

# In Quest of Oneself: Cultural Identity in Modern Kazakhstan Sculpture Space

Ikram Oiykbayevich Nadirbekov\*, Madina Ernestovna Sultanova and  
Olga Vladimirovna Baturina

Kazakh National Academy of Arts named after T. K. Zhurgenov, Almaty, Kazakhstan; Madina.  
Sultanova@yandex.kz, olga.baturina@mail.ru, I\_nadirbekov.i.o@mail.ru

## Abstract

**Background:** The article presents a culturological analysis of searching the cultural identity through the poetry of visual and artistic image in modern sculpture of Kazakhstan. **Methods:** The methodology of this study is based on the cultural-historical and hermeneutic methods; it allows a deeper and wide-ranging looking at the problem of relationship of imagery language and socio-cultural landscape; axiological method is able to identify the value orientations of modern sculpture as a reflection of cultural identity. **Findings:** One of the important results of our study is the interrelation of work of sculpture with art material selected by the sculptor for it. "Iron" people-heroes of the 1950-70s were imprinted in metal, stone and marble; after the 1980s and especially the 1990s masters are increasingly turning to new materials for sculpture – plastic, glass, alloys, artificial stone, etc. We interpret this rather as a kind of reflection of the multiculturalism and multiple identities due to them, but not just as an attempt to diversify the arsenal of art. The problem of investigating the Kazakhstan experience about specifics of cultural identity searching on the example of the sculpture has never been studied either in foreign or in the Kazakhstan science. This socio-cultural context is considered for the first time. Now, despite the problems, characterized by the abuse of "national originality", sovereign Kazakhstan has gained its unique cultural code and awareness of its own identity. **Improvements:** Freedom of imagery and expressive language (external) in the plastic art is directly proportional to the expansion of social and cultural horizons (internal) of the new generation of Kazakhstanis.

**Keywords:** Cultural Identity, Kazakhstan, Plastic Art, Sculpture, Visual Imagery

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, the authors analyze the way and the search of cultural identity of modern Kazakh through the prism of art – namely, the art of sculpture. Currently, a powerful transformation of modern art is going on, expressed through the complexity of the visual image, dominating in conditions of information age. Kazakhstan is entering a fundamentally new information space that is due to different cultural understanding, the main feature of which is the replacement of the verbal paradigm by the visual one. And here the problem of identity is one of the key problems.

Kazakhstan professional sculpture is a massive and interesting layer for investigation, as it was a novelty for the nomadic worldview. Nevertheless, it already has its own history and potential. The interest in the imagery language in general and in the space of sculpture in particular is due to the fact that the image is an important, integral part of the work of art, especially of plastic art. There is no doubt that the image, ultimately, determines the nature of art, its content, form and significance to society.

At every historical stage of its development, the spiritual foundation of art is faced with the necessity of its material expression. Things that are completely ordinary for us now were previously innovative, bizarre, some-

\*Author for correspondence

times, even outrageous. Each time, changing its imagery language, the art has sought thereby to be incarnated in the most suitable for this material, to create a unique tandem of the form and the content, expressing the feelings and emotions of the era in the most proper way.

The unequivocal synthesis of the arts, observable now, where it is impossible to single out a particular kind, requires a serious and large-scale analysis not only in the spiritual realm, but also in the socio-cultural area, where the problem of cultural heritage and self-determination appears most acute.

The relevance of this study is determined by significant changes in public, social and cultural life of modern Kazakhstan – a former part of the USSR, now – a young sovereign state. In the context of this study, the authors examine the entire history of the Kazakhs, with all its nuances and events, conditionally divided into two parts: Everything that was before the 20th century and that was afterwards.

This divide separates the nomadic Kazakhs history from its modern context, where the Kazakhs are already Kazakhstani, having become sedentary against their will in 20th century. The first half of 20th century has become tragically fateful for Kazakhstan: Forced collectivization, famine and political repressions. Blurring the key parameters of national identity – the traditional picture of the world determined the distortion of language and culture, which undoubtedly resulted in an injury to the ethnic and cultural memory.

The problem of cultural identity is now extremely important for many countries of the world and Kazakhstan is not an exception. Identity perspective as an integral part of the cultural policy was considered in detail in the works of<sup>1-3</sup> and it is of interest for us.

With respect to Kazakhstan and the cultural policy promoted by it, the investigations of<sup>4-10</sup> are essential for the authors of the article.

Certain aspects of existence and ways to strengthen national identity in modern Kazakhstan in the format of fine art were analyzed by<sup>11-23</sup>. But nevertheless, the problem of the study of conceptual foundations of artistic image visualization as a spiritual and aesthetic phenomenon in the process of acquiring and preserving cultural identity is a poorly studied question. And in the area of sculpture art it was barely considered, although the sculpture as a special kind of plastic art in the context of ideological imagery form creation has several unique peculiarities that are specific to it.

## 2. Concept Headings

The main hypothesis of this article is the belief that sculpture, despite some limited means of expression is able to recreate the material image of era more than any other type of visual art. Modern Kazakh sculpture appears primarily as a special text, a unique artistic organization of meanings and images, concisely and clearly expresses the spirit of its age, on example of which peculiarities of the formation of Kazakhstan cultural identity can be traced.

The starting point here is an attempt to find answers to the following questions: What is Kazakhstan undertaking today in the search for the optimal solution to the problem of building a new cultural identity, without abandoning the heritage of the past years? How was the influence of the Soviet ideology reflected in the sculpture construction of the “hero of our time” in the 20th century? And how can the formation of the cultural identity be traced on the example of visual and artistic imagery in modern Kazakh sculpture?

