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# The Artist and His Circle. Russian Emigre Artist Eugene Klimoff



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**Ключевые слова:** Евгений Климов, портретист, пейзажист, деятель культуры, русская эмиграция, русская культура, А.Н. Бенуа, М.В. Добужинский, З.Е. Серебрякова, «Мир искусства»

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Художник и его круг. Мастер русского зарубежья Евгений Климов

**Abstract.** The article is devoted to the artist of the Russian emigre artistic circle Eugene E. Klimoff (1901–1990). a committed realist, as a painter and graphic artist, Klimoff worked in the field of landscape and portrait. The artist's creative heritage includes many portraits of representatives of Russian artistic emigre circles, cultural and scientific figures, as well as landscapes of those places in which he happened to live during his life. These landscapes are autobiographical and belong to the category of historical evidence, acquiring special value after a hundred of years. a significant part of the landscapes is executed in the technique of lithography, and the attention of this article is focused on them. At the same time, the landscapes by Klimoff are analysed not only from the point of view of a modern art critic but also from that of his contemporaries. This perspective became possible due to Klimoff's extensive correspondence with many famous Russian artists in exile, including Alexandre Benois, Zinaida Serebryakova, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, and others.

Klimoff's activities in various fields of art pursued a specific goal — the promotion of Russian art in its entirety in those cities and countries where he happened to stay. He became one of the founders of the cultural and educational society "Akropol" in Latvia, and in 1932 became its executive secretary; in 1940, he headed the Russian Department at the Riga Art Museum. In different countries of the world, Klimoff painted churches and restored church murals; he also gave public lectures on ancient Russian icon painting, subsequently expanding a variety of lecture topics and including Russian fine art of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, including the work of his Russian contemporaries. At the same time, Klimoff's activities as an educator began to spread in another direction — towards homeland, for which he carefully preserved not only his and his circle artists' works but also memories of them in a form of correspondence with famous Russian culture and art personalities.

**Аннотация.** Статья посвящена художнику русского зарубежья Евгению Евгеньевичу Климову (1901–1990). Убежденный реалист, живописец и график, он работал в области пейзажа и портрета. В своем творческом наследии Климов оставил множество портретов представителей русской художественной эмиграции и деятелей культуры и науки, а также пейзажей тех мест, в которых ему довелось жить в течение жизни. Эти пейзажи носят автобиографический характер, относятся к разряду исторического свидетельства, что сто лет спустя приобретает особую ценность. Значительная часть пейзажей исполнена в технике литографии, на них и сфокусировано внимание данного исследования. При этом пейзажи Е.Е. Климова рассматриваются не только с точки зрения современного ученого, но и с точки зрения современников мастера. Этот ракурс стал возможен благодаря наличию обширной переписки Климова со многими известными русскими художниками в эмиграции — А. Бенуа, З. Серебряковой, М. Добужинским, др.

Деятельность Климова в разных областях искусства преследовала конкретную цель — продвижение русского искусства во всей его полноте в тех городах и странах, куда его забрасывала судьба. Он вошел в число основателей культурно-просветительского общества «Акрополь» в Латвии, а в 1932 году стал его ответственным секретарем; в 1940 году возглавлял Русский отдел в Рижском художественном музее. В разных странах мира Климов расписывал храмы и реставрировал церковные росписи, читал публичные лекции, посвященные древнерусской иконописи, впоследствии расширив лекционную тематику и включив в нее русское изобразительное искусство XVIII, XIX и XX веков вплоть до творчества русских художников — его современников. При этом со временем его деятельность просветителя стала распространяться и в другом направлении — в сторону родины, для которой он бережно сохранял произведения не только свои и художников своего круга, но и переписку с известными русскими деятелями культуры и искусства, воспоминания о них.

Did not the Lord send us, artists,  
 So that seeing His creation,  
 We would extract the nectar of beauty  
 And gently bring it to the hive?

*E. Klimoff, Riga, 1938 [35]*

## The figure of Russian culture

“An outstanding man of art” [18] — this is how Alexander Serebryakov described the Russian emigre artist Eugene Klimoff (1901–1990) in one of his letters during their correspondence which lasted for almost 20 years. Indeed, Eugene E. Klimoff can hardly be called a painter only, as his almost 70-year creative activity was very diverse and vigorous. The main areas of Eugene Klimoff’s creative activity include but are not limited to painting and graphics, lithography and engraving, woodcarving, mosaics, creating and restoring church murals, history of art, teaching, delivering lectures, writing works on Russian artists, both his predecessors and contemporaries, memoir writing... This list can be continued by exhibition and patronage activity, to name a few. In one of her letters to the artist, Zinaida Serebryakova wrote, “I am surprised at your inexhaustible energy — to travel and work so much, both art and restoration (I wish I could learn from you!), teaching young people ... What a gift it is to be so talented and active!” [24].

