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# FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ARTISTIC TRADITIONS IN THE FINE ARTS OF MONGOLIA

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## **Abstract**

The interaction of tradition and innovation in the artistic culture of the peoples of Central Asia determines the specific nature and character of the original Mongolian visual art. Artistic experience of many generations has developed ethno-cultural universals, which appear in a special creative language, principles of composition, spacing, colouring, image objects. Mongolian art took in the rich oriental folklore, myths, legends, stories. It reflects the nomadic life, the people's love to the steppes, the relation to the fauna and flora of the region. But the processes of globalization and the growing cosmopolitanism in contemporary socio-cultural environment negate the meaning of the uniqueness of each culture, and Mongolian culture is not the exception. Therefore, the reference to the problem of studying the traditions and their modernization becomes relevant in the context of the preservation and restoration of artistic excellence and artistic heritage.

*Keywords:* tradition, innovation, Mongol zurag, decoration, ornamentation

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## **1. Introduction**

Currently, the problem of innovation is of big interest, and unconventional approach to any cultural phenomenon is considered to be the most viable and relevant. However, culture cannot develop and exist without traditions; its integrity depends on them, exactly the traditions form the base for a change. There is a relevant fact that the art of XXI century shows a trend of blurring of such an important concept as 'artistic'. This trend is connected with the uncertainty of the aesthetic ideal, the introduction of computer technology in the visual arts and some other factors of the present. The author of the article makes an attempt to identify the features of the formation of art traditions, as well as to determine the vector of their development on the example of Mongolian art. The author uses art history methods of stylistic, comparative analysis, system and semiotic approaches.

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## 2. The main part

The etymology of the term *tradition* comes from the Latin - *traditio* – ‘transmission’. In a broad sense, the term is defined by the researcher D.I. Varlamov – “traditions are historically developed and passed down from generation to generation socially important customs, rituals, social rules, norms of behaviour, role models, attitudes, knowledge, skills, values, etc.; elements of the socio-cultural heritage, which have persisted in society or in some social groups for a long time” [1]. Traditions originally have a modernization program inside that provides the impetus for innovation. “The nature of traditions is procedural, it determines the direction of the development and updating of cultures, mediates various artistic periods.” [2] The founder of the Siberian Scientific-Pedagogic School of Arts T.M. Stepanskaya defines tradition as a set of social relays, where the nature of innovation in culture, language, in various forms of social activity cannot be imagined without reference to the dialectic of the development of tradition [3].

The most urgent problem for art history is the study of artistic tradition, the experience of its transmission, inheritance, restoration and modernization. The purpose of this paper is a comprehensive study of the peculiarities of artistic traditions in the Mongolian fine arts, their artistic means of expression and morphogenesis.

Researchers date Mongolian culture back to the nomadic (steppe) type, which has been developed on the basis of the traditional way of life with the immutability of the skills of farming, accumulated through centuries, common worldviews of the successive steppe peoples, their language unity and continuity of cultural forms [4]. The ancient culture of Mongolia is peculiar due to multiculturalism, based on a complex system of relationships, and, consequently, the interpenetration of the artistic experience of the nomadic Turkic peoples: Huns, Juan-Juan, Turks tyugo, Uyghurs, Kyrgyz, Khitan, Jurchen, and so on. In the context of ethnic and cultural diversity, the integration and assimilation of artistic experience has resulted in a unique type of Mongolian culture, which was formed on the basis of objective internal laws and mastered the experience of neighbouring territories. In the history of the development of Mongolian culture an important role was played by the geopolitical position between the two great cultures of China and Russia, which determined the historical fate of the region and left an imprint on the formation and development of artistic traditions. In the course of development of artistic and aesthetic experience the art of the Mongolian settled peoples was enriched with new principles, means of artistic depiction, plots, etc. But at the same time Mongolian culture has no predominance of any form of Chinese or Russian cultures, therefore, the art is original and has its unique features.

