

## CLASSICAL TRADITIONS OF EASTERN AND WESTERN ART IN THE PORTRAIT PAINTING OF UZBEKISTAN IN THE 1920S-1930S



**Azizkhon Avazkhanovich Imamov**  
Doctor of Philosophy in Art History (PhD)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37547/ssa-V5-02-11>

**Abstract:** This article examines the formation and development of retrospective approaches in portraiture, starting from the 1920s; the peculiarity of interpretation of classical traditions of Eastern and Western art is revealed. Special attention is paid to the analysis of the retrospective concept in the works of A. Isupov and A. Nikolaev. For the first time, the creative quests of D. Stepanov, O. Tatevosyan, G. Nikitin, and B. Pestinsky, who relied on various traditions of European classical art, are also studied.

**Keywords:** tradition, East, West, art, portrait, painting, genre, retrospectivism, Renaissance, quattrocento, icon, miniature.

**Annotatsiya:** Ushbu maqola 1920-yillardan boshlab portret san'atidagi retrospektiv yondashuvlarning shakllanishi va rivojlanishini o'rganadi; Sharq va G'arb san'ati klassik an'analari talqinining xususiyatlari ochib beriladi. A. Isupov va A. Nikolaevning asarlarida retrospektiv tushuncha tahliliga alohida e'tibor qaratilgan. Shuningdek, Yevropa klassik san'atining turli an'analari asosida ijodiy izlanishlar olib borgan D. Stepanov, O. Tatevosyan, G. Nikitin va B. Pestinskiylarning ijodiy faoliyati ilk marotaba o'rganiladi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** an'ana, Sharq, G'arb, san'at, portret, rasm, janr, retrospektivizm, Uyg'onish davri, quattrocento, ikon, miniatura.

**Аннотация:** В данной статье рассматривается формирование и развитие ретроспективных подходов в портретном искусстве, начиная с 1920-х годов; раскрывается специфика интерпретации классических традиций восточного и западного искусства. Особое внимание уделяется анализу ретроспективной концепции в произведениях А. Исупова и А. Николаева. Впервые исследуются творческие поиски Д. Степанова, О. Татевосьяна, Г. Никитина и Б. Пестинского, опиравшихся на различные традиции европейского классического искусства.

**Ключевые слова:** традиция, Восток, Запад, искусство, портрет, живопись, жанр, ретроспективизм, Ренессанс, кватроченто, икона, миниатюра.

The formation of the portrait genre in the painting of Uzbekistan in the 1920s-1930s was complex and unique. During this period, along with formal and stylistic searches in the painting of the republic, retrospective approaches related to the classical traditions of Eastern and Western art were developing. One of the first researchers to draw attention to this issue was S. Krukovskaya. She linked the formation of these trends in the painting of Uzbekistan, particularly in the work of Usto Mumin (Alexander Nikolaev), with the direction of retrospectivism in the art of Russia in the early twentieth century, and the artists of the association "Мир искусства" [1, p.6]. However, it was not analysed in detail that this trend, formed in Russian art in the period of aggravation of socio-cultural relations, emerged as a reaction to modern artistic trends in Western art.

L. Zinger, one of the largest specialists who investigated the problems of portraiture in Soviet painting, also noted [2, p.102] the influence of early Renaissance art on the work of A. Nikolaev. However, L. Zinger at that time did not take into account the significant differences

between the portraits of A. Volkov, who sought to create a monumental image of the “man of the new era”, and A. Nikolaev, who in his work was more based on the traditions of classical art. These differences in approach were of a fundamental nature and required a deeper analysis of retrospective searches. L. Rempel, having set himself the goal of studying the problem of “portrait and personality” in the art of Central Asia in a broad historical context, noted that many portraits of the 1920s-1930s have an oriental character and have a retrospective orientation connected with classical traditions [3, p.212]. He also argued that this feature is mainly characteristic of Usto Mumin's work.

