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## CONSTANTS OF NOMADIC CULTURE IN THE ARTWORK OF ARTIST SHOY CHURUK

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### Abstract

Shoy Churuk is a famous Tuvan artist. His artwork revives and gives new meaning to the traditions of folk art. The artist endeavors to address fundamental cultural foundations that are relevant today. This article examines three of Shoy Churuk's paintings using the methodology of cultural universals (constants). Mongolian culture identifies two constants – “The Warrior” and “The Homeland”, which are significant for various nomadic cultures of Eurasia.

**Keywords:** Shoy Churuk, modern Tuvan art, cultural constants, painting, symbols.

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Tuvan artist Shoy Churuk is one of the most interesting masters of Siberian contemporary art. His artwork emphatically reveals various trends in contemporary Central Asian art. Shoy Churuk's creative method can be called symptomatic. It expresses an entire set of trends that are characteristic of the present stage in art development in several regions of Eurasia. Let's take a closer look at these trends.

First, Eurasian artists pay particular attention to national culture: folklore, decorative-applied art, and the historical heritage of their ethnicity, country and region. The works of artists Valery Tebekov and Sergei Dykov [9] from the Republic of Altai, Gennadi Raishev from Khanty-Mansiysk, and others are interesting in this respect. We also see similar trends in Mongolia, where the deep-seated worldview foundations of traditional Mongolian culture are being actively revived, which is reflected in the works of an entire galaxy of vibrant artists, such as Zorgit Uyanga, Heinzangiyn Sodnomitseren, and others [1; 2]. Their artwork not only reveals the artists' interest in the artistic traditions of the past, but also shows their probing study of these traditions and the creative reinterpretation evident in their works.

Second, the artists are actively seeking the most vibrant means of expression for representing their ideas. Here we see a vast diversity of techniques, compositional designs, symbology, semantic connotations and stylistic trends.

Third, they make active use of metaphor and allegory, as well as the language of symbols. For this, the artists use a system of symbols inherent in traditional art. This is particularly characteristic of the nomadic peoples of Eurasia, whose decorative-applied art is abundant in symbolic images related to shamanic beliefs.

The artwork of Shoy Churuk does justice to these general trends, although he clearly has his own creative style. Let us take a look at how the Tuvan artist's easily recognizable style came into being. Shoy Churuk began his life journey in art during his school days, when the future artist did a lot of drawing, particularly landscapes, was interested in folk culture, and engaged in wood and stone carving. In 1986, Shoy Churuk graduated from the art department at the Kyzyl Academy of Arts. After the academy, he began searching for his own style: he would visit exhibitions, talk to landscape artists, and took a lively interest in realist art trends. While working as a graphic-designer, Shoy Churuk also studied the artwork of the Tuvan nomads, his ancient roots. It was at the beginning of the 2000s that his particular style of compositional design and technical resolution in his paintings formed. Shoy Churuk successfully participated in the "Siberia-10" exhibition (Novosibirsk, 2008) in the city of Edirne (Turkey, 2008), the "Two Rivers: Irtysh and Yenisei" regional exhibition (Krasnoyarsk, 2011), and others [7]. Shoy Churuk's works were presented most recently at the FORM Interregional Siberian Exhibition (Novokuznetsk, 2019) [4].

The uniqueness of Shoy Churuk's artwork requires that it be examined from a certain semantic viewpoint. It is important to set forth a system of coordinates that will reveal the inherent meaning of his paintings to the fullest extent. For the purposes of our study, the theory of cultural universals (constants) appears to be the more conducive. Recently, several theoretical works devoted to the cultural universals, or constants, of nomadic cultures have appeared that address the culture of the cross-border territories of Russia and Mongolia. In particular, a comprehensive study has been carried out to identify the cultural constants of the Mongolians [6; 8]. For instance, based on the epics of the Western Mongols (the Oirats), two cultural constants have been identified – "The Warrior" and "The Homeland". These constants are expressed not only in epic literature, but also in archaic forms of art.

