she graduated with honours from the monumental and decorative painting restoration programme at the Stroganov University of Design and Applied Arts in Moscow. Since 2021, she has worked on the systematic restoration and archival processing of ancient Khorezm's fine art. Antonova has authored a number of reports and papers on the museification and restoration of the Khorezm Expedition's finds, and she organised and participated in a scientific research seminar convened for the Institute of Restoration's sixty-fifth anniversary. As part of her research, she has developed a method of digitally reconstructing fragments of monumental paintings. In 2024, Antonova won an award at the Stieglitz Academy of Art and Design's national restoration research competition for her research into the restoration of monumental and decorative painting.

Large-scale archaeological excavations were undertaken in the Soviet Central Asian republics in the 1940s and 1950s. Researchers discovered many ancient landmarks, among which Toprak Kala (second to fourth centuries CE) occupies a special place: according to researchers, it was the capital of ancient Khorezm in the early first millennium CE. The fragments of monumental painting and sculpture found at Toprak Kala and other sites posed a serious problem. The real challenge was removing the artefacts from the excavations and conserving them. The then-current restoration techniques did not permit painstaking work with the ancient paintings because the paints used to produce them were devoid of binders, their primer coats had been partially or completely dissolved by soil moisture, and the adobe plaster on which they had been painted was held together with a decayed vegetal filler.[1] Even uncovering the thousand-year-old rubble posed an immediate threat, as the evaporating moisture would force salts to the surface of the works, thus completing the process of deterioration. For these reasons, painting and sculpture fragments could not be removed from the excavation pits for a long time, and documenting them was limited to making professional watercolour and pencil drawings, plaster casts, and diagrams pinpointing the locations of the artefacts at the sites. Each of these stages was photographed in detail.

In the mid-1940s, Soviet restorers began introducing technologies that enabled these artefacts to be extricated, moved from the excavation sites, and examined more closely in laboratories. The safest way of lifting and transporting the finds, along with the loess encompassing them,[2] was to encase them in massive plaster blocks after reinforcing and stabilising the artefacts using special compounds devised for the purpose.

Toprak Kala is not only a unique historical monument and treasure trove of material culture, but also a phenomenon that has united researchers from different periods—from the moment of the site's discovery in 1938 to today's cutting-edge interpretations and digital reconstructions. The Khorezm Expedition was always characterised by a diverse approach to the study of archaeological sites. The ancient settlement of Toprak Kala was a unique testing ground where new scientific methods

1 The traditional painting technique in the ancient Oriental monumental art employed clay plaster mixed with chopped straw (adobe) as a medium, covered with a thin white layer of gypsum as a primer coat. The painting itself was executed with mineral and organic pigments on a vegetable glue base.

2 Loess is a dusty yellowish marl consisting of clay, tiny grains of sand, and calcium carbonate with various impurities. In ancient times, loess was the main building material in Central Asia. Loess was also used to plaster rooms, for which purpose it would be mixed with water and chopped straw, producing *saman*, a type of adobe.

Shuyi Cao (b. 1990)
***She from the Sky*, 2025**
Still from video installation
Commissioned and produced by GES-2 House of Culture

for the restoration, analysis, and attribution of artefacts were tried out. Research into the artefacts from ancient Khorezm led to the establishment of the two leading centres for the conservation of loess-based paintings: the first was the Hermitage Museum, while the second was the All-Union Central Research Laboratory for the Conservation and Restoration of Museum Assets (VTsNILKR, later GOSNIIR). The current methods for processing fragments of painting and sculpture from archaeological excavations are based on the accomplishments of these centres. The fragments are removed after they have been strengthened with mortars and other reinforcing materials over a thin layer which includes plaster, primer, and paint. This procedure enables archaeologists to lift out works of considerable size. The so-called *Mourning Scene* (second to third centuries CE), a fragment on display in *Split Together, Merged Apart*, was thus lifted from the digs in a single layer.

After being conserved and packed in the field, the finds are sent to workshops for desk work, which requires laboratory conditions. Desk work involves imparting optimal mechanical strength to the artefact, purging the original surface of all extraneous layers, and reconstructing the artefact's entire original appearance, which includes analysing its artistic and stylistic features and searching for analogues.

Examples of artefacts from Toprak Kala which have undergone the complete cycle of restoration and subsequent reconstruction are the monumental painted décor fragments known as *Lady with a Garland*, *Mourning Scene*, and *Rosettes in Diamond Grid*, which were discovered during excavations of the Northern Complex, situated outside the fortifications about one hundred metres north of the palace.[3] The last two fragments are notable for their hefty size: to date, they are the largest sections of ancient painting to have been reclaimed by restorers and give a clear sense of Toprak Kala's majestic picturesque décor.[4] One of the most important problems in the study of archaeological monumental painting and sculpture is the way they are exhibited. Usually, the larger the work, the more extensive the damage, thus complicating our reception of the work. Although we can now speak of recognised methods of conserving archaeological artefacts, the question of exhibiting such works remains an open one. While restorers the world over mount thin fragments of paintings and reliefs on sections of imitation wall, what to do with the media themselves and the lost colour layers is a task that has not yet been solved. The issue of a painting fragment's final appearance is so vexing because, in fact, the artefact appears to the viewer both as a piece of documentary historical evidence and as an artistic image.

3 The excavations and research were carried out by the staff of the Central Asian department of the Institute of Restoration's monumental painting division over a number of years (1978–1986, 1990, 1991). The lab work on these fragments was performed by restoration artists Natalia Kovaleva and Galina Veresotskaya.

4 The so-called Northern Complex consists of several ceremonial buildings that were located outside the fortress walls. It is also sometimes identified as the "Suburban Palace" in research literature.

Vadim Pentman (1918—early 1990s)
***Hall of the Harpist. Sketch of wall painting fragment*. Toprak Kala, 1946**
Paper, watercolour
Miklukho-Maklay Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology Scientific Archive

Reconstruction and intrusions into the artefact are age-old problems of restoration, but modern computer technology makes it possible to avoid intervening in the original while preserving its authenticity. Digital reconstruction is a flexible tool with which we can generate several versions of the work's original appearance in the form of auxiliary plates or accompanying banners or reconstruct the work with different quantities of detail and modifications. This technological approach increases the artefact's artistic value, enabling us to restore it to its original context as part of a once-integral monumental ensemble, to transform an abstract "fragment" into a detail in an intricate pattern or into an independent composition. Digital technologies are especially vital when working with imprints of murals, permitting us to reflect, superimpose, and combine images.[5] For many years, the processing of the Toprak Kala finds consisted of seeking and selecting disparate parts of the ensemble using fragments from the rubble of collapsed buildings. The painstaking process stirred the imagination of researchers, forcing them to ponder what the complex's décor had looked like. A large number of schematic sketches of people, mysterious paint stains, and outlines of figures have survived into our time. All of them have given room for research, creativity, and keen interest on the part of specialists. An artist's watercolour copy has often become the only surviving record of a wall painting.

