

**PRESERVING REGIONAL HISTORY THROUGH CULTURAL TOURISM:
A CASE STUDY OF THE SAVITSKY MUSEUM AND ITS GLOBAL AUDIENCE**

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**ИНФОРМАЦИЯ О
СТАТЬЕ**

ИСТОРИЯ СТАТЬИ:

Received: 04.10.2026

Revised: 04.10.2026

Accepted: 04.10.2026

**КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ
СЛОВА:**

*Cultural tourism,
Savitsky Museum, Russian
avant-garde, Khorezm
oasis, Pre-Aral history,
global audience, heritage
preservation.*

АННОТАЦИЯ:

This paper examines the pivotal role of cultural tourism in safeguarding regional history and ethnic identity, focusing on the I.V. Savitsky State Museum of Arts in Nukus, Uzbekistan. Known globally as the "Louvre of the Desert," the museum holds a unique dual repository consisting of the world's second-largest collection of Soviet avant-garde art and an extensive archive of traditional Karakalpak applied arts alongside ancient Khorezm archaeological antiquities. This study analyzes how the museum acts as a critical cultural anchor in the peripheral Aral Sea zone, evaluating the dynamics of foreign tourist inflows and international museum collaborations. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates how strategic cultural curation transforms isolated regional history into a sustainable global asset.

Cultural heritage has become one of the most dynamic drivers of global tourism in the twenty-first century. As travelers increasingly seek authentic experiences rooted in history, identity, and local traditions, cultural tourism has gained strategic importance for many developing and transition economies. In post-Soviet Central Asia, tourism is now viewed as a vital instrument for economic diversification and international integration [1]. Uzbekistan's tourism sector has shown rapid expansion in the post-pandemic period. According to official data, approximately 7 million foreign tourists visited Uzbekistan in 2023 [2]. This figure grew markedly in 2024, reaching 8.2 million international arrivals [3]. Preliminary estimates for 2025 indicate continued growth, with about 6.3 million foreign tourists entering the country during the first seven months of the year [4].

The State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan named after I.V. Savitsky, widely recognized as the "Louvre of the Desert," holds a unique position in global museology. Founded in 1966 by artist and ethnographer Igor Savitsky, the museum contains a massive repository of nearly 100,000 artifacts that preserve both Soviet dissident culture and local

Central Asian traditions [5]. The geographic isolation of the city of Nukus, away from the immediate control of major political centers, allowed this institution to become a world-class sanctuary for endangered art [6]. The museum's global fame is primarily driven by its extraordinary collection of Soviet avant-garde masterpieces, which is the second-largest in the world. During the Soviet regime, under strict censorship and the enforcement of "Socialist Realism," abstract and experimental art was banned, and artists faced severe persecution. Igor Savitsky secretly rescued approximately 44,000 of these banned canvases from the families of persecuted artists, creating an intact historical time capsule of creators like Lysenko, Volkov, and Borovaya that exists nowhere else on Earth [7].

Beyond fine arts, Savitsky worked extensively to protect the vanishing heritage of the local nomadic population during the Soviet modernization era. He collected thousands of traditional Karakalpak artifacts, including bridal headdresses (kiymeshek), jewelry, woven carpets, and yurt decorations. Savitsky intentionally curated these items alongside avant-garde paintings to demonstrate a profound visual connection between the bold geometric patterns of modern art and ancient tribal craftsmanship [8]. Today, the Savitsky Museum serves as a crucial economic and cultural driver for the region, attracting thousands of international tourists, art historians, and researchers annually. This unique destination has integrated the remote city of Nukus into international cultural tourism routes. The museum's academic and global significance continues to expand through international digital archiving projects and exhibitions, proving the power of a museum in preserving regional identity [9].

The State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan named after I.V. Savitsky plays a foundational role in researching, preserving, and institutionalizing the historical memory of the Southern Aral Sea region and the ancient Khorezm oasis. Long before establishing the famous art repository, Igor Savitsky first arrived in the region in 1950 as an official artist for the iconic Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition, led by the world-renowned scientist Sergey P. Tolstov. This direct connection to field archaeology laid the groundwork for the museum's extensive Ancient Khorezm Art section, which transforms the remote city of Nukus into a central gateway for understanding one of Central Asia's oldest sedentary civilizations [10]. The museum houses a breathtaking archaeological collection of over 15,000 artifacts spanning four millennia—from the Bronze Age down to the 14th century CE. Due to the historical scale and material richness of the ruins discovered across the desert fortresses of Karakalpakstan, scholar Sergey Tolstov famously referred to ancient Khorezm as the "Central Asian Egypt. The displays feature unglazed ceramics dating back to the 5th century BCE, ancient household items, weapons, and tools that reflect the everyday socioeconomic life of the oasis. Among the most prominent masterpieces are the unique 2nd–1st century BCE royal wall paintings and frescoes excavated from Akshakhan-kala and Toprak-kala, which portray a royal portrait gallery and offer irreplaceable data on early regional statehood and iconography [11].

