

IMAGES OF STONE STATUES IN ART: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

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Abstract. This article is devoted to the study of images of stone statues in the visual arts of Kazakhstan, examining their evolution from ancient times to the present within shifting historical and cultural regimes of representation. The research begins with an analysis of the work of Chokan Valikhanov, the first Kazakh draftsman, whose work laid the foundations of visual tradition in Kazakh art. By documenting images of balbals and petroglyphs, Valikhanov created a unique visual archive that serves as a link between the past and future of Kazakh culture. The article analyzes the works of key Kazakhstani artists from the second half of the 20th century to the early 21st century, each interpreting stone statues in their unique way, reflecting both national identity and contemporary artistic explorations. Stone statues symbolize the continuity of cultural traditions and constitute part of a mythologized artistic universe functioning as sites where cultural memory is constructed and transmitted. The article engages cultural memory theory, postcolonial studies, and visual culture approaches to examine how these figures operate as mnemonic and representational structures within shifting historical regimes. This research emphasizes that the images of stone statues, as an essential element of Kazakh cultural identity, continue to play a vital role in contemporary art, symbolizing the unity of man and nature, the continuity of traditions and innovations, and a deep connection to the historical past.

Keywords: visual art; stone statues; balbals; cultural memory; post-Soviet identity; Kazakhstan; contemporary art.

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Introduction

Analyzing stone statues within Kazakhstani art requires a deep dive into their historical, artistic, and cultural significance. These statues, spanning from the 6th to the early 9th centuries, represent unique examples of medieval nomadic sculpture characteristic of the vast Eurasian region. To fully appreciate their artistic value and role in contemporary Kazakhstani art, it is essential to engage with historical and archaeological perspectives that shed light on their cultural and ethnic nuances. These artifacts are not only sculptural objects but also symbols embodying the identity and spiritual beliefs of ancient nomadic societies. Distributed widely across different regions, they exhibit a remarkable consistency in iconographic features, suggesting a continuity in sculptural methods and a fluid exchange of cultural influences across Eurasia. This commonality points to a shared tradition and mutual influences, underlining the interconnectedness of the various communities that contributed to the region's historical and artistic landscape. By examining the aesthetic qualities, plastic forms, and symbolic meanings of these statues, contemporary artists in Kazakhstan can draw inspiration from this cultural legacy, reinterpreting these forms to explore themes of identity, heritage, and continuity. Stone statues remain vital cultural artifacts, bridging the past and present, offering valuable insight into both the ancient and modern artistic expressions in Kazakhstani art.

In recent scholarship, cultural heritage is increasingly understood not as a static relic of the past, but as a dynamic construct shaped by shifting regimes of representation and authority (Erlí; Assmann). In post-imperial contexts such as Kazakhstan, the visualization of precolonial monuments inevitably reflects changing relations between memory, identity, and power.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How have stone statues (balbals and related anthropomorphic monuments) been

represented within different historical regimes of interpretation in Kazakhstan?

2. In what ways did Soviet archaeological classification shape the scientific and cultural understanding of stone statues as heritage objects?

3. How did twentieth-century Kazakh artists reinterpret these monuments within national and Soviet visual paradigms?

4. How do contemporary artists transform the image of the stone statue into a reflexive and critical sign within post-Soviet and decolonial discourse?

5. What visual and symbolic markers distinguish the four regimes of representation proposed in this study?

By addressing these questions, the article seeks to trace not only the transformation of a visual motif but also the shifting epistemologies through which the past becomes culturally legible.

Methods

This research follows a qualitative interpretive design combining art-historical, archaeological, and visual culture methodologies. The study operates on two interconnected levels: (1) analysis of medieval stone statues as material and ritual artifacts; and (2) analysis of selected twentieth- and twenty-first-century artworks that recontextualize these statues within changing cultural frameworks. Rather than employing statistical generalization, the study adopts comparative case-based analysis to identify recurring visual strategies, symbolic transformations, and shifts in representational logic.

The research begins with historical-archaeological analysis, which situates medieval Turkic stone statues within their socio-cultural and ritual contexts. Drawing upon archaeological reports, epigraphic materials, and historical documentation, this method reconstructs the functional, symbolic, and spatial roles of stone figures in nomadic memorial complexes. Particular attention is paid to chronological development and regional variation, allowing for a

reconstruction of the evolution of sculptural forms and associated ritual practices from the sixth to the ninth centuries.

Classification and systematization form a crucial component of this research. The typological frameworks developed by Soviet scholars such as Ludmila A. Yevtyukhova, Yurii S. Khudyakov, and Vladimir D. Kubarev are employed as foundational analytical tools. These systems categorize statues according to structural features, degrees of anthropomorphic completeness, iconographic attributes, and ritual functions. Yevtyukhova's classification distinguishes between primitive standing figures and volumetric seated or standing forms, further subdivided by the extent of human representation (Yermolenko 132). Kubarev supplements this approach by identifying four primary iconographic types based on the presence and positioning of vessels, weapons, and facial detailing (Kubarev 24).

While these typologies provide indispensable empirical foundations, they also reflect a specific twentieth-century scholarly paradigm grounded in structural classification and ethnocultural attribution. Soviet archaeological discourse systematized steppe material culture within a modern epistemology of scientific ordering, thereby producing a particular regime of knowledge through which nomadic memory became legible as heritage. Acknowledging this historical framework does not diminish its analytical value but situates it within the broader history of representation and interpretation.

