

Research on Outdoor Sketching of Mongolian and Inner Mongolian Fine Arts in the 1950s-1960s

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Abstract: In the 1950s of the 20th century, outdoor sketching began to take root in the fine arts of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia. During this period, the oil painting technique, known as "tösön budgiin zurag" by Inner Mongolian artists, started to mature professionally. In Mongolia, the first generation of professional artists launched outdoor sketching training—an artistic practice of observing and creating en plein air—and pioneered the methodologies for landscape painting amid difficult conditions. In the 1950s, Inner Mongolian artists who had studied in Beijing and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) introduced the outdoor painting techniques to the region, and further pioneered the new form of "tösön budgiin zurag" (oil painting) in their hometowns. The emergence of outdoor sketching as a core fine art practice laid the fundamental groundwork for the evolution and development of landscape painting. This study aims to elaborate on the efforts made by the early professional artists and their creative disciples in imparting the theoretical foundations of sketching, and in cultivating and refining the professional painting skills of emerging artists.

Keywords: Study Sketch, Outdoor Landscape Sketch, Landscape Painting, Fine Arts, Oil Painting.

1. Introduction

Research Methodology: This study adopts general research approaches including contextualization within historical timeline, compilation of relevant documents, extraction of research characteristics, and synthesis by emphasizing the core theoretical and methodological perspectives.

Research Objective: To highlight the initiatives undertaken by the first professional artists in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia starting from the 1950s, who laid the theoretical and practical groundwork of sketching for emerging artists with formal art education, and strove to elevate the artists' professional competencies.

Research Purpose: To examine the process of outdoor realist painting's emergence and development as the primary technique of realistic art during a period when it played an active role in the cultural and artistic sphere of the Mongolian people.

Practical Significance: To illustrate the pivotal role of sketch training in reforming the rigid paradigm of landscape painting that had long relied on excessive naturalistic imitation and traditional representational methods in fine arts.[2]

Research Focus: To highlight the historical advancement of fine arts, which began to embrace the concepts of spatial representation, formal depiction, and atmospheric expression through color.

Core Hypothesis: The training of sketching played a crucial role in elevating the fine arts of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia from a stage of amateurism to professionalization, marking a historic development in representational art.[4]

Research Outcome: This study will serve as a valuable reference for research on the history of representational art development and the thematic evolution of fine arts among the Mongolian-speaking peoples.

2. Main Body

In 1951, a group of Mongolian artists who had received higher art education returned to their homeland and initiated the task of training professional artists. From this era onward, fine art creation broke away from the extreme naturalistic styles marked by mindless imitation of reality and the primitive representational methods of stylized depiction. Instead, it advanced toward a professional understanding of European artistic techniques, and fostered an approach to learning and creating that transforms natural scenery into works of aesthetic refinement. Artists came to recognize that the tenets of Realism formed the foundational basis for mastering realistic painting techniques, and sketching—designed as a targeted training program—fulfilled an indispensable role in enhancing their artistic capabilities.

Outdoor sketching (from the French en plein air) refers to the practice of painting in the open air, which captures the changing hues of nature under the effect of sunlight. This technique is defined by the freedom of creative approach, and crucially, by the need to complete the work within a limited timeframe before the light and color of the subject undergo noticeable changes. For artists, this practice is a creative endeavor that sincerely expresses their emotional responses, perceptions, and sentiments toward nature, and vividly portrays the vitality of the natural world.[5]

A study sketch is a preparatory drawing created to gather material for artistic production. It involves painting a specific scene with the intent of observing and planning the interplay of light, color, form, shape, space and perspective.[6]

Sketching practice distinctly reflects an artist's unique creative methods and artistic vision. It is an act of improvisation—creating freely without prior preparation or documentation. An artist's creative vision is fully manifested in their powers of observation, aesthetic judgment, and innovative artistic techniques.[9]

Unlike traditional academic approaches, outdoor landscape painting is created spontaneously on-site without

premeditated composition, making it a record of the artist's initial impressions of the scene. It undertakes the task of expressing spontaneously arising emotions through aesthetic language, by emphasizing color harmony, the interplay of light and shadow, and the unity of generalization and detail. In the process of sketching en plein air, artists study the relationships between color, form and shape, while also capturing and depicting the unique characteristics of the subject with concise brushstrokes. As the colors of nature shift constantly with the changing sunlight, outdoor sketching is a practice that requires capturing and recording the scene within a limited window before the overall color tone alters.

