

International Emerging Action (CNRS)
Seminar « Critical Heritage Studies in the Post-Socialist Space »
(CNRS, Sorbonne University, Bielefeld University)



**RECONSIDERING THE MUSEUM IN CENTRAL ASIA:
INSTITUTIONS, SPACES, APPROACHES, AND NARRATIVES**

International conference

Salle de conférence (2^e étage), Institut d'études slaves, 9 rue Michelet, 75006 Paris
2 June 2026
9:00–19:00

Organizers:

Svetlana GORSHENINA, Kristina BEKENOVA, Dilda RAMAZAN, Marinika SADGYAN

ARGUMENTATION

Over the past three decades, museums of Central Asia have undergone profound transformations, specific to each republic and linked to the collapse of the Soviet system, the formation of new nation-states, and the constant tensions between global cultural models and unique local historical trajectories. Museums in the region, to varying degrees, have become key spaces in which questions of identity, heritage, memory, and power are articulated, contested, and reconsidered. Accordingly, the place and role of the museum as an institution in the context of global cultural, economic, and media shifts are currently being actively discussed in all Central Asian countries. At different levels — from government officials and directors of private galleries to independent curators and the interested public — the question of the museum's purpose is increasingly being raised: it is presented as a conscientious and impartial “custodian of antiquities”; as an instrument of political power designed to illustrate new national narratives; as an intersocial mediator aimed to foster inclusivity among diverse visitor groups; as a mechanism for knowledge production and alternative education; or as an independent actor in cultural policy that shapes the cultural agenda and public debate.

Such reconsideration of the museum's role comes from the recognition that it is no longer the only legitimate space for cultural representation. Moreover, the very concept of "museum" is undergoing a crisis and transformation.

In Central Asia, this process is complicated by the coexistence of the Soviet institutional legacy, post-Soviet nation-building strategies, international cultural interventions, and local, often informal or grassroots, initiatives. Parallel to the blurring of the very concept of "museum" and its institutional boundaries, other alternative, yet significant and comparable hybrid formats — "third" spaces and initiatives (art residencies, cultural centers, art clusters, memorial sites, temporary platforms, galleries) — are increasingly emerging. These spaces either assume some of the museum's functions without necessarily claiming museum status, or, conversely, demonstratively reject them, provocatively declaring themselves "non-museums," whose goal is to radically transform "traditional" museum forms.

It is precisely these transformations of the museum in Central Asia, in the specific contexts of individual countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan), and the transgression of its institutional boundaries and practices, perceived either as a crisis of museum practice or as a visible confirmation of existing resources, that will be the focus of the conference's discussions.

Without losing sight of the historical perspective, beginning with the 19th century, when the museum — a specifically European institution — was introduced to Central Asia during the early stages of Russian colonial presence, and acknowledging the asynchronous nature of contemporary transformations across the republics, the conference proposes to approach the museum not as a given and not even as a cultural institution, but as a specific spatial, political, and epistemological construct embedded within specific national, historical, and urban contexts, where various forms of power and different types of memory are refracted. The museum can be both a space for negotiation and an arena for "memory wars," where various conflicting regimes of legitimacy collide; an object of decolonial critique demanding radical change (decolonization); a structuring element of the urban and cultural landscape; a participant in economic and network processes; a screen for state cultural policy; and a mechanism for constructing personal reputation.

This conference proposes to critically rethink the museum as an institution in Central Asia not as a stable and self-sufficient form, but as a dynamic field of tensions between state and society, official narratives and alternative practices, architecture and urban memory, global standards and local knowledge regimes. The conference recognizes the fundamental heterogeneity of museum regimes in Central Asian countries. However, its goal is to create a shared analytical framework in a comparative perspective for studying Central Asian museums beyond normative Western models, as well as to strengthen research and professional networks within the region and beyond.