Iconographic analysis is employed to interpret recurrent symbolic attributes such as vessels, weapons, birds, and headgear. This approach examines how these elements function within funerary rituals, social stratification, and religious cosmology. Drawing on interpretations by Kyzlasov, Charikov, Sher, Pletneva, and Gavrilova (35; 87; 138; 75; 10), the study explores competing explanations of symbolic meaning, thereby revealing the multiplicity of readings embedded in ancient material culture. The comparative method further enhances this analysis by

juxtaposing divergent scholarly interpretations and identifying both shared motifs and conceptual tensions.

Artistic and stylistic analysis extends the methodological scope into the modern and contemporary periods. This involves examining compositional strategies, plastic form, spatial organization, and symbolic transformation in the works of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Kazakhstani artists. By analyzing how ancient sculptural motifs are recontextualized within modern artistic languages, the study traces the transformation of stone statues from ritual objects to aesthetic signs and reflexive cultural symbols.

The methodological framework is further informed by visual culture theory, which treats images not merely as aesthetic entities but as active participants in the construction and circulation of meaning (Mitchell; Belting). Within this perspective, stone statues are understood as visual agents whose significance shifts across historical contexts, reflecting transformations in cultural memory, identity construction, and representational authority.

The combined use of these methods ensures a conceptually integrated and historically grounded approach to the study of stone statues, allowing them to be examined simultaneously as archaeological evidence, symbolic forms, and dynamic elements of visual culture.

The archaeological corpus includes documented stone statues dated between the sixth and ninth centuries CE from the territories of present-day Kazakhstan and adjacent regions of Central Asia. The study relies on typological descriptions provided by Yevtyukhova, Kubarev, Khudyakov, and related scholarship, focusing specifically on statues containing anthropomorphic features and identifiable iconographic attributes (vessels, weapons, headgear).

The artistic corpus consists of selected works by Kazakhstani artists from three historical phases:

(1) Soviet period (e.g., Telzhanov, Akanayev, Tabiev);

(2) Late Soviet and early independence period (Kaidarov, Ikhanova and Umbetov);

(3) Contemporary critical practices (Narymbetov, Atabekov, Suleimenova, Seitov).

Artists were selected according to the following criteria:

- explicit use of stone statue or balbal imagery;
- engagement with historical or ancestral themes;
- demonstrated relevance within Kazakhstani art discourse.

The methodological framework is informed by visual culture theory, which considers images not merely as aesthetic forms but as cultural agents participating in the construction of meaning (Mitchell; Belting).

Material Description

The primary material analyzed in this research consists of stone statues created by medieval nomadic cultures of present-day Kazakhstan between the sixth and ninth centuries. These artifacts form part of Turkic memorial complexes and are frequently found alongside steles, animal sculptures, and commemorative markers. As material embodiments of ritual practice, they offer insight into social hierarchy, cosmological beliefs, and modes of ancestral commemoration.

The corpus of statues is examined through both qualitative and quantitative parameters. Distinctions are made on the basis of constructive features, iconographic attributes, degrees of anthropomorphic representation, and spatial placement within funerary complexes. Such differentiation enables a nuanced understanding of how visual form, ritual function, and sociopolitical meaning intersect within these monuments.

Yevtyukhova's typological distinctions between primitive standing figures and volumetric seated or standing statues provide a structural basis for analysis (Yermolenko). Kubarev's classification of iconographic types—particularly the differentiation between statues holding vessels, bearing weapons, or combining both attributes—further

clarifies the semantic complexity of these forms (Kubarev). Khudyakov's hypothesis that anthropomorphic statues evolved from earlier steles situates these objects within a *longue durée* developmental trajectory of steppe monumental culture (Khudyakov 215).

Epigraphic evidence from the Orkhon inscriptions deepens the interpretive framework. References to balbals in the Kül Tigin and Bilge Kagan steles, including the statement that “we raised up baz kaghan, was the first balbal” (Ross and Thomsen 866), demonstrate that these figures functioned not merely as sculptural markers but as symbolic articulations of succession, memory, and political continuity. At the same time, inscriptions such as Yenisei 34 reveal terminological ambiguity, indicating that the semantic scope of the term “balbal” remains debated (Orkun 557). Modern scholarship has further examined the etymology and shifting semantic usage of the term, emphasizing that “balbal” has been applied inconsistently across different historical and regional contexts (Yilmaz 4–6).

This material corpus therefore operates at the intersection of archaeology, ritual practice, political symbolism, and cultural memory. From a contemporary analytical perspective, these statues may be understood as early mnemonic infrastructures—material anchors of collective remembrance that later become reinterpreted within national, artistic, and postcolonial frameworks.

By examining both the empirical material and its historiography, the study treats stone statues not only as remnants of medieval nomadic culture but as enduring nodes within an evolving network of representation, knowledge production, and identity formation.

Discussion

The attributive semantics of ancient Turkic statues plays a critical role in iconographic analysis, as key symbols identified by researchers—such as vessels, weapons, birds,

and headgear—are deeply connected to funerary rituals, social status, and religious beliefs. Among these symbols, the vessel is one of the most frequently encountered attributes. According to Leonid R. Kyzlasov, drawing on ethnographic parallels, the vessel held by the deceased signifies participation in a commemorative feast and symbolically marks the continued presence of the departed within ritual practice (Kyzlasov 35). In contrast, Aleksei A. Charikov proposes that the vessel may represent a “sacred drink” associated with notions of immortality in Turkic cosmology (Charikov 87).

Another significant attribute is the weapon, frequently depicted alongside a vessel. Yakov A. Sher argues that the presence of weapons signifies affiliation with the military aristocracy, whereas their absence may indicate a non-military administrative status (Sher 138). Svetlana A. Pletneva further corroborates this distinction by identifying markers of social stratification in Polovtsian sculpture, where pose and weaponry function as indicators of hierarchical status (Pletneva 75).

