

# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SHARED CULTURAL HERITAGE: WOODEN ARTWORKS IN AJARA STATE MUSEUM

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to examine the wooden artworks exhibited in the Ajara State Museum from an art history perspective, evaluating their place within the region's cultural heritage and their contribution to the preservation of this heritage. The Ajara region, located in the southwest of Georgia on the Black Sea coast, is a geographical area where different ethnic and cultural structures have intersected throughout history, thus forming a rich artistic accumulation. Wood craftsmanship, in particular, has been highly valued in both the daily life and artistic production of the region, developing with mastery passed down from generation to generation. In this context, the wooden artifacts in the Ajara State Museum stand out as representatives of cultural continuity and local identity, beyond their aesthetic value. In the research, selected wooden artifacts in the museum's collection were analyzed in terms of their formal characteristics, ornamentation motifs, technical structures, and stylistic features. Through iconographic analysis, the symbols in the artifacts and their relationship with social structures were evaluated. Furthermore, by establishing a connection with the period characteristics of the artifacts, their meanings within the historical context were revealed. The developmental trajectory of wood art in the region was also evaluated through typological classifications. This study focuses not only on the production of individual artists but also on shared cultural memory and collective identity. The findings indicate that the wood art in Ajara is not merely craft products serving functional purposes, but also original works with high artistic value and historical significance. Consequently, the documentation, preservation, and exhibition of these works is of great importance for the sustainability of cultural heritage, art history writing, and museum practices.

**Keywords:** Ajara State Museum, Wooden Artworks, Cultural Heritage, Cultural Identity, Museology.

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**Introduction.** Ajara, one of the oldest regions of Georgia, is historically located in the southwestern part of the Meskheta region (Tolga, 2020: 19). Administratively, the region has been divided throughout history into "Upper Ajara" (centers Khulo, Khikhani) and "Lower Ajara" (centers Keda, Batumi) (Tolga, 2020: 19, Korkut, 2018: 61-62)). The administrative center of the Ajara Autonomous Republic, which is stated to mean "rainy place" in the Megrel-Laz language, is Batumi, and it borders the Artvin and Ardahan provinces of Turkey in the northeast. Ajara has an area of approximately 3000 km<sup>2</sup>, with a 120 km border with Turkey and a 50 km Black Sea coastline. The region maintains its characteristic as an important transit route in Transcaucasia. Due to the inclined topography and high altitude, settlements are scattered across the terrain, similar to the Eastern Black Sea Region. This geography, covered with vast forests, hosts rich plant diversity and multiple tree species (Hasanoğlu and Cemilli, 2006: 130; Aytekin and Kaya, 2019: 1197). (Map 1).



**Map 1:** Geographical Location of the Ajara Autonomous Republic<sup>1</sup>

Ajara has a very ancient history. The region, which was part of the Colchis (Kolhet) Kingdom starting from the 9th century B.C. (Bala, 1997: 837), in the 1st century B.C., came under the domination of Pontus and then the Roman Empire. Batumi developed militarily and commercially during the Roman period. In the 5th century A.D., the Kingdom of Lazika (Egrisi) continued, and subsequently, the region became an area of struggle between the Byzantines and Persians (Lang, 1997: 15; Sari, 2010: 18). Islam began to spread in the region starting from the 7th century with the conquest of the Caucasus by the Islamic armies, and it came under Arab rule during the Umayyad period. With the collapse of the Arab rule, the United Kingdom of Georgia was established, and Ajara also came under the roof of this kingdom (İberieli, 2014: 149-156). After the Seljuk victory in 1071, Batumi and Ajara were included in the Seljuk territories; during this period, Turkmen groups were settled around Akhaltsikhe and Batumi (Kırzioğlu, 1966: 43-47; Sari, 2010: 19). Georgian King David IV (1089-1125), settled a large community of Kipchaks in the region to stop the Seljuk advance. Since this date, the Kipchaks have played an important role ethnically and culturally in the history of the region (Gül, 2009: 79-80; Alasania, 2015: 96-97). With the conquest of Trabzon in the 15th century (1461), the connection of the Georgians with Byzantium was cut off, and Ajara came under Ottoman rule in the early 16th century. Following the conquest in 1535, Islam spread rapidly as the region's people connected to the Ottomans through the beys who voluntarily accepted Islam (Gül, 2009: 86; Karamanlı, 1996: 314). Under Ottoman rule, Batumi was briefly connected to Erzurum, but mostly served as the center of the Lazistan Sanjak, which was part of the Trabzon Eyalet (Province). With the annexation of Georgia by Russia in 1801, the Ottoman presence came under threat. With the Treaties of San Stefano and Berlin signed after the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War, Batumi, Artvin, Ardahan, and their surroundings were ceded to Russia. As a result of this war, thousands of Ajaran Muslims were forced to migrate to Anatolia, but these historical ties continue to this day (Aytekin, 2018: 37). Bostan, 1992: 201-211; Seçkin, 2017: 107-128). Although Ajara temporarily returned to the Ottoman Empire with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, it was evacuated at the end of World War I. During the Soviet Union period, its legal autonomy continued as the Ajara Autonomous Soviet Socialist