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PROGRAM

09:00–09:05 — Svetlana GORSHENINA, Kristina Bekenova, Dilda RAMAZAN, Marinika SADGYAN, *Introductory remarks*

09:05–09:25 — **Keynote Lecture**

Katarzyna JAROSZ (Vizja University, Warsaw, Poland), *When science becomes heritage. Power, Legitimacy, and the National Narrative*

09:25–10:10 — **Museum as colonial product: is it possible to decolonize it/should it be decolonized?**

Moderator: Xavier HALLEZ (Cetobac, EHESS & IFEAC, CNRS)

09:25–09:45 — **Gulmira SULTANGALIYEVA** (KazNU Al-Farabi, Almaty, Kazakhstan), *From colonial knowledge to national narrative: visual representations in the historical museums of Kazakhstan*

09:45–9:55 — **Kristina BEKENOVA** (Scuola IMT Alti Studi, Lucca, Italy), *Museums forever? Collections, people, and the exhibition regimes in the early Soviet Central Asia*

9:55–10:10 — **Q&A / discussion**

10:10–10:30 — **Coffee break**

10:30–11:45 — **Museum, exhibitions, and ideologies: national narrative and its limits**

Moderator: Isabelle OHAYON (CNRS)

10:30–10:50 — **Zeev LEVIN** (The Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem, and Tel-Aviv University, Israel), *The “Jews of the Region” exhibition at the Samarkand Museum of Local History: between dialogue and exclusivity* (Zoom)

10:50–11:10 — **Alexey ULKO** (independent researcher, Oxford–Tashkent, UK–Uzbekistan), *Evolution of identity politics and global expectations in the museums of Uzbekistan*

11:10–11:30 — **Tenlik DALAYEVA** (KazNPU Abay, Almaty, Kazakhstan), *Museum as mediator: visual narrative in the formation of cultural-historical memory in Kazakhstan*

11:30–11:45 — **Q&A / discussion**

11:45–13:00 — Museum and creative industries: mobility, networks, partnerships, commercialization

Moderator: Adrien FAUVE (Université Paris-Saclay)

11:45–12:05 — **Alexandra ROMANOVA** (*Haqiqiy* gallery, Tashkent, Uzbekistan), *The role of the gallery as a source of formation of the museum collection and gallery activities within the modern museum*

12:05–12:25 — **Olya VESSELOVA** (philosopher, independent curator, Almaty, Kazakhstan), *Inventing the post-museum: private museum initiatives as a platform for expression*

12:25–12:45 — **Lola SAYFI** (*Human House* gallery, Tashkent, Uzbekistan), *Human House as a museum: a new model of cultural institution in Central Asia* (Zoom)

12:45–13:00 — **Q&A / discussion**

13:00–13:45 — Lunch

13:45–15:10 — Museum as locus: memory, architecture and city landscape

Moderator: Cédric PERNETTE (Sorbonne Université)

13:45–14:05 — **Jamilya NURKALIEVA and Alima KAIRAT** (Tselinny Center for Contemporary Culture, Almaty, Kazakhstan), *Tselinny Center for Contemporary Culture as a regional institution of the 21st century: mission, strategy, challenges*

14:05–14:25 — **Anel MOLDAKHMETOVA** (cultural projects curator, Almaty, Kazakhstan), *[non] Museum of architecture as a participatory site-specific format of working with the collective urban memory*

14:25–14:35 — **Marinika SADGYAN** (CNRS / Sorbonne Université / ENSA Paris-Est, Paris, France), *The Aral Sea and the Savitsky Museum: a balance in Karakalpakstan's fragile ecosystem*

14:35–14:55 — **Igor KRUPKO** (International Centre for the Rapprochement of Cultures under the auspices of UNESCO, Almaty, Kazakhstan), *“Asia, through his voice, emerges from the swamp of museums to become a muse once again...”: problematizing the acquisition of historical subjectivity by the Kazakh intelligentsia in the twentieth century*

14:55–15:10 — **Q&A / discussion**

15:10–15:30 — Coffee break

15:30–17:05 — Museum value and collections: what makes a museum significant?

Moderator: Valéry POZNER (CNRS)

15:30–15:50 — **Maria SILINA** (Université de Montréal, Montreal, Canada), *How to study the nationalization of museum collections in the USSR today: cultural diplomacy and expertise* (Zoom)

15:50–16:10 — **Yekaterina REZNIKOVA** (Abylkhan Kasteev National Museum of Arts, Almaty, Kazakhstan), *Soviet collections: how to show them today in independent Kazakhstan?* (Zoom)

16:10–16:30 — **Baktygul MIDINOVA** (Turgunbay Sadykov Osh Regional Museum of Arts, Osh, Kyrgyzstan), *The Osh Museum: institution outside of the dominating narrative*

