

# Conceptual Approaches to the Analysis of Contemporary Art: On the example of the Painting by the Altai Artist G.F. Borunov "Chapel" (2003)

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## Abstract

The article examines the work of the Altai artist G. F. Borunov and provides a conceptual approach to the analysis of the artist's work "Chapel", 2003. The question is raised about the application of conceptual methods of art critical analysis to reveal the ideological and figurative aspects of a work of art. Based on the concept of the art critic G. Zeidlmayer, approaches are considered that most fully allow for analysing the work's central idea and its semantic depth. Applying this concept, the main themes, motifs of the artist's work, and his "artistic task" are revealed. The research methodology in this publication combines the historical-biographical, formal-stylistic method and elements of iconological analysis.

**Keywords:** G.F. Borunov, painting, Altai art, approaches to the analysis of works, themes and motives of a work of art, "artistic assignment", "genius loci".

One of the urgent tasks of modern art criticism is the development of conceptual approaches to the analysis and semantic interpretation of a work of art. This is dictated by a number of objective factors.

Firstly, the number of art museums and galleries has increased dramatically. They present collections covering many periods and movements of world art. The flow of visitors to these galleries has also increased, and many popular exhibitions gather kilometre-long queues for their vernissages.

Secondly, new trends have become increasingly evident among viewers. Thanks to the development of information systems, the publication of a larger number of magazines, albums and monographs on art, which directly testifies to the growth of professionalism of art critics and the increase in their numbers, an ever-increasing segment of art lovers has begun to emerge, which could be defined as "professional viewers". They are well prepared to understand and appreciate the work of various artists and periods of art history, know the main stages of artistic development, biographies of masters, etc. This category increasingly requires not just a retelling of the life and work of masters of painting, sculpture, or graphics, but approaches to revealing the idea of the work, its semantic depth and how this is connected and conditioned by the entire system of means of artistic expression.

The request is made very clearly and, in this connection, a difficult task arises: the application of such methods of art criticism, knowledge and disclosure of a work of art from the point of view of its embodiment and ideological and figurative sides. "It is obvious that the ability to see not only the formal elements of a work of art, but also the non-obvious layers of the work's meaning, is connected not only with the level of expertise of the art critic, about which Max Friedlander wrote in detail in his works, but also with the experience of working with works of art, the philosophical and ideological knowledge of the interpreter, and also, and perhaps this should be considered one of the main qualities of an art critic – their taste and intuition. The art researcher, through their immersion in a work of art, goes from the material embodiment—from the objective plane of art—to the ethereal realm, to the realm of images and ideas. Not every art critic, even one who has worked in a museum for a long time, has these special qualities. That is why the works of insightful art connoisseurs, their assessments

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and how they reveal the semantic depth of a particular work of art are so valuable.

The next problem in addressing this topic—the search for conceptual approaches in the theory of interpreting works of art—lies in the contemporary state of fine art. It is multifaceted and diverse, which, among other things, gives rise to many difficulties in analysing and interpreting works of art. For example, many have encountered this when they found themselves in large art collections of world-famous museums. Walking through their halls, you can trace the entire history of art from the period of early forms to the modern avant-garde search in the field of artistic form. Each of these periods requires specific methods of analysis and interpretation. Here again, it is necessary to return to the nature and characteristics of contemporary viewers. Many of them are interested in historical and exclusively aesthetic aspects of fine art. For example, they may be interested in the costumes of a particular era. Many are satisfied with experiencing aesthetic delight and pleasure from an expressive and harmonious artistic form. However, returning to the selected group of “professional viewers,” they will be interested in a more in-depth approach to understanding a work of art. This, in turn, makes us note the following.

There are ancient forms of art that require knowledge not only of the basics of religious doctrines but also of the characteristics of imagery and symbolism of this period of art. In this case, it is necessary to turn to the iconology and iconography of ancient and medieval forms of art. Another very complex area within art is contemporary forms of artistic creativity. The largest galleries in the world are filled with abstract works, various kinds of performances and installations. Again, it can be noted that there is a category of viewers who themselves find explanations for these works; they provide them with opportunities for a special kind of reflection and experience. At the same time, curators and art historians are working with these works of art, trying to somehow explain and interpret them. Most often, this appears in the form of essays and metaphors that can evoke a series of associations in the viewer.

