

FEDOSKINO 2009

This was my third lacquer box workshop – I had been to Kholui and Palekh already – and I was very much looking forward to it, because in Fedoskino they have a completely different style. They paint in oils, often on mother-of-pearl and their subjects tend to be either landscapes or fantasy subjects, rather than fairy tales, and they don't follow the strict icon-based tradition of stylised painting used by the other villages.



We were put up in a comfortable hotel/hospital. It was primarily a spa [though there was no spring] and offered all sorts of arcane treatments on the second floor. The canteen produced good food, though the menus were a trifle unusual to British palettes. You might be offered grilled chicken for breakfast and porridge in the evening, and for some reason, if you were offered coffee [instant] in the morning it would be juice at dinner time. They took awhile to get the measure of our vegetarian friend's needs, but once they got into their stride we were all very envious of her!

We worked in a spare meeting room in the hotel – very convenient and well set up – each with our own source of light. Our teacher Anton was a dish! There is no other way to describe him. He was about 6 feet tall, slim and good looking, with hair nicely greying at the temples. He was also unmarried, but unfortunately most of us were 10 to 20 years older than him!

I had always dismissed oils after a distressing experiment when I was about 15. I thought them smelly, thick, and prone to becoming muddy when the colours were mixed. I had however seen my miniaturist friends produce wonderful delicate paintings in oils, so I was keen to try.



We were each given a large tile on which a selection of colours had already been placed. Also some brushes [very like the ones I normally use for watercolours], some thinner and some linseed oil. Each of us had a rectangular box with a silver surface. This was made by pressing aluminium powder on to a box made sticky by the application of glue.

Our sample was a beautiful snow scene created by Anton. We started with the sky, and this was my first surprise. You can get *transparent* oils, and you can smear them smoothly on using a finger tip. Wonderful! I became more and more entranced as the week progressed. With my small brushes I could immediately get the finest of lines, with a lot more reliability than with watercolour or even tempera. The colours glowed, and of course, if you could be patient enough to wait for the work to dry, you could paint light colours and light highlights over dark paint, producing the contrasts I had tried so hard, and so unsuccessfully, to produce in my previous paintings.



The week was amazingly hard work and wonderfully rewarding. At the end of a long day we could take our turns in the shiatsu armchairs in the lobby. 50 roubles [£1] gave 5 minutes of extremely effective shiatsu massage down the whole back and legs.

This holiday was beautifully planned, jointly ARSA-F and Carole Richardson of the Friends of Kholui, to whom very many thanks.

Caroline Hayes