

P A V E L Tchelitchew

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OU's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art
scores another triumph with an
exhibit of masterpieces from
The Museum of Modern Art.

By VICTOR KOSHKIN-YOURITZIN

Adding to the University of Oklahoma's ever-growing national and international reputation in the arts, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art mounted "Tchelitchew," an exhibition of 29 paintings and drawings by the famed Russian-American artist, Pavel Tchelitchew (1898-1957), one of the 20th-century's greatest painters and ballet stage designers.

continued

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As the distinguished British critic Martin Battersby wrote in 1970, “By far the most popular painting in New York’s Museum of Modern Art is a large canvas called *Hide-and-Seek*.” *Hide-and-Seek* (1940-42) was the radiant centerpiece of the OU exhibit, which ran from January 18 to March 10 and included 20 of Tchelitchew’s other finest paintings and drawings from The Museum of Modern Art’s extensive holdings of his work. Additional pieces came from private collectors, as well as through the kindness of two of New York’s leading art galleries, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery and DC Moore Gallery.

Outstanding artistic quality was a prerequisite for any piece’s inclusion in this extremely prestigious loan show, which was organized exclusively for the FJMA with the assistance of The Museum of Modern Art. One of the show’s paintings, *Still Life*, was donated to the FJMA in 1999 by Mark Allen Everett, M.D.

One of history’s most dazzling draftsmen, a painter of enormous range, originality and power, and a complex, mystical thinker who constantly probed for essences, seeking a unity between man, nature and the cosmos, Tchelitchew was born near Moscow into a liberal aristocratic family. (His father owned such vast, expertly conserved estates that he was known as the “king of the forests.”)

The artist’s family lost its possessions in the Russian Revolu-

PREVIOUS PAGE: *Hide-and-Seek (Cache-Cache)*, 1940-42

Oil on canvas; 78½ x 84¾”

The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund.

LEFT: *Little Red Riding Hood*, 1940

Gouache on board; 30 x 20”

Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York, NY.

tion, and Tchelitchew escaped from Russia, settling in Berlin and then Paris (1923-34). There he was, for a while, the leading member of the “Neo-Romantic” painters, became Gertrude Stein’s protégé, and commenced a long, intense friendship with the British poet Edith Sitwell. In Paris he also produced designs for Serge de Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes and completed the first of many historic collaborations with the celebrated Russian-American choreographer George Balanchine.

From 1934 through the 1940s, Tchelitchew lived in the United States—primarily in New York—after which he moved to Italy. In 1942 he had one of the first solo shows ever granted an artist by The Museum of Modern Art. At that time, as critic Michael Duncan has written, Tchelitchew “was considered by many to rank with Picasso, Matisse, Léger, Dali and Rouault.”

A virtual mini-retrospective, the OU exhibit presented early Cubist paintings—all easily a qualitative match for similar efforts by Picasso, Braque or Chagall—and a wide range of other pieces spanning major aspects of Tchelitchew’s career. Included were a Modigliani-like painting of Edith Sitwell, a riveting portrait drawing titled *Africa*, and grim commentaries—in *Sleeping Pinheads* and *The Madhouse*—on human suffering. The show also contained set designs for two Balanchine ballets, *Apollon Musagète* and *The Cave of Sleep*, with a stunning, “flayed man” costume sketch for the latter.

Ambiguity and metamorphosis were essential ingredients in much of Tchelitchew’s work, as seen in the exhibited *Little Red Riding Hood* (with a wolf hidden in the painted landscape) and the ink drawing, *Metamorphic Landscape with Lion*, where Tchelitchew’s rendering of the king of beasts rivals Dürer’s famous *Two Lions*.

Four powerful drawings of trees helped trace the fascinating evolution of what would become Tchelitchew’s greatest work and, indeed, one of the most extraordinary paintings in the history of art, the 6½ x 7’ *Hide-and-Seek*. With its seemingly endless hidden images and brilliant integration of human and vegetal forms, the picture features a huge hand and foot (the artist’s own), which simultaneously constitute an old tree. At the base of the painting, the foot’s big toe becomes a fetus, marking the beginning of a veritable life cycle, which is enacted as the viewer climbs into the branches, and, clockwise, experiences the passage of the seasons, beginning with the Head of Spring at the lower left. In this ingeniously composed, ever so delicately painted picture—filled with subtle echoes of various shapes—Tchelitchew forever pulls us visually around, into and back out of his mysterious “tree of life.”

