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The Doll's House Museum Basel presents:

Palekh – The magic of Russian lacquer miniatures

Special exhibition on the fascination of academic folk art from a village.

28 November 2009 – 14 February 2010

The Doll's House Museum Basel is showing lacquer miniatures from a private Swiss collection. The items, over 60 in number, were painted in Palekh after 1990: plaques, caskets, tins and utility items. The main topics are fairy-tale scenes, everyday scenes with people in local costumes as well as themes from old Russian heroic epics. A colourful Christmas exhibition with a difference.

Palekh and its history

Lacquer miniatures on papiermâché have been painted in Russia since the late 18th century. In the 19th century, the Lukutin and Vishnyakov factories in Danilkovo to the north of Moscow were highly renowned. Using oil-based paints, they mainly decorated caskets, snuffboxes, cigarette cases and other small items. The painted scenes usually were not original compositions, but reproductions of well-known paintings. In the 20th century, the tradition of oil painting on papiermâché was continued in Fedoskino, a neighbouring community to Danilkovo. Lacquer miniatures in oils are still produced in Fedoskino to this day under the name of the village.

The artists' village of Palekh, a good three hundred kilometres to the north-east of Moscow, experienced a very different history. Art lovers associate the name Palekh with two special types of Russian art: exclusive, exquisitely detailed icons and the equally delicately painted lacquer miniatures on papiermâché. In the 17th century, Palekh became a centre for icon painting. During the 18th century, the style known to this day in Russian icon painting as the

Palekh Style was developed there. In addition to the saints depicted on them, these Palekh icons also feature richly decorated architectural backdrops and lush landscapes as equally important elements of the composition. During the 19th century, icons were increasingly painted in commercially oriented factories and icon studios and marketed as far afield as the Ukraine and the Balkans. Among the best-known producers were the Safonov and Belousov factories.

The 1917 October Revolution was accompanied by far-reaching social changes. Facing a massive decline in demand for icons, the Palekh artists found their livelihoods under threat. In the early 1920s, Ivan Golikov and other Palekh icon painters began to experiment with lacquer painting on papiermâché. In 1924, they founded the *Old Russian Painting Cooperative* and began commercial production of small objets d'art on papiermâché, painted and lacquered using the egg tempera technique. As early as 1925, the Palekh lacquer works were shown to great success in Paris. In 1928, the training of apprentices began and in 1935, a museum was opened in Palekh at the instigation of Maxim Gorky.

The artists, with their roots firmly anchored in the old Russian tradition of icon painting, had thus found a way to go on putting their artistic skills in fine art painting to good use under the changed social conditions.

Everyday rural scenes and scenes from Russian fairy tales, from old Russian heroic epics and from Russian history were the principal subjects depicted on the lacquer works. The artists were able to make the switch from the religious themes of icon painting to secular images in a very short time, probably not least since the Palekh icon painters were not monks but people who had grown up and lived in a secular environment. In the 1930s, the artists also began to take up themes based on political ideology. These depictions glamorised the positive social changes attributed to the October Revolution, the glory of the Red Army in the civil war and later in the Second World War. The result was a symbiosis between the socialist realism promoted by the political system and stylistic elements from icon painting.

In the 1930s, the people of Palekh came to experience the repressive methods employed by the Soviet authorities and in the 1940s, they defended their country in the Great Patriotic War. After the retirement in the 1950s of most of the first-generation artists who had still learned their skills as icon painters, Palekh art appeared to have lost the stylistic characteristics derived from icon painting and to dedicate itself primarily to compositions based on political ideology. In the 1970s and 1980s, a new generation of artists succeeded in increasingly incorporating the traditional values of Palekh art in their works once again.

Palekh today

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union twenty years ago, Palekh found itself confronted with the new post-Soviet situation. The new Russia no longer employs any art critics and cultural bureaucrats, who as patrons determine the direction of Palekh art, who control the art produced in Palekh and award state honours to the artists. No longer is there a state-sponsored artists' cooperative to finance exhibitions. The artist no longer works under the Palekh brand name as a guarantee of authenticity and quality. He is personally responsible for the creativity of his artistic output and forced to meet the constantly changing demands of the global art market at all times. The Soviet-style cooperative has had its day, the Palekh artists' community has largely disintegrated. Its place has been taken by groups and individual artists who eye one another suspiciously and have no hesitation in attempting to destroy each other's livelihoods.

As a consequence of this development, various well-known Palekh artists have since then abandoned decorative lacquer work. They have turned to religious art and paint or restore icons and frescoes in the many new and old Russian churches.

The tradition of exclusive, exquisitely detailed Palekh icon painting came to an abrupt end after 1917. It was not lost, however, but was able to "overwinter" in the form of lacquer miniature painting during the time of the Soviet Union. Since the 1990s, icon painting has started up again in Palekh. Thus the circle is completed: from icon to lacquer miniature and back to the icon.

The technique employed in the production of lacquer miniatures

The papiermâché "blanks" are soaked in hot linseed oil. After drying, the now very hard and robust objects are finished to make boxes in many different shapes and other items such as candlesticks, salt cellars and brooches. Following priming with several coats of special clay, oil and soot, a black varnish is applied and, in the case of caskets, an additional coat of red varnish on the inside. These semi-finished products now go to the painter. He applies the design with a blunt needle and then paints it with zinc oxide. Only now are the colours painted, using mineral pigments emulsified with egg yolk, vinegar and water. This technique, known as egg tempera, has been used in icon painting for centuries. The first stage is to paint the base colours, after which the artist gradually applies all the details by applying increasingly lighter shades to the painted surfaces. After applying further coats of lacquer, the artist paints with gold. The gold paint gives volume to the people and animals depicted and decorates the painted plants and buildings. Gold leaf is also used to paint the exceedingly fine ornaments that generally adorn the edges of the miniatures and the sidewalls of boxes. After polishing the gold lines with a wolf's tooth, the object is given

several more coats of lacquer and finally polished with velvet and with the ball of the thumb. The entire manufacturing process is extremely time-consuming and the painting on the finished work of art consists of many layers, a typical characteristic of lacquer painting. Depending on the size of the object and the subtlety of the composition, the painting may take weeks or even months. The "Palekh" box, for example, took four months to paint.

The collection on display

This year's somewhat different Christmas exhibition in the Doll's House Museum shows a private Swiss collection of Russian lacquer miniatures from Palekh, amassed over the last eighteen years. The 60-odd items (plaques, caskets, tins and utility items) are works painted since 1990. The main topics are fairy-tale scenes, everyday scenes with people in local costumes as well as themes from old Russian heroic epics.

Various trips to Palekh by the lender have resulted in intensive contacts with artists and to commissioned works.

Opening hours

Museum, shop and café: daily from 10.00 to 18.00.

Admission

CHF 7.00 / 5.00

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only in the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The entire building is wheelchair-accessible.

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