Toprak Kala today is a complex of meanings and visual images that has united a team of scholars, artists, architects, restorers, and enthusiasts ever since Sergei Tolstov caught sight of the "uninteresting fortress" covered with sand.[6] The exhibition *Split Together, Merged Apart* provides our own contemporaries with the chance to get in touch with the culture of the ancient Khorezmian civilisation and lends a new impetus to the study of the archival drawings, diaries, and photographs made by past expeditions.

5 When a painting is in the process of deterioration, it very often falls face down, the original primer coat crumbles, and the paint layer is imprinted on the surface with which it comes into contact. This imprint thus serves as a mirror image of the original painting.

6 "On a clear October evening in 1938, when our small reconnaissance group had ascended the walls of the Kushan fortress Ayaz Kala, a sweeping panorama of the road behind us and the road before us was revealed from the height of sixty metres. Along with the familiar silhouettes of ruins in the south and east, far to the west, beyond the smooth plain of barren ruins and salt marshes, the outline of huge ruins appeared on the horizon, crowned on the northern edge by the mighty outlines of a three-towered citadel. 'What is this fortress?' I asked our guide. 'It is Toprak Kala. There is nothing of interest there,' was his laconic reply. The next day, our caravan approached the uninteresting fortress." S. P. Tolstov, *Po sledam drevnekhorezmiiskoi tsivilizatsii*, [On the tracks of the ancient Khorezmian civilization], 164.

Anna Daumann The Preservation and Loss of the Khorezm Archaeological Expedition's Cultural Artefacts

Anna Daumann (b. 1989) is an art historian and archaeologist. A graduate of the art history programme at Moscow State University (2012) and the classical and oriental archaeology master's programme at the Higher School of Economics (2021), she is a research fellow in the Museum Department of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences and a member of the Southern Aral Sea Region Joint Karakalpak–Russian Complex Archaeological Expedition at Great Kyz Kala.

Beginning with its first field season in 1937, the Khorezm Archaeological Expedition made tens of thousands of archaeological finds annually, and every year all of these finds were dispatched from the Kyzylkum Desert to Moscow for conservation and examination.

Although this treasure trove undoubtedly warranted its own museum, one was never established over the half-century of the Expedition, which was abruptly wound down in the 1990s. By this time, its collection, comprising 3,994,196 artefacts from 117 sites, as well as approximately one thousand pieces of anthropological material, was housed in six basements in Moscow covering a total area of 937 square metres.[1] Russia's economic collapse had caused rents to rise a hundredfold, demolishing the system for preserving antiquities.[2]

When the threat of losing their storage facilities arose, the staff at the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology's ethnoarchaeology department petitioned the director. They wrote letters and reports, asking him to extend the lease on Festivalnaya Street, at least, or to provide other premises for continuing the research and publishing work on the collections. Unfortunately, the leadership failed to meet the researchers' demands.

According to extant testimonies, the expedition staff sought help not only from the institute but also from private individuals. A 1992 appeal to the entrepreneur Vladimir Sternfeld described not only the expedition's financial problems, but also a plan by which the funds invested in saving the collection would be recouped through exhibitions and publications in Russia and abroad. As further events attest, there was no response to this appeal.

The staff had to interrupt their research, which had been planned a decade in advance, and spend all their time transferring the Institute's collections to museums in Central Asia and Moscow. The interruption of their work did considerable damage to Central Asian archaeology and Russian scholarship in general, since the Khorezm Expedition had played a leading role in the study of Central Asia for over half a century and had shaped the course of academic research in the southern Aral Sea region.

The average age of the institute's staff in the early 1990s was between sixty and seventy—a time in life suitable for writing scholarly papers but not for the hard physical labour

1 Two of the basements were located on Festivalnaya Street, three on Leninsky Prospekt, and one on Dmitry Ulyanov Street in Moscow.

2 Institutions with their own storage facilities faced similar problems. The profit they stood to make from letting them to third parties exceeded the perceived value of the collections at many research and cultural institutions. Collections were "deregistered," i.e., written off, deemed insufficiently important. The tragic loss of their premises, and thus the ability to store museum pieces, has affected many research organisations in today's Russia.

of sorting out and moving collections. Work on many planned research topics was interrupted. For example, Bella Vainberg (1932—2010) reported at the close of 1994 that the edited volume *The Kalaly Gyr 2, Ritual Centre in Ancient Khwarazm*, which had been scheduled for publication in 1995, could not be delivered on time, because she and her colleagues had been spending all their time packing and transporting the collections. According to other sources, the publication of this book had been planned jointly with the Karakalpak Institute of History, Archaeology, and Ethnography, but since all research organisations in Uzbekistan had completely switched to Uzbek, nothing came of it. The work was also slowed down by the emigration of two of the expedition's younger members, Semyon Kolyakov (b. 1947) and Marina Polonskaya (b. 1958), who, as excavation supervisors, had been involved in researching Kalaly Gyr 2 between 1985 and 1991. The book was published only ten years later, in 2004,[3] after the collection had been transferred to the State Museum of Oriental Art, where it served as the basis for the museum's permanent archaeological exhibit. Earlier, in 1992, the edited volume *Archaeology of the Aral Sea Region: Ancient and Medieval Khorezm and Its Cattle-Breeding Hinterlands* had been left on the drawing board for the same reasons, despite the fact that its topical scope had been condensed and its illustrations abandoned during the process of working on it.

Many other monographs that had been announced for publication in the early 1990s have never seen the light of day. A fundamental work on Khorezmian terracotta by Militsa Vorobyeva (1914—1991) has not yet been published, and Yuri Rapoport (1924—2009) and Olga Vishnevskaya (1923—1998) were unable to complete their monograph on the ancient Khorezmian city of Kyuzeli Gyr (seventh to fifth centuries BCE).[4] As Rapoport wrote, "In 1992—1995 [...] I was involved in urgently emptying the storage facilities and processing, packing, and arranging ceramics at the new site. I compiled and typed inventories containing all the data on each individual find that was transferred to the Museum of Oriental Art."

The staff was given only one option for saving the collection—transferring the finds to the former Soviet republics. Meanwhile, Central Asian museums and cultural institutions sent requests to the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, asking it to return the collections to their places of origin. In 1993 and 1994, the institute was visited by emissaries from Kazakhstan,[5] Uzbekistan,[6] and Turkmenistan,[7] who were mainly interested in significant, canonical items. Expedition staff, however, insisted on observing the museum law, which requires that archaeological collections be transferred indivisibly and in their entirety.

