

NIKOLAI BLOKHIN





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*W*orks of Nikolai Blokhin make a stunning impression from the first sight. Bright, sound colors complement each other exquisitely, colorful medley seems to be spontaneous yet strictly structured, and each paintbrush catches your eye at the same time performing important function in the entire composition. The artist demonstrates unobtrusively his solid academic drawing skills - pleasant rarity in our days. Images of his portraits, landscapes, single and multi-figure genre compositions have a magical quality to remain in one's memory for a long time. Vivacious mood of his paintings and virtuoso drawings is contagious. It is enough to see Nikolai Blokhin's works once to understand that he is a phenomenon of the modern art.

Introducing Nikolai Blokhin, we present not simply a young, gifted master with powerful creative temperament and complex inner world, but the Russian artistic tradition, closely connected with the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts. The history of the Russian art spreads over ten centuries.

For the first seven centuries, the ancient Russian painting existed in a form of icons and frescoes, where the Russian mentality was mirrored for the first time – with its idea of communion, its oriental contemplation and inclination to irrationality. The New Age in art came in the beginning of 18th century along with reforms of Peter the Great thus incorporating Russia into the context of the European schools of art. Fundamental principles of academic education were laid out already in the Age of Clas-

sicism. Usage of lexicon formed in the Greek and Roman antiquity, precise and competent drawing, logical and universal laws of composition, orientation toward the highest achievements of the European Art tradition – all of that has been remaining its foundation for 250 years, since the moment of the official opening of the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg in 1857. In a course of its history, the academic system has experienced some changes. Fresh impulse

was brought in the second half of the 19th century by the “Peredvizhniki” school of realism lead by Ilya Repin: they have broadened range of themes and subjects, shifted the accent from antique symbols to studying nature. The short period of avant-garde experiments within the Academy in the 1920s (after the Socialist Revolution in 1917) was followed by the return of realism in the Soviet era (the realism at this time turned to be “socialist”). The Iron Curtain screened off Russia from the context of the world art development for many decades. However, each historic event has a dialectic unity of pluses and minuses. Thanks to the isolation and conservatism, Russia retained the classical school lost by majority of countries. Academic education has been considered routine for too long a time. Many radicals still believe that strict rules dry up artist's personality and limit freedom of expression. But in criticizing academia, one should keep in mind that it still stands and serves as a tuning-fork or landmark, set-

ting clear criteria to follow or reject, for academic system of education in Arts is a collective experience proved by centuries. This system can absorb and level the weak, as it can give a powerful take-off and foster self-development to the strong. When the system is not in place, everything breaks up into pieces, grows shallow, criteria loosen up and all goes to inevitable chaos. No matter, how original and complex the artist's inner world is, self-expressing by means of visual art requires certain knowledge – drawing skills, composition techniques, how to hold the brush and mix the paints. It should not be also forgotten that any language of art is conventional – in order to be heard and understood, one must acquire at least an elementary literacy in it. When the system is assimilated, one either can continue to develop within its limits, or reject it completely, but in any case it has to be mastered. It is true that rigid regulation and conservatism of the Academy often lead to believe that all possibilities were exhausted, but every time a powerful creative personality appeared from within, thus proving vitality of the academic system. In the 19th century it was such great Russian painters as Karl Bryoulov and Alexander Ivanov who inspired new life into classicist canons, and leaders of the “Peredvizhniki” Ilya Repin and Vassily Sourikov who have shaken up thematic repertoire, but retained the core of the academic language. Solid academic foundation can be found in the works of Mikhail Vrubel, Valentin Serov, and in the Pleiad of the artists of the turn of the 20th century, Boris Koustodiev, Philipp Malyavin, Nicolai Fechin, Alexander Yakovlev, Vassily Shoukhayev. Later, in the Soviet times, new interpretation of academic art was given in the works of Yevsey Moiseyenko, Andrey Mylnikov and many others.

