

Zaya: A Contemporary Mongolian Painter, Melding Music From East and West

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Abstract

This essay discusses the paintings of Zayasaikhan Sambuu, the Mongolian contemporary artist who is known as Zaya. The focus is on the theme of music, which is the most notable motif that often recurs and conveys this artist's fundamental concerns. From his youth to the present, often with images that evoke music, Zaya has explored and expressed both Mongolian identity and cultural hybridity through his paintings. His taste in music appears to have guided and affected his development in visual art. Like most his compatriots, Zaya especially enjoys vocal music.

Music's importance for Zaya, has its roots in Mongolian culture, where it has long been an integral part of that culture's development. Mongolian music's unique contributions include long songs that feature extended syllables; throat singing, also called overtone singing; and *morin khuur*, the two-stringed horse-headed fiddle.

Contemporary Mongolian songwriters often pay homage to archetypes from Mongolian folk song and performance styles in their compositions, just as Zaya alludes to Mongolian visual archetypes in some of his paintings. Although not much recognized outside of Mongolia, a popular music scene thrives in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. Contemporary pop musicians often include traditional Mongolian melodies, instruments, and singing traditions in their music. Zaya says that he enjoys listening to both traditional Mongolian and Western musicians and their instruments appear in many his paintings.

At the same time, like many of his compatriots, Zaya knows and enjoys a world-wide music scene. His enthusiastic enjoyment of foreign pop music is not unusual in Mongolia, especially since the contemporary popular music scene uses English and sometimes other languages for its lyrics. But Zaya appropriates from the West not only musical culture, but also visual culture. A close look at his development as a visual artist reveals how he borrowed from the West and shaped his own synthesis in order to transform local culture and create his own version of contemporary Mongolian painting.

Keywords: Zayasaikhan Sambuu, Zaya, Mongolian contemporary art, Western and Mongolian music

In the paintings of Zayasaikhan Sambuu, the Mongolian contemporary artist who is known as Zaya, music is the most notable motif that regularly recurs and conveys a fundamental concern. From his youth to the present, often with images that evoke music, Zaya has explored and expressed both Mongolian identity and cultural hybridity through his paintings. His taste in music compliments and guides his development in visual art.¹ Like most his compatriots, Zaya especially enjoys vocal music.

Music's importance for Zaya, has its roots in Mongolian culture, where "Just about any gathering, party, celebration, or national holiday includes singing—and lots of it. In the cities, most contemporary Mongolian songs fall into broad style categories such as pop, rock, or hip-hop music" (Whitener, 2017, p. 16). Music has long been an integral part of Mongolian culture. Its unique contributions include long songs that feature extended syllables; throat singing, also called overtone singing; and *morin khuur*, the two-stringed horse-headed fiddle.

Contemporary Mongolian songwriters often pay homage to archetypes from Mongolian folk song and performance styles in their compositions, just as Zaya alludes to Mongolian visual archetypes in some of his paintings. Although not much recognized outside of Mongolia, a popular music scene thrives in the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. Contemporary pop

musicians often include traditional Mongolian melodies, instruments, and singing traditions in their music (Whitener, 2017, p. 16). Traditional "Mongolian" music including folk singers from places like Tuva in southern Siberia and "Khalimag, Mongolia" as well as from Inner Mongolia, have won Zaya's attention.² He says that he enjoys listening to both traditional Mongolian and Western musicians and their instruments appear in many his paintings.

At the same time, like many of his compatriots, he knows and enjoys a world-wide music scene. His enthusiastic enjoyment of foreign pop music is not unusual in Mongolia, especially since the contemporary popular music scene uses English and sometimes other languages for its lyrics (Dovchin, 2016).³ But Zaya would appropriate from the West not only musical culture, but also visual culture. A close look at his development as a visual artist reveals how he borrowed from the West and shaped his own synthesis in order to transform local culture and create his own version of contemporary Mongolian painting.