Mongolian culture can be identified by a number of traditional components that were formed in ancient times and served as the artistic and aesthetic foundation of the fine arts of the Mongols. Folklore has played a crucial role in the art of the Mongols. According to L.I. Nehvyadovich,

ethnotradition acts as a stylistic and shaping factor of national art, which is based on folklore: “art is connected with the types of folk art, and above all with the folklore. There the artist finds the forms of artistic interpretation of ethno-mythological content, which reflects the images of nature, views of man’s place in the structure of the Universe, space and time, about the relationship between the earthly world and the transcendental world, about the connections between them.” [5] The formation of the Mongolian national artistic traditions is due to specific nature and the role of folklore. The folklore of the Mongols is extremely rich and diverse, and its themes and plots shaped the fine arts. It is dominated by ethnic motives: steppe plots, a nomadic way of life, occupation of the Mongols, the images of yurts, horses. The epics like ‘Dzhangar’, ‘Geser’, ‘Kyuryul-Erdene’ and other heroic poetry, Mongolian tales, folklore, folk songs have their own specific means of artistic interpretation, and an extended set of expressive means. In the visual arts, this feature is transferred to the front spacing plans that relate to the intent of the artist and make an explicit characteristic shape. Plot and compositional centre emphasizes the main image and its variations.

Heroic epic spirit and breadth of the narrative is reflected in the complex spatial rhythms of ornament, alternating patches of colour, multiple repetitions of the composition elements. The compositional structure is predominated by the symmetry and balance; it allows achieving the impression of solemnity, majesty, spiritual strength of the freedom-loving Mongolian ethnotype. The authors of the article ‘Folklore of the Mongolian peoples: traditions and innovations’ N.T. Bikteev and A.N. Bikteeva note that Mongolian folklore is subject to variation and improvisation, but it is based on tradition: “... tradition in folklore is unthinkable without variation. Narrators (transmitters, as well as improvisers) comply with the canons and reproduce texts in the tideway of tradition.” [6] Therefore, it can be stated that folklore provided the basis for the formation and development of the traditional means of artistic expression.

Another important quality of the Mongolian tradition of painting is the excessive decoration, which comes from the relationship between crafts and pictorial arts. Mongolian folk art is mainly planar, it is inextricably linked with the plane and the shape of the object. It is characterized by conditional interpretation of the colours; open local colours are used. The Mongolian art researcher H.-O. Tsultem [7] noted that colour played a special role in the art of Mongolia; craftsmen used primarily solid colours: red, yellow, blue, green, and white. White was considered as ‘Mother of Colours’, because combined with other colours it gives new colours - light green, light yellow, blue and so on, which are called ‘colours-sons’. ‘Colours-servants’ were the tones produced through mixing with black paint. Each colour had its own symbolic meaning; blue colour, associated with the sky, personified the eternal, faithful; yellow expressed love, mercy; red - the joy, the jubilation of the soul; white - virginity, holiness; black - danger, distress, evil. In the works of art made of metals and stones colour symbolism was expressed by turquoise - fidelity, constancy; gold or amber - love; ruby or red coral - joy; pearl or silver - purity and innocence. Bright colours are mainly used without light and shade transitions in the

Mongolian painting that makes decorativeness even more dramatic. Decorativeness is also predicated by the important role of contour which provides a framework for depicted objects. Line belongs to the main means of artistic expression; it identifies the object, isolates the space, and represents the depth and scope of available items on the plane. Line expresses the stylistic features of Mongolian art; its various modifications and variations form a unique pattern. Various intricate combinations of tangles become an integral part of the decor of the Mongolian dwelling, household items, and clothing. The old Darkhan Masters provided ornamental motifs with some special meaning: the idea of invincibility, good luck, wealth and happiness. Mongolian ornament possesses a highly stylized motif and an organic connection of all components, which emphasize the artistic flair and originality of Mongolian ornamental tradition. The most popular in Mongolia is the ornament of 'Uldza', symbolizing longevity, good luck, prosperity and happiness. It is usually located in the centre of the composition; this is an alternation of tangles that forms a complex pattern, which the Mongols call a 'knot of happiness'. Originally, ornament played a decorative role, and it was used in arts and crafts mostly, but with the development of the fine arts it began to perform the function of stylistic order. Ornamentation is the main feature of the traditional folk art. Folk art was represented by a miniature image – 'dzagal', which portrayed the spirits of Earth, water or light in the images of people. These pictures were related to ancient beliefs of the Mongols, which were able to withstand the onslaught of Lamaism. These works were not bound to strict rules like religious canons, so the extant works of folk paintings of the late XIX - early XX century demonstrate a lot of freedom in interpretation, the courage to transfer facial expressions, gestures, unique features of clothing, ethnographic features that help overcome static and isolation. Artists were given the freedom of imagination that is why despite the generality and convention, folk images possessed dynamics and vitality. Small in size, direct, full of observation, grace and artistic imagination dzagals often were combined into more complex compositions, where in addition to the individual images of a spirit, celestial bodies were painted in the upper part of the picture; people in the middle, and at the bottom - trees, animals and birds. Besides dzagal, the playing cards 'uychur', drawing by hand, were popular. They depicted 130 animals and birds. The images required in addition to a rich imagination and talent of the artist, knowledge of nature, faithful transmission of characteristic features of any particular animal. Artists did not adhere to any strict rules, and they put their own distinctive theme solution in each picture.