The dimensions of history. The specific climatic conditions of a steppe zone of Eurasia, in the center of which Kazakhstan is placed, gave rise to a special life-support system – nomadic civilization.

A glance at the history shows a strong influence of different cultures the people of Kazakhstan experienced. A special role is given to the Great Silk Road. This unique cultural and historical phenomenon for centuries in many ways defined the development of politics, economy and culture of the countries and peoples that were a part of the orbit of its powerful attraction. It is noteworthy that at the moment there is an active resuscitation of global importance of the Silk Road, its new, urgent meanings in the strategy of East and West unification.

Specificity of nomadism and largely of the Silk Road contributed to the development of a particular worldview on the territory of Kazakhstan, characterized by the increased tolerance, cultural values, preferences and spiritual and moral ideals.

Up to a point, Kazakhstan had no problem of cultural self-identity. Everything has changed when there was a radical turn in the history of the Kazakh society in the early 20th century. It completely changed all the parameters of the society existence and moreover, the spiritual consciousness and the whole complex of contemplative orientations got a heavy blow<sup>8</sup>.

The year of 1918 is considered as a radical turn in the centuries-old nomadic history of the Kazakh nomads. This is the end of the old era and at the same time the

beginning of another – the Soviet era. First, it was necessary to destroy the symbols of the old system and then to build a new, radically different picture of the world, the core of which was a settled way of life.

Incompatibility of the nomadic societies with the Soviet social ideal was undoubted that gave rise to the idea of forced collectivization of the indigenous population of Kazakhstan. The policy of “persuasion” offered the former nomad cities with the industrial landscape instead of freedom of steppe, technogenic environment instead of nature<sup>9</sup>. The result was as follows: From 1926-1939, all the population of the republic increased by 2.6% and the urban population – by 268%. The collectivization of the nomadic people in the recent past has led to a humanitarian catastrophe of the 1930s, when the “victims of famine was 1798.4 thousands of ethnic Kazakhs or 46.8% of the total Kazakh population”<sup>24</sup>.

The enormous reduction in number of livestock and the subsequent famine, no doubt, created the conditions for irreversible sedentarization of Kazakhs. Radically disrupting the social balance by moving the ancestral groups in indicated areas, adversely affecting the transmission of traditions and memories of older generations, the forced sedentarization became a fundamental turn to Kazakh society and to some extent, a forced acculturation<sup>10</sup>.

This affected the entire population policies, turning the Kazakhs in the minority on their native historical territory. Only a generation later, by the 70th, a number of Kazakhs has approached to the level of 1926. In the future, the historical realities have led to active migration processes, the result of which up to 1989 was as follows: The Slavs comprised already 44.3% of Kazakhstan’s population – 7.2 million people. Due to the high level of urbanization and education, the Slavs dominated in health and welfare of Kazakhstan: 46% against 38.5% of the Kazakhs; in science 60% of the Slavs against 25.4% of the Kazakhs; in the management 56.8% of the Slavs against 30.2% of Kazakhs<sup>25</sup>.

It should be remembered that the spiritual world of the Kazakhs, through contacts with Russian culture was connected to the system of European and international cultural relations. The main objective of cultural creativity was the acquisition of new values<sup>26</sup>.

It is also important to recognize that, despite the political and social excesses and distortions, cultural community of the Soviet Kazakhstan has always sought for unification. Culture and art has always been recognized as a special space which is consciously and systematically sought to be defended from merging with politics

and ideology by intellectuals. Even in terms of aggressive Soviet cultural policy, the need to preserve traditional culture for its own carriers remained a priority.

Kazakhstan gained sovereignty and it caused the magnitude of efforts and increased dynamics in the process of creation and development of the national idea. It was not just the formation of a new cultural and historical landscape in a new unity on the political map of the world, but the formation of a “national model of the world”, the actualization of which was possible only through education, science and culture<sup>7,8</sup>.

The underlying idea in the formation of the cultural identity of Kazakhstan in the 1990-2000s was multiculturalism. Given the multi-ethnic population of the Kazakhstan people and due to this tolerance, multiculturalism is seen as the most appropriate key to further positive socio-cultural development.

At the moment, multiculturalism is largely a semantic core of the state cultural policy in Kazakhstan<sup>6</sup> based on which a new cultural identity has being constructed for more than two decades. And although we cannot call this process definitely unique and perfect<sup>4,5</sup>, however, it moves and gains traction.

Now Kazakhstan faces a number of global challenges, some of which to some extent can be resolved with the help of tools of circumspect and balanced cultural policy. And here, an appeal to cultural identity is a basic condition, as a distinguishing feature of cultural policies in the countries, which are characterized by the presence of “colonial legacy”, is the special importance of identity preserving issues<sup>1</sup>.

We believe that the sculpture with all the brevity of expressive means is able to create the most compelling and viable forms of artistic imagery because of a three-dimensional picture. Analysis of visual specificity of sculpture allows revealing and identifying the peculiarities of formation and development of the cultural identity of modern Kazakhstan.

The Soviet Period. Formation of professional art in Kazakhstan began in the 1930s of the 20th century and it coincided with the tragic events in the history of the Kazakhs. Despite the complexity of the situation, the young Kazakh art asserted itself clearly and authoritatively. The specifics of the Kazakh professional art is not so much in the fact that it started from scratch, considering the lack of a certain period to any professional art school with its technical capabilities, although this is very important, but in its internal content. Originality here is

not as the form of traditionalism inherent in every people, but on the level of worldview, where deep complexes of ethno-cultural traditions of nomads in general begin to work.

