



Russian Lacquer Boxes: A Narrative Tradition

November 18, 2006 to January 14, 2007 | Mayer Gallery

Magical fish, evil wizards, prodigal sons and elegant princesses will flood your imagination in a new exhibition at the Chazen Museum of Art. Combining a long tradition of storytelling with the high skills of icon painting, *Russian Lacquer Boxes: A Narrative Tradition* features sixty original lacquered papier-mâché boxes from the Frederick Seibold collection. These richly detailed and highly colorful miniatures depict enthralling stories ranging from Russian folk tales to religious themes. *Russian Lacquer Boxes* will be on view at the Mayer Gallery November 18, 2006 through January 14, 2007.

The boxes in the Mayer Gallery come from a unique and outstanding collection numbering over three hundred exemplars, which was put together by University of Wisconsin Law School graduate Frederick Seibold. Collecting Russian lacquered boxes since 1975, Mr. Seibold has often traveled to the three remote villages where the boxes were and still are produced. Interviewing artists and watching them practice their highly refined craft, he has learned a great deal about Russian lacquer box decoration and about the long tradition of icon painting from which lacquer box painting developed. "When the Soviets suppressed religious practice in the early part of the twentieth century, highly skilled icon painters had to find a new form of livelihood. My lacquered boxes come from that long established artistic tradition."

These visual jewels are more than exquisite artistry. Collectors of Russian lacquer boxes generally will point to the storytelling feature that allows viewers to summon up memories of familiar folk and fairy tales. Whether looking at *The Scarlet Flower*, *Country Fortune Telling*, *The Mother*, or *The Golden Calf*, a viewer can 'read' the narrative behind the images with ease. This principle of storytelling in art is grounded in the belief that artists must paint so as to make the picture clear to everyone without explanation or inscription.

As Seibold became more discerning in his collections, he started to pay more attention to the draftsmanship of the pieces. "Artists who use single hair brushes, who paint flawless facial features that can undergo magnifying glasses—these are the very high quality boxes," he notes. Concurrently, he also became acquainted with the actual artists in central Russia who created these boxes. Bypassing dealers, he has been making trips to these villages every year in search of new boxes for his collection.

The tradition of lacquer boxes in the three villages of Central Russia—Palekh, Mstyora, and Kholui—originated in the early twentieth century when, following the profound revolutionary change in the country, these ancient centers of icon painting managed to reinvent themselves and gained international recognition as unique schools of applied and decorative art. Relying on both icon-painting and folk art traditions, these artistic schools have produced some of the best examples of visual story-telling. This unique art form represents the best of Russian epic stories, fairy tales, literary works, historical events, as well as episodes from everyday life, full of poetic, heroic, or comic moments.

The Palekh school is the most renowned among the three traditions for its high artistic standards, refined flowing style of drawing and painting, and generous application of gold paint. About half of the boxes in the exhibition are decorated by Palekh artists, including the well-known A. D. Kochupalov and O. Terentyeva. The boxes coming from Kholui are more rooted in the Russian folk art tradition. The Kholui artists include such famous contemporary painters as Nikolai Baburin and Nikolai Denisov. Two artists in this exhibition represent the Mstyora school, known for a bright, colorful palette and clarity of expression.

The exhibition also consists of the works of contemporary artists. Some of them have already gained recognition and their works can be found in decorative art museums and private collections. A few of the presented artists belong to artistic dynasties of Palekh and Kholui. They continue within their family traditions while searching for new expressive means and individual style. Thematically, the presented collection covers Russian fairy tales, both taken from the folk tradition and those written by such famous writers as Pushkin, Ershov, and Aksakov, epics, historical events, and religious motifs. In each of these literary translations, there is an almost magical ability of the artists to convey a story—whether simple or

more complex—through narrative images that resonate with the viewer's sense of beauty and poetic feeling.

Frederick C. Seibold, Jr. is a 1949 UW L&S; graduate as well as a 1956 UW Law School graduate. He practices law out of his home in Arlington, VA. Seibold shared his love of art with his late wife, Eleanor, who owned an art gallery in New York for 38 years. His daughter, Emilia, also owns an art gallery, *Higher Art*, in Paddington, Australia that specializes in original etchings, lithographs, woodcuts and mezzotints by international artists.

Reception

A reception for Russian Lacquer Boxes: A Narrative Tradition will be held on Friday, November 17 from 6 p.m.–7:30 p.m. The reception will include complimentary hors d'oeuvres and a cash bar; guests will be entertained by the music of accordionist Sergei Belkin.

Educational Program

A lecture by Darya Vassina, who researched and wrote the exhibition's Gallery Guide, will be given on Thursday, December 14 at 5:30 p.m. in Room L140. Gallery hours will be extended to 5:30 p.m. before this lecture.

Funding

Generous funding has been provided by The Hilldale Fund, UW–Madison Center for Russia, East Europe and Central Asia (CREECA), and the Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin.

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The Chazen Museum of Art is open Tuesdays–Fridays 9–5 pm; Saturdays and Sundays 11–5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the Murray Street (north) entrance. Parking is available at the city of Madison's Lake Street and Frances Street ramps, University Lot 46 on Lake Street between Johnson and University Avenue, University Lot 47 on Johnson Street between Park and Lake streets. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Chazen Museum of Art will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, 608-263-4421 (voice).

Public Reception

Opening

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A Narrative Tradition from the

Frederick Seibold Collection"

With musical entertainment and refreshments

November 17, 2006

From 6:00 PM to 7:30 PM