Eugene Klimoff was born in 1901 in Mitau, Latvia, where his father, a lawyer by education, had moved from the capital after his marriage in search of a better-paid job and took the post of assistant court clerk at the district court. Eugene’s three older brothers had been born there too; he was the youngest in the family. A few years after his birth, the father climbed up the career ladder, first in Libau, then in Warsaw and St. Petersburg, where the family lived until the revolutionary upheaval. When it became turbulent, the Klimoff family moved to Novochoerkassk in the hope to wait out the revolutionary unrest. There Eugene graduated from a non-classical secondary school and started studying at the Don Polytechnic University, and concurrently studied at the I.F. Popov School of Art. [see: 42, p. 108]. However, the situation in the country began to evolve in a way nobody expected. Unable to withstand the pressure of what was happening, the father died, leaving the mother alone, while all the sons, with the exception of the younger one, happened to be directly

involved in the White Guard movement in one way or another. Therefore, hailed from the Baltic state, in 1921, the family decided to legally move to Riga — by that time the capital of an already independent country. Having graduated from the Latvian Academy of Arts, Eugene Klimoff became an active participant in the artistic process, worked as a graphic artist, portrait and landscape painter, and gave lessons. Later, he would significantly widen the area of his artistic interests and would work in the techniques of mosaics and engraving, and in the field of creating and restoring church murals. In 1944, Eugene Klimoff and his family moved to Europe, and in 1949, he settled down in Canada, where he would reside until the end of his life. All those years the artist participated in exhibitions, organized his monographic expositions in different cities and countries, delivered public lectures on the history of Russian art, including contemporary art, had his works published, and taught the Russian language at an American summer school for over 20 years. He sent individual albums of his lithographs to the USSR and patronized arts, donating items from his personal collection of works by Russian artists in exile after 1917 to their homeland.

The name of Eugene Klimoff was introduced into the scientific discourse of the Russian art history in the 1990s, when Alexis Klimoff, the artist’s son and custodian of his creative heritage, continued to hand over to Russian museums his works of art and biography materials, including personal memoirs and an extensive collection of letters that many iconic representatives of Russian emigre culture and arts exchanged with the master. Eugene Klimoff, the same age as the 20<sup>th</sup> century, met and communicated during their lifetime with three generations of Russian emigration. His addressees included artists Alexandre and Nicola Benois, Anna Cherkesova-Benois, Mstislav and Rostislav Dobuzhinsky, Vasily Masyutin, Zinaida Serebryakova, Alexander Serebryakov and Ekaterina Serebryakova, Vasily Sinaisky, philosopher Ivan Ilyin, archpriest Alexander Schmemann, writers Ivan Shmelyov, Naum Korzhavin, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and many others.

Most of the paintings by Eugene Klimoff are now reposited in the Pskov Museum-Reserve. According to art historian N.I. Saltan, during 25 years, the Klimoffs family donated to the Pskov Museum a collection of 1,000 items, including the master’s paintings, drawings and books [38, p. 125]. From the late 1920s up until leaving for Europe, the artist visited the Pechora territory almost on a yearly basis, went to Pskov and Izborsk and

left records that chronicled the life of those places and captured evidence of antiquity, which still existed in those years. The icon above the Pskov Kremlin gate is a monumental porcelain mosaic icon of the Holy Trinity designed by Eugene Klimoff. Created in the 1940s, the icon miraculously survived and waited to be embedded in the empty space above the gate (the icon that had been in place before 1917 was lost in the years after the revolution). During his lifetime, the artist donated albums of his lithographs dedicated to the places where he happened to live to the State Russian Museum. Some of the albums are now stored in the collection of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts; some individual works — mostly portraits of representatives of Russian culture and science in exile — are kept in the museum collection of the Solzhenitsyn House of Russia Abroad.

Currently, Eugene Klimoff's creative activity is the subject of scientific research in Russia, so the name of the artist and, more broadly, a figure of Russian culture, enjoys merited recognition. Some years ago, a biographical book by V.N. Sergeyev about the artist came out, based on Klimoff's intimate diaries, which he had kept throughout his life [39]. However, from our perspective, it is of particular interest to understand not only how today's researchers see the artist's creative activity, but also how his contemporaries evaluated it, primarily artists he had immediate acquaintance with, friends whom he sent his works and photographs of exhibitions as gifts, whom he consulted and addressed with purely artistic problems — the issues of composition, colour and light, technology of lithography and engraving, etc. Eugene Klimoff's extensive correspondence provides such material for analysis.

