The Study of Mongol History Through Art and Culture

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History: The Mongol World Empire

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In our modern day, Mongolia has admittedly lost much of the fame it was attributed to during its capture and claim of the 13th and 14th centuries. Despite being a country known for its rough militaristic rule and brute-ish history, Mongolian culture has always had a lot more to show for than just their prowess in battle and ability to conquer. Between their riding to new nations and waging new wars, Mongolian peoples were, and are still, part of a nation that thrives as a deep well for cultural and artistic inspiration. Its nomadic origins were fertile grounds for all major creative avenues, making Mongolian craft distinct in contrast to more stationary societies. Mongolians drew creative influences from cultures across Central Asia, including China, Iran, Tibet, and India, amongst many more within the rising empire. Thus, it was a nation which indiscriminately blended a variety of arts and expressive media to curate a unique legacy of its own design. Beyond the brilliance within its borders, such art made a long-lasting impact on other cultures as well, implanting its proverbial signature upon many art forms and iconography that we see today.

One of the most significant forms of cultural presentation in Mongol history is clothing and ceremonial regalia. Mongolian wear lives on as the foremost show of cultural performance, and within ceremonies and gatherings, has remained the most consistent from before the empire to the modern day. Aside from cultural preservation practices, Mongolian clothing has changed little, due to little *needing* to be changed. The typical Mongolian outfit consists of: a hat, deel, boots, and accessories. The greatest benefit of such a simplistic design was it being as versatile as they come, allowing for any kind of activity required for daily life; basic living, hunting, riding, weather changes and anything else they faced daily[1]. Although the

[1] Cartwright, Mark. “Clothing in the Mongol Empire.” World History Encyclopedia, 2 Apr. 2022, www.worldhistory.org/article/1455/clothing-in-the-mongol-empire.

basic formula has always stood, there are many different categories that all sport their own rules based on formality, gender, age and so on. The Mongolian *deel* was by far the most important article of clothing as the base of one's attire. *"Everyone wore the deel, a robe-like wrap that resembled a long overcoat that closed diagonally from the side to the front. The basic deel was worn by all the tribes, but with many small differences in shape or colour."*[2] Of which could be worn for any kind of activity, only varying in materials and extravagance. Belts, jewellery and headwear were the categories where one could make any social assumptions about the wearer. Headwear, the article with the most variety, boasted over four hundred different styles across the ranks for all different occasions, social/political statuses and seasonal preferences[3]. Belts were an item strictly worn by Mongolian men that could hold the power of obedience and respect in the simple action of its removal within ceremony or prayers[4]. Lastly, of the main components of Mongolian garb, Jewellery was worn by everyone, with a significant emphasis on women of nobility. As women in Mongolian societies were treated with far more equality than many of their neighbouring countries, women found themselves distinguishing their wardrobes from the men's with the use of all sorts of jewellery, including headdresses and hair ornaments.

Although the overarching style of Mongolian fashion did not change much throughout history, by no means did Mongolians ignore influences from outside of their nations. After the Mongols had conquered the Song Dynasty, many rulers and

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[2] "Mongols: Clothes for a Rough, Active Life in the Cold." History on the Net, 11 May 2017, www.historyonthenet.com/mongols-clothes-for-a-rough-active-life-in-the-cold.
[3] Discover Mongolia. "Mongolian Traditional Clothes." Discover Mongolia, www.discovermongolia.mn/about-mongolia/culture-art-history/mongolian-traditional-clothes. Accessed 4 Apr. 2022.
[4] Cartwright, Mark. "Clothing in the Mongol Empire." World History Encyclopedia, 2 Apr. 2022, Climate and Significance www.worldhistory.org/article/1455/clothing-in-the-mongol-empire.

elite adopted Chinese-style ways of dressing[5], and later in the mid-1200s, textile makers began developing new styles of patterning and weaving with inspirations from both China and Iran, leaving their cultural mark in nearly all Mongol textiles. Overall there was a three-way trade of weaving craft and design between Northern China, Central Asia, and the Iranian world. This trade was particularly seen within the spread of Yuan Chinese dragon iconography and motifs through Mongol and Iranian clothing and embellishments from and beyond the 1270s[6]. Beyond the fabrics and methods used to make clothing, the final product was typically the same throughout most of the Mongolian lower classes. Whether it be peace or war, their clothing needed to account for harsh summers, and bitter winters, and always needed to be appropriate and unrestrictive for horse riding.

