



Emotional accents of philosophising

National Art Museum of Belarus hosts exhibition of works by People's Artist of Belarus Arlen Kashkurevich

By Victor Mikhailov

The exhibition displays around 80 pieces from various periods of Kashkurevich's creativity: well-known drawings and engravings, early works (including his diploma paper for his graduation from the Belarusian Theatre and Art Institute), and works from recent years.

The creativity of People's Artist of Belarus and BSSR State Prize holder, Prof. Arlen Kashkurevich is notable in contemporary Belarusian art. His name is widely known among art lovers in our country and far beyond — not least for the mystery surrounding his private life. Officially, he was not a member of any creative union, choosing his own path; his personality was inseparable from his dramatic and intense art. From the 1960s — a time of emergence for the Belarusian art school, he presented the contrasts of the 20th century, exploring philosophical issues regarding our human place in the modern world. Republican and All Union exhibitions began to display works by the new generation of graphic artists, Arlen Kashkurevich was among them. Like his peers, he embraced modern aesthetic ideals, new themes and techniques. Arlen even explored gravure etching into lino, creating portraits in black and white, using intense, expressive strokes with a dry needle technique.

Arlen Kashkurevich was born in Minsk in 1929 and lived there all his life, except for a short period when his family was forced to evacuate to Saratov, during the war. After the liberation of Belarus, he returned to his hometown and, on completing high school, entered Minsk's Civil Engineering College. However, having exceptional drawing ability, he took classes at Minsk's House of Folk Art, under Nikolay Tarasikov — a great master of painting with much experience. Kashkurevich then entered Minsk's Art College and successfully graduated in 1953. He immediately continued his studies at the Belarusian State Theatre and

Art Institute's Graphics Department.

Arlen Kashkurevich quickly became a perfect graphic artist, being asked to illustrate various editions. His graduation work was a series of illustrations for *Atom Station* — a novel (1959) by Icelandic writer Halldór Laxness. Invited to teach at the Institute, he dedicated himself to this over the next decade. In 1960, he was admitted to the Union of Artists of the BSSR, and regularly had his works on show at Republican and All Union exhibitions.

Book illustration occupied a significant place in Mr. Kashkurevich's creativity, providing him with many years of employment. He showed skill in creating original images to accompany text: evidence of his deep insight into the essence of literary works. He was able to grasp philosophical and ethical content, producing images both fresh and simple yet meticulously executed.

One of his first major tasks was to illustrate an edition of Yanka Kupala's *Three Poems*, in 1962. His stark images were the perfect accompaniment to the emotional artistic language of Kupala's poetry. The artist was excited by the task, due to its architectural structure and, despite its small circulation, the book was awarded a diploma at the All Union Competition in Moscow.

Arlen Kashkurevich's book illustrations frequently won honorary diplomas and prizes at international competitions: *Third Generation* by Kuzma Cherny, *Snowy Winters and Heart in Your Palm* by Ivan Shemyakin, *Gadfly* by Ethel Voynich, *King Stakh's Wild Hunt* and *Ears Under Your Sickle* by Vladimir Korotkevich, Hans Andersen's *Fairy Stories*, and Ales

Adamovich's *Chasteners* and *Story of Khatyn*.

Among his most significant achievements was a series of illustrations for *Song About The Auroch* by Nikolay Gusovsky: a remarkable poem of national importance. His images in the style of old engravings captured the spirit of the age of this prominent lyrical and epic work.

His colleagues considered Arlen to be not only an artist, but a highly educated person, who



Landscape with a Cat, 1968

comprehended traditions — particularly in Western European art. His allegorical images, used to illustrate *Variations on Faust*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, convey well the tragedy of our personal responsibility for our actions and the necessity of moral choice. His extraordinary interpretation of characters and events and introduction of contemporary realities added an acute relevance to the German classic, as well as philosophical depth. Meanwhile, pain, grief and protest are dominant emotional accents of Arlen's illustrations for Ales Adamovich's



Craftsmen series, 1966-1967

Chasteners, in which he ruthlessly analyses and blames the inhuman ideology of Fascism.

Arlen depicted exceptional drama and pathos regarding the heroic events detailed in *Partisans* and *Siege*, as well as sympathetic lyricism in his tenderly drawn female characters in *She and I* — based on the poem by Yanka Kupala. He conveyed the beauty of creative labour in *Craftsmen* and the battle between good and evil in *Faust*, alongside the terrifying grotesque in *Napalm*. His illustrations for the Icelandic epic of *Edda* spanned nine episodes.

Working at his easel, he often created great graphic cycles, working fully through a concept as the sequence progressed. His series of etchings for *Craftsmen*, dedicated to those working at Neman Glassworks, in Belarus, is an anthem to inspired creative labour. The glassblowers' hard work is depicted via savage strokes in *Brigade* and *Glass-blower*. In contrast, his images of female workers are made with flowing, soft lines, in *Inspiration* and *Cutters*.

Arlen's four etched engravings for *Partisans* are dedicated to the heroic events of the Great Patriotic War. Using the dry needle method, they don't depict battle scenes. Rather, they look at the tragedy of our Earthly fragility and, thus, the true courage of self-sacrifice during war. His expressive and dynamic *Thirst* evokes quite different feelings to his severe, static *Partisans' Mothers*.

The artist was awarded the State Prize of the BSSR in 1972 for his

Partisans engravings and a series of graphic works based on Yanka Kupala's works. A year later, Mr. Kashkurevich was awarded the title of Honoured Artist of the BSSR. His images were always vividly recognisable, whether portraying anger or heroism, whether lyrical or elegiac. With each bold stroke, he created great expression and emotion. Meanwhile, he was a master of various techniques.

Throughout his life, he remained faithful to his creativity, offering philosophical contemplation of man's eternal search for meaning and truth. His major cycle, entitled *Concerto Grosso* (Grand Concert), created from 2003 to 2006, explored the tragedy of an artist never feeling that he achieves all that is possible. Meanwhile, his *Nice Urban Life* series looked at human loneliness in our challenging modern world. Using imagery of people lost in our big cities, he presented the full force of our alienation from society and our own identity when obliged to live in faceless urban environments. Portraying sadness, bitterness, grief, despair, resentment and mournful empathy, his works cannot fail to arouse the deepest sympathy.

Arlen Kashkurevich died last August. The leading art museums are honoured to own examples of his works: the National Art Museum of Belarus, the Belarusian Union of Artists, the Modern Fine Arts Museum (Minsk), the National Museum of History and Culture of Belarus, the State Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow), the Directorate of Exhibitions of the Union of Artists of the Russian Federation, and Johann Goethe and Friedrich Schiller Museum (Weimar, Germany), as well as museums in Polotsk, Grodno and Kiev. His unforgettable paintings can also be found in private collections in Belarus, Iceland, Poland, Germany and the USA.