



Tchelitchew, Pavel (1898-1957)

by Daniel Starr

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Russian-born painter, sculptor, and set designer Pavel Tchelitchew (pronounced chel' lee chef; also chel ee' chef) created a number of works that illustrate homoerotic desire.

Tchelitchew was born September 21, 1898 in the Kaluga district near Moscow on the estate of his aristocratic family. He was educated by a series of French, German, and English governesses, who encouraged his interest in the arts.

His father, a follower of Tolstoyian principles, supported his desire to become a painter. In spite of his father's liberal views, however, the family was expelled from its property in 1918 following the revolution of 1917.

Tchelitchew joined the White army, and the family fled to Kiev, which was not yet under Communist control. While in Kiev he studied with Alexandra Exter and produced his first theater designs.

By 1920 he was in Odessa, escaping the advancing Red armies. He went on to Berlin via Istanbul. There he met Allen Tanner, an American pianist, and became his lover. In 1923 they moved to Paris and Tchelitchew began painting portraits of the avant-garde and homosexual elite.

Tchelitchew developed a predilection for outrageous blues and pinks, calling himself the "Prince of Bad Taste."

Gertrude Stein noticed his entry in the 1925 Salon D'Automne, *Basket of Strawberries* (1925), and bought the entire contents of his studio.

In addition to becoming an accomplished painter, he also became one of the most innovative stage designers of the period and designed ballets for Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in Paris.

Tchelitchew's American debut was in a group show of drawings at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1930.

In 1934 he moved to New York with his new lover, writer and critic Charles Henri Ford, and exhibited in the Julien Levy Gallery. He and Ford were at the center of a social world of wealthy homosexuals, such as Lincoln Kirstein, for whom he also designed ballets.

He continued his work in design for Balanchine's fledgling American Ballet and for A. Everett "Chick" Austin, a friend and director of the pioneering Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut.

In 1952 Tchelitchew became a U.S. citizen, but shortly afterwards moved to Frascati, Italy. He suffered a heart attack in 1956 and died on July 31, 1957 in Rome, with Ford by his bedside.



Pavel Tchelitchew in 1934.
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, November 14, 1934.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

While Tchelitchev was trained in traditional classical drawing, his earliest influences were cubism and constructivism. He soon reacted against their emphasis on the geometric shapes of cones and cubes and began working in curves, a decision that led to his representational style, which used every traditional device of anatomy and perspective.

In 1926 he was included by the Galerie Druet, Paris, in a group show the title of which gave rise to the appellation "Neo-Romantic," a designation applied to an amorphous combination of figurative painters of various temperaments and attitudes. The artist always disapproved of the term; and in spite of similarities of his work with such artists as Salvador Dalí, he also always denied any association with Surrealism.

Phenomena (1936-1938), the first painting of a projected series of three major works, aroused violent reactions because of its lurid color and characterization of persons then still alive (including a self-portrait and images of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas). The most prominent of the nude male figures in this painting is Nicholas Magallanes, a favorite model, who later became a famous dancer.

The second work, *Hide and Seek* (1940-1942), a strikingly red painting of an enormous tree composed of human body parts, remains one of the most popular paintings in the Museum of Modern Art. The final work in the series was never finished.

Tchelitchev's later style developed as a result of his search for "interior landscapes" inspired by metamorphoses of the human body.

His works include, in addition to well-known nudes such as *Tattooed Man* (1934), a number of pen-and-ink sketches that illustrate homoerotic desire, some of which are housed in the Kinsey Collection of erotic art.

The artist also executed watercolor illustrations of the gay novel by Ford and Parker Tyler, *The Young and Evil* (1933). These illustrations were not published with the text until 1988.

Tchelitchev's critical reputation declined in the 1950s and 1960s along with the decline of interest in figurative art. The retrospective that was the opening exhibition of Huntington Hartford's conservative Gallery of Modern Art in New York in 1964 was the last museum survey of his career until the 1998 exhibition at the Katonah Museum of Art in Katonah, New York.

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About the Author

Daniel A. Starr is Chief Librarian, Technical Services and Planning, at The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York.