### Topographer artist. The images of homeland and their reception

The present article mainly focuses on the genre of landscape graphics. Here is what Klimoff himself wrote about his work in this area in a letter to the director of the State Russian Museum V.A. Pushkarev in 1973: "I have issued the following albums of lithographs:

1. Ten cityscapes. 1928
2. Cityscapes. 1937
3. In the Pechora Land. 1938
4. Riga. 1941
5. Italy. 1943

6. Kitzingen. 1948
7. Quebec. 1951
8. What is going away [Ce, qui s'en va]. 1952
9. The shoreline of the Gaspé Peninsula. 1953
10. Toronto. 1955

In addition to the albums, I have created individual lithographs and wood-cut engravings with the views of the Baltic States, Italy, Paris, Germany and Canada" [13].

The lithographs are different in technology, performed on stone and on zinc. The first three albums dedicated to Riga and the Pechora territory were enough to bring Klimoff recognition and fame.

Riga was the city of utmost importance in the life of Eugene Klimoff. There in 1929, he graduated from the Art Academy of Latvia (class of painter, portrait painter, graphic artist and sculptor Jānis Tilbergs, a student of Dmitry Kardovsky); he also worked in the studio of landscape painter Vilhelms Purvītis, a student of Arkhip Kuindzhi. Thus, Klimoff was fortunate in having his teachers: J. Tilbergs and V. Purvītis are considered outstanding Latvian artists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, masters recognized worldwide. Concurrently, Eugene Klimoff graduated from the Art History Department of the Art Academy (teacher — Professor Boris Vipper), which would later allow him to deliver lectures on Russian art and not once would help him make ends meet. Yet in his student years, having tried turning to the avant-garde in his creative quest, Klimoff became a dedicated follower of realism in the visual arts, in which he found support from the Academy teachers and fellow artists. [see: 39, p. 27].

While studying at the Art Academy, Eugene Klimoff travelled extensively; he went to Germany, France and Italy to study Western European art, twice travelled to the USSR in order to study Russian art. With a group of students he visited not only Moscow and Leningrad, but also the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, Novgorod and Pskov. The choice of places was founded on his interest in church art and group lessons in icon restoration. As the artist later wrote in his diary, "the trip strengthened my love for everything Russian" [39, p. 31]. Yet another confession was made: "Art is inconceivable without God. a disbelieving artist is not a true creator" [39, p. 32]. These two fundamental conclusions determined Klimoff's artistic career.

On graduation from the Art Academy of Latvia, as if he had been waiting for that very moment, the artist started intense professional activity: he participated in exhibitions, in Europe, in particular, painted murals, restored icons, published articles on fine art, delivered lectures, and went on ethnographic expeditions to remote areas of the Baltic, including the Pechora territory, which had been part of Estonia since 1920... He had published his first album of lithographs with urban landscapes, mainly of Riga, while still a student.

Apparently, Eugene Klimoff was a truly whole person, whose character was marked with openness, benevolence and energy; he always sought to maintain relationships and keep in touch with colleagues, friends, and later with his students. A hundred years ago, in the absence of modern communication means, maintaining relationships, as well as beginning new ones, was only possible through correspondence. The character traits of Eugene Klimoff that have been mentioned above allowed him to come into contact with a broad spectrum of representatives of Russian art and culture, despite age difference. Additionally, especially after the World War II, since he taught and gave public lectures, including those on contemporary Russian art, and published articles, he often turned to famous artists and their families to clarify the information about their work. Sending his own works as gifts to his addressees, Klimoff sometimes consulted recognized fellow artists, brothers of the brush (in the words of Mstislav Dobuzhinsky) and asked them for feedback and advice on his works. Some of those people of art he corresponded with for years he never happened to meet in real life.

One of the first Russian emigre artists to have got acquainted with Klimoff's lithographs was Alexandre Benois. Klimoff highly appreciated his contributions to Russian culture, reread his books on art history, and later became the author of a biographical book about the founder of the legendary *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art). As can be seen in their correspondence of 1938, Eugene Klimoff sent Alexandre Benois an album of lithographs dedicated to the Pechora territory; Benois thanked him in a return letter, evaluating the works: "Motives are collected most admirably. <...> It provides insights into this sadly poetic and miraculously survived corner of old Rus" [2].

A few years later, by 1943, Alexandre Benois was able to become familiar with all the lithograph albums issued by Klimoff by that time:

"Now I have three of your albums, which gives a surprisingly lively idea of our homeland, where you, lucky fellow, continued living, and which we are never destined to see again!.." [3].

