

IVAN YAMBERDOV: THE GUARDIAN OF THE NATION

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Abstract

The author of the article analyses the artistic journey of Honoured Artist of Russia Ivan Mikhailovich Yamberdov (born in 1955) to be one of the leading fine art artisans of the Republic of Mari El. His work should be viewed in the context of the Mari culture. He is the carrier and the guardian of the national mental outlook. Ivan Yamberdov is a muralist artist not only by education but also by the type of his thinking and sensitivity. He started his career in the 1970s and 1980s amid *national neo-romanticism*, which appeared in the Soviet art at its later stage. The artist's paintings of this period are full of poetisation and idealisation of rural life, they demonstrate his first contemplation of the Mari people's fate. In the late 1980s, a symbolic basis in I. Yamberdov's paintings is intensified. He does not break with the academic painting parlance but he introduces new original picture techniques. The colouring of the paintings becomes gloomy with bright flashes of light. This particular colour produces a powerful emotional impact on the viewer. In the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, socialist realism dictation in the art disappears and Yamberdov, like other national artists, gains creative freedom. From this time his style can be defined as *ethnosymbolism*. The ancient images of the native culture are revived, however they do not look like Mari folklore illustrations similar to those created by many Soviet artists. The national tradition is creatively revised by Yamberdov. He touches upon formerly tabooed aspects of the people's life, for example, religion. He broaches half-forgotten issues which mainstream the meaning of a myth as a form of thinking. The artist enters the process of myth-making. As if taking on the role of the wizard - narrator who sees the past and the future and restores the continuity. The images of his relatives and fellow countrymen pass into the archetypes, which often turn out to be much wider than the Mari culture alone. The plots of his paintings are filled with the mystical events explored by the artist from one painting to another. This is how the stable mythologems of Yamberdov's artistic cosmology are created. The artist actively uses the method of metamorphosis. The artist's mythogenic aura pervades all his paintings and reigns around his personality. Ivan Yamberdov is a unique phenomenon, he writes an unmatched modern chapter of the Mari fine arts.

Keywords: Mari fine arts, national neo-romanticism, ethnosymbolism, Ivan Mikhailovich Yamberdov

1 INTRODUCTION

Ivan Yamberdov is a national artist whose work should be viewed in the context of the Mari culture. He is a carrier and a custodian of the national mental outlook. The essence of this world view is a holistic perception of the nature and the human being in their syncretic interrelationship and mutual responsibility. It especially becomes relevant nowadays. The Mari people managed to preserve till the present day their own traditional religion of **Yumyn Yula**, whose origins go back to the mythological consciousness of the past.

Ivan Yamberdov was granted the keys to this lurking world from his relatives in his early years. He spent his

childhood in a village among the people who preserved their traditions, irrespective of the external ideological conditions. The image of the sacred family tree growing on the fringe of the farmstead, follows him all his life. This image has become the symbol of his spiritual roots.

The artist involuntarily generates symbolically expressive situations, attracts people and circumstances, creates whatever popularly is called a miracle. The artist's intuition and distinguished charisma make up the basis of his ability to foresee the events, to understand them as signs and to perceive symbolic meanings from them. The artisan's mythogenic aura runs through his paintings, entails an ambiguous reaction of the audience, emotions being on the verge of affect. The artist is a mythmaker.

2 THE ONSET OF THE CAREER

Ivan Yamberdov started his artistic career in the 1970s while still a student of the Department of Mural Painting of V.I. Surikov Moscow State Academic Art Institute. It was time when the national theme in the Mari art was renewed after long time of calm after the defeat of the first artistic intelligentsia in the 1930s. They again broach a subject of identity and prospects of the ethnic group still in terms of socialist realism but already affected by the new artistic trends. National neo-romanticism manifests itself in the republics of the Soviet Union.

