

A Lightness of Flight With Labas at New Tretyakov

By [The Moscow Times](#)

March 15, 2011



Banned in the '30s, Labas was allowed to exhibit his work in the Thaw Era.

The New Tretyakov Gallery has a new large exhibition devoted to Alexander Labas, one of the Soviet Union's most lyrical painters.

The gallery has brought together works from its own collection, the Pushkin Museum, the Russian Museum, the Bakhrushinsky Theater Museum as well as from the collection of Labas' heirs for the show, which opened Tuesday and runs till May 18.

Labas' best work comes from the 1920s and 1930s with pieces such as "Metro," where we see a silver ribbon of a metro escalator move upward, or "Airship and Children," where an airship floats above a pink haze of children.

It was at that time when the young artist, born in 1900, created his distinctive style, a light and soft use of oils to paint his favorite topic — anything that moves, whether it flies, steams

or floats by. He not only brought to the canvas flight and speed but a visible delight in it. That can be seen in the composition, which is almost always dominated by the vertical.

Unlike Italian futurists whose portrait of movement is almost aggressive, Labas shows the human side of technical progress. He is not interested in the mechanics of it but in the emotion. That's why whenever he paints trams or airships or planes we can almost always see passengers in them.

In one painting from 1928, we see the passengers in their seats in an airplane as if they are suspended in mid-air.

At the end of the 1920s, Labas created a cycle of lyrical poetic landscapes rather than the pompous style that preferred to create romantic Soviet heroes.

But in the mid-1930s, Labas was accused of formalism, his light style considered not befitting for the highly controlled Soviet art world, and he was barred from exhibits. His work was not shown again at major exhibits until 1966 as the Khrushchev Thaw allowed artists disdained by the state to re-emerge.

Labas died in 1983.

The gallery attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the time with models of automobiles and aircraft from the Polytechnical Museum as well as contemporary newsreels. It also features personal items of Labas and his theatrical designs and will be accompanied by talks on aviation and airships.

The exhibit also features a copy of a model that Labas made for an agricultural exhibition in Minsk in 1930. Called the "Electrical Venus," the 4-meter composition made out of wood, glass and metal was made for the electrification and mechanization pavilion at the exhibit. The original was lost and the model is supposed to be the highlight of the exhibit, but it pales into insignificance next to the paintings of the happy airships and kind-hearted airplanes.

"Alexander Labas" runs till May 18 at the New Tretyakov Gallery, 10 Krymsky Val. Metro Oktyabrskaya, Park Kultury. Tel. 230-7788, www.tretyakovgallery.ru.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/03/15/a-lightness-of-flight-with-labas-at-new-tretyakov-a5646>