

Conference Paper

Glass Artworks of the Naive Artist Albert Korovkin

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Abstract

Naïve art is still under-represented in Russian museum and professional art institutions, with the works and heritage by many artists remaining under-exhibited and under-researched. Albert Korovkin (1935) is an artist whose name features in the *World Encyclopaedia of Naive Art*. His works entered the collection of the Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts as part of the gift from Yevgeny Roizman. Among the donated works, there were about 50 pieces of glass-blowing art. Korovkin worked as a glassblower at the Institute of the Ural Scientific Centre, where he manufactured scientific equipment, but did not have a professional glassblower education. Since the collector did not register attribution data at the time of the acquisition of works, any information on the technology of manufacturing works, as well as a comparative analysis of the series of paintings and glass-blowing works, is relevant. This article presents an attempt of such an analysis providing relevant information on the artist's background, style and technique.

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Published: 25 August 2020

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E**Keywords:** amateur art, artistic glass, glass-blowing technique, glass staining

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Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Questions of Expertise in Culture, Arts and Design Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

On November 18, 2017 – a historical date marking the founding of Yekaterinburg – the city became enriched by the new museum of naive art, a branch of Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts and a new cultural institution on the city map. The naive art collection of Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts is the biggest collection of Ural naive artists based on the personal collection of Yevgeny Roizman. In 2015, after the large-scale exhibition in the Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts, the collection was transferred to the museum and became a core of the Museum of Naive Art.

2. Materials and Methods

The collection of works by Albert Nikolayevich Korovkin – his paintings, watercolour drawings, engravings, applications and glass art – form a unique phenomenon of naive

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art and a highlight of the museum collection. While Korovkin's paintings are well-known (his canvases and "boards" were shown at exhibitions and bought by the museums since early 1970s), his glassworks were less fortunate. Only recently, in 2015, these 1970s–1980s works found their way to the viewer.

Yulia Kruteyeva, the collector's wife, remembers:

We had at home several cardboard boxes with glass works standing among the paintings. We always knew that these items existed, that they had been created by the artists Albert Korovkin who signed their paintings: "Painted by glassblower Korovkin". We even sometimes took some items out and looked at them. But we could not figure out where to put them and how to present them. And so, these objects continued to exist in boxes among the paintings.

[1]

3. Discussion

Albert Nikolayevich Korovkin was born on January 11, 1935, in the town of Sysert. He graduated from the local vocational college and specialized in the repair of high-precision equipment. After completing his obligatory military conscription, he worked in experimental workshops of the Ural Research Centre. Korovkin excelled in delicate and meticulous work: first he worked as a mechanic, but later asked to be transferred to a glassblowing workshop. As a child, Korovkin enjoyed drawing, collected reproductions, copied them and tried to paint from nature. However, his true experience of the joy and intensity of life enriched by art happened only when, in late 1960s, he began to study in the amateur studio of the Railworkers' House of Culture headed by the artist Nikolay Gavrilovich Chesnokov.

While studying in Chesnokov studio, Korovkin not only mastered the basics by learning to prepare apply the coating and mix the pigments – he also "found his own means of expression, his technique: after covering a board by a solution of his own preparation, he paints with tempera under varnish." [2, p.25] Albert Korovkin learned an art of creating a painted image from N.G.Chesnokov, while various graphical techniques he mastered at A.A.Kazantsev's. Today it is evident that for Korovkin Chesnokov's studio became his refuge and his sanctuary, where the young artist could boldly experiment with materials while carefully preserving personal emotional imaginative content of his works. In 1960s–1970s Chesnokov studio was different and unique in its "harmonious co-existence of eccentrics and pragmatics based on the respect to an artist and to

a creative individuality, and on the idea that art was indispensable for human self-expression in the real world.” [3, p. 111]

His fascination with the *lubok*, his interest in old Russian painting, his admiration of children’s art and imitation of it – all these trends are reflected in these works. His early works focus on simple subjects: typically, these are ironic sketches of urban life, often imaginative and filled with kind humour. Vivid and colourful, they took part in many exhibitions, including abroad. Each of them had an inscription “Painted by glassblower Korovkin. From Sverdlovsk. Student of N.G.Chesnokov”.