For forty-four years, Klimoff lived in different territories that had been part of the Russian Empire before the revolution, which is what Alexandre Benois had in mind when referring to "homeland". Meanwhile, when relocating from one place to another, where one settles down for a lengthy period, an obvious feeling of a home ground inevitably arises. Therefore, the series of lithographs by Eugene Klimoff, dedicated to various cities where he happened to find himself during his lifetime, is of autobiographical nature. Klimoff arrived in Riga at the age of 20, already being a mature, formed individual. It is highly unlikely that he intended to leave this place of residence, having studied the culture and history of this land, having met colleagues and friends, having started his own family, and having collected a bundle of memories and precious moments of life, both professional and personal. Therefore, the 1928 and 1937 urban landscape lithographic series dedicated to Riga express the desire to capture his native environment, to strengthen the feeling of homeland, where he established himself as an artist, restorer, icon painter, and teacher... This feeling would continue and would determine the creation of lithographic series dedicated also to Canada, where Klimoff would move in 1949.

The lithographs dedicated to the Pechora territory are a vivid reflection of the love that accompanied the artist throughout his life, the love for the history and culture of the area, Pskov and Izborsk, the love for its antiquity, the subtle beauty of its nature, making anyone perceive of the world around as God's creation. In those works, as stated by Alexandre Benois in one of the letters to Klimoff yet on a different occasion, "genuine inspiration resides, which in turn is the very essence of art" [4].

Generally, a poetic feeling is a steady component of Eugene Klimoff's works. This applies to both painting and graphics. It is not without a reason that his senior friend philosopher Ivan Ilyin in a humorous poem of gratitude for sending a sketch of the painting *Spring in Izborsk* called Klimoff, its author, "the master with a gentle soul" [39, p. 35].

Alexandre Benois would clearly feel this poetic tone, too: "What a delightful artist you are! This exclamation is due to the immense pleasure your *Spring in Izborsk* brought me! I just felt the breath of May in the north! and oh, those wrecked little houses! oh, those crooked fences! and oh, this



temple of God, as if fading into the morning fog!.. it is unfortunate that there are no colours, but I already feel this yellowish-greenish gamut!” [8] (apparently, Klimoff sent Alexandre Benois a photograph of his work *Spring in Izborsk* and described its colour scheme).

Alexandre Benois also felt a poetic mood in Eugene Klimoff’s lithographs dedicated to Canada: “Your lithographs gave me intense pleasure, both aesthetically (I admired your pencil technique), and „topographically“ (now I am familiar with what your Quebec, your Canada look like). Remember, you once complained in a letter that Canada knows no warmth and comfort. I should say some of your urban landscapes do express elegance and warmth” [7].

Vasily Sinaisky<sup>(1)</sup> a long-time senior friend of the artist, in his review on one of the lithographs from the album that had been sent to him, elaborated on these characteristics: “Lithography is masterful and art-filled, it looks into the heart of things in their simple and visual display in the general synthesis, in which a man is also involved” [25, l. 62 back].

Turning back to the series of landscape lithographs, through which Klimoff, each time finding himself in a new place, created an image of a new homeland, another aspect is worth considering: over the years, the city images began to take the form of historical evidence. Obviously, when making sketches of Pskov or Izborsk, the artist initially sought to preserve their images for posterity. He had a similar intent later in Canada, when he hurried to capture ancient buildings literally disappearing before his eyes [see: 39]. Working on urban landscapes with the views of the places where he lived, and trying to stop time to savour the moment, Klimoff would unavoidably record urban environment, which by today, with all the devastating cataclysms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has transformed beyond recognition. Meanwhile, the artist did not simply compile scenes from the life of a city, for instance, Riga; he created the space of Riga, incorporating its various faces.

Those first to appreciate it were his friends and colleagues who remembered the city in the days when Klimoff had depicted it. An

acquaintance of Eugene Klimoff from his time in Riga, the artist Max Lazerson, later a scientist, professor at Columbia University (the USA), wrote in his letter: “I am particularly grateful to you for the sketch of the Moscow suburb. It is very well-executed and if you have the whole album for sale, please, consider me a potential buyer. With trepidation and painful longing do I remember walking along this street <...> and how successfully you have presented Gostiny Dvor, somewhat primitive, but still Russian Empire style!” [15].

In another letter, he goes as follows: “I was touched to the core by the arch, which I seemed to have recognized unmistakably: it is a modest triumphal arch to Alexander I, in recent years standing on the Livland highway near Riga, near the new Jewish cemetery. But in your drawing, it is surrounded on top by tree branches, which make it even more inviting, it looks as if standing in a deserted park somewhere in Pavlovsk” [16].

Eugene Klimoff can rightfully be called an artist who, like Dante, “created when love prompted him to do so”. a distinctive feature of the artist’s urban landscape is silence. The artist engages the audience in a hushed conversation, which identifies those works as the so-called “quiet graphics” (Yu. Gerchuk). Extreme conciseness of artistic means, inner restraint and subtlety — these are the sources of the lyrical element in E. Klimoff’s graphic works. What we see is not just a topographer artist, but an artist endowed with inner vision. For this reason, his landscapes drawn from nature are always inspired, express the spiritual world of their author, and are filled with feeling. According to Vasily Sinaisky, “the line, its movement, bizarre forms and spots all have their own subtle charm, they carry the beauty of our visible and invisible world, the latter being represented by fine mental nuances, expressed in the visible world by the hand of an artist, poet, writer” [26]. As a result, in his landscapes, unremarkable at first glance, Klimoff managed to emphasize the power of the captured moment.

