



Belarusian monumental art showcased at Minsk's interesting exhibition in all its diverse forms

# Monumental image of the present, with clear focus on the future

Exhibition at Minsk Artists' Union gallery is unique in its creative content and external solution

By Victor Mikhailov

Monumentality is an epic narration in art. Of course, it's extremely difficult and, even, almost impossible to illustrate epic works in a traditional show. How can artists demonstrate something weighing many tonnes, or several metres long for such a purpose? However, a sense of magnificence and a high artistic element is certainly evident from their sketches and working models.

Impressive monumental painting is represented in its original form at the exhibition, with works by Alexander Kishchenko, People's Artist of Belarus, attracting great interest with their spirituality and classical themes: life and its characters, as well as holidays and daily routine. The pictures are highlights of creative improvisation — unique to this interesting master.

Another monumental retrospective was alluring and included Belarusian sculpture, decorative-and-applied arts and interesting interior solutions. The photo gallery was artistically diverse, with so many pieces on display. Visitors could see the best works of domestic monumental art, created over the last decade.

The tragedy of war — its heroic deeds and sacred memory — is an enduring theme for Belarusian art, finding its reflection in sculpture. Mr. Polyakov's emotional and expressive-dynamic works are captivating. His *Partisan Legend* is marked by bold allegory: we see an auroch and a person, 'flooded' with a single fast-moving motif, embodying the power and strength of a victorious nation. A. Metlitsky prefers calmer intonations, working primarily with marble, carving each image from newly-born stone, while carefully preserving its noble nature. Lyricism and deep emotional penetration are achieved through sensitive modelling of form in his *Maternity and Fertility*.

G. Gorovaya's *Run and Orpheus and Eurydice* represents the preoccupations of the last decade. Her works are associative and emotional, showing the relations between form and space.

At present, Belarusian indoor sculpture is primarily represented by allegorical compositions and portraits. There is a trend towards traditional forms, particularly portrait-busts, although historical portraits are also noticeable. These are primarily chamber portraits — monuments to enlight-

ers, writers and poets, designed to grace the interior of buildings. Curiously, a similar process is observed in painting and graphical art, perhaps connected with artists' common desire to feel their 'roots' and their sense of belonging towards centuries-old history and culture.



A. Kishchenko's work

Evidently, success in creating historical characters mostly depends on a painter's understanding of a corresponding epoch's events, as well as its spiritual atmosphere. They also need a sense of the passing of time, which divides us from the life of a historical personality. In this respect, it's interesting to compare A. Shaternik's *Maxim Bogdanovich* with a miniature composition by S. Larchenko, depicting Nikolay Gusovsky. Bogdanovich is a poet of the 19th and early 20th century, while Gusovsky is a 16th century Latin poet. Naturally, the character and style

of Gusovsky's time has inspired an expressive interpretation. A relaxed and sincere lyricism would hardly be appropriate; precision of structure and firmness of form seems more convincing. His work evokes the remoteness of five centuries past, arousing a feeling of respectful admiration.



Sculptural forms stand out for their monumentality

All the above-mentioned works share a common feature: assessing history from a modern day position while approving universal and immortal ideals. In recent years, works by ceramic artists have attracted increasing attention. They often use materials traditionally associated with sculpture (small forms, bas-relief and coins and medals). Their experiments enrich the genre while bringing an unexpected element of metaphor and new emotional tone. The sharply grotesque portraits of V. Koltygin, and the freakish *Guests at Home* by N. Bairachny are good examples. Belarusian ceramic painters embrace a retro style as yet untackled by traditional sculpture. This is vividly reflected in by A. Zimenko and A. Kontsub's *Chests and Cofferets*, where the exciting and mysterious poetry of ancient things is explored.

It may sound paradoxical, but it seems that these painters speak of the past using forward-looking language — yet describe the present using more traditional language.

If we put aside mundane definitions, we see that sculpture is a flight of fantasy, captured in stone. Our pro-

sculpture of the Belarusian enlightener in Prague, where he began his publishing activity, is most notable.

Famous sculptor Eduard Astafiev was entrusted to commemorate the memory of the Belarusian enlightener in the Czech capital. Jointly with architect Yuri Kazakov, they visited Prague and agreed the site for the monument with local authorities. The 2.5m metal sculpture shows him with the first Bible in his hands, welcoming guests to the Czech capital in the public garden of the Old Town, just a few steps from the National Library. Curiously, according to Mr. Astafiev, five centuries ago, young Skorina used to work as a gardener in that exact spot. The sculpture has become a landmark for the history of two cities and for the artist himself.

The topic of the Great Patriotic War is especially close to Mr. Astafiev. Among his works is the one dedicated to his father's memory — last surviving medal is 'frozen' in a granite piece, creating an eternal memory of an ordinary soldier's merits and of the Great Victory. Mr. Astafiev has created dozens of monuments and memorials in Belarus, dedicated to war. One honours prisoners of the death camp, sited at the cement factory in the Mogilev Region's Krichev. During the war years, the invaders tried to restore cement manufacture at the enterprise, fencing the surrounding area with barbed wire. A strongly guarded concentrated camp opened, where 18,000 people met their death.

The sculptor dedicated many works to the memory of Belarusian figures of history and culture, as well as heroes of war. Enough exist to create a whole gallery devoted to our fellow countrymen. The sculptor's cherished dream is to make a sculptural composition of 12 portraits — like the Bible's 12 apostles. These would depict Frantsisk Skorina, Yevfrosiniya Polotskaya, Kirill Turovsky, Kastus Kalinovsky and other Belarusian legends.

Each piece encourages us to ponder the great and heroic or simply to smile at life's delights. The tragic and comic come hand in hand in Mr. Astafiev's works.