

*Lomakin M.O., member of the Russian Artists' Union, candidate of pedagogical sciences, associate professor of the Department of drawing and painting of the Russian University of traditional art crafts, 191186, St. Petersburg, Griboyedov canal embankment, 2, lit. A., e-mail: mihail.lomakin@inbox.ru*

### **The Influence of Historical Tradition on the Transformation of Form in Decorative Solutions based on Student Drawings in Lacquer Miniature Painting**

**Abstract:** The article focuses on the role of academic and decorative drawing in the education of future artists specializing in lacquer miniature painting. It highlights the importance of academic drawing as a starting point for stylization and transformation of human figure images into decorative and small-format solutions. A brief overview is provided of the stylistic and technological origins of lacquer miniature painting, which trace back to iconography. An attempt is made to establish practical connections with academic drawing, which serves as a professional foundation for lacquer miniature painters through small-scale and miniature compositions at the present stage.

**Keywords:** lacquer miniature painting, iconographic canon, realistic art, academic drawing, decorative art, small-format linear solution, miniature solution.

The tradition of lacquer miniature painting from Mstyora, Palekh and Kholuy is based on the expressiveness of the pictorial form, which originates from Russian and Byzantine iconographic schools. The orderliness of painting techniques and the depiction of the human figure, established in the iconographic canon, have been reflected in the artistic practice of many generations of traditional lacquer miniature painters [1, p. 7]. Of course, during the further development of lacquer miniature painting, it acquired its own distinctive features that differed from those of icons, both thematically and visually.

The complex multi-component compositional structure of traditional lacquer miniature painting presents students working in the discipline "Drawing" with a challenging task of perceiving the subject in a flat, two-dimensional manner and transforming it into a decorative form. This involves decorating all elements included in the composition. Currently, in the educational process, decorative processing and small-format linear solutions are carried out taking into account the historical traditions of lacquer miniature painting, based on preparatory realistic drawings.

Realistic drawing from life is a process linked to the principle of reproducing spatial constructive forms. Drawing from nature became possible when the concept of space emerged in visual arts, along with the idea of arranging objects in depth within a drawing and an understanding of perspective—the visual diminution of objects as they recede from the observer [2, p. 83].

At the core of realistic representation lies a scientific analysis of the internal plastic structure of visible objects. The essence of decorative imagery is rooted in aesthetic tradition. Realistic art serves as a school, while decorative art embodies tradition. Experience plays a crucial role in developing decorative solutions—repeated technical practices honed over time—which emerges from knowledge and application of the artistic and technological characteristics of decorative crafts. Throughout their entire historical coexistence and interaction, especially in modern times when the academic school has become the professional foundation of traditional artistic crafts, realistic and decorative representations have influenced each other. As a result, traditions developed within realist schools and scientific understandings of the stylistic principles of decorative art emerged. Before encountering the realist school, the tradition of decorative art largely consisted of repetition and borrowing. Afterward, it primarily involved analytical study of tradition and the development of stylistic techniques in art.

Each center of traditional folk arts—Palekh, Kholuy and Mstyora—has its unique distinctions and artistic-technological characteristics manifested in artistic composition, figurative form and technological methods. Let us examine how these established traditions influence the formation of imagery in Mstyora's lacquer miniature painting.

In the 1930s, following the example of Palekh miniaturists, masters of lacquer miniature painting in Mstyora adopted the technology of making items from papier-mâché borrowed from Fedoskino, Russia's oldest center of lacquer miniatures not far from Moscow. Boxes, needle cases and caskets covered with black lacquer were painted using tempera pigments mixed with egg yolk, water and kvass. The traditions of ancient Russian icons were preserved, including graceful figures with slender proportions and small elegant heads, as well as conventional landscape depictions featuring hillocks. While adhering to the principles of icon painting, Mstyora miniaturists turned to themes inspired by peasant life, Russian song and fairy-tale folklore [4, p. 13] (Fig. 1).

The Palekh and Kholuy schools of miniature painting have maintained a stronger connection to the ancient Russian iconographic tradition than the Mstyora school. In Mstyora miniature painting, landscapes play a particularly important role, rendered with intricate brushstrokes against a backdrop of bright blue sky (Fig. 1<sup>36</sup>). The pictorial space is constructed with multiple planes, giving it depth. The composition painted on the surface of the box is framed by a delicate ornament executed in burnished gold. The side panels of most chests and boxes are adorned with floral carpet-like designs. Floral ornaments can also serve as independent decorations in Mstyora miniature painting, adorning the lids of various items. The setting for characters in miniatures often includes meticulously crafted landscapes or ensembles of "Russian palaces", distinguishing Mstyora's lacquer miniature paintings from those of Palekh and, to some extent, Kholuy, where compositions are typically painted on a black background.

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<sup>36</sup> Fig. 1. Klykov N.P. Landscape. 1940. Mstyora Art Museum. - URL: <https://museum-mstera.vld.muzkult.ru/news/65073374> (accessed: February 25, 2025).