Development of Kazakhstan's sculpture takes place in parallel with other types of plastic art and the start has been made with the help of Russian masters that influenced the formation of the national school. And the range of plastic traditions presented an initial base of Kazakh sculpture of the 20th century was entirely determined by European and Russian academic school<sup>11</sup>.

The end of the first third of the 20th century in Kazakhstan was marked by vigorous activity of sculptors, carried out mainly under the sign of the sculptural portrait. The young republic, as well as the whole country, has sought to immortalize their heroes, creating a kind of a whole gallery of portraits<sup>27</sup>. Alisher Navoi and Abai, Ybyrai Altansarin, Ciocan Valikhanov and other outstanding persons have found new life in realistic portraits, as close as possible to the original. Up to the forties, exhibitions and contests especially for sculptors became more frequent and we believe that the state placed a greater responsibility on this kind of art than on others.

We attribute this to the fact that the sculpture as a special kind of plastic art has a unique artistic and imaginative abilities, able to capture the image in such a way that to make it undeniable and unforgettable, in this case, the "face of the era", its "hero of our time". This strategy "worked" excellent, because further sculptors constantly appealed to the plaster models of the thirties and forties in order to draw out a little bit of the brightness and energy that distinguished the first Kazakh sculptural portraits.

We believe that in order to analyze peculiarities of visual and imagery evolution of the Kazakhstan's sculpture, it is advisable to apply cultural and philosophical chronotope analysis – cross-section of the era. Since we cannot "pull" the sculpture as a form of art out from all organically growing art system, because the picture will be distorted, we will use the well-known formula of differentiation into periods: The 1950-60s, the 1970-80s and the era of independence.

Formation of professional Kazakh sculpture is assumed to be identified with the name of<sup>22</sup>. Naurzbaev is the first true Kazakh professional sculptor, but we would like to emphasize the fact that he is a living proof of the synthesis of two world-view paradigms: Western (European) and Eastern (nomadic). Kh. Naurzbaev was destined to continue the conceptual line of "heroes of

our time", actualized in the thirties. But the sculptor succeeded in going beyond the level of the external display of heroes' image and rose to the level of philosophical understanding of their images.

The 1950-60s are the "golden era" of Kazakh sculpture. Perhaps, further there will never be this much harmonious clarity, understanding and harmony between sculpture, its creator and the cultural politics of those years. Challenges facing the founders of the art form, non-traditional for Kazakhstan, were national in scope<sup>18</sup>. Sculptors should have not just embodied a predetermined and known image, but to *find* it first. We mean a deep understanding of the spiritual nature of the image and its material equivalent.

The post-war decade was a special time, charged with enthusiasm and frenzied positive energy; it was a "counter" decade. On this wave, sculptors needed to create a heroic national image, forever fit it into the history of their people, knowing that people remember their heroes exactly in this way. R. Chapaytene considers that the formation of national identity, based on social identity, is largely based on national ideology and mythology, accompanied by their emblems, heroes, legends and outstanding historical monuments, which were used as an aid for the state representation, having metonymically and synecdochically received the value of constructed characters<sup>3</sup>.

"Heroic" in this case is not understood as bombastic and ostentatious. The heroes of that time are those who do not live for themselves but for the nation, the people. Whether he writes poems in groves of Bayan-Aul, casts steel at the Karaganda plant or cultivates crops in Northern Kazakhstan – they are the ones who are imbued with the ideas of the era, "synchronize" themselves with it.

Kh. Naurzbaev is honoured to have created an imagery plastic language which is fundamentally new for Kazakhstan that is able to transfer the free spirit of the steppe through the means of Western realistic art. Language of the pioneers of professional Kazakh sculpture is truthful, simple, logical and harmonious, as well as the people who became models. Artists did not merely "portrayed" their characters, they poetized them and thereby perpetuated.

We also believe that the characters themselves embody a certain proportion of the poetics. It does not matter who were those to be portrayed – poets and composers, scientists and national heroes, famous shepherds and rice growers – they were people who left their mark in

the national history and culture<sup>18</sup>. It is important that they were the ones who were originally distinguished by integrity and inspiration, wisdom and generosity and moreover, they believed in their ideals and that these ideals are the same for all people.

Persons were everything for the Kazakh sculpture of that time. Persons like representations reflecting an era, as if in a mirror. These persons spiritualized everything, whether it was a huge monument or a bust chamber. Since expressive emotional emphasis was focused exactly on the persons, this led to a professional, realistic artistic method which best meets the objectives of the time.

J. Elkins in his studies of the visual world has come to the conclusion that it is the persons who are “responsible” for the poetics of image. Nothing else, poetically sung by us – the sky, an ocean, spring rain, etc. is not able to match with people’s faces, since they are the power centers, something that sets places of meaning among other less important things in our little world<sup>28</sup>.

The 1960s were significantly different from the previous decade. Kazakhstan sculpture matured, got wings. Inspired by the successes of the 1950s and the fact that the task of creating a positive hero had been implemented to a certain extent, the artists performed bold experiments. Pictorial method began to change, sculptors pay more attention to the material, its expressive possibilities and this resulted in the diversity of imagery solutions. In order to develop professional Kazakh sculpture based on the introduction of the Western school foundations, it is specific that sensing other national plastic and ideological impulses, artists unconsciously subjected these waves to the powerful correction from their own points of view<sup>11</sup>.

A new galaxy of artists, who received an excellent professional education and could not waste time moving “by touch” have appeared. Apart from recognized masters, artistic fraternity was replenished with new names.

