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The Art and Architecture of Mongolia

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The Art and Architecture of Mongolia

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Comments

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indoor space of Uighur houses in arid areas inevitably results in the desire of the inhabitants for bright colours in the interior decoration for a visually pleasant sensation.⁴⁷

Part Three

THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF MONGOLIA

(*C. Atwood*)

Introduction

Despite the Mongols' traditionally nomadic, pastoralist lifestyle, they have nourished a surprisingly rich tradition of fine arts and architecture. Particularly in Mongolia proper ('Outer Mongolia', or the present-day independent state of Mongolia), the one-time monastery town and present-day national capital Ulaanbaatar has been a centre of art and architecture from the eighteenth century continuously to the present. Other monastic centres in Mongolia proper have also been centres of art. In Inner Mongolia, now an autonomous region in China, artistic and architectural traditions flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but did not make the transition to the modern era as successfully. The same can be said of the Buriats and Kalmuks, Mongol peoples living in Russia, where Buddhist temples were built in a peculiar mixture of Tibetan and European neo-classical styles. In all Mongol lands, Buddhist influenced monuments and art works were subject to violent communist inspired iconoclasm, under Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s and under Mao Zedong in the 1960s, from which only the most famous examples have survived.

Mongolia's history of fine arts and architecture can be divided into two basic periods. The first, spanning from roughly the late sixteenth up to the early twentieth century, was the period of the dominance of Buddhism and of Tibet and China as the main outside influences. For most of the twentieth century, Russian influences became dominant while communism and other secular European schools of thought prevailed. Today, this second period may be said to be continuing although with a more international cast and a pluralist ideology.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 327.

The successive predominance of first Buddhist and then communist aesthetics and practice of representation within Mongolian fine arts, and the influence of Tibetan, Chinese and Russian canons on Mongolian monumental architecture, raises the question of whether Mongolia can indeed be said to have a single artistic tradition. In reality, however, there was significant continuity in style, media, social base and artists between Mongolia's early European-style art and the Buddhist iconographic tradition. Although more purely European-style art later gained predominance, neo-traditional revivals have maintained strong continuity with Mongolia's Buddhist and folk-art traditions, a continuity reinforced by strong nationalist and essentialist currents in the current pluralistic cultural atmosphere. Continuity is less visible in monumental architecture, although one finds the use of yurt-shaped forms as an icon of 'Mongolianness' in both Buddhist and communist artistic traditions.

Fine arts from the 'second conversion' to 1900

The 'second conversion' of Mongolia to Buddhism began in 1576 in southwestern Inner Mongolia, spreading from there north to Khalkha Mongolia, east to central and eastern Inner Mongolia, and north-west to the Oirat Mongols. The spread of Buddhism involved the building of monasteries and assembly halls as well as the importation and domestic fashioning of Buddhas, both painted and sculpted. By the late seventeenth century, domestic schools of manufacture were well established, but in the nineteenth century commercial manufacture by Chinese and even Europeans took over virtually all the lowend market in cheap religious goods, as well as the construction of temples.

The earliest examples of Buddhist fine arts in Mongolia are the wall paintings at the Maidari Juu temple in south-western Inner Mongolia and in Erdeni Zuu in central Mongolia. Both appear to date from the late sixteenth or seventeenth century and show a number of similarities in composition, symbolism, and dress of the figures. Those of Erdeni Zuu have survived, however, only in copies.⁴⁸ The surviving wall-paintings of the Xiongbaodian hall in Maidari Juu picture the paintings against the Chinese-influenced naturalistic grassy, hilly background that had replaced the shrine-setting in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist art during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pictures commissioned by Chinese officials of Mongolian princes such as Altan Khan (1508–82) presenting tribute⁴⁹ had undoubtedly already familiarized Mongol artists with the portrayal of the human figure and landscape. (See Volume V, Chapter 18, Part Three.)

⁴⁸ Tsultem, 1986b, Pls. 150–1; Charleux, 1999.

⁴⁹ Tsultem, 1986b, Preface.

Mongol assimilation of Tibetan Buddhist art traditions was assisted by the importation of Tibetan Buddhist art and the translation of iconographic manuals. A number of famous Tibetan Buddhas were presented to the Mongols during the process of conversion such as a Juu (from Tibetan *Jo-bo*) Shakyamuni Buddha held to have been made by the gods during the Buddha's own life and housed in Höhhot's Yekhe Juu temple.⁵⁰ Mongolian sources also mention Nepalese artisans sculpting Buddhas, ornaments and reliquaries for Mongol patrons.⁵¹ Nepalese artists had been patronized by the Mongol khans as early as the thirteenth century. The movement of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist art into Mongolia was hastened both by the education of well-born Mongolian lamas in Tibet and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the identification of Mongolian incarnate lamas among children in Tibet. Both returning Mongolian lamas and Tibetan boys being escorted to take up their position as incarnate lamas carried with them vast amounts of religious articles, art works and sometimes entourages of artisans.