16:30–16:50 — **Aida ALYMOVA** (The Kurmanjan Datka Nomadic Civilization Center, Ornok village, Issyk-Kul province, Kyrgyzstan), *Musealizing the intangible*

heritage of the nomadic culture: the institutional experience of the Nomadic Civilization Center

16:50–17:05 — Q&A / discussion

17:05–18:30 — The future of museums in Central Asia: between the traditional vision and new understanding of museum space

Moderator: Ksenia PIMENOVA (Université Paris Nanterre)

17:05–17:25 — Alexandra FILATOVA (Independent researcher, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), *Whose museum? Institutional trends and community initiatives in the museums of Kyrgyzstan*

17:25–17:45 — Gamal BOKONBAEV (Tolon Museum of Modern Art, Kuntuu, Kyrgyzstan), *The Aivanism Museum: incorrectness instead of post-totalitarianism*

17:45–18:05 — Inga LĀCE (Almaty Museum of Arts, Almaty, Kazakhstan), *From Richard Serra to Aisha Galymbayeva: building a platform for conversation on contemporary (art) at the Almaty Museum of Arts (Zoom)*

18:05–18:15 — Dilda RAMAZAN (CNRS / Sorbonne Université, Paris, France), *The role of the Kasteev Museum in legitimizing contemporary art in Kazakhstan: «The galleries parade» (1995–1999)*

18:15–18:30 — Q&A / discussion

18:30–18:45 — Svetlana GORSHENINA, Kristina BEKENOVA, Dilda RAMAZAN, Marinika SADGYAN, *Closing remarks and summary*



ABSTRACTS OF THE PRESENTATIONS

Aida ALYMOVA (The Kurmanjan Datka Nomadic Civilization Center, Ornok village, Issyk-Kul province; alymova.ak@gmail.com), *Musealizing the intangible heritage of the nomadic culture: the institutional experience of the Nomadic Civilization Center*

The paper examines the activities of the Kurmanjan Datka Centre of Nomadic Civilization as an example of contemporary musealisation of the intangible heritage of nomadic culture in Kyrgyzstan. In the context of changes in traditional lifestyles and the intensification of globalization, preserving and presenting cultural practices based on oral transmission of knowledge, rituals, crafts, and mobility becomes particularly important. The Centre is analyzed as an institution that connects a living tradition with its museum and educational interpretation. The study explores forms of presenting intangible heritage — from reconstructing a traditional environment and demonstrating crafts to narrative and educational programs. Special attention is given to how the meaning of tradition changes as it transitions into the museum space. The experience of the Centre of Nomadic Civilization in musealising nomadic culture is not only about preservation, but also about rethinking heritage within the system of cultural memory.

Kristina BEKENOVA (Scuola IMT Alti Studi, Lucca: kristina.bekenova@imtlucca.it), *Museums forever? Collections, people, and the exhibition regimes in the early Soviet Central Asia*

Today, museums are commonly defined as permanent institutions. However, the history of museums shows a more precarious reality: museums trade, merge, relocate, or lose their collections amid shifting ethical standards, war, economic crisis, natural disasters, or when their collections outlive their usefulness. Starting from this perspective, this presentation approaches the history of museums in early Soviet Central Asia not from the position of their establishment, but from their endings. It examines how the change in political regimes — from Russian imperial rule to Soviet power — with its shifting national boundaries and new Soviet cultural policies, affected the choice of what was worth preserving and what could instead be transferred, merged, dispersed, or destroyed.

Gamal BOKONBAEV (Tolon Museum of Modern Art, Kuntuu; gambokonbaev@gmail.com), *The Aivanism Museum: incorrectness instead of post-totalitarianism*

The presentation will examine the specific features of the curatorial and museological strategy of the *Tolon Museum of Modern Art*, whose institutional concept is grounded in the notion of “Aivanism” — a neologism proposed as an alternative to socialist realism and to the totalitarian tendencies historically present in the visual arts. Drawing on several exhibition projects realized by the museum, the paper will demonstrate how Aivanism enables connections across diverse contexts and geographies that extend beyond Kyrgyzstan’s borders.