Of great influence for the development of realism in the painting of Mongolia in the late XIX - early XX century were very popular paintings 'Sansaryn-hurde' ('Wheel of Life'), which portrayed all the stages of human life. The main focus in these compositions was given to the image of everyday human activity. They are characterized by narrative means, the use of folklore and literary plots. There is the 'Sansaryn-hurde' in the collection of Moscow State Museum of Oriental Art, which was created at the turn of XIX-XX

centuries and served as the prototype for M. Sharav's works. Folk art has had a great impact on the development of painting thereafter. This influence was manifested in the increased role of ornament and exaggerated decorativeness. Masters of Mongolian art developed their unique creative styles, based on past experience, and improved their artistic techniques, ensuring their high aesthetic expression [8].

For the description of the art of Mongolia and the dynamics of its development, it should be noted that religious painting on the scrolls played a special role. For centuries it formed a distinctive style and its own logic of artistic development. Mongolian art had a long tradition. Its origins like ornaments and planar genre painting emerged from the creative assimilation of ancient painting techniques of the Huns, the Uighurs, the Khitans; and later in XVI-XIX centuries, the experience of the Tibetan and Chinese art was taken too. Back in the Middle Ages Mongol masters got acquainted with the methods and techniques of writing, with a system of proportions and composition, and a complex philosophical and religious doctrine of Lamaism, which included all kinds of creative activities. All these aspects have been learned during the training in Tibetan monasteries, during the study of Tibetan art and scenic tracts. [7]

Mongolian painting in comparison with Chinese and Tibetan is more decorative. Mongolian iconic works have traces of national art. As a result of combination of ornamental painting technique, born in the depths of nomadic culture, with the methods of painting, elaborated by sedentary peoples, an art style was born, which can be characterized by clear and bright colours, lots of ornamental motifs, canons of conditional calligraphic dimensional images, the finest study of details, almost naturalistic but at the same time subtle convention and generalization [9]. The researcher of Mongolian painting T.V. Sergeeva traces the genesis of Mongolian scroll painting, the development of its artistic features, the formation of shapes and styles with the use of the cultural and iconographic method, and comes to the conclusion that the painting on the scrolls, based on the medieval iconographic canon, had been developing progressively, and by the end of XIX - beginning XX century had received a new interpretation and a new expression, in accordance with the demands of time. T.V. Sergeeva notes: "Painting on the scrolls is a real embodiment of synthesis of the arts: drawing, calligraphy, literature, which had the original link with architecture, sculpture, theatre and ritual mysteries. Historical and artistic interpretation of the works of art reveals not only their formal and stylistic unity, features inherent in the national cultural tradition but also presents them as cultural phenomena of the time, prepared and institutionalized throughout the logic of the historical development of Mongolian society." [4]

Scroll painting was a bright phenomenon of Mongolian culture; it reflected the artistic traditions of previous eras, rich creative experience of many generations of monastic artists. Painting on the scrolls was notable for laconic pictorial means, perfection of technical skills, and a multi-valued content. It reflected basic principles of art: the plane of the canvas was inscribed with a

clear, almost mathematically verified scheme, consisting of singularly located from each other depicted objects. In these images the rough graphic drawing prevailed over the language of painting. Line identified the object and defined the space. The father is the object from the first plan; the thinner is its outline. To make the three-dimensional image, soft shading was laid on the painted plane and contour was enhanced with gold.

Colour in these images was only a symbolic attribute of an object or character; it did not express volume and space. The colouring was not of self-worth for artists, it was not perceived sensually, so there was no demand for its expressive properties; shades and gradations did not matter. Paints for icons had a diverse palette and they comprised the pigments of mineral and organic origin, as well as a binder composition. The minerals like turquoise, lapis lazuli, coral, pearl, mother-of-pearl were used. Such a composition was made of tenderized in sugar syrup animal skins, horns and bones with addition of a special preservative, which was citric acid or animal bile. The composition of paint could comprise some particles of the ground or water, collected by pious pilgrims in the holy places for Buddhists, as well as pulverized gold, silver and other precious minerals, juices and resins of medicinal plants. This paints possessed high resistance and bright colour; it gave a high degree of preservation to mandalas icons. Artists painted images not from nature, but according to the model, so they had to have a good visual memory. Vivid memories of the master got woven into iconographic basis. Sergeeva T.V. claimed: "... in the late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional formula of the canon did not hang over the consciousness of the artist. Each time a new pictorial work was created, different from previous due to psychologically significant shades of composition, rhythm, and colour. Hardly noticeable at first glance nuances led to completely unexpected and original solutions." [4]