In Tibetan Buddhist iconography, the proportions and attributes of Buddha figures are determined by a system of relative proportions called 'fingers' (the width of a finger) and 'spans' (the distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the middle finger fully extended). Each span contains 12 fingers. The various figures are divided into classes, such as Buddha, peaceful Bodhisattva, female deity, tall wrathful deity, short wrathful deity and humans.⁵² The details were found in Indian treatises augmented by the visions of Tibetan yogins. Eventually descriptions of iconographic prescriptions for large numbers of Buddhas were collected by scholars such as Ishi-Baljur (1704–88), the ethnic Mongol abbot of Sumpa temple in Kökenuur (Qinghai), and the '500 Buddhas' blockprint printed in Khüriye (Urga in Russian, today Ulaanbaatar) in 1811.⁵³ While those iconographic treatises contained in the *bsTan-'gyur*, or collection of canonical Indian treatises, were translated in the eighteenth century into Mongolian, Tibetan remained the universal language of Buddhist artists regardless of ethnicity. Indeed, books remained far less important in the transmission of these techniques than the ties between master and pupil.

Mongolian fine arts achieved an early peak of brilliance in the sculptures of the First Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu (*Qutughtu*) Lubsang-Dambi-Jaltsan-Balsangbu (1635–1723), commonly known by his name as a novice, Zanabazar. The chief religious figure of the Khalkha Mongols from age 14 to 16, he received instruction and initiations in Tibet from the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. On his return, he began casting reliquaries

⁵⁰ Elverskog, 2003, pp.187–8; Altan'orgil, 1981, pp. 89–97.

⁵¹ Elverskog, 2003, pp. 174, 187, 193.

⁵² Jackson and Jackson, 1984, pp. 45–67.

⁵³ Tsultem, 1986b, Preface.

and designing temples, and in 1655 he cast his first mature Buddha, no longer extant. A number of Buddhas from his hand survive today, with others being attributed to his school.

His greatest masterpieces include the Vajradhara cast in 1683, the set of five Dhyani Buddhas cast around the same time, the Sitasamvara and consort also of that time, and his White and Green Taras (the latter was traditionally completed in 1706). Zanabazar's religious images share with previous Mongolian Buddhist art a strong Nepalese influence visible in the delicate detail of the ornamentation, while Chinese influence can be seen in the soft modelling of the robes. Zanabazar's sculptures are all of cast bronze with gold gilding in which the matt finish of the skin contrasts with the burnished finish of the robes and jewellery. While Zanabazar used colouring for the hair and a few other details, he rarely if ever used the inlaid jewels common in other Tibetanstyle Buddhist sculpture. Adhering closely to the iconometric conventions, Zanabazar's masterpieces show a strikingly lifelike gracefulness and beauty of face. Legends connect his White and Green Tara images to the maturing beauty of his consort, the 'Girl Prince' (Kheükhen Khutukhtu). The artist's anvil has been preserved as a relic, although the only pieces in the hammered repoussé technique that could possibly be from his hand are the flame aureoles traditionally placed behind some of his sculptures. After Zanabazar's death, his school in Khüriye continued to produce masterworks of Buddhist sculpture during the eighteenth century, but this school was replaced by artists trained in differing schools in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴

In Inner Mongolia, the town of Dolonnuur (modern Duolun) was the main centre for producing religious artefacts. A distinctive school of highquality Dolonnuur sculpture flourished from 1700 to the early twentieth century, alongside a vast number of crude, mass-produced items. Masterpieces of this school, such as the series of three Buddhist deities, Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani, share much of the harmonious proportions and lifelike dynamism of Zanabazar's works, but otherwise are quite different in method and overall effect. Major Dolonnuur statues were made in parts of beaten brass plates soldered together and gilt with burnished gold. Opulent inlays of lapis lazuli, turquoise and coral along with lacquer and enamel pigments appealed to patrons. Billowing scarves, flat earrings and five-leaf crowns are also characteristic of the Dolonnuur style. By the nineteenth century, the Dolonnuur school dominated the production of high-quality Buddhist sculpture and members of this school may have also relocated to Khüriye to work.⁵⁵

The other major media of Tibetan-style Buddhist fine art are the *thangka* or iconographic painting and the temple banner or iconographic appliqué. *Thangkas* were painted

⁵⁴ Berger, 1995; Tsultem, 1982; Choinkhor, 1995.

⁵⁵ Bartholomew, 1995, pp. 81–2; Stoddard, 1995, pp. 219–20, 243–5; Rhie and Thurman, 1991, pp. 68–9, 144–5.

on silk or cotton stretched on a wooden frame. The cloth was primed with a mixture of liquor, glue and chalk and smoothed with stones. The pigments were made of ground minerals or lac in a size of animal fat. Basic colours were called 'father colours' while white was the 'mother colour'; their mixing produced 'son colours'. Demons and evil figures were depicted in ash-grey 'servant colours'. Half-tones were rarely used. Designs were first produced on paper and then transferred to the cloth by piercing the drawn figures with a needle and applying dye along the pricked outline. Temple banners were produced by sewing appliqués of silk and brocade along patterns drawn by master artists. Pearls and other jewels were frequently also sewn into these temple banners.⁵⁶

