

Artist raising the earth to the sky

National Art Museum hosts *Mystery of Night* exhibition, devoted to 85th birthday of People's Artist of Belarus and State Award laureate, Gavriil Vashchenko, with great success

By Victor Mikhailov

The recent exhibition has featured sixty works, created by Mr. Vashchenko over the past three decades, indicating the artist's extensive proficiency. Despite his venerable age, the master comes to his workshop every day and, according to the Chairman of Belarusian Union of Artists, Rygor Sitnitsa, 'his life is a perfect example of how it's possible to manage your time and life'. "Mr. Vashchenko has done this brilliantly," Mr. Sitnitsa states.

Importantly, the artist continues developing and changing, and his works are always varied. Gavriil's pictures from the 1990s differ greatly from those painted in the 2000s. "The present show is the result of many years of thoughts, inspired by insomnia and life situations, as well as old legends and superstitions. Actually, many mysteries are hidden in the night," notes Mr. Vashchenko.

Three of his pictures are most impressive. *Jordan in Polesie* arouses unconscious associations with the Chernobyl disaster: Polesie villagers plan to baptise radiation-polluted water. The *Two* creates an impression of the split world where survival is possible through love only. In turn, his *Heat of Kupalle Fire* amazes with a blossoming nature which is full of passion. One of Mr. Vashchenko's fans has proposed an interesting interpretation of his artistry. For many years he's been trying to discover why most of Gavriil's works are perceived as gloomy (for example, the artist's depiction of the sky). Eventually, he realised: Mr. Vashchenko's sky is our earth; the painter brings the Belarusian earth up to the sky.

No doubt, Gavriil Vashchenko is a landmark painter of our Belarusian art. He is viewed as a founder of the young national school of monumental artists and is among the brightest Belarusian painters. His works are hung at over 30 museums worldwide, and the Tretyakov Gallery alone owns over a dozen of his paintings. Not long ago, Mr. Vashchenko celebrated his 85th birthday. However, his respectable age does not prevent him from drawing.

Mr. Vashchenko, your artistic legacy comprises hundreds of portraits, landscapes, still-life paintings,

frescoes and stained-glass works. When did you draw your first picture?

This happened so many years ago! Those were school years. I had poor grades as, during lessons, I used to draw, doing this in notebook margins first, and then on the pages.

How can you explain this desire for drawing? Were any artists in your family?

I was born in the remote village of Chikalovichi, in Polesie's Bragin District. It was unpopular to paint there as, since



early childhood, field work was common. Accordingly, my family did not encourage my desire to paint. I learnt the art independently and received my first 'salary' in my sixth year at school. At that time, a topic of border guards was popular. I drew a painting on guards' night service and sent it to the 'Pionerskaya Pravda' newspaper. The picture was printed, and I was thanked with a box of coloured pencils. The war then began and we spent three years under occupation. I graduated from my seventh year at school only after the war, but never stopped drawing.

As far as I know, you did not initially plan to enter art college...

Jointly with my classmates, I went to enter Gomel's Railway College. My parents loved this speciality as it could bring in money. I passed the entrance examinations easily, and went to the quay to return home. In those days it was cheaper to travel by steamboat. At the

quay, I saw a Ukrainian newspaper with an announcement that Kiev's Art College was enrolling students. As a result, I went to Kiev instead of going home.

You focus on diverse genres now, but which of them do you enjoy the most: portraits, landscapes or still-life paintings?

Actually, I can't answer your question. A new artistic idea comes with the genre it should be implemented in, whilst frescoes and stained-



glass works were a part of an official order.

Let's turn to the stained-glass works then. When creating pictures, you are truly independent, but stained-glass works presuppose co-operation with architects. Is this difficult for you?

I'm a monumental artist by education, and my diploma paper was devoted to stained-glass windows. Easel painting was my hobby back then but, over the course of time, it's become the key. Monumental works involve co-operation

with architects. For example, I've proposed the system of stained-glass windows for Minsk's Moskva cinema.

Many of your works are related to the war or to Chernobyl. Are they a part of your personal memories?

