

“HE WAS AMONG THE CREATORS OF RUSSIAN AND UKRAINIAN AVANT-GARDE OF XX CENTURY”

In April of 2013 it has been 130 years since the birth of an outstanding Ukrainian and Russian painter, theoretician of new art — Alexis Gritchenko. Parisian art collector Michel Lievre Markovych tell us about the works of this notable painter and about his works market peculiarities.

— Between two World Wars in France there worked a real galaxy of talented painters who came from Russia and Ukraine. Why is Gritchenko your choice?

— There were several reasons. First, I liked his works very much. Second, at the time I started collected them, Gritchenko was almost forgotten in his native land, and I wanted to right this situation. For in 1910-ies

the painter was a very influential personality among Russian avant-gardists — alongside with Mashkov, Konchalovsky and Lentulov, he belonged to Knave of Diamonds group, was an outstanding teacher and scholar, one of the authors of famous manifesto “Colordynamos and Tectonic Primitivism”, affirming that easel painting is much more precious than all kinds of applied art and “ism-creation”. And, finally, I





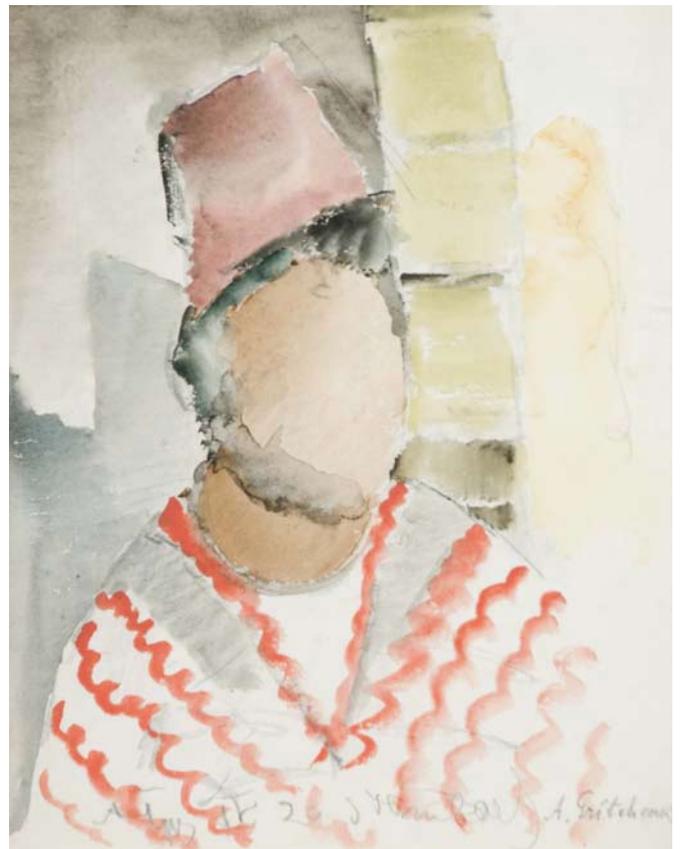
Port. 1920. Paper, watercolour. 23 . 29 cm

Turkish docker. 1919.
Paper, watercolour. 28 . 22 cm

was not indifferent to the life of a man who was born in Chernihiv gubernia, as my grandfather Volodymyr Markovych was. It might be interesting for you to know that Volodymyr Markovych (1903–1984) was an offspring of a Cossack colonel and general treasurer of Zaporizhian Sich Andriy Markovych (1674–1747). His sister Anastasia married Ivan Skoropadsky who became Hetman after Mazepa. Andriy’s son Yakiv Markovych (1696–1770), was also a colonel and a Minister of Finance of Hetmanshchyna, being one of the most well-educated people of Ukraine in his time. Gogol used his 10-volume “Journal” when writing “Taras Bulba” as a precious source on Cossack elite life in XVIII century. Alexis Gritchenko also is an offspring of Cossacks; his ancestors were from Glukhov.

— *When did you start collecting?*

— A little more than 12 years ago, when my friend





Turks in café. 1921. Cardboard, gouache 35 . 36 cm

Aleksandr Plevako, an official of Ukrainian embassy and UNESCO, suggested that I should sponsor the exhibition of Ukrainian émigré painters. The exhibition took place in 2000 in UNESCO headquarters in Paris, and it was the first time I saw Gritchenko’s works. That’s how my collection began.

— *Leaving Soviet Russia, Gritchenko left behind at his cubistic and primitivistic works in Moscow. Do you have some of them in your collection?*

— No. I have ones painted in Constantinople and Greece in 1919–1921— from those shown in Paris

Salon d’automne in 1921. The beginning of 1920-ies is a very important period in Gritchenko’s creative life in general. It seems to me that leaving Russia let him spread his wings, and, above all, get rid of the theories hampering the free development of his talent.