Although some *thangkas*, including a self-portrait and a portrait of his mother Khandu-Jamtsu, are attributed to Zanabazar, these traditional attributions are not certain. Few Mongolian *thangkas* can be reliably dated before the mid-nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, Khüriye was the great centre of *thangka* and temple-banner production in Mongolia, and one of the major centres of this medium in the whole Tibetan Buddhist world. Masterpieces by nineteenth-century artists include Agwangsharab's mid-nineteenth century portraits of the First and Fifth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtus, Gendündamba's images of the deity Jamsrang (or Beg-tshe), Chojjantsan's painting of the deity Mahakala (late nineteenth century) and Jügder's painting of Ushnishvijaya (turn of the twentieth century). It should be noted, however, that the Khüriye artists worked within a highly traditional school. Attributions of *thangkas* commonly differ from source to source and must be regarded as subject to further study and revision. Similarly temple banners, produced by seamstresses in the service of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu's great establishment under the guidance of master artists, are hard to attribute to particular individuals (Fig. 23).⁵⁷

An interesting feature of Mongolian Buddhist fine art was the importance of individual portraiture. In particular, the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtus were portrayed as distinct, recognizable individuals despite the overall iconographic conventionality of their art. Whether in *thangka* paintings, sculpture, temple banners or popular prints, Zanabazar's round balding head, characteristically inclined with a kindly expression, is very distinctive (Fig. 24). Portraits of the Seventh Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu (1850–68) are easily recognizable by his swarthy skin and strong, square-set jaw, typical of his Tibetan ancestry. Recognizable portraits of other high Mongolian lamas such as the Jangjiya Khutukhtus in Beijing are also known.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Tsultem, 1986b, Preface; Jackson and Jackson, 1984.

⁵⁷ Tsultem, 1986b, Preface, Pls. 3–86; Dariimaa, 2003, pp. 10–123.

⁵⁸ Tsultem, 1986b, Pls. 88–92, 105–16; Rhie and Thurman, 1991, p. 276.



FIG. 23. Temple banner of the fierce Buddhist protectress deity Baldan Lhamo. (Sanskrit, Shri Devi; Mongolian Okhin Tenggeri). Appliqué with inlaid semi-precious stones (necklaces), mother of pearl (skull diadem), and peacock feathers (floating crown). Artist and date unclear. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, Pl. 79.)

Buddhist architecture to 1900

As nomads, the Mongol tradition of domestic architecture was limited to the yurt (Mongolian, *ger*). Contrary to popular impressions of the unchanging yurt, yurts in fact underwent fairly significant changes, with today's collapsible lattice-work yurt first appearing in the sixth century and replacing non-collapsible forms on carts only in the fifteenth century.⁵⁹ During times of imperial expansion, the Mongols successively adopted a number of monumental architectural styles. At the time of the second conversion, the Tümed Mongols of southwestern Inner Mongolia were already employing Chinese architects and builders in creating palaces and pavilions. As a result, it is not surprising that Chinese architectural forms initially dominated Mongolian religious architecture. Later, however, Tibetan forms challenged the dominance of Chinese architecture. Hybrid forms, particularly with Tibetan walls surmounted by a Chinese roof, were also common. Among the

⁵⁹ Andrews, 1999.



FIG. 24. Zhanabazar (the First Jebtsundamba Khutuktu), by Agwangsharab. Mineral paints on cotton. Mid-nineteenth century. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, Pl. 105.)

Kalmuks and Buriat Mongols of the Russian empire, Buddhist temples were almost all influenced to varying degrees by European architectural forms, ranging from the neo-classical colonnade to the onion dome of Russian Orthodox churches, while still maintaining Chinese and/or Tibetan motifs.⁶⁰

Fine examples of Chinese-style architecture among the Mongols of Inner Mongolia include the Maidari Juu temple (built in 1606) near Baotou in south western Inner Mongolia, and the Yekhe Juu (Chinese, Dazhao) temple in Höhhot, first built in 1579 and rebuilt in 1640. The vast Badgar Sume (Chinese, Wudangzhao) monastery (begun in 1749) north of Baotou is a Tibetan style temple complex in Inner Mongolia. Shireetü Juu in Höhhot (first built in 1585, rebuilt in 1697) combines Chinese and Tibetan architectural elements in an appealing mix. A very distinctive monument is the Five Pagoda temple (Chinese, Wutasi) of Höhhot, dating from 1727. Built with the load-bearing, slightly inward-slanting walls of Tibetan architecture, the roof is surmounted by a Chinese-style pavilion and five unusually shaped stupas (reliquaries). The temple's walls are faced with stone on which are carved Buddhas and mantras, and a unique astronomical chart with Mongolian captions. This 'five pagoda temple' style originated in China's Ming dynasty (1368–1644), as an imitation of

⁶⁰ Borisenko, 1994; Minert, 1983.

the Mahabodhi temple in Bodhgaya, India.⁶¹ Unfortunately, few Inner Mongolian temples outside the Höhhot-Baotou area survived the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

In Mongolia proper, only Erdeni Zuu and Gandan-Tegchinling, the second of the two great temple complexes of Khüriye, survived the destruction of Buddhism in the 1930s. Vast Tibetan-style complexes such as Manzushiri-yin Kheid (outside Khüriye), Zaya-yin Kheid (Tsetserlig) and Baraibung Kheid (Khentii) were razed virtually to the ground. In general, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Khalkha the northern, more mountainous areas preferred Tibetan-style architecture, albeit often with Chinese roofs, while in the Gobi desert areas Chinese-style temples were more common.