The Academy of Arts was not just a place where professional skills were taught and acquired. It cultivated in its students ideals typical for all Russian artists: compassion to simple people, importance of humanistic values and ardent belief in the great mission of Arts. Therefore, the artists with academic background tend to be in search of great subjects and great forms. Moral dilemmas of society, meaning of human life and death, eternal search for an answer to the question: “What is beauty?” – all are translated into traditional paintings with apparent tendency toward monumental significance of the expressive language.

Nikolai Blokhin became related to the Academy of Arts even before he entered there. He was born in 1968 in the birth place of the Academy, the City of St. Petersburg, which had a different name back then. It was called Leningrad, named after Lenin, the founder of the Soviet state. In the Soviet era, the Academy itself was renamed into the Ilya Repin Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. It still carries that name, but the “Repinka”, as students called it among themselves, had always been and will always

remain in their hearts the Academy of Arts. Here, in Leningrad, Nikolai first studied at the ordinary district art school and then he was accepted to the art school, affiliated with the Repin Institute. This was a special school, where gifted children from all corners of such a huge country as Soviet Union were chosen to be trained as elite artists. One of Nikolai's classmates at that school, the St. Petersburg philosopher Danila Lanin¹ recalls that “almost half of the students were from the families of the Leningrad artists who all knew each other. The relations in our class were tough, competitive, with clear division between the leaders, the middling and the outsiders, with pitiless treatment of low-achievers and their discharge from school at the end of each year. There was no Soviet style pedagogy and no ideas of universal equality there, for equality between us was not expected either there, or in the future; we were being prepared to face the fact that art was objective hierarchy of talents and achievements. Of course, the status of a student was determined by his personal success and competency in art, but in the first years of studies practically everything depended on the student's home education and social status of his family. The artists' kids stuck together and felt like fish in water, for the others it was harder to survive.

The most important and rigorous selection of students has always been made while entering the fifth grade. But Blokhin came to school two years later, so he got into a fully formed collective with well known roles. His parents, as we have quickly found out, had no professional connections with art, so, naturally, nothing interesting was expected from the new boy. However, the very first hours in the drawing class set everything straight. The point was not that he could draw better than all of us (if we talk about the basics of academic drawing: proportions, anatomy, tonal correlations etc.) – not much better. The point was that his drawing of the model was not reduced to assimilating elementary principles. Aside of that, parallel to that, he was solving some more important problem on the same sheet, and even the most obvious imperfections that would have been considered simply nothing else but childish mistakes in somebody else, seemed here as almost deliberate technique. Naturally, they were not techniques, but mistakes. However, for some reason, it did not matter. Those were not immature study works, waiting to be analyzed pedantically. They were Drawings and Paintings, with all their mistakes. There were no questions: a new leader has come to the class...”² There was always a small group of classmates gathered behind his back, those who left their own easels and were curiously observing “creative process”. He was unusual. Blokhin worked with a very soft pencil, rubbing it often in with his finger or ball of bread, calmly ignoring holy of holies, so to speak, of the St. Petersburg Academy since Lossenko – diagonal

shading. He did watercolors in somewhat condescending manner, deliberately ignoring notorious "transparency" and mercilessly tearing off paper with a sponge, while waiting impatiently for a "real" oil painting.