Tenlik DALAYEVA (KazNPU Abay, Almaty; tenlik95@gmail.com), *Museum as mediator: visual narrative in the formation of cultural–historical memory in Kazakhstan*

The modern museum in Kazakhstan’s regions serves not merely as a repository for artifacts, but as an active mediator. Through visual narrative, it transforms fragmented local lore into a coherent and emotionally resonant history of the region. Regional museums structure their content by emphasizing local agency, where archaeological and ethnographic collections form the basis for a story of generational continuity and the unique character of a specific area. Through thematic visual exhibitions, the museum makes history accessible and understandable to the general public. While museums are intended to engage visitors in a dialogue with the past, the question remains: is this always successful? Does the evolution of technologies for creating visual museum narratives influence a deeper understanding of the stages of statehood and culture among visitors, or the formation of meanings within Kazakhstan’s cultural memory? Furthermore, which periods of Kazakhstan’s history currently serve as the foundation for the nation’s cultural memory?

Alexandra FILATOVA (Independent researcher, Bishkek; alexfilatova1@gmail.com), *Whose museum? Institutional trends and community initiatives in the museums of Kyrgyzstan*

When we speak about a museum, we usually think of an institution. An institution, however, always belongs to someone. A national museum belongs to a nation — or rather to the version of the nation defined by the government that manages it. But what kinds of museums function as community centers in Kyrgyzstan, especially for those who do not fit within the official national narrative? In these cases, the museum becomes a place for people rather than simply an institution of the state. Across Kyrgyzstan, we can observe small museums built by communities themselves. These initiatives reclaim space and visibility within dominant political narratives. They create places where alternative histories, identities, and forms of belonging can be articulated and preserved.

Katarzyna JAROSZ (Vizja University, Warsaw; katarzynojarosz@gmail.com), *When science becomes heritage. Power, Legitimacy, and the National Narrative*

Science has hardly ever been a neutral enterprise. It is used to support specific claims about history, territory, superiority, or political legitimacy. Science is not presented in a neutral way in museums either. In exhibitions, scientific knowledge is used to tell specific stories about the state, history, and progress, and at times to support claims about authority or civilizational

achievement. In this keynote, my aim is to show how different narratives of science are built and what their aims are. I draw on fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2025 in museums in Central Asia and China. I focus on three types of displays: geology museums and galleries, medical and pharmaceutical exhibitions, and technology museums. Instead of treating exhibitions as neutral displays, I pay attention to how meaning is shaped through concrete elements: which objects are selected, how captions are written, how space is organized, and what guides say to visitors. Science may be presented as a long and continuous tradition, as a sign of modernization and technical capacity, or as evidence of control over land and resources. In geology museums, mineral collections and maps are used to link natural resources to national wealth and territory. In medical exhibitions, traditional practices are framed as continuous heritage, while modern medicine is reduced to selected technologies rather than current research. Exhibitions rarely present competing or uncertain knowledge. They organize science into stable narratives that emphasize continuity, accumulation, and state capacity, while marginalizing uncertainty, failure, and social cost.

Igor KRUPKO (International Center for the Rapprochement of Cultures under the auspices of UNESCO, Almaty; tengri95hismatulin@mail.ru), *“Asia, through his voice, emerges from the swamp of museums to become a muse once again...”: Problematizing the acquisition of historical subjectivity by the Kazakh intelligentsia in the twentieth century*

During the twentieth century, several major ideological debates unfolded in the USSR. One of them centered on the discussion and condemnation of the book *Az i Ya* by Olzhas Suleimenov, which challenged many of the canonized prohibitions of Soviet historiography. In particular, it made visible the cultural trauma of the Kazakh national intelligentsia, which had internalized the thesis of the regressive nature of nomadic culture. An analysis of these ideological debates through the lens of documentary cinema and Soviet museum practices makes it possible to understand how ideologues who propagated the Soviet sedentarist hierarchy of cultures contributed to the formation of a traumatized subjectivity among Soviet post-nomadic peoples. In confronting such narratives, part of the creative intelligentsia sought to challenge representations of nomadism as having a “dead-end historical role.” This search for a renewed historical subjectivity unfolded both within the ideological priorities of the Soviet state and in the form of open intellectual protests against them. One of the key strategies involved examining the decisive influence of nomadic peoples during certain periods of world history on the development of major civilizations of antiquity. These large-scale efforts by the Soviet creative intelligentsia of Kazakhstan to legitimize nomadism were largely forgotten after 1991, despite the fact that they significantly shaped the principal directions of identity formation in contemporary Kazakhstani society.