Yurt-style log cabins among the Buriat Mongols of Siberia are known from their early contact with the Russians in the seventeenth century. A striking part of temple architecture in Mongolia proper, especially Khüriye, was the use of cylindrical buildings with conical roofs, inspired by the yurt form, and square marquee-type forms, inspired by tents (*maikhans*) used by Mongols at countryside entertainments. Both were constructed in wood and appear to have been designed for relatively easily mobility like the yurt and *maikhan* tents themselves. Indeed, the great temples of Khüriye remained mobile for over a century and a half, being moved to a new location every few years. The earliest known monumental yurt-style wooden temple was the shrine of Abtai Khan (1554–88), placed in Khüriye. Since the city of Khüriye did not settle at its present site until 1779, this wooden yurt must have been regularly dismantled and set up before that time. Yurt- and marquee-style tents were also used to surmount Tibetan-style temples as at the Gombo-Gurgi temple at Erdeni Zuu. These and all other yurt-style temples were destroyed in the 1930s and 1940s.

The most famous marquee-style building was the *tsogchin dugang*, or great assembly hall, of Khüriye's central temple, the Nom-un Yekhe Khüriye (officially titled Rebu-Gejai-Gandan-Shaddubling). This hall was square in shape, measured 42 × 42 m and could accommodate up to 2,000 lamas. The three-tiered wooden roof was erected on 108 poles (108 was a sacred number in Buddhism). The design of this temple was attributed to Zanabazar, although like Abtai Khan's yurt-temple it must have been regularly dismantled and set up until Khüriye was fixed at its present location in 1779. Mongolian hagiographies assigned great symbolic meaning to each of the features of this *tsogchin dugang*. Other smaller assembly halls in Khüriye imitated the form of the great *tsogchin dugang*.⁶²

⁶¹ Altan'orgil, 1981; Nei Menggu Bowuguan, 1987; Sélhéjab and Oyunbilig, 1991; Gaubatz, 1996, pp. 201–2.

⁶² Shchepetil'nikov, 1960; Tsultem, 1988; Ölzii, 1992; Dashnyam et al., 1999, pp. 295–79.

Architecture and the fine arts in the early twentieth century

In 1911 the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu (1870–1924) led Outer Mongolia to independence with the assistance of the Russian empire. Although Mongolia was forced eventually to accept only autonomy from China, not genuine independence, and make numerous economic concessions to Russia, this declaration began Mongolia's opening to the world and the country's halting efforts to develop modern institutions. Although Mongolia was reoccupied by Chinese troops in 1919 and by White (anti-communist) Russians in 1921, officials of the old autonomous government and young intellectuals formed a political party that appealed to Soviet Russia. In July 1921, with Soviet assistance, they established a revolutionary nationalist government, with the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu as the nominal head of state.

ARCHITECTURE

From 1911 to 1921 Mongolia was a theocracy in which the clergy established under the incarnate lama emperor, the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, expanded rapidly in wealth and prestige. Expanded patronage funded some of the great monuments of Mongolian architecture, while modern artistic trends and the paradoxically worldly atmosphere led to new experimentation.

The most outstanding monument of the theocratic period was the great temple of Migjid Janraisig (Eye-Opening Avalokiteshvara), which housed a 14-m high gilt copper image of the deity. The temple, which still occupies a prominent place on the Ulaanbaatar skyline, consists of a three-storey Tibetan-style hall surmounted by a further two-storey Chinese hall (Fig. 25). In contrast to many of these hybrid Tibeto-Chinese-style buildings, the proportions are strikingly harmonious. Built between 1911 and 1913 and funded by alms collected from the populace, the temple was erected to cure the Khutukhtu's blindness.⁶³

Other architectural monuments of the turn of the twentieth century include the palaces of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu along the Tuul river, just south of the capital Khüriye, and the Choijung Lama temple. The latter was built between 1899 and 1901 to house the younger brother of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu as the official state oracle. The only extant palace today is the Sharabpeljailing, popularly known as the Green (or Winter) Palace, built from 1893 to 1906 (Figs. 26 and 27). A striking feature of this palace complex is a two-storey Russian-style building added in 1905. Between 1912 and 1919 a magnificent

⁶³ Ölzii, 1992, pp. 123–33.



FIG. 25. Temple of Migjid Janraisig (on the left) and the *tsogchin dugang* (great assembly hall) of Gandan-Tegchinling monastery (on the right). This *tsogchin dugang* is built in the marquee style pioneered by the no longer extant *tsogchin dugang* of Zanabazar. (Photo: Courtesy of Katherine Petrie.)

ceremonial gate in the Chinese style was built in front of the temple – the 280,000 *taels* of silver for its construction were again collected as alms from all over the country. The massive multiple roofs, supported by 108 brackets (no nails were used in the construction), appear to float over the slender supporting poles. All of these buildings were constructed by Chinese contractors, using both Mongolian and Chinese craftsmen. The Buddhist images inside were the work solely of Mongolian monastic craftsmen.⁶⁴

Another, albeit minor, element in Mongolian architecture was the introduction of Russian vernacular architecture. From 1860 onwards, occasional Siberian log cabins, with their distinctive decorative shutters and trimmings on the windows, dotted the city. An elaborate two-storey version of Russian vernacular architecture was introduced in the famous ‘Red House’ built by the Russian mining executive Victor von Grot (b. 1863) near the Jebtsundamba’s Brown Palace (Fig. 28).

