On the problem of fine arts as practised by Soviet Northern peoples

This problem is part and parcel of the pressing issue of how small nations's cultures may be preserved and developed. In Soviet fine arts the theme of the Soviet North is usually associated with the canvases and graphics made by D.K. Sveshnikov, V.A. Igoshev, A.A. Yakovlev and A.V. Borodin. The life of reindeer-breeders, hunters and fishermen is portrayed with emotions that vary in intensity. Their representations combine traditional realism and slight stylizations but they are always presented from the outside. Meanwhile, the Soviet Northern nations have their own original thinking in the arts and their unique spatial concepts born on their boundless tundra expanses and the Arctic Ocean and out of their life-styles as evidenced by their poetic folklore, birch-bark, wood, stone and bone carvings as well as by their fur patterns and embroidery in beads.

The small nations scattered about the vast expanses of subpolar and transpolar areas are hard pressed to establish their own professional movements in fine arts. While the Yakuts established their own graphic art movement in the 1960s, the Nenets, the Evenkis and the Chukchis have nothing of sort in terms of such local art forms. But according to the testimony of Northern art researchers who believe that every Northern nation has an astonishing penchants for representational art, all of the Northern nations could not but evince a desire to express themselves in painting and graphics in the 20th century. This desire of theirs is manifested from time to time in the art

of talented people born to be artists. Those artists would often be unaware of one another or of the links of continuity among them. As a result, they would fail to build a tangible tradition.

Nonetheless it appears feasible for us to discern some logic in the evolution of the Northern nations' 20th century fine arts and to outline the stages of their history shaped both by changes in the Northerners' world-views and by their contacts with Europe's tradition in the arts. For us those stages are linked to these three names: Tyko Vylko, the first Nenets painter, Konstantin Pankov, an alumnus of the Leningrad Institute for Northern Nations, and the Hunt artist Gennady Raishev, our contemprorary.

Vylko's talent bloomed in the 1900s when a vigorous campaign started to tap Russia's Northern Polar regions. Moved from an almost primitive environment to a highly civilized one by a twist of fate, the talented Samoyed showed what his nation was capable of. Opened in Moscow's Museum for Handicrafts, the exposition of Vylko's drawings and paintings was a sensational success. Some of the viewers liked the exotic in his art: it was only fifteen years before that the Samoyed Vasily, Vylko's fellow-countryman, was presented as a live exhibit eating raw fish in public at the All-Russia Exposition of Industry and Fine Art in Nizhny Novgorod (the fish-eating show was staged in the North pavillion decorated with Konstantin Korovin's and Sergei Malyutin's murals). Others were driven by their scholarly ethnographic interest in his art. Still others saw Vylko's naive canvases as an illustration of pure and sincere art,

the kind of art artists took pains to produce in the early 20th century. Some time later the residents of Moscow could compare Vylko to Niko Pirosmani, while in 1927 in Soviet Russia the works produced by the two popular art masters were shown concurrently at an art exposition held to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. One is ill advised to fall for analogies between Vylko and Georgia's brilliant primitivist, for Tyko Vylko had a different relationship with professional art. The criteria of Russian realist landscape painting he had learned from A.A. Borisov, V.V. Pereplet-chikov and A.E. Archipov were organic to the Northerner's artisctic thinking only in some reduced measure, giving rise to his eclectic compositions, as a result.

Theoretically, we have more gounds, it appears, to compare Pirosmani to the Nenets artist Konstantin Pankov and to a constellation of his less well-known coeds in the Institute for Northern Nations (late 1920s and early 1930s) that include the female Nenets artist Lampai, the Hunt Natuskin, the Selkup Ijimbin, the Evenkis Terentyeva and Sakharov and the Ude Kilepyachka. Their thousand-year-old cosmogonic thinking emerged blended with the joyous feeling of national self-awakening in their art. At last they were able to look at themselves through an outsider's eyes and their first contacts with the 20th century civilization put the romantic touches on their folkloric world-view devoid of the real awareness of problems and tragedies of the day.

Their Leningrad teachers dropped academic classes on drawing and painting from nature in the belief that "instead of teaching

art to the Northerners they would rather allow them to reveal what they have inherent in their awakening consciousness".[1] According to the Institute's teaching methodologies "The major feature that sets the small Northern nations' perception apart from that of European nations is their easily observable plane and graphic techniques and realism in the new sense that may be deciphered as their realist approach to the medium (pencil, pen, paper)".[2]

Of course, those classes were conducted with the students as no indifferent objects. The classes helped the would-be artist to put the tools of expression he or she liked best to good and efficient use.[3] The professors appear to have drawn their alumni's attention to the world art phenomena the alumni found congenial, in particular, classical Chinese painting known for its large landscapes that evolve from the bottom to the top. But nonetheless Pankov's and other Norcoeds' brilliant art remained primitivist. The logic of its evolution was to place it in touch with the 20th century avant-gardist trends that looked for support and inspiration in the art of early civilizations. This was the sentiment shared by the sculptor L.A. Mess and the painter A.A. Uspensky who were in charge of the Institute's studios as well as by N.N. Punin who set up the Northerners' art show in the Russian museum. But the situation that obtained on the art scene stood in the way.