The attribution of retrospective portraits to the “Turkestan avant-garde” [4] raises a special question, and this term, as before, remains debatable. N. Akhmedova, a leading researcher of painting in Uzbekistan, notes that the creative endeavours of A. Nikolaev, O. Tatevosyan and V. Markova cannot be directly associated with avant-garde trends. In particular, the researcher writes: “Their search is defined by quite different intents, despite the original neoclassical reminiscences of V. Markova, or the connection of the traditions of the West and the East, the interpretation of the graphic approach of the miniature by O. Tatevosyan and A. Nikolaev. The plastic canons of the medieval art of the two areas, taken as the basis of their work, were not radically revised by these artists. Here, most likely, we can speak about a talented variant of retrospectiveism or original searches in the vein of symbolic orientalism” [5 p.22-23].

It is also necessary to mention the recent monographs by E. Shafranskaya [6] and B. Chukhovich [7], devoted to the work of Usto Mumin. They collect a large amount of archival data and reveal important facts related to different periods of the artist's work; they analyse the role of classical traditions in the artist's retrospective search. Nevertheless, it should be noted that both monographs have rather controversial conclusions on A. Nikolaev's work. In particular, in matters of the influence of Sufism on the artist, as well as some positions are insufficiently substantiated and tendentious in nature, which, in general, leads to contradictory ideas about the painting of the 1920-1930s. For this purpose, it is necessary first of all to determine the main reasons, historical and social factors that shaped the retrospective portrait in the painting of Uzbekistan.

Unlike European art schools, which had a historically consistent path of development, the painting of Uzbekistan in the twentieth century underwent a period of rapid formation, which manifested common and specific features. This aspect is relevant for the whole region, as ‘the genesis of Central Asian painting was inspired by historical and political factors, not intra-artistic’ [8, p.41], which had a direct impact on the retrospective interpretation of national images in the painting of Uzbekistan. The search for artists in this direction began in Samarkand in the Committee for the Protection and Restoration of Historical Monuments (Самкомтарис), established in 1920. This institution, headed by Vasily Vyatkin (1869-1932), one of the leading experts in Oriental art, employed master painters alongside professional archaeologists, architects and craftsmen.

Daniil Stepanov, a well-known artist and restorer, medallist at the St Petersburg Mint, was invited to head the art department of the committee. The beginning of retrospective experiments in painting in Uzbekistan is connected with the creative activity of this artist. A unique creative team was formed in Samarkand under the guidance of an experienced specialist, which united such talented artists as Alexei Isupov, Nikolai Mamontov, Usto Mumin and Viktor Ufimtsev. The committee members lived in a garden house rented by Stepanov, located near the city. Such famous artists as Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin and Alexander Samokhvalov were also guests here. D. Stepanov, a connoisseur of the Italian Renaissance, familiarised them in detail with the techniques and methods used by Italian Renaissance artists. It is clear that it was these lessons that inspired A. Nikolaev to turn to tempera painting. This is evidenced in his memoirs and V. Ufimtsev. According to the artist's memoirs, D. Stepanov and A. Nikolaev “had a common language”, “They whispered advice, worried” [9, p.52]. Artists of the Samarkand group also turned to the experience of miniature painting of the Middle East, and as L. Shostko noted, “it is the art of miniature painting that becomes an important basis for local artists to find a language of artistic expression in the new easel painting and the main source for mastering national traditions” [10, p.9].

D. Stepanov also endeavoured to create a retrospective image of an eastern man. In the artist's paintings "Chaikhana" (1923), "Prayer", "Boy's head", "Seller of suzane", "Melon seller" (1925) we see generalised, poetic images of local teenagers, which later found their vivid embodiment in the works of Nikolaev. In some works ("The Boy", "Radiance with a Pomegranate") A. Nikolaev can be seen that the young artist directly, though creatively mastered the eastern type and figures of D. Stepanov. This characteristic national type eventually received an independent interpretation in the portraits of A. Isupov and A. Nikolaev, which confirms the idea that these artists were united by common aesthetic and figurative tasks in art.