Finally, there is a large section on world art, which includes all works created in the classical forms of artistic creativity that arose in the New Times in Europe. It is also very diverse, and many artistic styles and trends have already been identified in it, and the names of artists who are recognised throughout the world are known. Thus, we can conclude that at least three conceptual approaches are required: one for ancient art, where knowledge of religious doctrines and an understanding of how the religious worldview of a particular people is reflected in works of art are essential. There is contemporary art, where the interpretation by an art critic and self-reflection

of an artist are of great importance, and there is classical art, within which, on the one hand, a theory of fine art has already been developed, and on the other hand, several important philosophical and theoretical developments have been made that help to understand the ideological and figurative conception of works. Let us present one experiment in analysing and interpreting a work of art from this particular tradition.

It is worth noting that a tradition has already been established in European art criticism, based on which good prospects open up for revealing the characteristics of a specific work of art, which we will try to show using the example of analyzing the painting “Chapel”, 2003 (oil on canvas 105x130) (pic. 1), by the talented Altai painter, Honored Artist of Russia Gennady Fedorovich Borunov (1928-2002).



**Pic. 1**

The hypothesis is that the painting is much deeper in its content than can be perceived through a quick analysis of its concept and imagery. We believe that the painting held special autobiographical meaning for the artist; he associated it with reflections on his life and creative journey. Several important aspects speak in favour of this. The painting is undoubtedly a creative achievement by the artist, a major work of art completed near the end of his life when he was already seriously ill.

It depicts the high bank of the mighty Siberian River Ob, on the high bank of which stands a small chapel, and next to it is an ancient cemetery with slanted grave crosses. The chapel appears old, with blackened logs and roof boards, and a slightly tilted dome. It is located on a hill, on one side of which adjoins a grove with yellowed autumn foliage, and behind it opens the sky and the river. The state of early autumn, the cold of the sky and water, and the saturated greenery of the drooping grass

are well conveyed. A barely noticeable path goes past the hill to the river, and from it to the chapel is laid, knocked down and also by the look of old stairs. The light is on in the chapel, which means that someone is praying in it. At the hill by the steps that lead to the chapel stands a man dressed in monastic robes.

The composition of the painting is strong and expressive; rich, colourful brushstrokes seem to sculpt the form of each object and, with their energy and strength, convey the emotions of the artist himself. It is evident that the work was painted on a spiritual and creative upsurge; each part of it conveys the artist's experiences. He seems to be trying to communicate something important to the viewer, to have time to tell something, to share something intimate. The work was a success, he felt it, because he signed the painting brightly and energetically in the lower right corner, with confidence and flair. This is a signature, a sign that everything worked out, that he managed to express something very important. It would seem that the painting is finished, and the viewer, of course, will perceive it as a typical Siberian landscape with elements of the historical past. It is well known that G. F. Borunov, an artist of the realistic trend, who loved his homeland very much, often painted his pictures from the high bank of the Ob, once again showing his favourite places. But here comes an important, intriguing moment, and there is no such place in the artist's favourite places. More precisely, the Ob, the high bank, the hills and the groves are all there; more than once in his paintings, there appears a cold autumn sky with heavy rain clouds, and we find in his sketches birch groves filled with gold—all this is there, but there is no chapel. This is an invented detail, well and deeply thought out, which we will tell below, but in reality, today on the Ob, near Baranov's native places, you will not find such a chapel. Therefore, it has symbolic significance.

To reveal this symbol, we have to put aside the story about the painting for a while and at least briefly talk about the artist, his biography, family, and native places. In addition, we will have to situate the painting within the context of the artist's body of work and choose an analytical approach that will help us understand the artist's ideas and thoughts that guided him, compelling him to paint precisely this type of work. Borunov G.F. was born in the village of Pavlovsk in Altai, and loved to draw since childhood, which he was supported by his father, who was also passionate about fine art. But he had to endure the most difficult military ordeals; he fought and was wounded in the bloody Battle of Stalingrad. With all his strength, he tried to help his son become an artist during the most difficult post-war years.

G. F. Borunov, thanks to this help, determination and talent, was able to receive the highest level of art

education possible at that time in the Soviet Union – at the Leningrad Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture named after I. E. Repin of the USSR Academy of Arts in the workshop of the People's Artist of the USSR B. I. Ioganson. This opened up great opportunities for him to live and work in the country's capital, but he returned to his homeland, to the historic village of Pavlovsk in the Altai Territory, known for its rich history.

To understand the work of G. F. Borunov, let us note one characteristic of his family. It combined two lineages—peasant farmers and artists who were icon painters. His mother was a deeply religious person who, despite various prohibitions, attended church and even sang in the church choir. G. F. Borunov himself was also a religious person who, despite various restrictions, restored paintings in churches. He felt a connection with icon painters and wrote directly about this in his memoirs: "... but I have something in my genes: my grandfather Georgy, whom I have not seen, was an icon painter from near Pskov. I had the opportunity to see several icons by him in 1953 when I began studying at the Academy of Arts in Leningrad... in 2-3 villages; churches contained paintings by my grandfather." [1, p. 47].