One of the leaders of the “new wave” is Erkin Mergenov who was the first who pondered the meaning of the space. If previously the main “load” was on the portrait only, then now in the 1960s, the sculptor projects the expansion of his own horizon and vision to the creative plane. E. Mergenov makes space as an active participator in the birth of the artistic image on a par with the development of the primary (tough) material<sup>27</sup>.

The “thaw” of the 1960s influenced the art as the emotional “defrost” of plastic sculptural language. Gradually, the “all-national heroism” began to give way to “battles of local importance”, where the events unfold no longer out-

side, but within the hero himself. And many other works of the time focus and retain the viewer’s eye on the emotions of the portrayed persons that in the hands of the masters are literally bare wires-nerve.

Why is this so and not otherwise? Why is there such a difference, which separates one decade from another? We understand this as a kind of a paradigm shift. This is not to say about drastic or radical change, however, it is very fundamental. As such, the imagery language did not undergo an essential transformation in terms of artistic techniques: Ideologically “right” characters and surroundings are still in sight. But if we look more closely, we will see a clear transformation of visual imagery.

It is all about poetics: People began to feel their own personality much sharper. Previously, plastic language was intended to state the fact that they are heroes and now the heroes wondered themselves “what or who made them heroes”? That is why the space suddenly became so important.

Earlier, the hero existed as if only through time and eclipsed everything; his phenomenal was in his self. Now the space has declared its rights along with the time. We believe that this is an extremely important point, especially given the main feature of the space-time continuum: The restriction of time and space expansion.

As before, sculptor - “sictier” “claims” his work as a material object in the space, but now he goes further – he dissipates his creative energy around him, being acutely aware of that all this is a unified whole. In this context, Heidegger argument about the emptiness in sculpture becomes more urgent: “Emptiness is not nothingness. It is also not an absence. Sculpture, physically embodying the creation of places and through the latter, opens the fields of the possible human habitation of the possible stay of person’s environment, related to his thoughts and things<sup>29</sup>.”

The 1970-80s were marked by the transformation of the plastic language. It was truly an innovative trend, developed in parallel with the old, official one. The essence of the new line was an instant reaction to being and real life.

The former “counerness” in art was encouraged from the standpoint of politics and ideology, but it was lost by the artists themselves. Relatively recently, the master and his work were ideologically unified. The man truly believed in what he saw, felt and thought. And the heroes of the 50-60-ies were exactly as follows: Simple and clear people who performed equally simple and clear actions.

The most important here was an amazing exterior and interior imagery unity. Therefore, the art in all its forms was extremely sincere and pure. But with the advent of the 1970s, a lot of things changed and most important here was the change of the vision. Things remained the same, but the point of view changed and the language changed as well.

An artist of the 1970s abandoned to blindly rely only on what he sees; he trusted his intuition, hearing, thoughts much more. Thus, new aspects that required the artist's utmost frankness, truthfulness of inner "I" were highlighted. It can be said that for all of the seventies a kind of "resetting" of plastic vision was conducted that would clearly and effectively manifest in the eighties.

The seventies in many ways became the "transition" for creative people, differing always by special subtlety of perception. Despite the seeming appearance of calm and peace, many artists apprehended the coming changes. Most of Kazakhstan's art world continued to follow the well-trodden track, but a certain part had already begun to form a new imagery vision that was like a "Cassandra's Brand" for others.

The above-mentioned innovative trend is broadly divided into two vectors, which we would call "the policy of the West" and "the return to the East". Of course, both are not definitive; they are largely mutually permeable, but still amenable to differentiation.

"The policy of the West" was characterized by an active interest in the plastic innovations of the second half of the 20th century. The closeness from the outside world frightened artists by intellectual isolation. Imagery language of the most prominent representatives of this plastic direction – E. Mergenov, M. Seisov, V. Rakhmanov and others – got rid of strained optimism and "collective experience".

It is not imitation, but an inspired search for the new – not for thoughts and ideas, but their full realization through the material, technology and vision. There is not a drop of flirting, "sifting" themselves through the sieve of the Western tradition in this imagery language. On the contrary, it is a clear, crisp, almost "clinical" look of sculptor at himself, his time and his contemporaries. Good and evil here are not complementary origins, but initially hostile parties.

Visual imagery is designed to highlight the work of art in every way as a final and indisputable fact. There is also no place for concealment: Everything has to be very clear, even if it is fraught with the interruption of the contact

with the audience. It is not a mystery or innuendo with a bunch of questions, but the naked truth, where everything is definitely clear and the detachment is emphasized and renunciation of reconciliation with reality is laid on all possible levels of perception.

Another vector of plastic innovation is conventionally directed to the East. The direction given by artists of the sixties, found its imagery expression in sculpture. This is a national style that is expressed through the development and further transformation of "decorativism" of stylistic features of oriental culture traditions and above all, of Central Asia<sup>14,16</sup>.

For the first time, sculptors applied not just to the Asian "motives", but wanted to rethink their internal content. This rethinking was the initial step on the road to themselves, to their ethnic memory. We have in mind the fact that the sculpture by their nature can only rely on the minimum number of means of expression and the latter, in turn, are a visual representation of some philosophical imperatives.

Turkic spiritual heritage is gradually revived in modern plastics through the epic and folklore – an inexhaustible source of folk art. With no exaggeration we would call this a *magical* art, because first, it motivated an artist and then his audience.

