



Isabella: I Don't Need Another Queen (triptych; oil, 68x124)

Igor Kozlovsky and Marina Sharapova collaborate on compositions that exemplify the tension between the figure and the ground.

■ By Ruth K. Meyer

Beautiful Ambiguity

Imagine arriving in present-day Chicago from St. Petersburg, Russia, where the scale of the architecture was determined by 18th-century Francophile czars and czarinas, who wanted a capital that looked just like Paris. Twelve years ago, when the artist Marina Sharapova arrived in Illinois, the tall skyscrapers on the Chicago lakefront terrified her. Accompanied by her artist husband, Igor Kozlovsky, and their young daughter, Irina, the family had come west for a new beginning.

Along with a group of Russian friends, Igor had filled out an application for a green card in a lottery sponsored by the United States and, almost unbelievably, he'd won. Today the couple share an apartment and a studio in the suburb of Evanston, Illinois. Their sought-after work is represented by galleries in Chicago, New York and San Francisco. Their daughter, a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design, creates designs for Martha Stewart. The reasons for Kozlovsky's and Sharapova's success are multifold, but foremost is their sure sense of artistic identity, coupled with a commitment to working hard, as well as together.



Africa (oil on canvas, 48x60)

A basis of good design

In simplest terms, the **figure** is a positive shape that attracts our eye. It's what we identify as a shape. Everything that is not the figure is the **ground**. When you place a figure on a ground, you establish a relationship. If the ground stays in the background, it's a simple relationship. If the ground competes with the figure in some way—by being approximately equal in emphasis or by

encouraging the viewer's eye to move back and forth so that the figure/ground relationship is ambiguous—you have a more interesting composition.

The lesson amateur painters can learn from Igor & Marina's work is that you should never concentrate on just one element, for instance, the figure, and leave the background to fend for itself. Igor & Marina's pictures are visually fascinating because as viewers we inspect both the figure and the ground around and within the figure. The best compositions make the entire space—the figure and the ground alike—compelling. —M.B.

Igor & Marina, as they wish to be known, both graduated with a master's degree in fine arts from the Mukhina Art Academy (now St. Petersburg Academy of Art and Design) in 1985. They describe the progress of their career: "We've been working toward our present level of cooperation for many years, first employing the techniques of realist art, then becoming interested in the achievements of abstraction, then those of the Russian avant-garde. Simultaneously, we studied techniques and concepts of Russian religious art, inspired by the work of Andrei Rublev (ca 1360–1430) and Dionysius (ca 1440–ca 1502). This synthesis of western post-Renaissance art with the Russian religious tradition has, we think, given our work a new and unusual profile."

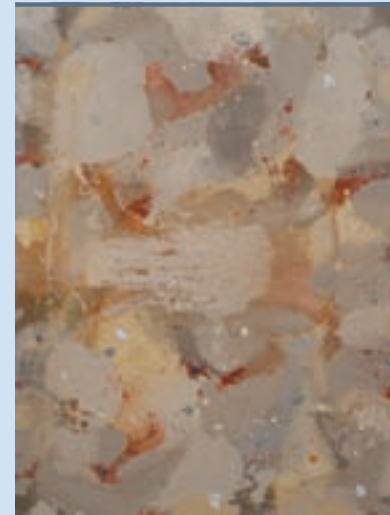
The richness of this preparation can be seen in canvases produced over the last few years. Typically, on a large, unprimed, heavy-duty canvas (it has to be strong, given all the layers of paint), Igor paints an abstract design in oil (Old Holland Classic, Maimeri Puro, Williamsburg Handmade, Sennelier Artists' Extra Fine, Pebeo Fragonard, and Lefranc & Bourgeois Artist Oils). The surface shows repeating motifs or symbols that

form patterns in a loose, atmospheric background. After studying this surface, the artists choose figures that will correspond with—or comment on—the abstract ground. These figures, drawn with Koh-i-Noor, Faber-Castell or Prismacolor pencils on strong Strathmore paper, will be laid over the elaborately patterned ground.

In this way the artists set up a dynamic relationship between the gestural, abstracted grounds and the simply outlined figures. While the ground around the figures is eye-popping, intricate and replete with patterns, the figures retain their integrity. As a result, the viewer's eye goes back and forth, from the ground to the figure, from the figure to the ground. This dramatic interplay

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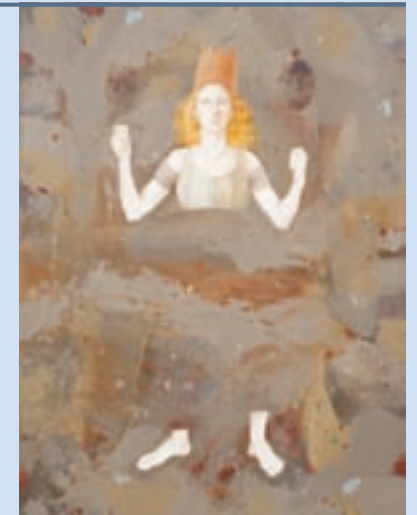
The evolution of *Venice*



Igor used Escoda brushes and oil paints mixed with a medium composed of Galkyd, turpentine and linseed oil on unprimed, heavy-duty canvas.