Even before the crisis with their storage facilities, the expedition's property was not housed in the best conditions.

3 B. I. Vainberg (ed.), *Kalaly-gyr 2. Kul'tovyi tsentr v Drevnem Khorezme* [Kalyly Gyr 2. Ritual centre in Ancient Khwarazm], (Vostochnaia literatura, 2004).

4 Vishnevskaya and Rapoport had supervised the excavations at the site for eight field seasons. The fruits of the 1953—1954 excavations were transferred in 1992 to the Kunya Urgench Museum (3,900 finds, mostly consisting of massive ceramics and stone and bone artefacts). In 1994, the State Museum of Oriental Art acquired the finds from the 1967—1982 excavations (2,143 items, including ceramics, jewellery, beads, arrowheads, and tools).

5 Between 1989 and 1991, the Institute of History and Archaeology of the Kazakh Soviet Republic sent similar requests. However, it was invariably interested in only the most valuable, exhibition-ready items, such as precious metal artefacts and jewellery. In full, the collection from Kazakhstan totalled hundreds of thousands of items and required considerable storage space.

6 When the Uzbek Soviet Republic adopted its Law on Property in 1990, archaeological finds excavated in Uzbekistan had to be deposited in Nukus. As of 1986, the Institute of Archaeology of Uzbekistan had also demanded that all processed materials be returned to their place of origin, even though it did not have sufficient storage facilities for this purpose. The situation changed in 1991, when the Russian Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology itself asked to acquire its collections, and the finds of the Expedition's archaeological-topographical detachment of the 1950s and the ceramics from Koy Krylgan Kala were sent there. In 1991, the Museum of Local Lore of Karakalpakstan was asked to adopt the collections of the topographic detachment of the 1950s expedition, as well as ceramics from the excavations at Toprak Kala. In 1994—1995, the newly established museum in Khiva acquired materials from the excavations at Ayaz Kala 2, Kavat Kala, and Bazar Kala, as well as archaeological collections from the Bronze Age, including the fully excavated Late Bronze Age settlement Yakke Parsan 2 (consisting of ceramic shards that had no material and artistic value). It is telling that the Institute's warmest

The dilapidated basement rooms were often flooded with hot water, fires sometimes broke out, and artefacts were destroyed.

Before the collections were handed over, the least valuable researched and published bulk items had to be written off. More than 1,200,000 items were sent in eight heavy-duty containers to museums in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in 1993, and more than 140,000 items were sent to museums in Uzbekistan in 1994.

Some artefacts uncovered by the Khorezm Expedition had been transferred to museums in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan in the 1970s and 1980s.

Artefacts that had not been researched and published, as well as finds in need of restoration, were transferred to the State Historical Museum and the State Museum of Oriental Art. In particular, artefacts were removed from the storage facility at 61/1 Leninsky Prospekt and transported in six lorries to the latter museum.[8] In early 1995, the remaining 90,000 finds were housed in the two basement storage facilities at 23 and 27 Festivalnaya Street.

The ethnoarchaeology department also had to give up its 128-square metre base in the Nukus Botanical Gardens, where finds had been handled before being sent off to Moscow since the 1950s.

Almost four million items were processed, partly written off, and prepared for transfer between 1993 and 1996, although the annual norm at which researchers were expected to process artefacts at the time was just over one hundred. Over two million items were transferred to museums in Moscow and the former Soviet republics, including museums in Karaganda, Lisakovsk, and Baikonur, in Kazakhstan; the Itchan Kala Museum Reserve in Khiva, Uzbekistan; and the Kunya Urgench State Historical and Cultural Park and others in Turkmenistan.[9] Twelve containers of finds were dispatched to the former Soviet republics at the expense of the new owners.

One of the beneficiaries in Moscow was the newly established museum at the Russian Archaeological Society. In early 1993, the society asked Larisa Levina (1932—2022), head of the ethnoarchaeology department, to transfer the archaeological materials remaining in the basements on Festivalnaya Street to the Society's museum, and so 121,624 items from 118 monuments (mostly bulk items) were completely removed to the Society's storage facilities in late 1994. This collection later ended up at Moscow Preparatory School no. 1505, whose headmaster provided a room for it. A school museum was organised around the collection, and an archaeology club was formed, whose members learned the basics of restoration and made an inventory of the artefacts. Thirty years later, the school's new authorities returned the collection to the Institute, but its future has still not been decided.

correspondence about transferring collections in those difficult times was with the Nukus Museum of Art. It constantly discussed the possibility of securing funding to transport the artefacts, despite the republic's budget troubles.

7 The situation was different with the transfer of the collections from Turkmenistan, where the Expedition had been working since 1939. The Institute's numerous requests to the Kunya Urgench Museum to adopt the collections were not immediately successful. A letter to the Minister of Culture of Turkmenistan dated 14 April 1992 describes the catastrophic situation with the storage facilities in Moscow, whose rent had increased three hundredfold in a single year due to inflation. The finds made among the monuments of the Dashoguz Region and the Tuyamuyun Hydro Complex (Sadwar, Kaparas, Elkharas), which remained the only evidence of the antiquities that had been flooded, were handed over to the Chardzhou Museum only in late 1992. Archaeological collections assembled from the excavations of burial mounds in Left Bank Khorezm were transferred to the Kunya Urgench Museum in 1992 as well.

8 Substantial transfers of collections had also taken place prior the 1990s, of course. In 1971, for example, the Hermitage Museum was bequeathed 801 items, including paintings and bas-reliefs from Toprak Kala, which have been included in the current exhibition, as well as ossuaries from Kalaly Gyr.

9 According to the oral testimony of scholars and archaeologists working in the region, many of these materials are still in storage and have not been unpacked.

All the enormous, extremely complex, and strenuous work of disassembling the storages, transferring, and decommissioning the artefacts was carried out exclusively by ethnoarchaeology department staff using the remaining funds allocated for the expedition, without additional funding from the Institute's budget. Hard physical labour was accompanied by paperwork—the drafting of official documents, inventories, and covering letters. At the same time, the Expedition's archives, containing unique archaeological and ethnographic materials from the mid-1930s (drawings, diagrams, diaries, photographs, and reports) were put in order.

