

## **Contemporary Fine Arts of Kazakhstan**

Kazakhstan's fine arts have passed through all the stages of its development, starting with formation up to international recognition, within a historical short period. In essence, the environment, which is a non-traditional factor from the historical point of view, fostered the birth of a new concept and national school of art. Analyses and studies of this cultural phenomenon will continue, but one fact remains indubitable: its emergence was the result of the fruitful interaction of European and Central Asian arts. It was here, the cultural sphere, that the Eurasian idea found a fertile ground to germinate on.

The political and social changes that generously fill Kazakhstan's 20<sup>th</sup> century history, certainly, constituted the internal potential for the development process. However, in this country the fight against complete ideological oppression, avant-grade ideas and personal artistic credos had its own peculiarities and was not as acute as Russia's struggle with its long history of schools, trends and ideas.

In the 1950s – the epoch of developed socialist realism – talented Kazakh artists who had graduated from the best professional educational institutions in the 'country' (USSR) returned home and started the formation of a new cultural order. Their sphere of interests was not so much in ideological programs, but rather in the level of skill, artistic and aesthetic assimilation of actual events and national themes, and the introduction of new specialists like scenography, book illustration, and cinema into the new arts. Thematic pictures, the mainstay of every exhibition of that time, were not turned into ideological messages from their brush.

Paintings like 'The Ancestors' Land' by K.Telzhanov or 'Catching a Horse' by M.Kenbayev rather demonstrated their love for, loyalty and homage to their people. The same could be said of the then popular revolutionary and wartime compositions. Those dramatic events were still too fresh in the minds of that generation to be treated as simply formal contributions of that period. The Art Foundation of the Union of Artists, where social orders for artistic works accumulated and which determined the particular 'canon' for their execution, played the role of an ideological buffer during that period till the collapse of the socialist system.

Noteworthy are the activities of those masters who taught at the Almaty Art College. They laid the foundation for a system of education in the field of arts in Kazakhstan. With regards to their stand and world outlook, that generation resembled the generation of the 1960s in terms of sincerity, thirst for knowledge, enlightened ideas and devotedness to their profession.

However, art as a vivid creative process can not be adapted to a certain trend, because, according to the well-known sociologist and philosopher Yu.Davydov, it 'produces a communication model of a freedom pattern in the purest form'. The very concept of 'socialist realism' – limiting artistic research themes to only visibly perceptible events bearing a particular political charge – contained this blast-starting device. Such a set-up could not correlate neither with the artist's own world perception, not with traditional world outlook, which became the main issue of spiritual research during the 1960-70s.

A group of artists led by Salikhiddin Aitbayev decided to change the trend of events. They introduced an air of freedom into the arts. By deliberately dissociating themselves from the ideological control, they turned to their own historical and artistic identification regarding them as the main purpose of their life and creations.

The action Aitbayev and his adherents took was revolutionary and very daring at that period. Giving up the social topics, they turned the theme of their paintings into an experimental art arena where the author's personal position was revealed with the same vigour as the artistic value of the work. The spirit of that time finally found its reflection in these works.

These artists were able to inject into the society's official atmosphere the ideas, hopes and aspirations of the artistic intellectual milieu, whose life in Kazakhstan, particularly in Almaty, was similarly interesting and tense during that period. Olzhas Suleimenov's poetic voice was acquiring full pitch. Murat Auezov's research work, the first to raise the issue of conceptual aesthetics of nomadic culture, was extensively debated. Alan Medoyev, another famous personality with

encyclopedic knowledge, a scientist, concept-maker, a romanticist and poet in his own way, assimilated the unknown historical horizon of his archeological and cultural researches. The ideas of Vernadsky and Gumilyov were brought into reality in that auspicious atmosphere and preserved with rapture and care as the rightly chosen path. The list could be continued.

The nomadic culture and its philosophic, artistic and esthetic imagery became the subject of artistic cognition and a special area for new artists. Possibilities were opened for experiments with colours and plastic forms of objects in traditional Kazakh applied art. As a result, the colour and ornamental improvisations turned out to be fresh and avant-guard, which unexpectedly correlated to the experiments of some famous Western artists. This correlation determined the course taken by the development of Kazakh fine art.

This search for new forms of artistic expression was not an antithesis to the previous period. The on-going process brought up the inevitable issue of creating a national art language and a new conception for the evolution of the fine arts.

The works by Aitbayev, Sariyev and Toguzbayev carried no classical presentation of the future. Their composition was intuitive and improvised. The plastic forms resembled ornamental patterns on folklore artifacts where colour remained the unifying and primary element. Free and unlimited use of colour is not merely a technique. It is rather a call for emotional liberation, a search for a new philosophical content, and, finally, the path to symbolism, which presupposes meditation as one of the functional characteristics of art. The lessons of great post-impressionists like Sezann, Matiss and Gaugin, and the genius of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Picasso, are clearly perceived in these works. However, there is no imitation or direct copying. What appealed to these artists was that remote accord in the colour experiments and national colour perception of the works of these great masters. They appreciated the ability to mould a form into any idea and the capability of opening the unexpected facets of objectiveness, clearly emphasizing the advantages of a creative conscience over inert material.

