

Mysteries of Mstera · Joanna Tulloch

Last summer a group of six of us were lucky enough to study lacquer-miniature painting in Mstera. The trip was very ably organized at this end by Carole Richardson and at the Russian end by Ludmilla and Vladimir Fishchuk. We stayed in a comfortable wooden house surrounded by birch trees and looking out onto a small lake in a resort called Ozerki, between Mstera and the nearest large town, Vyazniki. We were made very welcome for our classes in a spacious room at the Mstera art workshops by director Sergey Sukhov and his colleagues; our teacher was the great Vladimir Moshkovich, one of the grand old men of Mstera painting, who nevertheless was not at



all stuffy, but turned out to have an impish sense of humour and fun. The design that had been chosen to copy was Moshkovich's version of the

Firebird fairy tale, incorporating not just Prince Ivan and four Firebirds in the central section, but an elaborate coloured border with a Firebird at each corner. At the beginning I think most of us wondered whether this was achievable in only six days, but were pleasantly surprised to be able to go home with a 'finished' lacquer box—we completed the painting on the top of the lid (most of us with help from Vladimir), but had to leave the sides of the box unpainted. The lacquering master at the workshops even found time on the last morning to lacquer our lids for us.

For those of us who had attended classes in Kholui and Palekh in earlier years, many of the techniques were now familiar; but the Mstera style of painting has a unique characteristic, the use of a light background, and this was something new to master. The whole of the central oval and the birds and scrolls of the border had first to be painted plain white

before colour could be built up on them. The main design was then traced onto the white oval in red ochre, similar to the tracing of an icon onto white gesso. Next came the painting of blocks of colour, such as the turquoise sky and the base colour of the Firebirds. The detail



was added in stages, and only at the very end did we pick out highlights and border with paintable gold leaf (which had previously been ground down with a finger into gum arabic, made into a solution with water, then strained and dried on a saucer).

There was time for sightseeing and recreation as well as work. We had a half-day excursion to Vyazniki, where we visited the monastery and the Museum of Russian Song as well as admiring the wonderful view across the Klyazma river valley from the hill above the town. In Mstera itself, we visited the museum and a silver workshop, bought paints and brushes in the market, and took in an exhibition of batik. We even found ourselves at two weddings, one of them complete with belly-dancers! But it was the hospitality and welcome from the artists themselves that most moved us.

We were privileged to go and look at the work the master artists had brought to the workshops for the peer review of the artistic council, and on our last day had the treat of lunching in the workshops with some of the most famous artists, including Valentin Tikhomirov, Vladimir Molodkin, and Anatoly Shirokov, whose albums of work were quite breathtaking, inspiring me to write this poem:

The Masters of Mstera

Let us now praise famous men
Who paint the icons and the fairy tales
And yet so modestly approach us
With conversation and with soulful songs.
In their wooden houses they sit and spin the
gold,
Creating their fabulous designs,
Making of the landscape a legend of
shimmering colour

And a lullaby of lines to rock the imagination.
They stroke the pigments into vibrant life
As their brushes swish and swerve and the
lines begin to sing
So that long after the lacquer has fixed their
work for ever
The song still echoes faintly in the mind of the
admiring buyer
Who carries their jewel-like treasures home
across the miles.



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Writing