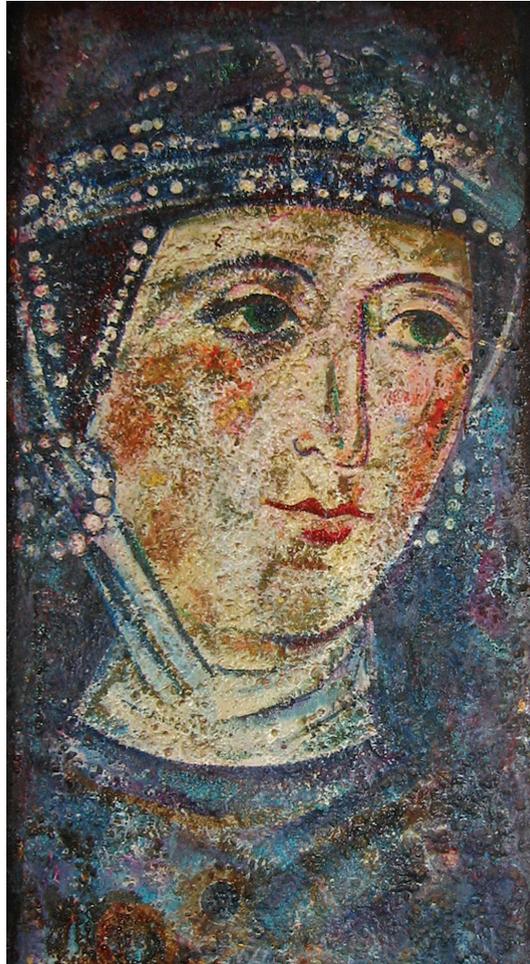


GALLERY



Kras Gorin

by Lydia Billon

Kras Gorin's painting style is as unique and exotic as his life has been. This year, the Bulgarian born iconographer and abstract painter, currently a resident of Wilmington, Delaware, is celebrating his 60-year jubilee in his home capital of Sofia. His icons and paintings, while rooted in tradition, exude a 21st-century aura in an unexpected meeting of past and present.

"I'm trying to bring in the 21st century with this because the icons are made really fine. I do this with a lot of layers to express myself, my spirituality and the Bulgarian region and culture. I'm trying to combine everything that surrounds us where the material disappears and becomes something living. It's got to

have magic, to grab you when you see it. It has to move. It has to move me and move somebody else, not just be decorative.”

As you might imagine Gorin’s interest in the art of iconography began early on during visits around his home country, and as he observed his father and grandfather at work: “My grandfather was an artist doing icons. My father is an artist. I come from an artistic family, so I was surrounded by art at an early age before I went to Italy. There are beautiful churches and monasteries in Bulgaria. The icons in Bulgaria are especially spiritual ones. It’s not only the surface, but they give a character, a spirit to the saint they represent. I’ve always admired the artists who have done them.”

One icon in particular that holds meaning for Gorin represents the inspiration for one of his works. “In Boyana Church, just outside Sofia, there is a portrait of Dessislava [an aristocratic early patron of the church]. It’s considered to be the first expressionist painting before the French even thought about it. It is an icon so impressively done that it’s one of the treasures of Europe.” The icon is a 13th-century fresco, a masterpiece, which alongside some 240 figures chronicles Bulgarian history at the height of Medieval civilization. Known for their technical mastery, psychological depth and complexity, the Boyana Church frescoes adhere to the canon of icon writing instilled by the ecumenical Council of Nicaea of 787.

Gorin’s Dessislava portrays a regal image of the original fresco of the noblewoman, probably from Byzantium, which he couldn’t resist painting, given her alluring, serene expression and refined features. “It’s such a vivid image considering the age. Her beautiful face is an inspiration. I created a stucco-like background and built it up with paint to achieve the texture and color of an old wall painting.”

As a youth in the sixties, Gorin left Bulgaria to join his mother, world-renowned ceramicist Yova Raevska, in Ravenna, Italy. From there, he went on to the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome where he studied under Italian

cubist, Luigi Montanarini, who applauded the young art student’s sense of individuality. As a student in Rome, Gorin stayed with the Baroness Adelina Dancin, who became a second mother to him. Upon graduating from the Academy in 1967, he left Italy for New York, and then spent some years as a starving artist in Chicago, working in a factory when he won a commission to paint a mural for the famous Moorish style Aragon Ballroom on Chicago’s North Side. “I did the icon style, those blues and reds with the icon style, and the old Moorish style disappeared. I made the first page of the *Chicago Tribune*, so that is how I got my start.”

After Chicago, Gorin settled in Arizona. The year was 1976. Inspired by the local landscape, he founded The European School for Monumental Art in Phoenix, Arizona, teaching classes and exhibiting in Scottsdale and Santa Barbara in California in the early eighties. After about twenty years in Arizona, he returned to Bulgaria to see what it was like after the fall of the iron curtain. There he was well received personally and professionally. Gorin and his wife stayed in Sofia for ten years; he had eight successful one-man shows, but decided to make a permanent move to the U.S. in 2005. Now the artist divides his time between homes in Wilmington, DE and Tempe, AZ.