The Khorezm Expedition undertook its last major field season in 1991. Field work, which had usually occupied an important place in the ethnoarchaeology department's research activities, ceased in 1992, although individual staff members continued to participate in expeditions in Kazakhstan (1994—1996), Uzbekistan (1994), and Turkmenistan (1993—1994). Due to the Soviet Union's collapse, the difficult economic situation in the former Central Asian republics, and overall instability, the agreements on archaeological work in Uzbekistan were discontinued at the behest of the commissioning parties. Only in 1996 and 1997 was field work carried out at Hazorasp, with the Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan and the Itchan Kala Museum Reserve in Khiva footing the bill. The Kazakh Academy of Sciences, despite political and economic difficulties, authorised archaeological digs in 1992 and 1993. The ethnoarchaeology department was forced to use the funds it received to arrange and process archaeological and anthropological collections, prepare for the closure of its storage facilities, and draft and publish scholarly works.

By the early 2000s, many of the department's researchers had passed away, while others had been forced to change jobs or emigrate. The department was disbanded in 2002, although many of its affairs, including the transfer of collections, had not been finalised. Work on the remnants of the Khorezm Expedition's collections resumed only in 2022 when new staff arrived at the Institute.

The cultural artefacts unearthed by the Khorezm Expedition are scattered around the world: they can be found in thirteen museums in four countries, and it is impossible to imagine a single place where the entire collection would be reassembled. The expedition continues to exist in the information realm through exhibitions and publications uniting the disparate collections, as well as through the only ongoing expedition involving Russian researchers in the sands of Karakalpakstan, at the Great Kyz Kala. A Khorezm Expedition museum may also be built one day, but now it will be a virtual museum.

Tigran Mkrtychev
The Science of Archaeology

Tigran Mkrtychev (b. 1959), a specialist in the ancient art of Central Asia, has a habilitation degree in art history. He studied in the archaeology of Central Asia programme at Tashkent State University. While still an undergraduate there, he began working under the tutelage of the famous historian of Central Asian art Lazar Rempel, who supervised his Ph.D. thesis. From 1985 to 2021, Mkrtychev worked at the Museum of Oriental Art in Moscow, first as a senior researcher, then as head of the Central Asian archaeology section, as deputy director for research and, finally, as a branch director. While still a schoolboy, he was involved in the University of Kalinin's Upper Volga Archaeological Expedition. He later worked on many archaeological expeditions in Central Asia as a researcher and as a leader, including Merv (Margiana), Akhsikath (Fergana), Durmon Tepa (Samarkandian Sogdia), Varakhsha (Bukharan Sogdia), and Kara Tepe and Kampir Tepe (Northern Bactria). He was involved in the excavation of Sengim Agyz (Xinjiang). In 2003, he defended his habilitation thesis on the ancient Buddhist art of Central Asia. From 2021 to 2025, he was the director of the Savitsky Museum of Arts (Nukus, Karakalpakstan, Uzbekistan). During this time, his interests focused on the history of the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition and the Mizdakhan site near Nukus.

I do not honestly know if I can call myself an archaeologist.

Many years ago, I graduated from the Central Asian archaeology programme at Tashkent State University, but my honours diploma identifies me as a history and social studies teacher. It says nothing about archaeology. I did subsequently have the opportunity to teach, but not in schools.

Archaeology was my conscious choice as a child. Everyone thinks that romance and adventure are the main motivations at that age. It was a little different for me. I saw the Indiana Jones movies much later in life.

Books were the first reason I decided to become an archaeologist. In the third grade, I read several works by Yavdat Ilyasov (1929–1982) about Alexander the Great's Central Asian campaign, which featured the Sogdians and other Central Asian ancients. I knew nothing about the author or the setting of his narrative, Central Asia. But that was not what had grabbed me. This ancient history, described in surprising depth and detail (and which, I later realised, was also quite emotional), made me wonder how the author knew all that stuff. I do not remember exactly where I got the answer: that ancient history is based on historical sources and archaeology. The solution came to me at once: I would become an archaeologist and write similarly interesting stories.

The second reason was the Soviet environment of my childhood. I should say at once that I had wonderful parents, and we were a well-off family. My parents were not dissidents and did not discuss contemporary politics with me. My father was a Communist who held management posts at various levels, including the directorship of large factories. But my own experience of society at school clearly showed me there was a huge difference between what the television, newspapers, and teachers told us and what was happening around me. Archaeology provided a perfect opportunity not to be involved in modern life. At least, it seemed that way to me at the time. It was another plus when I was choosing a profession.

I enrolled at Tashkent State University in a naive attempt to find an accessible way to get into a history programme. In those days, the universities of Moscow, Leningrad, and Kyiv were regarded as unscalable mountain peaks. No one remembers this now, but in the late 1970s, history departments were bastions of ideology, important primarily because of their programmes in the history of the Soviet Communist Party

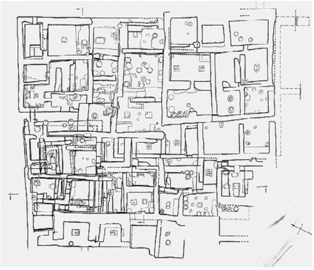
Alfred Ashkinezer (1921–19??)
***Professor Tolstov checking the expedition route along the Main Turkmen Canal line against a map*, 1950**
Paper, digital print
Russian State Film, Sound, and Photo Archive

Vladimir Pilyavsky (1910–1984)
***Ayaz Kala fortress complex. Panorama*, 1939**
Photocopy of watercolour drawing (copy of glass plate negative)
Shchusev Museum of Architecture

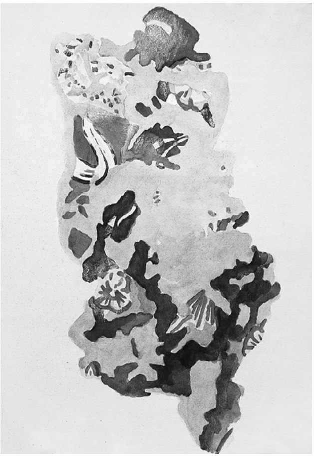
(the guiding force of Soviet society). A diploma from a history department gave its bearer the excellent chance to pursue a well-paid and fairly trouble-free career as a Party functionary. The archaeology departments remained the province of romantics and misfits, but it was extremely difficult to break into their ranks at universities. My choice of distant Tashkent had been a necessity, and I intended to transfer to Moscow or Leningrad after completing my first year.

My first year in the east was quite hard: I was living on my own among different people, who had a different perception of reality. Everything was different. I felt like an immigrant in Tashkent, although I had gone into “exile” voluntarily, and I was still in the same country. But they were very different parts: Kalinin (present-day Tver), where I had been born and gone to school, was nothing like Tashkent, where I studied at university. At that difficult time, I remembered my distant landsman, the Tver merchant Afanasy Nikitin, author of *A Journey Beyond the Three Seas* (1466–1472). I sometimes used his name as a pseudonym. About a year later, I managed to immerse myself in the “dust of the east” and become a particle of this dust. Just like Afanasy Nikitin, I had come to take a lot of things (but not everything) for granted.