2.1. Theoretical Synthesis

The practical experience of outdoor sketching proved invaluable for every artist, enriching their perceptual knowledge and understanding. The artistic traditions of this era became the foundational bedrock for the artistic practices and theoretical innovations of subsequent generations. The depiction of the ever-changing natural colors under sunlight in fine art had been a refined practice since the Middle Ages. In the 15th century, during the Italian Renaissance, Leonardo da Vinci was the first to note in his treatise that "atmospheric perspective is the primary factor influencing the color changes of objects. A striking example is the blue hue of distant mountains, a direct result of the color shift of the air between the viewer and the object" (Masters of Art on Art, 1966, p.110). He further elaborated on the intrinsic properties of color and the laws governing the interaction of light and color in his writings.

Building on this, European scholars advanced research into the color changes of nature and color harmony in fine art: Isaac Newton discovered the law of the solar spectrum in the 17th century; F.O. Runge and L.F. Helmholtz refined the laws of color properties in the 19th-20th centuries; J.W. von Goethe developed research on the psychological effects of color; and G. Zeising and K. Auer further advanced the discipline of color theory.[12]

Color perception is a primary means of creating color rhythm and expressing emotional resonance in artistic creation. Sketching is an act of improvisation—a spontaneous creative process completed on-site without prior planning or scripting, translating an idea directly into a work of art through on-the-spot painting.

In landscape painting, form unifies to convey a distinct thematic content. In fine art creation, the interplay of form, shape, objects and their contextual elements fulfills a central role in expressing the subject matter, and form evolves in tandem with changes in thematic content. Form embodies the intrinsic properties and stability of objects, while content reflects the objective world. Landscape painting depicts the distinctive features of open-air scenes such as mountains, rivers, grasslands and forests, and further accentuates the regional characteristics and the vitality of the natural environment. Thus, in this artistic form, representation and content are inextricably and profoundly intertwined.

The alla prima technique—direct painting in one layer—pioneered by French Impressionist painters spread widely across European art. As the foundational method of Soviet fine art, this technique was introduced to the fine arts of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia in the 1950s.

2.2. Inner Mongolian Landscape Painting

The institutionalization of landscape painting training at

the Inner Mongolia Normal University (IMNU) stands as a testament to the early development of this art form in Inner Mongolia. The IMNU Normal College (now the IMNU College of Education) was first established in 1952; in 1953, Chinese artists including Guan Guanji and Gu Yuan came to the college at the invitation of IMNU and launched the practice of study sketching, creating works centered on rural themes.

Their artistic creations caused a sensation in Inner Mongolia's art circles at the time, and were the subject of academic seminars and discussions—an event that has been well-documented in art history. The study sketches and subsequent academic seminars by Guan Guanji, Gu Yuan and other artists inaugurated a new era in the development of Inner Mongolian watercolor painting, and inspired a strong desire to learn among the region's artists and art enthusiasts.

The Inner Mongolian artist Toms aimed to depict the regional features and natural landscapes of his homeland through simple and straightforward representation. As Wang Hongmin noted, "The artist excels at discovering the profound spiritual world and inner richness of ordinary people through the eyes of the common folk" (Wang Hongmin, 2009, p.233).

