

SYMEON VOLCHKOV, PAINTER AND POET
by Dr. Klitos Ioannides

During all the years that he lived in Cyprus, I did not have the good fortune to get to know Symeon Volchkov, the fine painter-poet of Russian descent and Cypriot in spirit. An omission that pains me after the fact... Nevertheless, as fate would have it, I have come to know him through the immense love of his daughter Lara who, with her aesthetic-poetic soul, has succeeded in imparting to me the hues and poetic language of her artist father. I feel blessed by Lara's initiative and I am delighted by this rare encounter. I thank Lara for the sky that she has given me. I am eternally grateful for the precious treasures of colour and poetry that I have received. All I have been given belongs entirely to the sphere of sacred beauty, of the stewardship of existence, of the divine erotic exclamation. This has been an unforgettable aesthetic surprise, unbearable for the sensitive receiver, accessible for the lover of supreme beauty and for the anxious seeker of the sensory extrasensory realms of the fiery heart.

In every unique painting that I saw in Lara Bargilly's hospitable home, which looks more like an Art Museum or a Gallery, in the book *Albatross*, in the CD that I studied, and in the film that I watched about the life and work of Symeon Volchkov in Cyprus, beyond the painter-poet's lyricism, I experienced the mysticism of holy Russia translated into the most hallowed Russian and Cypriot nature, a soul topography, a composed inner geography, a soft-voiced semiology of being.

Symeon Volchkov maps out his rich artistic soul in colour with a graceful understanding of the grammar and syntax of the language of painting. At times realistically, at times impressionistically, like a true mystic-hierophant, he initiates his reader-viewer into the realms beyond the veil; like a true high priest of Art, he enters first into the holy of holies of the majestic beauty of God's Creation. When it comes to his Russian or Cypriot moments, it seems that Symeon Volchkov – the exquisite philhellene, friend of Cyprus, and Russian to his core – piously kisses everything that he holds in his hands and, in so doing, succeeds in rendering innocence, purity, holiness, awe, wonder and reverence. This holds true for both great aspects of his artistic nature, painting and poetry.

Those who have written about Symeon Volchkov speak about the migratory bird that he was and about the farthest edge where he was constantly perched. If we agree with these positions, it is so that we can move them into universality, into the universality of the warm language that characterizes both his painting and his poetry. Symeon Volchkov skillfully validates the beauty of truth and the truth of beauty in every visual synthesis, in every poetic verb. What we have in front of us is a Zenonian cosmopolite, a true compatriot of the stoic forefather of Citium.

When I saw his paintings and read his poems for the first time, the great poet of Greek antiquity came to mind, Simeonides of Ceos, who used to say: "*Painting is silent poetry, and poetry is painting that speaks.*" Both are true in the case of Symeon Volchkov. His silent painting liberates the soul in a movement toward the heights and does not attempt to convince; instead, it carries you away in reverence and moves you emotionally. His solemn poetry is a hymn to the inner realms, a drink from the fountainhead – holy water and bread that the unique tears of love have transformed into a holy communion.

A lover of the transcendental, Symeon Volchkov deposits – like a true albatross – the harvest of his free flights to the soil of Russian Cyprus and to the sky of Cypriot Russia, precious stones which must be guarded with the fear of God.

Like St. John of the Cross, he traveled into the darkness and brought holy light to the cruel times of Armageddon, to the iron age of Hesiod, to the strife of Empedocles.

Even so, he was a way-shower of the graceful love of Aphrodite and a true Orthodox Christian, who beheld Cyprus from above and stepped firmly onto the holy soil of Russia, for which he fought, sustained wounds, and ached bitterly like a loving father – teacher, beloved husband, and heroic warrior against dark forces.

In addressing his own wounded Albatross, Charles Baudelaire ended by speaking about the great, injured wings that prevented him from flying. The wounded albatross that was Symeon Volchkov, despite his injured wings, manages to fly into the unknown realms of Art to bring back that which is novel, as the great 19th century French poet Charles Baudelaire would have wanted. For this he paid dearly, like Prometheus and all those who endeavor to steal fire from the gods. He experienced his own Caucasus, bound by Beauty, bound by words, bound by colour, and found repose after enduring trials of fire and water: the Cypriot epic, family dramas, losses of children (son and son-in-law), the loss of his beloved wife Katerina – repeated injuries that transformed his bleeding wound into a deep source, into Jacob's well, and into living waters dancing in life eternal.

A living spirit, Symeon Volchkov passionately loved the sea-kissed, sea-beaten Mediterranean and the light that he rendered in warm language and in plastic works: a watery fairy tale at Petra tou Romiou, in the occupied Famagusta of Agios Nicolaos of the Venetian walls, in the Beautiful Kyrenia with her castle over the rocks and with the waves that “wrestle them intransigently and furiously for centuries;” Cyprus of the leap year 1974 (a tall tree split in two – the tragic consequence of the wrath of gods and demons in the otherwise romantic setting of an eternally beautiful nature). Traveling the endless panorama of Cypriot colors, we behold ancient and Medieval Paphos, the lavish nature of Troodos that conceals a Byzantine treasure at every mile, the unapproachable precipices of Stavrovouni “*with the cross that touches the blue of the Ecumene,*” Kantara and Larnaca in the moonlight and in the twilight. The “Symphony of Famagusta” is rendered in a wondrous light that descends from the Sky with a promise, which hatches the hope for a rebirth at the dramatic moments of the raging sea – all that composes the Cypriot epic. Also, the beautiful portraits of his daughter Lara, the tragic figure of his son Vladimir, the image of his other self – his beloved Katerina, the Odyssey of his own sea or rather the sea of his own Odyssey, at every hour whether ancient or contemporary.

While reading and seeing his multifaceted work, I sought out “the endless magic of the sounds” that “is sung by the sacred Muse of the soul,” by his own angels, exquisite and white. Symeon Volchkov moved to the rhythms of the soul. He moved with vital force in “his blue dreams,” like a true Don Quixote hounded by “Pharisees” and “twin Robespierres.” Be that as it may, he remained faithful to “the benediction of the vastness, of God,” a true creator, a continuer of Antiquity, of the Renaissance, of the newer religious, aesthetic and historical myth, a true child of the Kingdom of God with his head always resting on the stone-pillow of the gates of the sky, where Jacob's ladder of the ascending and descending can be seen in dreams. He knew the pains of Hades but was not denied Paradise in the least. He found salvation in a constant poetic and figurative ascension. These are the precious and holy things that you have given me, Symeon Volchkov, and for that I am deeply grateful.

Translated by Irena Ioannidou