

NIKOLAI BLOKHIN

*Drawings*

## DRAWINGS BY NIKOLAI BLOKHIN



Academic Drawing  
80x60, *paper, charcoal*, 1995

All artwork dimensions in centimeters.

Drawing holds a unique position among the Fine Arts. Even though drawing often plays almost an inferior role, as a foundation or draft on which to base painting or sculpture, it is one of the best methods of understanding form. This is why it is taught at the beginning of art education and treated as an “applied instrument”. Drawing can be seen as limited in its expressive qualities in that it is a relatively “less spectacular” art form when compared to painting. In addition, the fragility of the material and specific care and storage needed somewhat decreases its circle of collectors. All of this together has resulted in fewer artists choosing drawing as an art form on which to base one’s career.

It is drawing that expresses the artist’s personality in the most immediate and distinct way, highlights specific qualities of one’s character, psychology, worldview, one’s unique style. It gives one the opportunity to work with special ease and swiftness, preserves spontaneity that allows the artist’s hand to follow the internal rhythm of his thought, feeling, and sensation. A unique relationship of the form and the paper’s plane in a drawing, the simplicity and complexity of the system of the expressive methods, the unity of the line function triad (artistry, decorativeness and expressiveness) give an opportunity to seize the ever-changing states and dynamic of the development of the form, expressing the subtlest nuances of emotions. A drawing converges “an individual temperament of the artist and the mood of the whole epoch.”<sup>1</sup> Whatever issues were presented in drawing along its historical development from Renaissance to the beginning of XX century — study of the relationship between man and the world, inclusion of a drawing into a specific environment and consequent solution to the problem of representing space, light, relationship between subjects, perception of the drawing’s own aesthetic beauty, creation of narrative drawings or those artistic and avant-garde — first of all, the artist would build a relationship with the subject, with real form, even if the subject of the drawing was imagined.

The Twentieth Century brought radical changes. Relationship with the world was now based on pure intellect and the attempt to get to the core. Reaching all possible boundaries and beyond required understanding structural laws, not representation, or worse, study of the subject. An event was compressed to the level of a digit. In The Twentieth Century traditional drawing continued its evolution in various forms, not by anachronism or accident. Development of art followed the same fundamental laws. Cold rationality and pure intellectualism sooner or later elicited the desire to return to wholesome emotional experiences. The World, deconstructed to the molecular level, yearned to be put together into a whole picture, and achieve harmony through dissonance. Even through all this time and transformation, classical drawing maintained its importance.

An excellent example of this is the art of Nikolai Blokhin, an artist of a bright creative temperament. His full-blooded, free, liberally-coated

paintings define him as a born colorist. At the same time the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Blokhin is his brilliant drawing skill. Today such quality is hard to find. The whole life of Nikolai Blokhin is closely tied to the Saint Petersburg Academic Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture named after I.E. Repin, where immediately after graduation he stayed to teach in the Drawing Department. Repin's Institute is an heir to the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, which always used to be the main custodian of the tradition of Russian drawing. Actually, drawing emerged within its walls, and the majority of outstanding drawers — from A.P. Losenko, K.P. Bryullov, A.A. Ivanov to I.E. Repin, M.A. Vrubel, and V.A. Serov, F.A. Malyavin, N.I. Feshin, B.D. Grigoriev, A.E. Yakovlev, V.I. Shukhaev, K.S. Petrov-Vodkin, or masters of the Soviet period — E.E. Moiseyenko, A.A. Mylnikov — were connected to the Academy.

The art of masters of the classical Russian school raises the bar extraordinarily high. The depth and complexity of the meanings built into the images are so multi-layered, and the artistic form so perfect, that not to refer to them and not to compare one's own abilities with that level for an artist raised by the Academic school is simply impossible. For Blokhin, thinking within the system of classical art became a part of himself, and to draw for him is the same as to breathe.

