

УДК 75

Nikolaj Rybakov: «... Between the Abyss and the Heaven»

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Received 24.02.2009, received in revised form 03.03.2009, accepted 10.03.2009

The article is devoted to the work of Nikolaj Rybakov, one of the most well-known painters of present-day Siberia. A brief outline of his life and work is given; the main stages of his creative development are observed; the main themes of his oeuvre and specificities of his creative method are considered.

Keywords: Nikolaj Rybakov, Siberia, Siberian painting.

Nikolaj Rybakov takes the leading position in the modern art of Siberia; his works embellish museums and private collections in many countries of the world, his canvases never fail to impress by their inwardness. Being dissimilar in his creative work to most of his brothers of the brush, Rybakov has found his own picturesque, his own self-expression from his youth, but still staying integral, ambiguous, not being read up to the end, and that is why exciting, making gaze into his mysterious world again and again.

At first, his graphic series, and then, canvases appeared for the first time at the exhibitions in the end of 1970-s – in the beginning of 1980-s, and they immediately became the subject of temperamental disputes, of passionate acknowledgment or explicit antagonism. But the time was passing by and inner depth of Rybakov's images revealed itself in an every new cycle of canvases; some incomprehensibility of his depictive language, his strong conviction in the correctness of the chosen way, his vivid artistic talent fascinated more and more.

For a long time, the main personage of his creative work has been an archaic Asia. From his youth, Rybakov has found his own world of modern inhabitants of the steppe South, he has seen the connection of the settled scheme of their life with ancient Siberian camping-grounds, he has revealed for himself an unknown pagan Siberia through the meeting with this world. The master's works of 1970-s-1980-s are actually threaded by the themes of ancient camping-grounds, images of Nomads. Whatever plot-associative compositions, landscapes, still-life paintings, themes, genres, and kinds of art the painter has addressed, Asia has been included into all the oeuvre of the artist. There is no simply ancientry in the works of Nikolaj Rybakov, but there is exactly Siberian ancientry with its epic millenarian history, full of dramas. The artist has seen, heard, felt with all his heart tabernacles of Huns, and herds of Scythian horses, and the clanking of chains of protopope Avvakum, rushed by Siberian roads and the painter has sloped over all these onto his expressive canvases. Landscape

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N. Rybakov The Meeting. 2007



N. Rybakov The Orange Beam. 2007

paintings of Rybakov are also ingrained by this rich content. The landscape painting of a concrete place is not important for the artist, but associations, having been caused by this place, are of big value. The painter says, that he «constructs the landscape as if a still-life», i.e. as if some temporary phenomenon, reflecting his imaginary authorial world.

In the course of time the borders of his interests have been broadening and he has included into his canvases not only Siberian immeasurable vastitude, but also Tibet and central Asia. If ethnography and antiquity took some place in his cycles in the beginning of his creative work, though there were never documentary facts, but since 1990-s his Asian cycles have been already filled by more generalized symbols out of space and time. The author does not narrate about some concrete events. Factual events are just an original basis for the painter; they are causing vivid generalized images. Basing on a concrete episode, sometimes quite insignificant, the painter passes over to panhuman considerations. In his oeuvre reminiscences of his childhood and intuitive context-rich historicity have successfully merged together in one whole, when a small impulse is enough in order the creative thought gives birth to magnificent, spiritual, multitudinary canvases.

In painter's metaphoric works, full of dramatics and expression, the author contemplates over the ways of mankind, over indissolubility of spiritual connection with one's ancestors, fulfilling his creative work with content-rich symbols and ascending over the commonness. His magnificent and tragic personages live in their own world, not seeing us and being plunged into far worlds of may be past or may be future ...

The grandeur and generality of the theme requires a special depictive language, and the author has found it in the convention of images. The plots of his works are quite mysterious, possessing that very degree of uncertainty, that

makes the spectators find associations, empathize, think.

There is always a cover of secrecy in all the works of Nikolaj Rybakov. One can read deeply hidden sadness even in the most clear and full-of-life works, such as, for example, the canvases from the cycle «The blossoming», or polychromic, wonderfully picturesque still-life paintings, having been made particularly a lot by the artist in recent years. It is not the universal sadness about the destinies of humankind, but that very melancholy, which is being disclosed along the cognition of the world order and oneself. «Great is the sadness of mine about the land of my reminiscences», – Nikolaj Rybakov considers these lines from Halil Dzhibrān's poem to be the epigraph to all his oeuvre. The author is always on the verge: of reality and the world of unreal, of the past and the present, of exaltation and sorrow, of the light and shadows. And he has dedicated his new jubilee exhibition to dualistic indissolubility of the light and the dark.

Generally, all the creative works of Nikolaj Rybakov are threaded by philosophic thinking, there is always hankering for contemplations. What is man's assignment on the Earth? Is it, as it was written by Nikolaj Gumilev, in order «to draw one's spirals between the time and the abyss»? Or does the mankind have a different destination? Or may be the striving to cognate one's past is the striving to see one's future?

