

'I'm not Chagall, I'm Prokoptsov'

Director of National Art Museum of Belarus celebrates his 60th birthday by presenting a personal exhibition



By Victor Mikhailov

Vladimir Prokoptsov celebrates his 60th birthday on 8 August. 2013 also marks Vladimir Prokoptsov's fifteenth as the director of the country's main museum. The protagonist of our story does not have a split personality; being museum director does not prevent

him from also being a successful artist. Our interview takes place not in his director's office, but in his studio, among the smell of oil paints. Here, early in the morning, on weekdays and weekends, he has been painting pictures for his upcoming exhibition. In the title we added the words of Prokoptsov by which he emphasised not only the importance of his creativity, but his author's credo.

Study needs to be followed by daily commitment, to rise in your profession.

Artists are most stimulated when they are dissatisfied and feeling perturbed. Of course, some remain forever in obscurity while others might work unknown for years before exploding onto the public scene, finally impressing others.

I took a postgraduate course at The National Academy of Sciences of Belarus, to broaden my

artistic horizons. It showed me the art of concentration. As I'm now a museum director, I can no longer paint from dawn until night but it's a good job for me, as I'm self-sufficient: my education in fine arts enables me to speak with any artist or, even,



the director of the Louvre, as an equal. I feel that I'm in the right place. I couldn't become, say, the Minister of Cultural Affairs or the Prime Minister but my current occupation suits me. I enjoy working in the museum and I love my studio. I can switch from administrative work to artistic. I 'swim' in colour and listen to Pavarotti.

As a master of fine arts, I pay attention to our national culture. During the Year of Books in Belarus, last year, we launched our 'Famous Belarusian Artists' series, for which I wrote two editions: about Belonicky-Berulia and about Stanislav Zhukovsky.

Next, I'm planning an edition on Ferdynand Ruszczyc. Next year, we'll hold an exhibition using works on loan from museums in Poland and Ukraine. We're awaiting a picture of Ruszczyc - 'Near the Kostel'. I'd like to create a book about this artist for the exhibition too.

In a word, I'm self-motivated and very proud of my work, in which I feel comfortable. I like to learn from others, looking at how other artists are arranging their works; I like to learn from other museum directors, seeing how they arrange lighting or how they paint the walls. The walls in our Museum were grey while those of the

Tretyakov Gallery are green so we made ours green also.

It's understandable that it wasn't initially your dream to become a museum director. It requires a lot of time, so is painting now just a hobby?

It's a serious job. If you wish to call yourself an artist, exhibiting paintings, you have to be serious. I understand all the responsibility. If, as a director, you also call yourself an artist, your colleagues will offer criticism. Since you manage them, they feel entitled to give their opinion on your work. It's a game that must be played. If art were only a hobby to me, I'd simply paint for myself. However, it's more than a hobby. I lack enough time, since

I can't paint from dawn until night as a free artist, only using the early mornings and evenings, weekends and holidays.

Of course, only a handful of artists create one genius painting and go down in history for their talent. It usually takes many works to achieve acclaim, even though your 'hundred' paintings may not all be significant. You can paint just one or two annually and achieve acclaim, as long as they are able to touch people's hearts. If other artists call them perfect, you have your answer. It's important to me to receive professional approval as well as public popularity. It's part of my path to self-perfection.

It might seem strange for me to 'switch' between being an artist and a museum director but I benefit from both. In fact, my background will open doors to me sitting on expert commissions later.

This is my second exhibition at the National Modern Fine Arts Museum, and my works have been exhibited at the Commonwealth of Artists. I've exhibited one or two paintings at other exhibitions.

Is it important to convey your personal feelings in a picture?

Of course; what other reason is there? You'd just be wasting paint! I'm currently working on a painting entitled 'Vitebsk Night' and am trying to bring my energy into the picture. Vitebsk has mystery to it, like the Da Vinci Code. It exerts an enduring attraction that will always excite me. My Motherland is the other topic of which I can never tire.



My next painting is going to be called 'My Home'.

What keeps you painting: your personal feelings, your ability to draw, experience, or everything taken together?

Of course, everything together; feelings cannot always be sustained and, without experience, there is no professionalism. Training helps you to produce a professional picture. However, every artist approaches an empty canvas with trepidation. There's also an element of luck involved; sometimes, you might complete a work within a day or two but it can take much longer; I've been working on some for ten years. My 'Vitebsk Dreams about Paris' featured a young lady on the Moon, scattering cornflowers over Vitebsk. I came back to it after a few years and realised that there was something incorrect. I decided that the cornflowers looked too 'literary' so I repainted the picture with the girl throwing an armful of stars into the sky. This seemed more appropriately philosophical. Some pictures I repaint despite never exhibiting them, so my enduring interest is a combination of feeling, energy and professionalism.

Is each work individual or do you have an enduring motif?

Of course, each picture is individual. When I paint something, I immediately come up with a name. Let's say I intend to paint a lily, night or the dawn; first of all, I think about the philosophy of the name. To evoke mystery, you should use un-



derstate-ment and paint

things in a manner other than realistic: clouds should be green or not at all. I steer clear of the obvious unless I'm painting a straightforward still life work. Every artist has their

own philosophy and style.

Do you court public recognition?

Of course; all artists, actors, poets and writers want to be recognised for their talent. It's been so since man first picked up a piece of coal and began to paint on a rock, seeking admiration from his compatriots. I don't believe artists who say they don't desire glory; I think we're all ambitious. Of course, by nature, artists are individualists. Although poets and artists work alone, they dream of recognition. As a museum director, I want the museum to be the best in Belarus. In addition, I want to achieve something as an artist. This is natural; were it not so, how would we ever progress? Of course, there are various types of 'glory'; one is achieved through labour while the other is cheap. Time is a great judge.

I know a story about Minsk's Sarganov Street art studio. If it had ever exhibited every Belarusian artist in alphabetical order, there would be more than a thousand represented: the first would be Alshevsky and the last Yanushkevich. However, the only one who'd be pleased by this approach would be Alshevsky! Nobody wants to be in second place.

Are works by Belarusian artists interesting to foreign audiences?

Yes; of course. In fact, the Belarusian school, especially the realist school of our older generation, is rated highly. Europe lacks such a level today. Sadly, we lack

an art market which can support auctions. I'd like to see something in Vitebsk: the place permeated by the smell of paint since the times of Chagall and Malevich. Why do we have so many casinos and so few art galleries? We want to be a European capital and we certainly have the perfect geographical position. Our cities are well-groomed. We lack a Pavarotti but we have gorgeous artworks so why shouldn't we take a leading role in the art market; especially when we have such traditions as Chagall and Malevich?