Imagery language of "Eastern" direction is soaked in poetics, the sounds and rhythms of native encampments. Here, the sculpture is quite consonant with the painting and drawing of the same period, underscoring the commonality of artistic thinking. Painting of this time was described as follows: "Surpassing the scope of folklore clashes, the value of folklore, deeply rethought, in terms of modernity and the nation's history, in which people are both the creator and the hero, enters the painting of Kazakhstan"<sup>13</sup>. We are confident that this is just as true for the sculpture.

Ethnic start has sublimated in the peculiarity of combining academic excellence with professional insight and acumen of artifex. The pointed remark of L. Gumilev is appropriate here: "Every original and beautiful work of art, philosophy or literature contains a combination of three elements: Craft work, thoughts and passionarity of the artist, "pouring" part of his energy into his work"<sup>30</sup>. An original artisanal approach that includes the deep intuitive understanding of the material, its nature and possibilities, as it was in antiquity and the Renaissance, distinguishes a new galaxy of sculptors – E. Kazarian,

D. Tolekov, A. Esenbayev, N. Dalbay, M. Zhunisbayev, K. Kakimov and others.

A special opinion on the material and its artistic possibilities is that unites both vectors of innovative course of Kazakh plastics in 1970-80s. Visual imagery language has extremely expanded and strengthened, rising to the surface the deep archetypal concepts – Good and Evil, Forgiveness and Revenge, Eternity and Immediacy.

It is important to realize that this is not the conflict-phenomena (as it seems at first glance), but the shoots with a single root and therefore, mentally unrelated. Returning to imagery language, we note that the “West” is intended to identify and pinpoint the problem and “East” – to find a way to solve it by getting valuable experience, which then will become one more puzzle in a mosaic of the people’s cultural memory.

Independent Kazakhstan. The New Time or artistic culture of sovereign Kazakhstan is expedient to be divided into two periods: The 1990s and the 21st century. This differentiation will help more clearly understand the evolution of visual imagery in the plastic arts.

Art situation of 1990-2005 in Kazakhstan is called a kind of experiment in cultivation of “new” forms of art on local soil, the result of their transformation in search of their own adequacy with the same spiritual tradition and with changing reality and the consciousness of the nation during the whole century<sup>14,16</sup>.

In the early 1990s, the internal emotional conflicts of artists reached their zenith: Eyes refused to accept, ears – to hear, hands – to do. External suppressed spiritual, provoking creative people in an effort to rebel against tradition and in most cases, artists did not want to or could not distinguish these traditions.

It is important to remember that the reality and inevitability of conflict between tradition and modernization, turning into quite acute forms in terms of national identity, cannot be ignored<sup>19</sup>. In this context, an appeal to the East was on the one hand partly a conscious departure (or escape) from reality, on the other hand – healing therapy of wounded consciousness of timeless wisdom and peace.

The tendency towards the East, which became evident as early as in the 1960-70s, became stable in the 1990s. And in opinion of Kazakhstan artists and sculptors, the East was diverse – Turkish and Japanese, Iranian and Chinese motifs intertwined, enriching each other. Appeal to the East resulted in a deep interest in its mythology and mythopoetics. Ultimately, it had the most serious impact on the change in the visual plastic language.

Since the mythopoetic essence appears itself as a creative origin of ectropium orientation as opposed to entropic dive in speechless, darkness, chaos<sup>31</sup>. In this context, such relentless pursuit of the plastic art of the 1990s to the symbolism becomes clear. It became a new horizon of art, its open creative space, free from hidebound ideology.

Since Kazakhstan gained sovereignty, the creative thinking did not only acquire a new temporary reference point, but other imagery and meaning. The “dusk” 1980s and early 1990s utterly exacerbated the internal conflict between the outer and inner world, revealing a very artistic consciousness<sup>32</sup>. This is especially true for the sculpture, which literally “sees the root”, as it has a limited set of expressive means and is always forced to isolate the most important, archetypal to a certain extent.

The period of Independence formulated new fundamental tasks prior art, whose essence was in a series of artistic transformations of the most global ideas of new all-Kazakhstani spirituality and historical development course. It was no less important to declare this on a global scale as well in order to clearly visualize the image of the new sovereign state on the political map of the world. In this context, the plastic art with its crisp, clear artistic language and opportunities acquires particular importance like no other artistic form.

According to Turner, each character expresses a lot of topics and each topic is expressed by many characters. The cultural fabric is weaved by symbolic framework and theme woof. Plexus of symbols serves as a rich repository of information not only about the environment, how it is perceived and valued by ritual performers, but their ethical, aesthetic, political, legal and ludic (scope of games, sports etc. in culture) ideas, ideals and rules<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, since the beginning of the 1990s the sculpture is experiencing its peak, especially in the genre of monumental plastic arts, designed to materialize the new spiritual time formula.

Monumental plastic arts is more often associated with the dominant ideology and cultural policy, since it is a monument that represents an important idea, necessary at the moment of development of society and the state, with an arsenal of its own expressive means<sup>21</sup>. Monumental sculpture here is the state order, designed to express a certain message, the formation of a paradigmatic image of the hero, as it “goes beyond the formal art searching and matching the forces of cultural and social order”<sup>23</sup>. Monumental plastic of Kazakhstan’s independence era is

distinguished by a bright characteristic – the quality of ensemble.

Indoor sculpture as well as the monumental plastic is now on the rise and, unlike the latter, it may be more emotional and poetic. The main sense trend here is the regeneration of cultural memory and continuity of generations. Modern sculptors-easel painter A. Yessenbayev, E. Kazaryan, U. Shanov, Sh. Tuleshov, D. Tulekov, S. Narymbetov, K. Ishanov and many others seek the truth through the revival of the ancient signs and symbols and metaphors return<sup>12</sup>.

