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## With the Stroke of the Brush

The vivid, magical, romantic, and real works of a true contemporary expressionist, Nikolai Blokhin.

BY DEVON JACKSON

The Soviet Union collapsed nearly 16 years ago and still there often seems to be two types of Russian artists: those who embrace traditional Russian art history and techniques even as they carve out something modern and contemporary, and those who reject Rus-

sia and the former Soviet Union's artistic past altogether in order to project a more modern, Western sensibility. The former camp tends to eschew politics and prefers the figurative and the realistic, while the latter group tries to make as big a statement as possible, be it

artistic or political. Nikolai Blokhin, whose lush, impressionistic and almost bejeweled oil paintings—the still lifes and the landscapes but especially the portraits—clearly and no doubt proudly identifies with this first group.

Born in 1968 in Leningrad (now, once





again, St. Petersburg), Blokhin started out at one of St. Petersburg's conventional art schools. Unique in talent, Blokhin stood out; in short time, the prestigious Ilya Repin Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, now known as the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, accepted him into their hallowed halls. Centuries old and steeped in protocol and

tradition, The Repin Institute trained gifted children from all corners of the Soviet Union, grooming them for their futures as elite Russian (if not Soviet) artists. At least half the students had parents who were artists themselves, part of Leningrad's cultural *crème de la crème*. Blokhin's parents, however, had no professional connections with art; therefore, as talented as Blokhin was, neither the students nor his instructors, at first, expected much of him. Somewhat of an Eton on the Neva, in terms of the school's pecking order

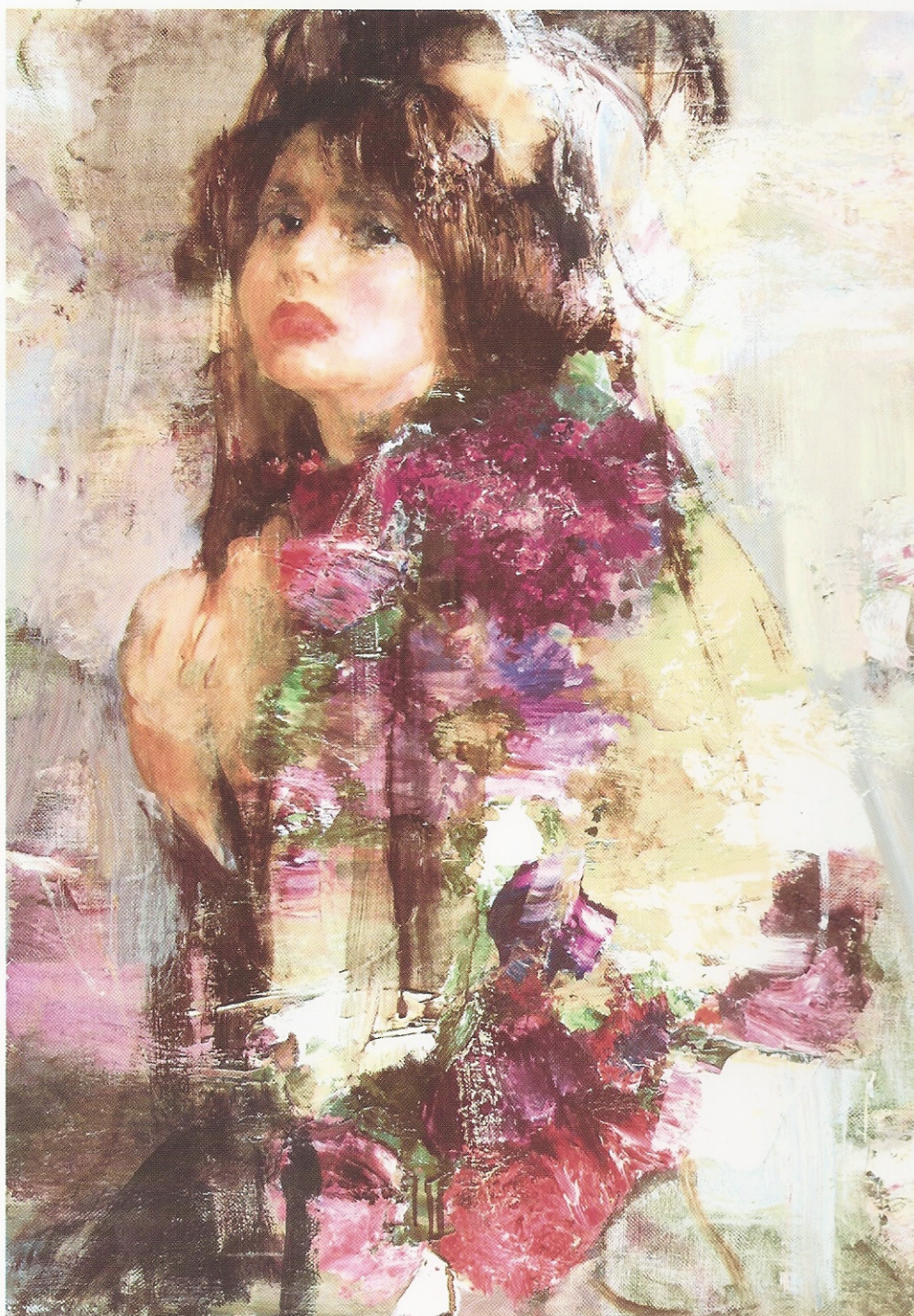
and competitiveness, the Institute emphasized drawing and painting methods that had been around for ages. Blokhin chose to go his own way.