This shared characteristic of representation and expression was further developed in the rural fine art movement, which merged traditional painting techniques with European artistic methods. Unlike European paintings that emphasize light and shadow, volume and the three-dimensionality of objects, Inner Mongolian fine art formed a unique genre of lyrical painting that focuses on outlining the external contours of subjects and infusing the interior with delicate color layering. Early works featured a small number of colors dominating most of the composition, with redundant details omitted and simplified; the depiction of human figures with lyrical brushstrokes also bore the influence of Chinese color painting traditions in certain aspects.

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 brought peace and stability to the nation, and spurred a wave of overseas study across all sectors of society—including the arts. Inner Mongolia saw a surge in artists studying in the Soviet Union, the employment of professional artists, and the training of high-level professional representational artists (Jiang Shaomin, 2002, p.27). This social context created the conditions for the development of oil painting (tósón budgiin zurag) in Inner Mongolia.

In his works of the 1960s-1970s, Toms pioneered and developed a distinctive artistic style known as the "Rural Fine Art School". As the Inner Mongolian art scholar Sain-Olzii commented, "The works of the Rural Fine Art School artists highlight the aesthetic aspirations of the nomadic people of the grasslands, and stand out for their thematic content that captures the unique characteristics and diverse life experiences of these people" (Sain-Olzii, 2005, p.169).

In his artistic creation, Toms rejected the mindless direct imitation of natural colors and the detailed depiction of multiple forms and complex events within a single lyrical composition. Instead, he used a limited color palette to capture the lingering charm of nature through concise lyrical representation and brief brushstrokes, expressing emotional resonance through color.

As Chuluu noted in a manuscript, "After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the establishment of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, Lü Gunlu took on administrative responsibilities there. In 1955, he

studied at the Repin Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in the Soviet Union for three years; upon his return, he made a conscious effort to adapt oil painting to Chinese artistic traditions, rather than simply adopting Soviet painting styles outright." While Lü Gunlu employed Soviet painting techniques, his color and representational choices retained the essence of traditional painting traditions. His works, characterized by a limited color palette and bold, expressive brushstrokes, evoke the artistic charm of Chinese freehand brushwork painting.

His creations feature realistic figures depicted with more delicate and nuanced brushstrokes than real life, and subjects painted with greater freedom to capture their inner essence and vitality.

The artist expressed his personal emotions through free and unrestrained brushstrokes, infusing his works with a rich, romantic sensibility.

His landscape paintings, which integrate human life into natural scenery, draw on traditional painting forms, and vividly portray the vitality of life through expressive brushstrokes, thoughtful color selection and vivid representation.

In 1955, at the behest of the Soviet government, the artist Maximov came to China and founded and taught the "Maximov Oil Painting Training Class" at the Central Academy of Fine Arts.

The Maximov Training Class provided rigorous instruction in accurate representation, color harmony, composition and spatial perspective-core tenets of representational art.

As Chuluu noted, "While the Soviet oil painting tradition was not initially well-received locally, it was enriched by the profound patriotic sentiment of the Chinese people."

Though Toms was unable to attend the Maximov Training Class, he studied at the Central Academy of Fine Arts during this fervent era of Soviet art learning in China, and thus was directly influenced by the artistic atmosphere of the time. In 1961, an exhibition of works by Chinese students who had studied in the Soviet Union was held at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, exerting a profound influence on Chinese artists of the period. Toms did not seek to abandon the profound artistic connotations of traditional painting in his pursuit of capturing the ever-changing hues of natural landscapes in oil painting with vivid on-site brushstrokes. As Toms' mentor, Lü Gunlu was a direct recipient of Soviet artistic influence through his studies in the USSR, and this influence extended to Toms through multiple channels. These influences are clearly evident in Toms' iconic landscape works such as *Erdeneshish in the Breeze* (1960) and *Outside the Pasture* (1962), which embody a concise artistic language with profound connotations.