Retrospective portraits, created under the influence of classical traditions, differ significantly from "ordinary portraits". They are dominated by a generalised image of an Oriental man rather than his individual character. Almost every portrait depicts a cool-headed, cordial-faced representative of the local population. It is this universal type and appearance that became recognisable features of the retrospective portrait. The clear influence of iconography is also evident. "Of course, the iconic image cannot be directly compared with the secular portrait in easel painting of the New and Modern times; such a juxtaposition goes against the gap in the pragmatics of visual communication between the two cases. However, if we abstract from the idea of the sacred (or rather, to translate it into a more general register), the "countenance" of the portrait is the manifestation of the personality of the portraitist at the deep level of meanings, the inner form of the model's face (even in the case of non-natural painting)" [11, p.292].

The first important steps in the creation of retrospective portraits made A. Isupov. Familiarity with the Turkestan region, its ancient culture helped the artist, who grew up in the family of a Vyatka master-icon painter and learnt the basics of painting at the Moscow School of Painting.

Moscow School of Painting and learnt the basics of realistic art and impressionism, to discover a new world of the East. Even during his military service in Tashkent (1915-1918) A. Isupov visited Samarkand several times, creating a series of landscape works, ethnographic portraits ("Steppe Bride", "Uzbek", "Portrait of the Artist's Wife", "Portrait of Colonel N.F. Khaletsky"), where the artist's keen interest in the decorative and applied arts of the peoples of Central Asia was manifested. In this sense, the work in the committee (1920-1923) helped the artist to understand the art of the East, its unique ornaments and architecture even more deeply. While getting acquainted with the life and customs of the local population, A. Isupov carefully studied the external and internal appearance of Turkestan people; at the famous book markets of Registan he found colourful miniatures decorating medieval manuscripts. Thanks to them, the artist discovered new ways of translating the classical traditions of the East into the language of painting. The result of these creative searches was a series of retrospective portraits of local residents, created in 1920-1921.

These works, painted in tempera, are stylistically different from other portraits by A. Isupov. In them, the artist tried to develop a form of retrospective interpretation, moving away from the realistic approach. At the same time, the artist managed to combine classical traditions of Western and Eastern art. For example, in such works as "Chaikhanshchik", "Musician with a Dutar", "Woman Serving Tea and Fruit", "Porcelain Seller", "Jeweller", "Three Images" and "Uzbek women", where the artist harmoniously combined the experience of Old Russian icon painting, which he received in his native Vyatka before coming to Uzbekistan, and the traditions of the East. In them the characters are depicted against the background of an arched doorway, referring this composition to both Renaissance painting and traditional forms of Islamic architecture. If in "The Porcelain Seller" the traditions of miniature painting are manifested in the vivid colouring and detailed depiction of each object in the interior, in such works as "Three Images" and "Uzbek woman" the artist achieved generalisation of their spiritual and individual qualities through monumental treatment of the portrayed images. Despite the fact that the location of some works ("Boy with a Book", "In a Barber's Shop", "Jeweller", "Musician with a Dutar") from the Samarkand cycle is currently unknown, the surviving reproductions clearly show that the artist tried in his works to reflect the national and everyday environment vividly and colourfully

and at the same time to reveal in each portrait a spiritual image of the local people with a certain degree of individuality.

Meanwhile, upon close examination, it becomes clear that these portraits by A. Isupov are imbued with the creative concepts of the Western Renaissance. The artist, who masterfully mastered the linear style of painting, characteristic of Quattrocento painting, creatively interpreted the ideas of Italian humanism. This aspect was vividly reflected in such group portraits of the artist as “Mother and Children” and “Father with Children”. The characters depicted in them are to some extent idealised as in religious paintings in Renaissance painting. For example, in the painting “Mother and Children” we see an oriental interpretation of the well-known classical iconography – “Madonna with a baby in her arms”. At the same time, the images of a mother with a child and the children surrounding her appear as national images.