Such reverence to drawing came out very early, and manifested in full during his work on his diploma, a subject of which was Maslennitsa (Shrovetide) (1995), or Russian traditional celebration of the end of winter. While the final project did not spill over the boundaries of a student's work, the drawings for "Maslennitsa" are undoubtedly the works of a mature master. At the same time, they make an unexpected impression. On the one hand, the drawings carry all the details of the sketch with its focus on a straight-forwardly expressed character, where in turns and poses of a model one can guess the link to the concrete life situation. However, Blokhin's positions and angles are complicated to the point of resembling special staging, and attention to their detail reminds of a study. But these drawings are much more than sketches and studies, there are obviously fully-developed pictures, finished images. Found characters such as "Old Woman," "Smoker," "Turning Man" — are archetypal characters, the unchanging feature of Russia, whose primal energy and intensity are simply a gift to the artist. The drawings themselves are very librated, totally dynamic, with a complex rhythm of strikes and shadings, energetic variety of self-evolving lines: from aggressive, wide, thick, executed with gusto and pressure to subtle, tenderly touching the paper — lines that without failure transmit the feel of different materials. In the drawings, the exquisite detail is combined with the unfinished, with caesurae and accents, which form their vigorous tempo. Here one immediately senses a cult of artistic form, its aesthetic self-sufficiency, which doesn't lose the complexity of characters captured in the mimic and expressions of the faces, the precise psychological characteristics. The artist savors the process of his work, combining different tasks and synthesizing different ideas about academic drawing.

Drawing in the art of Nikolai Blokhin takes an equal place with painting. His main theme is a play with endless variations: dress-ups, costumed characters, singers and musicians, traveling troupes, masquerades, barrel organists, theater and circus actors — ballerinas, clowns and characters from comedie del arte. All these stories, funny and not too funny, romantic and grotesque, lyrical or dramatically-expressive, make up a whole picture of a carnival and its Russian variation, Maslennitsa. These themes find realization on mono- and multi-figural compositions and costume portraits — however, their genre identification is freely exchanged. As expected, while compiling his compositions Blokhin makes preliminary drawings, but calling them preparatory is only a formality. They are basically



Study of Hands  
30x40, paper, sanguine, 1997





Sketch  
45x30, paper, sepia, 1993

self-sufficient creations, which is supported by the format, since the figures are often rendered in life-size, and the level of detail, and the intentional artistry of the presentation.

The drawings can be grouped by series. Among mono- or double-figure preliminary drawings for painting compositions one can find intentionally-esthetic, remotely-associated with the images of the World of Art Union, namely with L. Bakst — Joker (2004); Skomorokhs (Street Harlequins) (2006); Street Musicians. Self-portrait with Anya (2006); and more dramatic, grotesque Little Rooster (2006); or Horseman (2006), which remind one more of Goya or Velasquez's dwarves. In parallel to this is the "Russian Series" with all those muzhichki (little men) in screwed-up ushankas (fur hats), with wrinkled faces where one can easily read biographies of kind-hearted drunkards, with their uncomplicated entertainment — songs accompanied by garmoshka (accordion), whistling, and simply long conversations about life. They are, at the same time, characters from the street from any Russian town — and fabled, comical old men, who may accidentally run into the mythical firebird.

Series on clowns and ballerinas have an intermediate place between story-telling one-figure compositions and portraits. Ballerinas, as they are supposed to be, are romantic — but definitely not incorporeal. The artist is attracted to the ideal plasticity of the female body, he chooses effective but natural poses, which gives him a chance to work on the anatomy. At the same time, the intentional daintiness of lines, lightness of tonal blotches, large unfilled spots of the white sheet that read like air space create harmonious images full of exquisite lyricism, images of the proverbial "pure beauty" — without irony and without "cuteness." The clowns are rendered as polarities, their faces presented large and mask-like, with active incorporation of color. In them, the artist is interested in the complexity of psychological states, a dissonance between internal and external. Ballerinas and clowns are the two opposite poles: ideal, wholesome, harmonious — and exaggerated, brutal, complicated. Much more often this topic of inter-permeation and inter-relation of beauty and ugliness is expressed in the same image.

The constancy of play, dress-ups, changelings, linking and morphing of one into another in Nikolai Blokhin's work happens on different levels — often for his compositions he uses his friends and models, mostly artists themselves, and portraits of his friends per se are included in the system of carnival images, since he dresses them up in different costumes and can sharpen their images to grotesque, thus creating time psychologically-precise and at the same meaningful portraits (Samurai. Portrait of the Artist D. Akhriev (2009); Man from Florence. Portrait of the Artist Yu. Kalyuta (2009); Artist. Portrait of the Artist R. Gubaidullin (2009); Andrey. Portrait of the Artist A. Sklyarenko (2009) and many others). This brings authenticity to liberal fantasies, and adding a playful moment to reality helps emphasize the essence of the characters. In a very subtle way, Nikolai Blokhin uses stylization, such as in the exquisite portrait of V. Smukrovich (2009). Almost direct reference to graphic portraits by K. Somov is more than relevant here, as the artist Vitold Smukrovich came from the family of generations of the Petersburg artistic intelligentsia, in whom the aura of the Silver age has been naturally preserved. At the same time, Blokhin can create powerful, unorthodox, spiritually-full images even without stylization or accessories. In the portrait of the artist Hamid Savkuev, expressive means are minimal — a detailed face, a well-defined silhouette, a tonal splash that thins in lighted places and thickens to black in the shadows, creating the contrast of external calm and internal emotional tension.