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.google.com/search?q=Acara+%C3%96zerk+Cumhuriyetinin+Co%C4%9Frafii+Konumu&rlz=1C1YTUH\\_trTR1027TR1027&oq=Acara+%C3%96zerk+Cumhuriyetinin+Co%C4%9Frafii+Konumu&gs\\_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIJCAEQIRgKKGKABMgkIAhAhGAoYoAEyCQgDECEYChigATIJCAQQIRgKKGKAB0gEKMTAyMDdqMGoxNagCCLACAFEFA1MCQXZOkCc&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=Acara+%C3%96zerk+Cumhuriyetinin+Co%C4%9Frafii+Konumu&rlz=1C1YTUH_trTR1027TR1027&oq=Acara+%C3%96zerk+Cumhuriyetinin+Co%C4%9Frafii+Konumu&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIJCAEQIRgKKGKABMgkIAhAhGAoYoAEyCQgDECEYChigATIJCAQQIRgKKGKAB0gEKMTAyMDdqMGoxNagCCLACAFEFA1MCQXZOkCc&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

Republic. After Georgia gained its independence, the region solidified its de facto autonomy under the administration of Aslan Abashidze after 1991 (Ağacan, 2001: 27). The new Constitutional Law that came into effect in 2004 legally limited autonomy by granting the central government the authority to dissolve the Supreme Council (Aydın, 2020: 32). Today, together with Batumi (the center), Keda, Kobuleti, Helvaçauri, Shuakhevi, and Khulo are important settlements of the Ajara Autonomous Republic. The discipline of art history analyzes the formal, technical, and semantic aspects of cultural heritage, revealing the role of art in the identity construction of societies. In this context, the Ajara region, located in the southwest of Georgia, is an important cultural center that has been shaped by the interaction of Ottoman, Byzantine, Georgian, and Caucasian cultures throughout history. The tradition of wood art in the region has deep roots in both architectural ornamentation and portable handicrafts. The Ajara State Museum is one of the most important institutions that preserves and documents this traditional art concept. The wooden artifacts in the museum's collection are examples reflecting both the level of mastery and the local aesthetic understanding. This study aims to determine the place of these artifacts in the shared cultural heritage of the region by examining them with art history methods. The research utilized a qualitative analysis method; selected wooden artifacts in the museum's collection were examined through direct observation, photography, and literature review. The artifacts were evaluated in terms of their formal characteristics, technical structures, ornamentation motifs, iconographic analyses, and typological classifications. In addition, the historical context related to the production periods of the artifacts was examined, and a connection was established with the concepts of local identity and cultural continuity in this context.

