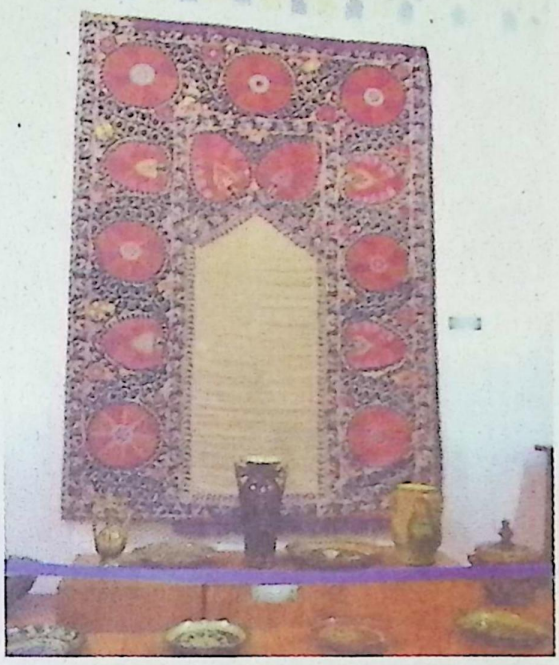


Suzani, hand embroidered wall hanging.

BOKHARA 3
PEACOCKS AND PALACES

NEEMAN SOBHAN

As soon as we step through the gate we notice them. The strutting birds. Symbols of majesty, regal beauty, grace and arrogance. A Palace such as this summer residence of the erstwhile Emirs of Bokhara, which we are here to visit, had already proclaimed itself: Look upon my peacocks and know you are in royal surroundings!

We will soon be duly impressed, but more by the building's interiors and contents, and not so much by these almost mythical birds that sit on trees screeching irritatingly like monkeys or drag their folded plumage around like small turkeys or large hens. I am not overly fond of birds (a Hitchcock-derived legacy?) and claws, beaks and pride are not among my favourite personality features either in the animal or human kingdom.

This palace, located 4 kilometres from Bokhara was built in the nineteenth century by one of the Emirs for his wife Sitora-Bonu and named Sitorai Mokhi-Khosa, the Palace of Moon-like Stars. It has three main sections, the main palace, the octagonal guest pavilion and the Harem. We visit the first, stepping up to the long decorative verandah, pose on the throne set up there, and look at the courtyard, the pulpit like entrance to the building opposite (now a national costumes museum) and the surrounding rose garden with peacock filled trees. The feeling we get is of a lovely summer retreat built for pleasure.

We will walk around the surrounding gardens and parks with their fountains, ornamental lakes, pergolas and loggias later. For now, Fazl leads us inside what are the sumptuous Throne room, the receiving chambers and halls filled with chandeliers and high backed chairs. There is a strong European and Russian imperial air about it all, and yet a great deal of Asian craftsmanship is apparent too, especially in the walls of the waiting rooms embellished with intricately wrought frescos of geometric decorative patterns inlaid in vertical and horizontal panels and niches, as are



Emir of Bukhara.