Drawings of Blokhin for multi-figure compositions are unquestionably an unusual occurrence. To even define the drawings to the painting Singing as preliminary is impossible, they are rather a variation of the same work in drawing. The very topic is very important to the artist. Relativity of the

space and situation suggests that we are not looking at a representation of a real scene, and not reminiscing on singing during village gatherings, but witnessing a somewhat remote dialogue with traditions of the Russian choir genre picture. In XIX century in images of the Cross Procession, community gatherings, village mass ceremonies and celebrations, the ideas of Christian Sobornost' (Unity) and the traditional communal way of Russian life were portrayed. A painting, like a window into the world, held the reality in place with its own forms. Blokhin does not concretize a place and a time of the event. Here he realizes his wish to transmit a deeper layer — that common emotional state, when a pitiful and flowing Russian melody, breaking out from within, born in the time before time, droning, unites all these people into one entity. This singing can be experienced only on the sensual level of the subconscious, where lies hidden our genetic memory of the times when a single personality did not exist without the family and tribe, and the measured, calm and majestic rhythm of people's life was dictated by the nature herself. The significant size of the composition, which can be rendered on a canvas, turns the drawing into a triptych. Comparing the painting composition with its variation in drawing, it is difficult to give preference to one or the other. Blokhin achieves equally-powerful images by both painting and drawing means.

A favorite, intermittent theme of Blokhin is Maslennitsa, the very same merry, the most wanton and truly communally-shared holiday celebrating farewell to winter and welcoming the spring. Many rituals are dedicated to it — bliny (Russian crepes), masquerades, mounting up and burning the effigy of Maslennitsa, comedy plays, down-hill sliding, fist fights and the siege of a snow city. In this merry chaos, which lasted for the whole week before the Great Lent, the people's joyousness was portrayed, and the Russian character, at times without bounds or limits, was reflected. This topic gives much food for thought — about Russian character, that very same character that cannot be trimmed to European standards; about constancy of the cycle of life — from adoration of Maslennitsa to her pyre; about unity of the opposite — here we find both boundless festivities and "wall against wall" group fighting. This theme is constructed in portraits, sketches, in compositions, in paintings and in drawing, it is inexhaustible for Blokhin, and becomes more complex with every step, drawing out that very deep meaning of the carnival as Bakhtin understood it, where life plays, and the play temporarily becomes life.

Fist fights, the images from the same series, are realized in both painting and graphic variations. Positioning groups of the fighters preparing for the "wall against wall" in full size in the forefront, the artist creates a frieze-like composition. He does not concretize the place of the action, the event is outside of the time context, he is interested in the characters themselves — their types, mimics (people yelling, whistling, ululating, frowning, etc.), a diversity of psychological states and their gradation (bravado, doubts, merriment, frenzy, fear), complex motives of movement, supple and emotional interconnection of the characters. Human characters and temperaments are the themes of classical art from Leonardo and Durer to the realists of XIX century, the specifics of national, Russian mentality became topic of active study on the edge of XIX-XX centuries (F. Malyavin, N. Feshin, B. Grigoriev and others). Images bordering on grotesque and baroque dynamic were combined with reminiscences on Breigel and Rembrandt, as well as traditions of the Russian Realism school.

Blokhin's relationship with nature is far from simple; he does not aim for life-like representation of reality, but is interested in "immanent logic of artistic illusion." 2 Traditional iconography, themes and problems, system of images - i.e. the classical artistic language itself is not revised, but is used with certain adaptation to one's own purposes. Classical is classical because



Sketch  
30x20, paper, ball pen, 1993

#### NOTES:

1. Vipper, B. P Introduction to Historical Study of Art. Moscow, 1985, p. 26
2. Lanin, D. Nikolai Blokhin. Moscow, 2007, p. 45





Page 16  
 Academic Drawing, 60x90, *paper, sepia*, 1993  
 Study of Hands, 30x40, *paper, sanguine*, 1997

Page 17  
 Top row: Sketch, 20x15  
*paper, pencil*, 1995

Academic Drawing, 80x60  
*paper, charcoal*, 1995

Bottom row: Sketch, 40x28  
*paper, sanguine*, 1996

Sketch, 40x30  
*paper, pencil*, 1994