The archaeology of Central Asia proved to be an order of magnitude cooler than the archaeology of Central Russia, where I had already had the chance to work on an expedition during my school years. The contrast was of cosmic proportions. When I first climbed the fortress wall of Gyaur Kala (second century BCE—seventh century CE), I saw a landscape resembling the moon: thousands and thousands of pottery shards were scattered everywhere, testifying to the city’s antiquity and greatness. I immediately recalled my first find, a small shard of a Slavic pot, carefully planted by the head of the excavation to bolster my fading enthusiasm. But there, right on the ground, for the taking as it were, one could find a hell of a lot! Later, at Central Asian sites in places other than the Merv Oasis, I had the opportunity to discover many delightful treasures: gold (or rather, to be honest, gold foil), a large silver ring with a carnelian inset (now in the collection of the Museum of Oriental Art), and gorgeous turquoise beads. Hunting for retrievable archaeological material is much more exciting than picking mushrooms, and not because I do not like picking mushrooms: it is another (the highest) class of free exploration, the search for traces of time. During my youth, however, archaeologists condemned this practice, especially as performed by non-professionals (the so-called tomb raiders, armed with metal detectors), and they still do today. So, archaeology can be very provisionally defined as the search for something you never lost, a fusion of the unknown and hope. Archaeology is partly built on this fragile ground, and all prehistory grows from it.



Ancient settlement site.
Lower level. Toprak Kala, 1975
Tracing paper, India ink
Miklukho-Maklay Institute
of Ethnology and Anthropology
Scientific Archive



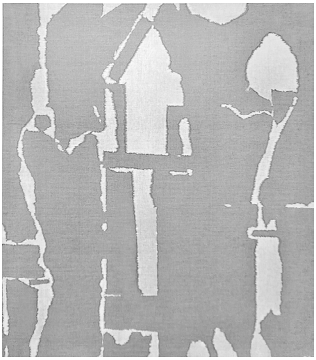
N. A. Yusov
Wall painting fragment.
Toprak Kala, 1950
Paper mounted on cardboard, watercolour
Miklukho-Maklay Institute
of Ethnology and Anthropology
Scientific Archive

An archaeological expedition is something like a submarine or a space station. It usually involves working autonomously far from the mainland: no one will send a shuttle into orbit to deliver a batch of new shovels. Your submersible or aircraft must have a professional, reliable crew, able to work under pressure. Gone are the blessed days when archaeology was the domain of brave loners leading squads of clueless labourers. Archaeological expeditions are now crewed not only by the usual restorers, photographers, and architects, but also by a multitude of specialists in the hard sciences. Personally, I still have doubts about them, especially when they try to use different scientific methods to determine promising areas for excavations. I was around, however, for the quite romantic times of tents in the desert, run-of-the-mill spirit levels, spades, digging knives, brushes, scholarly intuition, and luck. In the old days, overhead photos of excavation sites were taken by a photographer balancing on the top rungs of a stepladder. Today, this work is done by drones. Aerial photography was once regarded as mind-blowing, but now Google Earth supplies these panoramas.

Life does not stand still, but the sites which archaeology studies do stand still. They can be ruined, but it is difficult to move them. Despite all our technological progress, archaeology is still a science which destroys the material layers of the past in the process of studying them, and this is an irreversible process. Excavations often disturb the object of study, because certain stages of the site's existence are inevitably eradicated.. The modern archaeologist causes irreparable change to the material traces of the past, and this damage cannot be corrected yet. If we overlook these negative consequences, however, the archaeological expedition is the best place to knock all the nonsense of the present out of your head. At the excavation site, you can easily, if you wish, dive into the abyss of a past in which you have never been. It clears your mind perfectly. An archaeological expedition is a genuine time machine which travels from the present to the past and then to the future. It is like a Moebius strip.

Life in the east and archaeology have taught me to see events as cyclical and regular. Thus, in Tashkent, I became friends with the son of the very writer who had made me want to become an archaeologist. My friend is also an archaeologist and one of my constant co-authors. I think that the high quality of his father's works serves as an additional incentive for us in our "creative work," as we are used to calling our scholarly research collaborations.

Another twist of fate is connected with my research adviser, for whom I worked as an assistant for many years before becoming his graduate student. In 1937, the then-young scholar was exiled from Moscow to Bukhara as a family member of an "enemy of the people." In his case, this was

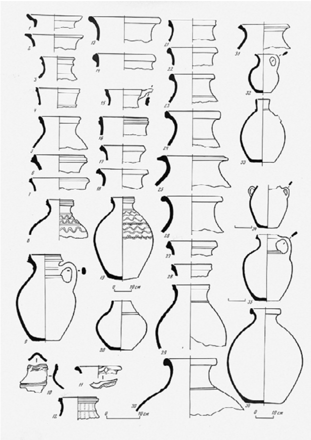


Alexandra Sukhareva (b. 1983)
***Portrait Through a Barrier*, 2025**
Canvas, chlorine
Commissioned and produced by GES-2 House of Culture

extremely humane treatment, as his wife was shot. Finding himself in Central Asia in a powerless position (for a long time he was unable to get official employment), he managed to build his academic career on the material that was at his fingertips, so to speak. In Tashkent, he became an absolutely legendary art historian. I am certain that if it were not for his Jewish background, Lazar Rempel (1907–1992) would have become an academician. I still very much regret that I did not write down my conversations with him. Thus, it transpired that he had worked briefly (in 1929–1930) as deputy research director at the State Museum of Oriental Cultures in Moscow. Years later, I spent over a decade as the deputy research director at the Museum of Oriental Art—the new name of the same institution.

Once at Rempel's house over tea, I met a strange man, an exceedingly thin fellow with an unusually high, almost feminine voice. I thus became acquainted with Igor Savitsky (1915–1984). He was a painter but was quite fond of archaeology and consequently abandoned his own art, started collecting Karakalpak folk art, established the Nukus Museum, and worked as its director for many years. After Savitsky's death, the museum was named in his honour. It so happened that after graduating from an archaeology programme, I defended my Ph.D. dissertation and then my habilitation dissertation in art history. Both dissertations dealt with ancient art, and so to archaeologists I am an art historian, while to art historians I am an archaeologist. Because of my appearance (stereotypes kick in) I am often mistaken for an artist, and for a while I worked as director of the Savitsky Museum. Such things happen.

