

Rapid run of time frozen in bright moments

XX, XXI is the laconic title of an exhibition by People's Artist of Belarus Leonid Shchemelev, hosted by Minsk City Gallery



All ages adore L. Shchemelev's art



By Victor Mikhailov

Leonid Shchemelev's artistic career spans both centuries, inspiring the title of his latest exhibition. The maestro of painting has lived a rich life, being already over 90 years old: a life filled with wonderful moments, which he has captured on canvas, as if time were frozen (or rapidly moving forward when we view those works in quick succession). The spacious hall of the gallery is now filled with their unique aura.

As always, the opening of the exhibition was crowded, with those present congratulating Leonid and chatting in a relaxed manner as they viewed the canvases. For many, it was not their first encounter with his creativity. His incredible power draws fans back repeatedly.

What is the secret of such success and what draws us to become engaged and fascinated by Mr. Shchemelev's works? He tells us, "Art can't exist on its own; it must be connected with the country and society. Nothing develops entirely independently. There are many painters but few can reflect the spirit of the nation, the spirit of our culture and the spirit of national trends. This was true yesterday, is true today and will be so tomorrow. Everything can be learnt through art. If this doesn't exist, then we are simply painting pictures."

The artist underlines that nothing exists without the expression of the nation's spirit and without creativity. However, should art follow life, or should art be a guide for life?

It's very difficult to display the great variety of life. Art has always

been at the forefront of mankind's development. 3000 years ago, Greek and Roman art was to the fore. Later, Russia had such icon painters such as Rublev, whose works represented the spirit of Russia, in its unique beauty. All this is highly valued. Art reflected the time and looked a little towards the future. Art is a complex process of man's attitude towards beauty and to its essence. It is very interesting. Certainly, there are artists who see the world differently: probably not in the same way as some officials. However, art is not an act of pleasuring yourself! An artist sees the world their way and expresses the essence of this world. I never hear or read that we do not need art. Our life is impossible without it.

Do you feel today's world has an interest in art?

Many are keen to buy my works, but it really isn't necessary to do so; you can simply look and discuss. People come from all corners of Belarus and it's very interesting to me to chat with them, since art is an



integral part of our education, capturing the essence of all that's beautiful and best. Art used to be taught as other subjects, such as mathematics. This was not with the purpose of making all pupils artists, but to encourage taste, knowledge and understanding of the aesthetic: skills useful in all walks of life. Think

of Greek sculptures and how perfectly they were made. That artistic school is now lost and, sadly, many works are made without knowledge of art.

In this respect, we may recollect the fates of Isaac Levitan and Konstantin Korovin. The wonderful diploma paper of Levitan, presented at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, wasn't awarded a Big Silver Medal. Finishing his studies in 1883, he didn't even receive the title of 'classroom artist' but a diploma designating that he was a teacher of drawing (calligraphy). When, in 1886, Ko-



Artist still hard at work

rovin finished the same school, the pedagogical council also held back the title of 'classroom artist', making him 'non-classroom': having only the right to teach at a drawing school. Paradoxically, during this period of the late 1880s, this 'non-classroom' painter created a series of pictures destined to occupy a prominent place in the history of Russian art.

These days, when everything is so flamboyant at exhibitions and there are no barriers, the public is no longer surprised by anything, so it's impossible to imagine the devastating effect of *Wedding* — Leonid Shchemelev's diploma paper at the Theatre and Art Institute. The origi-

nal variant of this picture, created in his student years (in the 1950s), is on display at the exhibition. It has figurative and expressive shortcomings, especially when compared to the works of Shchemelev's peers, but it highlights the excessive seriousness of the other graduates' paintings. The picture is unusually personal, penetrating not with exclamatory pathos but with lyrical intonation. It's so unlike his other works, which were strictly ranked and regulated by thematic canons.

Today, it's easy to see why Shchemelev's success developed from his *Wedding*; rejected by the authorities, it was a success among young people, who viewed it as a bright example of its time. Shchemelev was being bold and impudent, in a juvenile manner, confirming his own ideal, giving him unrivalled popularity among the young.

Is there a lack of cultural education nowadays?

Teaching is vital. Once, a teacher brought pupils to my studio. I spoke to them but all were silent. I asked them what they liked but they didn't answer. Only one responded while the rest remained silent, not knowing what to say. It was good that they

interesting and much older than their pupils, boasting huge experience. They were not great masters but they taught efficiently and it was interesting. Many passed away without leaving any great works but they did leave wonderful memories, which is extremely important. Art isn't an exclusive occupation for the few; art is for everyone. Why hang a landscape on your wall? People need to think. The same concerns cinema, which is a great shaping force for society. Some films are a real legacy. Think of Sergei Eisenstein's 'Battleship Potemkin'. It's short but has great power. This is the essence of true art and many such films have been made.

Have you always been concerned or is this a recent passion for you?

Of course, I've developed in fits and starts, like everyone. I saw much after WWII and took various fancies, but my approach towards pictorial culture remained true. I create art to reflect my understanding of people. You can make a beautiful portrait but it may be unsuccessful in artistic terms. Serov painted Shalyapin: as displayed in the Tretyakov Gallery. It's as big as my studio wall — some 3 metres across. It's unique in depicting both the person and personal-



were brought to me, and this should be done more often.

Artists become more confident on feeling the interest of society, feeling that they create not only for themselves but for other people and for the country where they were born and brought up. These days, many live for the moment: eating, sleeping and going to work. Previously, times were hard. From 1947-1949, people had nothing to eat for days but there was a goal. Moreover, teachers were

ity in musical art. However, my own opinions are just some of many. You may agree or disagree. Art is supposed to inspire debate. We have a population of around 10 million and 1,200 artists. If all are engaged in abstract art, what will people see on visiting exhibition halls? It's a real issue.

Such is the conversation we had against the background of his exhibition; he captured his time and continues to do so with a bold spirit, as in his younger years.