From Zaya's birth in 1975, in Baatsagaam, a small town near Mongolia's southern border, some 625 km (about 388 miles) from Ulaanbaatar, his life followed an unusual trajectory.⁴ He recalls Baatsagaam as "a remote *sum* [district], a small village of about hundred families, with no museums, no art school, no electricity and

¹ This study is the result of a Fulbright Grant that took me to Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia, in the summer of 2019, where I visited Zaya's studio. I interviewed him in Mongolia and again on his visit to New York City in February 2020. Quotations from Zaya are from those interviews. This article develops further my earlier study of his work published as Levin, G. (2020). *The art of Zaya, Zayasauigan Sambuu, Mongolia, lost and found*. Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia: Zanabazar Fine Arts Museum & the National Gallery of Mongolia. For introducing me to Zaya and for her invaluable assistance I wish to thank my former student, Dulamjav Amarsaikhan. I also wish to acknowledge the help of Myagmartseren Purev.

² Tuva (then called Tannu Uriankhai) had been part of Mongolia since 1759, which in turn was a part of the territory of the Chinese Qing dynasty. As the Qing dynasty fell in 1911, revolutions in Mongolia were also occurring, leading to the independence of both Mongolia and the Tuvan Uryankhay Republic. By "Khalimag, Mongolia," Zaya referred to another Mongol subgroup in Russia and Kyrgyzstan. They form a majority in the Republic of Kalmykia located on the western shore of the Caspian Sea.

³ Based on the contemporary sociolinguistic theories of "linguascape" and "translocal English," this study investigates how and why young Mongolian musicians employ English within their musical practices.

⁴ The population of Baatsagaam, Mongolia in 2006 is listed as 3,568.

no access to information, almost like an aboriginal village.” It was about as isolated from the international art world as any place could be. His father, however, was a high school teacher who, having studied in Ulaanbaatar, was fluent in Russian and taught both art and Mongolian history. Thus, Zaya learned from his father about modern art, especially Impressionism, Cubism, Picasso, Dadaism, and Surrealism.

Like Picasso, who also had a father who taught art, Zaya developed his visual skills at a young age. Zaya was still in his early teens, however, when his father protested that the pictures his son was painting were much too dark and depressing. Motivated to please his father, the adolescent painted a picture of the *White Tara*, the female Bodhisattva of compassionate activity, the supreme mother and collective manifestation of the enlightened activity of all the Buddhas. He wanted to satisfy his father by presenting him with an image of the deity who is believed to counteract illness and thereby to help assure a long life. He depicted the *Tara* playing a stringed musical instrument.⁵

By age 14, Zaya was making copies of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist art painted on cotton or silk known as *thangkas*. These usually depicted a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala—a geometric figure representing the universe in Buddhist symbolism. The message often is the exhortation to be mindful of death and to recognize the transient nature of life. “I was copying a lot of *thangkas*, but did not understand the meaning behind them,” says Zaya.

Through the eyes of a teenager these Buddhist deities seemed weird, with their many eyes, heads, hands, and items and tools that were distant from our everyday lives. I was eager to learn

about the meaning of these things that seemed so mysterious to me. There was no way for me to learn these on my own. (Interview with Zaya in February 2020)

Some of the motifs that attracted Zaya in *thangka* paintings were fire with exaggerated flames, linear decorative patterns in landscapes, as well as ordinary cultural vignettes. Chagrined that he did not even know the meaning of Buddhist gods, Zaya longed to become a monk, which was a forbidden pursuit from 1924–1990, when Mongolia’s Communist regime outlawed all Buddhist practices (Jadamba & Schittich, 2010; Morris, 2010). Zaya experienced growing up as a teenager in the 1980s, when, he recalls, “The Communist regime repressed any means of artistic expression that did not serve as a tool of authoritarian propaganda.”

Such strict constraints provoked a reaction. Government repression appears to have motivated Zaya to paint forbidden Buddhist imagery and to respond to political events, especially the pro-democracy demonstrations that led up to July 1990, when he was just fifteen. Only then Mongolia held its first democratic election, which led to the end of Communism there and a radical change in government.

