

Fedoskino: an account of painting snow scenes amidst a freak heatwave in Russia

A group of artists flew out to Russia in August 2010, courtesy of the Friends of Kholui and ARSA. This year was going to be different, as I had decided it was high time that I too shared in the adventure. It was, however, to be touch and go all the way. Our visa applications were far more rigorous this year than they had been hitherto, and I joined the group in avidly following for weeks beforehand all news reports on the excessive heatwave which had hit Russia. This had provoked horrific fires and smog, resulting in a devastating loss of life, crops, property—indeed, whole villages. We all conferred and decided, on the basis of the worst of the heatwave having passed, fires being finally brought under control, and smog lifting over Moscow, that we would still sally forth as planned. This was of course always provided we weren't either grounded by cancelled flights due to the situation potentially worsening out there, or perversely due to airline strikes threatened at this end! Yet somebody was smiling upon us all, it seems, because, having met up as arranged one early morning at Heathrow airport, we found ourselves touching down in Moscow, despite some remaining smog. After an overnight stay and morning visit to the local (Izmailovo) crafts market—which I nearly had to be dragged away from, it was so interesting—our group set off for Fedoskino, where we were to lodge at a health spa. The village of Fedoskino, 25 km north of Moscow, is considered to be the mother of all four lacquered miniature centres, and the only one to paint in oils rather than tempera. Visiting Russia was a first for me, but so too was to be painting in miniature on a Russian lacquered box, working in oils, and further handicapped because I had not picked up a paintbrush in three whole years!

The artwork chosen for us to copy was of a troika driven by a bear, the troika being the symbol of Fedoskino. On a technical note and especially for those of you interested: the troika operates by a system of the centre horse holding to a straight line, while the two opposite-pulling horses generate the high speeds typical of a well-balanced troika. The original painting from the 1950s featured people as well, but to ensure we managed to complete our painting within the allotted week, our teacher had painted his own lacquered box for us to work from, excluding them for simplification. Just three-quarters of the lacquered lid was coated in aluminium powder to allow for the snow and features to glow, while leaving the top quarter inky black for the night sky.



We learned of the tale behind the scene, which enjoys the status of a folk legend. According to the poem by Nikolay Nekrasov, one evening General Topytgin and his adjutant, who happened to be a fully-grown Russian bear, are obliged to stop their troika due to inclement weather and to seek shelter at a village inn. Unfortunately, there being insufficient room at the inn for them both, the bear-adjutant is forced to

bed down in the stable with the horses. Miffed by this slight, and not one to pass up an opportunity to bedevil the perceived perpetrators of this inconvenience, the bear roars loudly and takes to the troika, whereupon he revels in riding about the village all night creating a frightful stir and howl, and causing the villagers to come out to see just what is disturbing their peace. I was apparently not alone in having reservations beforehand about how enjoyable painting the chosen subject matter would be, but we all agreed that once we had got into the spirit of painting the snowy landscape, horses and bear, it was immensely rewarding.

Our teacher Anton took it in turns at our five workstations to demonstrate each stage of the painting, with the lovely Ludmilla always present and close at hand to translate. We didn't always know quite where we were heading to reach our daily goal, but somehow by working at a feverish pitch we all managed to get there eventually, including myself (much to my amazement). We even managed to fit

some amusements in between, visiting the Fedoskino workshops and museum one day, and returning to Moscow on another to see the Kremlin and Red Square, St Basil's Cathedral, and the palace of the first tsar's parents, the Romanov boyars.

By now our day of departure loomed near . . . by which time the old hands had managed to pop some figures into their painting. I was more than happy to put the finishing touches to my one and only painting, having at least completed the task set for me by Anton. A bonus for me was that, since I had never before got around to painting in oils, I now cannot wait to try them out at home, perhaps forsaking my long allegiance to watercolour. It really is true that you can achieve the finest of lines in oils, and I enjoyed being able to smooth in oils with my finger or blend them with a large brush—very satisfying indeed.

Health spa? Well, I not only found time to avail myself of the incredible shiatsu massage chair, one of two which dominated the atrium, but I also indulged in a quick-fix energy-giver. One morning I queued up to receive and digest a large bowl of whisked-up egg white, mixed with liquorice juice and injected with pure oxygen. I think it did give me a sort of high—but then I ‘crashed’ later and had to retire to bed early, completely fatigued by a day’s painting!

Apparently I acquitted myself well, making quicker progress than Anton had envisaged, although I have never painted so fast in my life to meet the deadlines of several lacquerings and flight departure. I am already focusing on next year, when there will be a repeat trip to Fedoskino, this time to paint a portrait. This is more my field, so I am going to get in some practice with oils and start saving my pennies. Perhaps I will see you there!

Dianna Goodwin