One of the high points of my archaeological career occurred in the final Soviet years. The Soviet Union was falling apart, but I was digging at a dream site: the Buddhist worship centre of Kara Tepe (first to sixth centuries CE), in Old Termez in southern Uzbekistan. Paradoxes piled up at this site. Kara Tepe was located not far from the bank of the Amu Darya, in a restricted border zone. The river was just a short distance away, but it was impossible to go to the shore: along the bank was a no man's land separated by ploughed land and a barbed wire fence. On the other side of the river was Afghanistan, where the war was underway. The closed state borders of the present day contrasted with the openness of the world of two thousand years earlier, when Buddhist missionaries had travelled freely from India to China via Central Asia. In the years I worked at the site, one of the hills where the Buddhist caves were located served as the backdrop of a military firing range, and the disembodied ghosts of the Buddhist monks of antiquity, whose basic principle was to do no harm to the living, were shot with enviable regularity with all manner of modern small arms. Nature and life enhanced my experience. I often saw cranes flying toward India regrouping in the blue autumn sky just over



Pottery from Toprak Kala, 1980
Paper, reproduction
Miklukho-Maklay Institute
of Ethnology and Anthropology
Scientific Archive

Archaeologist's brush in excavation. Toprak Kala, 1949
Black and white print
Miklukho-Maklay Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology
Scientific Archive

Kara Tepe. Choppers speeding toward Afghanistan on missions also rattled and chirped in that same sky.

Time has wrought changes on the Buddhist monastery. Judging by the artefacts which were found there, after the Buddhists left Kara Tepe, the abandoned caves served as a refuge for members of a Christian sect and for Muslim hermits. The aura of Buddhist teachings hovering over the abandoned Kara Tepe shaped the worldview of the famous Sufi scholar Hakim al-Tirmidhi (circa 755—869 CE), who lived and was buried in Old Termez. His mausoleum was one of my favourite places. The firing range has now been removed, the no man's land has been abolished, and Kara Tepe has been opened to the public and is about to be restored. The modest Sufi mausoleum has been "restored" and turned into a popular pilgrimage site surrounded by the usual shops for tourists. An exact copy was made of Hakim al-Tirmidhi's marble tombstone and placed next to it in the museum. There are now two tombstones: shrines multiply, as they should. Serenity has given way to frivolity.

Today, field archaeology for me is like the recollections of an old cowboy pestering his drinking buddies in a backwoods saloon with tales of his youthful exploits. But the Moebius strip still functions and from time to time transports me to the plane of my past. Needless to say, this is not déjà vu. There is nothing wrong with my psyche yet. This is reality.

On a May evening, after a long and pointless day of work and endless meetings, I called the chauffeur and asked him to drive me to the archaeological expedition where my friends were. After three hours of awful roads, we drove onto the flat takyr where the camp was located. In the twilight, the walls of the ancient site could be seen in the distance, and a huge moon loomed over the desert and the old tents of the Khorezm Expedition. It was the birthday of one of my friends. The people who welcomed me had not quit the "tribe of archaeologists," and so I had the sense that I was on an Indian reservation where the old customs had been preserved, where hunting with a bow and arrow was still practised, and knowing how to handle firearms was as obligatory as knowing how to use the internet. We sat for a long time at a roughly hewn table by the light of a dim bulb powered by a generator. We drank and ate, reminisced and shared our joys and problems. I quickly switched to the archaeological lingo, which I now get to speak quite rarely. Then, when everyone had begun to disperse, I exited the tent into the night and gazed at the barely visible silhouette of the archaeological site for a long time. It seemed as if in the darkness the shades of my great mentors in Central Asian archaeology passed before me.

In the morning, I was already back in my office running a board of directors meeting.

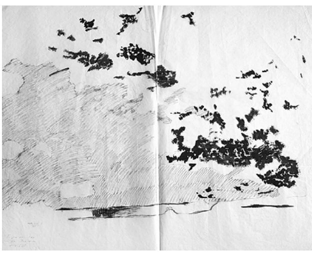
Yaroslav Aleshin and Katerina Chuchalina Split Together, Merged Apart

Shuyi Cao (b. 1990)
***She from the Sky*, 2025**
Still from video installation
Commissioned and produced
by GES-2 House of Culture

It may seem, at first sight, that the exhibition *Split Together, Merged Apart* is intended solely to inform today's public of the history, heroes, and results of a fascinating Soviet scientific project: the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition. However, as the exhibition title suggests, the intention is somewhat different—it is to draw attention to the paradoxical, inconspicuous, but close and deep connections between the practices of archaeology, on the one hand, and modernism, on the other.

Modernism, as a general trend of twentieth-century culture, envisioned the future as a new and better stage in the development of human society. In its Soviet version, modernism was not just about historical progress. It emphasised the overcoming of the past and ways in which the present becomes an inverted reflection of the past. Tomorrow could only be bathed in light thanks to the shadows cast by earlier times. This special relationship between the future and the past was a source of constant tension in Soviet culture. The modernist impulse in the USSR gave rise to projects of unprecedented scale that were intended to transform the natural world and human life, from transcontinental transportation routes to the construction of canals and power plants, the building of new cities, and the displacement of millions of people. These projects were often preceded and spearheaded by what the Russian language describes using a loan word from English, "*ekspeditsii*" ("expeditions"): large groups of specialists travelled to often remote parts of the USSR's vast space to carry out geographical, geological, and other studies of a particular location. On the one hand, such expeditions were emblematic of the regimented and ideologically driven Soviet experiment. On the other hand, paradoxically, by allowing people of great talent to use their initiative, often far from centres of Soviet officialdom, they offered scope for individuality and escapism, for staying true to the past, tradition, and oneself in niches where ideological control did not penetrate.

Starting in 1937 on the territories of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan under the leadership of Academician Sergei Tolstov, the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition continued for over half a century, until the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Its scale and duration were unmatched in the history of Soviet archaeology.