We believe that this is not just a steady interest in exotic motives and not a craze on the “East”, but the formation of a new imagery, new plastic language based on “collecting yourself” as if pieces of the puzzle, achieving a wholeness. M. Mamardashvili very accurately pointed out that there is one very interesting phenomenon, widely observed in modern civilization: “The lack of symbolism”. It seems that we live in a time (or “we are the way we are”), when there is a lack of symbols for our own handling and usage. This can be for a variety of reasons – historical, cultural, religious or providential, which may be performed because of some permanent reason, rooted not in temporary circumstances, but in certain peculiarities of the individual mental functioning (perceptual, apperception, intentional)<sup>28</sup>.

Symbolization is a practical understanding and poetization of the picture of the world. Avoiding it means the loss of yourself and your attitude in any given spatio-temporal context and return of symbols can be regarded as recovery of ourselves. We have seen this on the example of the Western art concept with its “flashes” of symbolism, the era of modernity, modernism, etc.

J. Elkins speaks of the 21st century as a complete chaos in the study of visual culture, which is a good sign of the strength and novelty of a new research paradigm<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, the last decade of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century in Kazakhstan was marked by an incredible number of new trends, forms and manifestations and with all the diversity, the only thing is invariable – an emphasis on visual imagery. The last one sometimes even dominates over the internal content. Here we observe not the substitution of one another, but the transfer of emphasis to the most contentious and controversial aspects in order to identify and highlight the global concepts.

Analyzing the current state of Kazakhstan’s visual culture in general and the plastic arts in particular, we believe that there is one common definite trend that many

contemporary cultural studies called “Tengri culture”. We would like to emphasize that the authors do not invest in this phrase any religious overtones, especially if we consider that Tengriism as such is not a religion, but an “open outlook”<sup>35</sup>.

Mythologicality and mythopoetization of modern Kazakhstan plastic thinking in our understanding does not just “address” Tengrianism and elects its cultural and philosophical paradigm, which is based on “Tengri cultural type – the phenomenon of world history, which constitutes the spiritual and cultural foundation of many agricultural peoples of the Eurasian continent”<sup>36</sup>.

Symbols and signs of different times and peoples reigned in a visual space, taking on themselves the former functions of communication, or the rapprochement of cultures. Sculpture has a special role here, because it materializes the thought, creates form for the formless, a visible image of that which existed before beyond images.

Tengrianism largely inspires an active search and discovery, sometimes shocking philistine consciousness of the masses. In fact, the imagery language, which is elected by the so-called “non-traditional” representatives of the arts, in our opinion, just aims to reconciliation, balancing at first not outside, but inside himself the beast and his victim (emotions and mind). And before the internal “lambs” finally become silent, an artist-sculptor-musician-philosopher should become a kind of shaman to find this way by *himself* and then to show it to others.

Analyzing modern Kazakhstani cultural context, we can talk about shamanism as the practical magic in art<sup>23</sup>. And here, the lines between the art forms blur, transforming individual static things into the action – act, improvisation and intuition – characteristic external signs of shamanism. We believe that resorting to different kinds of art – space and time, plastic and others, initiates most expressive features of each of them, creating a new visual language.

We are not talking about a direct analogy with the shamanic actions in its usual understanding, but the unconditional relationship of such thinking and visualization in real life. Besides, the “shaman” approach in many ways became the shortest route to its roots.

Recent artists form a new view of history, focusing not on the chronological narrative, but on the problem of literal reconstruction of the archaic tradition or cultural stereotype<sup>37</sup>. We think it is referred to attempts through concrete action to find the lost support, creating a myth, even if it is necessary to slaughter a sheep in the space

of an art gallery or organize the natural environment by hanging bronze sculptural reliefs on the living trees.

The creation of contemporary sculptors of Kazakhstan is that by the only power of visual imagery poetics returns a person to the primordial, ancestral roots, holistic perception of the world, with its main commandment: The destruction of the natural harmony of its structure leads to the destruction of man<sup>38</sup>.

Now the question whether the art is able to not only display but also to form their own new models of socio-cultural and political identity is very relevant<sup>2</sup>. We are convinced that, of course, it can.

### 3. Results

An analysis of the genesis of the sculpture of the 20th-21st century sharply and categorically raises the problem of the artistic image as a symbol of time. In this case, we consider this as a symbol of “compressed” essence of a particular type of cultural identity. Cultural identity, expressed through the artistic images (in our case – sculpture), allows cultures to be “open”.

Kazakhstan has a very unique history of plastic art. Almost at every stage of its development, sculpture was interpreted as one of the priority kinds of plastic art, able to visualize the global ideological values of each period: From the heroic optimism of pre-war and post-war period until the emergence of innovative trends in the 1960s and

**Table 1.** The transformation of the visual imagery of modern sculpture of Kazakhstan (second half of the 20th – early 21st centuries)

