

**МОНГОЛЫН УРЛАГТ ГАРСАН ШИНЭ НОМЫН ТОЙМ:
Ц.ЭРДЭНЭЦОГИЙН МОНГОЛЫН ДҮРСЛЭХ УРЛАГ ДАХЬ
ӨНГИЙН СИСТЕМ НОМЫН ЖИШЭЭН ДЭЭР**

Евгений В. Яйленко

Доктор (Sc), Соёл урлагийн их сургуулийн Дүрслэх урлагийн академийн хүндэт
профессор, Улаанбаатар, Монгол улс

A COMPREHENSIVE BOOK ON MONGOLIAN ART

Evgenii IAILENKO

Science Doctor, Honorary Professor of the Academy of Fine Arts, Mongolian National
University of Arts and Culture, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Abstract: This article deals with the analysis and critique of the main statements formulated in the monograph by Professor Ts.Erdenetsog. “Color System of Mongolian Art” as well as an investigation of its basic structure. We proved that this book constitutes an outstanding example of modern Mongolian art history because it provides a broad panorama of the historical evolution of Mongolian artistic tradition since its origins until modern times. Its content is dedicated to the investigation of different questions concerning the formation of the color system in native Mongolian art as well as its further development. Special attention is paid to the extensive study of Mongolian painting of the 20th century when it came into contact with the different traditions of European as well as Russian art. This inevitably resulted in considerable changes in the color system inherent to it. We concluded that the monograph by Professor Erdenetsog has great significance for the further studies of Mongolian art and culture.

Key words. *art history, Mongolian art, painting, color system, color symbolism, Mongol zurag, easel painting, Impressionism, D.Amgalan*

The study of Mongolian art has been developing in a variety of ways in this country since the mid-20th century. Those art historians who lived and worked once in the People’s Republic of Mongolia were mostly graduates from the Ilya Repin Leningrad Institute for Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. Due to their prolific scientific activity, Mongolian art history reached its peak in the 1980s when it was at a high level, without any doubt, comparable with that of the Soviet as well as Western European scientists. The most important achievement of this period is marked by an outstanding book entitled

“A Concise History of Mongolian Art (1940- 1989)”, written by two well-known art historians, science doctors L.Sonomzeren and L.Batchuluun. Being highly informative and comprehensive, it provides a general overview of the development of Mongolian art during the 20th century.

Nevertheless, the situation became more complicated in the difficult years following the Revolution of 1990. Although there were no more ideological norms that had previously been influencing the development of art history in Mongolia, profound socio-economic changes impressed significantly this process throughout the 90s. Nowadays, the situation looks much more optimistic because Mongolian art history resumes its successful growth. This is clear from the fact that a series of important books on the various aspects of Mongolian 20th century art is being published currently under the guidance and active participation of Professor, Doctor D.Uranchimeg, Director of Academy of Fine Art (Mongolian National University of Art and Culture). Many renowned art historians are effectively continuing their scientific activity (Drs. L.Batchuluun, S.Badral, D.Sergelen, B. Bayartur). Also, of note is a younger generation of researchers deeply involved in studying ancient and, especially, contemporary Mongolian art (E.Bathuleg, G.Amarsanaa and many others).

Against this background, Professor and Science Doctor Z.Erdenetsog is justly characterized as one of the leading Mongolian researchers of this time in the sphere of art history. Graduate from the Repin’s Institute with a qualification in “Painting”, he is a renowned Mongolian painter decorated with many awards from Mongolia’s Union of Artists and at international exhibitions. As a practicing artist, he stays firmly on the principles of Realism, although there are some borrowings from Impressionist painting and even discernable Modernist elements in his original artworks. At the same time, Professor Erdenetsog is also a prominent art historian who got his doctoral degree in 2007 (Science Doctor). Qualified also as a professor in the sphere of art history (2011), he is now occupying the position of the Head of the Department of Fine Arts at the Mongolian State University of Education in Ulaanbaatar.

Active research work carried out by Professor Erdenetsog is to a great extent influenced and even motivated by a unique combination of the various interests typical of him as a practicing artist and University scholar. Basically, as an art historian, he is dealing constantly with the problem of working methods and expressive means implied in producing any artwork. He is interested most of all in studying various matters concerning the use of color in painting which is quite understandable if we take into account his artistic practice. As a painter, Professor Erdenetsog is deeply involved in exploring the expressive power of plein-air painting. This is the main reason why his investigation is for the most part also dedicated to this question. His monograph entitled “Color System of Mongolian Art”, issued in Ulaanbaatar in 2018 is justly considered to be the crowning jewel of his academic career. This is a unique phenomenon of contemporary Mongolian art history. This outstanding book gains its importance from the fact that this is a large study of Mongolian art investigated as a whole from its early beginnings until the modern era. Unfortunately, a range of publications with such a wide scope of research materials is too short. A monograph on the art of the People’s Republic of Mongolia by the Soviet writer Inessa Lomakina has already become outdated, other publications of Russian and

German scientists are for some reason inaccessible to Mongolian readers. Therefore, the publication of the book written by Professor Erdenetsog should be qualified as an important event because it provides a vast panorama of the historical development of Mongolian art divided into some periods and studied in great detail.

