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## Sacred Art in Painting by Nafaa Teachers of 1980s–1990s Period

### 1. Introduction

The twentieth century last decades' historical transformations, which in our country were determined by such sequence as the totalitarian system crisis, Chernobyl disaster, arrival of perestroika and finally the Ukrainian state independence occurrence, have led to significant socio-cultural changes. Both the USSR and the totalitarian regime disintegration, that formally took place quickly, actually began a long time before 1990 and rather did not end yet. These needs for change, not completely realized and not always clearly articulated, were acutely felt in society getting an instantly reflection in artworks. That late twentieth century period, the artistic pursuits' figurative and stylistic diversity as well as the cultural environment richness embodied a spontaneous reaction to rapid historical changes.

The destruction of limitations imposed by the socialist realism ideological vertical combined with the desire for self-determination and self-identification, where the national self-identification imported much, contributed to the rise in the cultural and artistic circles. In search of a new imagery, the artists turned to what was forbidden in previous decades: eroticism, folk art, the early twentieth century landmarking avant-

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garde, esotericism and religion. The Ukrainian art uses a great interest and the experts never pass over its creative manifestation: in the past decade published is a large number of various studies on the domestic post-totalitarian art phenomenon that revealed in the twentieth century last decades. Well recognizing the national art and especially folklore, in Ukrainian art cornerstone and moreover its development “ideological pivot” since the 1980s, modern professional critics do not pay enough attention to the importance of sacred art and its impact on fine arts formation at the current stage of the Ukrainian Independence.

This work purpose is to study the sacred art influence on the creation by Kyiv painters in the last two decades of the twentieth century. The use of sacred plots and images in secular painting will be considered on the examples of paintings by the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture (NAFAA) teachers.

Despite the experts' lively interest a complex multi-layered process and the historical context, full of political and socio-cultural upheavals, complicate the researchers task. Therefore, today we state a lack of generalizing studies and there still remain many unanswered questions, in particular, this one of the sacred art place and role and its impact on the plastic and plot-style painting language.

Interest in Ukrainian art at the XX–XXI centuries turn is steadily increasing. This trend is reflected in the growing number of studies and texts published. Thus, L. Turchak, G. Vysheslavsky, O. Fedoruk, V. Sydorenko work on the problems of periodization and issues of stages of Ukrainian art; texts by G. Sklyarenko, L. Smyrna, N. Averyanova, and O. Avramenko are devoted to separate issues of artistic language updating. There are also theoretical studies of the creative process participants: artists, whose creative formation took place at the end of the last century: O. Petrova, A. Storozhenko, G. Vysheslavsky, T. Silvashi; as well as exhibitions curators O. Barshinova, T. Mironova, O. Solovyov, T. Kochubinska.

## 2. Main research

The opportunity to explore and reflect on their own history and culture at the same time revealed the problem: “At the same time, domestic artists

had to move in opposite time dimensions: they desperately needed to rethink the past national-avant-garde achievements of the early twentieth century, absorbing current trends of other countries, and thus enter the world context”<sup>2</sup>. The desire to join contemporary world art combined with the need for self-reflection and filling gaps in the national art creativity caused a real explosion in the artistic life of 1980–1990. In Kyiv, Kharkiv, Lviv and Odessa creative life flourished, creative associations were formed, there were held independent exhibitions, and generally the art sought freedom. G. Vysheslavsky described in detail this stage in Ukrainian art<sup>3</sup>. In particular, the author provides details on the organization and manner they key exhibitions were held, as well as exposes the main programs of creative unions and associations. Such nuances allow better understanding of the artists’ creative search directions allowing also to recreate the context in which the studied period art was formed.

A certain feature of domestic professional criticism is the tendency to focus on local phenomena, the late twentieth century’s art of nonconformism, especially of particular interest is the “new wave” trend. It is, of course, a powerful and vivid phenomenon, but painting is not limited to this one, and artists have changed their creative tastes thus belonging to different groups at different times, or their artworks have been represented at exhibitions of several creative associations at the same time. Therefore, the study of this period fine arts through the prism of individual groups will be not only impractical but also incorrect. G. Sklyarenko’s opinion on the new wave can be generalized as valid for all fine arts: “The art of the second half of the 1980s and 1990s has not yet been realized in art history as an important and very significant phenomenon in the general development of national culture. The complexity of its study and analysis is associated with the diversity of creative directions, individual artistic positions, changing social functions of art,

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<sup>2</sup> Sydorenko V.D. (2008). Vizualne mystetstvo vid avanhardnykh zrushen do novitnikh spriamuvan: Rozvytok vizualnoho mystetstva Ukrainy XX–XXI stolit. [Visual art from avant-garde shifts to the latest trends: Development of visual art of Ukraine of the XX–XXI centuries.]. In-t problem suchasn. myst-va Akad.myst-v Ukrainy, 187 p.: il [in Ukrainian]. P. 96.