Period	Creative tasks	Heroes	Visual image	Artistic material
50s	Creating a universal national image of positive character.	Ordinary people who have devoted themselves to the socialist labor.	Logical, precise, clear. Focus on the face, its expression, meaning.	Marble Tree Bronze
60s	Experiments in the field of visual methods, especially in the expressive possibilities of the material.	Contemporaries. Not only labor heroes, but people desperately making sense of their identity and place in the world.	A variety of imaginative solutions. Emotional “defrost” of plastic sculptural language.	Marble Tree Bronze Aluminum
70s	Instant reaction to being, a real life. Rejection of blind belief only to what one sees; trust your instincts, thoughts.	Contemporaries and allegorical/mythological characters synthesizing the main signs of age.	A fundamental change of the plastic language. “Reconfiguration” of plastic vision.	Rock Tree Bronze Aluminum
80s	The development of two main areas: “the policy of the West” and “the return to the East”.	The sharp increase in the allegorical, symbolic and folkloric characters. Portraits of contemporaries yield positions to archetypal images.	The visual language is extremely widened, turning to deep philosophical concepts. On the one hand, the “Western” values, on the other – the “Eastern values”.	Rock Tree Bronze Aluminum Plastic and other new materials
90s	The aggravation of the internal conflict between the outer and inner world, limiting exposure of artistic consciousness.	“Rebel Soul”, archetypal images, symbols and signs.	Symbolization as a practical understanding of the world picture. The experiments and the synthesis of their own adequacy with the same spiritual tradition.	Rock Tree Bronze Aluminum Plastic and other new materials
21st century	Formation of a new view of history based not on the chronological narrative, and the problem of literal reconstruction of the archaic tradition or cultural code.	The dominant of collective symbolic images.	The search for “oneself” through the prism of the Tengri cultural code.	Classic and fundamentally new materials:

their amplification in the 1970-80s respectively. The 1990s were a time of profound transformation of artistic vision and plastic language under the influence of the expressed identity quest.

The last twenty-five years in the domestic plastic art of independent Kazakhstan are characterized by active search of “oneself” and recovery of memory through the prism of ethnic traditional cultural code.

Results of the analysis of visual imagery in the context of cultural identity in the space of modern Kazakh sculpture should be reflected in a tabular form. (See Table 1).

## 4. Discussion

In the humanities there is a sufficient amount of studies in the field of cultural identity, but they are all concentrated around a limited number of kinds of art (mainly painting and music) and themes. The problem of studying the Kazakhstani experience of specifics of searching cultural identity on the example of the sculpture has never been studied by either foreign or Kazakhstan science. This socio-cultural context has firstly been considered in this article.

Since the sculpture is one of the most ideologically “convincing” arts, its expressive potential is mostly involved in the socio-cultural space. However, with the aggravation of the internal contradictions between the author’s ideological position and existed imagery language, there was a need to develop new visual systems that can adequately convey the dynamics of change in the cultural and historical landscape of modern Kazakhstan.

One of the important results of our study is the interrelation of work of sculpture with art material selected by the sculptor for it. “Iron” people-heroes of the 1950-70s were imprinted in metal, stone and marble, after the 1980s and especially the 1990s masters were increasingly turning to new materials for sculpture – plastic, glass, alloys, artificial stone and etc. We interpret this not just as an attempt to diversify the arsenal of art, but a kind of reflection of the multiculturalism and multiple identities due to them.

Freedom of imagery and expressive language (external) in the plastic arts is directly proportional to the expansion of social and cultural horizons (internal) of the new generation of Kazakhstanis.

## 5. Conclusion

Summing up the analysis of the search of cultural identity through the poetics of visual and artistic image in contemporary sculpture of Kazakhstan, we can say that professional art, whose history in Kazakhstan begins with the first quarter of the 20th century, inherited and temporarily retained national archetypes and visual codes trying to learn a completely new plastic language. This process initiated the “East-West” dichotomy in the artistic space format. But in this case, the aforesaid dichotomy has acquired a different sound, the uniqueness of which lies in the fact that due to the historical and political circumstances, national identity is now “monoethnic”<sup>39</sup> i.e. forcedly mixed between the two bases and not able to do the choice between them.

The evolution of visual imagery in the plastic art of Kazakhstan was carried out in stages, generally coinciding with the official periodization. Almost at every stage of its development, sculpture was interpreted as one of the priority kinds of plastic art, that is able to visualize the global ideological values of each period: From the heroic optimism of pre-war and post-war period until the innovative trends in the 60s and their strengthening in the 1970-80s respectively. The 90s were a time of transformation of artistic vision and plastic language under the influence of expressed mythopoetical origin.

In our view, the last twenty-five years in the Kazakh culture are characterized by the search for “oneself” through the prism of Tengiri cultural code. The latter, in turn, led to the emergence of a unique visual imagery designed to help harmonize the whole art system to form a “symphonic personality”, capable of “reading and speaking” the language of global symbols and metaphors.

Now, despite the problems, characterized by the abuse of “national originality”, sovereign Kazakhstan has gained its unique cultural code and awareness of its own identity.

## 6. Acknowledgements

We thank Gulmira Shalabayeva – PhD, Head of the State Art Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan named after A. Kasteyev for providing access to an expanded collection of modern sculpture of Kazakh State Art Museum. We thank UNESCO Cluster Office for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for cooperation. We thank colleagues from the Kazakh National Academy of Arts named after T. Zhurgenov and the Kazakh National

Pedagogical University named after Abai for support and assistance in our research.