Inga LACE (Almaty Museum of Arts, Almaty; inga.lace@gmail.com), *From Richard Serra to Aisha Galymbayeva: building a platform for conversation on contemporary (art) at the Almaty Museum of Arts*

Almaty Museum of Arts, a private museum of modern and contemporary art, opened in Kazakhstan in September 2025. With works by artists such as Richard Serra, Yayoi Kusama, and Yinka Shonibare in its collection, as well as a significant body of works by contemporary Kazakhstani artists, the museum situates international art in dialogue with local contexts. At the

same time, the exhibition *Qonaqtar* (meaning “guests” in Kazakh) explores the notion of the international from within Kazakhstan itself, tracing how histories, identities, and cultural influences have long been shaped through exchange, movement, and coexistence. How can these two narratives be brought into relation — held in parallel, yet made to speak to one another? How can the museum become a platform where the global and the local are not opposed, but understood as mutually constitutive?

Zeev LEVIN (The Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv University; levinzv@gmail.com), *The Exhibition “Jews of the Region” at the Samarkand Museum of Local History: between dialogue and exclusivity*

The presentation examines the exhibition “Jews of the Region” at the Samarkand Museum of Local History in the context of collective memory and the urban landscape. It analyzes how the museum’s architectural environment and its location within Samarkand’s historic space shape perceptions of Jewish heritage. Special attention is given to the interaction between the exhibition and the urban fabric, as well as to the symbolic inclusion/exclusion of Jewish history within the local narrative. The exhibition is interpreted as a site of intersection and interpretation of memory, architecture, and intercultural dialogue in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Baktygul MIDINOVA (Turgunbay Sadykov Osh Regional Museum of Arts, Osh; baktygulmidinova@gmail.com), *The Osh Museum: institution outside of the dominating narrative*

The Osh Regional Museum of Fine Arts named after Turgunbai Sadykov is one of the main centres of artistic culture in southern Kyrgyzstan, bringing together collections of fine art, graphics, sculpture, and decorative and applied arts. Founded in 2004 at the initiative of local artists, the museum today carries out a mission to preserve, study, and promote the national artistic heritage. It actively organizes exhibitions, art residencies, and educational programs, supporting contemporary artists and fostering the creative environment of the city.

Anel MOLDAKHMETOVA (cultural projects curator, Almaty; anel.midori@gmail.com), *[non] Museum of architecture as a participatory site-specific format of working with the collective urban memory*

What should a city museum be, and who has the right to create urban narratives and make them visible? These questions led to the creation of the *[non] Museum of Architecture* — an independent research and curatorial platform whose aim is to rethink the museum as an institution, both in its function and the formats through which it operates. The platform proposes viewing the city itself as a museum space beyond institutional boundaries, where architecture functions as a medium of collective memory. In contrast to the model of the institutional museum with a fixed collection, the initiative operates as a civic system of urban memory, forming a space of memory commons where the city’s memories and its architecture are created, interpreted, and re-examined together with its residents. Through site-specific exhibitions, urban research, and participatory practices, the platform explores and activates the urban environment and architecture as a field for public dialogue about collective memory, identity, and the right to the city.

Jamilya NURKALIEVA and Alima KAIRAT (Tselinny Center for Contemporary Culture, Almaty; jamanurkalieva@gmail.com / alima.kairat@tselinny.org), *Tselinny Center for Contemporary Culture as a regional institution of the 21st century: mission, strategy, challenges*

Regional cultural institutions in the twenty-first century are increasingly becoming spaces where new cultural infrastructures and intellectual connections are formed. In Central Asia, this process is particularly significant, as contemporary institutions in the region are still developing their own models of existence, situated between local context, historical heritage, and the need to participate in international cultural dialogue. As a case study, the Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture is presented as an institutional experiment. The reconstruction of the modernist building of the former cinema serves as the starting point for creating a new cultural environment in which architecture, contemporary art, and a public program together shape a space for interdisciplinary exchange. In this context, Tselinny can be understood as part of a broader process of the formation of a new cultural ecosystem in Central Asia.