<sup>3</sup> Vysheslavskiyi H. (2008). Khudozhni protsesy u suchasnomu mystetstvi Ukrainy 1990-kh rr. [Artistic processes in contemporary art of Ukraine in the 1990s.]. Suchasne mystetstvo, Vyp, 5. pp. 7–62. [in Ukrainian].

evolution and transformation of its established species boundaries characteristic for this time as well as with important historical, political and ideological factors that significantly influenced the artistic process, often subordinating its direction to itself<sup>4</sup>.

Professional critics and researchers of artistic processes that took place in our country in the late twentieth century agree that the new art was based on the past eras creative achievements, especially on folk art and the early twentieth century discoveries (here usually meant is the avant-garde art). The influence of sacred art has been much less studied, although after a long and severe restriction on the topics that could be worked on by imposed atheism, many artists turned to sacred art in search of new plastic language, content, meaning, and new painting in general. A wide variety of samples available in the city beginning from the Kievan Rus times and up to the popular naive icons of the early twentieth century, provided ample opportunities for reflection and creative rethinking.

### **3. NAFAA Sacred painting workshop and M.A. Storozhenko**

An iconic figure for Ukrainian sacred art became the outstanding artist and teacher Mykola Andriyovych Storozhenko (1928–2015), who in 1994 founded and headed the Studio of Painting and Temple Culture at the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture (NAFAA), where he brought up many bright and original brush masters (O. Tsugorka, O. Solovey, R. Petruk, etc.). That workshop opening, as well as its founding creator figure, had a significant impact not only on students but also teachers from other workshops. Striving to combine the form and content, the students technical skills with a three-dimensional understanding of the sacred painting meaning, M. Storozhenko actively worked on the theoretical and practical content of the course. “The idea of organizing academic productions was based on the principles of Ukrainian Baroque, incorporating the cornerstones of the Baroque art constructive principles: the opposition of light and darkness as two parts of the

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<sup>4</sup> Skliarenko H. (2007). Na berehakh. Notatky do ukrainskoho mystetstva XX stolittia. [On the shores. Notes on Ukrainian art of the XX century]. Zbirnyk statei. Peredmova M.R. Selivachova, 336 p. [in Ukrainian]. P. 109.

universe i.e. the material world and the spiritual world; the light that penetrates the darkness passes through it as if through some slit; indivisible unity of light and shadow, the disappearance of objects' contours. The drawing sheets main compositional component was the energy of the baroque fold, which dynamically grinds-distorts-bends the space, organically directing it to infinity, influencing and colliding with large conditional spots of white and black"<sup>5</sup>.

M. Storozhenko worked in the field of easel and monumental-decorative painting, book graphics and so his most famous works, paintings of the Mykola Prytyska Church dome in Kyiv (1997–2000) and "Shevchenko" project that included series of illustrations to "Kobzar" by T.G. Shevchenko (1986–2004). Like easel works, the illustrations are made in the artist's inherent neo-baroque style, they combine plots from the Taras Shevchenko works and episodes from his biography with the art and plastic language of sacred painting. Emphasized expression adds a special dynamic and dramatic sound to works that have had a significant impact on contemporaries (not only students but also colleagues artists).

L. Smyrna emphasizes the importance of M.A. Storozhenko figure and his school for the whole Ukrainian art: "Having established and headed the NAFAA Painting and Temple Culture Workshop (1994), the artist created an innovative original school with its unique teachings and philosophy of stylistic culture. Storozhenko saw the Workshop concept in an unique synthesis of two opposite principles: the academic-scientific direction characteristic to NAFAA, which absorbed almost a century of experience from outstanding Ukrainian artists of world significance, and religious-subconscious emanation based on style, art and technology of Byzantine and Baroque art"<sup>6</sup>.

Such a duality of worldview was inherent not only in Storozhenko, it is largely a sign of the entire Soviet society of perestroika epoqe, when

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<sup>5</sup> Maistrenko-Vakulenko Yu.V. (2018). Mykola Storozhenko – khudozhnyk, pedahoh, liudyna: zb. tez dopovidei nauk.-prakt. konf. [Mykola Storozhenko – artist, teacher, man: a collection of abstracts of scientific-practical reports. conf]. (Kyiv, 08 lystopada 2018 r.), 37 p. [in Ukrainian]. P. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Smyrna L.V. (2013). Filsofsko-estetychni pohliady ukrainskykh khudozhnykiv-shistdesiatnykiv. [Philosophical and aesthetic views of Ukrainian artists of the sixties.]. *Kultura Ukrainy*, №43 pp. 85–96 [in Ukrainian]. P. 89.