Neo-romanticism was represented in the Mari art by several artists, among who Ivan Yamberdov was in evidence. Ivan Yamberdov was said "to have taken a quick start" (Prokushev, 2003, p.304). At this stage, the artist uses transparent paint, creating canvases full of deep peace (*The Stable Yard*, 1977; *The Sun Sets*, 1980; *The Morning in Karamasy*, 1985, etc.). The theme of the native land, the native village of Chodrayal and its surroundings is affectionately expressed in the paintings of that time (*The Native Land*, 1981; *The Shepherd Boy in the Native Land, From Childhood*, 1983; *The Koramas Mlande*, 1988, etc.). The theme of the grove (oto in the Mari language) to be of sacral significance for the Mari people - "the children of the forest"- is widely present in the landscapes. Even in those years, the people cherished the memory of their religion and their sacred places (*The Grove*, 1976; *The Old Linden*, 1977; *The Agavayrem Oto*, 1978, etc.).

Over time, I. Yamberdov's paintings appear to be more dynamic. Being a passionate nature, his temperament manifests itself, above all, in colour. A series of works were painted while in the Novgorod Region expedition dedicated to the 1000th anniversary of Christianisation of Russia. Those paintings vividly capture the artist's new techniques *The White Tower. Novgorod Vallation; Saviour on Nereditsa*, 1988, etc.). In the 1980s, I. Yamberdov asserts himself not only as an artisan of genre and landscape painting but also as a portrait painter. He deeply perceives the nature of the model and conveys the national character through the individuality (*Grandmother Lchi*, 1977; *Grandfather Matvey*, 1980; *The Bellman*, 1988; the portraits of fellow students; Mari artists and children's portraits, etc.).

I. Yamberdov's genre paintings transfer the ethnographic authenticity of the details of national life, already largely lost by that time, into the space of art (*The Witch Tree in Blossom*, 1980; *The Holiday in Coramasy*, 1986; *The Preparations for a Wedding, The Still life*, 1989). However, it is not just actuality, it is filled with psychological content just as it is in the painting *On the Wedding Day*, 1986-1987, and it is also endowed with a special sublime subtext (*The Honey Noon*, 1982; *The Haymaking Time*, 1984).

The artist began painting genuine symbolic works (*Grandfather Myron*, 1980; *By the Old Oak Tree*, 1982; *The Festival in the Square*, 1984, etc.). He resorts to metaphors and allegories e.g. the painting *Red Horses*, 1986 shown at the exhibition dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the October Revolution. In 1987 the painting was interpreted as an image of this event. However, even then, they noted such a feature as the "washing off" of the symbol and reality to be viewed as an element of novelty (Kuvshinskaya, 1991, p.89). A little later, the artist himself interpreted his work as vision of the Soviet Union's collapse. Today, a rare viewer will have such a narrow association with this painting. It is more like a feeling of some vivid, life-giving energy flying through space and time, i.e. the image of red horses as a symbol gained depth and ambiguity over time.

3 IVAN YAMBERDOV BEING A SYMBOLIST

In the 1990s Ivan Yamberdov styles himself for the audience as an artist-mythologist and a symbolist. The Mari land, the land of the ancestors, is depicted in his canvases with bare, shrunken trees (*The Land of the Fathers*. The central part of the triptych *The Voice of the Earth*, 1991). Old white willows, patrimonial trees that used to grow in every Mari family's farmstead backyard seem to be stretching their branches-arms (*The Roots Yamberde*, 1992). While gaining maturity, the artist lays his life credo on the canvases (*The Faith*, 1992; *My Vertical*, 1994, etc.). Unlike other national artists who, while searching for their own ways of expressing ethno-cultural issues, have radically changed their artistic language to a conditionally symbolic

one, Ivan Yamberdov remained a conventionalist. Based on the academic and realistic traditions of the fine art, he created his own painting style. He has become one of the most profound representatives of the national principle, the “voice” and the “eye” of the Mari nation. The symbolic Ruler of the World in the form of an eagle owl (*The Ruler. The Eye*, the central part of the triptych *The Universe*, 2003 clearly demonstrates this role of the artist. The motive of the traditional religion (*The Adoration*, 1993; *The Mari kudo*, 1995, etc.) and the Christian one (*Nativity of Christ. Saviour*, 1991; *Ava of Jesus Christ*, 2002) are equally present in his paintings. These motives are experienced as mystical revelations of the same order to reflect not only the syncretic dual faith of the Mari people but a deeper modern idea of the unity of the divine spark regardless of the forms of its religious embodiment.

