

It is only comparatively recently, just twenty years ago, that the art of the enamelist emerged from a long period of neglect, and local experimentation gradually became an artistic phenomenon. Today enamel painting has spread around the world, and the seventies saw the birth of what could be termed an association of "newly-converted" enamelists who began to organise international seminars and exhibitions (in Budapest in 1987, in Moscow in 1982). In 1971 the ancient enamel centre in Limoges, France, was host to the first major enamelwork exhibition, *The Art of Enamel*, which then became an international biennial exhibition and one of the most important centres of European enamelwork. Soviet artists have also taken part in this exhibition three times since 1984, and have been awarded a number of diplomas and prizes. As well as exhibitions, there are now also seminars on the enameleer's art. Beginning in 1983, similar art groups have been working and organising exhibitions in Palanga. In 1989 the enamelwork seminar at Palanga was attended by members of the French National Association of Enamelists, and enamel artists from Poland and England. The first all-union exhibition *Enamel Painting* was held in 1987 in Riga, Vilnius, Leningrad and Moscow, and the first personal exhibitions by enamelists were held in the second half of the 1970's.

Among those who are today preserving and developing the traditions of this ancient art, two names stand out in particular — Alexei Maximov and Leonid Efros. Both artists have transformed the traditions of the past to create their own inimitable artistic style and world of images.

Here is how Leonid Efros sees enamel: "Working with enamel is like working with a diamond to produce a jewel; the more facets, the greater the risk. Enamel is poetry combined with the anarchy of fire." This view of enamel as a mystery echoes the Byzantine legend that the art of the enamelist is blessed from above. Of the construction of the throne in the altar of the cathedral of Saint Sophia in Constantinople it was said: "Fire, fuse these things together, and create of them one. The Emperor and the first artist saw an angel appointed to this work, and raking in the furnace..."*. In other words, the artist is engaged in an act of co-creativity with the material, revealing its spiritual essence.

The triptych *L. N. Tolstoi* (1977–1978) is illustrative of Efros' work. The creative prism of genius offers a fresh perception of the world, the concepts of good, beauty, justice, and the vocation of the artist.

At the centre of the composition is the portrait of L. N. Tolstoi, and on each side a plate with a landscape in which the sky is the dominant feature. The powerful emotional tension of the elements is transformed into the profound contemplation on the face of the writer. His clothing is conveyed symbolically;

* I. Zabelin. *A Historical Review of Enamel und Jewelry work in Russia*. St Petersburg, 1853, p. 2.

the delicate lines and the soft illumination of the shadows seem to reflect the scurrying sky in the landscape, creating the impression of a monumental image conveyed in miniature.

*The series *Heroes of the Patriotic War of 1812* (1977–1978) is closer to the classic miniature. Using historical, literary and iconographic sources, the artist expresses his own understanding of the people of the early 18th century, depicting them simply and laconically, using various styles of brushwork and a rather abstract colour range to convey clothing, while the identifying facial features of each of the heroes are highlighted in white.*

*In contrast to this series, the *Portrait of Kutuzov* (1980) is executed in a very untraditional manner. The image of the military leader is extremely generalised, becoming a symbol of the past. The portrait itself delights the eye with the beauty of its pearly colours, the delicacy and precision of the execution. The smallness of the plate itself emphasises the natural quality of the enamel – a three-dimensional drop of molten glass in which, as if within “a drop of time”, is reflected the pale profile of the fieldmarshal. One has the impression that this fragile vision will vanish at any moment, and the solid glass dissolve into the air. The symbolism of the artistic generalisation becomes allegory, and every category of being shifts into another dimension.*

*The triptych *Petergof* (1984–1985), elegantly refined in its combination of cold tones, is akin to works by the *Mir Isskustv* group. On three plates depicting a palace and fountains (*Morning, After Sunset, White Night*), we find the portraits of men and women. The time of day is carefully chosen: it is then that the natural light quivers and trembles. This sense of unstable light is created by the morning mist, the evening haze, and the blurred outlines of a white night. For the artist, the landscape becomes that lyrical image through which he conveys the theme of love, while triptych itself becomes a metaphore for the beauty of the relationship between man and woman in all its complexity and unpredictability.*

*In the composition *A Horse for the Fieldmarshal* (1982–1983) dimension and space are handled in a manner very unusual for the miniature. The triptych comprises a portrait of the fieldmarshal, a chess board, the figure of a horse and a die, all of which become as it were a rebus evoking various associations. Medieval philosophers compared life to a chessboard – just one move, and the entire situation is changed. Here each viewer determines for himself the meaning of the work on the basis of his own knowledge, artistic and historical associations. One of the most significant works by Efros is his *Portrait of Voltaire* (1984), which is reminiscent of sculpture by Houdon in its artistic expressivity. However Efros preferred the costume and wig to the mantle of antiquity traditional in the 18th century. He uses an original*

combination of enamel painting and decorative enamel to reveal the essence of the image, thanks to which the face of Voltaire stands out in relief, giving particular emphasis to the outline, the high, sloping forehead, the thin smiling lips and attentive gaze. The white carnations stand out vividly against the dark-blue background and dark turquoise costume, lending a note of vibrant emotionality. All of this combines to emphasise the deception of mimicry and the tense inner life of the philosopher. This work illustrates the successful combination of the aesthetic qualities of enamel and the talent of the philosopher-artist.

The Maly Hermitage. Natasha in the Pavilion Room (1987) is one of Efros' latest works. The background of the portrait is delicately traced out in bright lines combined with the soft pastel shades of pale blue, violet, lilac and turquoise. The equilibrium of the composition concentrates on the face of Natasha, which inevitably draws attention to the classical interior. The purity of the classical, organised space becomes as it were the key to the interpretation of the image. This portrait, as many other works, convey the artist's unique vision of the world.

The works of Leonid Efros go beyond the traditional concept of the miniature, taking this form of art onto a new level and bringing it close to easel painting. Yet at the same, in his delicate approach to the material and to tradition, the artist preserves the basic features of the classic enamel miniature.

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