This is how Klimoff himself explained his interest in the genre in the opening statement to a set of reproductions of his urban landscape drawings: “Most of my life I have lived in cities, and yet in my younger years, streets, squares, bridges, monuments and the entire “city landscape” became my point of focus. However, it is not only wide panoramas that I found fascinating; I also saw a peculiar charm in the inconspicuous parts of cities. Traveling across Europe in recent years, I have tried to notice

(1) Vasily Sinaisky (1876–1949) — lawyer, historian, poet. They met at one of the exhibitions in Riga, since Sinaisky was seriously interested in painting and practiced it, including in Paris. Klimoff was still a student of the Art Academy of Latvia back then. Later they had a trip to Italy together. Their friendship lasted until the rest of V.I. Sinaisky’s life.

the urban spirit, where each temple or building gives evidence of its life and history” [34]. (There is no date on the set of postcards, but there is an indication of publication in Canada, based on which the artist’s successors nominated the year of publication as 1980).

### The peculiarities of artistic techniques

Let us make a point about the master’s technique, bearing in mind the fact that having applied for the Art Academy of Latvia, he entered year two directly. Faithful to the traditions of the old masters in painting and graphics, Eugene Klimoff was favoured with comparison with such recognized masters of urban landscape of his time as Mstislav Dobuzhinsky and Georgy Vereisky. The first to draw the parallel between the artists was Alexandre Benois in a 1939 “artistic letter” to the audience, dedicated to the review of the Latvian exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris: “To ... the names of Riga graphic artists, we should add that of E. Klimoff, whose lithographed views of Latvia are full of mood and poetics (the 1937 album). I cannot give Klimoff a better compliment than comparing his charming urban and suburban landscapes with similar works by Dobuzhinsky and Vereisky” [1, p. 469].

The testimony of Mstislav Dobuzhinsky himself deserves attention. In one of his letters to Klimoff, the master thanked him for the lithographs he had sent and concluded: “Although you were not my student, I can consider you one.” [11, l. 2].

Two years before his death, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky conducted a detailed analysis of Eugene Klimoff’s artistic technique in drawing, defining it as very close to his own, revealed his arsenal of lithography techniques, and gave advice: “... I rejoice at the fact that you strive for a short composition and know to find a „point of view“; it is something I can relate to”. And further: “If I may, if that does not make you angry, I would give you friendly advice of a fellowman, purely technical: do not limit yourself to a lithographic pencil; apparently, your lithographs are made on stone or aluminium, not on paper. If on stone, the more so — lithographic ink, a pen or a brush combined with a pencil can give a greater emphasis to the drawing — though, I judge it from my own experience and I certainly do not want to impose this on you! I also have employed a scratching technique when working on stone — for the same purpose. I am not keen

on stroke shading; why not apply continuous shading with the flat side of a lithographic pencil? No need to „teach“ you drawing — you yourself understand everything. I would only consider scrutinizing the pattern <...>” [11, l. 10 back, 11, 11 back].

Interestingly, Alexandre Benois also gave recommendations to Eugene Klimoff on his lithographs — and very unexpected ones indeed: “... it seems to me that if coloured, they could acquire particular exquisiteness! I am aware that from the point of view of true lithography connoisseurs this is vandalism and heresy. But so it goes and I cannot help it — the lithographs by Martynov and Galaktionov, and (quite another story) those by Domiet and Gavarni, all of them I prefer (!) coloured (and how wonderfully coloured!)” [7, l. 8, 8 back].

Returning to the works of Eugene Klimoff-the graphic artist, it should be emphasized that his drawings, lithographs and engravings follow the academic tradition in art exclusively. There is no appeal to the deformation technique as a figurative form of modern plastic arts. The focus of the artist’s attention was not the question of experimental language, and he did not consider it possible to transform his artistic language in response to his whims of fate. Although, it may be due to hardship that he could not accept the distortion of natural vision, aiming to convey in his works only the beauty, inner charm and appeal of what he depicted.

