By the late 20th century, after decades of communist purges and persecution, the rich history of Mongolian Buddhism was nearing extinction. Between 1925 and 1989 over 100,000 lamas were killed or sent to labor camps, hundreds of temples and monasteries, along with their artifacts, were destroyed, and the people were forbidden to practice Buddhism. Then, as the Soviet Union collapsed and Mongolia held its own pro-democracy demonstrations, the way was opened for the return of religious freedom.

Since 1990 there has been a lively re-connection with Buddhism, encouraged in part by visiting monks, nuns and scholars from Tibet, Nepal and the West. Temples and monasteries are being rebuilt, some older ‘hidden’ artworks are being discovered, and artists, both lay and monastic, are again painting thangkas and carving or casting images.

This presentation studies the re-connection with Tibetan art and practice evident in many contemporary Mongolian works. Traditional forms as well as near-abstract ‘Western’ styles can be seen today. A combination of early and modern styles in contemporary Mongolian Buddhist art may be leading to a new hybrid style. An important example of traditional continuity is the Mongolian Traditional Culture & Art Center in Ulaan Baatar, founded and directed by B. Lama Purevbat. Lay artists discussed will include Uranchirmeg Darjaz and D. Soyolmaa.

The resurgence of Shamanism, a practice which displays many ancient art-forms, will also be addressed. While its practitioners were also persecuted during the 20th century, Shamanism is now also growing again in acceptance. Ritual objects and beliefs traveled, carrying influences from the Mongolian regions to as far as pre-Buddhist India. Later filtered through Tibetan Buddhism, some of these aspects were reintroduced to Mongolia.

A study of contemporary Mongolian art indicates the power of religious beliefs as well as the longevity of ancient traditions. Two decades after Mongolia’s new chapter, it is clear that an inner spirit survived and has been rekindled.