Since the West Mongolian and Tuvan cultures are relatively similar due to the geographic and historical proximity of these regions, the results of the abovementioned study can be used as a methodological basis for this work. This choice of study basis is also confirmed by the artist's own viewpoint, which he has repeatedly voiced in interviews and is based on his frequent citation of the traditions and deep-seated cultural foundations of his people.

The constant of "The Warrior", which reveals an active male origin in culture and frequently assumes the image of an epic hero, acquires an interesting interpretation in one of Shoy Churuk's paintings called "The Keeper of History" (2015, illus. 1).

The artist's technique draws particular attention to itself. In an interview, Shoy Churuk admits that he prefers to work with a palette-knife. This creates the effect of a textured surface. In this painting, we can even say that the warm, uneven texture creates the impression of a stone surface. The daubs of paint, which contain a variety of color combinations, suggest a surface glimmering in the moonlight; the earth and sky are distinguished only by the warmth

and coldness of the colors – the color of the sky is closer to blue, while the earth is closer to green. And the image of a stone warrior with glowing eyes, its outline etched in black, stands out against this glimmering background. In this image, a form of Turkish statute popular in Eurasia is mystically portrayed. As a rule, such statues were erected at burial sites belonging to the era of the Turkish khaganate (6th-7th centuries). The structure of the burial site was composed of several elements: the burial chamber itself, the burial mound on top of it, and the surrounding square stone fence consisting of small flat slabs. This is precisely what surrounds the stone warrior in this painting. But at the same time the pointed stones can be perceived as mountains that enclose a valley, over which rises “The Keeper of History”.



*Illus. 1. Shoy Churik.  
The Keeper of History, 2015.  
Oil on canvas.  
133 x 120. [11]*

Shoy Churuk seems to have precisely reproduced a canon of Turkish sculpture. But there are also very colorful additions; for example, the spear with its barely perceptible slender ribbon, which nomads call a sacred khata. The stone warrior himself is very large, enclosed in the outline of the moon, which gives the image a powerful and imposing appearance. He literally seems to emerge from the surface of the stone under the moonlight. The statue's eyes are bright; the artist applies yellow-orange glowing daubs of paint to create a significant semantic accent – these fiery eyes draw the viewer's attention to the center of the painting, and from there the entire mystical composition unfolds.

The artist depicts the stone warrior from an interesting angle. He appears to be looking at the viewer over his shoulder. This brings the inanimate stone to life, turning it into a kind of spirit – the keeper of history. The angle also emphasizes the moment of animation: the warrior seems to be turning to face the viewer. Two temporal aspects are combined in this



single image – the present (a dialogue with the viewer) and the past (an image of a Turkish stone warrior), that which is embodied in the historical process. The addition to the canon of Turkish sculpture (the spear with khata) is very subtle and unimposing, but it is also placed in the center of the composition and has an important semantic significance. All Turkish-Mongolian peoples follow the tradition of tying pieces of cloth of different semantically provisional colors to objects. Ribbons and pieces of cloth are tied to sacred natural things (wellsprings, solitary trees and cliffs, in mountain passes, on ritual piles of stones (called *ovoo* in Mongolia)). For nomads, the khata (a silk scarf, usually turquoise or white in color) is an essential element of almost all rituals. A turquoise khata symbolizes saintliness, belonging to the Eternal Blue Sky. By portraying a khata in the center of the painting, the artist seems to be conveying to the viewer the sacred link between the past and present, the greatest sacrament of the course of history. In this case, history as such is not portrayed as a strict sequence of events and destinies, but as the essence of some higher order that comes in touch with legendary reality. The legends about Amursana can serve as a vibrant example of this provenance of history in folk culture. I am referring to the Oirat (West Mongolian) noyan, Amursana, who took active part in the internecine war in the Dzungar Khanate in the 1750s, while in 1755-1758 he headed the anti-Manchurian uprising, after which he fled to Russia and died in Tobolsk. In Tuvan legends, real events and heroes blend with legendary, and Amursana, who fled to the White Czar, is depicted now as a powerful warrior, now as a cunning trickster, which in general is in keeping with the character of this historical figure [4, p. 218]. So, the canvas “The Keeper of History” reveals the general essence of metahistory, as well as introduces a canonic – constant – image that expresses the mystery of the passage of time.