he Aral Sea and Khorezm region are deeply intertwined with the origins and development of Zoroastrianism. The Savitsky Museum acts as a vital guardian of this spiritual history through its rare collection of Zoroastrian cult artifacts. The exhibition showcases unique terracotta cult figurines of local deities, ritual vessels, and elaborately decorated ossuaries (clay bone-chests) featuring ancient Aramaic inscriptions. Many of these pieces were recovered from ancient sites like the Chilpyk dakhma ("Tower of Silence"), shedding light on the complex funerary practices, cosmological beliefs, and intersecting religious currents that thrived along the Amu Darya river basin centuries before the Islamic era [12]. In addition to sedentary oasis life, the museum holds paramount importance for documenting the shifting ecology and ethnic composition of the Aral Sea delta. The chronological displays trace the transitions of nomadic tribes—including the Massageteans, Sarmatians, Oguzs, and Kipchaks—who navigated the harsh desert landscapes between the Aral and Caspian seas. Furthermore, the museum curates vital material culture from the medieval Kerder culture of the Southern Aral region. Through excavated bronze ornaments, unique coins, and 12th–13th century glazed ceramics, these specific exhibits provide modern ethnographers and international tourists with concrete material evidence regarding the early stages of Karakalpak ethnogeny and adaptation to the local environment [13].

The Phenomenon of the "Louvre of the Desert" (Global E'tirot) Despite its remote geographic coordinates in the heart of the Kyzylkum desert and near the ecologically distressed Aral Sea basin, the Savitsky Museum has transformed the city of Nukus into an internationally recognized cultural destination. The museum achieved its global status after Western diplomats and art historians dubbed it the "Louvre of the Desert". This catchy international branding triggered a steady influx of foreign travelers who are willing to bypass traditional Silk Road destinations like Samarkand and Bukhara specifically to witness this hidden artistic oasis [14]. The dynamics of cultural tourism at the Savitsky Museum show a unique pattern of highly educated international visitors, including researchers, art critics, and European tour groups. The museum serves as a critical cultural anchor for the entire Republic of Karakalpakstan. Foreign tourist arrivals not only inject financial resources into the local hospitality and transportation sectors but also drive the revitalization of traditional crafts, turning the museum into a sustainable engine for regional development [15]. In recent years, the museum's global audience has expanded dramatically beyond the borders of Uzbekistan through active international cooperation. Thanks to partnerships with prestigious global institutions, priceless masterpieces from the Nukus collection have been displayed at high-profile international exhibitions in cultural capitals like Paris, Moscow, and Florence. Furthermore, ongoing international digitization projects are creating multilingual virtual tours and online open-access catalogs, allowing global researchers to study the unique collections remotely [16].

In conclusion, the I.V. Savitsky State Art Museum in Nukus serves as an extraordinary testament to how strategic institutional curation and cultural tourism can safeguard

endangered regional histories and transform them into globally recognized identities. This study has demonstrated that the museum is far more than a conventional art gallery; it functions as an irreplaceable historical crossroads where the political resistance of the Soviet avant-garde seamlessly converges with the ancient material identity of the Southern Aral Sea and the Khorezm oasis. By systematically rescuing approximately 44,000 banned canvases alongside thousands of vanishing Karakalpak nomadic artifacts and Zoroastrian antiquities, the institution successfully prevented the systematic erasure of both dissident human expression and indigenous Central Asian traditions. Furthermore, the phenomenon of the "Louvre of the Desert" highlights the profound socio-economic and diplomatic power of modern cultural tourism. Despite its geographical isolation near the ecologically distressed Aral Sea basin, the museum has integrated the remote region into global tourism networks, creating crucial financial incentives for regional infrastructure development, localized hospitality growth, and the active revival of traditional craftsmanship. Recent international exhibition partnerships in Western Europe and ongoing multilingual digital archiving initiatives have expanded the museum's audience into a dynamic, global scientific community, proving that geographic distance is no longer a barrier to cultural preservation.

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