On Strathmore paper, Marina used several kinds of pencils and a Staedtler eraser.



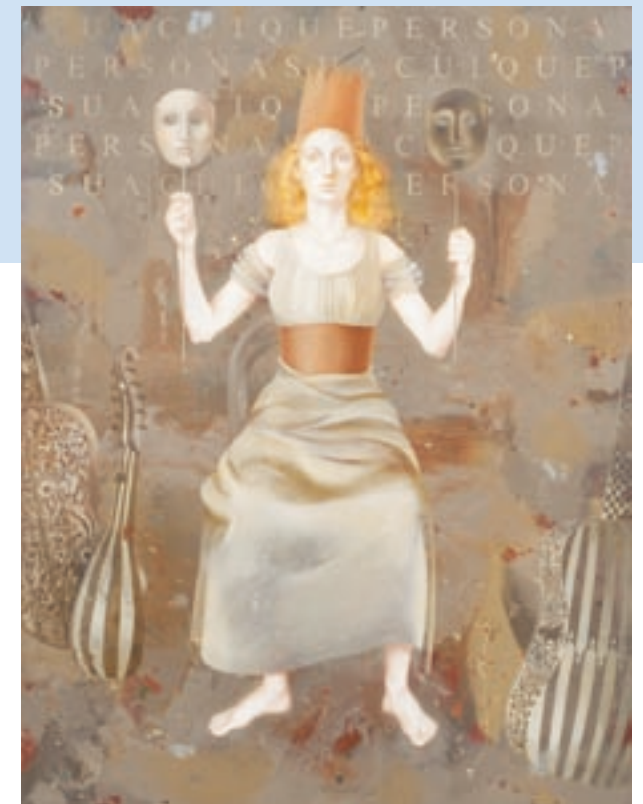
After transferring the outline of the figure, Igor scraped away the first layers of paint and applied Artistic Gesso (Blick Art Materials), and Marina started to paint the figure.

The figurative elements, the text and the highly textured ground are integral to the effect of *Venice* (oil, 64x48).

between the figure and the ground is a hallmark of Igor & Marina's work (see A Basis of Good Design, on the opposite page).

Once the ground has been established, Marina prepares full-scale pencil drawings of the figures on paper. Before she transfers the forms to the canvas, Igor has the tricky task of removing layers of paint, which he'd previously applied, in order to create a new space in the composition for the figures. Then he applies coat after coat of gesso; next he transfers the figure's outline to the newly gessoed area. Finally, Marina draws and paints the figure.

Where do these figures come from? Working together, the artists select the sources from the history of art or from life studies drawn from models posed for the purpose. Their taste tends to nearly life-size figures that are captured in full or partial profile, shown in a regal posture. Only in the series called The Walkers Project are the figures given a measure of animation because deliberating on the act of walking is the motivation for the series. As they describe it: "Our Walkers Project (see *The Walkers VI* on the next page





The Walkers VI (at right; oil, 63x48), *The Walkers XII (I Wanna Hold Your Hand Too)* (opposite page, left; oil, 66x48) and *Avalokiteshvara* (opposite page, right; oil, 81x49)



The artists have made extensive visits to Italy, where the ancient frescoed walls have drawn their concentrated attention. Looking at *The Walkers VI* (at left), one recognizes the reddish-gold coloration of the murals of Pompeii as well as the desiccated textures of crumbling plaster. Initially, the sharp contrast between figure and ground appears to be a contemporary conceit, but a close viewing reveals that the figures are bonded with the ground by means of symbols scattered over them like random graffiti.

The wall paintings of ancient Egypt also have attracted them. They noted the ranks of tomb figures striking profiled poses and walking or standing solemnly. Marina has an eye for details of historic costume: In one of a pair of paintings from the series, *The Walkers XII (I Wanna Hold Your Hand Too)* (above), the silhouette of a tall pharaonic crown distinguishes one striding female figure who sports Egyptian-inspired jewelry neatly integrated with the patterns of her modern leotard. The background is equally remarkable. Igor selected a grid of raised hands cataloging expressions in international sign language.

"We decided to create a series of interrelated canvases," explains Igor. "So far we've created 15 large-scale canvases that would walk around a large room. The viewer in the middle would be invited to follow or even



join the procession, which would be complicated by the relationship of the figures, who would not merely follow one another but also interact with those figures on the opposite side of the room."