#### **Evaluation of Ajara Wood Art as a Cultural Intersection Point**

The word 'ahşap' (wood) originates from the Arabic term "ahşâb," the plural of "haşeb," meaning "lumber" or "tree" (Yücel, 1989: pp.181-182). This deep historical origin emphasizes the material's importance to humanity. Lumber carefully obtained from various tree species is meticulously processed in workshops, transforming it into a construction and design material suitable for different areas of use. The widespread and daily life integration of wood naturally paved the way for the birth of wood craftsmanship ; and the sophisticated techniques developed over time have ensured the enrichment of wood art (Kaya, 2023: p. 142). However, compared to other building materials, wood's vulnerability to geographical conditions and its primary use in portable artifacts have significantly limited the number of tangible examples that have survived to the present day. This situation further increases the value and artistic importance of the rare pieces that have survived. Wood has been accepted as humanity's most fundamental and versatile building material since the beginning of civilizations. Its use ranges from everyday objects to monumental architectural compositions of the highest level in terms of scale and grandeur. In different cultural geographies of the world, the language of wood art has been meticulously shaped by its local style. This situation led to the originality of the artifacts in terms of their techniques and craftsmanship, allowing each geography to form its own architectural identity. In this context, the Ajara region holds a unique position worth examining. Historically, the Ajara region has been located at the intersection of four cultural basins (Black Sea, Caucasus, Anatolia, and Byzantine/Georgian). This strategic location has enabled the region's wood art to acquire a rich structure that cannot be reduced to a single national identity. Therefore, Ajara wood art is a tangible piece of evidence representing not only local craftsmanship but also a shared cultural memory that transcends borders. It is known that wood was used in mosque architecture starting from the Early Islamic Period (Aytekin & Kaya, 2024: p.229, Aytekin, 1997, pp. 53-55).

#### **Ajara State Museum and Wooden Artworks**

The Ajara State Museum (Khratio Akhvlediani) (ხრატონი ახვლედიანი) is located in the city center of Batumi, at the intersection of Woznesensk and Olga streets (corner of Melikishvili and Vakhtang Gorgasali

streets). The first museum in Batumi (today's Ajara State Museum) was established in 1890 in a six-grade school building. The founder of the museum is Nicholas Goman, who was a handicraft teacher between 1893 and 1906. In 1906, Goman created the first exhibitions with the workshop he opened on his own initiative and local artifacts he collected from Ajara villages. This museum was officially established as a Children's Museum in 1908 through the initiative of the local people, and Nicholas Goman was appointed as the director. In 1910, due to the growth of the exhibitions, it was moved to the City Council Building. In 1912, it was officially converted into the City Museum. In 1913, its founder Goman was re-appointed as director and continued this duty until 1937. This initiative, started by the efforts of Nicholas Goman, became an important turning point in the cultural history of the region (Özbek, 2022: p.210).

The museum building has a rectangular plan form oriented east-west and was constructed as two stories (Photo 1).



**Photo 1:** Ajara State Museum (Khrat'ion Akh'vlediani) (Batumi Center - 1890)

On the first floor of the museum; there are six galleries, including an administrative unit, a nature (flora and fauna) gallery, an archaeology gallery, three ethnography galleries, and a gallery housing a red-figure krater (vase) belonging to the Hellenistic period in a single room, as well as galleries located along a long corridor displaying archaeological artifacts, stone artifacts, copper utensils, a wooden model of a Laz house, wooden shaping materials, and wooden door wings and wooden pieces belonging to architectural structures.

#### **Section Containing Wooden Artifacts**

The museum's ethnographic collection consists of rare pieces that reflect the artistic depth of Ajara and Georgian culture. The collection contains selected examples of wood carving, original Georgian embroideries, and traditional handicrafts. Regional endemic tree species were generally preferred as building materials in the preparation of these artistic products. Durable and aesthetic trees such as beech, chestnut, walnut, and spruce have been the material source for the artifacts. The decorations on the wooden surfaces were executed using graphic cuts (engraving technique) that provided depth and distinctness.

Among the most striking pieces in the collection are the doors brought from the villages of Khino, Zendidi, and Aho. These doors represent rare and typologically important examples of Georgian wood engraving art (Aytekin & Özbek, 2024: p.179). The decorative motifs on the doors and other objects reflect the region's centuries-old traditions and belief system:

- **Tree of Life:** Symbol of eternal life and abundance.