But what was not possible back in those days came true in Gennady Raishev's art. Enrolled in 1954 in the North Department of the Leningrad Teachers' College, where he was reading the Russian language and literature and, at the same time, studying

fine art, Raishev felt that he had to pick up where Pnakov and his coeds left off. Almost a self-taught person, the young Hunt set out to master the experience of world art in a systematic fashion. He was lucky in that winds of change began to sweep the country during his years in Leningrad and Soviet artists started to unearth the artistic traditions that used to be taboos or almost taboos earlier on. Vrubel helped Raishev to come across the visual embodiment of fantastic images, while Churlenis helped him learn the "union of sound, motion and color".[4] The Hermitage collections of French paintings helped him refine the sense of measure he had been born with and his sophisticated colorism. Fawism gave him what he needed to fortify his search for plane expressiveness which "allows to act rythmically and fast adapting form and color to motion". But Matisse's program designed to rely on art in saving man from "his agitation and anxiety" proved alien to Raishev. His empathy with human suffering prompted him to lean toward Van Gogh and the German Expressionists.

Raishev's original talent was apparent in the late 1960s. In those years professional artists working in various constituent republics in this country felt the need to go back to their roots. Folk art emerged as one of the major guidelines. What set Raishev's experimentation apart was the fact that he was busy mastering his professional skills and criteria in the area of figurative folk art concurrently, criteria that were vital to his work.

Shortly after his graduation from the Institute Raishev made his home in the town of Karpinsk in the northern region of the

Ural Mountains close to his native Siberia, where he was inspired not so much by impressive realities as by the memories of his childhood: in his mind's eye he saw the world of his old Hunt settlement and the people whose life was that of nature animated by their flights of imagination. "The North is the limitless expanses of water, swamps and snow. I will forever remain enraptured with space". Space unfolds like a scroll, or is stretched horizontally, in Raishev's engravings and on his canvases. At times his entire composition acquires an ornamental decor. But the artist does not borrow his patterned designs from folk art, instead he finds them in the silhouettes of thick woods, the tops of pine-trees, the reliefs of the ground and in the ripples of water. He attempts to rediscover the path trodden by generations of his ancestors: "I follow the people. I learn from life by reaching out for the symbol and hieroglyph and then I go back to impart my sensations in them". Reflecting reliefs of Raishev's touches dot the fringes of his human bodies as if they were the edges of a gaping wound slit in the earth-crust that used to shelter those queer creatures and spirits of nature which are almost real fishermen and hunters who have their very own personalities, morals and habits. No previous Northern artist was as skillful and as dramatic as he is in portraying life. Known for his naive and joyous perception of life, Pankov, it seems, would shudder at the sight of the modern Hunt artist's characters' piercing stare.

Unlike his forerunners, Raishev appeared on the art scene with a different experience. His view of the world was, by and large,

shaped by the tragedy of the 1930s and the Second World War that broke into his green years. Seen as a menacing metaphor, Raishev depicted the Ponomarev steamship carrying away his peers' fathers and detaching them from the age-old life-styles: the steamship appears creeping along, covered in smoke only to turn into a shapeless hydra looming large over a handful of people. It pains the artist's heart to see all the living creatures die. The screams of the loons and the springtime warbling of the woodpecker knocking on the trunk of a dry tree sound almost like the alarm. Civilization personified, the long-legged triangular shaitan is trampling man underfoot, his shape borrowed from electric line or oil rig support beams and his arms extended far into the sky. In his numerous works Raishev relies on this image as a part of his national visual symbols in portraying it either as the silhouette of a giant, or as a linear ghost travelling over land and water. His shaitan has many faces he keeps changing all the time: now he is an enemy of nature, now he turns into a lion, now he is a living creature in the sky laughing at the conceited man vindictively.

No matter how folkloric Raishev's thinking is in his art, he is a bright and original artist with his own personality that manifests itself in his dramatic images, in their poetic overtones and in his toung-in-the-cheek attitude to traditional popular beliefs. Over the past decades his work continued to evolve, growing increasingly philosophical in his view of the world and revealing global problems that lurk behind the experiences and troubles of the people he accepted as his kith

and kin. Being a member of a small nation, Raishev has, perhaps, felt the pressing need for surrounding the planet with care and attention. There is no doubt in our minds that he is a unique artist. Nowadays one can hardly point up any other Northern artist of his caliber. But the Raishev phenomenon is graphic and conclusive proof that small nations are capable of developing their cultures in their very own unique ways and evidence that the need to choose between isolation and assimilation is for them anything but inevitable.

NOTES:

1. See Gor G. Prostranstvo Pankova (Pankov's Space). In the collected works Raduga na snegu (The Rainbow on the Snow). Moscow, 1972, p. 169 (Russian edition).
2. Leningrad Archives of the USSR Academy of Sciences. F. 250, Op. 3, No 166, p. 86 (Russian edition).
3. Ibid.
4. From now on Raishev is quoted from the tapes recorded by the authors of the report.

The report has been prepared by

Golynets S.V., member of the AICA,
Head of Art History Chair,
Ural M. Gorky State University

and by Golynets G.V.
Assistant professor,
Art History Chair

Telephone 24-54-33

Address: 620055, Sverdlovsk,
Vostochnaya 84-b, apart. 18.