Just before this momentous change, Zaya read a popular historical novel published in 1989 by the Mongolian author, Sengiin Erdene, who told the story of Zanabazar, the 17th century sculptor, who is regarded as preeminent among the Buddhist countries of Asia and considered the greatest sculptor of Mongolia. Öndör Gegeen *Zanabazar* (born Eshidorji) was the 16th Jebtsundamba Khutuktu and the first Bogd Gegeen or supreme spiritual authority of the Gelugpa (Yellow Hat) lineage

⁵ Unfortunately, this image disappeared around the time his father died.

of Tibetan Buddhism in Outer Mongolia (Bareja-Starzyńska, 2009-2010; Wallace, 2015). Zanabazar could trace his lineage back to Genghis Khan, founder of the Mongol empire.

Zanabazar became the role model for Zaya, giving him an ideal goal on which to pin his own hopes and dreams. He began to imagine becoming a monk, a painter monk. He recalls that he also had the book, *Mongol Zurag*, by Nyam-Osorin Tsultem, published in Russian, English, and French: “From there I copied *thangka* paintings as well as lots of details. I liked the wrathful deities the most.” Mongolian *zurag* is a style of painting developed in the early 20th century, which is characterized by the representation of secular, nationalist themes painted in a manner adopted from traditional mineral painting on cotton like a Tibetan or Mongolian Buddhist *thangka* (Figure 1).⁶

Towards the end of the Communist period, Zaya, one of the brightest schoolchildren, was selected to go to a summer camp in the neighboring Erdenetsogt *sum*, located in Övörkhangai (Kharkhorin *sum*) province, about 200 km (124 miles) away. There three small temples and the external wall with the stupas had survived the Communists’ 1939 order to destroy the monastery and slaughter the monks.⁷ By 1944, Stalin pressured the Mongolian Communist leader, Choibalsan, to maintain this and a monastery in Ulaanbaatar to deceive international visitors into believing that Communism allowed religious freedom. By 1947, the monastery in Erdenetsogt had become a museum. Only after the fall of Communism in 1990 did the monastery of Erdene Zuu return to being a place of worship.

“I knew that in Erdenetsogt *sum* one temple still remained from the time of religious purges,” Zaya explains.



Figure 1. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, Copied *thangka* painting, Collection of Zayasaikhan Sambuu, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.

Religious temples were not as heavily persecuted at the time, and I heard that a few monks still carried out religious practices. I told my parents I was going to the camp, but on my way to camp I jumped out of the car as it passed through the Erdenetsogt *sum*. I asked people for the local monk, which led me to find an eighty-year-old monk named Ulzii, who was the last survivor in his monastery after the Soviet purge. He was surprised when I asked him to be my teacher. (Interview with Zaya in February 2020)

The old monk accepted and established a teacher-student relationship with Zaya, who preferred studying and chanting with him over going to summer camp with his friends.

⁶ The style of Mongol Zurag was developed much earlier during the Il Khaganat (13th century), but the term Mongol Zurag began as a formal term in the 20th century, when the style found a modern expression as Mongol Zurag.

⁷ For the story of one monk who escaped to Inner Mongolia in China, see Haslund-Christensen (1996) and Jerryson (2007, p. 90).

“He taught me basic Tibetan reading. I still remember some of it,” Zaya recalls.

When the kids were returning from camp, I waited for the car to pass on the way home and got in. At first my parents were shocked to hear my truth. But deep down my father was glad to hear about my wishes to become a monk. (Interview with Zaya in February 2020)

Although Zaya’s parents were initially stunned when they discovered his deceit, upon reflection, they believed that their son’s bold initiative revealed his destiny. They not only allowed him to return to continue his study of Buddhist culture later that same summer, but also allowed him to go again the following summer. “Soon I started going back to the monk’s and spent that whole summer learning more Tibetan and Buddhist texts,” Zaya explained. “I received my robes and became a monk.” “Buddhism played a major role in how I discovered my passion for art,” Zaya asserts. Thus, he spent two years, from the age of fourteen until he was sixteen, going to high school during the winter and studying to become a monk during the summer.

