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The depiction of the human figure in lacquer miniature painting involves the stylization of form while considering plastic anatomy

Abstract. The article examines the stylistic features of depicting human figures in Russian lacquer miniatures – Fedoskino, Mstyora, Palekh and Kholuy. It explores the artistic language of these lacquer miniature traditions, analyzing their degree of realism and anatomical accuracy, as well as changes in proportions and preservation of anatomical structure during transformations of human figure representations. Through specific examples, the author demonstrates that the stylization of human figures has an anatomical basis. The conclusion emphasizes the necessity for future lacquer miniature artists to study plastic anatomy due to the specifics of their creative work.

Keywords: traditional art crafts, lacquer miniature painting, plastic anatomy, specificity of artistic language, stylization, human figure, anatomical accuracy, proportions.

Lacquer miniature painting is a unique type of traditional art craft that involves depicting people, showcasing various forms of their activities and relationships. Due to the small size of works in this genre and the tradition of selecting thematic compositions, skillful portrayal of the human figure becomes particularly important for the miniaturist artist. Realism in depicting humans and the convincing conveyance of their image are inextricably linked with the artist's understanding of the human body's structure, its anatomical characteristics, and movement capabilities. The more naturalistic the depiction of a person should be, the greater the importance of knowledge and application of plastic anatomy.

To understand the extent to which knowledge of plastic anatomy is necessary in figurative compositions of lacquer miniature painting, it is essential to study the pictorial stylistics of specific directions within lacquer miniature painting, the nature of human figure plasticity, and trace the historical prerequisites and characteristics of the visual language of lacquer miniature painting.

The historically established regional schools of lacquer miniature painting—Fedoskino, Palekh, Mstyora and Kholuy—each possess their own unique stylistic and technological features, as well as artistic techniques. For this research, it was necessary to identify the degree of stylization and realism in depictions of the human figure, which has its distinct characteristics in each direction of lacquer miniature painting. Additionally, there are variations depending on the historical period and individual artists' styles.

Having developed under the influence of easel painting, the artistic language of Fedoskino lacquer miniatures reproduces the academic traditions of Russian and European schools and is sufficiently realistic. The subjects are adapted to the small size of the works and are emphatically decorative. The style of figure representations varies according to the individual manner of the artists—ranging from soft painterliness to graphic interpretation of figure contours and details—but generally remains realistic and lifelike (Fig. 1⁷⁵, 2). In many cases, the character is endowed with individual traits and portrait-like characteristics.

Researchers of lacquer miniature painting such as M.A. Saltanov [7, p. 47, 52], M.N. Mochalova [4, p. 37], and N.Yu. Dunaeva [2, p. 75, 77] emphasize that knowledge of plastic anatomy is an essential requirement for creating a convincing human image when implementing the artist's creative concept.

At the current stage of studying this issue, the most controversial problem seems to be the application of knowledge of plastic anatomy for the creative realization of figurative compositions in the lacquer miniature art of Palekh, Mstyora, and Kholuy. Stylization of the human image and anatomical accuracy – how compatible are they, does one contradict the other?



Fig. 1. Box "Tea Drinking," fragment. Factory of A.P. Lukutin. Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting. Second half of the 19th century. Museum of Decorative and Applied Arts (Moscow)



Fig. 2. O.I. Shapkin. Box "Tea Drinking." Fedoskino lacquer miniature painting. 2012. Collection of Yu. Slavski (United Kingdom)

Such types of lacquer miniature painting as those from Palekh, Mstyora and Kholuy emerged from icon-painting schools. They were created by artists whose skills were shaped and refined through centuries-old traditions of ancient Russian iconography and its canons [1]. Their art demonstrated "the perfection of technique, subtle methods, richness of color and texture, amazing beauty of completeness, leading into the depths of millennia, back to the roots of ancient culture" [5, p. 163].

⁷⁵ Fig. 1, 2. Pyrogova L. L. Russian Lacquer Miniature : A Brief Encyclopedia / L. L. Pyrogova. – Moscow : Foundation «Connection of Epochs», 2022. – pp. 38, 108. – ISBN 978-5907396-19-7.

By combining the artistic language of icon painting with the influence of easel art, lacquer miniature painting developed its own unique visual language, which gives the author more creative freedom in interpreting the depiction of the human figure compared to icons.