Professor Liu Jinsuo stated in *A Brief History of Mongolia* (Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, 1985, p.206), "The influence of the Soviet artistic legacy did not fade away; instead, it exerted a tremendous impact on Chinese artists of the era, and its role in the development of Chinese representational art as a driving force of Soviet art is undeniable-for the development of any art form is a gradual, cumulative process like the accumulation of earth to form a mountain. What is remarkable is that Inner Mongolian oil painting, with its unique characteristics, vividly showcased the magnificent natural colors of the grasslands and the simple daily life of the people to the world."

Chuluu[3] noted in his research, "Mentor Lü Gunlu encouraged Toms to master Soviet representational art

theories, advocating for realistic and meaningful painting that conveys the magnificent landscapes of the grasslands and the indomitable spirit of the Mongolian people through color and form. Toms' works fully reflected the mentor's requirements, featuring harmonious color and brushwork relationships and an extremely refined artistic language." The art scholar Shao Dacheng commented, "He weakened naturalistic detail and emphasized the emotional expressiveness of color, using color as the primary medium for creating artistic form and conveying spiritual essence. This color refinement aligns perfectly with his pursuit of the 'true flavor of stone inscriptions' and his adherence to the aesthetic tenets of representational art, endowing his works with a distinctive identity that sets them apart from the mainstream of contemporary oil painting. In this way, Toms' creations made a significant contribution to the research on color in the development of oil painting with national characteristics" (Shao Dacheng, 2008, p.5).[8]

Regarding the introduction of European artistic methods to Mongolia, Zhao Hong emphasized, "In terms of artistic form and representational methods, the laws of Western representational art-such as linear perspective, the creative use of light and shadow, and color layering-became integral to the works of Mongolian artists. At the same time, Mongolian artists mastered European techniques including oil painting, sketching and academic painting, while preserving their own cultural traditions. They infused their creations with the unique lingering charm of the grasslands, the free-spirited sentiment of nomadic people, and the inner qualities of humanity" (Zhao Hong, 2015, pp.21-28).[13]

In Inner Mongolian representational art, "the 1950s-1970s marked a crucial era in the development of Inner Mongolian fine art, a transformative stage from traditional Mongolian painting forms to the institutionalized paradigm of contemporary art. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the national and cultural policies of the state strongly supported artistic creations centered on national themes, and urged artists to depict the lives of the people and the construction of socialism in their works. This brought about a profound transformation in the thematic focus and representational methods of fine art" (Zhao Ting, 2018, pp.58-65).[14] Fine art of this era was predominantly rooted in realist tenets, with the core aim of expressing the thoughts, feelings and artistic forms of the people.

2.3. The Foundations of Sketching in Mongolia

Artists including N. Tsultem, L. Gavaa, G. Odon and Ts. Dorjpalam led the initiative to launch sketch training for rural artists in Mongolia.

As the artist O. Tsevegjav recounted in his memoirs, "The 42nd meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party on August 16, 1954, noted that while the works of our artists had developed successfully, they still fell far short of meeting the cultural needs of the society. The meeting mandated the organization of art courses to elevate the national and professional standards of artists, and the dispatch of artists to rural and industrial areas for creative fieldwork" (O. Tsevegjav, 1974, p.14).[10]

The artist and scholar N. Sandagdorj [7]commented, "These artists were among the first to bring back advanced artistic painting techniques from the great Soviet Union, and like sowing seeds in the fertile soil of the grasslands, they taught these precious artistic skills to countless young

people."

The artist G. Odon recounted his participation in the Fine Arts exhibition held in Arkhangai aimag with a group of artists, which was followed by a journey of thousands of kilometers from the provincial capital to sum (district) and brigade levels, during which he created dozens of study sketches.

During this period, the fine art community of Mongolia embraced the core tenet of realistic art as an aesthetic approach to truly reflecting real life. While there was a tendency toward excessive naturalistic imitation of reality, artists recognized that sketching was the foundational basis for creating works that embody artistic aesthetics, making its promotion a critical priority. Sketching practice consistently emphasized the depiction of the living traditions of rural herders and the harmonious relationship between humans and nature.