Fig. 1. N.P. Klykov. Box "Landscape." 1940. Mstyora Art Museum

Characteristic compositional techniques are most evident in the depiction of landscapes, whose treatment differs from that found in other schools of miniature painting. Here, the stylization of landscapes avoids affectation and formulaic approaches, instead maintaining simplicity and naturalness, guided by a sense of proportion and taste. These landscapes possess a distinct color culture characterized by the unity of tonal transitions and drawing amidst a diverse palette.

The execution of decorative or small-format drawing solutions by students of lacquer miniature painting is conducted step-by-step, taking into account the artistic, technological and compositional peculiarities of Mstyora miniature painting [3, p. 355].

Compositions created by Mstyora artists in lacquer miniature painting combine realism and decorative techniques, making this art form unique. However, the contemporary understanding of the relationship between realistic drawing and decorative imagery is highly complicated, often eluding comprehension among students and even educators at times. The academic school of drawing strictly adheres to correct construction of form, adherence to proportions, coherence in volume rendering, fidelity in shading and accuracy in tonal analysis. Any deviation from these established norms invites criticism from proponents of pure academic drawing. This position is justified because, indeed, throughout the 20th century, Western European artistic culture experienced a complete disintegration of the realist school, which was nearly lost both in pedagogy and artistic practice. One major reason for this is the emphasis on the "freedom" of creative expression, hasty declarations about the obsolescence of realism and the abandonment of studying form from life. Art became overly "free," losing much of its ability to convey the inner essence of plastic form.

However, this justifiable respect for the tenets of the academic school sometimes has a downside, contributing to uncertainty regarding how the human figure should be depicted in lacquer miniature painting. Questions arise concerning

the relationship between the academic school of drawing and the decorative school, as well as the extent to which the depiction of the human figure can be transformed without violating the traditions of the craft, yet still remaining within the boundaries of basic representational literacy.

Typically, reference is made to the experience of old artists of lacquer miniature painting, rigidly and verbatim repeating their artistic techniques. At the same time, historical conditions, different epochal requirements and entirely different cultural-historical environments are not taken into account. By attempting to transplant the "preserved style" of lacquer miniature painting from distant times into modernity, superficially understanding the essence of its tradition, artists turn its private, archaic stylistic traits into anatomical errors.

Thus, the question arises regarding the relationship between realism and decoration in the realm of traditional folk arts and lacquer miniature painting—how to imbue academic portrayals with the qualities of miniature art without compromising the principles of accurate human figure representation.

The creation of a lacquer miniature painting begins with a detailed linear sketch, initially executed in pencil on paper (Fig. 2<sup>37</sup>).

Similarly, in the icon-painting technological process, as well as in the work on lacquer miniature painting, tracing plays a significant role (Fig. 3<sup>38</sup>) – "A specially technically refined brush drawing, usually executed in three tones: shadows are painted with umber, while light areas are painted with cinnabar or light ocher. The significance of the tracing lies in its ability to convey the plasticity of the future image's forms prior to painting. From the experience of ancient masters, we know that any representational form was precisely worked out in the tracing before being followed by the actual painting."



Fig. 2. Linear drawing of the plate composition on the theme "Mermaid"



Fig. 3. Prokhorova T.E. Tracing from an Iconographic Original. 1976.

<sup>37</sup> Fig. 2. Ukolova Yu.I. Features of Mstyora Lacquer Miniature Painting: A Textbook for Students Studying in the Field of "Decorative and Applied Arts and Folk Crafts (by Type)" – Mstyora Lacquer Miniature Painting / Yu.I. Ukolova; Mstyora Institute of Lacquer Miniature Painting named after F.A. Modorov, Higher School of Folk Arts; Technical Editor Yu.E. Lapina. - St. Petersburg: VSHNI, 2024. - P. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Fig. 3. Dmitriev N.G. Mstyora Handmade: A Story about the Art of Lacquer Miniature Painting and its Masters / N.G. Dmitriev; [preface by I.Ya. Boguslavskaya]. - Leningrad: Artist of the RSFSR, 1986. URL: [https://royallib.com/read/dmitriev\\_nikolay/mstyora\\_rukotvornaya.html#81920](https://royallib.com/read/dmitriev_nikolay/mstyora_rukotvornaya.html#81920) (accessed: February 25, 2025).

Tracing defines the composition, plasticity and overall content of the future miniature, except for tone and color [4, p. 25]. As an element of preparatory drawing, tracing establishes our approach to drawing from nature—the fundamental preparation of a modern professional artist in the field of Mstyora lacquer miniature painting. Techniques of line drawing from nature and subsequent decorative resolution are therefore critical in higher education for specialists in lacquer miniature painting.

During the learning process, free improvisation while working from samples is unacceptable. Such freedom is only permissible with high levels of skill and extensive experience.

To bridge the gap between academic drawing and the specifics of lacquer miniature painting at the initial stages of reworking a drawing from nature, a small-format linear solution is implemented (Fig. 4, 5<sup>39</sup>).