Let's analyze the depictions of humans in the lacquer miniature paintings of Palekh, Mstyora and Kholuy, and examine specific examples to determine how anatomically accurate these images are and whether this quality is lost due to stylization.

Among the main anatomical characteristics of depicted figures, violations of which are most noticeable, are the proportional relationships between body parts. Realistic proportions of the human figure correspond to the following ratios: the height of the head fits into the height of the body 7.5-8 times. In the tradition of icon painting, the following proportional ratios of the head to the height of the figure have been established: Dionysius canon – 1:10, Rublev canon – 1:8, “folk” icon – from 4 to 6.

In Palekh miniature painting, where iconographic traditions are strongest, real proportions change, figures transform, "stretch" and sometimes the height corresponds to 9-10 head sizes. There is a lengthening of limbs, especially calves. Feet point downward, which also visually increases the length of the lower leg. Rounded shapes and smooth silhouettes enhance the decorative effect. Figures become slender and majestic, gaining a poetic elevation, and this creates the impression that the fairy-tale image does not belong to this world (рис. 3⁷⁶).

In Mstyora miniature painting, the tendency towards elongation of figures persists in some scenes, but overall, the proportions of the imagery are closer to reality (рис. 4⁷⁷), including age-related human proportions. For example, in the miniature "Mstyora's Madonna" by V.F. Nekosov, the ratio of the child's head to his height is 1:5, which corresponds to the actual proportions of a three-year-old child (Fig. 5). Other body part ratios are also realistic.

In the lacquer miniature painting of Kholuy, the depictions of figures are the most realistic, and the proportions closely resemble the actual ratios of the human body parts.

To study the anatomical accuracy of human figure depictions in lacquer miniature painting, let's refer to drawings from N.M. Zinoviev's album “Stylistic Traditions of Palekh Art” [3, pp. 142, 145]. The drawing of the figure in the style of lacquer miniature is executed fully consistent with anatomical logic. On the figure, numerous anatomical details are marked with gaps and contour—major muscle groups and support points of the anatomical structure (suprasternal notch, acromion, joint bones, etc.) are listed. The contour represents a living line that outlines the spatial characteristics of body parts and muscle groups. At the same time, we see

⁷⁶ Fig. 3. Nekrasova M. A. Palekh Miniature / M. A. Nekrasova – Leningrad : Artist of the RSFSR, 1983. – P. 91.

⁷⁷ Fig. 4, 5, 12. Photo by the article's author (Mstyora Art Museum).

that stylization affects not only the figure itself but also its anatomical details (Fig. 6⁷⁸).



Fig. 3. I.I. Golyikov. Box. "Musicians," fragment. Palekh lacquer miniature. 1924. State Museum of Palekh Art



Fig. 4. V.F. Nekosov. Panel. "May 1945," fragment. Mstyora lacquer miniature. 2005. Mstyora Art Museum



Fig. 5. V.F. Nekosov. Panel. "Mstyora's Madonna," fragment. Mstyora lacquer miniature. 2008. Mstyora Art Museum

As a rule, in lacquer miniature painting, figures are depicted clothed, leaving only faces, hands, and occasionally feet exposed. The overall plasticity is conveyed through folds in clothing, which also follow the anatomical structure of the body and the laws of its movement. Folds are taut over protruding body parts and fall in loose waves, emphasizing the movements of the figure and its limbs while marking the bends of joints (Fig. 7).

Let's take a closer look at the work of one of the founders of Palekh lacquer miniature painting I.I. Golyikov "Sten'ka Razin's Speech to the Rabble" (Fig. 8⁷⁹). This composition is interesting for our study because it combines the bright stylization and transformation of figures typical of the Palekh style with the anatomical accuracy of their depiction, which becomes apparent upon close examination.

In the central figure – in the figure of Sten'ka Razin, who is proportionally composed, one can discern the volume of the chest and the movement of the spine, the orientation of the pelvic and shoulder girdles, and the support on one foot, which produces the effect of contrapposto, adding a sense of dynamism and enhancing emotional perception.

⁷⁸ Fig. 6, 7. Zinovyev N. M. Stylistic Traditions of Palekh Art / N. M. Zinovyev. – Leningrad : Artist of the RSFSR, 1981. – Pp. 142, 145.