The contrasts between Mongolian higher and lower classes were, like any other Empirical nation, quite drastic. *"…The grand khan appears in a superb dress of cloth of gold, and on the same occasion full twenty thousand nobles and military officers are clad by him in dresses similar to his own in point of colour and form; but the materials are not equally rich"* (Marco Polo, 1296)[7]. Marco Polo goes on in further detail from there on the thread work and materials he saw within the nobles' clothing, which puts into perspective just how extravagant such textiles must have been. The luxury of fashion for nobility was an inspiration to surrounding nations and continues to be one in the modern day, even to a negative extent. Mongolian styles and influences can be seen throughout a variety of creative narratives, and most particularly infamous being the Star Wars Franchise. For anyone who has witnessed the character Padme Amadalla, and had any exposure to Mongolian royal regalia,

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[5] Cartwright, Mark. "Clothing in the Mongol Empire." World History Encyclopedia, 2 Apr. 2022, The Imperial Court

[6] Watt, James C.Y., The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353. First Edition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002, p. 65

[7] Polo, Marco. The Travels. Translated by Ronald Latham. London: Penguin Books, 1958, Chapter XI.

the appropriative nature of her design in Star Wars' sci-fi environment is clear and unfortunately abundant. On a cultural level, this extravagance of noble wear did not hold quite as much importance proportionally to the quantity of it. With their nomadic origins, the Mongols understood the practicality of clothing over its performance. Therefore, outside of the noble courts, as long as you were dressed to work and provide for your tribe, nation, army etc. you would be dressed appropriately.

During the Mongol conquest, it was known that not many were spared if they did not submit willingly, exceptions to this included those who had claimed skills that were considered useful to the Mongols. Alongside textiles and the skill of weaving, the other foremost craft that was sought after by the Mongols was metal workers, including armourers and gold/silver smiths[8]. To hone the skills of these people was a means of growth for the Mongols and support to their people. Due to the nature of fine metalwork, these smiths were very mobile, allowing them to be stationed anywhere across Central Asia. This led to a great wealth of variety in styles, not only from native techniques but also a vast breadth of fusion styles. William of Rubruck had an audience with the great Khan Möngke and gave us detailed accounts of his court at Khara Khorum. In particular, he noted an elaborate silver wine fountain built by a Parisian goldsmith, that sported the iconic European depiction of an angel blowing a trumpet[9]. The reach of the Mongol empire allowed for this type of cultural mixing where the Khan himself could appreciate European decoration in his own home. As aforementioned in regards to clothing motifs, Chinese and Iranian iconography were widespread throughout Mongolian metal work as well, found upon

[8] Watt, James C.Y., The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353. First Edition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002. p. 63
[9] Watt, James C.Y., The Legacy of Genghis Khan, p. 67

belt fitting and plaques, piazza (passport), decorative items such as bowls, boxes, mirror stands, and especially ornate jewellery[10].