Fig. 4. Small-format linear solution of a standing model's figure drawing



Fig. 5. Small-format linear solution of a seated model's figure drawing

The degree of form transformation in students' decorative solutions depends on the goals and tasks set by the educator at this stage of training. Given the multicomponent nature of the future composition in lacquer miniature painting, beginners start by working with simple and straightforward subjects such as household items and plants. Later, the processed forms of flowers, trees and everyday objects will form the basis for future tracings.

The most challenging phase in the development of a miniature painter is undoubtedly working with the depiction of the human figure. Despite the influence of the iconographic canon, which simplifies the technical aspects of representing the

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<sup>39</sup> Fig. 4-8. Photos from the methodological collection of the Department of Drawing and Painting at the Russian University of traditional art crafts.

human body and face, difficulties persist in accurately conveying the proportions of the figure, facial features and clothing elements during the decorative resolution and stylistic transformation phases.

Transformation [5, p. 12], undeniably enhances the expressiveness and sharpness of the image. It can assist in constructing the stylistic unity of a decorative composition since, when applied to all parts of the composition, it introduces uniform plastic elements. During the transformation of form, a great deal depends on one's sense of measure and taste, internal creative experience and understanding of the artistic norms and criteria established by the tradition of a particular school or type of art—in our case, lacquer miniature painting. The process of transforming image objects must be conscious and deliberate, as it is fundamentally a creative, intellectual endeavor. Every movement and change in form should be carefully considered, with a clear understanding of the purpose behind each action. These actions require planning and exploration of alternative solutions through preliminary sketches.

Alongside transformation, stylization of form is employed in the image-making process. Stylization refers to the "process of reinterpretation of the artistic content of an image using conditional characteristic techniques inherent to a specific type of traditional applied art" [5, p. 12]. Stylization brings the drawing closer to the specificity of lacquer miniature painting, showcasing the extent to which academic drawing influences it. To advance further along this path, in addition to linear solutions, a miniature drawing solution is performed—a black-and-red brushwork image that is stylistically close to the tracing (see Fig. 6-8).

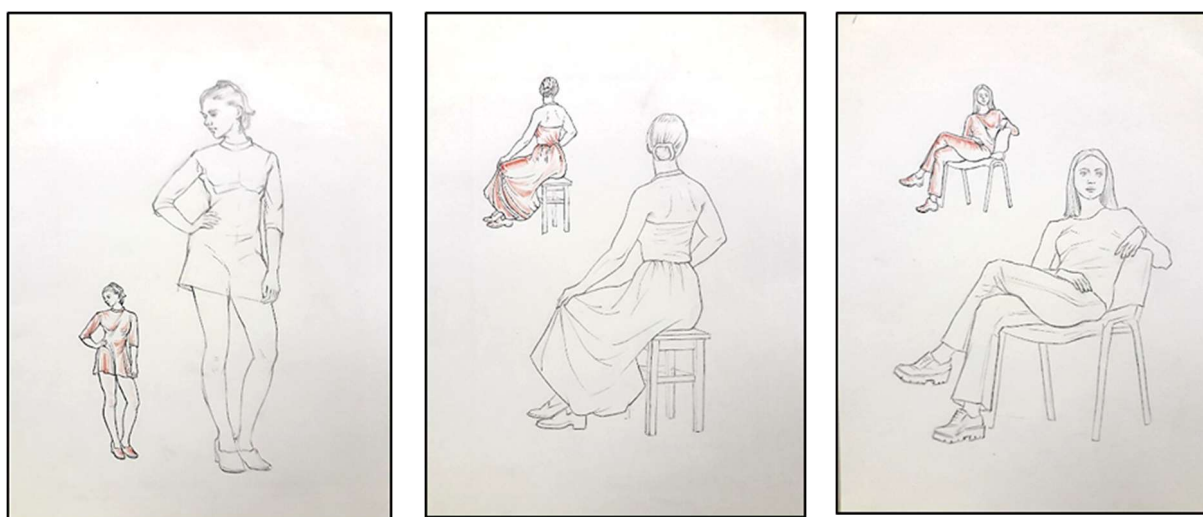


Fig. 6-8. Linear and miniature solutions of human figure sketches (linear solution and processing using tracing technique)

Such pictorial properties of a composition as spatial volume, line, tonality and texture acquire individual character and a certain stylistic hue due to their specific organization. The individual nature of decorative work results from creative thinking, during which the depicted object acquires new artistic attributes. In this process, the natural characteristics of the subject are transformed according to the thought processes of the artist.

In 2024, at the Dissertation Council of the Higher School of Folk Arts in Saint Petersburg, Yu.I. Ukolova successfully defended her candidate's dissertation titled "Content of Higher Education in the Field of Mstyora Lacquer Miniature Painting." The dissertation scientifically substantiated and methodologically revealed the principles of working on miniature solutions for life drawings. Based on the materials of the dissertation, textbooks have been published, which now serve as the foundation for practical teaching in this area.

There is a belief that the artistic characteristics of Mstyora lacquer miniature painting come from the iconographic tradition and remain unchanged. However, this art form evolves from generation to generation because fidelity to tradition does not lie in mechanically repeating technical methods and stereotypical plots but rather in sensing and transmitting the aesthetic heritage embedded in deeper layers of artistic thought and perception of nature.

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