Zaya practiced Buddhist chants, a form of musical verse or incantation believed to prepare the mind for meditation. While learning Buddhist chants, Zaya also began to appreciate popular Western music genres such as Heavy Metal. He appears to have chosen music that offered metaphoric layers of meaning, though he was not entirely conscious in his choices. But like much of humanity, he responds to music in a very deep way. Lyrics, tone, and tempo suggest a range of emotional resonance.

Zaya’s appetite for contemporary music links to the burgeoning spirituality of his teen-age years. Heavy metal’s intensity—its

loud distorted guitars, emphatic rhythms, dense bass-and-drum sound, and vigorous vocals appealed to his need for the spiritual. Music can transcend any particular faith or set of aesthetic values. For Zaya, however, he was already fascinated with death and was focused on Buddhist paintings of spirits and skeletons. Thus, it is not surprising that he found especially appealing the aggressive lyrics of Heavy Metal rock music.

Heavy Metal began in the United States and Britain during the late 1960s. It featured groups like Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple, and Black Sabbath (Pearlin, 2014). Zaya also liked to listen to music by the British groups Pink Floyd and Queen; AC/DC, a rock band from Sydney, Australia; and the Soviet heavy metal band, Kino, co-founded by a singer and songwriter called Viktor Tsoi (1962–1990).

At this time, in his teens, Zaya, would have listened to music on a boombox, a powerful portable sound system, capable of emitting high volume. He played cassette recordings that his older brother had obtained from the Soviet Union, where he traveled to sell animal skins. We can think of Mongolia at this moment as squeezed between the Soviet Union and China, two much larger and more powerful nations with immense cultural influence, both then discouraging religious practice.

During this era, listening to recorded music was precious, since Zaya’s family had electricity only about two days a week from six to nine at night and batteries were very expensive. He could play music only to the extent that his batteries lasted to power his boombox. “I listened to these various musical influences and for a period there got into really dark ideas about death, skulls, deeply philosophical and religious songs with lyrics like ‘. . . if God calls you, young or old, it does not matter,’” recalls Zaya.

A few years later, when he was just 16 years old, he painted *Stairway to Heaven* (1991),

inspired by a Led Zeppelin song (composed by guitarist Jimmy Page and vocalist Robert Plant) for the band's fourth studio album, *Led Zeppelin IV*. Zaya depicted a woman's body under a shroud, with just her feet and long hair sticking out. Also visible are footprints making their way to heaven on a bolt of divine light (Figure 2), his imaginative reference to the lyrics of this 1971 song, "Stairway to Heaven." The lyrics include,

The piper's calling you to join him;
Dear lady, can you hear the wind blow;
And did you know; Your stairway lies
on the whispering wind. . . . There
walks a lady we all know, yeah; Who
shines white light and wants to show;
How everything still turns to gold
And she's buying a stairway to Heaven.
(Page & Plant, 1971)



Figure 2. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Stairway to heaven*, 1991, Watercolor on paper, 18 × 18 cm, Collection of Zayasaikhan Sambuu, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.

What has been said in general, applies to Zaya in particular: that this very popular "song resonated with young listeners, opening up a door to a different realm of spirituality and transporting them into a more mystical view of life" (Zeppelin, 1971).

That same year, when Freddie Mercury (1946–1991), the song writer and lead singer of the musical group Queen, died from complications of AIDS, Zaya painted a tribute to the rock star. He recalls:

I used to listen to Queen as a child and when Freddie Mercury passed away I did a painting called *Miss HIV*, but back then I did not have the chance to listen to all of the band's songs and as a university student I got hold of all of their music. (Interview with Zaya in February 2020)

When Zaya painted his art school graduation picture in 1997, *Sound of the Steppe*, he signaled his ongoing concern with music and its component, sound.⁸ By 1995, he had copied line drawings from traditional Mongolian *zurag* showing people dancing to music. Zaya got to hear a lot more American music when, upon graduation in 2002, he made his first trip ever out of Mongolia, traveling as a tourist to the United States.