In spite of their obvious affinity for Egyptian art, no historic period has had greater attraction for the artists than the Renaissance of both northern and southern Europe. In particular, their attention is drawn to magnificent textiles and costume accessories that they reinterpret so as to heighten the appearance of regal isolation such costume sometimes conveys. *Avalokiteshvara* (above) is a witty portrait of Marie de' Medici, the Italian-born, 17th-century queen of France as a multi-limbed Indian goddess. Bejeweled and brocaded, hung with laces, pearls and ermines, even with six hands, she is powerless and remote, imprisoned by fashion. Asked about the import of these and other mysterious multi-media canvases, the artists only say, "We don't necessarily have a story for each painting, but it's important for us to create the sense of a story."

The couple's 2008 exhibition in New York presented a suite of works with more universal themes. The paintings centered upon acknowledged cynosures of classical beauty that are both timeless and modern. An example is *Daphne* (see next page), which evinces a marvelously assured technique for the painting of

and *The Walkers XII* on the opposite page) is meant to open a new chapter in the long history of painterly images of motion. We propose to build on a series of works we've been creating over the past five years, works that in their painterly technique synthesize many past epochs of artistic achievement. In particular, our exploration of the paradoxical relationship of motion and stasis is paralleled by a simultaneous consideration of the relationship between abstract and figurative art and between conventionality and verisimilitude."

Living in America while becoming American citizens has conferred many advantages, but none has been more important than the freedom to travel abroad.



To see more of Igor & Marina's work, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/igor-and-marina.



Daphne (oil, 52x48)

youthful complexions, an effect of transparency that makes the figures appear to glow from within like fine porcelain.

Whatever the subject matter, the tension between figure and ground is an essential component of their style. Just as the figure and ground compete with and enhance one another, the two artists work together. Like a good debate that raises contrasting values and judgments, their collaboration is far from simple, as they note: “We’re artists, which is an excellent thing. We’re married, also an excellent thing. We work together—not necessarily an excellent thing. What do we mean by this? Clearly, it isn’t that we don’t find inspiration in each other’s work or ideas. However, on a practical level, it’s hard to avoid some problems. First of all, though we’ve been together for 25 years, whenever we work on a picture together, we spend most of our time arguing. Perhaps this isn’t all that surprising. Van Gogh and Gauguin tried to work together in Arles. They stood side by side, produced some wonderful work, and ultimately came to hate each other. Our task may even be harder (they weren’t married, after all). And we don’t want to end up hating each other. However, each time we see the result of our collective work, we decide that the whole process, with all its aches and pains, is worth it.”

Influences in art: Russian icons

Igor & Marina’s work quotes the Russian iconic tradition. The word *icon* derives from the Greek *eikon*, or likeness. While Judaism prohibited images of the face of Yahweh or Elohim (God), Christianity encouraged image-making. According to an apocryphal story, Luke the gospel writer painted a portrait of Mary and Jesus, a likeness that became identified with the miraculous as an object of devotion.

Byzantine and Russian icons had their artistic origins in ancient Graeco-Roman portrait panels that were executed in encaustic. Andrei Rublev, whose work appears here and whom Igor & Marina cite as an influence, is the finest Russian icon painter of the 15th century. His *Old Testament Trinity* depicts the three wanderers who visited Abraham at Mamre. As a gesture of hospitality, Abraham ordered a calf killed and served the strangers bread and honey. Revealing that they’d been sent by God, the strangers/angels told Abraham that his barren wife, Elizabeth, was to have a child.

Indeed, the hospitality of Abraham is a persistent theme in the history of art; to see one of Rembrandt’s versions of the story, visit www.nga.gov/feature/artnation/rembrandt—M.B.



Icon of the Old Testament Trinity (ca 1410; tempera on wood, 56x45) by Andrei Rublev (1360–ca 1430)

TRETYAKO GALLERY, MOSCOW; PHOTO: SCALA/ART RESOURCE, NY



Drawing a simple but evocative concept can lead to eloquent variations on a theme. *There's Something on my Head* (top, left; pencil on paper, 42x32) led to *Nesting Season* (top, right; oil on canvas, 54x40) and to *Three-Cornered Hat* (below, left; oil, 40x30).



Meet Igor & Marina

Igor & Marina are represented by Campton Gallery in New York City, where they’ll show “All the World’s a Stage” in May 2010, Caldwell Snyder Gallery in San Francisco and Thomas Masters Gallery in Chicago, where they’ll have a show in October 2009. To see more of their work, visit their site at www.igor-marina.com.

Note: The artists wish to thank Professor Andrew Wachtel, dean of Northwestern University’s graduate school, for translating their statements from Russian to English.