FINE ARTS

In the fine arts, the theocratic era saw the birth of secular genre paintings, experiments with ink drawings and the growing influence of photography. These developments are associated especially with the famous painter Busybody (*marzan*) Sharab (1869–1939), although other artists were also pursuing them. Trained in iconography in the countryside, Sharab moved to Khüriye in 1891 and eventually became the official portrait painter for the court of the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Ölzii, 1992, pp. 5–46, 107–19.

⁶⁵ Lomakina, 1974; Sonomtseren and Batchuluun, 1989, pp. 46–56.



FIG. 26. Ulaanbaatar. The ceremonial gate complex Andingmen, outside the Green (or Winter) Palace of the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, completed in 1919. (Source: Tsultem, 1988, Pl. 70.)

The development of genre paintings, exemplified by Sharab's famous works, *Airag* [fermented mare's milk] *Feast* (also called *A Day in the Life of Mongolia*) and *Autumn* (Fig. 29), appears to have been inspired by the Buddhist genre of the wheel of samsara painting. In wheel of samsara paintings, the painter portrays the six possible births for living beings (as a Hindu god, demi-god, human, animal, hungry ghost or hell being) as the result of



FIG. 27. Ulaanbaatar. Andingmen (detail): front of the main gate in the ceremonial gate complex, completed in 1919. (Source: Tsultem, 1988, Pl. 71.)



FIG. 28. ‘The Summer Residence’ or Khaistai Labrang Palace of the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu. Painted by an anonymous painter of the Khüriye/Urga school. The large ‘Red House’ was built by the Russian mining executive Viktor von Grot. Mineral paints on cotton. Early twentieth century. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, Pl. 170.)

ignorance, anger and lust (allegorically represented by a pig, a snake and a rooster). As can be seen in Buriat examples from the turn of the twentieth century, the section on the human birth began to be used for portraits of the details of human life, whether evil (hunting, slaughtering animals, farming), good (lamas holding religious ceremonies) or neutral (wrestling, shearing sheep, setting up yurts). Evidently, Sharab and others in Khüriye were inspired by depictions of the human birth to begin to paint these genre scenes separately.⁶⁶

Sacred-place portraits was another Buddhist genre that eventually fed secularizing artistic trends at this time. Notable portraits of sacred places included the nineteenth-century portraits of Khüriye and Bereewen monasteries, and especially the portrait of the Tibetan capital of Lhasa sometimes attributed to Sharab and the painting of the Maitreya procession attributed to Dorji (1870–1937). After independence in 1911, this genre took a secular direction in Jügder’s 1912 portrait of Khüriye (Fig. 30), which was conceived not primarily as showing a religious site but as displaying accurately the new and rapidly changing capital of an independent country. Other painters in the Khüriye school during the theocratic period mixed pictures of the new palaces and European-style buildings of Khüriye with the animal and human figures of the genre painting style.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Pupyshv, 1995, Pls. 74–7; Tsultem, 1986b, Preface, Pls. 161–9.

⁶⁷ Berger, 1995, pp. 172–9; Tsultem, 1986b, Preface, Pls. 153–7, 170–3.



FIG. 29. *Autumn* by B. Sharab. The painting depicts the typical activities in autumn. Mineral paints on cotton. Early twentieth century. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, Pl. 166.)



FIG. 30. Ulaanbaatar. Mongolia's capital Khüriye (Urga, modern Ulaanbaatar) in 1913. Painted by Jügder. Mineral paints on cotton. Now kept in the Bogd-khaan Palace-Museum. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, p. 156.)

In this period, the use of Chinese ink paintings and photography influenced iconographic art. The famous Inner Mongolian poet and novelist Injannashi (1837–92) painted sketches of the courtyard where he was born and birds and flowers in a thoroughly Chinese

style.⁶⁸ In turn-of-the-century Khüriye, Damba was inspired by Chinese landscape drawings in his portrait of Zaya-yin Gegeen's monastery painted in mineral paints with mostly monochromatic hues. Tsagan Jamba ('White Jamba') used coloured drawings to picture livestock and game animals, as well as portraits of the female deity Gūnjin Lhamo and the epic hero Dugar Zaisang. Sharab mastered pencil and *tush* (thick Russian ink) as well as the traditional mineral paints. In his most famous portraits, he inked in the flesh tones of his patrons (such as the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, his consort Dondugdulma and other high clerical figures) but painted the clothing and background in mineral paints. His settings were mixes of traditional Buddhist iconographic conventions and more realistic depictions of the figures, throne and room. He frequently drew faces from photographs.⁶⁹

Fine arts, 1921–90

The 1921 revolution brought to power a revolutionary junta supported by the Soviet Union. The new government was initially very cautious about making radical cultural changes, a reluctance accentuated by the embryonic state of the country's modern intellectual class. For many years, the new government had neither the will nor the finances to sponsor large-scale experiments in secular arts.

Even so, the revolution made a striking difference to the work of painters like Busybody Sharab. Sharab gave up painting both his genre scenes and his iconographic portraits and instead took up printing political cartoons and portraits (drawn from photographs) of world revolutionary figures such as Lenin and Karl Liebknecht and Mongolia's leader General Sükhbaatar. Little if anything of the occasional and journalistic art of the next two decades has great artistic significance. Famous Buddhist artists such as Gendündamba and Nawangdendüb continued to work and train pupils into the 1930s, although their work has not survived. The massive purges of 1937–40 and the concurrent destruction of the Buddhist monasteries and laicization of the lamas killed off the older generation of artists.

