



TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN 1960S UZBEK PAINTING: THE CASE OF CHINGIZ AKHMAROV

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Abstract The 1960s, known as the “Thaw” period, marked a pivotal turning point in Uzbek painting, characterized by the relaxation of ideological constraints and a renewed quest for national identity. This article examines the dynamic interplay between tradition and innovation in the art of this era through the creative oeuvre of Chingiz Akhmarov, one of the leading figures in the formation of a modern national school of Uzbek painting. Drawing upon the aesthetics of classical Eastern miniature, architectural decoration, and folk art, Akhmarov developed a distinctive artistic language that synthesized the poetic expressiveness of traditional Uzbek and Islamic visual culture with elements of modernist experimentation. The study analyzes key works from his portraiture and historical series, including portraits of contemporaries and depictions of Alisher Navoi, demonstrating how the artist revived classical miniature traditions within monumental and easel formats while transcending the limitations of Socialist Realism. The article argues that Akhmarov’s work not only renewed the poetic language of painting but also affirmed the vitality of national cultural heritage in the face of ideological pressure, contributing significantly to the transformation of Uzbek visual art in the second half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Uzbek painting, 1960s Thaw, national identity, tradition and innovation, Chingiz Akhmarov, Socialist Realism, Eastern miniature, cultural heritage, national school of art, Soviet Central Asia

The study of tradition and innovation in painting constitutes one of the most significant directions in art history, gaining particular relevance during transitional periods such as the post-war era, the “Thaw,” and the gradual dissolution of rigid ideological control. The 1960s, defined as the period of the “Thaw,” marked a decisive turning point for Uzbek painting, closely associated with the relaxation of ideological pressure. The freedom that emerged from shifts in the political and cultural spheres intensified artists’ pursuit of national self-awareness in art. For painters seeking to express the uniqueness of their cultural heritage, the issue of national identity acquired growing urgency. Their



creative work was structured around the fundamental dialectic of tradition and novelty. The values born from the synthesis of complex worldviews manifested themselves in both the figurative and formal language of their paintings. It is therefore essential to emphasize that the aspiration of Uzbek artists in this period to harmonize tradition with innovation renewed the poetic language of art and made a substantial contribution to the formation of a distinct national school of painting.

A comparable process of turning toward ethnocultural heritage unfolded almost simultaneously across many Soviet republics. Scholarly attention to this phenomenon intensified from the late 1950s onward, with questions of national character and *narodnost* (folk sensibility) becoming central topics of academic discussion. In a series of critical articles published in periodicals from the late 1950s to the 1970s—texts in which E. Zinger was among the first to systematically examine Soviet visual arts—the emergence of national schools in painting was prominently addressed [5]. Zinger pioneered the study of interactions between national artistic schools from a philosophical-aesthetic perspective and offered a profound analysis of the role of traditions and cultural heritage.

L. Zhadova stressed that “in our time, the striving for high artistic quality and the search for vivid figurative-expressive and national forms serve as the driving force for deepening realism.” [4]. She highlighted that the work of U. Tansykbaev, N. Karakhan, N. Kashina, A. Abdullaev, R. Akhmedov, V. Zhmakin, T. Oganegov, M. Saidov, V. Zelikov, and N. Kuzibaev, despite all complexities and difficulties, developed precisely along this central trajectory.

V. Lakovskaya, in her assessment of the period’s painting, particularly noted the heightened attention to national culture: “In the 1960s, easel painting in Uzbekistan experienced a new stage of development following the 1920s–1930s. The growth and deepening of interest in national culture, history, the distinctive nature and way of life of the people, and national psychology enabled the clear revelation of both universal human and national features in art.” [7].

In Uzbek painting, this period can be characterized as one of continuous exploration and discovery centered on the problems of national distinctiveness. The artworks of artists who engaged with the concept of ethnocultural heritage were stylistically diverse. The quest for identity resulted from a series of internal and external socio-historical shifts occurring within the development of society.

The actualization of national distinctiveness in painting can be examined through the work of Ch. Akhmarov, R. Akhmedov, and R. Choriev. These artists drew upon various layers of



national heritage, developing methods and dynamics that remain exemplary today. For instance, Chingiz Akhmarov relied on the aesthetics of Eastern architectural decoration and miniature painting. R. Akhmedov employed the color palette of folk art, while R. Choriev sought to convey immediate cultural distinctiveness through a synthesis of decorativeness and national poetics. A historical foundation for such stylistic diversity existed in the approaches these artists took toward solving the problem of national identity. In the early twentieth century, artists such as A. Nikolaev, O. Tatevosyan, A. Volkov, N. Kashina, N. Karakhan, and U. Tansykbayev had already developed stylistic explorations connected with the people's cultural heritage; these approaches retained their relevance in the 1960s. These masters advanced the renewal of painting's language by individually and plastically interpreting the artistic traditions and philosophy of the East, turning to elements of miniature painting and decorative-applied art.

