Basil Milovsoroff: 21st Century Artist

An Exhibition at the Center for Puppetry Arts

July 29, 1999 – January 8, 2000
Basil Milovsoroff (1907 - 1992)
Storyteller, Puppeteer

Gnarled roots gathered in the woods near his home, fluorescent paints, springs, wire, marbles and brightly colored plastics - these materials form the foundation of Basil Milovsoroff's creations. Fashioned into whimsical works of fantasy, surreal or satirical, these creations elicit a sense of amazement and discovery in children and adults. From the comically grotesque to the exquisitely beautiful, they create a humorous world of innocence and imagination - a world where everything is slightly yet charmingly askew.

"THE TRUE PUPPETS ARE NOT REALISTIC...THEIR PURPOSE IS NOT TO COPY OR TO IMITATE ANYTHING, BUT TO CREATE FRESH THEATRICAL REALITIES...
THE PUPPET THEATER WAS MEANT TO STIMULATE OUR SENSES."  Basil Milovsoroff

As a puppeteer he gave the breath of life to characters as diverse as the fox and the crow of Aesop's Fables, and the wicked Baba Yaga of Russian folklore. Flying through the air in her mortar and pestle, she was the agent of terror inflicted on generations of hapless Russian children by their parents should they dare to misbehave. (Baba Yaga will come for you!)

The thread of Russian folklore in which Basil's youth in Russia was steeped is especially evident in his early days where his puppet shows and carvings were drawn from Russian stories such as "The Little Humpbacked Horse." As his art matured, theme followed theme. There were vegetables; there were insects; and stories told by crows or ants. There
were undersea creatures and machines from a future age, and finally wood creatures and sprites, a fantastical gathering literally springing from his Russian roots in a sculptural outpouring after his retirement from professorial life.

Milovsoroff was born in Altai, Siberia, in 1907, and moved to the United States when he was 20. He was a charter member of the Puppeteers of America, and his career as a puppeteer spanned the decades of the 30s, 40s and 50s. During this period, he produced fourteen complete programs and two delightful public service films: “Muzzleshy,” a gun safety film, and “Poison in the House,” about accident prevention. He also created a number of drawings or “doodles”. In the 1950s, Milovsoroff became a professor at Dartmouth College, where he served as the Chairman of the Department of Russian Language and Director of the NDEA Russian Language Institute. After 15 years of teaching, in 1972 he retired and returned to the world of puppets through sculpture and exhibition. He continued to experiment with the puppet as an art form, integrating its visual form with sound and movement, color, light and shadow.

“A PUPPET MAY BE A MAN, ANIMAL, INSECT, A TEAKETTLE OR TOMORROW.”
From a 1953 essay entitled “Reality with Strings Attached”

The distinctive style of his art grew from an early discovery that to exaggerate or distort the puppet form was to free it from the limits of imitation. The recipe for a Milovsoroff creation: start with a root or branch with intriguing form, accentuate its features by carving, then add a few mushrooms for ornamentation, a spring for a neck, marbles for eyes, found materials for the hair and dress, or a tea kettle for a head. The whimsical humor of this strange collection of features in no way detracts but rather adds substance and reminds us that in fact these creatures all have some story to tell if we but let them.
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Executive Director/ Vincent Anthony

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Museum Manager/ Susan Kinney • Curator & Brochure Author/ Peter Milovsoroff
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CENTER FOR PUPPETRY ARTS
1404 Spring Street, NW • Atlanta, GA 30309
Ticket Sales Office/ 404-873-3391 • Administrative Office/ 404-873-3089 • Fax/ 404-873-9907
Web Site/ www.puppet.org • Email/ puppet@mindspring.com

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