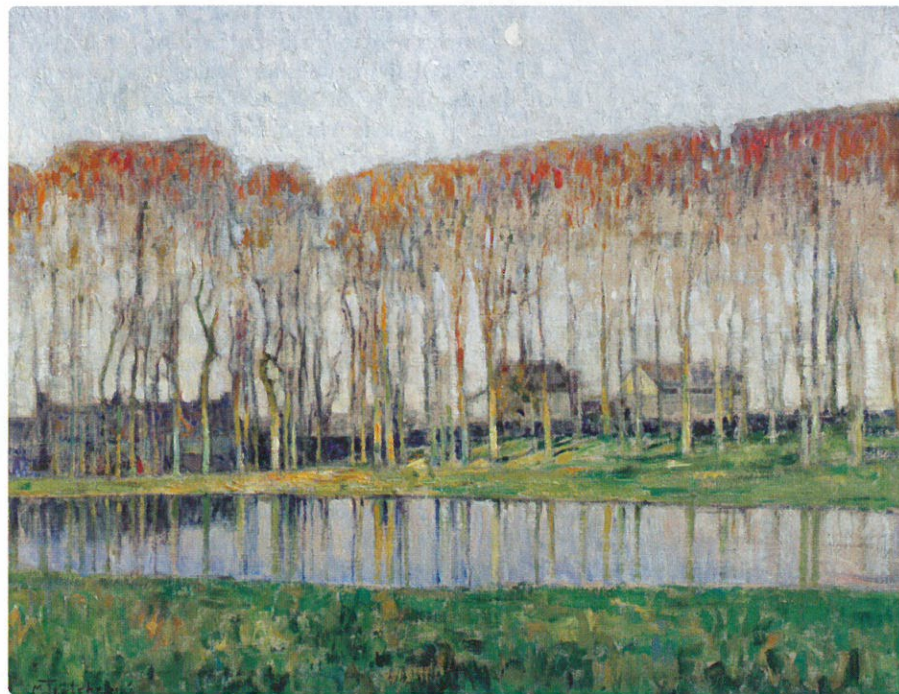


The Restoration of Ukrainian Impressionism

UKRAINE is known for giving birth to outstandingly gifted people only to later delete them from history and deny them acknowledgement. This is exactly what happened to nearly 200 artists who joined the free-spirited multinational artistic community of Paris in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Since the late 19th century, Paris had exerted a gravitational pull on artists from all over the world: rich or penniless, talented or not, they came to Paris to breathe an air of freedom and creativity, catch up on the latest artistic ideas and try to develop their own. However, due to the complex historical and political circumstances of the 20th century, Ukraine-born artists abroad were generally forgotten in the West or often identified as Russian and later "Soviet". Their achievements were rarely acknowledged at home, in Ukraine.

It is only since the beginning of the 21st century that Ukrainian art historians and collectors have made attempts to redress the situation and bring recognition to the Ukrainian contribution to Impressionism. These attempts included several studies and the publishing of several books on the topic – *Impressionism and Ukraine* by Anatoliy Melnyk (2011), Dmytro Holet's *Mikhail Stepanovych Tkachenko* (2010), and *Ukrainian Artists of Paris 1900–1939* by Vita Susak (2010), as well as an exhibition of 150 pieces

The link between the Impressionism movement and Paris is as indelible as the links between the city and the artists that spearheaded the art form – the Impressionists. To put forward the notion that Impressionism can be linked to Ukraine is bold. Though, thanks in large part to the British Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce (BUCC), What's On looks at the impact Ukraine-born artists, particularly Mykhaylo Tkachenko made to the Impressionist movement in Paris and how the annals of art history recognised him and his Ukrainian contemporaries.