- **Borjgali:** Georgian symbol representing the sun and eternity.
- **Cross and Vine Images:** Show the strong cultural influence of the Christian faith and the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The museum also displays architectural pieces such as historical doors brought from the mosques of Akho (17th century) and Baratuli Khino (18th century), various decorated columns, arches, and shutters. A significant part of the collection consists of pieces belonging to the wooden residential architecture and mosques built during the Ottoman Period, especially between the 19th and 20th centuries. These artifacts and handicraft products from that period are exhibited in this gallery as tangible evidence of the region's multicultural structure and the syncretic (hybrid) nature of its architectural styles (Photo 2).



**Photo 2:** Section containing wooden products

### **Description of Wooden Door Ornamentation**

The entire door is covered with rich geometric ornamentation crafted using deep carving (engraving) technique.

#### **General Composition:**

- **Geometric Repetitions:** The door surface consists of repeating square or rhombic (diamond-shaped) panels arranged vertically and horizontally. These panels enclose the door surface within a regular grid system.
- **Arched Upper Part:** The upper part of the door is finished in a slightly arched (close to semicircular) form, creating an architectural effect.

**Symmetry:** The decorations of the two-winged door exhibit a symmetrical arrangement according to the central vertical hinge line (Photo 3, Drawing 1).

#### **Details Within the Panel:**

- **Diamond Motifs:** Inside each square panel (diamond shape), there is a large geometric flower or star motif in the center.

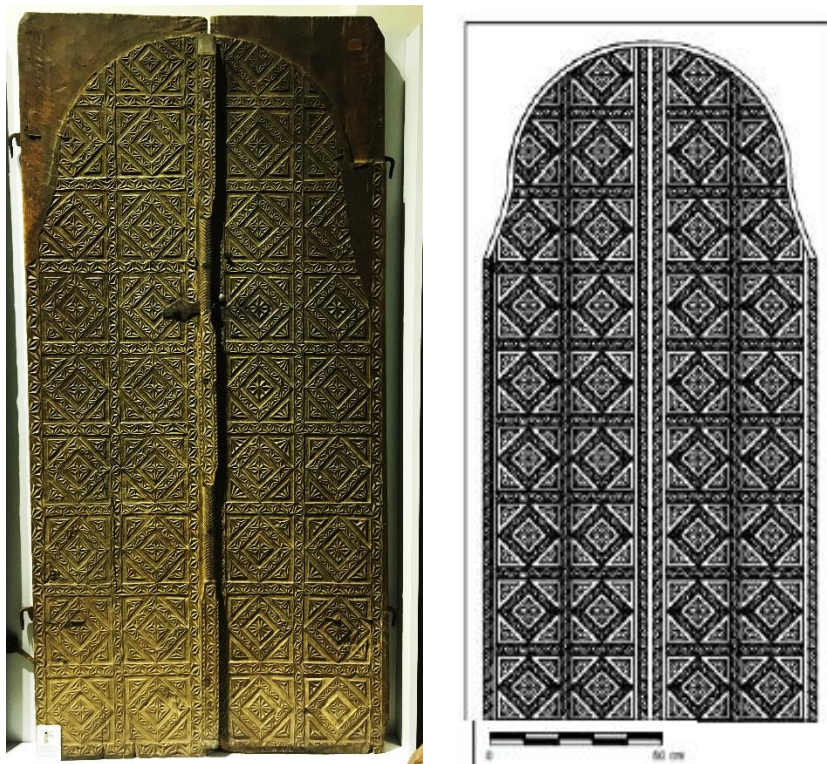
- **Inner Frames:** The main motif in the center is usually surrounded by smaller geometric borders or double-lined frames. This creates a sense of depth and layering within each square.

**Boundary and Separator Elements (Borders):**

- **Vertical Borders:** In the middle section where the door wings join, on the edges of the door, and on the lines separating the vertical panels, there are narrow borders (strips) consisting of continuous vegetal (rûmî or palmette type) motifs, different from the main geometric patterns. These borders soften the harsh geometric transitions and add dynamism to the ornamentation.

- **Horizontal Separators:** The lines separating the horizontal panels are also usually enriched with geometric/vegetal motifs such as braiding or chain patterns.

This type of intense geometric and vegetal transitional carved ornamentation is characteristic of Ottoman and Georgian wood art and architectural details.

