

# Paint and Canvas: Reimagining of Kyrgyz Identity in a Post-Soviet Context

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Photo — Gapar Aitiev (1912–1984), Kerme-Too, 1969. Painting. Image sourced from the Kyrgyz National Museum of Fine Arts (KCRMS). © Gapar Aitiev. [https://kcrms.org/collection/Data\\_Code\\_923](https://kcrms.org/collection/Data_Code_923)



In the years following Kyrgyzstan's independence on August 31st, 1991, the task of reshaping the nation was not only political but cultural. The collapse of Soviet authority in December 1991 left behind a vacuum of symbols, narratives, and belonging. Artists and cultural institutions became some of the first to fill this void, not merely by creating new works, but by reassembling fragments of myth, memory, and history into a coherent image of nationhood. Through paintbrushes, monuments, and cameras, they helped to construct a vision of the past that merged what was historical with what was legendary, alongside the considerations for what the state needed for its own legitimacy. These reconstructed memories projected across the landscape and culturescape, giving Kyrgyzstan an image of continuity at a time when continuity itself was in question—from **Gapar Aitiev's** mountainous landscapes to the monumental figure of Manas and the restless gaze of contemporary videographers documenting the bustle of modernization. Taken together, these works show that Kyrgyz identity has been rebuilt not only through past archives, but also through images that remember the nation's history. This work examines three of these forms—Aitiev's landscape portrait of Kerme-Too, the Manas Monument in Ala-Too Square, and **Kasmalieva** and **Djumaliev's** video-art piece "A New Silk Road"—to trace how Kyrgyzstan assembles an imagined memory in a post-Soviet moment.

Among the first visual languages used by the Kyrgyz nation to see itself was the work of Gapar Aitiev (1912–1984), often referred to as the father of Kyrgyz modern art (Vecherniy Bishkek 2022). Painting in the late Soviet period, Aitiev merged realism with local imagery. His mountainous scenes, marked by white peaks reminiscent of yurts and plains riddled with riders and animals, became not just depictions of nature but reconstructions of ancestral memory. In portraying the landscape as sacred, Aitiev clearly connected the Kyrgyz nation with the modern

state as a part of the Soviet Union. After independence, these same images were absorbed into the national iconography, serving as proof of deep cultural endurance. What began as subtle resistance to Soviet homogenization later became a foundation for state mythology. Though this idea did not originate from Aitiev, his work clearly showed how the mountains served not as mere geography, but as an imagined origin of the people.

If Aitiev's work painted memory, the Manas Monument in Bishkek's Ala-Too Square sculpted it into power. The monument, erected after the statue to **Lenin** was removed in 2003, signaled a deliberate act of state re-imagination (Wood 2022, 2–4). Manas, who is a mythical-historic hero, was elevated as the embodiment and symbol of Kyrgyz sovereignty. His metallic form, raised on a horseback staring out at the Ala-Too mountains, transformed the world's largest oral epic, the Epic of Manas, into political legitimacy. This has, in turn, acted as one of the state's most visible acts of cultural synthesis: fusing legend, history, and governance into a single location. The square surrounding the monument moved from being an area for Soviet control to a monument for national rituals like independence day ceremonies and Nowruz festivals, as well as the protests that later unfolded. In doing so, the Kyrgyz government turned cultural memory into civic legitimation, using the figure of Manas to naturalize its authority by rooting political power in mythic continuity. Manas moved from being just a character into being an instrument of the state, a symbol through which it could claim the right to be a continuation of a primordial path. This symbolic expansion continued even more recently: in August 2025, the government installed a new Manas statue, and formally renamed the city of Jalal-Abad to Manas in September 2025, extending the symbolic presence from the capital into the national map itself (Bishkek Mayor's Office 2025; Tukueva 2025).



*Opening ceremony of the “Айкөл Манас” monument, Bishkek, August 2025. Photo courtesy of the Bishkek Mayor’s Office, official website. (© 2025 Мэрия города Бишкек).*

By the early 2000s, a new generation of artists began reimagining the image of their nation. In the video-art project ‘A New Silk Road,’ Gulnara Kasmalieva and Muratbek Djumaliev followed convoys of trucks across the mountainous Kyrgyz highways, showing them hauling goods and labor between China and Europe (Queensland Art Gallery 2006). The mountains fade into the smog of the future, engines replacing the singing of the Epic of Manas. This work portrays Kyrgyzstan not as a timeless land of legend, but as a new cog in the international order. In contrast to the state’s heroic stillness, these artists visualize memory within the international order, bringing together the imagery of camels crossing the Tien Shan with new flows of goods between China and Europe. Their film transforms trade from just economic to a cultural piece as well. Where the government falls upon a historical understanding of Kyrgyz nationhood, Kasmalieva and Djumaliev highlight the window to the future for the Kyrgyz people. Their work marks a shift from mythic continuity to lived

transience, in the valleys of the mountains where the roads wind.

Across these pieces, Kyrgyz nationhood emerges not as a discovery, but as a design into a new understanding. Each artwork reflects a stage in the state’s construction of imagined memory. Aitiev provides the ancestral landscape, Manas provides the heroic lineage, and Kasmalieva and Djumaliev expose the uncertain present that follows. Together they reveal how post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan built its national identity up by merging the historical, mythological, and political. This process did not erase genuine culture, but reorganized it. The nation that looked backward to find itself ultimately found that memory could be shaped as easily as canvas, metal, or film. In this sense, Kyrgyzstan’s visual art does more than reflect independence, but builds it. Through art, the state transformed fragments of past and myth into an image of continuity, constructing a nation which had been held down for so long under Russian colonialism. **g**

## References

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