The three-horned headgear depicted on certain statues has attracted particular scholarly attention. In analyses of the Kudyrgy Stone, it has been linked to the cult of the deity Umai, indicating possible religious symbolism and sacred associations (Gavrilova 10). These attributes in ancient Turkic statues, therefore, encapsulate not only ritual and religious beliefs but also social positions, providing rich insights into the culture of Eurasian nomads. The interpretations of these symbols reveal the intricate and multifaceted nature of ancient beliefs and practices, making stone statues an invaluable resource for art-historical analysis. From the perspective of cultural memory theory, such recurring iconographic elements may be understood as mnemonic codes stabilizing collective identity across generations (Assmann).

In contemporary Kazakhstani art, the image of stone statues frequently symbolizes cultural continuity and a connection

to heritage. Modern artists actively engage with these images, embedding them as metaphors of cultural identity and historical memory in their work. Stone statues, in this modern context, come to represent resilience and the enduring spirit of ancestral traditions, resonating deeply within contemporary Kazakhstani society. This shift may be described as a transformation of representational regimes: from ritual object to archival artifact, from national symbol to reflexive artistic sign.

Moreover, these images are often perceived as a commentary on globalization’s impact and the erosion of cultural roots. By visualizing ancient statues, artists underscore the importance of preserving cultural heritage amid a rapidly shifting world. On a cultural level, this evokes a call to honor and safeguard one’s roots, traditions, and identity in the face of external influences. The incorporation of stone statue imagery not only enriches artistic discourse in contemporary Kazakhstani art but also revives cultural heritage, lending it relevance for future generations. In post-Soviet cultural discourse, such returns to pre-Islamic and precolonial imagery often signal attempts to renegotiate historical subjectivity within a globalized cultural field (Tlostanova). (Table 1)

Results

The findings allow us to identify several historically distinct regimes of representation shaping the visual presence of stone statues in Kazakh art:

1. archival-documentary,
2. Soviet curated memory,
3. post-independence mythologization,
4. contemporary deconstructive reinterpretation.

In examining the history of Kazakh visual art, it is essential to recognize that the absence of an educational art school or a structured system was compensated by diverse artistic forms and visual languages. Rock paintings, ornaments on statues, *balbals*, and images on *mazars* attest to the fact

Table 1. Key Parameters for Investigating Historical Subjectivity.

Regime of Representation	Historical Context	Dominant Function of Stone Statue	Visual Markers	Representative Figures
Archival-Documentary	19th century (Valikhanov)	Ethnographic documentation	Sketch-based realism, descriptive accuracy	Chokan Valikhanov
Curated Memory	Soviet period	Heritage classification and national framing	Monumentalization, integration into genre realism	Telzhanov, Akanayev
Mythologizing National Revival	Late Soviet/early independence	Symbol of ancestral continuity	Spiritualization, theatricalization, epic imagery	Kaidarov, Tabiev
Critical/Deconstructive Recontextualization	Contemporary period	Reflexive sign within global discourse	Repetition, irony, material transformation	Narymbetov, Atabekov, Suleimenova

that visual traditions have long been part of the Kazakh people’s way of life. In this context, individuals emerged who were connected to European culture; one such figure was Chokan Valikhanov, who can rightfully be considered the first draftsman in the Kazakh steppe. Though he did not possess the status of an artist as we perceive it today, he was a worthy representative of his time, bridging the European and traditional worlds. In his work, with artistic qualities, Valikhanov skillfully realized his ideas in form, plasticity, and imagery—traits characteristic of visual art.

Chokan Valikhanov, a renowned Kazakh scientist and traveler of the mid-19th century, was also the first national artist-draftsman of his time and one of the most original Kazakh graphic artists.

It is known that not all of Valikhanov’s graphic works have been found and identified. This study focuses on one work among more than 100 exemplary works stored in the archives of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

On the northern shore of Issyk-Kul, Valikhanov depicted stone statues with remarkable detail. In his pencil sketches from 1856, there is a sense of direct observation, where the stone faces, despite their static nature, emit emotional warmth. (Fig. 1)

“Stone Statues at the Tomb of Kozy-Korpesh and Bayan-Sulu” (1856)

Also of interest are the frontal images of stone statues at the tomb of Kozy-Korpesh

and Bayan-Sulu. In his 1856 drawings, one can see the figure of Kozy-Korpesh with a missing head, the female sculpture of Bayan-Sulu wearing a scarf, as well as the seated figures of her sister Aygiz and aunt in conical headdresses. These images demonstrate preserved artifacts and their significance while maintaining attention to detail and historical context (Ualikhanov 267).

Drawing was a vital need for Valikhanov from childhood. The favorable atmosphere at home in Kushmurun, where topographers, surveyors, and scientists frequently visited, contributed to his interest in visual art and literature.

The artistic work of the scholar-ethnographer, traveler, historian, and geographer testifies to the origins of the Kazakh visual art school. It is especially important for us that in his sketches, Valikhanov brilliantly illustrates the prehistory of the visual tradition of the Kazakh people, meticulously documenting images of petroglyphs on rocks, tombstones, clothing details, and, of course, capturing images of balbals along his expedition routes. Overall, it is noteworthy that Valikhanov’s drawings synthesize and sublimate the visual thinking of the people, shaped not by a systematic school but by an inner spiritual state. Valikhanov’s desire and aspiration to capture moments of life with pencil or ink were not constrained by formal aesthetic demands, leading to greater purity and sincerity in comparison to the modern



Fig. 1. Stone Statues on the Northern Shore of Issyk-Kul (1856)

period—his works capture natural, uncontrived truth without excessive stylization. His drawings are concise, precise, expressive, and unusually plastic.

