

Meeting “Mr. Time”

The National Portrait Gallery salutes the genius of Time Magazine cover artist Boris Chaliapin

By Peter A. Balaskas

The gentle classiness of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. The joyful tenacity of Althea Gibson. The concentrated focus of Thelonious Monk. The passionate humor of Julia Child. And, of course, the stunning, wounded beauty of Marilyn Monroe. Russian artist Boris Chaliapin, who painted over 550 portraits for TIME magazine, magically captured these subtle, yet memorable features for the publication’s covers. Of that number, 413 of them were printed. His prolific nature was matched only by his speed in producing his works; his record quickest time was a portrait of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, which he painted in seven hours as he was recovering from a hangover after celebrating his 19th anniversary with his family. Little is known about him. But from May 17, 2013 to January 5, 2014, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. presents an exhibition of 26 original Chaliapin portraits, where art lovers around the world can learn more about the artist who was simply known as “Mr. TIME.”

Portraits at an Exhibition

As curator of the National Portrait Gallery, historian James G. Barber has many responsibilities and talents. With regard to the creating and organizing the exhibit, “Mr. TIME: Portraits of Boris Chaliapin,” Barber wanted to make the appropriate choices out

of the 350 paintings that the gallery now owns; 130 of them are unpublished portraits that were discovered in the Chaliapin Connecticut home and donated to the gallery in 2010.

To pick the perfect 26 portraits for the exhibition, Barber followed three criteria. The first dealt with chronology.

“What I tried to do was to I wanted to show the full 28 year range of Chaliapin’s work,”

Barber says. “So we use the earliest portrait that we own...and that was of General.

Lesley James McNair (12/28/42).” McNair—dubbed by his superiors as “the brains of the army” because of his love for academic pursuits—was responsible for the training of all American army ground troops on the eve of World War II. The late general’s piercing intelligence is brought to life even more in Chaliapin’s portrait.

The next involved showing a variety in subjects. Barber says, “I wanted to show an equal balance of men and women, as well as different occupations.” So the professions of the subjects range from statesmen, actors and actresses, athletes, sports coaches and even cartoonists like Alfred “Al Capp” Caplin, creator of “Li’l Amber” (11/6/1950).

Chaliapin’s portrait shows the painter’s playful side as he has the cartoonist grinning in the foreground, while having Caplin’s two lead creations—Li’l Abner and Daisy Mae—pulling at his ears.

The last criteria Barber strived for was a variety of artistic styles. One primary example he chose was The New York World’s Fair (6/5/1964). This portrait was one of the few Chaliapin TIME covers that delved into an abstract, almost pop-like approach. And if there was one style that Chaliapin hated, it was abstract art. The artist was even quoted, saying, “I want a linoleum design on the floor, not in a picture on a wall.”

Regardless, Chaliapin's distain for the abstract is not evident in this vibrant illustration that includes colorful banners and fireworks, skyscrapers of different sizes and shapes, and a small portrait of Robert Moses—president of the World's Fair—hovering in the very center of this textural mosaic.

With this diverse selection at the exhibition, connoisseurs from around the world can absorb the passion of a man where artistic creativity seemed to be dominant not only throughout his life, but also the lives of his family.

A Family Trait

Born in 1904 in Moscow, little Boris Chaliapin was surrounded by a talented family: his father was Feodor Chaliapin, one of Russia's most renowned operatic basses, his mother was an Italian ballerina, and his younger brother Feodor Jr. was an actor, most notably in the 1980s with "Moonstruck" starring Oscar award-winning Cher and "The Name of the Rose" starring Sean Connery. That creative talent was passed on to Chaliapin in terms of his artwork; he was three years old when he crafted his first recognizable drawing: a horse.

"I would say...he's been born in this family that values the arts," Barber says. "And I think early on, [Feodor] and the family discovered that [Boris] had artistic interests and talent."

Chaliapin's gift was nurtured as he attended an academy of arts in Petrograd, as well as the Russian Artistic and Technical School. He even studied in the studios of Russian realist artists Abram Arkhipov and Dmitry Kardovsky.

But it was in the early 1920s that began to shape Chaliapin's creative evolution. In 1925, the Chaliapin family immigrated to France to escape the violence of the Russian Revolution. It was in Paris that the family became exposed to the beginnings of the Surrealism and Art Deco movements. However, young Chaliapin gravitated towards a style of realism in his works, using a diversity of media including graphite, watercolor, and oil on canvas.

"He begins studying painting at the Academic Colarossi in Paris," Barber says. "And there he meets many of the great artists of the day, and he begins painting their portraits. So, portraiture is in his blood. He will, later on in life, also do landscapes and whatnot. But portraiture seems to be what comes first."