At the end of XIX century, the painting on a red background – ‘martan’ (the technique of icon painting on the scrolls with gold outline on a red background), and the painting on a black background – ‘nagtan’ (the technique of icon painting in gold on a black background) were widespread [10]. The martan technique was mainly used for the images of red bodies of the Burkhan (Mongolian deities). The nagtan technique was used for the images of black and blue deities. A major role in both techniques belonged to expressive lines. Therefore, the artist needed to create a living dynamic drawing. Martan and nagtan painting is very beautiful, and it demanded from the artist's great skills in the transmission of images.

Iconography laid the foundation for the fine arts of the Mongols, which influenced the development of painting thereafter. At the turn of XIX-XX centuries the painting of Mongolia formed a specific art style, own techniques, imagery that was characteristic for the Mongols' consciousness, and its artistic-aesthetic principles. During this period, the range of expressive possibilities of scroll icons expanded; expression and dynamics were combined with poetic grace and lyricism. Later many generations of artists turned to the artistic

elements of religious scroll painting, and tried to find new principles for their works.

All these features are clearly manifested in the ‘mongol-zurag’, national Mongolian painting, which is based on ethno-cultural artistic experience, Mongolian tradition of icon painting and folk art. Painting technique in the ‘Mongol-zurag’ resembles the technique of traditional planar painting with glue, mineral and earth paints on a fine-grained primed canvas. Usually, the pictures are painted in gouache on canvas. These works are close to Mongolian iconography on the scrolls in style. The compositions in the ‘mongol-zurag’ can be characterized by a clear graphic quality of drawing, locality of bright saturated colour patches, flatness, lack of the perspective and chiaroscuro, precise composition with a conditional and generalized background. Artists have often used the tradition of arts and crafts. Great importance was given to the decorative frame, which was carried out on the basis of the traditional Mongolian patterns with their complex symbolism. Researchers determine time of origin of the ‘Mongol-zurag’ differently. Sergeeva noted that ‘Mongol-zurag’ as an artistic trend was formed finally in the mid 50s of XX century. Lomakina I.I. characterizes ‘Mongol-zurag’ as a style, which has its roots in the beginning of XX century, and it is based on the traditions of the planar that was characteristic for iconography [11]. ‘Mongol-zurag’ is the total ethno-cultural artistic experience. Its origins are laid in antiquity, it was developed and enriched with the features of the Tibeto-Chinese fine art and folk art. Senior artists worked in the tradition of ‘Mongol-zurag’, for example B. Sharav (1866-1939), U. Yadamsuren (1905-1987), A. Sengetsohio, B. Gombosuren, B. Avarzad, Ts. Minzhuur, Ts. Zhamsoran, Ts. Damdinsuren (1908-1986).

In the twentieth century, Mongolia had close connections to Russia. There was a series of important cooperation agreements, which brought the Mongolian and Russian cultural traditions closer to each other. On November 5, 1921 an agreement was signed between the Government of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the People’s Government of Mongolia on the establishment of friendly relations between the two countries. The ideas and principles of the Agreement from 1921 have been developed in other documents on friendship and mutual assistance, on cultural cooperation between the two countries – in 1936, 1946, 1966. March 12, 1936, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR and the Presidium of the Small Khural of Mongolia adopted a resolution “... to turn the Protocol of 12 March 1936 in the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance between the two countries, valid for ten years”. January 15, 1966, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the USSR and the Mongolian People’s Republic was signed for a period of twenty years and was automatically renewed for the next ten years. The Treaty continued to develop the principles of cultural cooperation between Mongolia and Russia from the previous documents, as well as spelled out the areas of mutual cooperation: education, health, science, literature, the press, radio, television, art, etc. An important document in the field of cooperation between Mongolia and the Soviet Union was the Agreement on