Valikhanov's unassuming sketches in his workbooks sharply convey his impressions of what he saw. Drawing on the longstanding tradition of Russian culture, Valikhanov affirmed with his drawings the existence of a long-standing steppe artistic tradition in Kazakhstan, an artistic mindset and sensibility.

Representing the historical traditions of the eastern region, Valikhanov captured the most minute details of his time. From the perspective of the 21st century, Valikhanov is perceived as an excellent draughtsman, striving neither to diminish nor to elevate what he observed. This is one of his key qualities as an observer who respectfully recorded the individuality of his time.

Kanafiya Telzhanov "Kokpar" (1960)

Regarding the unique perception of painting by Kazakh artists of the 1950s, it may be compared with the tasks of genre realism in the RSFSR. "In post-war genre painting, with its elevated artistic level, broader scope, depth, and humanity, our artists undoubtedly absorbed the best realist traditions of 19th-century Russian painting. The characteristics of the best examples of genre painting—engaging narrative, sharpness of situations, attention to distinctive aspects of

everyday life, sometimes satirical sharpness or gentle humor in character portrayal..." This quote convincingly proves that the artist was primarily expected to have the gift of a writer or publicist. Kazakh artists sought to move away from literature, go beyond thematic boundaries, and find images and means to express their national life content.

This study focuses on Telzhanov's iconic work "Kokpar."

Telzhanov's lively and impulsive painting technique and approach—to recreate a phenomenon that embodies the characteristic defining features of a specific moment—recall an impressionistic grasp of the world that he had absorbed. However, for Telzhanov, it was essential to combine the active experience of a particular moment in the game with the overall decorativeness of the canvas and a tendency toward generalization. The viewer, captured by the moment of the sports competition, does not immediately notice the fallen balbal in the lower left part of the composition. The power lines, positioned above the stone image, seem to call for living by new achievements while not losing national traditions.

The unity of man and nature, poetry, musicality, terseness, restrained expression of feelings, love for the native land, and, as we see, respect for cultural heritage, are fully expressed in Telzhanov's "Kokpar." (fig. 2)

Within the Soviet visual paradigm, the balbal functions as an element of curated memory — preserved as a marker of national antiquity, yet integrated into a broader ideological narrative of socialist progress (Assmann 36)

Akanayev and His Unique Artistic Perception

A different impression is created by the works of A. Akanayev (b. 1949). The pieces created by Akanayev convey a sense that the surrounding world literally disturbs him. Yet the anxiety triggered by numerous impressions is an acute sense of the plasticity that shapes everything around, making one feel the movement, development, and ultimately, the integrity and depth of nature. This state



Fig. 2. K. Telzhanov Kokpar 1960

is fully revealed in “Domalak-ana,” where against a background of ominous red-gray with yellow specks, there is an image of a stone woman with a bowl in her hands. The painted figure, sculpturally worked and monumental, is dedicated to Domalak-ana, the third wife of the batyr Baidibek Karashauly, who ruled tribes in Zhetysu, and the mother of Alban, Suan, and Dulat. According to legend, she was a modest, loving mother who radiated love to all children, had the gift of foresight, and was known as “Domalak-ana” due to her small stature. She remains in people’s memory as a mother who radiated love for all people. Her wisdom allowed her to reconcile warring tribes, and in the modern world, she embodies wisdom and nobility.

Akanayev's approach to the plastic aspects of painting is distinctive. His method can be described as penetrating the plasticity of nature's phenomena. This approach, distinctive of his work, underscores the artist's desire to deeply feel nature.

Akanayev approaches the understanding of the world not from the perspective of an admiring observer, idealizing within the framework of calm beauty. He sees constant creation, the process of development, movement. This feeling awakens the need to bring the viewer as close as possible to the history and object of his motive, encouraging them to physically feel everything his heroes experienced.

In Akanayev's works, there is a concentrated striving for expressive means. In Akanayev's painting, this is a striving to break free from the confines of his subjective feelings into the space of the objective world. He approaches his goal by concentrating vi-

sual density in the figure of the main heroine, compressing space for this purpose, but leaving the vastness of the background (fig. 3).

B. Tabiev and the Fusion of Tradition and Modernity

In his iconic work "The Meeting" (1987), artist B. Tabiev demonstrates the need to connect with nature and the artifacts of Turkic heritage. The compositional structure of the work reflects the artist's personality, his searching gaze, and his emotional reaction to form and color. These qualities define the image's plastic expressiveness in depicting the encounter between a person and a balbal against the background of a steppe landscape. The gesture of the woman's left hand in a pink dress, bluish cloak, and white headscarf, touching the statue, can be interpreted as a touch of eternity. Placing himself at the center of life events, the artist engages in the process, making the viewer sharply feel not only the overall state of life but also its nuances, opening new perspectives for perception. feel not only the overall state of life but also its nuances, giving new perspectives to perception. This explains the pene-



Fig. 3. A. Akanayev Domalak ana. 1992

trating emotional feeling expressed through color harmony, the heightened plasticity of the drawing, and the maximal proximity of the characters to the viewer (fig. 4).

Tabiev was inclined to perceive the harmonious, clear state of life in people and nature. The artist's constant theme is the terse motifs of the au

l, full of their own significance, which gains even more momentum when addressing the ancient past of the region. The plot of the work is revealed through a subtle and complex color scheme, relationships among close tones and semitones.