Switching to oil next year, a headache for everyone, was for him a long awaited occasion for celebration he forgot about watercolors right away and never touched it again. Meanwhile, his early watercolor compositions were phenomenal. Those small pictures possessed some intense inner world, almost metaphysical drama that was lost in the works to follow, and then all of the sudden appeared in his academic diploma, then lost again for another ten years yielding to tranquil chamber works and finally was shown again in a loud voice in his series of monumental paintings of 2005-2006. Having gotten to the oil, Blokhin made it clear that following the sanctified by centuries methods of teaching was not his intention. His first grisaille was done with a palette knife and a piece of cloth, pouring medium from time to time onto the laid down canvas right out of a bottle, rubbing it in with another, clean piece of cloth. It did gather crowd around too. The next step in Blokhin's artistic career was the Academy, where he chose a studio of Professor V.I.Reikhet, who was particularly fond of painting traditions. The most interesting works of that time were not the classroom studies, but his own drawings and sketches that he did on his spare time. Those sketches he was working on for several hours every day were no longer focused on striking graphic techniques (that have become a commonplace and something secondary), but on serious research of the models and nature everybody talked about, but what usually remained limited to mastering the academic program. First serious results and first declaration of personal credo are usually demonstrated in diploma projects. As a subject for his diploma, Nikolai Blokhin chose the Shrove Tuesday Carnival (in Russian "Maslenitsa"). Maslenitsa is the most cheerful, wild and truly popular celebration of parting with Winter and meeting the Spring. All rituals of the fest symbolize this important transition of the life cycle – pancakes, dressing up, burning down thatched figure of the Maslenitsa, fisticuffs and storming a snow fort. Pagan cults are mixed here with the Christian ones. This cheerful commotion lasting all week before the Lenten fast always showed vitality of the Russian people. Bright colors, openly shown emotions, laughter and cheers on parting with the Winter and joyful anticipation of the Spring sun's coming have been always associated with this fest. However, since many traditional customs in contemporary Russia have been lost, it looks today more like theatrical shows and games. Nevertheless, making pancakes and going to church during Maslenitsa survived seventy years of official atheism and are still popular among many Russians.

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temporary Maslenitsa, nor is a reminiscence of the past (although the costumes and the moment of the fest evoke the 19th century's associations). He made an attempt to line it up with prominent pre-revolutionary Academicians: the famous paintings of Vassily Sourikov's and Nicolai Fechin's diploma work "Cabbage Fest" come to mind immediately. The aim was obviously to show his own capabilities in creating a large format multi-figure genre painting with multitude of characters, various motivations of their behavior, inconceivable fore shortenings, gestures, interrelations, sophisticated coloring solutions, different levels of dynamics (from deliberately complicated body movements to inner geometry of composition). While one can argue that the painting has not surpassed the level of just a claim for a master piece, the sketches for "Maslenitsa" are indisputably the works of a master. Their format itself (some almost life-size) leave no doubts that they were conceived as independent works. It does not take. Nevertheless, making pancakes and going to church during Maslenitsa survived seventy years of official atheism and are still popular among many Russians.

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Another attempt to do a large genre painting is his recent work "The Singing" (2006). Conventionality of space and situation hints that this is not a real scene reproduction, not a reminiscence of folk songs in the country, but a bit veiled roll call with traditions of the Russian choral genre painting. The 19th century painters translated ideas of Christian communion and traditional Russian communality into portraying religious ceremonies, community gatherings and country side rites and fests. Painting framed reality into its own forms, like a window to the world.

Blokhin does not give concrete clues about place and time. He wants to show something deeper – that emotional condition, when a slow, mournful Russian

melody, born centuries ago, breaks free and unites all the singing into one soul and body. That kind of singing can be perceived only at a sensual depth of the subconscious, where genetic memory of the time is hidden – the times, when individuality did not exist without its kin or tribe, when unhurried, calm and majestic rhythm of human life was tuned by the nature. Three years after graduating from the Academy and finishing his post graduate practical training, Blokhin begins his own teaching career at the studio of Professor V.V.Pimenov (Prof. Reikhet's successor). Today, Nikolai Blokhin is a Professor of Drawing at the Academy, his works are well recognized by general public and specialists in Russia and far beyond.