In 1942 Mongolia's now thoroughly communist-style government organized the Union of Mongolian Artists with the mission of funding and nurturing artistic talent in all branches, while simultaneously enforcing socialist-realist canons of art on the Soviet model. The artists recruited had varying backgrounds, although most had spent time working as illustrators or commercial artists for publishing houses or newspapers. Work on cinema and theatre sets was also important for this early European-style art in Mongolia. ürjingiin Yadamsüren (1905–87), for example, went from carving block-prints of Buddhist

⁶⁸ See the plates in Erdenitoūtaqu, 1958/1981; Liu Wenyan and Lai Bingwen, 1988.

⁶⁹ Tsultem, 1986b, Pls. 158–60, 174–8 (note: Pls. 176–8 are actually copies, not originals).



FIG. 31. *Breaking in a Horse* (1963) painted by O. Tsewegjaw. Oil on canvas. 200 × 150 cm. (Source: Sonomtseren, 1971, Pl. 3.)

scriptures in 1918 to Moscow's Communist University of the Toilers of the East in 1930 and the Surikov Fine Art Institute in 1939. Luwsangiin Gawaa (b. 1920) trained from 1933 with a Soviet artist K. I. Pomerantsev (and later with Sharab) as an apprentice illustrator at the State Publishing House.

Soviet influence, while dominant, was not the only conduit for modern artistic influences, however. Ochiryn Tsewegjaw (1915–75) was born in Buriatia in Siberia, fled the Russian revolution with his family, and entered high school in Ulaanbaatar (Fig. 31). There an Inner Mongolian artist Soyoltai, who had trained at the Beijing Art Institute before migrating to Mongolia, introduced him to the French Impressionists (Soyoltai himself perished in the Great Purges).⁷⁰ Dulamjawyn Damdinsüren (1909–84), who became a lama in 1920, had experience as an iconographic artist before being laicized in 1937. He studied with Sharab in that same year and worked at the printing house until 1947, when he began working full time as an artist.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Sonomtseren and Batchuluun, 1989, pp. 80–104.

⁷¹ Dariimaa, 2003, p. 10.

At first the new Union of Mongolian Artists treated European-style oil and canvas as the sole superior medium for painting. Until the mid-1950s, scenes from revolutionary and military history and portraits of political leaders were virtually the only permissible topics for Mongolian artists. The ideological thaw created by the de-Stalinization movement in the Soviet bloc after 1956 had a direct influence on Mongolian art. Portraits of living leaders and the idolization of the deceased Marshal Choibalsan (Mongolia's 'Stalin' from 1936 to 1952) disappeared and the range of acceptable themes expanded vastly. Although Mongolian urbanization accelerated in the 1950s and 1960s, the country's artists preferred to focus on the countryside and traditional themes, a trend that has continued to the present. Depictions of horses, camels and the herding life were particularly popular. Yet scenes of rural life often stressed modernization, portraying a train in the distance or a motorcycle parked by a yurt.

Political pressures did not disappear, however, and the artists' clear preference for traditional and rural themes was frustrating for the national leadership. In March 1959 the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) charged that Mongolian artists had 'hardly studied Marxism-Leninism at all or the works of the world's classic authors, and not worked intensively to master socialist realism'. Despite this criticism, de-Stalinization continued in the Soviet Union until 1963, and the Mongolian Government had to follow the liberalizing trend. In the mid-1960s, however, the political and cultural space opened by de-Stalinization began to close. In January 1969 the MPRP again issued a decree criticizing abstract art and calling for the Committee of the Union of Mongolian Artists to stick to socialist realism.⁷² This time, the cultural climate in the Soviet Union was likewise becoming increasingly dogmatic and the decree greatly inhibited Mongolian artistic development. Trends towards abstract art and 'unedifying' subjects were driven underground, ending the period of unusual artistic creativity that had begun in the mid-1950s.

Although painting remained the dominant branch of the fine arts, other media that flourished in the 1950s and 1960s included drawing, printing and sculpture. Drawing in pencil had been a phase of production in Mongolian *thangka* painting, and it was through pencil drawings that Mongolian artists assimilated European canons of composition and draughtsmanship. Likewise printing, including lithographs and linocuts, had been the main medium for the illustrations and propaganda art that formed the bulk of artists' work before the 1940s. Two of the most familiar and widely reproduced works of Mongolian art are the linocuts *Good Morning, Mommy!* (1963) by D. Amgalan (b. 1933) (Fig. 32) and *A Herd of Horses* (1962) by S. Natsagdorj (b. 1928). Modern sculpture in Mongolia began with Sonomyn Choimbol's monumental sculpture of the revolutionary leader General Sükhbaatar

⁷² Sonomtseren and Batchuluun, 1989, pp. 149, 151.



FIG. 32. *Good Morning, Mommy!* (1963) painted by D. Amgalan. From the collection 'Morning in Our Motherland'. Linocut. 45 × 75 cm. (Source: Sonomtseren, 1971, Pl. 33.)

on horseback, erected in the capital city Ulaanbaatar's main square (unveiled in 1946). More so than any other medium, however, sculpture remained limited to either sentimental portrayals of folk life or monumental depictions of historical and political leaders.