Tabiev sought to speak of the aul's everyday life in the language of rich painting culture, with the elevated tone of a thematic painting. He aimed to revive the classical process of sequential, step-by-step "composition" of a work (fig. 5).

The effect of such a transformation of past realities into the material of one's own consciousness and worldview is achieved through a particular method of execution, based on the principles of modernist design, where the composition of the canvas is materially materialized in a "natural" form—stone, animated by color, developing the idea of the canvas. The author skillfully uses the spatial scales of the composition, detailed treatment of the image in the decorative layout of the main color planes. By processing history through himself, M. Kaidarov

speaks of the greatness of the ancient Turks through Tonukuk—a political and military leader of the Eastern Turks, who, along with Kutlug, was at the origins of the formation of the Second Eastern Turkic Khaganate (7th–8th centuries). The depiction of a shaman (baqsy) at a presumed burial site is meant to allow contemporaries to touch the past, as if speaking with ancestors. The literary orientation of the canvas dictates the visual solution. Malik Kaidarov, in his work "Communication with Tonukuk" 2022, appears primarily as a painter, a genre artist, landscape painter, and portraitist, solving the task of creating completed compositions containing his artistic world. Kaidarov's peculiarity is that having mastered professional skills, he sought his path of self-expression, ignoring the demand for the latest trends, preserving his contemplative view and gentle narrative tone in his works. Depicting fragments of the past, the artist chooses his own manner of transforming the national existence of people and the objects around them. The specificity of the mythological motive is softened by color effects, with sometimes unnatural glowing of rich shades of gray and blue, sometimes active masses of color, as well as the "presence" of the depicted characters before the viewer, the haziness and unreality of the space, some theatricality and "staging" of scenes. In this, one can see the



Fig. 4. B. Tabiev The meeting 1987



Fig. 5. B. Bapishev "Four Prophets" 1991

artist's understanding of the essence of his art and its purpose. The nature of Kaidarov's creative relationship with the viewer is aimed at a personal, interested attitude towards the depicted fragments, and at the possibility of intimate communication. The national features of Malik's creativity are undeniable, but it contains a multicultural beginning. The artist's work shows the most vivid and sensitive interest in the aesthetic experience of national and regional characteristics. (fig. 6).

Referring to the transmission of a special sense of immersion and harmony with the surrounding world and the universe when reflecting a fragment of an event intended to achieve a certain "state," reflecting the character and wisdom of the people (Fig. 7). Such mythologization reflects what memory studies define as the transformation of historical material into cultural myth... (Assmann 87)

Against the recognizable Kazakh landscape—mountain ridges, with a flowing river in the foreground and camels grazing on the left—there is an image of relief stone figures. The work is made of leather, enhancing the impression of the composition. The spouses, in a unified creative impulse, created a unique artistic technique "kushkon," where a combination of leather, sculpture, and paint is used in a single artwork to create a perspective effect. Each element is handmade by stamping painted leather on the canvas, creating a work that is simultaneously sculpture and painting. The uniqueness of the technique, reference to epochal traditions, and masterful material implementation testify to the artists' multifaceted talent. The chosen palette of delicate color combinations and transitions, the very careful introduction of objects and nature's inhabitants into the composition, the softness of tones and transitions of relief fragments and the plane of the leather fully convey and reflect the rich cultural heritage of the Kazakhs.

M. Narymbetov, leader of the artists' association "Transavangard," created in 1990 in Shymkent, and later renamed "Kyzyl



Fig. 6. M. Kaidarov,
"Communication with Tonukuk."



Fig. 7. Ikhanova, Amangul and Umbetov,
Zhangiir 1995.

Traktor." The Kyzyl Traktor artists sought to adapt avant-garde techniques of Western art to traditional Eastern cultural norms. Their artistic concepts are based on references to Kazakhstan's pre-Islamic past—ancient rituals, shamanistic practices, and Sufi rites. The key images are either the wandering dervish, searching for truth and harmony, or the shaman performing meditative practices aimed at healing or bridging the real and unreal, past, present, and future (Fig. 8).

In 2007, M. Narymbetov turned to images of stone figures in his painting, depicting

four figures in red on a green field, with blue inserts echoing the conventional sky at the top of the composition. Each depiction of the stone has its own character, with the artist imbuing it with a range of sorrowful human emotions. Reflections on the great heritage were fully realized years later in the installation "100 Balbals," 2012. Using rubber from used tires, wooden frames, stones from southern Kazakhstan, lacquer, and nails, M. Narymbetov created unique sculptures ranging from 75.9 x 51 x 40 cm to 144.6 x 61.3 x 77 cm. By re-materializing the bal-bal through industrial debris and repetition, Narymbetov destabilizes its monumental singularity, aligning with neo-avant-garde strategies of repetition and displacement (Foster 95). (Fig. 9)

"100 Balbals" is one of the latest monumental works by artist Moldakul Narymbetov.

"100 Balbals is not a work about sorrow or loss, but rather a reconstruction of steppe history in a new urban context," notes the Eurasian Cultural Alliance. From 2012 to 2019, fragments of the installation "Balbals" were exhibited in museums, galleries, and sometimes public spaces in cities across Russia, the USA, and Kazakhstan. In 2019, part of the installation entered the permanent collection of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow through a donation from private collector M. Gelman. It is important to note that the emotional impact of the sculptures did not depend on the number of objects—the



Fig. 8. Moldakul Narymbetov. Balbals, 2007

thoughtfulness of the author's concept and the plastic solution of the figures make each variation effective for perception. Automobile tires—a cheap material, which was given to him for free at a service station, gained a new life in art after processing. Rubber, a product of oil processing, and wind-swept sandstone from the sacred places of his native South Kazakhstan region, where this work was created, united global issues with the power of his small homeland.