In his explorations of national distinctiveness, Chingiz Akhmarov continued the path established by Usto Mumin, combining principles of classical poetry, the expressiveness of miniature painting, and realism within an Eastern aesthetic framework. The artist's work is characterized by monumentality and breadth of thematic scope, alongside laconicism and maximal generalization of form. Rhythmically arranged and generalized compositional motifs, the elegant interplay of colors, chromatic harmony of details, and the relationship between image and space transformed into a distinctive iconography in his paintings. Akhmarov dedicated his art not to truth in the narrow sense, but to the grand idea of Beauty preserved in the cultural memory of the Uzbek people—the heirs of the spiritual values of Islamic civilization. Naturally, this approach did not align with the dominant doctrine of Socialist Realism.[3]

Nevertheless, through his creative output, Ch. Akhmarov demonstrated that the idea of preserving and developing national culture proved more viable than the ideological criteria of Soviet art, which were often perceived as externally imposed. Although in the late 1950s and 1960s he was fully occupied with large-scale monumental commissions, Akhmarov continued his pictorial research in easel works. Paintings such as “Portrait of Master Jurakulov” (1955), “Woman without Clothing” (1955), and “Rakhima” (1961) reveal his love for pure, luminous colors reminiscent of the Fauves. Unlike his previous state commissions, the artist expressed folk aesthetics through decorative palak patterns in the background, contrasting bright colors, and fluid formal solutions. As N. Akhmedova notes, “even before the arrival of the ‘warm’ period, Chingiz Akhmarov revealed himself in this work as a free colorist and innovator whose presence was sorely needed in Uzbek painting.” [2]



It was during these years that the artist's personal artistic concepts took shape, harmonizing with his inner needs, desires, and worldview. This is evident in the processes of strong generalization of form and color drawn from folk art and the search for mutual harmony between them. The portraits of Master Jurakulov and Rakhima represented an unprecedented creative experiment for the painting of this period, boldly combining the classical painting traditions of the East with elements of Western modernism. This synthesis may have resulted from Akhmarov's direct contact with the artistic environment of Moscow and exposure to world art. These experiments gradually evolved into a personal style dominated by precision and expressiveness of drawing. A. Khakimov compares these works with the aesthetics of Post-Impressionism, particularly the painting of Paul Gauguin. Notably, while working on majestic compositions devoted to the people's past, the artist sought wisdom, beauty, and the complex inner life of the nation in the images of his contemporaries. Works such as "Portrait of a Pensioner from Bulungur" (1961), "Portrait of Saida Borodina" (1961), "Portrait of Artist Rashid Temurov" (1961), and "Portrait of Poetess Zulfiya" (1967) represent a logical continuation of realist traditions. In each portrait, Akhmarov selected pictorial expressiveness according to the character of the sitter and their place in society. Nevertheless, all are united by a distinctive expressiveness of line characteristic only of Akhmarov's stylistics.

The oeuvre of Ch. Akhmarov cannot be imagined without his series of paintings dedicated to the central figure of classical literature—the poet-thinker Alisher Navoi. In works such as "Navoi in Childhood" (1965), "Young Navoi" (1968), "Navoi with His Students" (1968), and "Navoi in Samarkand" (1970), the harmony of lines, flawless color combinations, and elegant forms acquire a lyrical melodiousness. The artist sought to restore the cultural memory of the people through inner sensation, expressing the perfection, wisdom, and grandeur lost by modern man through a universally recognized visual formula. Among these works, "Adolescent" (1969), executed in tempera on wood, stands out. Akhmarov approached the image with the expressiveness of Renaissance portraits: the adolescent, depicted to the chest in close-up, embodies absolute spiritual calm and inner perfection.

The greatest and most significant achievement of Ch. Akhmarov as a painter lies in his revival of the traditions of classical easel miniature in monumental forms and his creative continuation of these traditions on a new historical-artistic foundation. The artist's broad intellectual horizon resulted in works where social, everyday, or other mundane qualities of the model rarely appear; spirituality always prevails.



The 1960s became a period of continuous searches and discoveries in the painting of the republic, centered on the problems of national distinctiveness. These works were stylistically diverse, reflecting the new generation of artists' understanding of the issue of identity. The quest for identity emerged as the result of multiple internal and external socio-historical transformations in the development of society. Artists such as Ch. Akhmarov, R. Akhmedov, R. Choriev, and B. Boboev relied in their work on a conventional artistic language and generalized forms rooted in new national traditions and decorativism. The application of new principles led to stylistic changes in painting, with a striving for greater expressiveness, poetic imagery, and emotional significance. The searches of this generation were directed toward innovation. In the paintings of Chingiz Akhmarov, Rakhim Akhmedov, Ruzi Choriev, Mannon Saidov, and Bakhtiyor Boboev, one can observe a transformation of Socialist Realism grounded in ethnocultural heritage. It was precisely these artists who initiated an active return to tradition and actualized the question of national identity in painting. Their works testify to an ongoing struggle for national self-expression through diverse creative explorations encompassing varied approaches, artistic techniques, and styles.

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