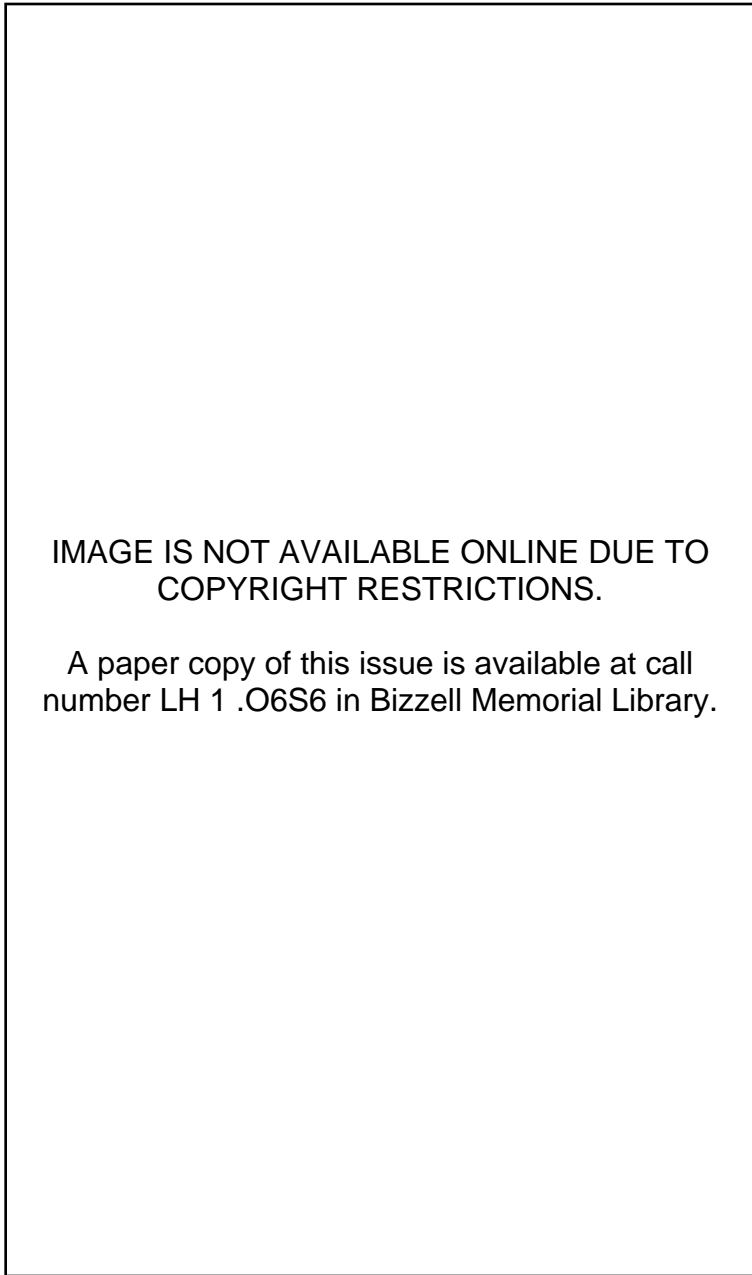


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LEFT: *The Golden Leaf*, 1943
Gouache on paper; 25 x 19 1/2"
Collection of J. Hyde Crawford,
New York, NY.

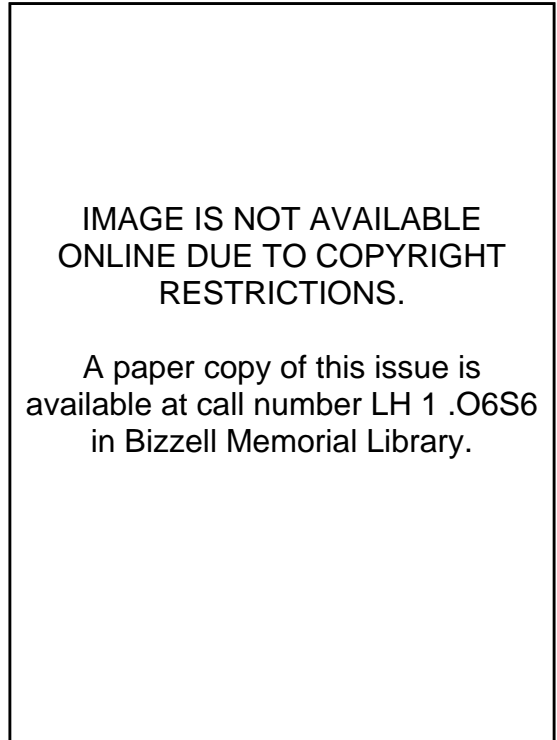


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Interior Landscape VII (Skull), 1949
Crayon and watercolor on paper;
12 x 8 1/2"
Private Collection, courtesy DC Moore
Gallery, New York, NY.

Within the tree's trunk itself, other concealed images suddenly appear, one of the most crucial being a frontal face of an old, perhaps ancestral, Viking. Its nose is simultaneously the red-garbed torso of the enigmatic central figure, who, with long strands of hair and muscular legs, is perhaps the key to any one of innumerable possible interpretations of this painting.

Incorporating Tchelitchew's favorite device of triple perspective and "rhythmical time," this transcendently spiritual picture possesses a magical inner luminosity and an eternally pulsating quality that are unique. According to Tchelitchew, the composer "Stravinsky, who . . . stayed 2 1/2 hours counting with his chronometer the rhythms of the appearances and disappearances of the images, said, 'The whole picture beats

like a human heart with the blood pressure of 110.' "

Into *Hide-and-Seek* Tchelitchew poured his entire energy and heart; the painting, created during World War II, seems to have been his life's testament and his most complete comment about the human condition. From this point he moved into a series of "interior landscapes," probably the most noted of which is *The Golden Leaf* (1943), an imaginary X-ray view of a standing human figure that possesses an extraordinary transparency and inner glow. Among the show's three other exquisite "interior landscapes" was *The Sun*—a view into an eye, on a scale both microcosmic and macrocosmic.

Progressing towards a weightless, transparent dematerialization of form, from 1950-51, Tchelitchew, against dark backgrounds, created a series of amazingly controlled, luminous

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drawings of “geometric” heads. Consisting of thin, nearly parallel, sometimes energetically intersecting, circular lines, these hauntingly hollow images—which sometimes appear simultaneously convex and concave—seem eerily prophetic of modern computer graphics. Exhibited from this series was *Head, I*, reproduced on the January 1951 cover of the internationally esteemed *ARTnews*.

In the few years before his death, Tchelitchew’s spiritual journey took him into the cosmos of his “Celestial Physiognomies.” Placing round or oval forms such as a head-shaped egg (seen in the show’s *Untitled*) within dynamically crisscrossing rectilinear grids, he created glowing, pulsating evocations of interplanetary space with his ever-beloved subject—the human being—harmoniously represented at the center of the universe.