In his paintings, Zaya continued to make ongoing references to music performance. In *Hunters* (Figure 3) of 2004, painted in watercolor on cotton, Zaya included traditional stringed musical instruments (lutes) played by two men on horseback that suggest his later paintings of musicians. Returning to Mongolia after another trip to the United States in 2005, he made a stop-over to see South Korea. While visiting a Mongolian friend who lived in Seoul,

⁸ This painting is now lost.



Figure 3. Zayasai Khan Sambuu, *Hunters*, 2004, Water color on silk, 60 × 100 cm, Collection of Zayasai Khan Sambuu, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasai Khan Sambuu.

he met a Japanese woman, working in Korea, who piqued his interest. The attraction was mutual, for later that year, Zaya and Chie Ito married. When their first child was on the way in 2007, they moved to Japan to await the birth of their son. Before returning to Mongolia, they stayed for the births of three more children, another son and then two daughters.

As Zaya continued to paint and began to show his work in Japan, he kept to his exploration of Mongolian subjects. Before Zaya had arrived in Japan, his style, as seen in his 2006 painting, *Ancient Melody* (Figure 4), remained very flat. He featured five female musicians painted in gouache and watercolor on silk or cotton—still very much like the forms in Buddhist *thangkas*. These women are shown playing traditional Mongolian musical instruments including wooden flutes and the *morin Khuur*, a horsehead fiddle, which is considered a symbol of the Mongolian nation. It has been said that “no traditional Mongolian festival, celebration, wedding, or special event would be complete without its appearance” (Whitener,



Figure 4. Zayasai Khan Sambuu, *Ancient melody*, 2006, Gouache on fabric, Private collection, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. From: Zayasai Khan Sambuu.

2017, p. 21). As researchers have noticed, the instrument “manifests extensively in contemporary Mongolia, and it has become, along with Genghis Khan, a symbol of the nation” (Whitener, 2017, p. 21). Some legends recount that this Mongolian fiddle was first made by a grieving shepherd (March, 2004).

By the time he painted *Golden Palace* (Figure 5) from 2008, Zaya was painting in acrylic on canvas. Despite his change of media, music, both performing and listening to it, remains the central theme. He depicted courtiers around the ruler, but the space was organized with those most distant from the foreground represented higher up on the imaginary picture plane (the window framing this composition). This vertical perspective also contrasts dramatically with the mathematical or linear perspective in use in Western European art since the Renaissance. It could be misread as if one of the figures in the center is holding



Figure 5. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Golden palace*, 2008, Mix media canvas, 62 × 50 cm, Private collection, London, UK. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.

up the top rectangular carpet with a hat. Still, analyzing the middle ground in the center, we see a musician playing a harp. Others feed a peacock or enjoy tea, but a stringed instrument rests in the lower left corner of the composition.

By 2010, just two years later, Zaya can be seen experimenting with mathematical perspective. In *Musicians* (Figure 6), he depicted four female performers: one playing a flute, two on violins, and another playing a cello. But the setting is now against a floor that looks like checkerboard and allows for measured diagonal lines of recession (converging at an imaginary vanishing point) to indicate the illusion of deep space. Such patterned floors regularly occur in Western European painting from the Renaissance through seventeenth-century Dutch Baroque artists like Pieter de Hooch or Jan Steen. Dutch art and design



Figure 6. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Musicians*, 2010, Medium canvas, 58 × 89 cm, Private collection, San Francisco, CA. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.

did become known in Edo Japan because of the exclusivity given to Dutch traders at Nagasaki from 1641 to 1854. Thus, it is not surprising that it was in Japan that Zaya experimented with space in his painting, *Musicians*, which can be compared to a Renaissance panel painting (an altarpiece fragment) in the Philadelphia Museum of Art by Josse Lieferinxe, depicting *St. Sebastian Destroying the Idols* (ca. 1497) (Figure 7). Zaya, similar to this Renaissance panel, creates spatial depth for his figures through lines of recession mapped out by a checkboard floor.