Blokhin's first serious success was in portrait painting. Portrait is a genre where an artist depends on a model the most, where room for experiments is limited – otherwise the portrait is no longer a portrait. Blokhin stands on classical humanist traditions according to which a human is considered an integral creation, i.e. his individual features can reveal fundamental essence of his personality with all complexity of his psyche and biography. His portraits are obviously influenced by Impressionists in their aspiration for casual condition and fleeting mood of a model that produce an effect of naturalness and freshness of the first impression. At the same time, the artist structures his work as an entire esthetic phenomenon with inseparable plastic unity between the portrayed image and the background. Therefore, his portraits retain parity between the real and conventional, the graphic and decorative, thus reminding about the Modern style. However, the traditions of the Soviet-time academic studio settings are also present.

This complexity of painting together with its fresh intensity and spontaneity make Blokhin's portraits not the replicas of historic styles, but his own distinct portraits (from the early paintings like "Female Portrait" (1991) and "Portrait" (1997) to his mature works of 2000-2006 like "Knitting Girl", portraits of the astronaut Krikalyov, of R.Kekkalainen, of the artist H.Savkuyev). Blokhin often paints portraits of his family. He has created refined and tender images of his wife Natasha – not only a beautiful woman, but also an excellent painter. Her complex and deep character can be read from such portraits, as "Natasha in Scarf" (1994), "Natasha" (2002) and many others. His daughter Anya has become a constant source of adoration and joy. He does not hide his feelings, admiring relaxed elegance and soft facial features of his child. He introduces her to his fantasies as Little Princess, Infant, Ballerina. ("Street Musicians. Self-Portrait with Anya". 2006) Like a tuning fork, she sets a sunny optimistic mood to all artworks of the artist. That Nikolai Blokhin is one of the most outstanding contemporary portraitists are not mere words. In 2002 Blokhin participated in a portrait competition sponsored by the American Society of Portrait Artists (ASOPA) with the Grand Prize pre-

sented by a member of the renowned Forbes family. This award is considered one of the most prestigious in Arts in the U.S. It takes place at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. After preliminary selection, Nikolai Blokhin was among the well known artists from thirty six countries. As he later recalled, he was hoping to get an encouraging New Name award, or if he was lucky – the Third or a Second Prize. So, when all of them were given away, he felt gloomy. But his "Knitting Girl" took the Grand Prize, which was announced after proper pause. The victory in this competition puts the laureate into the front row of contemporary artists automatically. However, Blokhin did not stop there. In 2004, he was awarded Best of the Show in International Portrait Competition of the Portrait Society of America, USA – headquartered in major competitor of ASOPA.

Creative works of Nikolai Blokhin are not limited by portraiture. He finds brilliant ways of self expression in his exquisite landscapes, of his native St. Petersburg in the first place. The landscapes fill viewers with super real atmosphere of constantly rainy weather with its damp, dank air, typical for the northern seaside city. But some miracle happens, and the grey colors suddenly fade into the opulence of antique silver ("New Bridge. St. Petersburg", 2006), the blur silhouettes and absence of details unexpectedly uncover the vastness of space of the city, planned with grand imperial scale ("The Summer Park", 2006). No less attractive are the artist's still lifes, divided in "white" and "grey" series. They are done in noble reserved colors with delicate correlation of form and volume. Classical completeness is combined with elegant ease of contemporary interpretation plastique. In contrast with these series, still lifes with flowers become a good excuse for painting suites. The flowers themselves are of lesser importance there: what is more important is the sense of succulence of color harmonies. Blokhin's recent carnival series have become his distinct style. Their main subjects – folk theme with masks, jesters, booth theaters, organ-grinders; gallant theme with dames and cavaliers, queens and pages, beautiful Spanish and Gypsy women; theater theme with ballet and variety dancers, Harlequins and Columbines. It is not difficult to notice that all of them have roots in classical canonic art. The question is whether these themes and artistic language are merely the artist's desire to go back to past, to revive the once gone or, maybe, something else?