Historically, during the purely nomadic times of the Mongols, the most typical example of visual arts came in the format of cave drawings and stone sculptures; a visual preference that continued onwards during the rise of the empire. Architecturally, when they established their numerous stationary encampments and courts, they had to abandon the roots of their yurts. As described by Marco Polo *"The walls of the halls and chambers are all covered with gold and silver and decorated with pictures of dragons and birds and horsemen and various breeds of beasts and scenes of battle. The ceiling is similarly adorned so that there is nothing to be seen anywhere but gold and pictures."*[11] This expanse of imagery had commonality with Buddhist cave and temple art, which held its origins in classical Hindu and Greek visual cultures. Under Chinggis Khan's rule, there were few native Mongolian artisans to call upon, so foreigners of the lands they conquered and those they neighboured were who they relied on to build these permanent structures they were unused to. The Khan enlisted the skills of Chinese and Muslim architects to create multiple buildings and even Mongol capitals, including those at Khara Khorum and Ta-tu (Peking)[12].

Before the 1260s in central Mongolia, the nation had a serious lack of local craftsmen for both the mundane use of the common people and the extravagant personal use of the emperor. With different ministries of regulation in place, they put in larger-scale efforts towards workshopping the unemployed and others who were able to increase the production of textiles and all forms of metalworking[13]. With the

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[10] Watt, James C.Y., The Legacy of Genghis Khan, p. 70
[11] Polo, Marco. The Travels. Translated by Ronald Latham. London: Penguin Books, 1958, p. 125
[12] Rossabi, Morris. China Under Mongol Rule (Princeton Legacy Library, 340). 1st (scarce), Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 263
[13] Langlois Jr., John D. China Under Mongol Rule, p. 38-39

large-scale movement of craftsmen from far and wide- wherever they could reach them, there was a huge expansion of creative exchange and the population of these workers had stabilized by the early 1270's, with no shortage of variety, allowing for further workshops to be drawn for locally[14]. Because of the vastness of these workers' nationalities, and their abilities to move so freely, there is an absence of specific records and viable accounts for metal work of this time, even less so than textiles. Although the production details and cultural origins of such pieces are perhaps lost to time, there is no doubt that each one is rich with expertise from all of Central Asia[15].

Given the importance of textiles and weaving to the Mongols by the amount of dedication put forth to ensure the qualities of their fabrics, it is easy to see how that attention to detail would be mirrored within other mediums. Tiles, pottery, art of books, and the previously discussed metalwork are prime examples of such, that although with less surviving material, was still incredibly important in the lives of Mongols within the Empire. Within Mongolian architecture, there was never a lack of magnificence for courts and pavilions, where individually crafted and glazed tiles within an interlocking system would line the floors and walls. The iconography of fènghuáng (Chinese phoenixes) and dragons that were found amongst these tiles in the Mongolian palace, Takht-i Sulaiman, in Iran, hold incredible similarity to the fabrics that travelled throughout Central Asia from Northern China. Textiles within the trade of the empire often had an interlocking or dense array of isolated patterns that were empirically related in design. Similar comparisons have been found within bowls, plates, trays and other such wares, among many ceramic creations of their time. Saying this, it is important to acknowledge that a vast majority of these wares

[14] Watt, James C.Y., The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353. First Edition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002, p. 70-71
[15] Watt, James C.Y.,The Legacy of Genghis Khan, p. 67

were not *Mongolian* in creation, rather their creation can be attributed to the exchange supported by the empire. Because of the intensive amount of cultural mixing throughout this time, inspirations and genuine native creations have gotten mixed up and are thoroughly debated by archeological groups[16]. Despite the unknown true origins of many of these items, it was undoubted that they were traded and purchased with appreciation by the Mongols and their nobles, as it was them that provided the avenue for the exchange to begin with.