In the oeuvre of Rybakov, pictorial art and graphics intermingle and are almost inseparable from each other. His graphic works are saturated with colour. Alongside with pictorial pieces, he creates a great number of works performed by mixed technique, which, possessing wonderful colour-bearing, and made on the material (paper, cartoon), still belong to graphics. Practically, the approach itself to the representation can be called pictorial art on paper, when the painter is thinking with a help of colour. Precisely the colour, but

not a stain or a line becomes the main means of expression. His palette is excessively rich. Every so often, his canvases are made on the contrast of a deep «wraparound» background (usually, it is a warm gamma of green, olivaceous, ochre, and brown colours) and clear dynamic sheaves of vivid cold or hot blazing overtones, stains of foreground. The colours are clear, open; possessing amazing working capacity, the painter has created hundreds of canvases and graphic works in the course of his life, but, remaining for ever one, he has never repeated compositional and colorful treatments of his works. The author vividly proves his high professionalism in monochrome graphic pieces as well: magnificent glow of his picturesque canvases has transmitted to his black and white graphic works, which prepossess by their abundance, variety of tonal treatment, glimmering and silveriness, refinement of lines. Striving for maximal image disclosure, Rybakov does not draw a line at the dilemma – pictorial art or graphics, he invents his own authorial technique, whether it is monochromic presentment on the canvas or pictorial painting on the paper.

In November, 2007 a jubilee exhibition of pictorial art and graphics of Nikolaj Rybakov, dedicated to 60-th anniversary of the painter, was open in the exhibition halls of the Centre of Artists.

The exhibition reflected the searchers of the painter during last years. The exhibition leitmotiv was the artist's considerations about indissolubility and struggle of two primacies: worldly and celestial, the light and the dark. Many works, being presented to the spectators, were dedicated to this theme: the cycle of canvases «Worldly – celestial», «Black star», «Conservation», «Yellow-brown substance», having been written in the last years.

And one more motive, having been attracting the painter over the period of many years, sounded in the exhibition – the motive of chalice. The

chalice is an ancient sacral symbol. It is both the vessel of existence, and the chalice of sorrows, and the uniting cup of piece, and there are a lot of other readings of this object, perfect in its natural simplicity, having been created during centuries of mankind existence. Every artist has his own vision of the chalice. Nikolaj Rybakov, admiring its circular flowing shape, has filled the image of the chalice with an inimitable multiformity in his every canvas: now, the chalice, pierced by a burning beam, becomes a torch in the dark, then, it is filled with light from inside, and then, having become almost insensuous, it dissolves in space.

The complicated imaginative world, represented in graphic compositions of the jubilee exhibition, never fails to attract attention.

Nikolaj Rybakov is wonderfully gifted with a great talent and a grandeur working capacity, but as any talented person, Rybakov is marked by other talents as well, – whatever he touches upon, everywhere there is a stamp of deepness of his knowledge and of his creative ability. His absorption in semantics of ancient petroglyphic drawings in the last decade has brought Nikolaj Rybakov to new creative horizons, it has overgrown his just artistic vision and the process of scientific cognition has captured his attention.

Over the period of many years Nikolaj Rybakov has been closely connected to Khakassia, to the Ijussk steppe, where he spends several months annually. These places are called by the painter his «natural-landscape scientific-research laboratory». The beauty of this land, its gray antiquity, mysterious language of ancient petroglyphic drawings have been giving the artist all these years not only a creative impulse, but have brought to that fact, that Rybakov has been seriously interested in the researchers of Siberian ancient history. He has been extremely excited by the ancient monuments, connected, to his mind, to the traces of Manichaeism on the territory of the



N. Rybakov The Nature. 2003



N. Rybakov The Spring. 2007

South Siberia. This ancient religion, being dead for us, left, as Rybakov considers, some interesting evidence of its being in Khakass-Minusinsk basin. The interest to this almost unstudied theme has captured his attention so much, that Nikolaj Iosifovich has been studying this material deeply and absorbedly: he has been spending hours in the libraries, searching (and finding!) new monuments, and writing articles. He has published 12 articles related to Manichaeism in Siberia in scientific digests. He is plunging deeper and deeper into scientific work, becoming a true researcher of ancient Siberia.

Nikolaj Rybakov is also seriously interested in artistic photography. Not that one photography, which can be observed in abundance at various exhibitions in the result of high-technologies' widespread. His black and white artistic photography is a continuation of his artistic creativity. There is no any concrete plot here as well, as in his pictorial works and graphics, the same search for the utmost visualization, the striving to capture the imperceptible.

He does for everything: creation, scientific researches, publications, tours, and expeditions –

the fantastic working capacity of Nikolaj Rybakov is simply amazing. He has organized dozens of personal exhibitions all over the country and abroad, has been done a whole row of publication projects. One more quality of Rybakov is also recognized – his constant will to help, to support, give a hand to somebody. It is of special value in our aggressive time.

So, thus, Nikolaj Iosifovich Rybakov, a corresponding member of the Petrovsk Academy of Arts and Sciences, a brilliant painter, an absorbed researcher, being thoughtful and full of most various conceptions, celebrates his 60-th anniversary.

The consummate play with a flat surface of the list, with a stain, flaming auroras of silvery glimmering of lines, deep gaps of black bring into the list something harassing, exciting, making come back again and again.

We suppose that, it is for the first time, when Nikolaj Rybakov has presented a significant series of his works of minor size, performed by wax paints over watercolors. In these works the painter addresses the same panhuman themes, threading all over his oeuvre.