The neo-traditional movement in Mongolian art was clearly expressed in the creation of the *Mongol zurag* (Mongolian painting) style. In this style, the traditional medium of *thangka* painting (mineral paints on cotton) is used for non-religious topics. D. Manibadar was an early pioneer in this style with his painting *Old Warrior* (1942), portraying a bearded warrior in armour on a throne. This 'feudal' style and theme was only tolerated during the years of patriotic fervour during the Second World War. No further examples of the *Mongol zurag* style won public acclaim until 1958, when Ü. Yadamsüren unveiled *Old Fiddler*, portraying a bearded fiddler playing the Mongolian 'horse-head fiddle', the traditional instrument *par excellence* in Mongolian folk music. In the following decades, *Mongol zurag* artists created a number of classic paintings that became iconic images of Mongolian tradition such as *Naadam* [Games] (1966) by D. Damdinsüren, *Migration* (1967) by Ts. Minjuur (b. 1910), *Chess Players* (1968) by B. Awarzad (b. 1907), *Black Camel* (1968) and *Camels* (1971) by A. Sengetsokhio (b. 1917) (Fig. 33), *Mongolian Woman* (1968) by Ts. Jamsran (b. 1924) and *The Call* (1975) by N. Tsültem (b. 1923) (Fig. 34). Although oil painting continued as a widely used medium, the officially approved impressionism-influenced socialist-realist style was overshadowed in the 1960s and 1970s by the new *Mongol zurag* school.

In the *Mongol zurag* school, paintings of historical topics from the 1921 revolution were also popular; the use of this neo-traditional style to represent revolutionary topics graphically expressed the assimilation of the events of 1921 into Mongolian tradition as part of the



FIG. 33. *Camels* (1971) painted by A. Sengetsokhio. Mineral paints on cotton. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, Pl. 186.)

legacy of the elders. The *Mongol zurag* painters also paid homage to the pre-purge generation of Mongolian artists in, for example, Sengetsokhio's *Portrait of the Painter Busybody Sharab* (1963). Tsultem's *The Call* was a much more elaborate 'remake' of Sharab's own lithograph of a soldier calling revolutionaries to war by blowing on a conch shell used as the masthead to the party periodical *The Call* in November 1921. (The conch shell was used in Buddhist services to summon lamas to the services.)

The *Mongol zurag* school was by no means monolithic. Some artists, like D. Damdinsüren, remained rooted in the old Buddhist painting traditions, while others adopted European methods of perspective, shading and realistic portraiture. Kh. Tserendorj (b. 1910), for example, in his *Wedding Ceremony* (1967), made extensive use of shading (although without a single consistent source of light) to render the landscape and abandoned the traditional conventions of *thangka* painting in rendering the waves on water, clouds and grassy slopes. His *Migration for the Servants* (1968), however, shows a topic unusual in the *Mongol zurag* repertoire (criticism of class inequalities in the old society), with geometric perspective (unknown in traditional Buddhist painting) and an abundant use of half-tones,



FIG. 34. *The Call* (1975) painted by N. Tsültem. Mineral paints on cotton. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, Pl. 189.)

yet with an elaborate cloudscape taken directly from *thangka* conventions. In general, however, while *Mongol zurag* painters made more use of half-tones than did traditional *thangka* painters, they generally emulated the *thangka* painting practice of using outlines filled with swaths of colour.

Paintings of rural scenes like Ts. Dawaakhüü's *Festivities at a Cooperative* (1979) (Fig. 35) and Minjuur's *Migration* were typically composed without geometric perspective in an episodic panel-style composition very similar to Sharab's *A Day in the Life of Mongolia*. On the other hand, indoor scenes, such as *The New Masters Have Come* (1963) by B. Gombosüren (b. 1930) (Fig. 36), showing the arrival of the 1921 revolutionaries at the palace of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, and *An Audience with Lenin* (1967) by Sengetsokhio, depicting Sükhbaatar's meeting with Lenin in Moscow, use perspective to centre the heroic figure of Sükhbaatar with his followers faced with either the darkened authority of the Khutukhtu or the welcoming figure of Lenin. In line with his aim to document traditional rituals in their architectural setting in pre-revolutionary Khüriye,



FIG. 35. *Festivities at a Cooperative* (1979) painted by Ts. Dawaakhüü. Mineral paints on cotton. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, Pl. 191.)



FIG. 36. *The New Masters Have Come* (1963) painted by B. Gombosüren. Mineral paints on cotton. The painting depicts Sükhbaatar (centre) and his revolutionaries (on the left) receiving the seal of government from the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu (enthroned on right) and his entourage. (Source: Tsultem, 1986b, Pl. 190.)

Damdinsüren's portrayals of the *Naadam* games and the *Tsam* dances were drawn from an aerial perspective, as if from a photograph taken from an aeroplane (Fig. 37).⁷³

⁷³ Tsultem, 1986b, Preface, Pls. 181–92; Sonomtseren, 1971.



FIG.37. *Tsam in Khüriye* (1966) painted by D. Damdinsüren. Mineral paints on cotton. The Tsam was an exorcistic dance performed in honour of the fierce Buddhist deity Yamataka. The painting is looking north towards the centre of Mongolia's capital Khüriye (modern Ulaanbaatar) and represents the city's look around 1920. In the middle of the immediate foreground is the city's ceremonial gate. The walled compound behind the dancers is the 'Yellow Palace' of the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu. The low white building to the north-west of the Yellow Palace is the marquee-style *tsogchin dugang*, or Great Assembly Hall designed by Zanabazar. (Source: Sonomtseren, 1971.)

