

Russian Lacquer Boxes

A Narrative Tradition from the Frederick Seibold Collection

This exhibition presents modern lacquer boxes by artists from the three villages of central Russia—Palekh, Mstyora, and Kholui. Artists from these ancient centers of icon painting learned to blend cultural story telling with visual art after the market for religious icon painting collapsed in the early twentieth century. By adopting the new artistic media of small papier-mâché boxes, Palekh, Mstyora, and Kholui painters were able to transition successfully into a high-demand market and gain international recognition as brilliant and unique schools of applied and decorative art.

The art of lacquer painting was introduced to Russia in the eighteenth century when the reformer Tsar Peter the Great opened the country to European and Asian culture. Russian merchants trading with China imported lacquered goods along with other oriental exotica. The demand for fashionable lacquered decoration remained high throughout the eighteenth century as the new capital of St. Petersburg was growing, and numerous new palaces and mansions were built for the Russian nobility. By the end of the eighteenth century, lacquer painting had been firmly established in the country, and the first Russian factories producing lacquer painted, decorative goods were established.

The first artists who created secular miniature paintings were experienced and well trained iconographers, skilled in creating cohesive religious stories with pictures. Among the features that were inherited from icon painting were the inverted perspective; the highly ornamental and decorative treatment of form, two-dimensional figures and structures; the conventional, often symbolic, background of hills, waves, plants, and chambers; the manner of rendering clothes and animals, such as multicolored horses with slender legs and swan-like necks; and the use of egg-tempera (although Fedoskino artists traditionally used oil) and silver and gold paint. Many tight and well-developed compositions were also derived from established iconographic patterns. A few of the artists presented here belong to artistic dynasties of Palekh and Kholui. They remain within their family traditions even while searching for new expressive means and individual style. This collection thematically covers Russian fairy tales taken both from the folk tradition and written by such famous writers as Pushkin, Ershov, and Aksakov, and from epics, historical events, and religious motifs. In each of these literary translations, the artist's chief aim is to convey a story—whether simple or more complex—through narrative images that also reflect the refined and lyrical quality of the highest quality draftsmanship.