In *Melody* (Figure 8) of 2012, Zaya features a close-up of a woman soloist, playing on a stringed instrument. In *Voodoo People* of 2012, a small male child holds a keyboard, while the adults who look on wear Communists medals.



Figure 7. Josse Lieferinxe, *St. Sebastian destroying the idols*, ca. 1497, Oil on panel, 81.6 × 54.6 cm, Collection of John G. Johnson, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. From : Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Forgotten Melody (Figure 9) of 2013 shows five women musicians, a string trio, a horn player, and an accordionist. *Elegant Memories* of 2014 depicts a female soloist playing a horn. *Sax Sisters* (Figure 10) of 2014 presents a trio of women, dressed in traditional Mongolian costumes, playing saxophones, which could represent a variety of musical genres from classical to jazz to contemporary rock and roll, as well as other popular music.

The featured woman in *Untold Story* of 2014 holds a stringed instrument. That same year, Zaya painted *Entering Nirvana* (Figure 11),



Figure 8. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Melody*, 2012, Oil canvas, 90 × 73 cm, Private collection, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.



Figure 9. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Forgotten melody*, 2013, Oil canvas, 90 × 117 cm, Private collection, Tokyo, Japan. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.



Figure 10. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Sax sisters*, 2014, Oil canvas, 80 × 130 cm, Collection of Enkhbayar Jadamba, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.



Figure 11. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Entering Nirvana*, 2014, Oil canvas, 97 × 163 cm, Private collection, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.

showing four female horn players and one ringing a bell in the transcendent state for Buddhists in which there is no suffering, desire, nor sense of self. One of the women plays an *ikh büree* or the traditional Mongolian longhorn trumpet, which is made of copper with a length of two to five meters and generates a bass tone.

In 2015, Zaya painted three canvases of female soloists playing the saxophone (*Saxophone Player #1*, *#2*, and *#3*) as well as a solo sax player in *Urban Dreams*. That same year, he painted a female soloist playing a French horn, which he called *The World's End*.⁹ There is also a trio of female musicians on the left side of Zaya's 2017 painting, *The Time Machine*. They play a violin, a horn, and a keyboard. *House of*

Melody of 2017 shows all members of a family of women and children, except for the three youngest, coming together to make music. Only one child holds the traditional stringed instrument before the yurts in *Daddy's Deel* of 2017. In the *Goolingoo Story* (Figure 12) of 2017, a Mongolian woman in traditional costume sits beside a Victrola, invented in 1906 in the United States to play recorded sound, thus an ancestor of the modern boombox.

Eight female musicians, together with a lone child, play instruments in Zaya's painting, *Golden Melody* of 2018. That same year, he painted *Blues Sisters* (Figure 13), a sextet of women musicians with a single child. He says that he enjoys "Louisiana blues," the secular folk music created by African Americans in the early 20th century, originally in the Southern United States. By the 1960s, their simple but



Figure 12. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Goolingoo story*, 2017, Oil canvas, 92 × 66 cm, Private collection, Singapore. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.

⁹ The theme was perhaps prescient and seems quite apt during the current pandemic.



Figure 13. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Blues sisters*, 2018, Acrylic canvas, 102 × 194 cm, Private collection, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.

expressive forms became a major influence on the development of popular music throughout the United States. The influence of some blues performers such as B. B. King, Sam Myers, and Gary B. B. Coleman reached all the way to Zaya in Mongolia, becoming some of his favorites, even as he discovered and listens to the Twelve Bar Blues Band, also known as 12BBB, from the blues scene in the Netherlands.