Despite the roots of *Mongol zurag* in Buddhist painting, religion itself had only an ambivalent presence in *Mongol zurag* painting, due to the continuing ideological pressure of the communist government, and perhaps to a reluctance on the part of traditionally trained artists to mix secular and religious styles. Compositions that explicitly adopted iconographic methods of portraiture, even for secular topics such as D. Urtnasan's *Wise Queen Mandukhai* (1982) or D. Damdinsüren's *Mother's Glory*, were rare. In private, however, painters such as Damdinsüren, who had never given up his Buddhist faith despite forced laicization, continued to paint Buddhist icons.

Architecture, 1921–90

Mongolian architecture, like the fine arts, did not emerge from the period of revolutionary destruction until the 1940s. As in the Buddhist period, monumental architecture in Mongolia continued to be more strongly influenced than the fine arts not just by foreign models but by the presence of foreign architects and construction workers. Until the mid-1960s, foreign labour played a major role in Mongolia's building industry.

Despite the 1921 revolution, little visible change occurred at first in the cityscape of Khūriye, renamed Ulaanbaatar ('Red Hero') in 1924. The first distinctive new building was the Green Dome theatre (built in 1927), designed by a Hungarian architect, Joseph Gelet, with a round green roof in a form inspired by the yurt. The few buildings built before 1945, such as the State Printing Press of 1929, followed a purely European style. The architects were generally Soviet, but their designs in Mongolia in this period were surprisingly ornate, perhaps influenced by the Siberian vernacular architectural style.

After 1945, Soviet architects such as N. M. Shchepetil'nikov and Gerhard Kozel designed the buildings around the central square of Ulaanbaatar in a full-blown neo-classical style with columns, entablatures and pilasters (Fig. 38). Meanwhile Japanese prisoners of war built the first large apartment blocks in Mongolia, four storeys high and again with a number of neo-classical touches. This style was continued in the 1950s in apartment blocks built by Chinese guest workers under the direction of a city plan drawn up by Soviet and Mongolian architects. The pioneering Mongolian architect in the post-war era was B. Chimed, who closely imitated Soviet styles, modelling his tombs of General Sūkhbaatar and Marshal Choibalsan, for example, on the tomb of Lenin in Moscow. In designing the Ulaanbaatar Hotel (1961), Chimed moved in a more modernist direction while also adding touches of Mongolian 'national characteristics'. Despite the imitative character of the architecture, the centre of the new Ulaanbaatar kept a certain charm and architectural unity marked by, for example, the widespread green roofs. This charm has, however, been marred by the generally poor upkeep of the buildings and the subsequent addition after 1990 of several multi-storey steel and glass constructions.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, Mongolia witnessed a construction boom both on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar and in the surrounding cities. Construction had to be rapid to keep up with the rapid pace of population growth, urbanization, and industrialization and most of the buildings fit the stereotype of Soviet concrete public housing projects with shoddy construction and an alienating gigantism. Few if any presented any distinctive Mongolian characteristics, nor did they mix harmoniously with the previous neo-classical style in the Ulaanbaatar centre.⁷⁴

The contemporary art scene

The increased openness of the late 1980s and the peaceful 1990 democratic revolution removed the ideological controls on art in Mongolia. The Green Horse Modern Art Society was formed to promote abstract and avant-garde trends in art, and its members eventually

⁷⁴ Shchepetil'nikov, 1960; Tsultem, 1988.



FIG. 38. Ulaanbaatar. The Opera and Ballet Theatre on Sükhbaatar Square. Designed by Gerhard Kozel. The Opera and Ballet Theatre was unveiled in 1949. (Source: Tsend et al. (eds.), 1974, p. 56.)

created their own Art Institute. The Union of Mongolian Artists remains, however, the major professional organization.⁷⁵ At the same time, the economic crisis eliminated state funding for the arts and put virtually all large construction plans on hold until the late 1990s.

Mongolian painting has a relatively high profile both in Mongolia and abroad – it has established a significant reputation in Japan, Europe and North America, where many Mongolian artists have exhibited. Artistic trends are very diverse. Religious and erotic themes that were previously prohibited are now given free expression. Despite the new importance of purely abstract art, Mongolian painting remains predominantly representational and traditional themes based on the national past, the countryside and pastoralism are still important. The definition of the traditional past has, however, been expanded to include shamanism, religious rituals, the great conqueror Chinggis Khan and other previously taboo subjects. The religious revival has meant that Buddhist iconographic art is again in great demand for temples, private devotions and connoisseurs. Ironically, however, the secular *Mongol zurag* style has been somewhat overshadowed both by the new vitality

⁷⁵ Union of Mongolian Artists, 2002–4.

in European-style oil and canvas painting and the return to purely religious art. In 2002, 14 *Mongol zurag* artists established an organization called Mongol Zurag to promote their style. New or revived media include leather art, felt art, and calligraphy in the traditional vertical and cursive Uighur-Mongolian script, which had been replaced by a new Cyrillic alphabet between 1945 and 1950. Overall, the Mongolian artistic scene is remarkably lively for a nation of only 2.5 million people set in the heart of Asia.