Dilda RAMAZAN (CNRS / Sorbonne Université, Paris; dildaramazan@gmail.com), *The role of the Kasteev Museum in legitimizing contemporary art in Kazakhstan: «The galleries parade» (1995–1999)*

This report explores the development of the contemporary art scene in Kazakhstan during a formative period when this emerging field lacked dedicated official venues. In response to this institutional vacuum, artists in Almaty appropriated existing Soviet cultural infrastructure — most notably, the Kasteev Museum. For five consecutive years, from 1995 to 1999, the museum hosted the large-scale project “Parade of Galleries,” which brought together artists from diverse disciplines. The event articulated a framework for contemporary art that encompassed not only the production and exhibition of works but also their mediation through specialized media, press coverage, and engagement with the public. Through its location within a Soviet-style state museum, “Parade of Galleries” played a crucial role in legitimizing contemporary art as a new and autonomous form of cultural production in Kazakhstan.

Yekaterina REZNIKOVA (Abylkhan Kasteev National Museum of Arts, Almaty; reznikat@yandex.ru), *Soviet collections: how to show them today in independent Kazakhstan?*

The formation of art museums in Central Asia took place within the framework of Soviet cultural policy, which shaped the institutional models of museum activity as well as the principles governing the formation of collections. In this context, Soviet artistic heritage should be understood not only as an ideological product of its time but also as the structural foundation of the region’s museum collections. In the post-independence period, museum institutions face the need to reconsider the place of their Soviet holdings within the national history of Kazakhstan. The collection of the country’s largest art museum — the A. Kasteev State Museum of Arts, comprising more than 27,000 works and reflecting nearly ninety years of the formation of a national school of art — provides an opportunity to explore possible strategies for such reinterpretation. Contemporary museum practices increasingly turn to methods of

contextualization and critical reinterpretation of Soviet art, allowing artworks to be examined within a broader historical and cultural framework. Such an approach allows avoiding both the reproduction of the ideological narratives of the Soviet period and the exclusion of this heritage from museum discourse. In this process, the art museum functions not only as a repository of collections but also as a space for interpreting cultural memory.

Alexandra ROMANOVA (*Haqiqiy gallery, Tashkent; sanchital@yandex.ru*), *The role of the gallery as a source of formation of the museum collection and gallery activities within the modern museum*

Contemporary museology is rethinking the relationship between the gallery and the museum: moving from the historical model of their parallel existence toward an understanding of their profound interconnection. Historically, it was gallery activity that shaped the foundations of museum collections — from Renaissance cabinets of curiosities to the first public collections. Today, the gallery acts as a key agent in the formation of museum holdings, while private collections, often assembled through gallery networks, increasingly serve as the basis for new public institutions. This process is particularly significant for Central Asia, where the formation of contemporary museums frequently relies on the collections of private collectors who link regional art to a broader global context. At the same time, the very nature of gallery activity within museums is undergoing transformation: contemporary institutions are adopting flexible formats of temporary exhibitions and public programs, thereby transforming the museum from a static “temple of art” into a space of living dialogue. Gallery spaces within museums become sites of experimentation, where the curator acts as an intermediary between the artist, the collection, and society. In Central Asia, where the Soviet legacy, traditional crafts, and contemporary trends are being rethought, such hybrid spaces play a crucial role. They transform the museum into a living organism capable not only of preserving heritage but also of actively interpreting identity, exploring themes of memory, migration, and tradition through the language of contemporary art.

Marinika SADGYAN (CNRS / Sorbonne Université / ENSA Paris-Est, Paris; m.sadgyan@gmail.com), *The Aral Sea and the Savitsky Museum: a balance in Karakalpakstan's fragile ecosystem*

This intervention explores the tragic disappearance of the Aral Sea alongside the emergence of the unique collection of the Savitsky Museum in Nukus as a crucial contribution to the cultural ecosystem of the Republic of Karakalpakstan. In the context of the sea's retreat, climate change, the transformation of customary ways of life, and the loss of traditional skills and knowledge, the museum played an essential role: It not only filled its funds with works of local folk and applied art, but also preserved for future generations the visual and cultural images of a vanishing landscape. Without fully grasping the scale of the impending catastrophe, Igor Savitsky sought to safeguard the material culture of the region, while his successors continued this effort, transmitting the memory of the sea to the new generations after its disappearance.