Said Atabekov began his creative journey in 1993 as part of the first avant-garde art group "Kyzyl Traktor," which was formed in Shymkent but operated under other names until 1995. The artist used various techniques, from video and photography to installations and performances. His explorations include painting, graphics, woodwork, actions, installations, and performance. He conducts creative searches and experiments on the synthesis of past and contemporary art.

Atabekov's stone figures, repeating the outlines and forms of the ancients, hold guns. An army of several figures appears as a significant and coherent symbol of both protection and attack. By incorporating stone figures into his installations and performances, the artist provides a new reading and vision of historical aspects. Symbols of the distant past, as carriers of historical events to the present—balbals and mannequins, Budenovka and a hat... a touch of irony and thoughtful interpretation.

In connection with the use of sculptural imagery as a representation of extreme expe-



Fig. 9. Moldakul Narymbetov. "100 Balbals" 2012

rience, it is worth noting the different types of cultural memory proposed by J. Assmann, drawing an analogy with C. Levi-Strauss's methodology of "hot," dynamic, and "cold" societies (Sharipova 72).

"In the whole world—and I have traveled to many countries—we are still considered a steppe people, barbarian nomads. Look at the paintings of Kazakhstani artists: everywhere—horse riders, steppe in tulips, yurts. That's the whole national color." (Atabekov)

Another work dedicated to stone figures, "Supersoldat," demonstrates a deep and multilayered interaction with cultural references through the image of ancient stone figures. Atabekov interprets traditional forms of ancient Turkic sculptures, transferring them into a modern context. Each sculpture depicted in the work retains the characteristic features of ancient stone statues, such as generalized faces, simplified anatomy, and symbolism related to burial rituals and warrior tradition. Repeated images of statues arranged in a grid create a sense of rhythm and simultaneously point to massiveness, which can be interpreted as a hint at the many unknown and forgotten warriors immortalized in the steppe balbals. This repeated reproduction of the same image also emphasizes the idea of memory and its distortion over time, where the original loses its uniqueness, becoming a replica devoid of individuality. Atabekov thus updates archetypal images of the past, embedding them in a dialogue with the present (fig. 11).



Fig. 10. Said Atabekov. From the series "Road to Rome," 2007

Atabekov consistently challenges stereotypical representations of Kazakh culture based solely on images of the steppe, yurts, horsemen, and nomadic exoticism. Instead, his artistic practice proposes a more complex understanding of national identity, grounded in critical reflection on history, cultural memory, and the reinterpretation of pre-colonial heritage.

«...In his close attention to the world's religions, one can find a figurative interpretation of the intersection of cultural coordinates from past eras. » This observation is applicable to Atabekov's work (Truspekova 2011).

The militarization and serial repetition of the ancient form introduce a critical rupture, transforming the balbal from a stable cultural emblem into a contested sign. Such strategies resonate with decolonial aesthetics, which seek to unsettle inherited symbolic hierarchies (Mignolo 122; Tlostanova 54).

Stone statues have also found their place in modern culture, serving as poignant symbols of collective memory and identity. In A. Seitov's film *Qas*, which explores the famine in Soviet-era Kazakhstan, the image of a stone statue becomes a pivotal motif, representing both a point of departure and return within the vast expanse of the steppe. These statues serve as material embodiments of

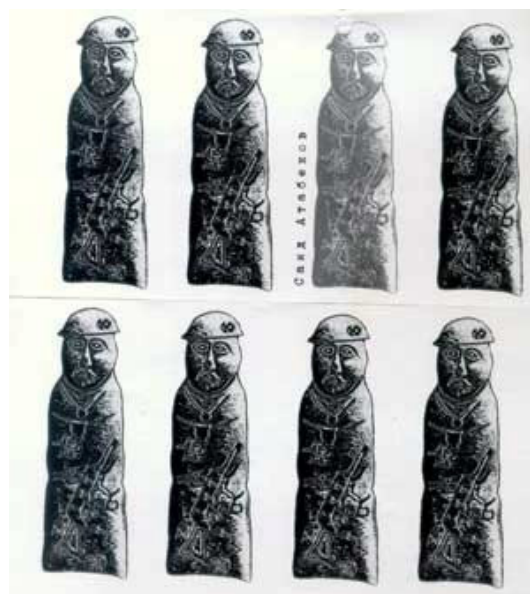


Fig. 11. Said Atabekov "Supersoldat"

the memory of the people, anchoring their collective trauma and resilience.

Rewriting Genealogy: Saul Suleimenova's "7 Ana"

Suleimenova's project *7 Ana* may also be situated within a broader Central Asian discourse on genealogical memory. In many nomadic cultures of the region, the knowledge of "seven ancestors" (jeti ata) constitutes not merely a family record but a fundamental mechanism of identity formation and social organization. As Bekmirzayev et al. note, genealogical memory functions as a core mechanism of identity formation and intergenerational transmission within Kyrgyz communities (Bekmirzayev et al. 1).

However, *7 Ana* exposes a crucial asymmetry within this mnemonic structure: while male lineage is ritually recited and institutionalized, female ancestry remains largely unarticulated. Suleimenova's intervention may thus be interpreted as a critical reconfiguration of genealogical memory. By monumentalizing seven maternal figures, she symbolically reconstructs an alternative lineage and questions the gendered hierarchy embedded within traditional systems of remembrance.

From the perspective of cultural memory theory (Assmann), genealogy represents a canonized form of cultural transmission—one that stabilizes identity through selective remembrance. Suleimenova's work intervenes in this canon, shifting the axis of memory from patriarchal continuity toward inclusive remembrance. In doing so, the balbal-like female figures become not merely references to precolonial heritage but instruments for rethinking the politics of memory itself.

