

Wonderful symbols of times past

National Art Museum showcases unique exhibition featuring artistic diversity of first director

By Victor Mikhailov

Nikolay Mikholap headed Minsk's State Picture Gallery from 1939 to 1941, becoming the first Director of the National Art Museum of Belarus. Seven years ago, art lovers saw with their own eyes that, apart from being a skilful administrator, he was also a talented ceramicist and an industrial designer. Even now, residents and guests of Minsk, Vitebsk, Gomel and many other Belarusian cities daily see examples of Mr. Mikholap's work, with no idea of their author. Lamp poles — installed in central streets — are decorated with 'aprons' designed by him, while his lamps and vases — inspired by Slutsk sash motifs — are a tribute to the Belarusian culture which he embraced all his life.

Seven years ago, an exhibition showcasing Mr. Mikholap's artistic

legacy was organised. This year, the master would have celebrated his 125th birthday and, to mark this date, the National Art Museum has decided to represent Mr. Mikholap as a ceramicist and a photographer. The exhibition reveals many new, previously unknown, facets of his artistic personality.

The showcased ceramics reflect the evolution of Mr. Mikholap's form and style. His early works (*Fish vase* 1914) were inspired by eastern motifs and, from the 1940s, he began using floral and national motifs on his vases, cups and dippers: *Bulba (Potato)* and *Vasilek (Cornflower)*.

Mr. Mikholap's photographic interest followed on from that of his family, who took many shots in the years before WWII; sadly, few photos have survived from those early times. They were made on



Ceramic vases by Nikolay Mikholap attract museum visitors even today

glass plates, featuring scenes from family life and some fine art pieces. On returning to Minsk from evacuation, in 1944, the master devoted much time to photographing the destroyed city and animals in the Belovezhskaya Pushcha. He took many pictures depicting the country's flora — such as potatoes and flax, which are now kept (alongside films) in several packages.

The present show unveils the city of the past, which we never see in reality. Several hundred photos present us with rare documentary evidence. The best are an example of true artistic black-and-white photography, with carefully chosen compositions: unusual angles, lyri-

cal feelings and expressive light and shadow combinations. All arouse admiration — for their theme, delicate graphic features and mood.

No doubt, panoramic pictures of Minsk, Grodno and Mir Castle are impressive, as are rare photos of city buildings and architectural details (such as grids, balconies and houses). Mr. Mikholap managed to capture moments of life from post-war cities, which were being rapidly built anew, changing every day. We feel the mood of past years, seeing cities and people from the past, giving us an expressive and convincing historical truth.

Mr. Mikholap was clearly full of curiosity for the world, although

his theme was largely urban. His attention to the smallest detail, taking dozens of photos to inform his ceramic decorations, is helping modern restorers return our city streets to their former 'faces'.

The exhibition showcases about a hundred photos taken between 1945 and 1956, featuring post-war Minsk and cities which Mr. Mikholap visited as part of Union of Architects' expeditions. They are kept by the Museum of Ancient Belarusian Culture (at the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Arts, Ethnography and Folklore) and in his heirs' family archives. They are wonderful symbols of the past...

Playing puppets seriously

Independent puppet theatre rivalling any professional company is new and little-seen phenomenon on capital's cultural 'landscape'

By Vasily Petrovsky

There are plenty of amateur companies who tour nurseries and schools with a couple of suitcases of carelessly sewn puppets; these lower the 'aesthetic bar' for puppetry, making people believe that the genre is only for children. However, Dmitry Gaidel, director and producer of Province Theatre — Belarus' first and the only private puppet theatre, which recently toured Minsk — is confident that his young actors' talents rival those of any in Europe.

Mr. Gaidel, is it difficult to create one's own theatre?

It took me three years.

Meanwhile, you've remained an actor with Grodno's Regional Puppet Theatre...

As long as I can combine these opportunities, I will. The Province Theatre is a creative, rather than a commercial, project. In Minsk, people know artists, stage directors and painters; there are some outstanding names and brands, but the situation is different in the provinces. Artists don't take part in films or soaps, preferring to make their name while they're young, so we decided to set up our own theatre, attending various festivals.

Which places have you already visited?

Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, Moscow and St. Petersburg...

How are you welcomed?

We've won prizes. 'The Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Knights', staged by Oleg Zhyugzhda, has three international diplomas. This year, Kafka-based 'Metamorphosis' took a prize



Private Province Theatre's Head, Dmitry Gaidel

at the 'Moscow Holidays' International Forum of Chamber Puppet Theatres. We've also applied to join events in Germany and Austria. The puppet world is rather unusual, being more consolidated. There are lots of drama theatres, even in Minsk, but only one puppet theatre. Previously, we weren't highly rated, although we don't give performances to pre-school children. We are true artists, search-

ing for major festivals at which to present our work. We've already made a name for ourselves. To create something good, you need to work hard, with good directors and set designers. Our performances are staged by Oleg Zhyugzhda, chief director with Grodno's Regional Puppet Theatre; he is known in Europe. Valery Rachkovsky, chief artist with the Belarusian State Puppet Theatre, worked with us on 'Metamorphosis'.

Do your colleagues from the Grodno Theatre form the major core of the troupe?

Yes. There was a time when we wanted to experiment. We don't have our own theatre and there are only six of us, so our performances are mobile and small in scale. We don't aim to perform to large audiences; we seek out our own, theatrically sensitive, spectators.

Are you always understood?

We're equally well accepted in the East and in the West.

Mr. Gaidel, what are the major problems facing puppet theatre?

They're the same as those facing drama theatres. Firstly, audiences tend to go to the theatre when everything is well in life. In Grodno and Minsk, people don't tend to go to puppet shows, having other

interests. Secondly, people mistrust private theatres. Even those who studied with me at the theatre institute treated us with irony until recently. They didn't understand why we operated privately.

We want to prove that, today, it doesn't matter whether a theatre is private, state or municipal. If a steady company exists, engaged in its favourite occupation, audiences will always be found.

Motifs of capitalistic realism

By Sergey Klimov

Original works by famous German painter Sigmar Polke on show at Minsk's Modern Fine Arts Museum for the first time

His *Music of Unclarified Origin* perfectly characterises his creativity, uniting forty paintings. "Sigmar Polke is a multifaceted master. We've tried to demonstrate the width of his artistry," notes the co-ordinator of the Minsk Goethe Institute's Department for Culture and Education (among the project's organisers), Igor Kuksin.

Sigmar Polke is a genius of German post-modernism, working with decorative fabrics (blankets, striped pyjamas and plastic film) rather than canvases, with topics chosen from advertising, films and comic strips. He defies definition, but his works resemble posters while testifying to his specific political views. In the 1960s, Mr. Polke joined German artist Gerhard Richter in inventing a new style: 'capitalistic realism'. This mocked the consumer hopes of post-war German society.

Mr. Polke has won numerous national and international awards, including the 'Golden Lion' Grand Prix at the La Biennale di Venezia in 1986.