Zaya's personal fondness for blues resonates, too, in the 1999 award-winning documentary film, *Genghis Blue*, although he reports that he has only seen a trailer for this film. Directed by Roko Belic, who also wrote the screenplay, this is the story of Paul Pena, a blind American blues singer who travels to Southern Siberia, near the Mongolian border, to learn Tuvan throat-singing, the ancient music tradition developed among the nomadic herdsman of Central Asia, who also populated what is now Mongolia. The American singer went on to participate with local musicians in a national singing contest.

Zaya's taste includes the music of James Brown (1933–2006), who continued blues and gospel-based forms and styles, but then extended his style to other rhythms that are known as “funk” music. Strains of the blues in the music of Nina Simone (1933–2003), a Black American singer, songwriter, and civil rights activist, also appeals to Zaya. Beyond blues, her music also spanned a broad range of styles

including classical, jazz, folk, rhythm and blues (R&B), gospel, and pop. Among Zaya's favorite music to listen to while painting is America's Southern singer-song writer, Johnny Cash (1932–2003), known for his rockabilly style in Memphis, Tennessee. Cash's themes of sorrow and redemption together with his rebelliousness created a distinctive sound of a bass-baritone voice and chugging guitar rhythms that one does not immediately associate with Mongolia.

Zaya likes the work of Amy Winehouse (1983–2011), the English singer and songwriter known for her deep, expressive voice and her eclectic mix of musical genres, including R&B, soul, and jazz. He also listens to contemporary music by the English singer and actor Hugh Laurie, the classic American soul singer Charles Bradley (1948–2017), and recent music by the Black Pumas (consisting of the singer and songwriter Eric Burton and the guitarist and producer Adrian Quesada).

Considering that Zaya consumes all of this music as recorded rather than live, it is not surprising that he has memorialized the machine that first delivered it to him. In *The Wind* of 2018, a woman on horseback holds a large boombox. In *Kiss Mark Warrior* (Figure 14) of 2019, a male equestrian figure carries a large purple boombox—the same kind of portable stereo system that Zaya had treasured as an adolescent. The boombox, which in its original design featured a cassette tape recorder and player as well as a radio, generally came with a carrying handle, making it convenient to transport, even for riders on horseback. By mid 1980s, a CD player was often included. Sound could be blared through an amplifier and two or more integrated loudspeakers. Though boomboxes might be plugged in, most were battery-operated, like Zaya's, making them heavy to carry.

The boombox figures again in Zaya's recent canvas called, *The Shape of Sound* (Figure 15), completed in early 2020. In it we see recorded



Figure 14. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Kiss mark warrior*, 2019, Acrylic canvas, Private collection, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.



Figure 15. Zayasaikhan Sambuu, *Shape of sound*, 2020, Acrylic canvas, 131 × 194 cm, Collection of Zayasaikhan Sambuu, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. From: Zayasaikhan Sambuu.

sound, represented as coming out of a boombox, which is held by one of four full-bodied female guardian figures, two of whom hold automatic rifles, and all of whom are rendered in a generalized monochrome blueish tint. These feisty local women are a variant on the typical male guardian figures that protect Buddhist temples all across Asia from malevolent spirits. Zaya's guardians remind us of the special status of women in the Mongol Empire. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, women were more

powerful than in many other Asian cultures (Cartwright, 2019). Some even reigned as regents between male rulers; others were shamans, practicing divination and healing.

Zaya has depicted the woman holding the boombox with only a single eye, defined by an actual medal from the communist era in Mongolia. This medal is attached to the painting; it is the kind of "glorious mother" medal that the government had awarded to Zaya's own mother.¹⁰ At the same time, the single eye recalls one-eyed giants from Greek mythology such as the cyclops, Polyphemus or, even more closely, the *Graeeae*, three witches or sisters that shared one eye and one tooth between them and who were often depicted as prophetic.