### The problem of classical art and the latest trends in painting

Meanwhile, modernist works of contemporary artists did not go unnoticed by Eugene Klimoff and, apparently, his question was as follows: “Is it true that modern painting is inspired by ugliness, and classical painting — by beauty?” [32]. This is how the question on contemporary art was formulated in the article by Prince Sergei Shcherbatov, published in the *Russian Thought* newspaper (no. 433, March 19, 1952) under the title “Declaration of Luciferianism”. The article was devoted to a discussion of an Italian radio debate about the “new art”, the topic of which was stated as the question above. Sergei Shcherbatov and Eugene Klimoff exchanged letters; they were brought together by a shared negative attitude towards modernism and rejection of the dominating trends in arts. Sergei Shcherbatov thanked the artist for one of his letters, which “expressed bitter anguish over art, which I myself have been suffering alongside with illnesses ...” [33].

In order to understand the viewpoints of protagonists and opponents of the classical art tradition and the latest trends in art, let us cite two passages from the article mentioned above: the one by the abstract artist Alberto Savinio — poet, prose writer, essayist, artist, musician, younger brother of Giorgio de Chirico, and the other one — by the author of the article, Prince Sergei Shcherbatov — artist, philanthropist, collector, student of Leonid Pasternak, establisher of the “Modern Art” salon in pre-revolutionary Moscow.

Reminding that “beauty” and “ugliness” are relative concepts, suggesting that the terms “old” and “modern” art should be discarded and that the latter one should be named “new”, Alberto Savinio defined his vision of contemporary art as follows (recall that the dialogue took place in the early 1950s): “The new generation is destined to reveal their inner world of concepts, their vision of a different, new beauty, which is drawn from an abstract cosmos of forms that has nothing to do with the visible world.

All the forms of the visible world, which old art operated with, are outdated, obsolete and no longer meet the aesthetic demands of new art, and new man — creator and visionary of new aesthetics, more refined and sophisticated. The „wise“ Matisse recognized this and turned away from the old forms, and so did the „outstanding master philosopher“ — Picasso” [32].

What did Prince Sergei Shcherbatov have to answer Alberto Savinio? He was uncompromising in rejecting modern, or new, art forms: “All that has been „so beautifully and exhaustively outlined“ in this declaration can be condensed into one word: Luciferianism with its temptation and pride.

Such is the unceasing denigration of the Holy Spirit, which through its grace-given power enlightens the entire spiritual life, of which art is a vivid manifestation — a power without which the impotent human frame could never and will never be able to create genuine, inspired art — but only the art that is weak, graceless, all the way to the perverted generation of brain deviations of the „new man“ — the creator of the „new art“” [32].

A similar discussion has been revolving since the time of N.A. Berdyaev. Nevertheless, the issue of the juxtaposition of classical and modernist art in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is exceptionally interesting, especially if discussed in places other than the USSR, where socialist realism legislatively prevailed in those years. This is of interest not only from Eugene Klimoff’s perspective about contemporary art, but also in the context of his correspondence

with the most recognized representatives of Russian art, most of whom, as we will see, were irreconcilably against the modernist experiment, and considered Picasso to literally have a demonic element (Alexandre Benois). Eugene Klimoff expressed his opinion on this matter at various times in his letters, writing about the exhibitions of contemporary art he attended, and his addressees welcomed the topic.

Alexandre Benois: “The continuous reign of the Naked King, and so many charlatans who have dressed him in non-existent garments!” [5].

“...„Non-objective painting“ is something terrible in nature, for this is work of all amateurism, ignorance, absurdity and, of course, charlatanism. However, another type of modern (continuous) charlatanism is no better. At the head of it are the modern-day Raphael — Picasso and the modern-day Titian — Matisse; in general, the name of this devilry is Legion!” [9].

“Everything that does not profess belief in Picasso, in Dali, etc., etc. — all is doomed to extinct without a trace. <...> All this brazen triumph of the devilry disgusts me...” [8].

Zinaida Serebryakova: “...an exhibition of the Guggenheim collection (from New York) is now open at the Louvre Museum of Decorative Arts — this „abstract“ nonsense is so revolting that the disgust will long plague life out...” [21].

“Last time A.N. [Benois] and I relieved our feelings about the modern “catastrophe” in art, and uncle Shura expressed his indignation with the impudence of Picasso, who had been so bold as to create a mediocre nonsense of a „fresco painting“ (800 square meters!) in the UNESCO courtyard in Paris ... We are predominantly appalled at the stupidity of the people (currently at the wheel of „art“) who accepted this work! A.N. sees a demonic element in Picasso...” [22].

Rostislav Dobuzhinsky (son of Mstislav Dobuzhinsky): “...I’m considering doing abstract art for extra money (if there is a demand, then why not amuse myself. After all, this is easy art. What is needed is just a little imagination and a sense of composition and beauty, which I have enough of), so I can compete with Kle [sic. — E.R.], Picasso and others. From a purely decorative point of view, it can even be entertaining. I will even call my series „decorative abstractions“. And painting is, of course, another thing” [12].