Ironically, one of his most cherished teachers turned out to be Professor V.I. Reikhet, one of the prouder patriarchs of the school's painting traditions. Rather than just throwing up his hands and turning his tutor loose, though, Reikhet shrewdly schooled Blokhin in the old ways while recognizing and encouraging the young painter's ability to

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OPPOSITE PAGE: *Musicians*, oil on canvas, 58" × 71"; THIS PAGE: *Venice Masquerade*, oil on canvas, 70" × 71"





make the older stylistic tricks his own and at the same time infuse his paintings with a sense of the contemporary. Galina Tuluzakova, an art historian who has written extensively on Blokhin, has pointed out the benefits of places like Repin: "Academic education has been considered routine for too long a time. But in criticizing academia, one should keep in mind that it still stands and serves as a tuning-fork or landmark, setting clear criteria to follow or reject." Adds Tuluzakova, "This sys-

tem can absorb and level the weak, as it can give a powerful take-off and foster self-development to the strong."

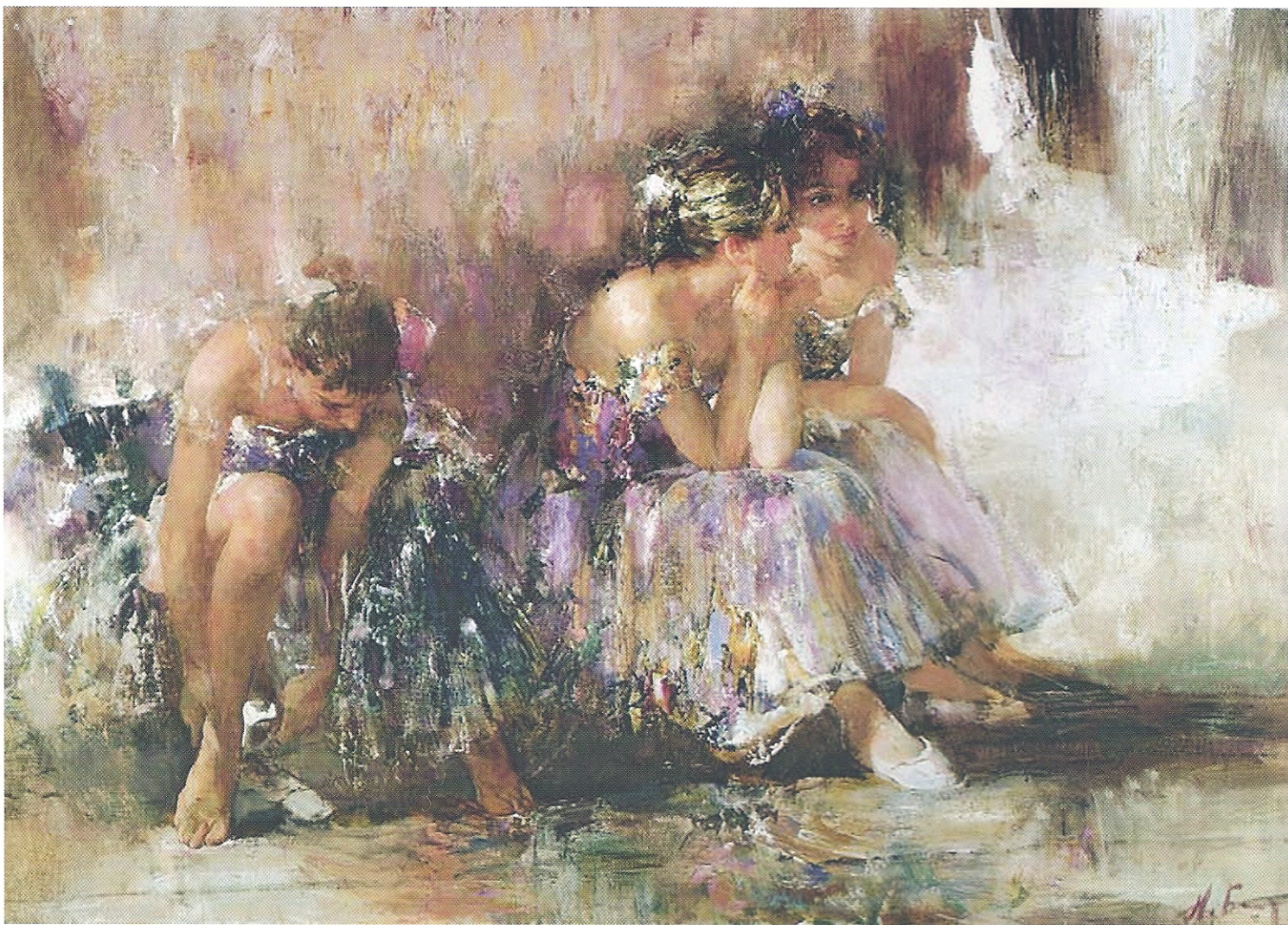
And Blokhin, as his impressive paintings prove, is nothing if not strong and extremely self-motivated. Three years after graduating from the Academy and finishing his practical training, Blokhin began his own teaching career at the studio of Professor Pimenov, Professor Reikhet's successor. He is now a Professor of Drawing at the Academy.