The figures that Zaya imagines seem to understand how music resonates within the human spirit, even in times when authoritarian governments attempt to control culture. He has represented sounds as abstract triangular shapes of color. The association of color and shape with sound goes back in aesthetic history and was featured in the work of European modernists like the Russian Wassily Kandinsky, who published in 1913 a book of poems in German that he called, *Klänge (Sounds)* (Kandinsky, 1913/2019).

Zaya, when asked what he was listening to when he painted *Shape of Sound*, responded with a long list featuring many of his favorite vocalists. At the head of his list is María Teresa Vera, (1895–1965) the Cuban singer, guitarist and composer, who was an outstanding example of the Cuban *trova* movement, a style of popular music that dates from the nineteenth century, when traveling musicians called *trovadores* roamed around Cuba and sang and played guitar to gain their livelihood. The poetic quality of this music continues to attract listeners.

¹⁰ Such ceremonies and awards still take place in Mongolia. See Office of the President, Khurelsukh Ukhnaa, President of Mongolia (2018).

Also on Zaya's extensive list of recorded music that he listened to while painting *The Shape of Sound* is the American jazz singer, Melody Gardot; the 2003 album *Lágrimas Negras*, a collaboration by Diego Ramón Jiménez Salazar (known as El Cigala, Castillan for "Langoustine"), a contemporary Romani Flamenco gypsy singer, with then 85-year-old Cuban pianist Bebo Valdés (1918–2013). Zaya recalled that he also listened to Omara Portuondo Peláez, a Cuban singer and dancer and founder of the popular vocal group Cuarteto d'Aida; Compay Segundo, a Cuban *trova* guitarist, singer and composer; and to Yasmin Levy, an Israeli singer-songwriter of Judeo-Spanish music.

Thus, listening to music, both Mongolian and foreign, while painting makes a deep connection for Zaya that inspires the many musical references in his pictures. "Yes I have always listened music," he asserts.

There is so much good music and without it, I'm too impatient to make paintings. I think that when you paint hours and hours a day and deal with some details and progress of your work, music actually helps you avoid feeling lonely. (Interview with Zaya in February 2020)

When I asked Zaya why his paintings so often feature musical instruments, he referred to someone who had once asked why he painted mostly women. He retorted, "Since I'm the man, I don't need another man in my life," which he admits he saw as a kind of a joke and then elaborated,

Perhaps I thought my girls need a spouse and it could be musical instru-

ments and music. Especially classical musical instruments appeal to me because they are the most exotic and they have good shapes and buttons and Interesting forms. Sometimes it feels like beautiful sculpture of [Michelangelo's] *David* or others. (Interview with Zaya in February 2020)

Perhaps Zaya also referred to the Hebrew bible, which tells of King David as a talented musician, who played the harp for King Saul to calm him from his bad moods (1 Samuel 16:23: "David took an harp, and played with his hand").

When Zaya observed that "Women and musical instruments make perfect harmony when they go together," he also echoed the sentiments of Picasso, who often linked the forms of stringed instruments and the shapes of feminine forms in the art of his Cubist period (see, for example, Miller, 1992). Recalling the early lessons in modern art that his father gave him, Zaya has not wanted to lose the flatness in his style, preferring its abstract quality. We see it in the *Shape of Sound*, though he is less interested today in an emphasis on line, seeing that as too close to illustration. His diverse education and varied life experience have led to a unique personal style, which synthesizes his background and taste for traditional Mongolian painting and music with international trends in contemporary visual art and music. Zaya's paintings are related to currents in visual art that range from appropriation to identity politics.¹¹

As Zaya says,

For me painting is like human life, they are inseparable. The kind of life

¹¹ Zaya's huge range of visual art references extends from Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* to *Two Fridas* by Frida Kahlo.

you lead; the same way your art grows. It is like a shadow. All art has its own values. The values are determined by the individual, the artist. I do not really like the work if I am not seeing the individual in the work. (Interview with Zaya in February 2020)

The international music he listens to travels easily. It helps to inspire Zaya on his journey to create a new and personal style of painting in Mongolia that links traditions of his ancestors with the latest invention in both painting and sounds beyond the border.

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