



Variety of the current portrait painting was revealed at the exhibition in the National Art Museum of Belarus

# The art of reality and imaginary amazingly combine in museum's artistic masterpieces

National Art Museum of Belarus hosts *Bystanders of the Time. The Portrait of the Russian Painting and Graphics of the 18th-20th Century* exhibition from the museum's funds. It was organised as part of *Our Collections* project.

**By Victor Mikhailov**

The most favourable impression from the exhibition leads to admiration: how rich are museum funds for painting of the highest level! Immortal (without exaggeration) art of true masters can be seen as part of one thematic collection.

Giving a definition to the portrait genre, many got used to speak about such concept as a 'life-like portrait', i.e., the likeness of an image and a person. However, the portrait does not always mean anthropomorph. An artist does not strive to capture the image of a particular individual, painting the lines of the face, body and gesture. Creating a piece of art, the master often solves another task — to reflect mood and state, to show typical rather than individual features, and to depict scenes which focus not on a person but on the activity they're involved.

The life-like portrait was a matter for the Russian art in the early 18th century, when the reforms of Peter the Great affected all areas of life and in many ways changed the role of the individual in society. Russian painters try to depict a person's singularity in their canvases, though not always reaching outstanding artistic results. However, this was only the beginning. The Russian art came to the European arena in the second half of the 18th century. A number of outstanding por-

traitists appeared, including Fiodor Rokotov with his unique painting manner, his ability to convey not only features, but also the atmosphere. He presents the image of a person inseparable from the surrounded world, with the outlines of a portrayed figure seem to merge in space... (*The Portrait of Vasily Sheremetev*, created by the author in 1770).

Undoubtedly, an insight into the historical past helps truly assess the exposition. The history of development of the Russian art in the first half of the 19th century testifies to the appropriateness of the previously chosen way, primarily the need to establish the Academy of Arts in Russia (1757) that played a significant role as an artistic centre of the country. Meanwhile, in the beginning of the century the postulate of classicism, propagated by the Academy, found their reflection in bright and expressive images, while by the middle of the century the crisis of the classical concept has become quite apparent.

However, not only classicism with its severity and proportionality, alongside high estimate of the civic duty and social significance of a particular person, determined the art of this period, as is seen from such pictures as *The Portrait of Emperor Alexander I* (1800), *The Portrait of Count Grigory Kushelev* (1800), and *The Portrait of Piotr Konovnitsyn*

(1823-1825) by Anthelme Lagrenée. Other styles and trends were also developing: romanticism with its belief in human genius — *The Portrait of a Man* (1807) by Alexander Orlovsky; sentimentalism with its anxious attitude towards an ordinary person — *The Portrait of Sophia Buchmeier* (the second half of the 1810s) by an unknown artist.

Nevertheless, Karl Bryullov was the most outstanding and

inconsistency of high professional level of its representatives and some distance from real life. However, there are also significant achievements of that time: *The Portrait of Elena Thone* (1844-1845) by Alexey Tyranov, *The Portrait of Fiodor Tolstoy* (circa 1850) and *The Portrait of Princess Anna Gruzinskaya* (1856) by Sergey Zaryanko, *The Portrait of Artemy Loris-Melikov with His Wife and an Italian Boy* (1856)

of *Pompeii* (1833). Fiodor Bronnikov used the similar method. At first, it seems that his work doesn't have any relation to portraits. However, the painter embodied himself (to the left deep) as a man sitting at the table and watching what is happening. In this way, the painter expressed his own attitude towards social injustice while trying to reflect human psychology. Here he was close to realism.

Realism was in the forefront of the Russian art of the second half of the 19th century. One of the greatest portraitists of the time was Ivan Kramskoi who very accurately and concisely conveyed the psychological portrait of the personality.

The traditions of realism continued in the late 19th-early 20th century, with young painters putting these rethought traditions into action: Nikolay Bogdanov-Belsky (*The Portrait of Maria Sheremeteva*, 1898), Alexander Moravov (*Friends. The Portrait of Lyubochka with a Dog*, 1908), and Alexander Murashko (*The Portrait of Leonty Benois*, 1904-1910).

At the turn of the century there were a number of masters with their own unique manner — unseen before freedom of painting and freedom in understanding of tasks of the art: Konstantin Korovin (*The Portrait of Anna Safonova*, 1911), Zinaida Serebryakova (*The Portrait of Yevgeny Zolotarevsky*, 1922), Valentin Serov (*The Portrait of Alexey Morozov*, 1909), and



memorable figure against the background of these events in the art. On the one hand, he's incorporated the best features of the academic school without losing the connection with nature. On the other hand, 'The Great Karl' was the ancestor of academism — a contradictory trend in the Russian art. The contradiction of this trend is primarily determined by



Boris Kustodiev (*The Portrait of Maria Shostakovich*, 1923).

Many painters, who had established in that period, soon found themselves in a completely new world for themselves — the new country — USSR, where the art was largely 'reinterpreted' by the state. They attempted to return to understandable and available images of the realism of the second half of the last century. All other trends and movements (including impressionism) were tried to fall away. However, Russian masters had a thorough grasp of the art of French painters, and it became a commonplace in the art of a new Russia.

A bright example is *The Family Portrait* (1934) by Alexander Gerasimov, one of the teachers of Konstantin Korovin and the President of the Academy of Arts of the USSR. This was a new understanding of colour and form. The similar brushwork was actually alien for masters of the second half of the 19th century. Thus, old methods and traditions of painting, after those proposed

by the state and designed to glorify new socialist ideals, appeared baseless. Even such an 'iconic' image as *The Portrait of Alexey Stakhanov* (1937) by Georgy Ryazhsky which presents the harsh and heroic daily life of its subjects, and captured by the language of painting, and which the era of extreme freedom, bordering on spontaneity,

crossed the 'point of no return.'