Lola SAYFI (*Human House* gallery, Tashkent; humanhouse@gmail.com), *Creative hubs as an alternative to the museum? Human House as a Museum: A New Model of Cultural Institution in Central Asia*

This paper examines the case of *Human House* (Tashkent) as an independent cultural institution situated at the intersection of museum practice, craft traditions, and cultural entrepreneurship. *Human House* operates not only as an exhibition space but also as a living cultural environment where the preservation of craft heritage, support for contemporary artisans, the development of educational programs, and the fostering of international cultural connections take place simultaneously. In contrast to the classical museum, traditionally oriented toward the preservation of the past through established collections and archives, *Human House* engages with living traditions — craft, textiles, decorative arts, and contemporary artistic interpretations — and acts as a key mediator among various actors within the creative economy. As such, the institution can be understood as a hybrid model, representing an emergent form of cultural infrastructure that combines the functions of a museum, a cultural center, an educational platform, and a creative cluster.

Maria SILINA (Université de Montréal, Montreal; silina.maria@gmail.com), *How to study the nationalization of museum collections in the USSR today: cultural diplomacy and expertise*

This talk draws on fieldwork conducted in Almaty in September 2025, as well as case studies from Russia, Ukraine, and Estonia. By combining archival research, fieldwork, and comparative perspectives, the presentation contributes to current debates on the legacy of Soviet museum governance, the reinterpretation of nationalized collections, and ongoing processes of denationalization in countries that were under Soviet governance for decades. I will outline the most pertinent questions scholars now face when studying the histories of objects and collections that were once nationalized, amalgamated, and transformed over time, and that have become matters not only of domestic concern but also of international relations and cultural diplomacy.

Gulmira SULTANGALIYEVA (KazNU Al-Farabi, Almaty; sultangaliyevagulmira@gmail.com), *From colonial knowledge to national narrative: visual representations in the historical museums of Kazakhstan*

My paper examines the transformation of interpretations of the colonial educational legacy in museum exhibitions in Kazakhstan — from imperial representations of a “civilizing mission” to the construction of a contemporary national narrative. Particular attention is paid to the role of visual sources in the reinterpretation of historical narratives. Drawing on approaches from visual history, museum studies, postcolonial theory, and the decolonization of knowledge, the paper addresses the following questions: in what contexts museums have interpreted visual documents; which biographies and narratives have been emphasized, and which have remained marginal or silenced; and how perceptions of the pre-revolutionary educational system in the Kazakh steppe have evolved — from viewing the “colonial school” primarily as an instrument of Russification to presenting it as a space in which the first generation of the Kazakh intelligentsia emerged. In this way, the paper demonstrates how visual documents and museum

artifacts can function as important instruments in transforming historical interpretation — from colonial knowledge and Soviet-era readings toward the construction of a national historical narrative and its contemporary decolonial reassessment.

Alexey ULKO (independent researcher, Oxford-Tashkent, alexulko@yahoo.co.uk), *Evolution of identity politics and global expectations in the museums of Uzbekistan*

The museum system of Uzbekistan is being shaped at the intersection of colonial heritage, Soviet regimes of knowledge, and contemporary global expectations. Following the collapse of the USSR, the museum became an instrument of state identity where scientific rigor gradually gave way to the mythologization of the national past and modern visual spectacle. Recently, the focus has shifted towards digitization and neo-orientalist, aestheticized forms of self-exoticization. Many international institutions, including those from Russia, participate readily in these spectacular projects as they offer a convenient and politically safe format for collaboration that avoids addressing problematic archives or the critical analysis of social practices. The contemporary museum landscape remains fragmented, with research work and archives continuing to exist on the periphery. While grassroots independent initiatives do not yet possess sufficient institutional strength, they represent an important potential resource for a future reimagining of heritage and the restoration of intellectual depth. In these circumstances, the museum is gradually becoming a space of negotiation between state interests, cultural industries, global standards, and local initiatives. The potential of grassroots practices remains a possibility rather than an active factor, but it is precisely this potential that may determine the long-term directions of the museum sector as the field undergoes further internationalization within the country.

Olya VESSELOVA (philosopher, independent curator, Almaty; vesselova.in.the.sky@gmail.com), *Inventing the post-museum: private museum initiatives as a platform for expression*

Private museum initiatives in Kazakhstan serve as platforms for articulating relevant public narratives and creating a space for discussion about the present and future of the region. This research examines the practices of creating private exhibitions as a way to rethink the European phenomenon of the «museum» and an attempt to form an original understanding of the Central Asian Museum in the 21st century, overcoming the limitations of traditional institutional narratives.