The cultural constant “The Homeland”, on the contrary, embodies the female origin in culture; it is related to a certain space that possesses both secular and sacral properties. In other words, in the nomadic culture, it is a place that unites home and temple. Native nomadic heroes in epic literature fit this description, but the yurt is also a good example. In Shoy Churuk’s artwork, this image acquires a very interesting resolution.

The artist elevates it to a kind of symbol, making the form as generalized as possible, eliminating details, and creating an image that is exclusively expressive. Let us take a closer look at this image, since it, in turn, leads us to some of the important cultural constants expressed in the artist’s creative work.

The yurt is a traditional portable conical dwelling for Eurasian nomads and cattle-breeders. Its modifications may vary in different tribes, right down to the stationary homes used by the residents of Mountainous Altai. However, the structural principle remains the same. The interior forms the periphery of a circle, strictly bound by horizontal and vertical semantic correlations. For example, the line depicting the entrance-hearth-place of honor in the northern part is the main horizontal line. This line divides the yurt into its male (left-hand) and female (right-hand) sides. The main vertical – from the hearth to the upper round window – marks the sacral center of the home. So the yurt is not simply a dwelling, it is a kind of ideal model of the universe; it is precisely these correlations that define harmony in the world. Let us take a look at how this principle is implemented in some of Shoy Churuk’s paintings. A striking example is the painting “The Sources of the Yenisei” (2015, illus. 2).



*Illus. 2. Shoy Churik.  
The Sources of the Yenisei.  
Oil on canvas.  
130 x 120. [11]*

The artist does not simply master a creative reinterpretation of the appearance of a real geographical feature (the confluence of the Greater and Lesser Yenisei rivers), but also elevates it to a culturally and semantically attributable symbol. The confluence of the two rivers is reminiscent of a figure with raised arms, as though standing in prayer. The color of the river is portrayed in a contoured gradient from light blue to dark blue. This technique is quite often found in the decorative-applied art of Eurasian nomads, particularly in furniture design. The flow of the river is represented by a vertical that divides the composition into two symmetrical parts. And since it is obvious that the artist is striving to present the composition from the viewpoint of traditional culture and folk art, we can examine it based on the traditional ideas of the Eurasian peoples (which are essentially the same) regarding the structure of the universe, which encompasses three realms: the world of the gods (the upper realm), the world of people (the middle realm) and the world of underground spirits of chthonian beings (the nether realm). The structure of this composition correlates with these ideas. We can clearly distinguish the upper realm, which corresponds to the world of higher divinities. The arms – the sources – are raised upwards. To the right we see a depiction of the sun, to the left, of the moon, both of which were sacralized in the traditional culture of the Turkish-Mongolian peoples. In the center we see the stylized portrayal of a yurt. This image is definitive not only for the part of the work being described, but also for the composition as a whole. According to Tuvan legends, the yurt is a gift to the people from the higher spirits. This emphasizes the upper realm once again. An important semantic support is provided by the depiction of the Three Jewels of Buddhism, which is also an identification mark (a cattle brand). This symbol in the composition has two semantic layers. First, in the yurt, which we see from above, it marks the northern part – the place of