This is what Pavlo Kovzhun his first biographer and Port. 1920. Paper, watercolour. 23 . 29 cm ‘Gritchenko’ almost 80

“In Constantinople, Gritchenko paints much. And he paints in an interesting way, with new energy and new love. And he paints all things new. Not as they used to be. Gritchenko is not looking for any art

statement in them. He throws around bright spots and contours with strange courage and unusually sensitive lyricism. These works of the artist are the triumph of his previous art achievements; they help him to avoid being stupefied. Just on the contrary, they crown all he has done before, all the experience he had lived through and processes”.

— ***And are there any early works of Gritchenko in the French art market?***

— As far as I am concerned, no. Seven or eight things from that period can be found in museums of Russia — in Tretyakov Gallery and in State Russian Museum in Saint-Petersburg; one is in The National Art Museum of Ukraine. Something might be in private collections. I have read that when Gritchenko fled from Moscow, his paintings were given to students to paint their assignments on them — during the Civil War it was hard to find canvas or even paper to paint on. It is very

likely that most of his early works were just lost.

— ***What was the artist's life in France like?***

— After his first exhibition, Gritchenko met marchand Paul Guillaume. Guillaume introduced him to gallery owner Leopold Zborovski, who worked with Modigliani, Soutine, Pascin and others. Zborovski sold 17 of his Greek gouaches to an American collector and avant-garde connoisseur Albert Barnes. Since 1921, the painter from Ukraine exhibits in Salon d'automne. The President of the Salon at that time was Fernand Léger, who chose 24 of his Constantinople watercolours and demanded to place them in the same hall with his own works. Later, Gritchenko works were exhibited in galleries Percier, Henri Bin, Katie Granoff, Druet ... His works are kept, besides Barnes Foundation with one of the best avant-garde collections, in Gorges Pompidou centre and in Musée d'Orsay, in New York MOMA, in museums of Madrid



Golden Horn. 1921. Cardboard, gouache 32 . 36 cm

and Monaco, in Royal Museums of Copenhagen and Brussels.

— *What works of Gritchenko have been shown in recent Paris exhibition?*

— Paintings and graphic works of 1920-ies, including eight Constantinople and Greek gouaches, 16 watercolours and 12 paintings in oils. Mostly they were from our and Daniel SZTUL collections.

We have invited representatives of Ukrainian Community, heads of organisations and associations to the vernisage. Also a Russian and Ukrainian avant-

garde scholar Jean-Claude Marcade and art scholar Vita Susak. The night was very nice. A Ukrainian musician played the piano, later everybody started singing Ukrainian folk songs. The next day we welcomed gallery owners and managers, collectors, who came from Moscow, San Francisco, London, Brussels, Kyiv and Lviv.



Mystras. 1921. Cardboard, gouache 35 . 36 cm



St. Jacques Tower. 1923. Oil on cardboard. 69 . 49 cm



Menton outskirts. 1925. Oil on wood. 54 . 81 cm



— *In many guidebooks and catalogues, Gritchenko is still called Russia artist. How did his communication with Ukrainian Diaspora take place?*

— I think he always identified himself as a Ukrainian, even when he lived in Moscow and wrote his policy articles and studies of art in Russian. But in 1930-ies Gritchenko speaks and writes Ukrainian, takes part in the exhibitions of Association of Independent Ukrainian Artists in Lviv. And people from Ukrainian Diaspora start buying his works! In 1958 Gritchenko went to America where Hordynsky and Arkhipenko helped him to hold a number of personal exhibitions in New York and Philadelphia. In New York he, together with Svyatoslav Hordynsky, he established the foundation where his archives and 70 of his works are still kept. The foundation was transferred to Ukrainian Institute in New York, and in 2005, according to Gritchenko's will — to Kyiv. Now the foundation is in National Art Museum of Ukraine.

— *You have been collecting for more than ten years. What can you say about the change of prices for Gritchenko's works?*

— The prices have substantially risen, though, in my view, they are so far still very low. The artist is obviously underestimated, taking into account his place in the art history and the number of his works. We should not



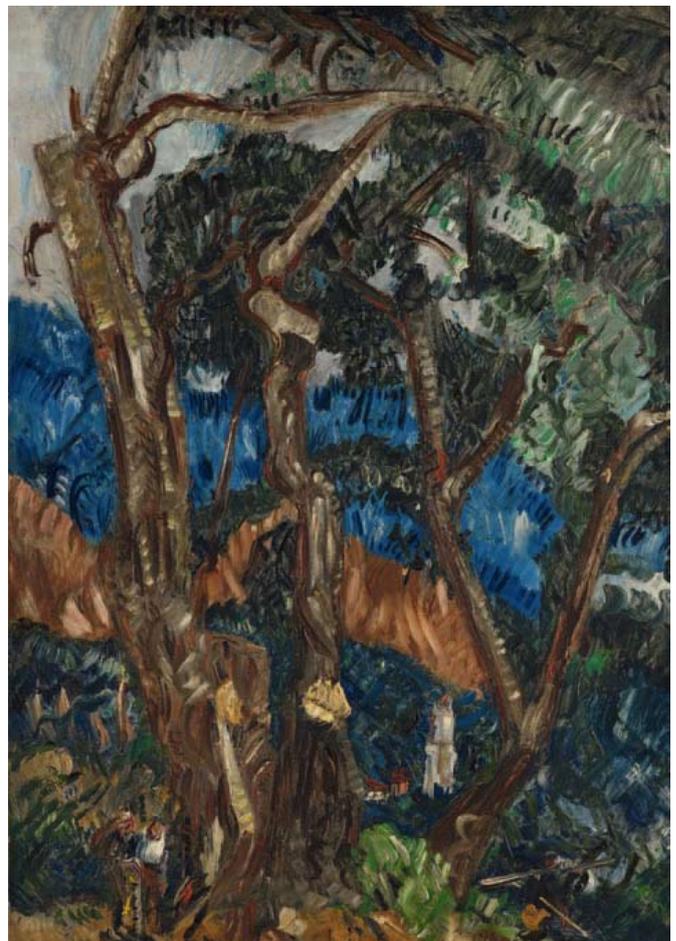
also forget that he was one of the fathers of Russian and Ukrainian avant-garde of early XX century.