Contours of multi-figure wall painting. Northern Complex, Toprak Kala, 1970
Paper, tracing paper, watercolour, ink
Miklukho-Maklay Institute
of Ethnology and Anthropology
Scientific Archive

The Khorezm Expedition aimed to uncover and document the flourishing Central Asian civilisations of the medieval and

Ossuary in shape of a seated female figure. Koy Krylgan Kala, 1st—2nd centuries
Fired clay
State Museum of Oriental Art
Photo: Evgeny Zheltov

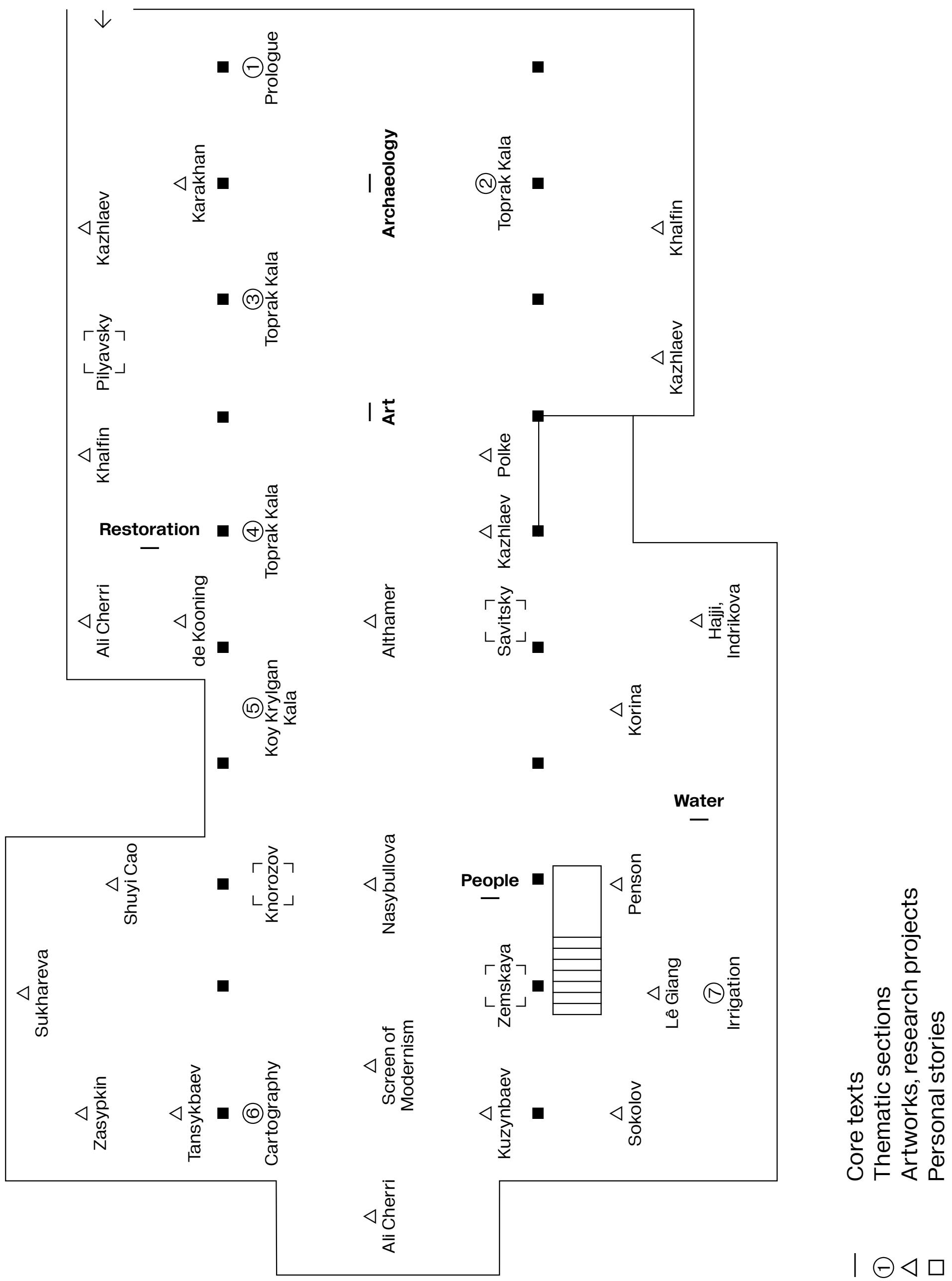
pre-medieval periods, which Tolstov himself called the "Central Asian Egypt." It pursued its work simultaneously and shoulder-to-shoulder with grandiose Soviet hydro-engineering projects: the scientists who excavated the ancient irrigation culture of the region were followed by engineers and canal builders with the mission of turning the deserts of Central Asia into verdant agricultural land and new settlements. The latter project was a grandiose failure. As the Soviet archaeologists unearthed ancient Khorezm, Soviet engineers, by their unbridled irrigation projects, ultimately drained the Amu Darya River and the Aral Sea—the mainstays of life in the region—and created a desert.

The dramaturgy of the exhibition is based on a mirroring effect between a reconstructed past and a planned tomorrow—the archaeologist who traces lines in the sand where cities once stood, the architect who plans future cities in the desert, and, finally, human efforts to preserve the past and to preserve life-giving water.

The metaphor of an archaeological expedition determines the very form of the exhibition, which is put together according to the logic of an archaeologist's or restorer's work. Fragmentariness and residuality are the properties of archaeological material: the archaeologist completes, speculates, reassembles, and reinvents from pieces, while remaining open to the possibility of different configurations and interpretations. Archaeology stands opposed to the image of wholeness, to completed, convenient, and museified historical knowledge. In its contemporary version, it is a process that marks lost links and connections, preserves seams and points of joining, the heterogeneity of materials, and the diversity of actors and events. Archaeology is the relentless linking of elements belonging in part to the imaginary and the phantasmal. By creating new connections, it unravels systems and undermines the autonomy of the single event and its history.

Like archaeology itself, *Split Together, Merged Apart* connects fragments from different levels, contemporary events and events from the distant past, bringing together archaeological finds from the collections of the Museum of Oriental Art, the Hermitage, and the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, as well as materials and documents from the Khorezm Expedition archive, and exhibits from other Russian and foreign collections. The artworks (some existing, some commissioned for the project) work like the glue used in kintsugi, a Japanese technique of ceramic restoration—the joins are no less important than the surviving fragments, which are joined. They emphasise gaps and fill lacunae. How the gaps are filled and the way in which our contemporary fantasies are connected with the silent fragments of the past is no less important for the exhibition than its historical subject matter.