Blokhin first made a name for himself with his portraits. Impressionistic, with a sense of freshness and spontaneity, and deceptively casual in mood and tone, Blokhin's studies evoke comparisons to a wide range of artists and styles: Velazquez, Gustav Klimt and Auguste Renoir among the Westerners; prominent academicians of the Soviet school such as Nicolai Fechin, Yevsey Mooiseyenko and Boris Ougarov; and Russian modernists Mikhail Vrubel, Valentin Serov and Filipp Malyavin. One of his favorite subjects has been his wife Natasha, who is not only beautiful but an accomplished painter herself. His daughter Anya also models frequently for Blokhin, giving his sometimes somber portraits a feeling, too, of adoration, joy and sunny optimism.

Blokhin's talents, and his works, are not limited only to portraiture. He frequently finds brilliant ways of self-expression in his landscapes of St. Petersburg. Filled with the atmosphere of constantly rainy weather and damp, dank air (typical for the northern seaside city), the grey hues of his landscapes will suddenly fade into the opulence of antique silver, and the blur in his silhouettes and an absence of details give his scenes a vastness of space. No less attractive are Blokhin's still lifes, which he tends to divide into a white and a grey series. These Blokhin executes in classically tendered colors with a delicate ease of contemporary interpretation.

It's perhaps in his carnival series, however, where Blokhin's powers of observation, his link to artists of the past and his concerns with questions both artistic and philosophical most come to the fore. Full of buffoons, jesters and harlequins, many of whom appear less happy than their colorful get-ups would suggest, Blokhin, whose likeness is often reflected in many of these festive but forlorn, happy-sad faces all dressed up for carnival, for the week before the Lenten fast, or for some other ancient occasion, here seems to be asking questions that have confronted great artists for ages: What is the role of the artist in this world? Am I here merely to entertain the public? Is this happiness I give





to others through my paintings just an illusion? Or is there something deeper I should be doing with my art, my life?

Ever careful not to give the viewer any concrete clues that might betray a specific time, a specific place in these paintings, Blokhin here and elsewhere (in his portraits particularly) is aiming for some deeper emotional truth, something not just inherently Russian (that mournful Russianness that neither globalization yet managed to erase) but human and universal. They are questions, and goals, which, according to Tuluzakova, came directly from the Institute: "The Academy of Arts cultivated in its students ideals typical for all Russian artists: compassion to simple people, importance of humanistic values and ardent belief in the great mission of Arts. eternal search for an answer to the question: 'What is beauty?'"

Blokhin's accomplishments include: 2002 Grand Prize winner of the Contest of the American Society of Portrait Artists (ASOPA) for Foreign Artists, one of the most prestigious awards held at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. In 2004, he also received the Best of Show of the Portrait Society of America, headquartered in Boston. Having found special recognition in the United States, he has had over twenty personal exhibitions in New York, Boston, San Francisco and Los Angeles. His works can be found in collections of numerous presidential museums and countries around the world.

Aside from Rembrandt, the artist Blokhin is most often compared to, and his one true artistic mentor, is Nicolai Fechin, the Russian-American artist who emigrated to America in 1923. Both studied with teachers from St. Petersburg's Academy of Arts, both

rapidly obtained recognition in the U.S. and there are distinct similarities in the way they draw, in the texture of their paintings, in their ambitiousness as artists. Both, too, value the illusion of life developing in front of our eyes as the intended result. In an upcoming exhibition, in Taos, New Mexico, at the Taos Museum and the studio of Nicolai Fechin, the works by these two Russian masters will be hung side by side.

OPPOSITE PAGE: *The Gypsy*, oil, 32" × 24";  
THIS PAGE: *The Debut*, oil, 55" × 85".

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*These phenomenal works can be viewed at Downey Gallery, 225 Canyon Road, (505)982-6701 and at 112 W. San Francisco Street, (505)988-7479, [www.downey-gallery.com](http://www.downey-gallery.com). Hours: Mon – Sat 10 am – 5 pm, Sun 11 am – 4 pm.*