

# Straddling the Sacred and the Decadent, Ukrainian Artist Tanya Ilyakhova Bridges the Gap Between Religious Art and Symbolism

Despite the rich and subtle effects that can be achieved with it, the ancient wax-resist process of batik, in which one paints on fabric with wax and these parts do not absorb the applied color but retain that of the original fabric, is normally associated with craft projects rather than with fine art painting. At least this is so in the United States. The renowned Ukrainian contemporary artist Tanya Ilyakhova, however, who is equally proficient in oil on canvas, makes one see batik in an entirely new light in her solo exhibition at the National Arts Club, Grand Gallery, 15 Gramercy Park South, from October 25 through November 8. (Reception: Tuesday, October 27, 5:30-7 pm.)



*“Lady Resting by the Stream”*

Ilyakhova has an interesting history.

Growing up in a small town in Novgorod-Volynskiy, she attended the prestigious Art School for Gifted Children of the Ukraine. Only one such school existed in each of the sixteen republics of the former Soviet Union and was often referred to in the press as a “Gold Fund” of those republics. After graduating with highest honors in 1973, at age eighteen, she was admitted to the National Academy of Arts, where Socialist Realism was the only acceptable style. She mastered the technical skills taught at the Academy so successfully that she was selected to paint a portrait of Lenin, the highest honor awarded to a young artist under the Soviet regime. However, in the early 1990s, she was to apply those same rigorous skills, enhanced by techniques developed on her own that were more in keeping with her unique vision, to the once forbidden subject of religious themes.

Several such works, which she calls “Contemporary Icons,” were seen in her exhibition at the National Arts Club. And it is in these paintings particularly, twenty of which were acquired by the Vatican from 1996 to 1998, that we see how Ilyakhova’s mastery of batik as a fine art medium enables her to revitalize time honored sacred themes. For the luminous hues peculiar to batik, as she applies them to cloth, are equal in intensity to the colors and gold leaf employed on panel by Greek and Russian Orthodox artists, such as the anonymous Byzantine icon of the early 12th century depicting the Virgin of Vladimir.

In batik compositions by Ilyakhova such as “Madonna” and “Christ in Majesty,” for example, the subtly dappled colorations appear illuminated from within. And in the latter painting, especially, the geometric areas of color, against which the figure of Christ is set, while simultaneously suggesting a deliberate heightening of the angularity in certain Byzantine design motifs, add a dynamic contemporary element of abstraction to this most traditional of subjects. Ilyakhova’s ability to lend new vitality to time-honored themes can also be seen in her “Tapestry Theme” series, where she updates subjects such as a unicorn and a lion in batik, using the complex surface effects possible in one textile medium to approximate the ornate hand-woven surface of the other.

Perhaps her most radical departure from long established pictorial conventions, however, occurs in batik paintings such as “Lady Resting by the Stream,” where Ilyakhova’s work takes a turn that can be favorably compared to the Symbolism of artists such as Maurice Denis and Gustave Moreau. At first glance, this tendency could seem contradictory to her religious imagery, since, as Havelock Ellis pointed out in his excellent introduction to J.K. Huysmans’ “Against the Grain (A Rebour),” Symbolism has been improperly called “the style of decadence.” In fact, what many refer to as decadence, particularly in regard to Symbolism, is a calculatedly aesthetic rather than an amoral stance.

For if Classicism can be beautiful because the parts are subordinated to the whole, Symbolism can be beautiful because the whole is subordinated to the parts. Only in superior works of Symbolism, of which it is clear that “Resting by the Stream” is a contemporary example, do the whole and the parts form a harmonious synthesis. Thus the long, flowing red locks of the willowy Pre-Raphaelite beauty rhyme visually with the graceful ripples in the stream beside which she reclines, and these and other details such as the ornate patterns in her garment and the intricate foliage at her feet, contribute to the sublime symmetry of the composition. Thus, far from exemplifying the dissonance that one normally associates with decadence, the composition can only be seen as a spiritual expression of wholeness so successfully conceived that no single detail need be subordinated, since all contribute equally to the overall design.

The same can be said of Tanya Ilyakhova’s decidedly secular paintings in oils on canvas, for while their subjects differ drastically, “Spring Dreams,” a buoyant image of delicate buds on slender sapling limbs and “Yellow Dream,” another oil of opium addicts in old China snuggled with their pipes, are both bathed in pale, sunny auras that lend them a dreamlike atmosphere. And while one can be fairly certain that the artist intends for us to make moral judgments about the self-indulgent hedonists in the latter work, it is still possible to appreciate both paintings equally well for their considerable aesthetic attributes, and to view the subject matter of “Yellow Dream” as a metaphorical disavowal of Symbolism’s more extreme aspects.

Indeed, the more romantic metaphors are suggested in “Lovers,” charmingly depicting a young man treading knee-deep in water with his inamorata riding happily on his back, and “Irony,” in which a stout Palliacci enigmatically juggles starlight between his palms while standing before a Venice canal bathed in the golden auras of dusk.

Here, as in her other works in oil and batik, Tanya Ilyakhova, who was featured prominently in a book published by the National Artist’s Guild in 2001 honoring the best Ukrainian artists of the decade and, in 2002, won the Grand Prix of the Art Festival in Kosovo, reveals herself to be a painter possessed of rare and enduring gifts that, if justice prevails, should eventually make her as popular in the United States as she already is in the Ukraine.

— Ed McCormack