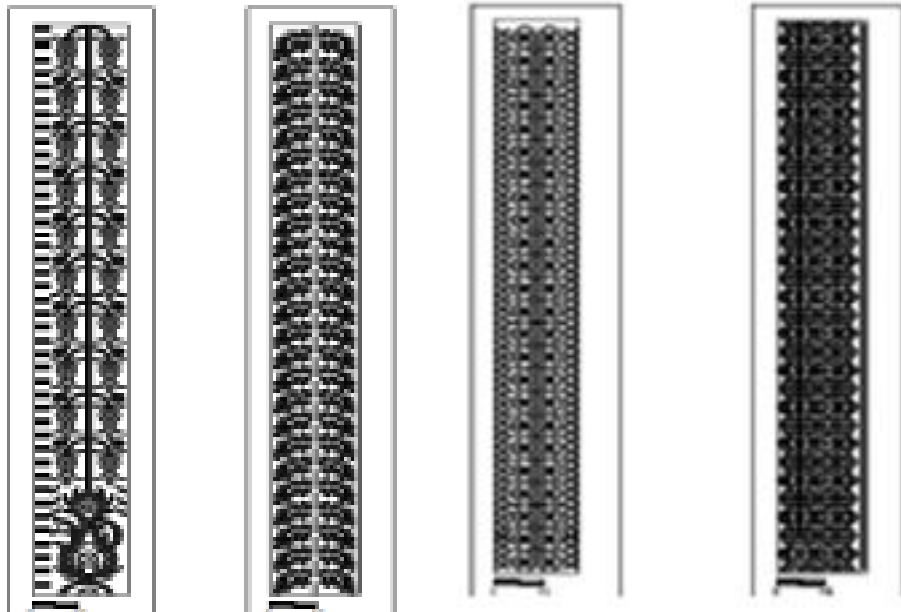


**Photo 3: wooden door Drawing 1: wooden door**

Other wooden door wings in the Ajara State Museum wooden artifact collection demonstrate the diversity of wood carving and engraving art prevalent in the Ajara and Caucasus regions. While the first and fourth panels mostly represent vegetal (rûmî/palmette/vine branch) ornamentation ; the Middle Left Panel is one of the finest and most dense examples of the geometric infill technique. This rich repertoire proves that the region did not adhere to a single style in architectural elements but reflected different periods and cultural interactions (Photo 4).



**Photo 4:** wooden door wings



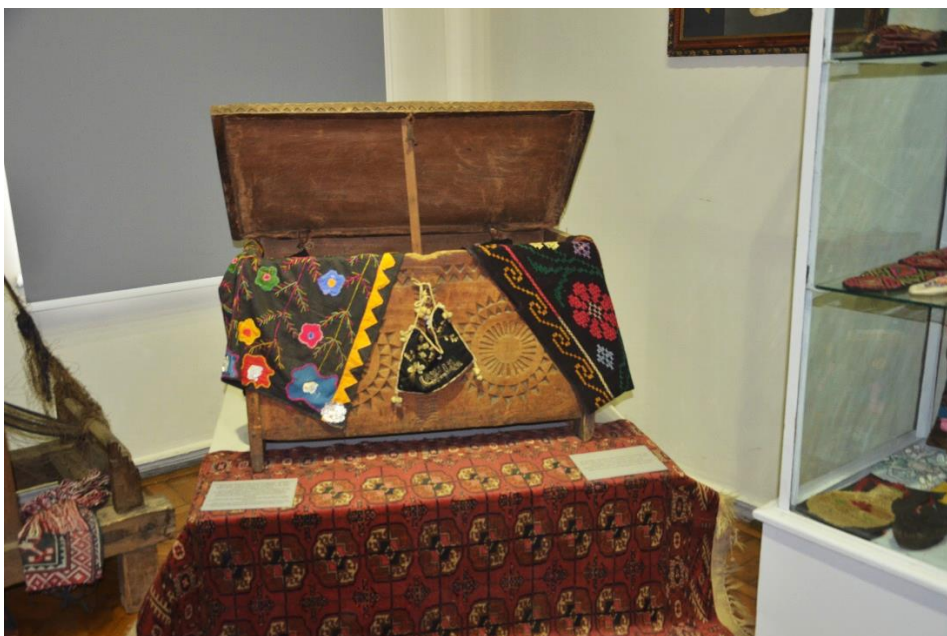
**Drawing 2:** wooden door wings

In addition to carving artifacts, the collection also includes ethnographic objects such as painted wooden trays from the 19th century. These trays are adorned with polychrome (multi-colored) paint technique on wood, and the star, crescent, and flowing geometric forms on them are exhibited as valuable daily use objects that reflect the region's cosmic symbolism and traditional aesthetic understanding (Photo 5).