⁷⁹ Fig. 8, 9, 11. ARTEFACT : site.. – URL: <https://ar.culture.ru/ru/subject/rech-stepana-razina-k-golytbe> (accessed: 09.02.2025).

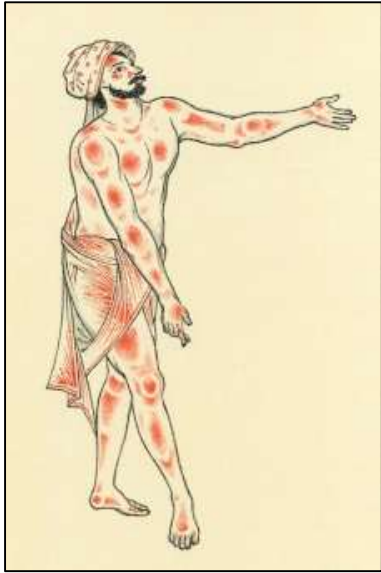


Fig. 6. Fragment of a drawing from N.M. Zinovyev's album "Stylistic Traditions of Palekh Art"

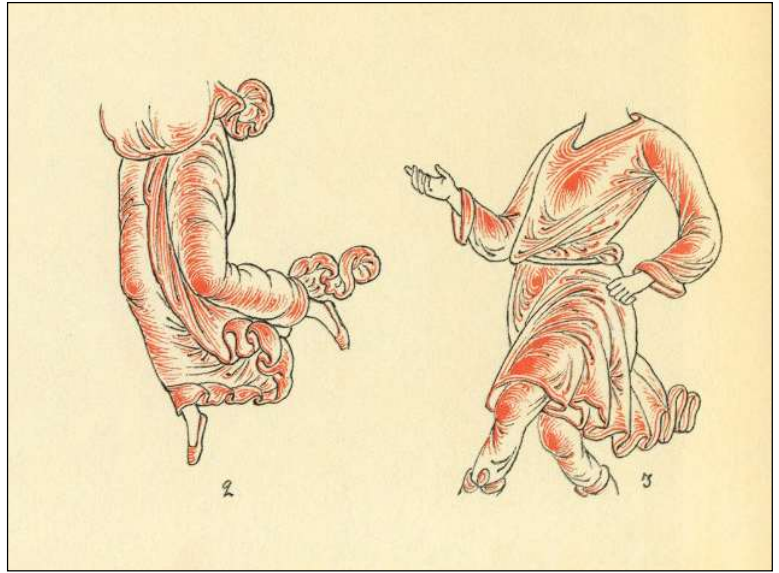


Fig. 7. Fragment of a drawing from N.M. Zinovyev's album "Stylistic Traditions of Palekh Art"

Let's focus on the figure in red attire standing to the left (Fig. 9). Here, we observe the bare shoulder area depicted in the style of Palekh lacquer miniature, yet it maintains anatomical correctness. The depiction clearly defines the deltoid, trapezius, large pectoral muscles, clavicle, hints at the acromial process of the scapula, sternocleidomastoid muscle, larynx, etc. While their forms and dimensions are altered, they are decoratively reinterpreted and stylized.



Fig. 8. I.I. Golyikov. Panel "Sten'ka Razin's Speech to the Rabble." Palekh lacquer miniature. 1924. State Museum of Palekh Art

When comparing this with an anatomical model of the human torso (écorché) in a similar perspective, all the mentioned details can be observed (Fig. 10⁸⁰).



Fig. 9. I.I. Golyikov. Panel "Speech of Sten'ka Razin to the Rabble," fragment. Palekh lacquer miniature. 1924. State Museum of Palekh Art



Fig. 10. Anatomical Model "Munich Torso" (Écorché)

The hands in the miniature are also anatomically accurate: the wrist bones, finger phalanges and muscular elevations of the palms are depicted, and the expressive plasticity of gestures is precisely rendered (Fig. 11).

Let's analyze the depiction of faces from the perspective of plastic anatomy. Highlights accurately reveal the volumes of the frontal eminences, supraorbital ridges, zygomatic bones, nasal bridge, etc. Even at such a small scale, the characters possess a rich imaginative characterization, conveyed through the depiction of facial wrinkles and grotesquely sharpened features.