Actually, my art is connected one way or another with my fate. As a boy, I lived through three years of occupation, and my childhood memories inspired me to paint a cycle devoted to the Great Patriotic War. The 'Ballad on Bravery' is among its best pictures, and I was awarded the Mitrofan Grekov medal for it. This work involves my personal recollections when, being a boy, I joined partisans in the forest. 'The Breakthrough', which brought me the Belarus' State Award, arouses similar memories.

Is Chernobyl connected with your personal recollections?

My native village of Chikalovichi was resettled, as it was part of the exclusion zone. I visited it five years after the disaster. Nobody lived in the village then but, being an artist, I wished to see what had happened to my native land, where I lived until the age of 16. My impressions were fearsome. I saw deep grass instead of streets, broken roofs and hous-

es. I met no one there, except for wolves in the barns. While staying there, I perceived everything as a surrealistic picture where sounds and sky are truly different. Those impressions inspired me to draw a picture, and the topic of Chernobyl was later augmented in my works.

You also have some 'unreal' pictures which focus on mythology. What mythological character do you love most of all?

Mythology is linked to my childhood. These are the stories which my mother and grand-



parents told me, and which I've depicted on canvas. My mother loved to tell me: 'Don't cry or else a kiviki-bird will take you'. According to my mother, this bird flies at night crying 'kiviki'. Many years after, I depicted it in my picture.

Artistic personalities love to say that they have no favourite works, as all of them are like their children, being dear and beloved. What about you?

I keep several works at my workshop which have been exhibited in Belarus and abroad. I've never sold them, bringing them home all the time. These are connected with my homeland and my family. Among these pictures is a portrait of my grandmother. She lived an incredibly long life, 115 years, and witnessed the Revolution, the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War.

Your pictures are held in thirty museums worldwide. In your opinion is Belarusian art perceived differently in our country and beyond?

Major art has always been national, but the borders in art began fading in the late 20th century, which impacted negatively, of course. Art is a nation's soul, history and code. If this code is lost, then art turns into mathematics, physics or whatsoever. It's no longer art then.

What do you think of modern artists, and are they a worthy generation, in your mind?

Art is becoming commercial. Accordingly, modern artists keep their eyes open and attentively follow what is in demand now. This has nothing to do with painters' souls or feelings. This is about making objects for sale. It's not just our country that faces this trouble; a similar situation is observed in Russia and the West.

There is an opinion that a person continues learning all their life, despite their age, knowledge and experience. What more would you love to learn at the age of 85?

Art is an exciting game. The more you learn, the more horizons open for you. After my

graduation from college, I accepted myself as a great master. At the age of 85, I see so many undiscovered aspects. With this in mind, art never becomes dull.

The *Mystery of Night* show, which the National Art Museum hosted for 32 days, is finished by now. The jubilee exhibition, dedicated to Gavriil Vashchenko's 85th birthday (which he actually celebrated last June) began with an open air show in Gomel. Later, the works of this 'non-typical painter of the 1960s' moved to Minsk's museum.

On the eve of the show, the most famous Polesie-born Belarusian failed to sleep. As he admits, since 1956, when the show was first organised, insomnia has haunted him before every exhibition. Meanwhile, the master always smiles and remains cheerful. Mr. Vashchenko visited the museum every day for a week — personally choosing the places for his pictures. As a result, his *Twilight* and *Old Dnieper*, a river of his childhood near Bragin, were placed as he wished.

The painter represents classical Belarusian fine arts, and his heyday was from 1960-1980s. During that time Mr. Vashchenko painted *Ballad on Bravery*, *My Polesie*, *Mother's Wings*, *September Fogs*, *First Snow* and his outstanding *August* (which is on the list of the 20th century's top hundred pieces of art).

Natalia Selitskaya, who managed the recent exhibition, notes, "His unique, yet well recognised style, and artistic language was formed at the end of the 1960s. Audiences can plunge into this meditation, perceiving Mr. Vashchenko as a major philosopher."

Interestingly, the artist's true family name reads VashchAnka, with an accent on 'O' coming from the years of his studies in Kiev. A mistake made in his passport has not prevented him from becoming a landmark figure of art.