Unfortunately, in 1926 A. Isupov took away to Italy almost all of the above works, so these works remained unknown to the general public for a long time. Before his death, the artist bequeathed his works, in particular, the portraits of Turkestanians kept in his studio in Rome, to the Art Museum in Vyatka.

A. Nikolayev also came to Samarkand in 1920 and at first lived in a cell of the Sherdor madrasah. The artist's dialogue with Eastern culture was unique. Rare oriental manuscripts provided to the young artist V. Vyatkin, became for him an inexhaustible source of inspiration. “After a while Nikolaev could copy a miniature perfectly, could easily create a composition imitating a miniature. It was necessary for him to master the techniques of miniature, to assimilate a special form of interaction between personality and art in the East” [12, p.20].

Unlike A. Isupov, who was generally characterised by the principle of stylisation of plastic forms, A. Nikolaev set himself a more complex task: the philosophical and poetic content of the retrospective portrait. “Inspired by the idea of synthesis, the artist sought not only to develop a new language of painting, but boldly introduced inherent in medieval art symbolic-meditative elements, associativity” [8, p.54]. The artist's interest in the culture of the Uzbek people and Islamic values is manifested in different pictorial and plastic solution works. Thus, in tempera portraits of young men “Sufi Boy” (1923), “Saifi in a fur hat” (1924) the artist's main attention is directed to conveying the spiritual and emotional state of the heroes. All of them are pectoral portraits of teenagers painted in tempera, in which the artist emphasises the face of the character, his condition and mood. In them, the artist's main attention is directed at conveying the spiritual and emotional state of the characters.

For example, in the appearance of the “Sufi Kid” in a white turban there is something mysterious, unknown to an outsider. In the eyes of the young man, secretly looking at us, there is a special meaning, which is understood only by the chosen ones – “akhli ishq” (a circle of people or nation experiencing love for the Almighty). And in the paintings “Dear Life” (1923) and “Spring” (1924) the elegant style of interpretation of national images, close to monumental and decorative painting, allowed A. Nikolaev to reveal the sublime spiritual world of oriental young men. It is obvious that the artist was spiritually close to the created images, deeply attached to them and each time strived to find a unique plastic solution. If in the “Road of Life” it is reflected in the inherent oriental miniature narrative form, in a flat composition, then in the painting “Spring” are noticeable inherent in the painting of S. Botticelli. Botticelli's painting is characterised by elegance and lyricism in the depiction of the two friends.

In the portraits painted in the second half of the 1920s A. Nikolaev, continuing to develop the retrospective aspect of the genre, sought to emphasise the individual features of his heroes. In the works in “Chaikhanshchik”, “Bedanaboz”, “Boy with Quail” (1928) “the artist is not just admiring the type, but also emphasises the cunningness of the old and experienced chaikhanshchik and frank sensuality of the young lover of quail fights” [1, p.34]. The artist managed to create images close to reality and at the same time as graceful as before, using a linear style characteristic of early Renaissance frescoes.

“Realistic” features, which began to appear in the portraits of A. Nikolaev, became more obvious in the 1930s: in the “Portrait of Alyosha” (1934), which depicts the artist's son, as well as



in the portraits of his artisan friends “Usto Nasriddin Shokhaidarov” and “Master of woodcarving Mir Said from Ura-Tuba” (1935). In A. Nikolaev’s portraits, the manifestation of natural, ethnic features became more pronounced. Such transformations in the artist's painting were associated with the strengthening of trends in art to create an image of a man of the new time. This process, which took on an ideological character, made it difficult to adapt the form of retrospective interpretation to the creative demands based on socialist realism. Nevertheless, even under conditions of increased regulation of the creative process, a number of artists - O. Tatevosyan, B. Pestinsky, V. Markova - continued to turn to the traditions of classical art.