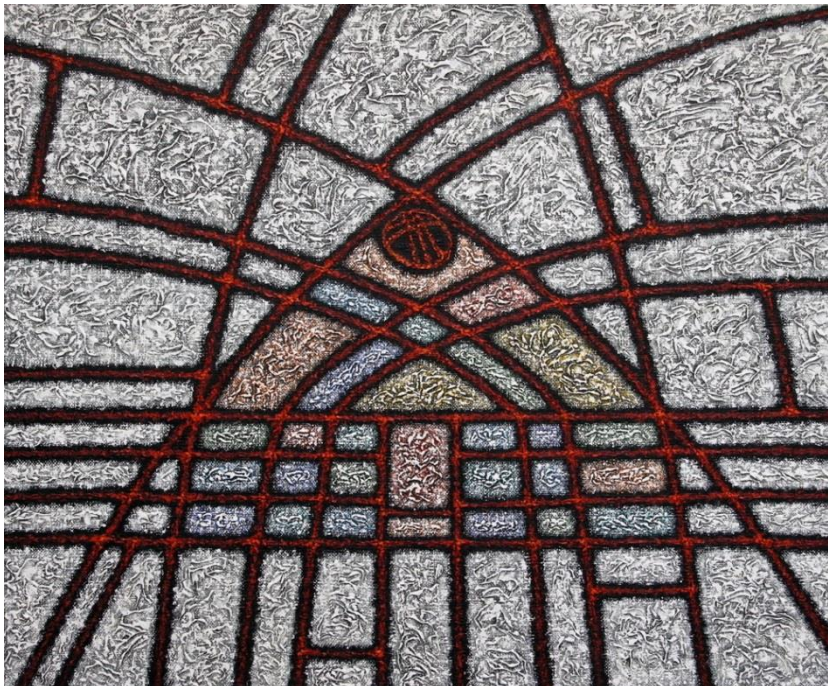


honor, where an altar can be placed. Second, it makes the yurt the most important part of the entire composition. The middle realm is figuratively resolved by the stylized depictions of eight green horses. They represent both the river banks and the grazing land, as well as being a symbol of human prosperity. As for the nether realm, the river, and the element of water in general, marks the world of the underground spirits in the nomadic peoples of Eurasia. For example, the Scythians attach felt decorations of fish to the bottom of their saddles; tattoos in the form of fish are worn on the lower parts of the body, and so on. So this painting depicts the intercorrelation among all three realms.

However, the yurt is the central image, a kind of tuning fork that gives the composition its integrity. It harmonizes the composition at all the semantic levels. First, at the secular, earthly level, the yurt is a human dwelling, and a yurt close to a river (as is essentially depicted in the composition) represents life. Second, at the sacral level, the depiction of the yurt completes the image of the figure with raised arms – the yurt becomes a countenance, whereby the countenance of a deity or spirit. Third, at the level of tradition, the yurt-home signifies the world assimilated by people, essentially the Cosmos, which counteracts the natural disasters created by the spontaneous chaotic plan of existence.

Particular mention should be made of the background of the painting. It is just as textural as in the previous work, whereby the artist chooses golden-ocher tones, which create an association with the Golden Earth – one of the constant images in nomadic epic literature. Thus, Shoy Churuk's painting expresses an important Eurasian category – “earth-water”. It is most fully revealed in Mongolian folklore, but, as Tuvan legends show, the nature of this category is quite universal [4, p. 55].

Another work that focuses on the image of the yurt is the painting “On the Roads of Life” (2015, illus. 3).



*Illus. 3. Shoy Churuk.  
On the Roads of Life, 2015.  
Oil on canvas.  
90 x 100. [11]*

We see the same textural background created by thick daubs of silver-gray hues reminiscent of snow driven by the wind and prominent brick red lines of roads running in different directions, which form the contour of the yurt and its supporting carcass. This

restless and dynamic composition seems to instill the hope that at the end of even the most difficult road there is always refuge. And again the artist reveals this thought in such a way that the composition can be interpreted at both the secular, earthly level and at the deeper metaphysical level.

So, when analyzing these three paintings by Tuvan artist Shoy Churuk, we again see confirmation of the general artistic tendencies characteristic of contemporary Central Asian art: interest in and a probing reinterpretation of the artistic traditions, symbols and images of archaic art. First, Shoy Churuk's style is striking in its vibrant originality, which nevertheless fully corresponds to the fundamental worldview principles of the Tuvan peoples. Second, Shoy Churuk's artwork is in harmony with the general contextual development of one of the most important trends in Eurasian contemporary art related to creative search based on restoration of the art of the past.

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