Furthermore, in the extent of visual arts, illustrated books, alongside architecture, were a principal achievement during the Ilkhanate time. Because of the use and hire of Muslim craftsmen to support the Mongolian's expanding needs, the populations of Islamic peoples grew and so did their voices. Within its swift rise in popularity, conversion to Islam swept through Mongol nations and left a deep impact on the arts during the 1280s and beyond into the 1330s[17]. Persian book and scroll paintings became a melting pot of Iranian influences, Chinese inspiration and Mongolian consumers, both of which continued with textile trends and iconography. Many of the newer procured art of the time took on artistic values from Song Dynasty silk tapestries with composition and use of colour[18], once again solidifying textiles as a crucial factor in the transmission of artistic aesthetics of the time. Albums of illustrations that survived archaeological investigation have been found to not be composed of autonomous works, but rather sketches and drafts that artisans would use in the planning stages of their other craft to be produced and traded. Often these albums would be used by craftsmen to copy down foreign designs so that they may

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[16] Komaroff, Linda. The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353. First Edition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002, p. 175-178
[17] Hillenbrand, Robert. The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353. First Edition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002, p. 135
[18] Komaroff, Linda. The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353. First Edition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002, p. 183

replicate them in their own designs or even as a form of plagiary for the less fortunate buyers. Many of these books seemed to have travelled the world as their collections had grown as bound artwork with relevance to the Ilkhanate era have been found throughout Persia, Istanbul and even Berlin[19].

The Yuan dynasty of China saw all varieties of the arts thrive, none more so than their textile designs, but a close competitor may have been Chinese porcelain and ceramics. During the Yuan period in China (1271-1368) Chinese painting and calligraphy flourished and within the upheaval of new and abundant arts, Chinese potters began evolving their Song Dynasty traditions and innovating all kinds of motifs and porcelains[20]. The Chinese were renowned for their blue and white designs that spread throughout the country like wildfire. Although this design was quite popular, the Iranian ceramists did not try to replicate it until much later (in the 15th and 16th centuries). The appeal to this aesthetic may not have impacted the depths of Persia right away, but it was nonetheless a fan favourite among the Mongols and Eastern Asia. On the other side of Mongolia, Iran was working on improving and experimenting with colourful over and under-glaze techniques within their pottery. They took the skills they knew from their tile and mosaic work and put them forth into ideas incorporating Chinese origins, successfully replicating many designs and ultimately using them to support their own styles further. With continuity to themes previously mentioned, Iranian ceramics were dateable from before and after the Mongol invasion with the decorative details seen in Chinese works. Just like in textiles, they were exposed to a mass of motifs including dragons, phoenixes, lions, lotuses and peonies, which marked a notable difference from the Mongolian inhabitants of Persia. Such motifs were visible all throughout the fourteenth century

[19] Komaroff, Linda. The Legacy of Genghis Khan, p. 187
[20] Rossabi, Morris. Eurasian Influences on Yuan China. 1st ed., Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2013, p. x

with significant imperial connotations to the great Khan. Over time, after the fall of the empire, such iconography would hold only aesthetic value[21].

Of all the arts the Mongols admired and partook in, performative expression was one that they cultivated themselves within their nomadic roots. Dancing was very important to the Mongols and the traditions they upheld before expansion. Traditional dance was, and is, performed in many ways, and the music it is choreographed to is crucial. Musical variations include bi-stringed instruments, drums, and some that are exclusively presented with human voice accompaniment. The Mongol Biyelgee is a unique folk dance performed by almost all regions of Mongolia, especially in western provinces, varying from tribe to tribe. Biyelgee embraces the environments in which the nomads travelled by implementing movements that were appropriate inside or outside of their dwellings, often limited in space which led to little to no use of the dancers' feet throughout. Historically these dances would be taught to children by their communities and passed along like any other aspect of their lives. Now, however, the main teachers of Biyelgee are the elderly, with diminishing numbers. Despite the era, dance, music, and performance have always been a significant aspect of Mongolian livelihood. Feasts, weddings and other community celebrations wouldn’t be the same without them[22].