there was a striking difference between the declared and factually implemented ideas and the real and hidden meaning. G. Sklyarenko accurately outlined the challenges that Ukrainian artists faced in the late twentieth century, and the main problem for which was “self-determination in a complex intertwining of two context: post-Soviet and new state one, colonial and postcolonial, national and European, modernist and postmodern. Here is the uniqueness of the current cultural situation in Ukraine”<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4. The sacred objects theme in painting

The desire to unexpectedly combine various things is one of the Ukrainian painting characteristic features in 1980s and 1990s, and this statement is fully true for sacred art, to which artists turned both in terms of images and plots, and in terms of content and plasticity. A striking example of such a combination embodies the paintings by V.I. Barinova-Kuleba from the cycle “Antiquity and Now” (1989–1997). The works series depict scenes from Ukrainian folklore and recognizable characters from the classical Ukrainian literature, the paintings arrangement tends to Baroque sculpture, the color is restrained, dominated by natural ochre tones. But the composition structure and the laconic characters do hint at the icon-painting tradition. This feeling is reinforced by the barely visible halos over the heads of boys and girls dressed in national costumes. Thus, the artist seeks to emphasize the sanctity of a hard-working man and the purity of simple peasant life. In addition, symbolically adding halos to folklore and literary characters V. Barinova-Kuleba conditionally sacralizes folk culture in general, raising the classical heroes to the level of saints and martyrs. Heavy everyday manual work as a guarantee of life and an allegory of the infinity of the life cycle is one of the key themes in the artist’s work.

F. Humeniuk works with literary and folk characters in another way. The artist has a characteristic creative style, that renders his authorship

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<sup>7</sup> Skliarenko H. (2004). *Mystetstvo XX – pochatku XXI stolittia: novyi kontekst*. [Art of the XX – early XXI century: a new context]. *Khudozhnia kultura. Aktualni problemy: Nauk. visn. In-t probl. suchas. mystets. Akad. mystets. Ukrainy; Derzh. tsentr teatr. mystets. im. Lesia Kurbasa, Vyp. 1, pp. 141–156* [in Ukrainian]. P. 142.

art immediately expressed: it is an expressive mixture of neo-baroque splendor and composition density with emphasized decorative color. The artist's works are characterized by dynamics, as created by a large number of expressive elastic lines. F. Humeniuk prefers generalized plots, which allow the work saturation with details and symbols that reveal the multi-layered content of the picture. It is worth noting that the leading genre of the master is monumental painting, but the artist also has a series of portraits of prominent historical figures and literary characters, which are made in a more restrained manner, that serves to render this artists' authorship works so recognizable.

Yu.M. Kompanets is a graphic artist by profession, and this is immediately noticeable in his paintings they are characterized by conciseness and clarity of composition, clear lines and much of color. The work "Motherland" (1991) hints at the colossal (height with a pedestal 102 m) monument of the sculptor V.Z. Boroday, established in 1981. The works are not only united by the title, they are similar in the strict interpretation of the image and the gloomy mood. The female figure is located in the center of the canvas and occupies most of the space.. The image shows a woman in a long white shirt with a hooded cloak over it, covering the woman's hair. she holds in her hands an embroidered towel from which ears of wheat fall down. A dark line is drawn under the woman's feet, where there are three figures with halos, which appear similarly to dead saints under the ground. Behind the woman's background is not clear, in the sky there are three clouds – two white and black, surrounded by a gold outline. The year of the picture's creation is important – 1991, the year of Ukraine's independence and the collapse of the USSR.

Oleksandr Mykhailovych Lopukhov's painting "Ukrainians" (1997) is also inspired by the young Independence of our state and at first glance is not full of sacred meaning, but this is an erroneous impression. The picture shows not juvenile but young man and woman bearing a child in her arms. Both are dressed in light embroidered national clothes, young greenery abounds behind, the bright transparent sky emphasizes the general sublime mood of the canvas. The man leaned his hands lightly on a young apple tree densely covered with early apples. The woman holds the child in her arms as the Mother of God is usually depicted – she holds the baby face away from her, the naked boy plays with an apple. In

the distance, in the right corner of the picture you can see the Lavra bell tower, in the left corner a flock of black birds flies away. All the characters are easy to read and the overall light color maintains the impression of a joyful anticipation, however, the picture gives the promotional and engaging impression that is facilitated by both excessive saturation with straightforward symbols and a realistic manner of painting. For a long time, it was the realistic manner that prevailed as the only thing allowed, and art could only exist as a way of direct or covert agitation, so the combination of the two factors negative impression as the picture seems a bit artificial and far-fetched. That is, from the viewpoint of building a composition of plastic and color solutions, everything is done skillfully, but the general impression is this one of compulsion because the canvas is perceived as a slogan. And this is also a problem inherited from the painting socialist realism method, because for a long time artists were faced with just such a task and each painting had to carry in the first place the ideas concept (and even better just ideological component).