According to the oral memories of one of the studio’s members, “Using icon-painting style, glassblower Korovkin drew on boards signs *TV is not Working* or his own self-portrait with horns titled *Deer Man* Another work I remember is his *Korovkin Flies to Moscow on Trip Voucher*, where he is flying in the sky holding a voucher in his hand, and below are Sverdlovsk and Moscow.”

Albert Nikolayevich early developed his own original style of painting that was to a large extent determined by his technique and the process he used. He was fond of folk “lubok” and Russian icon painting; from this latter influence he borrowed the technique of painting on boards with a small ark (“kovchezhets”), the use of levkas ground and the painting with bright vivid tempera pigments. Using every opportunity provided by Chesnokov studio and a boldness of forms unusual among other 1970s studios, he “expressed himself both in traditional academic or folk art, and in his own individuality” [3, p.112].

The works of Albert Korovkin became a part of Yekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts collection thanks to the gift of Yevgeny Roizman. Among the gifted works are about 50 glassworks. Collector Yevgeny Roizman remembers:

On top of everything else, he gave me seven boxes with glass artworks. While working as a glass-blower, he created exquisite highly sophisticated figurines. So, I put these boxes into storage. Then one day I walked into the basement, and there they were. Suddenly I realised that they’ve been there for 13 years! And so, I thought: why are they languishing in the basement? And we made an exhibition at once, and I gifted all the works to the city. [4]

Since at the time of acquisition the collector did not register attribution data, and the artist worked in Sverdlovsk outside of the professional community of glassware artists, any information on the techniques used by the artist is highly relevant. Attribution of Korovkin’s glass artworks is hindered by the fact that at the time glassware art did not exist in the region, and the artist worked through trial and error to establish his own

technique, style and manner; also, his works were not included in exhibitions or museum collections.

Therefore, the task faced by the museum researchers is to gather precise information on the artist, on glassblowing techniques and on the fine points of glassware art production. When analysing Albert Korovkin's glassware works, it is important to consider a number of factors. First, Korovkin had no specialized art education in glassware works; he mastered the glass-blowing technique independently when Ural Research Centre created its own workshop that produced laboratory and equipment glassware. Second, Korovkin created his artworks – i.e., decorative vessels, abstract compositions and sculptures – out of the glassware for laboratory equipment, machinery and technical glassware. Third, it is vital to trace thematic correspondences between his images in painting and in glasswork.

Glassblowing technique was widely used in the USSR at the factories and laboratories to produce various equipment and its parts. Ostensibly the work with laboratory glassware had no place for imagination or creative freedom: its goal was to satisfy specifications provided by the scientists and required for the high-precision scientific and technological tasks. On the other hand, experimental research carried by the physicists and chemists led the scientists to collaborate with the craftsmen who produced laboratory equipment, often designing non-standard formal and technological solutions. In this respect, the process of equipment production could become quite creative.

The materials used for experimental glassblowing works included glass tubes and glass monolithic rods of varying diameters, the so-called tubing vials and fillets. Many Soviet factories were engaged in mass production of a wide range of chemistry glassware, as well as of semi-finished products for various academic glassblowing workshops:

There were large-scale production lines that made laboratory glassware and glass equipment. The largest of them were such factories as Svetlana and Druzhnaya Gorka in Leningrad, Khimlaborpribor in Klin, Pobeda Truda in Kazan. Beyond this, research institutes created their own glassblowing workshops with cutting-edge equipment." [5, p.4]

Institute laboratories produced a wide range of glassware for chemical and physical experiments, from simple vessels to specialised equipment and installations: gas analysers, filters and fridges. The glassblowers who created the most sophisticated glass equipment for research institutes and laboratories used a so-called molybdenum glass.