## 7. References

- Mulcahy KV. Identity and cultural policy. Understanding the arts and creative sector in the United States. Revised Edition. USA: Rutgers University Press; 2008.
- Caroline T, Webb J. Art and human rights: Modern Asian contexts. Manchester: Manchester University Press; 2016.
- Chepaytene R. Cultural heritage in a globalized world. Vilnius: EHU; 2010.
- Edward S. The politics of multiple identities: Lineage and ethnicity in Kazakhstan. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 2000; 52(3):489–506.
- Mukazhanova K. The politics of multiple identities in Kazakhstan: Current issues and new challenges. Multiple Identities: Migrants, Ethnicity and Membership. Edited by Paul Spickard. USA: Indiana University Press; 2013.
- Abazov R, Khazbulatov A. Experimenting with multiculturalism and globalization: The case of Kazakhstan's Cultural Policies. *Il Nodo di Gordio*. 2015; 8:170–9.
- Sultanova M, Shaygozova Zh. Conceptual approaches of the UNESCO in Kazakhstan. *Il Nodo di Gordio*. 2015; 9:171–81.
- Sultanova M, Mikhailova N, Amanzholova D. Between the East and the West: Reflections on the modern art of Kazakhstan. *Electronic Journal of Folklore*. 2016; 63:45–64.
- Kulsariyeva A, Shaigozova Zh, Sultanova M. One nation - different fates: Kazakhstan in pursuit of cultural identity. *The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies*. Official Conference Proceedings; Kobe. 2015. p. 125–36.
- Kundakbayeva Zh. In search of the historical narrative of Kazakhstan: “Memories dialogue” or “national memory”. *National History of the Former Soviet Union*. Bomsdorf F, Bordyugov G. Editors. Moscow: Friedrich Naumann Fund, AIRO-XXI. 2009; 2:265–96
- Yergaliyeva RA. Ethno-cultural traditions in the modern art of Kazakhstan. Painting. Sculpture. Almaty: Gylym Scientific and Research Center; 2002.
- Yergaliyeva RA. Ethnic and epic in the art of Kazakhstan. Almaty: Zhybek Zholy Publishing House; 2011.
- Yergaliyeva RA. From poetry tales to poetics colors. Folklore images and motifs in the Kazakh painting and drawing. Almaty: Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan; 2004.
- Yergaliyeva RA. Traditional spirituality in the transformations of fine arts of Kazakhstan. National Idea and Artistic Culture. Almaty: KIE Linguistic and Cultural Studies Innovation Center; 2009.
- Yergaliyeva RA. From poetry tales to poetics colors. Folklore images and motifs in the Kazakh painting and drawing. Almaty: Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan; 2004.
- Yergaliyeva RA. National identity in contemporary art in Kazakhstan. National Idea and Artistic Culture. Almaty: KIE Linguistic and Cultural Studies Innovation Center; 2009.
- Yergaliyeva RA. Ethnic and epic in the art of Kazakhstan. Almaty: Zhybek Zholy Publishing House, 2011.
- Yergaliyeva RA et al. Art of Kazakhstan: The period of independence. Almaty: Arda; 2009.
- Shalabayeva GK. Kazakhstan, from ancient civilizations to the present day. Almaty: Economics; 2007.
- Sharipova DS. The mythological picture of the world and the idea of civil service in the monumental sculpture of the independence period. The idea of independence in the fine arts of Kazakhstan. Almaty: Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan; 2011.
- Sharipova DS. The main trends in the development of monumental sculpture of independence of Kazakhstan. Fine art of Kazakhstan. Almaty: Arda; 2009.
- Sharipova DS. Sketches of Kazakh Fine Art. Infancy (1930-50s). Almaty: Arda; 2008.
- Truspekova KhKh. The avant-garde ideas of the 20th century and the development of the Kazakh fine arts. Almaty: Eurasia; 2011.
- Masanov NE. History of Kazakhstan: Peoples and cultures. Almaty: Dayk-Press; 2001.
- Zhangutting BO. The migration policy of Kazakhstan and Russia: The attempt of comparative analysis. *Proceedings of the 10th International Academic Conference on Economic and Social Development*. Moscow: National Research University Higher School of Economics. 2016. Available from: <http://www.hse.ru/news/recent/7523313.html>
- Art education in the Republic of Kazakhstan: Understanding of national traditions and cultures closer. Research and analytical report prepared as part of a pilot project by UNESCO and IFESCO Arts Education in CIS countries: Development of creative opportunities in the 21st century; Almaty: 2010.
- Akhmetova E. Sculpture and monumental art. Kazakh art in five volumes. Sculpture. Almaty: Yelnur. 2013; 5.
- Elkins J. Exploring the visual world. Vilnius: EHU; 2010.
- Heidegger M. Time and being: Articles and speeches. Moscow: Republic; 1993.
- Gumilev LN. Ethnogenesis and Biosphere of the Earth. Moscow: ACT LLC; 2002.
- Toporov VN. Myth Ritual Form Symbol. Research of Mythopoetical. Moscow: Progress; 1995.

32. Yusupova AK. 1980-1990s Kazakhstan painting: The search for ways and. Astana: Foliant; 2009.
33. Turner V. The symbol and ritual. Moscow: Main Edition of Oriental Literature of Science Publishing House; 1983.
34. Mamardashvili MK, Pyatigorskiy AM. Symbol and consciousness. Metaphysical reasoning about consciousness, symbolism and language. Moscow: Languages of Russian Culture School; 1999.
35. Ayupov NG, Abayev NV. Tengrian civilization in the spiritual, cultural and geopolitical space of Central Asia. Abakan: Laboratory of Nomad Civilizations of Tuvan State University; 2009.
36. Sabit M, Kokumbayeva B, Temirton G. Spiritual culture of the Great Steppe and modernity. Almaty: Kazakhstan Research Institute of Culture; 2013.
37. Ibrayeva V. Art of Kazakhstan: The post-Soviet period. Almaty: Tonkaya Gran; 2014.
38. Lee KV, Kazaryan E. Masters of Fine Arts. Almaty. 2004; 3.
39. Kokumbayeva BD. Culturology of Tengrian Arts: Textbook. Pavlodar: Scientific and Publishing Center of Perm State Humanitarian Pedagogical University; 2012.