Thus, *7 Ana* expands the contemporary regime of representation: it transforms the ancestral monument into a site of mnemonic critique in which inherited structures of identity are not simply preserved but interrogated and reimagined. (fig. 12)

As Alexander observes, "cultural traumas broaden the realm of social understanding and sympathy, and they provide powerful av-

enues for new forms of social incorporation" (34). In this context, the depiction of stone statues in Aisultan Seitov's film *Kaş* reflects how cultural symbols rooted in historical trauma can foster deeper social empathy and reinforce connections to a shared past. The film becomes a visual representation of a difficult period in the nation's history, in which enduring cultural attributes function as mnemonic links within the viewer's consciousness. Shocking images that depict the disruption of ordinary life generate a new mode of representing Kazakh history, transforming it into an event that inflicts a visual "wound" upon the spectator and invites active engagement (Sharipova et al. 5).

In this cinematic context, the stone statue emerges as a site of trauma inscription, functioning as what Jeffrey Alexander conceptualizes as a carrier of cultural trauma (Alexander et al. 34). (fig. 13)

Synthesis of Findings. The research demonstrates that images of ancient Turkic stone sculptures (balbals) in Kazakhstani visual art operates within several historically specific regimes of representation, each reshaping the meaning of the stone figure in relation to memory, identity, and cultural authority.

First, the study confirms the importance of archival-documentary representation in the mid-nineteenth century. Valikhanov's drawings of petroglyphs and stone statues function as early visual documentation that relocates the balbal from its ritual landscape into an archive and a scholarly visual language, establishing a foundational layer for later artistic reinterpretations.



Fig. 12. Saule Suleimenova "7 Ana."

Second, the analysis identifies a Soviet stage of curated memory, in which stone statues appear as aestheticized markers of national antiquity integrated into the broader Soviet visual paradigm. In works such as Telzhanov's *Kokpar*, the balbal becomes a symbolic presence within a modernizing landscape, suggesting continuity while simultaneously aligning heritage with the rhetoric of progress and institutional cultural frameworks (Assmann 36; Rigney 14).

Third, the research reveals a late Soviet and early post-independence stage of mythologization, where the balbal motif is intensified through narrative, sacred geography, and symbolic dramaturgy (Akanayev, Bapishev, Kaidarov). In this regime, the stone statue functions as a cultural emblem that consolidates identity through aesthetic transformation of historical material into cultural myth (Assmann).

Finally, contemporary practices demonstrate a regime of deconstructive and critical recontextualization, in which the balbal becomes a reflexive sign rather than a stable emblem. In Narymbetov's installation *100 Balbals*, repetition and industrial materials shift the monument into contemporary visual discourse and unsettle its monumental singularity (Foster 27). Atabekov's serial and militarized stone figures further destabilize inherited symbolic hierarchies, turning the balbal into a contested sign that articulates post-Soviet cultural tensions and decolonial aesthetic strategies (Tlostanova 142; Mignolo 158).

Overall, the study establishes that the balbal in Kazakhstani art is not a fixed icon

but a historically shifting visual form through which cultural memory is mediated, curated, and critically renegotiated (Erl; Assmann).

Basic provisions

The balbal is a dynamic visual sign, not a stable symbol: its meanings shift according to historical contexts and representational frameworks.

Representations of stone sculptures in Kazakhstan can be analyzed through regimes of representation, which define how heritage is visualized, who speaks for the past, and what meanings become dominant (Erl).

Valikhanov's drawings establish an archival regime by translating steppe monuments into a documentary visual language and positioning them within institutional knowledge.

Soviet visual culture constructs a curated memory regime, preserving the balbal as a marker of national antiquity while integrating it into ideologically acceptable narratives (A. Assmann; Rigney).

Late Soviet and early independence art intensifies mythologization, where stone statues operate as sites of identity consolidation through symbolic and narrative aestheticization (Assmann).

Contemporary artists shift the balbal into a critical regime, employing repetition, material displacement, irony, and contextual rupture to deconstruct inherited meanings (Foster; Tlostanova; Mignolo).

Across all regimes, the image of the stone statue functions as a mediator between cultural memory and artistic innovation, enabling the negotiation of identity and historical consciousness in post-imperial Kazakhstan.

Conclusion

This study is qualitative and interpretive in nature. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive catalogue of all stone statues or artworks that reference balbals, but rather to identify



Fig. 13. A. Seitov "Qas"

representative cases that illustrate broader shifts in representational logic. Further research may expand the corpus geographically and incorporate digital mapping or quantitative visual analysis.

In light of Jan Assmann's distinction between communicative and cultural memory, the balbal may be understood as a medium through which collective remembrance becomes stabilized, canonized, and re-mediated across generations. Valikhanov's drawings mark a crucial transition in this process: the stone statue moves from the lived landscape of nomadic ritual into the domain of cultural memory, entering the archive and acquiring institutional visibility. During the Soviet period, this process intensifies, as the balbal becomes incorporated into a curated regime of representation, aestheticized and aligned with broader narratives of national form within socialist modernity.

However, in the post-Soviet context, the symbolic status of the balbal becomes increasingly unstable. As Madina Tlostanova argues, post-Soviet cultural production unfolds within a space marked by colonial difference and fractured modernity. Within this framework, the return to pre-Islamic and precolonial imagery is not merely nos-

talgie but indicative of an ongoing negotiation of historical subjectivity. In the works of Narymbetov and Atabekov, the balbal undergoes deconstruction through repetition, material displacement, and ironic recontextualization. The monument is no longer a secure emblem of continuity; it becomes a critical sign that exposes the layered sedimentations of memory embedded in the post-imperial condition.

