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Catherine's Maidens – Beautiful, Plain, Noble

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The "Smolyanki" portraits were restored for the exhibit, and viewers can see videos of the restoration process.

ST. PETERSBURG — Seven portraits of young noblewomen who studied at the Smolny Institute that were painted more than 230 years ago are now on display at the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. The exhibition, titled "Smolyanki," is dedicated to the 275th anniversary of the birth of their artist, Dmitry Levitsky.

All the portraits were painted at the request of Catherine the Great, who founded the Smolny Institute for Noble Maidens in 1764.

According to the empress's decree, the objective was to raise "educated women, good mothers and useful members of family and society." Although the stated aim of the institute was to bring girls up "in beauty and happiness," Russia's first educational institution for women was famous for its strict discipline. Students had to get up at 6 a.m. and had virtually

no free time. They were accompanied everywhere by schoolmistresses, and there was no opportunity for them to leave Smolny — all parents signed a document promising that they would not take their child home for 12 years.

Under Catherine the Great, the girls could only see their parents from the other side of a latticed screen. At the end of their studies, an exam was taken, after which most of the young noblewomen went on to become maids of honor at the imperial court.

Catherine wanted to show off her first students to high society, and with this aim in mind, she arranged for them to go for a walk around the Summer Gardens in 1773. Many people came to see the young women, who reportedly behaved modestly and won over their audience. The empress was so proud that she ordered the painter, Levitsky, to create portraits of the institute's most eminent students.

The artist depicted the girls in stage costumes, marking the beginning of a new genre in art — the "role portrait." Levitsky did not want to simply copy the subjects' faces; his portraits tell the story of heroines who exist both in theatrical appearances and in their own secluded reality.

All of the models are portrayed in action: playing the harp, dancing or moving in some other way. Some critics say the portraits can be considered to be allegorical, but according to Grigory Goldovsky, head of Russian painting from the 18th to 19th centuries at the Russian Museum, the portraits are "evidence of the epoch."

When viewed as a collection, the portraits complement one another. Levitsky lowered the horizon line because he wanted spectators to see the figures from that viewpoint — just as an audience sees actors on a stage. All the models are drawn close to the edge of the canvas to intensify the effect.

The portraits were created with the help of Ivan Betskoi, Catherine's personal secretary and adviser, who was also instrumental in the founding of the Smolny Institute. He was passionately in love with one of the students, Glafira Alymova, who is luxuriously depicted in her portrait. Although she is shown wearing regular parade dress, she has multiple accessories, including large pearls in her hair.

Another interesting portrait shows Yekaterina Khrushchova and Yekaterina Khovanskaya, who are depicted performing a scene from the pastoral opera "Le caprice amoureux, ou, Ninette a la cour." Khrushchova, dressed as a man, plays the role of a shepherd.

In another painting, Yekaterina Nelidova, the future favorite of Tsar Paul I, dances a minuet. The poet and dramatist Ivan Dolgorukov wrote: "The girl is clever, but she has a rather plain face, noble posture, but short height and is as black as a beetle. Though, she is so clever and kind that everyone who talks to her forgets that she is ugly."

The completed portraits were moved to Peterhof Palace, where they were hung in the empress' bedroom. During the process of assembling the original collection of the Russian Museum in the late 19th century, the museum's committee repeatedly asked the imperial family to donate the portraits, but the answer was always no. Only after the February Revolution were the portraits added to the museum's other exhibits.

During their long history, the “Smolyanki” have undergone considerable changes. Additions have been made to some of the portraits at various times. In the 19th century, for example, the paintings were considered too bright. The colors did not correspond to prevailing fashion, so the portraits were covered with yellow lacquer.

“Restoration started about five years ago,” Goldovsky said. “Of course, the paintings had a lot of signs of previous restorations, which had not always been done professionally. As well as various invasions, the portraits have also suffered some losses.”

The restorers’ main task was to remove all the layers that had been added to the originals. The portrait of Alymova, for example, revealed a lot of additional touches that did not match the artist’s tones. After restoring the portrait to its original appearance, the composition elements became visible.

Visitors can trace the whole story of the “Smolyanki” restoration at the exhibition.

“A lot of photos and videos showing the process are exhibited, as well as historical documents,” Goldovsky said.

“Smolyanki. Dmitry Levitsky” runs till Nov. 1 in the Benois Wing of the Russian Museum. 2 Naberezhnaya Kanala Griboyedova. St. Petersburg. Metro Nevsky Prospekt. Tel. (812) 595-4248.

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