The banner of art of the 20th century had (as it still has) the word "freedom" inscribed. Freedom of self-expression, freedom of experiment, freedom from taboos, freedom in choosing art schools and systems, freedom of disassembling any constructions flat to the ground, freedom of testing the limits of art were challenging and inspiring for many artists. Nikolai Blokhin is a contemporary artist, for freedom is one of the powerful motivations of his

creative works as well. But his concept of freedom has different foundation. For him, freedom is the freedom of dialogue with European cultural traditions, the freedom to speak the same language with them, the freedom of interpretation of existing techniques of drawing and painting. A special art critic term of trans-avant-garde comes to mind. It justifies an artist's right to use any artistic experience of any nation and time. But one can also argue that the art history itself is a dialogue with the past. This dialogue can have various forms: complete acceptance, development, disagreement, rejection – but the past has always been a starting point for evolution. Blokhin is not into copying or imitating – he is engaging exactly in dialogue. The most obvious references – great Spaniards Velazquez and Goya, realist Ilya Repin, impressionists Edouard Manet, August Renoire, Konstantin Korovin, Western and Russian Modern of the turn of the 20th century Andreas Zorn, John Singer Sargent, Mikhail Vrubel, Valentin Serov, Lev Bakst, Filipp Malyavin, Abram Arkhipov, Nicolai Fechin, prominent academicians of the Soviet school Yevsey Moiseyenko, Boris Ougarov. Perhaps, this list can be continued in many historical directions.

Comparison with Nicolai Fechin, the Russian American artist, arises in the first place. Curiously enough, the parallels begin when both Nicolai Fechin and Nikolai Blokhin rapidly obtained recognition in the U.S. while being students of the Academy of Arts. There is a certain similarity in defining main subjects – coexistence of the beauty and ugliness (the fine borderline between them, their interconnection and interdependence), dialectics of the exquisite and grotesque, the attractive and repulsive, the celebration and primeval fear of being, the game of dressing up.

One can easily see resemblance in their combinations of model forms with conventional painting virtuosity, their love for creating vibrating texture, their aspiration for complicated fore shortenings and poses in drawing. However, they have as many similarities as they have differences.

Powerful, dense, energetic lines of Blokhin's pressed charcoal and pastels are completely opposed to the finest, weightless lines of Fechin's charcoal drawings. Delicate reservedness of Fechin's coloring of his Russian period has very little in common with festive fireworks of Blokhin's paintings. As well as intensity of colors of Fechin's works that were done in America, is of different nature. Fechin received the initial impulse for drawing from a model, he never invented his subjects, but rather orchestrated real situations, whether it was a portrait or a genre composition. Symbolism was not typical for him. Blokhin likes to express himself in fantasies, and quite often his images have allegorical meaning. Nevertheless, there are some fundamental unanimity in their language of arts. For both artists, live natural form is a basis for limitless interpretations of various meanings not the rational constructions that could be ex-

plained verbally, but the plastic compositions (play of form and color, lines, modeling of space). Both Fechin and Blokhin value vivacity of the paint dough and vital energy of the line, their evolution, pulsation, continuation of the creative force in time, where illusion of life developing in front of our eyes is the intended result. The same dialectic chain of similarities and differences can be made for comparison with other artists. One can easily notice that many images of odd characters have portrait features of the author. He tries on various roles – Faun, Jester, Harlequin, Icarus. He is excited, intrigued and scared to look at himself from different sides of both the possible and unreal. He dresses up his models in the most unusual costumes, which reminds us about the great Rembrandt with his endless studies of his own face, emotions, conditions and transformations, as well as his aspiration for deliberately exotic clothes for his characters that gave him an opportunity to break free from the routine of existence.

Although Blokhin's motivation is obviously quite different (it is a play inside of play), but in both cases extravagant costumes become an excuse for festive show in painting.