— *Are there major galleries and art dealers in Paris who work with Gritchenko's heritage?*

— There are ones who specialize in Ukrainian art in general. But I know several big collectors who collect Gritchenko works. One of them lives in Moscow, the other in France, the third one in Lviv. There are also people seriously interested in his works in Canada and USA.

— *Gritchenko has left us a lot of written works: studies on Russian and Byzantine icon-painting, memoirs... Have they been published in French? Have any books on works of this artist been published in France?*

— I have all the books by Gritchenko he wrote in Moscow and in France in my library. In French, his "Two Years in Constantinople" were published with 40 of his watercolours reproduced (1930), memories "The Ukraine of My Blue Days"; monographs by Pavlo Kovzhun (1934), by René Jeanne and Paul Fierens (1948), book «Gritchenko. His life, his art» (1964) by a group of authors including Paul Fierens, Raymond Charmet, Svyatoslav Hordynsky. At present, Vita Susak and I are preparing to publication the book "Colordynamics and Early Years of Gritchenko Emigration".



Cap Martin. 1929. Oil on canvas. 93 . 60 cm



Tray with Lobsters. ca. 1928. Oil on plywood. 60 . 50 cm

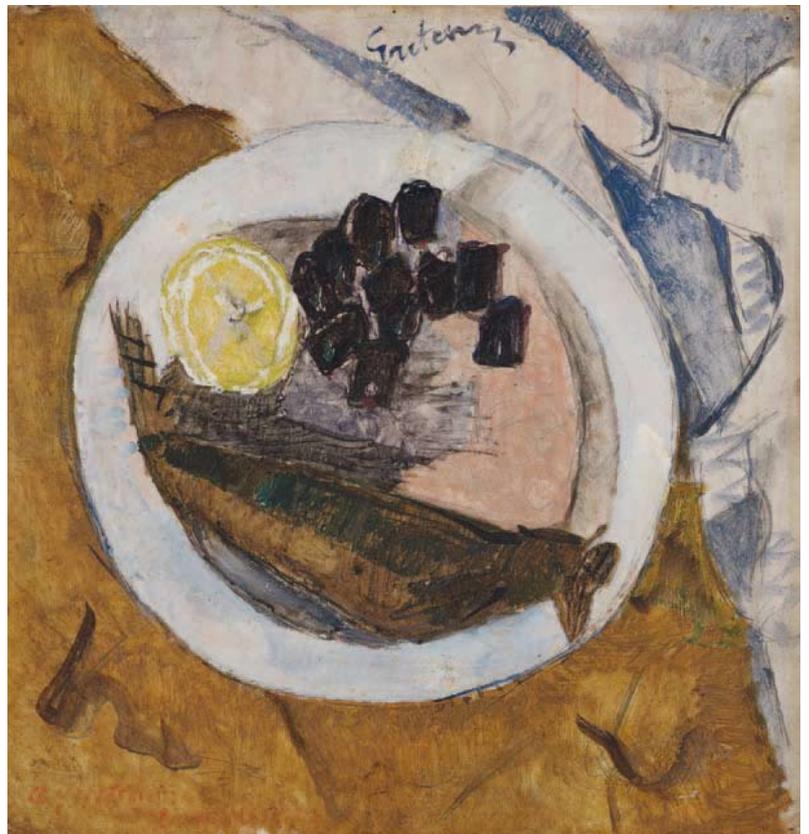


Town in Portugal. 1924. Oil on wood 79 . 60 cm

Herring and Lemon. 1921. Cardboard, gouache 36 . 35 cm

— *Would you like to hold a retrospective exhibition of Alexis Gritchenko in Kyiv, in National Art Museum of Ukraine?*

— It is my old and big dream, and the Paris exhibition in April can be regarded as a rehearsal of the future Kyiv one. It's his avant-garde works I would like to show, including early ones, which are now in Russia. I think, this all would make an interesting and important exposition. Ukrainians would understand at last what a brilliant painter they have. I am sure your country will be proud of Gritchenko as one of its best artists.



*Interview by
Anna Chermann
Photos by*

Petro Dzumala and Myroslava Plevako