There are three stages in the artist's work, each with the predominance of particular themes: the 1960s - the theme of the land and the farmer, the 1970s and 1980s - socio-historical themes, and the 1990s and 2000s - philosophical and religious themes. Thus, the painting we are considering belongs precisely to the last stage, when the following paintings were written: "The Extinguished Lamp", 1995; "The Last Annunciation". "The Year 1934", 1991; "The Apparition. You Know Not What You Do", 1998; "Christ and Mary on the Road to Cana of Galilee", 1999; "The Pavlovsk Icon Painters", 2001, 2007.

In his diaries, the artist wrote: "I, a small, weak, not very gifted, wanted to talk about my life in the Orthodox world. I was not given the ability to serve the Almighty with fervour. Only a weak light illuminated my path in life and creativity. And I am grateful to the creator. This lamp has not left me to this day" [2].

In the works "Apparition. You Know Not What You Do" (1998, oil on canvas, 200x100) and "Christ and Mary on the Road to Cana of Galilee" (1999, oil on canvas, 145x60), he compositionally employs the technique of figures hovering above the ground.

Despite this weightlessness, conveying images of the unearthly world, they are painted quite visibly, clearly, and materially, with a solid brushstroke. In these works, the role of colour is enhanced; G. F. Borunov actively uses combinations of bright blue, red, and yellow colours. The artist moves toward greater symbolism and uses metaphors. Icon-painting traditions can be traced in the works—the use of three primary colours, some flatness





Pic. 2

and elongation of the figures' proportions, which gives them harmony and grandeur. Thus, the picture we have chosen for analysis belongs to the final period of creativity, when the artist's philosophical and religious searches intensified.

Let us now return to the painting. The main element in it is the chapel, metaphorically understood as the place of God's presence, his House. This gives rise to the following reflections.

The artist frequently creates paintings with the theme of



Pic. 3

village houses and his native home: "Our House. Spring", 1980 (oil on canvas 34x48) (pic. 4); "Pavlovsk. Father's House", 1984 (oil on canvas 70x94) (pic. 5); "Pavlovsk. The Kremnevs' House. 1995 (oil on canvas 24.5x32.5) (pic. 6); "Father John's House (Dimitrov Street)", 1978 (oil on carton 38.3x53.1) (pic. 7) and others.

The motif of the House is one of the main ones in the artist's work. One of the famous works of the artist is the painting "Pavlovsk. Father's House", 1984 (pic. 5), now owned by the State Tretyakov Gallery. G.F. Borunov





Pic. 4



Pic. 5



Pic. 6



Pic. 7

depicts his family home in Pavlovsk in early autumn. In terms of colour, the painting is bright and resonant, with a predominance of yellow and brown tones. The house seems alive, inhabited by loved ones. Red is also the colour of sacrifice and tragedy. The house and its inhabitants experienced losses and grief during the difficult years of the Great Patriotic War. Another element in the painting recalls this—a blue mailbox with a red star. In rural areas, soldiers' houses were often marked in this way. The brushstrokes in the picture are heterogeneous and dense; it seems that G.F. Borunov sought to convey not the fleeting nature of a captured moment, but compressed time, time saturated with various events and human experiences. The house absorbed the past, present and future, despite the losses and hardships that all its inhabitants had to endure.

According to cultural scientist A.K. Bayburin, "Home is one of the key symbols of culture. All the most important

characteristics of human life and worldview are related to the concept of home to one degree or another: ideas of space and time, features of social organisation, religious views, etc. Home is the centre of one's mastered world." [3, 154].

Having identified the motif of the house as central, we will attempt to determine the most promising methodological approach for analysing the work we have chosen. We will assume that the house, both in its literal sense and metaphorically, can be considered a fundamental principle of the artist's creativity. In proposing this, we rely on the concept of the art critic G. Zeidlmayer [4], which helped the author himself to conduct deep art criticism analyses of works of art and was heuristically applied by other art critics.

One of the central tenets of his theory is the concept of the artist's "artistic task". This is an objectively universal task of the era and culture, "... which does not necessarily



have to be formulated in words. The artistic task belongs not only to the history of culture, society, religion, and political history, but is included in the history of art... The task... is never merely material; it requires the artist to embody a universal spiritual need, and it is never abstract, but entirely concrete" [4, p. 31].