The artist has developed his own specific colour scheme filled with a dramatic contrast of intense tones as if illuminated by an open white tone used for depicting flashes of bright light, shining through clouds. This creates a magical atmosphere in his genre paintings and speaks of the sacrament being created (*The Ovda Sola*, 1993, 1996, etc.). This technique used for portraits allows the artist to describe tough fate and feelings of his characters (*The Portrait of Mother*, 1983-1992; *The Awakening. Tatiana*, 2007).

The method of generalisation has become an interesting way of symbolisation in the painter’s creative process: the images of real people, first of all, his relatives, are elevated to the rank of the Mari culture archetypes, and even more, to the human archetypical images by means of avoiding naturalistic details or introducing the universal symbols into the plot (*The Ryabinushka (Rowan)*, 1998; *The Shymakshan (Osh Kue. Shosho)*, 2009; *The Mari Ava*, 2016). Definitely, those people have remarkable characters and destinies, which inspire the artist. For example, his grandfather Myron Aktuganov, who became a prototype for the image of a **blind, wise old man** (*The Saint*, 2000; *The Chotkar*, 2004) was a beekeeper. This occupation makes his personality sacramentally meaningful in terms of the traditional Mari religion. During the Great Patriotic War, he worked as a collective farm chairman. In those iron years of war, he managed to take care of the workers, sometimes at risk for his own freedom. Grandfather Myron is shown as a half-blind old man sitting on a fallen tree or a stump, against the backdrop of a spacious scenery in the pictures *My Grandfather Myron*, 1986; *The Memory Expanse*, 1990. The scenery is the river Pez running through a ravine overgrown with bushes. There is a small grove and a village pagan cemetery in the distance. Apart from that the scenery is made up of desert meadows which were once a forest. An impassable spruce grove, a large pine forest, of which only the name of the ravine *Yakter Korem* (Pine Ravine) remained, were cut over for the sake of a quarry to mine stone but soon abandoned. The artist said that his grandfather Myron was deeply upset by this deforestation. This personal story will be reviewed by the artist in his other paintings as the theme of the loss of not only the traditional habitat of the Mari nation but also that of the culture of the people as a whole.

Sinking into his own ancestral origins, I. Yamberdov penetrates into a kind of “matrix” of the native culture. Impregnating it with his own vision and interpretation the artist creates incredible images filled with archetypical numinosity (*The Century*, 2000; *The Vozh. Vodyzh. Leader*, 2015). These paintings break the boundary between the real and the imaginary, give rise to fantastic stories and incidents among the spectators, that is, they become mythic which means that this is proof of the true function of Yamberdov as a mythmaker.

Finally, an important part of his method has become metamorphosis polyphony fully revealed in the paintings of the new century. The paintings of I. Yamberdov devoted to the theme of a forest hide from the viewer and sometimes from the artist himself, the totemic inhabitants of the living Mari forest. They can by chance reveal themselves through an allusion in a fleck, a stroke, a contour on the foliage or between the trunks of the trees (*The Maska Oza (The Bear-Master)*, 2007; *The Master of the Forest*, 2008; *The Memorial Path*, 2009; *The Avamlande*, 2014). This is how the ancient magic of shapeshifting, animism liven up to be, in actual fact, the forms of mythological holism, a sense of the objective reality integrity, an individual being its inseparable component.

4 YAMBERDOV TODAY

Today's Ivan Yamberdov is not only a well-established artist and a recognised artisan, he is also the head of a large family: a husband, father, and grandfather. His family plays an essential part in his life and his artistic world (*Tanyusha. My Palette*, 2000; *The Family Nest*, 2004; *The Melodies of Generations*, 2005; *The Great-Grandfather's Wedding Arch*, 2010, etc.). The artistic thought carries him to *The Places of the Past Childhood*, 2009 and they give him a meeting not only with the forest, but also with his ancestors. The artist's pseudonym of Yamberde is the name of his grandfather who gave the surname to the family of Ivan Yamberdov. The surname means a place of grace in the Mari language. According to the artist, his grandfather was hardworking and thrifty, the artist with tears in his eyes recounts the family story about the

dispossession of his family at the end of the 1930s. Today grandson Ivan takes on the role of a custodian of both his own family, the Yamberdov kindred and of the entire Mari nation through his artwork.