Despite his classical education, Gorin developed techniques on his own after many years of experimentation. “In Italy my professor didn’t tell me anything. He just told me I was doing fine and to continue. I didn’t learn any techniques from anyone. It’s good because I’m not repeating any of those Old Masters. I’m trying to create my own images, because these artists were too good to copy and it’s not worth it because they already did something that’s unreachable.” Having said that, Gorin’s all-time favorite artist is Botticelli. The sensuality of the female form in the works of Botticelli is what most appeals to him.

Gorin works in mixed media. He uses oil, but sometimes even uses house paint and tempera. “It gives the texture of the walls inside the

monasteries and absorbs the oils. It gives the structure.” The artist builds texture with much layering of paint and employs knives and anything else he can imagine as a conduit for paint.

Gorin’s influences hark back to those Bulgarian churches and ancient monasteries of his past. “Everything comes from the icon. The age gives it something that makes it living. It’s an eight-hundred- or a thousand-year-old icon, but it’s still a living thing. It’s so real, that’s what attracts me.”

His home country of Bulgaria has a turbulent history, as well as a long tradition of Christian iconography. Bulgarian icons go back a thousand years. Also noteworthy is that the country was the first in the Slavic region to adopt Christianity from Byzantium in the year 865 under the rule of Tsar Boris I. From then on, the icon became an essential part of Bulgarian art. Under Ottoman rule in the 14th-century Bulgaria experienced an interruption in state support for icon writing, although the icon remained a symbol of hope and inspiration and national identity for all Bulgarians. The 19th-century brought with it the liberation of Bulgaria and a renaissance of icon writing, much of which had secretly flourished in the inaccessible monasteries of the region.

Gorin believes religion saved Bulgaria from assimilation: “Bulgarians didn’t let themselves be assimilated by the Turks. Many of the monasteries are hidden underground in the peaceful Rodopi Mountains. Three feet down you enter and see a treasure [trove] of miniature icons and stylized Biblical murals. Even the Turks couldn’t get into it.”

One hundred miles from Sofia is the Troyanski Monastery, which just southeast of the ancient town of Troyan, is known for its exceptional icons. One of the most visited monasteries, also the largest, is the 10th-century Rila, famous for its museum. Gorin recalls his childhood trips there: “We used to go there and sleep in the monastery. Under communism, the monks were not allowed to perform services. Instead they kept up the place, like maintenance men.”

In the Bulgarian iconographic

tradition there are three distinct schools of painting named after the towns from which they originate: Tryavna, Samokov and Bansko. Most of the artists of the early icons are unknown since they didn't always sign their work. Gorin's favorite school is the Tryavna, renowned for its realistic use of color. "It's not only the gold or the silver background color, but the creation of a real living painting. The colors are vivid, but the age gave them a little dullness, which is still attractive."

Though the Byzantine influences are evident in Gorin's work, there also exist abstract qualities. "The abstraction comes in when you have to combine millions of ideas and simplify them into my feelings about them."

His icons are a very private reflection of his work. His complete body of work is diverse, and addresses such themes as the Trojan War. Gorin has made religious mosaic sculptures fabricated of tree trunks and adorned with miniature glass and ceramic tiles, and traditional paintings of the Madonna and Child. Among his works are a Madonna with Thracian features, interpretations of Hindu goddesses, traditional scenes from the Last Supper and a very modern-day portrait of Mona Lisa.

Gorin does not strive to commercialize his work, although his art can be found in the collections of more than forty private individuals and corporations worldwide, including ING Direct in Wilmington, and The Vatican Library in Vatican City. The Vatican piece is an icon depicting Saints Cyril and Methodius. As an art student, he spent countless hours studying works at the Vatican museum and the basilicas in Rome. It was a Bulgarian priest who was at the Vatican at the time, who commissioned the work for the Vatican Library.

In Wilmington, his studio sits on the second floor of the Delaware Center for the Contemporary Arts on the Riverfront, a facility which houses seven galleries and the studios of 26 artists. Filled with natural light, his studio is a place where Gorin spends hours studying his paintings at different times of the day.

From April 1st through the end of the month, Gorin will exhibit at the

DCCA's Hatch Gallery with fellow artist Michele Madeksza, a student of Ed Loper. You can tour Gorin's studio and meet the artist on the first Friday of every month, when the Center hosts open studio during the Art Loop. One of Gorin's Madonna and Child icons graces the corridors of the DCCA, but don't expect to find many icons in his studio. While some can be found in the North Wilmington home of his daughter Amy Gorin Chapman, who is also his manager, others have gone to private collections.

What you'll likely see at his studio are bold canvases featuring idealized subjects and larger than life motifs awash in texture, color and motion. Many of these works glimmer with gold and silver accents that enhance his abstractions. You'll recognize themes from Greek mythology and notice the unique blend of elements of fantasy and magic the artist endeavors to exude in his modernist works. It is interesting to note the breadth of style and subject matter Gorin depicts. From the ancient to the space age his myriad explorations are a testament to his desire to define himself as a 21st-century artist.

Kras Gorin can be reached at info@krasgorin.com or via phone at 917-520-5364. The DCCA is located at 200 South Madison Street in Wilmington. The hours of operation are Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m.-5p.m.; Wednesdays and Sundays from 12-5p.m. For more information, please visit www.krasgorin.com or www.thedcca.org. ❖

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