"The task", according to G. Zeidlmayer, is specified in axioms, some ideological premises that the artist is guided by in his work. Applying this to the work of G. F. Borunov, it can be noted that his "task" was the Motherland, which encompassed all members of his family and all its generations, history and modernity, nature and spiritual sanctuaries. Within the "task" itself, several axioms can be distinguished: a kind of "genii" – "genius of the place," "genius of the family," and the genius of creativity. Genius, a word of Latin origin and in modern language has several meanings. The classical expression *Genius Loci*, which in Ancient Rome meant "the guardian spirit of the place," was originally applied to landscape. P. Weil first gave new meaning to this ancient concept in his book of the same title, "*Genius of the Place*", talking about the spiritual connection between the place of a person's life and his work. P. Weil writes: "The connection between a person and their place of residence is mysterious but obvious. Or rather: undeniable, but mysterious. It is governed by the *Genius Loci*, the genius of the place known to the ancients, which connects intellectual, spiritual, and emotional phenomena with their material environment." [5].

Since the painting "*Chapel*" (2003) belongs to the period of the artist's philosophical and religious quest, it has symbolic characteristics and can be metaphorically connected with the idea of the House of God, and the old cemetery with thoughts of the generations that have already lived, those who preceded him, whose legacy the artist inherits and which can simultaneously be a visible embodiment of his thoughts about his final resting place. He could envision it thus—himself next to all his ancestors, in his favourite place on the high bank of the Ob, where sky, water, and earth merge into a unified space. The validity of our assumption can be demonstrated by the fact that this is not a spontaneously emerging image, but one developed over a long period. This can be demonstrated through the fortunately surviving preparatory works of G.F. Borunov.

Let us arrange them chronologically. The first will be a quick sketch with a ballpoint pen, which most likely dates back to the mid-90s of the last century (paper, ballpoint pen 8.4x10.5) (pic. 8). With a quick stroke, the artist outlined the main elements of the composition - a hill with a small house on the right, a path descending to the river, a sky with clouds and a river in the background. Then came a pictorial sketch, where this composition was



Pic. 8

enriched by a figure of a woman in red clothes, which is dated 2000. It is clear that the solitary house on the high hill remained in the artist's memory, and he was beginning to explore it in colour. In the same year, Borunov's image became more specific, and the sketch "*Chapel over the Ob*" appeared (2000) (oil on canvas 31.5x37.5) (pic. 9).

It is clear from the style of painting that the artist painted it quickly. It is also good that now this original image of the old house has acquired its idea - a chapel on the high bank of the Ob. It would seem that the location had been determined and the idea crystallised, but it did not entirely satisfy the artist, and he ceased developing this version. Comparing it with the final version of the painting, one can sense what exactly dissatisfied the artist. It is less philosophical, more likely naturalistic-narrative. A white ship sails along the Ob, two boats are moored to



Pic. 9



the shore near the chapel, and the clouds and water are rendered in a generalised manner. In the final painting, the water and clouds are rendered powerfully, with physical presence; the drama is palpable, as if solemn and powerful musical chords can be heard. Evidence that the idea continued to occupy the artist, and that he felt he needed to make significant changes to the painting, is his 2002 sketch of the old house (oil on canvas 105x130) (pic. 10). It is painted quickly, with strong, bold brushstrokes conveying heavy autumn clouds with a leaden tint, the old log structure, and the drooping grass. The dramatic qualities are felt in this study.



**Pic. 10**

Finally, in 2003, the painting “Chapel” was completed. Now, looking at it and immersing oneself in its deep meaning, one involuntarily begins to recall similar works by other artists, writers, and composers. There are very bright analogies. A creative person is granted the ability

to create a work that absorbs the most intimate feelings and conveys deep aspirations and experiences. Everyone knows that Mozart wrote his “Requiem,” which was performed at his funeral. A creative person, who G. F. Borunov undoubtedly was, manages to rethink and experience, and in what amounts to a prayerful act, create an artistic and philosophical work.

### Conclusion

Having analysed the work, it becomes possible to trace how the idea was born and how it developed, achieving high artistic expressiveness. It becomes possible to observe how gradually, from childhood onward, through listening to adult conversations and then over time, realising that the spiritual and moral dimension of existence is reality, and that without it, not only is proper human orientation in the world impossible, but so too is the creation of works of high significance. Borunov moved toward such works in which the Supreme is addressed frankly and clearly. In the painting “Chapel” (2003), he simultaneously sings a hymn to his Motherland, affirms loyalty to the spiritual dimension of the world, and prays for his ancestors and for the possibility of being accepted by both the Motherland and God after departing this life.

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