Cultural Cooperation on April 24, 1956. Its main task was to develop and strengthen the cultural cooperation between the two countries on the basis of the principles of respect for sovereignty and equality. Contracting parties have decided to share their experiences and achievements in the field of science, technology, literature, higher education, education, the arts and other areas of culture by mutual sending of delegations, art and sports teams, individual scientists and cultural workers, graduate students, trainees and tourists, as well as by providing information and relevant materials. On the basis of this Agreement, Days of the USSR were organized in the MPR annually in October, within a month of the Mongolian-Soviet Friendship. Mongolian-Soviet cultural relations were constantly enriched with new contents and a variety of forms: from conducting of major joint activities, exchange of creative teams down to personal contacts of artists. In turn, Days of the MPR were organized in the Soviet Union. The program of Days of Culture was varied. Opening day was held in Moscow and began with a gala concert of masters of Mongolia. Photo exhibitions and exhibitions of contemporary fine and applied art of the MPR were held in Moscow and St. Petersburg; they featured as pictures of famous Mongolian artists as the works of young authors. New page of cooperation was the signing of the 'Agreement about advisers, trainers and specialists' between the Government of the USSR and Mongolia on December 1, 1934. This document claimed the order of invitations and missions, goals and objectives, rights and obligations of the Soviet workers sent to Mongolia to work there. In 1934, the Art Department was opened at the Pedagogical Institute in Ulaanbaatar, where teaching was conducted under the guidance of the artist A. Soeltoy, and invited professionals from the MPR became the main teaching stuff. In 1937, art school was opened in Mongolia, which started to train the first specialists in the field of fine arts. May 12, 1948 the first agreement on training of citizens of the MPR in the higher educational institutions of the USSR was signed between the Governments of the USSR and the Mongolian People's Republic. On the basis of this document, the Government of the USSR granted 30 places for training of citizens of the MPR at the universities of the USSR, who were sent for this purpose from the Mongolian People's Republic to the USSR. The ideas and principles of these documents have been refined and expanded in the Agreement between the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Government of the Mongolian People's Republic on the conditions for mutual training of undergraduate and graduate students in the highest civilian educational institutions and research institutions on October 3, 1960. The documents provided to Mongolian young professionals the opportunity to receive higher education in the universities of the USSR, and to create their own production, scientific, and artistic base. First, in 1922, fifteen Mongolian students began their study in the USSR, and the number has been increasing every year. Later, in January 1972, by the decision of the Central Committee of the MPR, the Association of Mongolian graduates of Soviet institutions was established inside the Society of the Mongolian-Soviet Friendship. The Association has maintained close contacts with the Soviet

educational institutions, where Mongolian young people were trained. The Association organized scientific-methodical conferences and seminars with the participation of Soviet scientists and specialists [12]

Mongolian artists become familiar with European artistic experience through art education. They get acquainted with new techniques of watercolour and oils, with new artistic techniques of perspective, chiaroscuro, spaciousness; all that enriches and modernizes traditions. Among the visual artists of this period Choyzhingiyn Ichinnorov, Bair Gambazhov, students of professor I.A. Serebryaniy, graduates of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts; Sumyazhavyn Dondog, Demchingiyn Myagmar, Dolgorzhavyn Bold, Ėdonngiyn Ulziyhutag, graduates of the battle painting workshop by Professor E.E. Moiseenko; Battsendiyn Purevsuh, student of professor V.M. Oreshnikov; Gavazhiyn Tomor, Lamzhav Gandbold, graduates of the workshop by Y.M. Neprintsev; among the graduate students of the workshop by S.V. Gerasimov was a talented Mongolian painter Nyam Osoryn Tsultem. Their works illustrate the result of learning of new artistic methods and modernization of the traditional 'Mongol-zurag'.

### **3. Conclusions**

Mongolian visual art has a rich and unique artistic experience and unique traditions. The formation and development of the arts were affected by geographical factors, the special climate zone, flora and fauna of the region. An important part of the artistic and aesthetic foundations of fine art of the Mongols became folklore, which reflected the worldview of nomadic peoples most clearly. These features joined the art of the Mongols and became a part of the shaped structure, properties, ornamentation, and the favourite motifs.

The national Mongolian painting 'Mongol-zurag' has formed under the influence of various factors; it is characterized by flatness, decorativeness, fragmented character, local colour and so on. This unique phenomenon of fine art has become ingrained in the artistic tradition of Mongolia. The means of 'Mongol-zurag' allow artists to enrich their creative method and save ethnocultural uniqueness.

The twentieth century enriched creativity of Mongolian artists due to introducing of the methods of European art schools through the system of Russian art education. Introduction of European creative methods and techniques enriched the art of Mongolia and brought it to the international level. However, Mongolian art has its own artistic language, national characteristics, unique means of imaging. This approach allows us to conclude that the national specificity of Mongolian art is connected with tradition, which is characterized by an appeal to folklore, folk art, medieval iconography and redefined experience of European art school.

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