Now, we are going to consider some basic positions of this book and add several comments that help to understand its core idea in a better way.

A comprehensive introduction opens with substantiating the relevance of the topic. It also comprises a formulation of the basic research tasks of this book. There are eight in number which is quite unusual. On the other hand, this helps the author to concentrate on investigating a very wide range of issues within a framework of one single monograph which unifies them through the notion of a “color system”. To summarize, the main goal consists of studying the reasons as well as different aspects of the forming and subsequent evolution of this phenomenon over a long historical period from ancient times until nowadays. Along with this, the author provides the reader with a comprehensive survey of publications divided into several sections according to their content. This approach helps to establish some basic priorities for further research, although sometimes omissions and gaps are inevitable.

Taking into account the importance of the research initiated by Professor Erdenetsog, we can list some other books that are of considerable use in their context. As to the various surveys of modern Mongolian art, of note are some important publications along with the book by Lomakina (omitted in the text, it is mentioned, nevertheless in the bibliographical list, number 189). Among them, there are research publications by J. Schulze (1979), I. Rinchen-Habaeva (2005) and K. Tchutcheva (2001) which provide us with a great amount of useful information concerning the evolution of the local artistic tradition in the 20th century. In the same way, the ground-breaking book by Johannes Itten, who taught in Bauhaus in the 1920s, is of great use for a better understanding of the color perception problem. Published in 1961 and since then re-edited in many languages, it is highly estimated as a guide to the nature of color combinations as a basic phenomenon in fine art.

The first chapter of the book deals with a color perception typical of Mongols and its dependence upon some features of the Mongolian natural landscape. Professor Erdenetsog was absolutely correct when he established a profound connection between the color system of Mongolian painting in general and the natural as well as climatic conditions of the country. As it seems to us, this statement needs to be developed further because this could lead to the understanding of more fundamental patterns of Mongolian artistic consciousness, i.e., the creative mind which was deeply influenced by some specific features of local atmosphere and light conditions. Necessarily, this approach should be based on a fundamental scientific groundwork which must include a survey of theoretical as well as historic research in this field. We can even label this issue as a study of the specific “Mongolian way of feeling art forms” (Bruckmann, 1931). It should also be noted that such an analytical approach has its roots in the 18th century when J. Winkelmann, founder of art history as an academic discipline, contemplated the various forms of influence produced by the beneficial Greek climate on Classical art.

The principle of “geographic determinism” was further developed in research conducted by the French Positivist historian and philosopher Hippolyte Adolphe Taine. As is well-

known, he treated the climate condition as a basic factor for the development of fine art while considering specific features of any national artistic tradition as merely a result of the impact of the relevant natural environment. Thereafter, this theme has been extensively researched in the 20th and early 21st centuries in the context of cultural anthropology investigation which, in turn, can also serve as a solid theoretical base for the research of some authentic features of native as well as modern Mongolian art. As it appears to us, this issue is still waiting for its further study in a much more profound way.

On the whole, Professor Erdenetsog points out some specific peculiarities in the life of Mongolian nomads which served as a basis for the formation of the color perception system (and in the long term – of the color system in Mongolian art in general). These peculiarities are still clearly visible in toponymy, in the designation of various everyday items, and even in time concepts. From this point of view, this is reasonable that the next research section consists of investigating principles of using color in the earliest rock painting ensembles on the territory of Mongolia as well as in the households of its nomadic inhabitants. For them, each color possessed a certain symbolic connotation resulting from its meaning in mythology and religious rites, due to this providing certain associations with the various natural events, animals, and birds. (As an example, we can mention the symbolism of the white color associated with an image of the mythological White Eagle as a Solar Deity which, in turn, means the notions of might and power). Consequently, color semantics appeared in the meaning of various motifs of traditional Mongolian ornamentation. Professor Erdenetsog rightly points to its dual function as a sort of the embellishment of everyday environment and, at the same time, a medium for the expression of symbolic language related to the notions of well-being and abundance.

Being in its base a system of signs, any ornamental pattern represents the nature of life phenomena by involving abstracted art forms. Along with the semiotic methods of investigation of native Mongolian ornaments, Professor Erdenetsog also resorts to the use of methods of iconography and formal analysis as traditional means for the investigation. This led him to the exploration of color systems in various items of Mongolian households (dress, habitation) which were also studied within the framework of semiotics as emblematic ensembles.