The artist has created an extensive portrait gallery of his fellow countrymen (A. Zenkin, 2005; Yuri Elmakov, 2010; V.S. Patrushev, 2014, etc.) among who we see artists, simple peasants, friends and strangers. His female portraits are remarkable for their earthly energy. They give a sense of durability and reliability of beingness and they encourage optimism (*The Morko Vata. Accountant*, 2007; *The Autumn. Nina*, 2012; *The Sveta Yan*, 2013; *The Shoptyr Sveta*, 2015). Currently, the artist is working at the portraits of M. Shketan National Drama Theater actors. His ability to see and reveal human characters is amazing.

The artist's creations are made up of the entire "card index" of the Mari culture archetypical images. These are the representations of exceptional power archetypes (Jungian archetypes) of the Wise Old Woman (*The Mari-Kitnya kuva. Narratress*, 2005; *The Lyvyr Mikal Vate Sanka*, 2010; *The Grandmother Lchi Mask*, 2015) and that of the Wise Old Man (*The Saint*, 2003; *In the Land of Forests*, 2009; *The Elder Toi from Coramas*, 2010; *The Vozh. Vodyzh. Leader*, 2015, etc.). Except portraits and generalised characters, the maternal archetypes are represented by zoomorphic characters from the Mari mythology, in particular, by the white horse (*The Ava Er*, 2015; *The Moonlit Night*, 2015; *Over the Mother Volga River*, 2008-2009). The cultured character in Yamberdov's new mythology, on the one hand, is a creative person viewed as a blessed custodian of knowledge and culture (*Zosim Fedorovich Lavrentyev in the Workshop*, 2009; *The Sanyan Vachi (Director Pekteev's Portrait)*, 2011, etc.). The creative person's special status in the paintings is shown with a burning candle or a flickering iconlike face in the headboard. On the other hand, the archetype of the Hero-Saviour is being established by the artist. The Hero-Saviour is portrayed in several guises: through the image of Christ (*The Saviour*, 2013; *The Prophet*, 2015; *The Svetloyar. Kitez Town*, 2015), through the traditional image of the sacrificial horse (*The Call of the Ancestors*, 1999; *The Universe*, 2010, etc.). The artist creates his own myths with the universal symbols of the Waterfowl, the World Tree, the Egg, the Circle/Wheel, etc. passing through the prism of the Mari culture. They act as a means to express the artist's philosophy in his latest programmatic opuses such as *The Mari Yugorno, The Sacred Mari Pass*, 2012; *The Festive Call of the Mari Drum*, 2014.

The artist's latest major work is *The Faith. Hope. Love* triptych, 2017. Three pictures of vertical format emit solemnity. Here, in the shade of the sacred Mari trees, life-giving women reside. Yambika mistress-mother keeps the Faith of the bright God of Heaven Kugu Yumo (*The Oza Ava Yambika*, 2011, the left part). A young girl preparing for marriage is full of hope (the artist depicted his daughter in the central picture *On the Wedding Day*). All natural forces are acting in concert with her. She is holding a traditional wedding sharpan (a veil), possibly her grandmother's one in her hands. The forest on the third canvas is glowing filled with the sounds of the violin (*The Musical String of Generations*, 2017, the right part). This is the other artist's daughter is playing the Mari melodies while grandmother Lchi is moving with light dancing motion devoting herself to the flow of happiness. Music is binding together the past and the future, the people and the nature, thus giving birth to Love. This is how the cornerstones of the Mari world are piled up. In this way artist Ivan Yamberdov – the custodian of the Mari kindred – today submits Life itself.

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5 CONCLUSION

To conclude, Ivan M. Yamberdov as a national Mari artist has passed an interesting creative transformation from the Soviet national neo-romanticism of the 1970s to the modern neo-mythological symbolism. He established his own recognizable pictorial style based on a dynamic contrast colourist. Using the techniques of symbolic generalisation and metamorphosis, he expresses the ancient archetypal meanings of the traditional Mari culture, acts as the creator of a new ethnic myth. Thus, he today plays the role of a custodian and a successor of the Mari nation's culture.

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