Naturally, the freedom of creative will and explicit reminiscences did not meet the understanding of exhibition committees and expert commissions. The authors were

accused of 'picassism', violation of the norms of aesthetic art, permissiveness and of 'choosing the wrong methods'. In spite of these stumbling blocks, their works passed the preliminary selection giving it the green light for display. However, they were often withdrawn from the exposition at the last minute by the Central Committee Party representatives, who, according to the existing rules, censored the exhibition before opening it to the general public. Aitbayev's picture *Field Works* and Khisametdinov's graphic series 'And the Sun Rises' missed the eyes of the public in such a manner.

The creative life of the artists of that generation was dramatic in its own way. The search for an own idea in art did not come easy. Consciously or subconsciously, the established aim – creation of a new art system – demanded great responsibility, which in turn called for intensive moral defense against symptoms like harassing doubts, fastidious self-analysis of the accomplished, and setting new goals for further creative advancement. And at the same time there was the constant need to justify one's artwork before colleagues and officials. Maybe it is not by chance that nearly all the artists of this group, the vanguards that the present generation refers to as precursors, have passed away so early.

Finally, the demonopolised artistic process is revealed through the diverse art associations, galleries, styles and trends, new names, intense exhibition activities and enhancement of geographic contacts. Annually in the Kasteyev State Arts Museum, a solemn and bright function – Parade of Galleries – is held where the gallery workers, art critics and authors are given the chance to parade their achievements and defend their artistic credo. This project of Kazakhstan is steadily gaining popularity and intends to become a noteworthy art laboratory of international significance. It is worth mentioning that for several years running the heroes of this exhibition and other art shows are the artists who made their debut at the first and the only exhibition of avant-guard art 'Perekryostok' in 1989, which was the first show to present the underground art of Almaty.

Today, contemporary art has assimilated various trends and styles. The absence of any prohibition giving way to the possibility of full artistic self-expression, search for new forms and cognition categories is its main credo. That is the reason why the countdown of its development starts with the works of the generation of the 1960s, whose aspirations coincide with the concepts of today's development of

contemporary art. They give way to creative realism and radicalism in any of its forms. There is the possibility to invent and stand for one's own original trend, which might open a new page in the history of arts. Variability of artistic discourse commensurate with the variability of natural forms, probably because they are all governed by the same fundamental universal laws.

Concepts of nomadic culture continue to develop and acquire new interpretations. The painting of symbols of A.Sadykhanov, based on the graphic representations of Kazakh tamga symbols, fully incorporates national artistic and plastic ideas. It unveiled the ontological values of ancient signs-scriptures which holds the secrets of human existence for the past centuries. In the works of many other artists the spiritual and artistic categories of nomadic culture is conveyed to the audience through spatial interpretations, colour compositions and special esthetic qualities of texture.

What is more, the traditional world outlook through which most modern authors express themselves also has a hidden dark side to it. As a concealed censor, it seems to impede the free creative fantasies giving it a tactical sort of conservatism. The modern artist does not belong to his family, country and place of birth alone. He is a part of the world and a creative element of the universe. In his search he tries to come out of the grips of objects and phenomena in order to reach the concealed metaphysical essence.

Symbolism, metaphor, allegory, philosophic thoughts in the movement of plastic forms, the feeling of being in the centre of cosmic laws and a somewhat feeling of being esoteric responsible for their manifestation – these are the qualities much common and characteristic of contemporary artistic reality. However, the most important achievement is the recognition of the artist's leading role as the creator and the bearer of spiritual and moral values. If deprived of this role art simply becomes a mere material object.

The popular branches of art still remain painting and sculpture. At the same time, the immigration of the artistic idea into three-dimensional materials is as strong as ever and probably will reveal both the new potentials of our authors and the new cultural paradigms in the nearest future. The exhibition of sculptural works of

Kazaryan in the open-air ancient temple of Tamgaly Gorge is a fitting example. The sculptures in their new quality as 'bronze graphics', absolutely fit into the natural and historic background like an equal partner in the Dialogue, which apparently was supposed to be the purpose of the action.

Incorporating the environment as part of the action is a new genre in Kazakh art. Currently, experience is being achieved in this field and there is no doubt that Kazakh artists will make their contribution to this domain. Possibilities for the artistic development in these creative spheres are great.

The project 'The Tower of Babel' by the creative group of the author Madanov is today the most successful implementation of both the environment incorporation idea and the project concept itself. The theme 'unity and separation on earth', where man is at the same time a creator and destroyer could not have come at a more opportune time. TV screens flood us with contradictory information and labyrinth staircases actually leading the ascender to a fall are some pieces of today's reality.

The modern art of Kazakhstan seems ready to create a new system of esthetic values, based upon intercommunication with a concrete person – the viewer – equated to the artist in the artistic environment.

A clear mutual interest of the artist and admirer is also one of the remarkable tendencies of the contemporary art process. Frequent exhibitions attract more and more view in public. Curiosity or the desire to 'party' can not be the only reason for the large numbers of the public. Rather. One finds the much-awaited change from post-industrial mentality towards spiritual values and a new human knowledge – the path which the society should traverse into the next millennium. Maybe that is the path that contemporary Kazakh artists are laying.

*Used material:*

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