Valentine Serov
(1865 - 1911)

Biography

Valentin Aleksandrovich Serov, a Russian painter, and one of the premier portrait artists of his era, was born in St. Petersburg, in the family of the Russian composer and musical critic Alexander Serov, and his wife Valentina Bergman, a composer of German-Jewish and English background. In his childhood he studied in Paris and Moscow under Ilya Repin and in St. Petersburg Academy of Arts (1880-1885) under Pavel Chistyakov. He soon showed himself to be a remarkably precocious draughtsman. He would catch the likeness of a model often more quickly and surely than older artists in the ‘facetious drawing competitions’ [Mataeva Olga. Valentin Serov], which were so much a part of gay and idyllic life of Abramtsevo. Serov's early creativity was sparked by the realistic art of Repin and strict pedagogical system of Chistyakov. Further influences on Serov were the old master paintings he viewed in the museums of Russia and Western Europe, friendship with Mikhail Vrubel and later Konstantin Korovin, and a creative atmosphere of the Abramtsevo Colony, to which he was closely connected. Mainly, he was studying under P. Chistyakov, but he did not finish The Academy of Arts in 1885, he went to Europe to complete his education in Holland and Italy – so powerful was his desire to work independently. It played a great role in his life and influenced his views. In 1887 he got married to Olga Trubnikova. Valentine Serov traveled a lot, participated in exhibitions in Russia and abroad. In 1897-1909 Serov taught in Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. He was a superb technical master of many media in which he practiced and he did not fail to impress his students by that. Serov died of a heart stroke in 1911. During his life he managed to create so much, developed the skills in many different spheres. Being the best I.E.Repin’s student, he became the artist who succeeded in transition from the old art to the new one.

Creative works

Valentine Serov’s first exhibited works – Girl with Peaches. Portrait of Vera Mamontova (1887) and Girl in the Sunlight. Portrait of Maria Simonovich (1888) – were a sensation. Critics called them a new word in painting. They were being painted for three months almost without a break. At the time of painting Serov was unfamiliar with the works of French Impressionists, yet he came very close to Renoir in these luminous, sunny, splendidly composed portraits. Serov tried himself in different genres: he was a beautiful landscape painter in a more sensuous and less nostalgic vein than another teacher of his, Isaac Levitan: Pond in Abramtsevo (1886), The Overgrown Pond, Domotcanovo (1888), Village (1898), Watermill in Finland (1902). Serov’s historical paintings are also of value and interest: Peter II and Princess Elizabeth Petrovna Riding to Hounds (1900), Peter the Great (1907). In his works he showed invisible to other people things
which made his paintings more vivid. We know how time-consuming was writing portraits for Serov. The number of sessions happened to be more than one hundred. But he also mastered the art of superfast sketching. Pencil, fusains, brush obeyed him, and the transition from the sketch to watercolour made such soft and poetic things as Madonna by Michelangelo in Florence (1887). Serov became the most successful and brilliant portraitist in Russia of the 1890s and 1900s. Every portrait shows the artist’s ambition to express the completeness of psychological characteristics, the desire to show the depth of the human being without hiding either good or bad. His most famous portraits are Portrait of the Actress Maria Yermolova (1905), Portrait of Henrietta Girshman (1907), Portrait of Ida Rubenstein (1910), Portrait of Princess Olga Orlova (1911). His art is multifaceted. He painted not only portraits but also landscapes; he created works on history, turned to antiquity, worked as a book designer and decorated the theater. In 1907 after having visited Greece he created the poetical legend The Rape of Europa.

Florentine influence

Valentine Serov visited Italy for the first time with I. S. Ostroukhov and the painter M. A. Mamontov in 1887. To obtain money for this trip, he had had to paint the plafond at The Seleznev’s house. They decided to visit three Italian cities – Florence, Milan and Venice. The trip inspired him to work, create something bright, sunny and joyful. They declined the idea to visit Rome.

Venice made a great impression on him. He wrote to his fiancée historical lines which would define his work: “I want, I want something pleasant and I will paint only pleasant things”.

From Florence, he wrote to E.G. Mamontova: “I am writing to you from the city which is your favorite... Yes, here you can find what to visit, I mean to learn, it is not enough to see. I expected a lot from Venice, but I should never have thought that there is so much wealth! Florence is the storehouse of paintings and sculptures”. May 22 / June 2, 1887, Florence. [Biography, letters...]

He wrote to A.Mamontov: “You say that you never found plastic art so exciting while looking at those Raphael and Michelangelos. So did I. But for the first time in my life I was ever impressed. Imagine, I was crying. It happens to me sometimes – at the theatres. But it never happened in front of a sculpture or painting. But in front of Madonna by Michelangelo in Florence I failed. Yes, we should not joke with these gentlemen” [Biography, letters...].

He creates the watercolour sketch of Madonna by Michelangelo in Florence which is famous for soft lines and inspiration.

Also he wrote to M.F. Yakunchikova: “What am I supposed to write? I like this place: paintings and sculptures are amazing, nature is beautiful, and so on and so forth. The air is sweet and pleasant – you know it all better than me.” June 25, July 6, 1887, Florence [Biography, letters...].

After this trip he was inspired to create his most famous paintings Girl with Peaches and Girl in the Sunlight.

During his second visit to Florence in 1904 Valentine Serov painted Via Tornabuoni in Florence. The skies are sparkling in white and light blue colours. They seem to be opposed to the straight vertical lines of the buildings. But they are mysteriously united with light blue human figures on the background.
Learn more