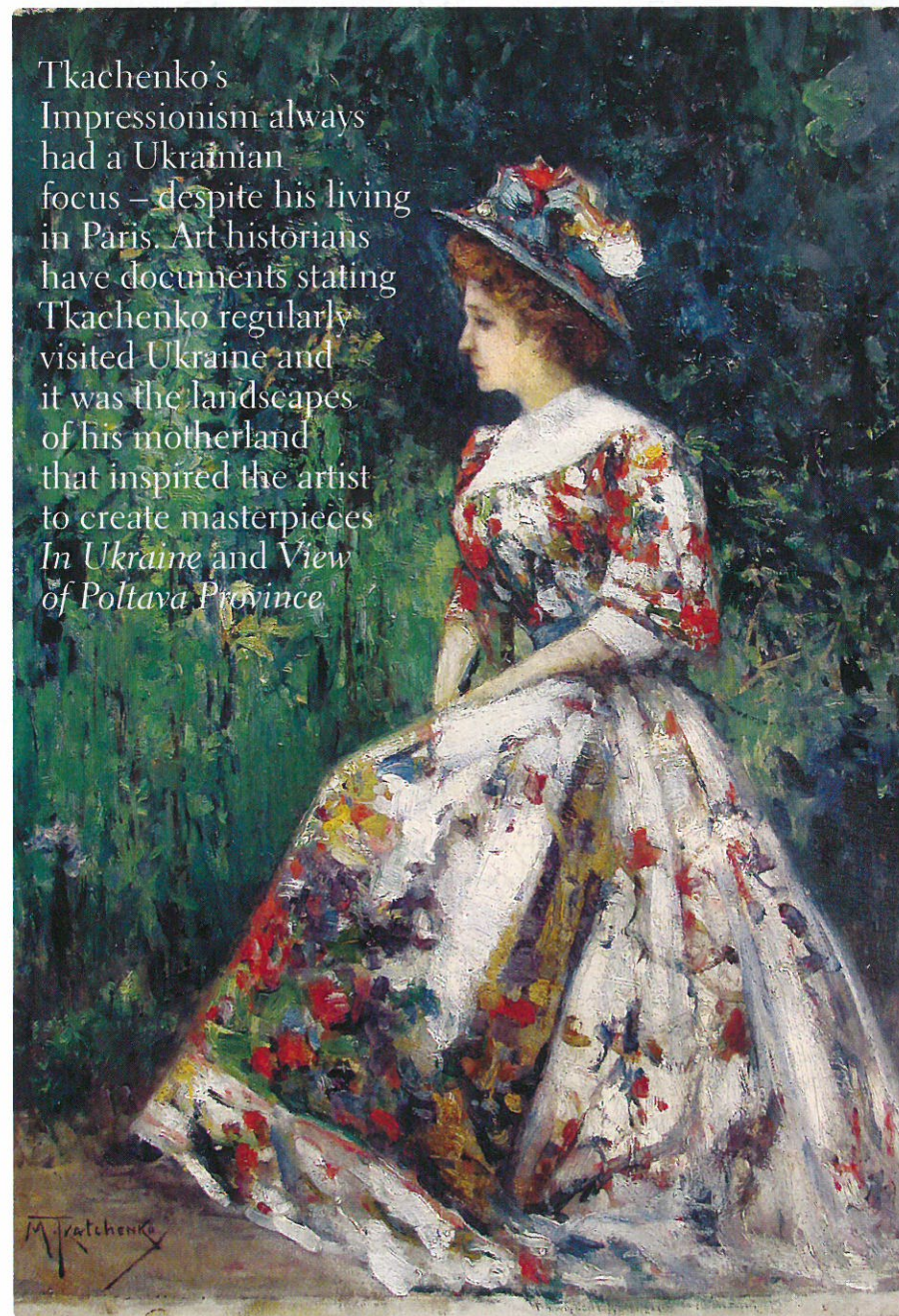


of Impressionist art developed by Ukrainian artists. The increasing recognition of Ukraine's role in the Impressionist movement looks set to move to a much higher level, with a large-scale exhibition of Ukrainian Impressionist art collected from various Ukrainian state museums and private collections. The plan doesn't end there; organisers want to take the works to London, Paris and New York.