Vasily Sinaisky: "...They look for technique, though unsuccessfully, and that is it. Goodness, beauty, and truth — this triad remains concealed from contemporary art, it does not see it" [27].

Anna Cherkesova-Benois (daughter of Alexandre Benois): "You are right to say that the world is threatened by the nightmare of abstraction... <...> I recently saw the ceiling painted by Chagall, which adorned the Paris Opera — well, I flew into a rage. God, what a nightmare, illiterate babble, in the most classical monument of the time of Napoleon III! Of course, father is right [*unreadable*], and so are all true artists and connoisseurs of art, like you and those who did not follow the stream of platitude and absurdity that is flooding exhibitions and even museums of so-called modern art" [31].

In this respect, how can we not remember here Nikolay Punin, an ardent advocate for abstract artists in Soviet Russia, who fearlessly tried to make the right to experiment in art recognized? In his lectures and speeches, Punin repeatedly proved that contemporary artists did not disregard traditional art but critically examined it and then generated bold ideas. By means of innovative art, they expressed their understanding of modernity and surrounding reality [see: 36, p. 287].

Whereas in the 1930s–1950s, the Soviet state prohibited Punin to express and publish his views on contemporary art (he ended his days in a Gulag camp), in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the authoritative art historian A.K. Yakimovich has the opportunity to freely express his opinion on the development of modernist art in the last century and discover its origins long before acquired its visual form [see: 43, p. 272].

A century later, it is easier to trace the origin of modernist art and define its place. However, in the mid–20<sup>th</sup> century, it was more challenging, especially when being a direct participant in the artistic process. Of Eugene Klimoff's addressees known to us, there is only one artist to have taken the liberty of justifying the work of Picasso. It was Vasily Masyutin, whom Klimoff had turned to with questions about the engraving technique. "You should not be so worried about Picasso's work", wrote Vasily Masyutin. "Above all, he is an interesting artist, very gifted. <...> If you admit of distortion of colourful that sometimes dims the „verity“ of the depicted object, then why not let in the possibility and legitimacy of distortion of form. Form as such can be either simplified or distorted, and its manifestations can be presented in different terms. Also, form

can be differentiated and what we are used to seeing as a whole can be dispersed, fragmented.

Of course, what dominates, in this case, is not a part but judgment; meanwhile it is the perception of form that is more complex than the perception of colour or line. Considering the conditions we live in, we cannot underestimate the moment which is pronounced in our technical age — the image moment. Obviously, the creative work of artists who challenge visible reality may seem alien, but ... what can be done: their brain is just more artistic than the eye, that is it" [17].

Eugene Klimoff remained consistent with his chosen creative path and committed to realism in art. In this regard, the opinion of the artist Max Lazerson, Klimoff's old friend, is of interest. Recalling his early works, Lazerson said that Klimoff would not have made a modernist artist anyway: "You are not suited to be a modernist architect. The Latvians, I remember, bristled at your „Latgalian“ suburb that turned out to be somewhat Russian" [14]. On receiving photographs of the exhibition of Eugene Klimoff's works, Max Lazerson wrote even more candidly: "I am glad that you are not an abstract artist, not a follower of Kandinsky, etc., but a naturally normal artist in a good way" [16].

This commitment of his was rewarded. The letters of various years, especially after 1944, when the artist moved to Europe, expressed regret that exhibitions of his works did not attract public interest. Alexandre Benois, unison in opinions with Klimoff, in his letter of January 7, 1952, expressed his grieving about the lack of demand for artworks by artists of his circle in the West: "... nobody needs my art. And not only mine, but all the art of our circle of ideas, feelings, attitudes, etc. Everything that we considered valuable in art, that we love in the souls of our like-minded artists, and that we thought to spiritually unite us — all is now declared nonsense. <...> Everything characteristic of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is now despised — all that in Russia turned into the creative activity of Mir iskusstva! All that requires a careful, love approach, that speaks for the beauty of life (at least in its dramatic and tragic forms), what artists gladly used to demonstrate their skill in conveying the image, etc. No one has any concept of this now, no one is interested! And the more refined and sophisticated the work of art, the more it excites disgust!" [6]. Having reminded that a similar thing had happened in the history of mankind before, Alexandre Benois bitterly concluded that "after the complete

decline of ancient culture, Europe returned to its beauties and essence, if at all, but it had taken a millennium...” [6]. (Underlined as in the original).

Many emigre artists had similar feelings. a recognized expert in the history of Russian emigre art A.V. Tolstoy wrote that “traditional picturesqueness and stylized decorativeness, which many Russian emigre artists pursued to a different degree, ... could not claim special attention of either colleagues-professionals or the public who were genuinely interested in the avant-garde quest of both compatriots and Western European masters” [41, p. 15]. In his article, A.V. Tolstoy provided an overview of the artistic life of Russian emigrants in Prague, however, the trend obviously dominated across Europe.