In lacquer painting, due to the miniature size of the figures, the depiction of posture, poses, gestures and the plasticity of the characters becomes particularly significant as a means of individualizing them, conveying their personality, and expressing mood.

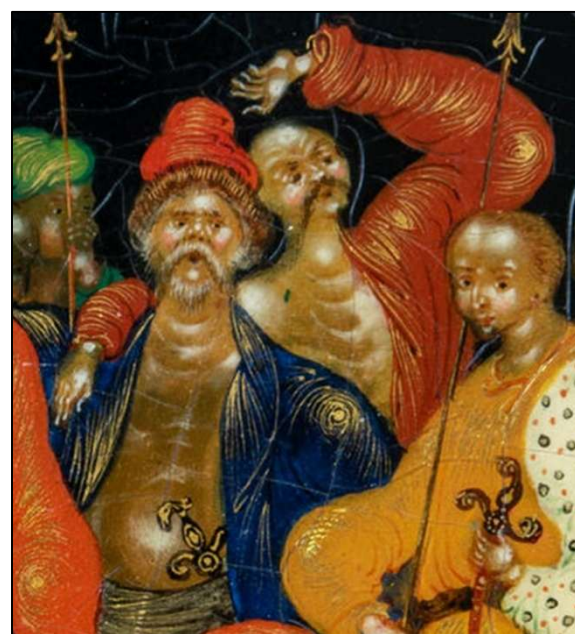


Fig. 11. I.I. Golyikov. Panel "Speech of Sten'ka Razin to the Rabble," fragment. Palekh lacquer miniature. 1924. State Museum of Palekh Art

⁸⁰ Fig. 10. Photo taken by the author of the article.

When examining the work «Mstyora's Ophens⁸¹» by artist V.Yu. Borisova, we easily recognize the nonchalant and crafty merchant, the tired, stooped old man, the modest young lady with her generous gentleman... (Fig. 12). All these psychological characteristics are read through the postures, poses, facial expressions, and gestures of the characters.

From everything said above, we can conclude that the stylization of figures not only does not contradict anatomical accuracy but relies on it, using it to enhance the expressiveness of the characters. Miniature painting can create its own unique fairy-tale world by transforming the forms and proportions of figures, or reproduce reality, but knowledge of plastic anatomy always serves as the foundation for any depiction of the human figure.



Fig. 12. Borisova V.Yu. Panel "Mstyora's Ophens," fragment.
Mstyora lacquer miniature. 2002. Mstyora Art Museum

At the Russian University of traditional art crafts, where training is provided for artists specializing in various branches of lacquer miniature painting, instruction in plastic anatomy is tailored to meet the needs of their future professional activities, including the necessity to stylize human representations based on anatomical principles [9]. The course in plastic anatomy is an integral component of the curriculum and is structured in close interrelation with other general professional and specialized disciplines.

During the learning process, emphasis is placed on understanding proportions, analyzing human movement considering the laws of mechanics and developing the ability to perceive the subordination of body parts in plastic unity. Moreover, the course in plastic anatomy for training future lacquer miniature painters includes special assignments alongside traditional forms of academic art education, such as theoretical (informational) and practical (drawing anatomical objects) components.

⁸¹ Ophens (singular form: ophenya) were wandering retail traders who sold manufactured goods, haberdashery, books, inexpensive jewelry, icons, and other items in Russia during the 17th to early 20th centuries [6, p. 141].

"To understand the connection between stylized representation and anatomical basis, students complete educational and creative projects aimed at studying a particular anatomical object followed by its decorative reworking in the style of lacquer miniature painting. Such tasks allow students to logically link plastic anatomy, academic drawing from life and the artistic-imaginary language and style of lacquer miniature painting" [8, p. 110].

One of the assignments is an educational project on the theme "Human Figure," which involves drawing a figure from life, followed by a graphical analysis of its anatomical basis (skeleton and musculature). Subsequently, a decorative adaptation of the original drawing is performed in the style of lacquer miniature, incorporating transformations into the traditional technique of iconographic drawing. Through such exercises, the interconnection between the content of teaching plastic anatomy and the specificities of the artistic language of different lacquer miniature traditions is realized.

Thus, anatomical accuracy in depicting the human figure in lacquer miniature painting serves as a foundation for stylization, and a confident grasp of plastic anatomy grants aspiring artists greater creative freedom in realizing their ideas.

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