Thus, the image of the stone statue in Kazakhstani art reveals more than aesthetic continuity. It discloses the mechanisms through which cultural memory is constructed, institutionalized, mythologized, and ultimately destabilized. The balbal emerges as a visual site where precolonial heritage, Soviet cultural policy, and contemporary global art discourse intersect. Its transformations illustrate how artistic practice participates in the reconfiguration of cultural authority and the rearticulation of identity in a post-imperial space.

Future research may further explore the balbal within broader comparative frameworks of postcolonial and decolonial visuality, situating Kazakhstani artistic practices within global debates on heritage, memory, and the politics of representation.

Authors' contribution:

Sv. Kobzhanova – definition of the concept, identification of the purpose and tasks of the study. Systematization of the material and analysis of the research results.

A. Kumarbayeva – editing the text, formatting of the article and development of research methodology. Preparation of a literature review in English language with a comparative analysis of whole literature.

Авторлардың үлесі:

С. Көбжанова – тұжырымдаманы анықтау, зерттеу мақсаты мен міндеттерін анықтау. Материалдарды жүйелеу және зерттеу нәтижелерін талдау.

А. Құмарбаева – мәтінді редакциялау, мақаланы рәсімдеу және зерттеу әдістемесін әзірлеу. Қолданылған ағылшын тіліндегі әдебиеттерді талдай отырып, шолу дайындау.

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ӨНЕРДЕГІ ТАС МҮСІНДЕРДІҢ БЕЙНЕЛЕРІ: ТАРИХИ ЖӘНЕ ЗАМАНАУИ КОНТЕКСТ

Аңдатпа. Мақала Қазақстан бейнелеу өнеріндегі тас мүсіндер образдарын зерттеуге және олардың ежелгі дәуірден бүгінгі күнге дейінгі эволюциясын тарихи және мәдени репрезентация режимдерінің өзгеруі аясында талдауға арналған. Зерттеу қазақтың алғашқы суретшісі Шоқан Уәлихановтың шығармашылығын талдаудан басталады. Оның еңбектері қазақ өнеріндегі визуалдық дәстүрдің негізін қалады. Балбалдар мен петроглифтерді бейнелей отырып, Уәлиханов қазақ мәдениетінің өткенін болашақпен байланыстыратын бірегей визуалдық архив қалыптастырды. Мақалада XX ғасырдың екінші жартысы мен XXI ғасырдың басындағы қазақстандық маңызды суретшілердің шығармалары талданады. Әрқайсысы тас мүсіндерді өзіндік тұрғыдан интерпретациялап, ұлттық бірегейлік мәселелерін және заманауи көркемдік ізденістерді бейнелейді. Тас мүсіндер мәдени дәстүрлердің сабақтастығын білдіріп, мәдени жады құрылып, берілетін мифологизацияланған көркем кеңістіктің бір бөлігі ретінде қызмет атқарады. Мақала мәдени жады теориясына, постколониалдық зерттеулерге және визуалдық мәдениет тәсілдеріне сүйене отырып, бұл образдардың өзгермелі тарихи режимдер аясында мнемоникалық әрі репрезентациялық құрылымдар ретінде қалай әрекет ететінін талдайды. Зерттеу тас мүсіндер образдарының қазақ мәдени бірегейлігінің маңызды элементі ретінде қазіргі өнерде де өзекті рөл атқаратынын айқындайды. Олар адам мен табиғаттың бірлігін, дәстүр мен жаңашылдықтың сабақтастығын және тарихи өткенмен терең байланысты білдіреді.

Түйін сөздер: мәдени жады; тас мүсіндер; балбалдар; посткеңестік бірегейлік; қазақстандық визуалдық өнер; заманауи өнер.

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ОБРАЗЫ КАМЕННЫХ ИЗВАЯНИЙ В ИСКУССТВЕ: ИСТОРИЧЕСКИЙ И СОВРЕМЕННЫЙ КОНТЕКСТ

Аннотация. Данная статья посвящена исследованию образов каменных изваяний в изобразительном искусстве Казахстана и анализу их эволюции от древности до современности в контексте изменяющихся исторических и культурных режимов репрезентации. Исследование начинается с анализа творчества Чокана Валиханова - первого казахского иллюстратора, чьи работы заложили основы визуальной традиции в казахском искусстве. Документируя изображения балбалов и петроглифов, Валиханов создал уникальный визуальный архив, который служит связующим звеном между прошлым и будущим казахской культуры. В статье анализируются произведения ключевых казахстанских художников второй половины XX - начала XXI века, каждый из которых по-своему интерпретирует каменные изваяния, отражая как вопросы национальной идентичности, так и современные художественные поиски. Каменные статуи символизируют преемственность культурных традиций и формируют мифологизированное художественное пространство, выступая как места, в которых конструируется и передаётся культурная память. Статья опирается на теорию культурной памяти, постколониальные исследования и подходы визуальной культуры, рассматривая данные образы как мнемонические и репрезентативные структуры, действующие в рамках изменяющихся исторических режимов. Исследование подчёркивает, что образы каменных изваяний, являясь важным элементом казахской культурной идентичности, продолжают играть значимую роль в современном искусстве, символизируя единство человека и природы, преемственность традиций и инноваций, а также глубокую связь с историческим прошлым.

Ключевые слова: культурная память; каменные изваяния; балбалы; постсоветская идентичность; казахстанское визуальное искусство; современное искусство.

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