Nevertheless, at some point, Eugene Klimoff’s exhibitions started to evoke keen interest in the audience, who could not help but fall under the spell of his deeply sincere creative work. As always, the artist shared the details of every exhibition with his addressees, send photographs of the exposition, wrote who attended it; if his exhibition was in the newspaper, he enclosed a press-cutting ... Thus, on November 22, 1947, Vasily Sinaisky wrote a return letter to his friend: “I have just received your letter <...> and learned about your Munich exhibition, and I am happy to share your joy that it was well received and aroused positive public feelings. Your love for creativity, for the beautiful and sincere passed on to them too” [28]. In another letter, Vasily Sinaisky wished Klimoff success in his upcoming exhibition, realizing how important it was for the artist: “I wish you every success in the exhibition, that heartfelt response from the audience, which multiplies the artist’s energy” [29].

Over a decade later, having written to Zinaida Serebryakova about an exhibition of his works in Canada, Klimoff received the following answer: “It was a pleasure to read that a lot of people attended it [the exhibition], it obviously was a success! Your vigour about generating interest of Canadians in Russian painting is also admirable... Here, in Paris, no one enlightens the French, and therefore, even people engaged in arts know nothing but „Russian icons“ (they have only heard about the „artist Rublev“ and Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes)” [23].

Anna Cherkesova-Benois also was supportive of Eugene Klimoff’s exhibitions: “I am very glad to receive the good news about your exhibition in Ottawa — what a pleasure it is to know that there is still an understanding audience that genuinely loves and appreciates true art. After all, there

are fewer and fewer true devotees of the art that you and I cherish and recognize as real” [30].

The feature typical of Klimoff’s graphic works include well-defined pattern, harmonious composition, appeal to light and shade when creating an image, varied and contrasting shading, and leaving some parts of a work blank, which adds airiness and lightness. The figurative and emotional structure of works reflects the artist’s worldview, his genuine interest in the world around, in everything he saw; this correlates with K.A. Korovin, according to whom a landscape should present the “story of the artist’s soul”. a person is rarely an object in Klimoff’s works; and even if present, they look insignificant contrasted with architecture or natural motifs. Normally depicted from the back, people in Klimoff’s works just supplement the composition. This may be the reason why in the drawings and lithographs different feelings go hand in hand: a feeling of love for what the artist saw around and a dash of tender sadness.

It was not once that Zinaida Serebryakova and Alexandre Benois mentioned to Klimoff viewing his lithographs with delight: “Your wonderful works. They brought us great pleasure, and we admired them for a long while!” [20]. “Yesterday, after a long time, I happened to visit Al[eksandr] Nik[olayevich] [Benois. — E.R.] and together we enjoyed your most interesting lithographs — they are very good!” [19].

## The enlightener

Eugene Klimoff understood perfectly well what he was working for, having chosen for himself an educational mission in exile: his goal was promoting Russian culture in all possible ways — through capturing and preserving in his works the image of the world around, through exhibitions of his works, public lectures on Russian art, and numerous publications on Russian artists ... Concurrently, his educational activity was also addressed to the audience in Russia — his ancestral homeland. That is why during his lifetime, he donated albums of his works to Soviet museums, exchanged letters with collectors (I.S. Zilberstein) and directors of cultural institutions (V.A. Pushkarev), sent them the works of his addressee artists (in particular, Alexandre Benois), as well as valuable evidence of the artistic life of the Russian emigration — letters from recognized figures of art and culture of the time. Eugene Klimoff put in significant efforts in capturing and

passing along Russian culture, which he carefully preserved while residing in different countries, and which he was the bearer of, to descendants in his homeland.

Many of Eugene Klimoff's associates in exile recognized the significance of his educational activity. For instance, Vasily Sinaisky, who highly appreciated being in correspondence with Klimoff, found in his letters a culture close to his soul: "Your letter of May 29, 1946 brought great joy to me and my family. On reading it (I read it many times, indeed), we felt its breath, awakening in us the high and modest, the delicate human culture, whose representative in our world is you, a sensitive artist who bears hardship with fortitude and encourages us to follow your example ... <...> ... now you alone are making sketches of a modest [unreadable] antiquity, exploring villages and countries, penetrating with your inquisitive eye into the culture of the mankind" [25, l. 3]

Nicola Benois, having met the master in Montreal, where the La Scala Theatre was touring with his stage design, wrote to Eugene Klimoff: "Meeting you left a lasting impression on me and I was so pleased that in an alien and „hostile“, purely American city like Montreal, I could find someone so near and dear, a vivid embodiment of our outstanding Russian culture, whose best form was „our“ world, the world long-gone, the centre of which, indeed, was my unforgettable, beloved father!" [10].

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