By the late 1950s, Mongolian artists had begun to create a rich body of landscape works. As Professor L. Batchuluun and artist L. Gavaa noted, "To create the landscape painting Golden Mountain for the Altai series, they traveled to Khovd aimag to conduct on-site research and create study sketches of the magnificent natural scenery of the Altai Mountains, which were then artistically refined and composed into the final work" (L. Batchuluun, 2014, pp.92-93)[1]. In the process of creating these study sketches (*études*), artists captured the subtle color changes of the subject under sunlight and the color shifts in perspective with small, detailed plein air sketches.

The high artistic attainments of Mongolian landscape painting gained international recognition: the renowned American artist Rockwell Kent wrote in the Soviet magazine *Ogonyok* in early 1969, "I have an unbounded love for nature, and was deeply moved by the works of Mongolian artists published in the 43rd issue of *Ogonyok* in 1968. I believe all forms of art should strive to achieve the noble goal of a deeper understanding and love of life. It is for this reason that I hold the Mongolian artists in the highest regard for their extraordinary ability to capture the true happiness of the grasslands in their works. As an artist and a passionate art lover, viewing these works not only reaffirmed my faith in life and humanity, but also filled my heart with sincere admiration for the Mongolian artists—a bond of fraternal love and respect" (N. Tsultem, 1988, p.80).[11]

In this way, the early professional artists quickly imparted the en plein air painting techniques of sketching—the foundation of fine art—to their disciples, and demonstrated its practice through their own works. This effort laid the essential groundwork for the flourishing development of landscape-themed artistic creations.

3. Conclusion

Starting from the 1950s of the 20th century, a group of artists who had received higher professional art education in the Soviet Union made an indelible contribution to the professional development and advancement of representational art in Mongolia by introducing European artistic traditions to the region. They imparted the theoretical foundations of fine art and painting techniques to emerging art enthusiasts, and quickly demonstrated the practice of on-site *étude* painting through sketching en plein air.

The establishment of a creative approach that combines warm and cool colors in landscape painting, and captures the rich color gradations within the cold tones of the subtle

shadows in open-air scenes, marked a new representational method in fine art.

The training of Inner Mongolian artists in oil painting techniques by Soviet artists led to transformative developments in the color application, spatial perspective and composition of landscape painting, and drove the in-depth development of oil painting art theory and practice in the region.

The founding of the "Grassland Charm" art school spurred the creation of a wealth of works depicting rural landscapes and the lives of the people starting from the late 1950s.

The historical and social development of Mongolia and Inner Mongolia in the 20th century were largely similar, and thus the historical evolution of their fine arts followed the same timeline. Both regions saw the modernization of fine art education through the introduction of artistic training from the Soviet Union and other European socialist countries. A distinctive feature of Inner Mongolia's artistic development was that while many artists received foundational art education in European countries such as France and Czechoslovakia, others also studied at top art schools in Beijing and Shanghai. Though they learned from the artistic approaches of European and other foreign countries, they created a rich body of landscape and life-themed works that integrated the unique characteristics of traditional Chinese freehand brushwork painting with oil painting.

The shift from excessive naturalistic imitation to realist painting techniques in fine art representation during the 1950s marked a historic advancement in the development of representational art.

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Plates



Figure 1. L. Gavaa. Khovd Ulias (Study Sketch), 1968. Oil on canvas, 40×65cm.



Figure 2. N. Tsultem. Amarbayasgalant Monastery (Study Sketch). Pencil and watercolor, 30×39cm.
Odon. Subbotnik (Study Sketch), 1953. Oil on cardboard.



Figure 3. G. Odon. Subbotnik (Study Sketch), 1953. Oil on cardboard.



Figure 4. Toms. Red Poplar, 1980. [Medium and Size Omitted].



Figure 5. Choigo. Mountains of the Aru Horqin Banner, 1999. [Medium and Size Omitted].



Figure 6. Toms. Herds, 1983. [Medium and Size Omitted].