**Photo 5:** wooden tray 19th century

This section also displays traditional wooden chests and handcrafted dowry products associated with them. The chests are important pieces of furniture, reflecting the social and economic status of families, adorned with circular carvings in the center evoking sun symbolism. The brightly colored floral and geometric patterned embroideries draped over the chests stand out as tangible examples of Ajara region's rich textile and needlework heritage (Photo 6).



**Photo 6:** wooden chest and handcrafted dowry

A significant part of the gallery features a traditional wooden living space diorama, depicting the social and architectural structure of the Ajara countryside. This cross-section of a typical, untreated wooden dwelling showcases the region's architectural tradition ; the mannequins inside depict daily life where

women are engaged in domestic crafts (weaving/spinning), and social division of labor is observed. This diorama, along with agricultural tools and household goods, offers visitors the opportunity to visually experience the rural culture and life cycle of the Ajara region.



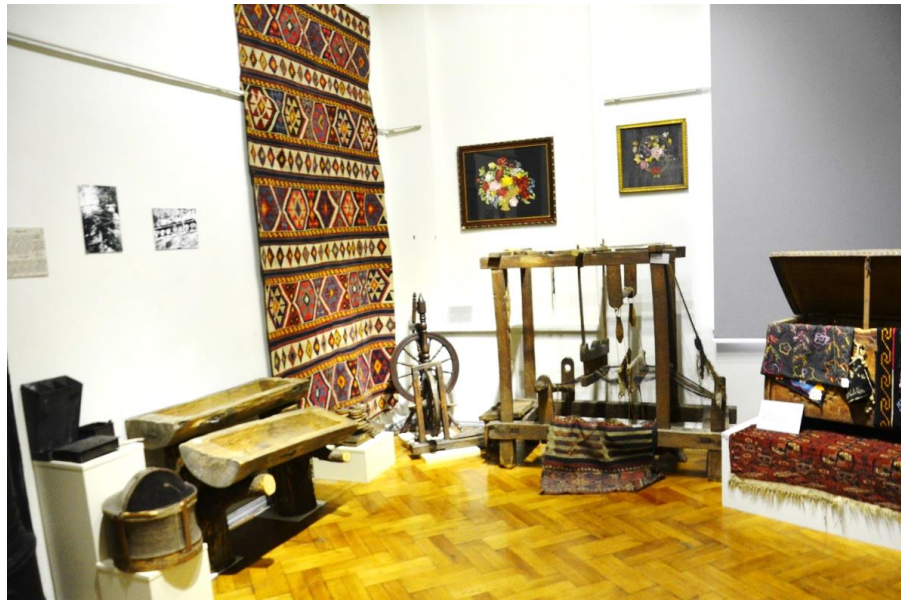
**Photo 7:** In the ethnography gallery wooden living space

In the ethnography gallery, the craft heritage used in the production of traditional wooden products and artifacts is exhibited in special glass panels and exhibition areas. This display aims to show not only the result but also the process. Traditional hand tools used in wood craftsmanship and carving (various chisels, axes, types of planes, and other carpentry tools) are exhibited, showcasing the technical competence of Ajara's master craftsmen. These tools are tangible data documenting the region's rural technology and expertise in shaping wood.



**Photo 8:** In the ethnography gallery, wooden products and traditional wood carving and processing tools are exhibited in the glass section

The richness of the gallery is reinforced with objects reflecting other rural production areas in addition to wooden artifacts. In this area, a traditional wooden carpet weaving loom is exhibited. This loom emphasizes the region's importance in textile art and is materialized with the brightly patterned, geometrically motified carpets (kilims) hanging right next to it. Furthermore, carved logs or other wooden tools used as beekeeping supplies are displayed in the exhibition; this demonstrates the traditional importance of beekeeping and honey production in Ajara's rural economy. This holistic presentation showcases the richness of local culture and the economic cycle.