Not only proponents of narrative painting addressed the sacred art topic, usually applying external elements to convey the hidden meaning. This is exactly the sound of the painting "Meditation" (1989). Despite the not-quite-Christian name, the image is immediately associated with a Christian church. First of all, the artist achieves this through the skillful use of architectural forms, in particular arches, which are repeated many times with varying intensity in the foreground and background. Intense blue paint over the arches, which are depicted in the foreground, also resembles the image of the sky in iconography – pure color, without tonal nuances. The figures in the interior confirm the first impression: ocher-red triangles wrapped in black immediately evoke an association with blueberries. Despite the calm name, the picture actively interacts with the viewer. This is facilitated by a distinct color: different shades of ocher with a dominant red, which in the foreground are outlined by the intense azure of the sky, which is not a calm horizontal stripe, and broken lines, which clearly break into the already calm brown-red color. The plastic language of the painting is also active: the artist uses a minimum of horizontal lines, preferring diagonals, clear verticals of red, blue and black, and creates a feeling of volume of space due to semi-arches, which multiply and languages in the mirrors are reflected in the back-

ground. And it is in the movement of these curved lines that hidden is the key to this artwork meaning, mentioned in the title. As the process of meditation is deeper than just sitting in a certain position and has a sacred meaning regardless of religion, so the picture's conditional plot is just a shell, a way to interest the viewer and hold his attention to comprehend the meaning of the canvas. To some extent, this canvas illustrates the desire to join the world cultural context (in this case through a combination of different religions). speaking about the problem more broadly, the Soviet Union ideological foundations destruction left deep voids that needed to be filled.

## 5. Conclusions

Summarizing, it can be argued that sacred art had a significant impact on the Kyiv artists' painting in the 1980s and 1990s. so the political subtext was sought in a work or a particular image. Such excessive politicization of art is still one of the hallmarks of Kyiv painting. The considered works prove that artists of different creative directions and thematic preferences addressed the sacred themes in their works. The artists not only did use individual plots or images, the appeal to the sacred was much deeper and more space-taking. Thus, the plastic language inherent in icon painting was actively used, artists began to use the semantics of color more actively, combining the sacred and the mundane in their works. This desire to combine is one of the key factors for understanding late twentieth century Kyiv painting, because it is not just about transferring images from icons to canvas. It was the need to find a new meaning in which one could combine the accumulated experience of generations with the new challenges of modern life. In fact, it is about the subconscious need to create a new Ukrainian myth, something that can be believed, that could be relied on today.

Thus, it becomes obvious that sacred art was one of the pillars in the new Ukrainian art formation. In particular, Orthodox Christianity influenced the formation of the idea of the hero-martyr and the need for martyrdom in general. It also affected attitudes toward life not as a source of happiness or reward, but as a way to atone for sins before eternal life (after death), which also affects each individual 's worldview

and the life of the community as a whole. This topic needs a deeper study and comprehensive research, because it was at the end of the twentieth century that the national idea and visual symbols of the Independent State were formed. It is in the 1990s that we should search for the origins of many phenomena that manifested in both the cultural and political spheres at the 21st century beginning.

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## Summary

In the article an influence of sacred art on Ukrainian painting of the late twentieth century, as exemplified by works of NAFAA teachers, was studied. In the professional literature, an idea was established that Ukrainian art, including painting, in the late twentieth century is closely connected with popular art and folklore, sometimes it is also about the influences of fine arts of previous epochs. Herewith, the influence of sacred art on the formation of a new art is mentioned only cursorily or its significance is completely neutralized.

The goal of the work was, first of all, to determine the influence of sacred art on the creation of Kyiv painters in the late twentieth century. To achieve the targeted goal the works of painters, who were representatives of different generations and different stylistic trends, were reviewed and formally analyzed.

The pieces of art presented in the work give grounds to state that the influence of sacred art on the formation of Kyiv painting is significantly underestimated. Even a cursory overview of the works suggests that sacred art responded not only narratively. Artists examined and actively used icon-painting and composition building, turned to specific recognizable images and combined them with modern themes. In the study, a special attention is paid to M.A. Storozhenko, the founder of the Department of Sacred Painting, who was not only a prominent artist, but also a teacher, and he managed to educate a number of artists who continue the work of the mentor, teaching sacred painting to a new generation of artists.

**Keywords:** Kyiv painting of the late twentieth century, paintings of NAFAA teachers, sacred in Kyiv painting of 1980–1990, influence of sacred art on the Ukrainian painting