The retrospective approach in the portrait genre of the second half of the 1930s is manifested in works on historical themes. Among them we should single out “Portrait of Alisher Navoi” (1938) by Georgy Nikitin, one of the first full-fledged images of the great poet in easel painting. It has a traditional compositional solution and head turn, typical of Renaissance portraits. The image of Alisher Navoi, with a book in his hand and penetratingly looking at the viewer, reminds of ancient thinkers who served as a spiritual ideal of Italian humanists. In the portrait, the artist, departing from the ethnic features of the poet’s appearance known from miniature paintings, sought to create a classical image of an oriental thinker.

The studied retrospective tendencies show that the formation of the portrait genre in Uzbek painting proceeded with the coverage of a wide range of classical traditions. The variety of artists’ creative endeavours aimed at creating the image of a man of the East and their results make it possible to identify the retrospective trend in the portrait genre as one of the main ones. Its influence in varying degrees can be traced in the work of almost all artists who created in the portrait genre.

This trend can be divided into two stages. The initial period covering the 20s is marked by the inflow and development of retrospective searches. This period is associated with a group of artists led by D. Stepanov in Samarkand, who in the 1920s created the image of a man of the East on the basis of a wide range of classical Western and Eastern traditions. A. Isupov and A. Nikolaev, combining the poetics of the European Renaissance, Old Russian icon painting and Oriental miniature, each purely individually, created an idealised image of representatives of local peoples. The second period (the second half of the 1930s) is marked by the weakening of the retrospective approach in the portrait genre. Nevertheless, the retrospective approach survived in the work of artists in later periods as a marginal tendency.

Today, when interest in the painting of Uzbekistan in the 1920s-1930s continues to grow both scientifically and in museum exhibitions, the retrospective portrait can play an important role as a unified path that unites Eastern and Western artists, as a universal form of image that has a universal character. Modern studies of museum holdings provide us with new creative materials confirming this point of view. Their introduction into the scientific turnover serves to broaden the views on the genesis of the portrait genre and gives a broader picture of the general processes taking place in the painting of this period.

## References:

1. Круковская С.М. Усто Мумин (Александр Васильевич Николаев). – Ташкент: Изд-во лит. и искусства им. Г. Гуляма, 1973. – 132 с.;
2. Зингер Л.С. Советская портретная живопись 1917 – начала 1930 годов. – М.: Изобразительное искусство, 1978. – 296 с.;
3. Ремпель Л. И. Портрет и личность в искусстве Средней Азии. – Ташкент, ЎЗР ФА СИ архиви, ИЖ Р-38, №1324, 1988. Ремпель Л.И. Портрет и личность в искусстве Средней Азии. – Рук. НИИ искусствознания АН РУз. Инв. № 1324. – 277 л.;
4. Туркестанский авангард: каталог выставки / авт. сост. М. Л. Хомутова, Е. С. Ермакова. – М.: Гос. музей Востока, 2009. - 223 с.: ил.;
5. Шафранская Э. Усто Мумин: превращения. – М.: Музей современного искусства «Гараж», 2023. – 304 с.: ил.;
6. Чухович Б. “Дружба, любовь, вечность” Усто Мумина. – Прага: Artguide s.r.o., – 432 с.;

7. Ахмедова Н.Р. Методологические вопросы и музееведческие аспекты изучения живописи Узбекистана 1920-х-1930-х годов // Музей в эпоху гиперкоммуникации: новые подходы: материалы научно-практической конференции. – Алматы, 2018. – Б. 18-23.;
8. Ахмедова Н. Живопись Центральной Азии XX века: традиции, самобытность, диалог. – Ташкент: SCD, 2004. – 224 с.;
9. Уфимцев В.И. Говоря о себе. – М.: Советский художник, 1973, – 135 с.;
10. Шостко Л. Оганес Татевосян. – М.: Советский художник, 1977. – 118 с.;
11. Злыднева Н. В. Портрет в авангарде: между именем и мифом //Критика и семиотика. 2019. – № 1. – С. 285–297.;
12. Усто Мумин (А.Николаев): Альбом / авт. вст. ст. и сост. Р.В. Еремян. – Ташкент: Изд-во. лит. и искусства им. Г. Гуляма, 1981. – 136 с.