Exhibition Plan



Split Together, Merged Apart
3 Apr — 28 Sep 2025

Authors

Art and Research
Sergei Azimov
Paweł Althamer
Alexey Artamonov
Igor Blidarev
Shuyi Cao
Ali Cherri
Lê Giang
Vera Inber
Nastya Indrikova and Ilyas Hajji
Sergei Kacheryats
Nikolai Karakhan
Magomed Kazhlaev
Rustam Khalfin
Boriy Khodjaev
Yuri Knorozov
Willem de Kooning
Irina Korina
Nigmat Kuzybaev
Harold Lawrence
Tigran Mkrtychev
Eldar Muratov
Mayana Nasybullova
Max Penson
Igor Persidsky
Vladimir Piliavsky
Sergei Piyanzin
Sigmar Polke
Anna Pronina
Ilya Sokolov
Alexandra Sukhareva
Ural Tansykbaev
Boris Zasypkin
Militsa Zemskaya

Documents
Boris Andrianov
Aleksandra Antonova
Georgy Argiropoulos
Alfred Ashkinezer
Abdullah Babahanov
Samuil Bubrik
Aida Epikhova
Zinovy Feldman
Marianna Itina
Nikolai Karmazinsky
Roman Karmen
Malik Kayumov
Aleksandra Kes
A. Klimov
I. Kolesnikov
Natalia Kovaleva
Aleksandr Krylov
O. Kuzmin
Lev Melehi
G. Mushkambarov
Anna Opochinskaia
Mark Orlov
Georgy Pavlidi
Vadim Pentman
Vladimir Piliavsky
Anatoly Pogorely
Yakov Poselskiy
Dan Psyol
Yuri Rapoport
S. Rukavishnikov
Igor Savitsky
Irina Setkina
V. Sobolevsky
Nikolai Tolstov
K. Tomashevsky
Arif Tursunov
Nina Vakturskaia
Sergei Vasilkovsky
Galina Veresotskaia
Dziga Vertov
Emilia Vinogradova
N. Yusov
Tatiana Zhdanko

***Split Together, Merged Apart. Marginalia Among the Layers* companion reader**
Aleksandra Antonova
Irina Arzhantseva
Sergei Bolelov
Anna Daumann
Tigran Mkrtychev

Curators
Yaroslav Aleshin
Katerina Chuchalina

Research assistant
Sergei Kozlovsky

Architecture
sashakim.studio:
Sasha Kim, Ira Ten

Lighting
Ksenia Kosaya

Producers
Varvara Arkhipova
Maria Kalinina
Veronica Luchnikova
Ksenia Makshantseva

Technical team
Andrey Belov
Aleksandr Dolmatov
Artem Kanifatov
Maksim Lapshin
Pavel Luzhin
Mikhail Sarkisyants

Art logistics and registration
Angelina Korovina
Daria Krivtsova
Daria Maksimova

Accessibility and inclusion team
Aleksandra Kharchenko
Vlad Kolesnikov
Victoria Kuzmina
Varya Merenkova
Vera Zamyslova

Graphic design
Misha Filatov
Maria Kosareva

Editors
Daniil Dugaev
Olga Grinkrug

English texts
Thomas Campbell
Ben Hooson

Media specialist
Ira Popovich

Design development
SLOVO

Exhibition partner
Miklukho-Maklay Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences

The *Split Together, Merged Apart* exhibition is organised in collaboration with
Central State Archive of Literature and Arts of Saint Petersburg
Gosfilmofond of Russia
Grabar Art Conservation Centre
Ivanovo Regional Art Museum
Kolomenskoye-Izmailovo State Architectural and Landscape Museum
Mardjani Foundation
Multimedia Art Museum
National Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan
Russian State Film, Sound, and Photo Archive
Rustam Khalfin Look Gallery
Schusev Museum of Architecture
Scientific Research Museum of the Russian Academy of Arts
State Hermitage Museum
State Historical Museum
State Museum of Oriental Art
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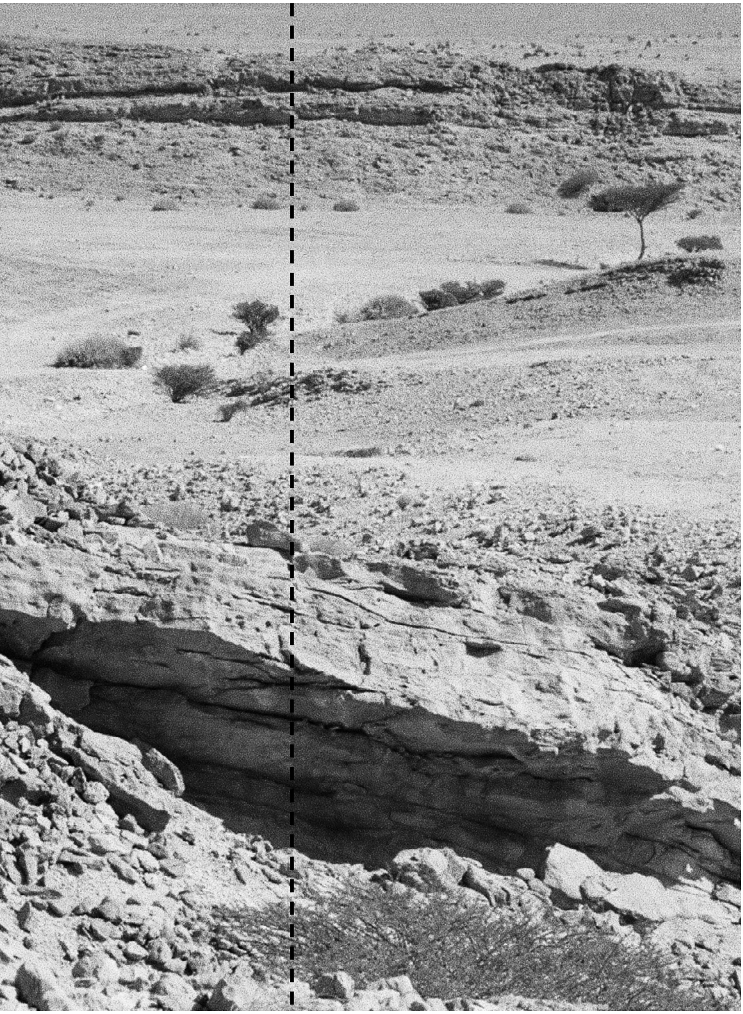

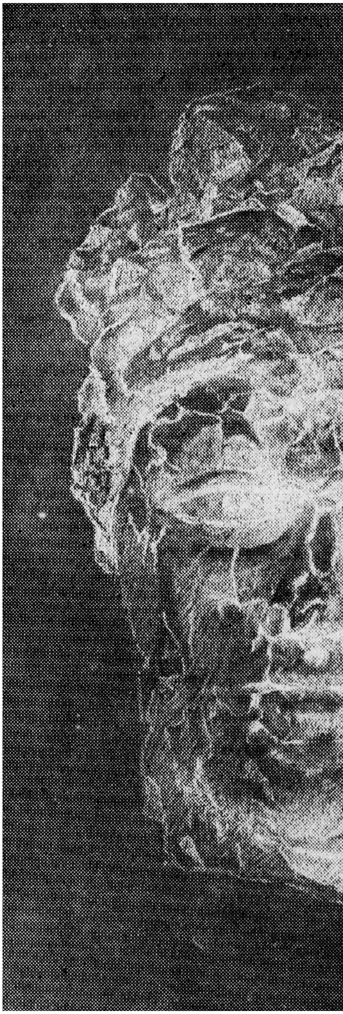

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