

The role of the Armoury in the artistic life of the country has changed at various times over the many centuries of its history, during which it has been transformed from a royal workshop into a state museum. What distinguished the Armoury was its link with the process of artistic creation: the unique Kremlin collections are not the result of the purchase of valuable articles for the royal treasury – most of the exhibits were made here, in the Kremlin, in the court workshops. In the arts centre of Russia. The most gifted artists and craftsmen were invited to work here, and trained a large number of pupils. In the 17th century the Armoury reached the highpoint of its activity, and it is no accident that the Armoury of that period is sometimes termed “the Academy of Arts”. It was then that the basis of the future museum was created – a store-house of remarkable works by Kremlin craftsmen, priceless ancient relics and magnificent gifts from foreign monarchs. From the 18th century onwards, the Armoury became first chiefly and then only a museum. The Kremlin workshops gradually ceased to function. When the court moved to the new capital of St Petersburg in 1712, many artists followed, and for the next two centuries the Armoury was given the role of ancient treasure-house in which was stored an unchanging collection that remained, with rare exceptions, closed to the work of contemporaries. This tradition continued right up to the last few years, although the first serious attempt to change the character of the museum was made in the postrevolutionary period, when the collections in the Kremlin museums were replenished with works from the 18th–early 20th centuries. The collection of Russian jewelry from ancient times to the early 20th century became one of the largest, and has no equal anywhere in the world for wealth and historico-artistic value.

Today, in order to retain that status, this collection requires not only to be replenished, but to be extended to include the present day. The museum has started to acquire the most interesting works by Soviet artists, and is looking for new ways of co-operating with them, one of which is to organise exhibitions of their works.

The present exhibition is the first, and therefore of particular importance as a step in this direction. It is no coincidence that it is being held in the Armoury. There are not many artists or works which could pass such a rigorous test. They risk remaining unnoticed or not understood, eclipsed by the chef d'œuvres of the past. It would seem that no such danger faces Leonid Efros, whose works, together with those of Alexei Maximov, constitute a natural and organic continuation of the main exhibition, a unique collection of Russian enamel from the 12th to the early 20th centuries. Revealing complete mastery of traditional techniques, the artist also continues to seek new, contemporary formal variations in every work, new possibilities for this ancient art, amazing the viewer with the wealth and inexhaustibility of his talent, and making his own contribution to the centuries-old history of enamel art.

The miniatures of Leonid Efros, captivating, some with the richness, others with the delicacy of their colour, are immediately perceived as genuine and valuable works of art in no way out of place within the walls of the Armoury. They continue the best traditions of the complex art of the jeweller, and yield nothing in beauty to the natural splendour of gemstones, gold and pearl.

However, the main quality and power of works by this artist lie in the fact that they are the expression and symbol of the beauty and value of noble human ideals. This has excluded fortuitous themes from his work, focusing his attention of one of the most difficult genres – the portrait – and determining his choice of subjects endowed with noble spirit, will-power and intellect. The world of these images, which include some of the outstanding personalities of the 18th – 19th centuries, has naturally taken its place within the historical panorama presented by the Armoury exhibition. It is this which explains why the museum, having decided to open its doors to contemporary artists, has chosen Leonid Efros to be one of the first.

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