From this point of view, the academic approach of Professor Erdenetsog can be defined as encyclopedic because he tries to cover as much material as possible. In the second part of his book, he investigates the evolution of the color system in Mongolian art in the time of Chinggis Khan's invasions and the subsequent formation of the Great Empire of Mongols. These processes resulted in a complete transformation of the traditional social structures and living conditions which inevitably led to a new comprehension of color symbolism. Along with previously widespread mythological and ethical connotations, it obtained a new dimension of socio-political allusions. The problem was that the color system had been forming simultaneously and in accordance with the newly established principles of imperious hierarchy. Each level of this intricate social system had a range of corresponding colors. From this position, the white color embodied the idea of supreme power because of its identification with the ruling class of Mongolian aristocracy; the blue one alluded to the state; the yellow color was equated with gold and, therefore, signified prosperity, etc. (Эрдэнэцог, 1999, 85-89).

At the same time, Professor Erdenetsog succeeded in establishing the idea that color perception had never been constant and unchanging. Since the meanings of different colors were overlapping having many common elements, this inevitably led to the further development of the semantic fields of each color.

The second chapter of the monograph deals with the problem of the interaction of native Mongolian artistic tradition with the other ones during the large-scale invasions in the 13th century and the subsequent incorporation of the new territories into the Great Empire of Mongols. Due to the newly established cultural interconnections, the color system of Mongolian art experienced a considerable evolution while obtaining new symbolic values. Professor Erdenetsog also emphasized the role of Buddhism in this process which had been considerably accelerating since the late 16th century. From that time, many Buddhist monasteries had been established on the territory of Mongolia which, in turn, led to the radical transformation of its religious as well as cultural life. In this respect, the investigation of Buddhist religious ritual is of especially great significance because it included a kind of theatrical performance called Zama. Being a mysterial spectacle, zamas had a very elaborate scenography in the form of theatrical masks and richly decorated costumes.

As it seems to us, this part of the monograph could be considerably expanded due to the study of the phenomenon of zamas in greater detail. Accurate research of its further development should lead us to the formation of the early Mongolian national theatre in the 19th century and, thereafter, its consequent evolution in the next century which could provide rich material concerning the color system.

The last chapter, entitled “Color System in the Works of the Traditional Painting”, deals with icon painting and traditional Mongol zurag style, although it also includes a large section dedicated to easel painting and its evolution in Mongolian art of the 20th century. Professor Erdenetsog with good reason considered the borrowed principles of pictorial representation and new color schemes as a modern alternative to the traditional color system of Mongolian art. This new approach which demanded to convey the atmospheric effects in the most precise way impressed greatly the color perception of many Mongolian painters. During the 20th century, the local artistic school experienced a strong influence on the part of European and Russian Impressionism as well as other Modernist movements (Эрдэнэцог, 1999, 141-145). As an especially good thing, we can point out the in-depth and, at the same time, subtle analysis of artistic merits in many well-known artworks created by prominent Mongolian artists. Eventually, they managed to work out a specific pictorial style that combined essential elements of traditional Mongolian art with the newly borrowed representative principles of various Modernist movements. In our opinion, this process is of particular interest because it testifies to the persistent striving for the national Mongolian identity in the sphere of artistic activity (Эрдэнэцог, 1999, 148-149). It’s also important to note that the return to the native Mongolian color system in the art of the mid-20th century didn’t contradict the principles of modernism and even stimulated this process to some extent. This is clearly visible in

the paintings by D. Amgalan which could be explored in a much deeper way.

Our critical remarks are mostly limited to the references to the occasional “proofreading” inaccuracies. On page 16, the initials of L.N.Gumilev are confused; a well-known painting by B. Sharav is mentioned in two different ways in the text of the book and the album (ill. 31); the monograph on Mongolian art written by L.Sonomtseren and L.Batchuluun was published in 1989; the name Tsaganzhamba is written in two different ways on one p.129, and so on. Such minor flaws like these can be easily corrected if the monograph by Professor Erdenetsog is republished in the future. It is our deep conviction that it also must be translated into English and Mongolian to provide the readers with a large amount of valuable factual information on the historic development of Mongolian art and the color system inherent to it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our brief survey of the content of the monograph by Professor Erdenetsog allows us to affirm that it has a great and enduring significance for the further studies of Mongolian art and culture. Its basic research statements are plausible and have been verified with the painstaking analysis of many artworks by the great Mongolian craftsman and artists. This book provides us with a broad picture of the historical development of Mongolian art in general as well as an analysis of the main sociocultural trends that contributed significantly to this process. Of great importance is also the study of modern Mongolian painting undertaken by Professor Erdenetsog because it shows various aspects of the multi-faceted interaction between its old traditions and, on the other side, many borrowings from European as well as Russian art. Without any doubt, this book may be used as a study guide in the process of teaching students in higher education institutions as well as in the practice of museum work for the organization of the educational process.

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