

Leonid Shchemelev:

‘Contemplations are meaningless unless they find expression; we need to speak through our creations...’



Mr. Shchemelev sees his birthday as no occasion to deviate from his routine, established over the past 50 years! Every day, he arrives at his studio by 10.00am, regardless of his state of health, mood or weather conditions. He inherited the spacious workplace from his teacher, Vitaly Tsvirko, while his strict work habit dates from his years of army discipline. Aged 18, he served with the infantry in the Great Patriotic War, then with the horse troops after his injury. Around fifty of his works are dedicated to his military recollections but there are no battle scenes. Rather, he focuses on individuals in the midst of war.

Mr. Shchemelev was born in Vitebsk — a city famous for its artistic legacy. He received his education in Minsk and taught for some years at the art college. His popularity was not immediate or universal, although he now boasts a history of around fifty exhibitions. His canvases are found in galleries and private collections in thirty countries worldwide, including at the Russian Tretyakov Gallery and in Hollywood. The Leonid Shchemelev Art Gallery launched a decade ago in Minsk.

His wife Svetlana has been his muse for over half a century, with hundreds of his canvases devoted to her. In addition, he very much enjoys painting his family, as well as scenes from ancient and contemporary Minsk. “I don’t feel tired, still being able to create my works of art,” he asserts. Fame has never been his aim, yet it has come. In 1941, he went to the front, following his father, but was wounded. Only later did he begin his artistic career.

“I had a brilliant teacher, Vitaly Tsvirko, who taught our group perfectly,” recalls Mr. Shchemelev. After graduating, Shchemelev returned to the Art School to teach, shaping a constellation of prominent masters.

Vladimir Krivoblotsky, a monumental artist and Shchemelev’s pupil, notes, “It’s such a joy to meet someone wonderful. He gave us complete freedom and the opportunity to truly discover ourselves.”

Mr. Shchemelev is known across over 30 nations — including the USA, Canada, Mexico and Japan. He has trav-

elled widely but admits that he is always drawn back home. “I’ve been to many places and have been inspired to draw but my homeland, my Belarus, is my foundation,” he asserts.

It’s rare for him to spend time shopping, so you’re unlikely to bump into him in a store; he tends to order clothes from catalogues, trusting his wife Svetlana to take care of all other practicalities. His time, he devotes to art.

pupils, fans and, of course, his canvases. Belarus’ Culture Minister, Boris Svetlov, and the Deputy Chairman of the Minsk City Executive Committee, Igor Karpenko, attended, congratulating the painter on his jubilee, as did various diplomats.

Mr. Svetlov read a congratulation from the President of Belarus: ‘Your creativity has chronicled an age while your bright talent and unique artistic manner have made you a

‘heavyweight’ artist.

Awards are not my motivation. If people didn’t seek out my works, I’d have had no success. Many Belarusians, people from Minsk and other places, have bought my pictures. This has given me life. I don’t paint any better than other people but I’ve had the opportunity to buy canvases and paints to work with. Artists’ contemplations are meaningless unless they find expression; we need to speak through our crea-

your travels with those from your homeland. How does Belarus differ from other countries and how do you think visitors to our country perceive us?

Nature is the first thing that delights visitors; Belarus is covered with a whole system of pure spring water lakes and a network of rivers — large and small — which intersect our land’s length and breadth. These ensure eye-catching freshness and rich colour throughout each season. The colours change but don’t fade, remaining bright and fresh. The vivid greenery of spring and summer is replaced by the delicate yet solemn shades of autumn. In combination, they create a rich palette at once cheerful and serious. The transition to winter is beautiful: pure and snow-white. Trees are laced with frost, irresistible and unique. Nature never grows tired, exhausted by the sun or

always, he remains true to his vision. He speaks his mind on the importance of art to society and believes vehemently that artists need more support. People listen to his opinion although they may not always agree.

Many portraits of your loved ones appear in your paintings...

Like all artists, I paint that which I love. Since I love my family, I paint them with pleasure. However, I create portraits of those who are close to me in spirit and in conviction with equal pleasure. In my opinion, they are good as they are.

How have you managed to retain your identity over the years?

It was always difficult to be an artist and I’ve always had something to overcome. I’ve lost some things and have suffered, having experienced the severe war years and those which followed; they hardened me for all of life. Life isn’t hard today, because I’ve lived through what came before. My art works remain in demand, so I’m happy about that and would like to see them on display at exhibitions.

Are our contemporary times favourable for creativity?

For myself, yes. I’m of an age where I can allow myself to speak more than act, so I can be critical. Today’s world is fine for me but I know that many face difficulties and hard choices. Artists are great individualists, so compromise can be trying. Art permeates all society so we should try to take an interest and understand better and more deeply.

Most of those who attended the exhibition were already familiar with Shchemelev’s works but, of course, his canvases are worthy of admiration again and again. Many came to shake hands with the master and thank him for his outspoken attitude — which probably prolongs this life. The ceremony of congratulating the hero of the day lasted two hours. None were anxious to leave early and Mr. Shchemelev showed no sign of tiring, giving his time to all those keen to chat.

Archimandrite Vitaly, a priest from the St. Trinity Alexander Nevsky Lavra, in St. Petersburg, remarked, “Look at his works. They breathe kindness — which we lack in our grey, everyday life.”



Birthday exhibition sees over 100 paintings and drawings by Leonid Shchemelev on display

“Your wife is the foremost person in your life; she understands your most intimate motivations and opinions, which creates a strong connection,” notes the artist. He doesn’t tend to sell or ‘lend’ any of his pictures for exhibitions, explaining that he loves his canvases so much that he can’t bear to part with them.

Since 2003, the Leonid Shchemelev Art Gallery has been operating in Minsk but most of his displayed works are kept at the National Art Museum. It is here that he celebrated his birthday, surrounded by his dear loved ones, colleagues,

prominent master of Belarusian painting, gaining recognition far beyond our country’s borders.’ The Head of State views Mr. Shchemelev’s donation of several canvases to the city of Minsk’s Leonid Shchemelev Gallery as a patriotic deed. The Gallery is a centre of the capital’s cultural life.

The current exhibition showcases around 150 paintings and sketches from the master’s long career, embodying his views and a dialogue with the world.

You’ve been awarded many times and received prizes, making you a true

Our work determines our personality.

Mr. Shchemelev wanted to display more of his works but had to reach a compromise, using careful selection to represent his life’s creativity.

“Is it possible to show everything? Even a museum wouldn’t have enough room,” jokes the master. “There was no need to create so many!”

Of course, his brush guided him towards themes, scenes and characters. He portrayed life as he saw it, choosing characters pleasing to him.

You were able to compare and juxtapose scenes from

frozen from strong frosts — it’s always alive and fresh. This may explain why there have always been so many wonderful landscape painters among Belarusian artists.

Mr. Shchemelev remains faithful to his professional credo: creating what he considers to be vital and what is interesting and important to him. He has often suffered for his creativity, failing to receive worthy praise, but has never allowed his spirit to be broken. He has followed his own path, eventually achieving acknowledgment. Now, his fame and popularity are obvious and, as