BEST LAID PLANS

The plan, the brainchild of the BUCC working with the National Art Museum of Ukraine, has led to the involvement of one of the most respected experts in Impressionism, James Rubin, and is ambitious as the Impressionists were themselves, but is gaining backers, including museums and leading art dealers. Rubin's involvement took little coercing, he committed after seeing the Mykhaylo Tkachenko painting *In Ukraine*. "This is a work of exceptional quality, which any museum would be honoured to have in its collection," Rubin says. "Every major exhibition needs at

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least one star, and *In Ukraine* was celebrated in its day by winning a medal at the Painting Salon of the Society of French Artists of 1911, it will make an excellent centrepiece and focus for reintroducing Ukrainian Impressionism to the West."

The name Mykhaylo Tkachenko needs even more of a reintroduction in his Ukrainian motherland. Much appreciated and awarded in France during his artistic career, he was friends with Claude Monet and had regular exhibitions at the Grand Palais in Paris. Yet Tkachenko remains relatively unknown in Ukraine. Born in Kharkiv, where he received his primary artistic education, Tkachenko went on to study at the St Petersburg Academy of Arts. It was his success at the academy that resulted in Tkachenko earning the right to continue studying and working abroad – mostly in Paris.

Initially, Tkachenko showed excellence in traditional academic painting, but it was in Paris that he hit his artistic stride. Settling in the city for more than 20 years, he realised his own take on Impressionism after becoming swept up in the artistic movement. "It's almost like my eyes opened, before that they were closed," wrote Tkachenko in a letter home. "I don't know what will come next, but from now I am going to paint absolutely differently."

It is these words art expert Dmytro Holet's regards as the starting point of Tkachenko's switch to Impressionism. However, old habits die hard and the expert says it took nearly 10 years for Tkachenko to go from well-constructed academic paintings to letting the "air and colour of Impressionism penetrate his works, and learn to perceive the nature wholly and immediately".

NODS TO HOME

Tkachenko's Impressionism always had a Ukrainian focus – despite his living in Paris. Art historians have documents stating Tkachenko regularly visited Ukraine and it was the landscapes of his motherland that inspired the artist to create masterpieces *In Ukraine* and *View of Poltava Province* for which in 1911–12 Tkachenko was awarded gold medals at French salons.

Rubin, the author of the principal study of French painter Edouard Manet and other books on Impressionism, shares his own impressions of Tkachenko's works: "Tkachenko was a real discovery for me. I found his skill and talent to be equal to most of the Impressionists following the original founders, and I was delighted by the specifically topographical character of his Ukrainian landscapes. Having been the official painter for the Russian Navy, too, he became a master at representing ships and water, the latter being especially appropriate for the Impressionist technique. His small paintings of ships and sailboats are especially skilful and pleasing." It is perhaps for this reason, when Tsar Nikolay II visited Cherbourg back in 1909, he presented the President of France with two of Tkachenko's paintings. In covering the event, France's leading newspaper *Figaro*, described Tkachenko as a leading Impressionist.

Despite his connections with Ukraine, Tkachenko has more commonly been associated as "Russian", partially due to him being the official painter to the Navy of the Russian Empire. This fact and the historical circumstances of 1914 led to more revisions in the artist's biography. In 1914, he went to St Petersburg to present two of his paintings to Tsar Nikolay II, never to return to Paris due to the eruption of World War I. He died in 1916 and disappeared from sight in post-war art histories in the West.

Compounding this was Tkachenko's lack of recognition by the Soviets. Impressionism was never appreciated by Soviet art experts, which is why Tkachenko, along with Mykhaylo Berkos, Petro Levchenko, Petro Nilus and many other Ukrainian Impressionists were, if not forgotten, then unjustly minimised. At the same time, academic convention defines the timeframe of Impressionism to the end of the 19th century. In Ukraine, Impressionist-style took off later and then it took time for a local interpretation to develop.

It is only now that Ukraine and the world are rediscovering these artists and their contribution to world art history. Bate Toms, of the BUCC, believes that proper recognition of these painters will greatly increase the appreciation of Ukrainian art generally. It is his hope and those working with him that others will become involved to rebuild this bridge between art in Western and Eastern Europe. ▣