**Photo 9:** Carpet Weaving Loom and beekeeping supplies



**Photo 10:** beekeeping supplies

A desk or table displayed on the Eastern front of the ethnography gallery presents a masterful example of the inlay art in the collection. This table features decorations crafted with materials like bright bone, mother-of-pearl, or ivory on dark wood. In the center of the tabletop, there is a large, symmetrical, and detailed star/rosette motif, reminiscent of a radiating sun. These radiating and triangular forms are also repeated on the table's edge borders and the upper parts of its legs. The side and lower parts of the table are cut in an elegant, arch-like form, particularly seen in Ottoman and Anatolian wooden furniture. Furthermore,

this table demonstrates that local craftsmen in the Ajara region are competent not only in carving but also in sophisticated inlay techniques and have successfully assimilated aesthetic influences from the Eastern cultural basin.



**Photo 11:** A desk (table) is displayed in the eastern front of the ethnography gallery

### **Evaluation and Comparison: Wood Art, Cultural Memory, and Regional Interaction**

In the Ajara region, wood material transcends being merely a functional element used in daily life, becoming a fundamental form of artistic expression that carries both aesthetic and symbolic meanings. The artifacts exhibited in the museum are a tangible part of the local community's collective memory, beyond individual artistic creation. Each artifact has served as a cultural narrative, carrying the beliefs, lifestyle, and craft knowledge of its period into the future (Çalış & Özbek, 2025: p.478). The exhibition of these narratives is vital for the preservation of cultural identity and continuity.

The geopolitical location of the Ajara Region (Georgia to the northeast, the Black Sea to the west, and the Artvin and Ardahan provinces of Turkey to the south) explains the region's cultural richness. Comparisons made with museums in Turkey's Eastern Black Sea Region and the Caucasus Region have shown that this geographical and historical proximity is reflected in the ethnographic collections. The Artvin Hopa Ethnography Museum, in particular, exhibits strong similarities with Ajara museums in terms of ethnographic artifacts due to its location on trade routes and its proximity to Georgia (Özbek & Aytekin, 2023: 545-551).

The closeness of the cultures of both regions ensures that especially:

- Wooden artifacts (carving, architectural details),
- Daily use items (furniture, trays),
- Fundamental ethnographic elements such as clothing and agricultural tools are similar in the collections.

Numerous ethnographic artifacts in the Hopa Museum's collection, emerging from the influence of pre-Islamic and Islamic Period Turkish culture and art, emphasize the importance of the historical, religious, and cultural proximity and mutual cultural interaction between the two countries (Özbek, 2022: p. 424).

The wooden artworks in the Ajara State Museum range widely from functional objects (chest, door wing, table, icon frame) to ornamentation-focused art products. The commonly found spiral, star, cross, bunch of grapes, and tulip motifs in the artifacts contain symbols belonging to both Christian and Islamic cultures. This situation is a clear indicator of the multicultural interaction in the region. Technically, deep carving and relief techniques stand out on the wooden surfaces. Colored paint and gold leaf applications are noteworthy in some examples. The fine craftsmanship in the artifacts indicates that the masters were not only artisans but also had an identity as artists. Stylistically, a synthesis aesthetic is observed in the artifacts dated to the 18th and 19th centuries, blending local Georgian motifs with the Ottoman ornamentation style. This synthesis stems from Ajara being a cultural transition zone throughout history.

**Conclusion and Recommendations.** The holistic consideration and examination of the wooden artworks in the Ajara State Museum in Batumi, Georgia, is not only an artistic study but also a basis for strategic cultural cooperation. Such studies carry great potential for establishing and strengthening developing cultural collaborations with the Republic of Georgia, a country with which we share geographical and historical proximity. Furthermore, making this cultural heritage visible will make a significant contribution to tourism mobility between Turkey and the Republic of Georgia.

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