It is easy to find in Blokhin's works parallels with court jesters and infants of Velazquez, majas of Goya, compositions and even titles with works of Vrubel ("Gypsy Girl", "Lilac", both 2006). However, the meaning of analogies is constantly shifting. The girls in the Vrubel's "Lilac" are personification of nature, in Blokhin they are demonstration of the artist's mastery. Female faces of all his Spanish women, Gypsies, Princesses (i.e. unreal, almost fairy tale characters) are taken from the street. They are simple (or even simple-minded) girls of our time, who suddenly reveal royal stature and eternal mystery of womanhood. Jesters, harlequins, booth theaters, buffoons, organ-grinders – are characters of the street art, the lower form of art. Thanks to their primitiveness they show boldly primordial purpose of arts – to entertain, to make people laugh, to distract them temporarily from their problems. However, an attentive viewer will find in those works an inner discord – his buffoons, jesters and harlequins are not as happy as they seem. With all splendor of their bright, festive colors, they cannot hide the feelings of a breakdown and tragedy.

Blokhin needs those characters to ask himself one more time "Who is an artist (i.e. who am I) in this world? A jester, entertaining the public? A vendor of illusory happiness? Someone who gives a momentary distraction by his carnival trumpery and his promising to fulfill an unrealizable wish? Or someone, who is able to sort off the most beautiful and sublime from crude reality by the act of his own will? And what is reality? A reality of the perceived or a reality of the imagined (an ideal inner space which creates the visible world)? These questions have no answers. Here is the realm of color full medley, exquisite color com-

binations, free flow of lines, transparency of techniques, – all that which creates reality in the painting – the only reality existing for Blokhin. The artist does not give the answers, posed by life. He answers only the questions, posed by art.

Here, it becomes clear that Blokhin in his art is not looking back, but exploring new ways ahead. He is researching the very same problems of contemporary art: defining its limits, meanings, archetypes, canons, codes, language, place in the world of information, globalization, technologization, computerization, primitivization, etc. Art still speaks an irrational language of feelings and emotions, it keeps warmth of human soul and forms human inner self. This thought is as old as the world, but no one can live without art and outside of art, and each generation discovers this simple truth anew.

Blokhin's "Icarus" (2006) can shed some light on this subject. It takes years to glue feathers together, to attach wings behind the shoulders – all for just one moment of desperate flight. This take-off upward against the rules of gravity, even leading to inevitable fall down is worth of all torments of creating. Mythological subject, elegant allegorical parable, multifaceted image, estheticism of formal constructions adequate to contemporary thought allow to consider this work of art a long-lasting classics.

Nikolai Blokhin is more than a successful artist. Since his student years, he has been actively participating in the most prestigious exhibitions in Finland, Poland, China, Netherlands, Indonesia, France, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium. He found special recognition in the United States, where he has had over twenty personal exhibitions

in New-York, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and many other large cities. His works can be found in collections of Oscar laureates, billionaires, politicians, prominent figures of show business like famous actor Anthony Quinn, as well as museum collections, among which are museums of Russia such as Research Museum of Academy of Art, St. Petersburg, Polytechnic Museum, Moscow, State Fine Arts Museum of the Republic of Tatarstan, Kazan, China – Beijing Contemporary Art Museum, Art Gallery of Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts, Shenyang and U.S.A. Museum of Contemporary Russian Art., Jersey City, NJ, Taos Art Museum & Fechin House, Taos, NM. He is well known in his home country as well. Series of exhibitions in the most prestigious halls, such as Exhibition Hall of Academy of Arts, Exhibition Hall of Unity of Artists, St. Petersburg and Central House of Artists and Polytechnic Museum (this Museum situated in the hart of Moscow famous by the great impact in Russian culture) in Moscow. It's a honor to have personal exhibitions in such places. Nikolai's exhibitions had very large response among art lovers. Russian museums from St. Petersburg to Samara or Voronezh offer exhibition opportunities, since they see in his works evolution of traditions of the Russian school of Arts.

Exhibitions all around the world, commercial success, prestigious awards (not limited by two mentioned above), an honorable position of a Professor of Drawing at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts – all that is very important; however, this artist will soon not need them to be recognized. It will be enough just to say his name – Nikolai Blokhin.