It received its name due to its remarkable quality: the inclusion of molybdenum allows to create a vacuum-tight layer.

This type of glass has medium thermostability (unlike leaded glass, which is less thermally stable, and unlike quartz glass, which possesses higher thermostability), has a relatively low melting point and is widely used to make equipment and vacuum communication links in whole-soldered laboratory installations. In its chemical qualities, molybdenum glass is less resilient to acid, water and alkali than other types of glass. However, its gas-permeability is low, and it is easy to work with. The main advantage of molybdenum glass is its ability to withstand complex fire-melting operations: twisting and welding of bundles and layers of the glass, curling and creation of rigs and spirals out of tubes, the possibility of welding the cracks, etc. Apart from the techniques typical for laboratory glass [6, pp. 196–202], Korovkin used decorative glass elements (scallops, pinches and spirals), as well as colour and staining. The colour scheme ranging from light yellow and pink to ruby-red colours was used to paint both parts of animal figures (manes of lions and horses) and the details of more complex vessels: ruby-red corks shaped as roosters, or roosters inside the vessels. The colour scheme that includes the colours ranging from orange red to the brown was created by combinations of cadmium sulphate and cadmium selenide. Since the artist worked with semi-finished transparent glass cylinders and not with the coloured glass, it was important to choose the technique of glass painting. Since research equipment did not require coloured glass, all experiments and discoveries in glass painting were the result of the artist's search and experimentation.

As a result, Korovkin chose two main colouring techniques. One of them required the use of ready-made coloured glass (for example, bottle glass or lamp glass). By touching his work with a coloured glass over the burner, the artist left traces of colour – spots and lines – on his work. The other technique was designed through experimentation with metal oxides that stain the glass when used over the flames. While directing the burner flame to a concrete detail (animal mane or back, for example), the artist put a piece of metal between the flame and the glass surface and directed the coloured flame at the glass, thus staining it with colour.

By softening, blowing and welding together details made of tubes of different diameters, Korovkin created decorative glassware shaped as animals and birds or, alternatively, put the animal figures – deer, bears, cocks – inside the vessels. Korovkin also created hollow sculptures of lions, deer, rams, hedgehogs, horses with and without riders. The glass zoo of Albert Korovkin is not a chance topic in his art. Based on the “main genre forms of glass art” [7, p.56–61], Korovkin's works should be classified as

animalist plastic and decorative vessels. During his childhood, he lived close to the Sverdlovsk old circus building at Kuybyshev street and often went to watch animal shows. Later circus characters and themes were used in his drawings and paintings, as well as in glass sculpture.

Vivid, plastic and quixotic glass, a child of the elements, of fire and light, was transformed in the hands of the master from tubing coils, laboratory flasks and retorts into the fiery horses and flaming birds. Here, in the fire tamed by the Master, was born a whimsical bestiary: kind, luminous and delicate. The deer and the rooster are mythological animals that symbolise brightly flaming sun, light and fire. We see them both in Korovkin's painted works and in his glass sculptures. His fairy-tale world was filled with the familiar images from folk tales and personal mythology: Firebird, fairy-tale hero knight (*bogatyr*), oriental beauty, the Silver Hoof, the stupid rams and an obstinate hedgehog. There are also actors of the kind-hearted but ephemeral and transparent circus company: "polka-dot" lions, humpback camels, horses with curly manes, a bear cub hiding inside the jar, and a clown who tries to get him out. Using an almost imperceptible play of forms, the master imbued his fairy-tale characters with individualities and unique expressiveness.

4. Conclusions

In 1984 Yugoslav researchers published the World Encyclopaedia of Naive Art [8]. This publication listed 69 artists from 9 Soviet republics, among them 31 artists from Russian Federation, two of them from Sverdlovsk region: Nina Varfolomeyeva and Albert Korovkin who are today considered classics of the Russian naive art. Unlike his paintings, glassware art of amateur artist Albert Korovkin remains almost unknown and barely researched phenomenon, which requires further attribution and comprehensive analysis of the artist's imaginative world.

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