TIME's ABCs

The next significant phase in Chaliapin's growth occurred when he moved to the US in 1935. Barber explains that when Chaliapin met his father during a tour at the New York Metropolitan Opera, Feodor arranged for his son's first exhibition at the Plaza Hotel. "He really turns a corner here," he says. "[The exhibition] is well-received, and it leads to important commissions. He then marries his second wife, Helcia, in 1942. And coincidentally, that's the year he begins with TIME Magazine."

Through a connection of his father's, Chaliapin becomes a contract illustrator and artist for TIME, starting with his first cover of Jawaharlal Nehru (8/24/1942), India's first prime minister and a student of Mahatma Gandhi. His ability to magically capture the overall impression of his subjects, while incorporating their professions, passions or the theme of the cover story in the background, resulted in him becoming a member of

TIME's ABCs, a trio of TIME's "go to" artists. While Chaliapin represented the "C," Russian painter Boris Artzybasheff and Rhode Island illustrator Ernest Hamlin Baker were the "A" and "B" of the trio, respectively.

"I look at Chaliapin and his two contemporaries as three of TIME's bread and butter artists," Barber says. "Whatever cover story they wanted to feature was to introduce that cover story with their cover. And Chaliapin was the most prolific of them all."

The Need for Speed

Chaliapin's artistic productivity was due to his incredible speed in creating TIME's covers, resulting in his nickname, Mr. TIME; he would normally finish a portrait in three days, whereas most cover artists needed a week or more. Besides the Yuri Gagarin record-breaking seven-hour portrait, the Pope John XXIII portrait that is in the exhibition (11/10/1958) took less than 24 hours.

Another example of his quick turnaround time was when he was assigned to paint legendary actress Gloria Swanson for the April 9, 1951 issue. TIME predicted that she would win the Oscar for her performance in "Sunset Boulevard." However, when Judy Holliday won for "Born Yesterday," Chaliapin had to work fast to paint a replacement cover for that issue; it was of Broadway star Barbara Bel Geddes. The Swanson portrait, which exudes the actress's glamorous intensity, was never printed. But is now on exhibit at the gallery.

"I think that was a pleasant surprise for TIME that he could work fast," Barber says. "I'm not sure that the TIME editors knew that when they first contacted him. I don't even

know if Chaliapin knew himself what he could do. I think that's one of those things that everyone discovers."

Chaliapin's other specialty was creating portraits of women. His esteemed subjects included Ingrid Bergman, Deborah Kerr, Princess Elizabeth, Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, Tallulah Bankhead, and even Julia Child (11/25/1966), who was one of his few life portraits; most of his other subjects were from photographs. Barber shares how this life sitting between the artist and the French chef was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

"He went up to [her] house outside of Boston and spent two days there with Julia," he says. "He made a friend for life. They would go to the market together, they traded recipes, and drank vodka together."

An End of an Era

In October 5, 1970, Boris Chaliapin's last cover for TIME was published; the portrait was of President Richard Nixon. There were two reasons for his retirement. One was of old age; he would pass away nine years later. But Barber points out that the second reason was due to the change in journalism.

"TIME begins to use...more and more topical themes, less portraiture," he explains.

"And their covers begin to look...they're just photographs of what you see. That was the nature of the business."

But regardless of this change and the loss of Chaliapin, his legacy will continue to grow, thanks to the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition, which has received excellent printed and online press.

"[Chaliapin] found his true calling when he went to TIME," he says. "[After] 413 covers and 28 years later, he realized it, and TIME realized it, and the readers of TIME realized it. So it's genius, talent, call what you want. But that's it in a nutshell."

Although the exhibition will close on January 5, 2014, "Dancing the Dream," which showcases performers, choreographers, and impresarios from a multitude of generations, opened October 4 and will continue until July 13, 2014. Included in this show is Chaliapin's 1962 portrait of African American dancer Katherine Mary Dunham. This sole selection will undoubtedly not only add to the spirit of the show, it will also sustain the spirit of the artist himself for those who love the passion of Mr. TIME.

Sidebar #1

Iconic Portraits

Boris Chaliapin's portraits at TIME will continue to immortalize his legacy in the art world. Every single one of them shows a facet of his talented genius. Here are five of his most notable works:

- Marilyn Monroe (5/14/1956): Chaliapin captures the budding sensuality of Monroe, while still adding subtle hints of her innocent vulnerability.
- Martin Luther King Jr. (2/18/1957): Although not in the gallery's exhibition, this TIME cover shows Chaliapin's attention to detail, especially the 1950s coloring of the Montgomery, AL Bus in the lower left foreground.

- Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis (1/20/1961): The tragic elegance of the First Lady is enhanced by the small baby carriage---containing John F. Kennedy Jr.---on the White House Balcony.
- Muhammad Ali (3/22/1963): Ali--- who once announced, “If he gives me some jive, I’ll end it in five!”---possessed a playful mischievousness that is immortalized by Chaliapin.
- Thelonious Monk (2/28/1964): A portrait created through life sittings, the groundbreaking jazz pianist kept falling asleep during the sessions.