The Mongols had a fairly small repertoire of instruments native to the Steppe, utilizing strung/bowed instruments, drums, sometimes flutes, and the human voice through a form of throat singing called khoomi, among others. Khoomi could be performed a cappella or with accompaniment and, like most native vocal techniques,

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[21] Carboni, Stefano. The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256–1353. First Edition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002, p. 192-202

[22] “UNESCO - Mongol Biyelgee, Mongolian Traditional Folk Dance.” Unesco, 2009, *See Cited works for URL

was the musical tool used most frequently. The complexity of throat singing comes from the singer's ability to produce two tones at once; one through the throat and the other with the voice that allows the artist to harmonize with themself. Khoomi was generally reserved for men, but in modern times has opened up to include women and others into the practice as well[23]. Practising music was a part of livelihood the Mongols could not ignore, even within the realms of their captured nations. Under the rule of Khubilai Khan, Arabic, Persian and Chinese peoples were restricted heavily by regulations under Mongolian law. Law that usually upheld a status quo in predominantly a social nature, as the Khan did not care for others' religious practise if it did not affect his own people. Seemingly despite this attention towards social practices, inhabitants of the empire were allowed to perform songs in their own languages and even hold orchestral performances of their native style[24]. Their freedoms with music were so liberal that Muslum and Chinese artisans openly shared songs, instruments, language and poetry within Mongolian courtly borders with no fear of restriction[25].

Performative arts are especially important to the cultivation of a growing nation next to its visual counterparts. Although music and celebration were shared amongst citizens, one form that grew to be unique within the time of the empire was theatre. The rise in dramatic performance was mostly led by the Chinese as a form of retaliation to the Mongols' culturally insensitive regulations and restrictions on political literacy[26]. The Mongols tolerated and accommodated the general Chinese ways of life as it was more profitable to coexist than to live in dangerous turmoil. So,

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[23] "Mongols: Clothes for a Rough, Active Life in the Cold." History on the Net, 11 May 2017, www.historyonthenet.com/mongols-clothes-for-a-rough-active-life-in-the-cold.
[24] Langlois Jr., John D. China Under Mongol Rule (Princeton Legacy Library, 340). 1st (scarce), Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 276
[25] Langlois Jr., John D. China Under Mongol Rule, p. 285
[26] Langlois Jr., John D. China Under Mongol Rule (Princeton Legacy Library, 340). 1st (scarce), Princeton University Press, 1981, p. 437

given the freedom to pursue forms of expression under their rule, the Chinese emerged with a genre of drama called tsa-chu[27]. It seemed that during this period under Khubilai, drama and music were promoted due to them serving the Mongol's interests based on the cardinal vices of "wine, sex, pleasure, and music."[28] It must be stated that although Mongol emperors supported and maybe even encouraged theatre, Chinese dramatists and ambitious literi were solely responsible for its production and in turn performance, therefore cannot be attributed to Mongol influence[29].

From this investigation of arts and culture, it is evident that the Mongolian world was an incredible mixture of nations that expedited cultural exchange and the continental evolution of visual arts. It was an empire rich with culture; a majority of it learned rather than spread, owing to the influences of the surrounding countries they conquered. Of their own design, Mongol clothing, music and dance are what have stuck with them, having survived through the empire and remained consistent throughout thousands of years of change. They were the deepest facets of the nomadic lifestyle that had the strength to remain true to the Mongols throughout. For the artistry that was consumed through the captured nations, Iran and China felt the most resounding impact of cultural exchange, of which artistic trends and advancements developed amazingly in each country. Societies under Mongolian empirical rule were allowed many liberties for independence which permitted them space to cultivate vast outlets of expression. Trade through Mongolia allowed for a swift passage of exchange between Persia and Eastern Asia in all things regarding

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[27] Langlois Jr., John D. China Under Mongol Rule, p. 12
[28] Langlois Jr., John D. China Under Mongol Rule, p. 443
[29] Rossabi, Morris. Eurasian Influences on Yuan China. 1st ed., Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 2013, p. 208

art and culture. By virtue of its achievements, Mongolia’s unique and diverse roots have stood the test of time, through the rise and fall of an empire, making its mark in history.

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