Russian Journal of Cultural Studies and Communication. 2023. 2(2). P. 4–13 Research Article
DOI 10.24833/RJCSC-2023-2-2-4-13

# Fragile Ties: Spanish Themes in Soviet Porcelain[1]

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***Abstract.*** This article is devoted to the study of the so-called "Spanish theme" in Soviet porcelain. The author analyses the reflection of the stereotypical perception of Spain in small porcelain sculptures of the Soviet period produced by a variety of manufactures. Among the components of the Spanish theme, the author highlights the images of flamenco (Spanish dance), bullfighting, the most recognizable heroes of Cervantes (Don Quixote and Sancho Panza), and the fiery Carmen who was created by Prosper Mérimée and has become the stereotypical image of a nineteenth- century Spanish woman in the popular imagination thanks to the musical and dance pieces of the same name. These traditional components of the perception of Spain in the twentieth century were supplemented by the interpretation of a turning point in Spanish history – the Civil War of 1936–1939 – in propaganda porcelain. This article proposes another perspective on the Spanish theme in Soviet porcelain and considers the formation of the images of Spaniards, men and women. Such images are reflected in all the plots presented in this paper. Most of the sculptural works by different generations of Soviet porcelain masters are devoted to dance. The author concludes that dance scenes, including the ones that refer to Carmen, are fundamental for the Spanish theme in Soviet porcelain.

***Keywords:*** USSR, Spain, porcelain, small plastic arts, imagology, stereotypes, Soviet ballet, Spanish dance, Carmen, bullfighting, Don Quixote

Soviet porcelain is one of the most striking symbols of the twentieth century Russian culture. Its originality and superb quality are associated with the enduring tradition of porcelain production in the Russian Empire, while at the same time being a result of the conditions in which Soviet arts and crafts developed as a whole.

Numerous studies have dealt with the topic of images and ideas about Spain (Astakhova 2017; Bagno 2006; Grantseva 2017), one that can rightly be called among the most significant in modern Spanish studies (Grantseva 2018: 274). However, arts and crafts – and porcelain in particular – remain a more or less ignored area in studies

[1] English translation from the Russian text: Grantseva E. O. 2022. Fragile Ties: Spanish Themes in Soviet Porcelain. *Concept: Philosophy, Religion, Culture.* 6(4). P. 105–114. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24833/2541-8831-2022- 4-24-105-114

that are devoted to a discussion of images and ideas about Spain in various spheres of Russian culture. That being said, art critics who study Soviet porcelain do on occasion mention Spain in the context of other issues they are investigating (Sapanzha, Ivanova, Balandina 2021).

So, what do we mean when we talk about the "Spanish theme" in Soviet porcelain? One of its main features is that it conveys stereotypical ideas about Spain. As A. Koroleva notes, "in the context of the dialogue of cultures in the symbolic capital of national culture, heterostereotypes – stable generalized ideas about 'others' – come to the fore. Being incredibly stable over time, they primarily create a simplified, one-sided image, and sometimes distort it" (Koroleva 2018: 243).

The most popular stereotypes reflected in Soviet porcelain are flamenco dancing and bullfighting. Other key images of the Spanish cultural tradition such as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza also appeared on these works of art. And let us not forget the main female image associated with Spain, that of Carmen, created by the Frenchman Prosper Mérimée and firmly entrenched in music and dance. These traditional components of the perception of Spain in the twentieth century would be joined by propaganda images from a turning point in the country's history – the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939 – in which the Soviet Union played a significant role.

There were thus four main elements of the "Spanish theme" in Soviet porcelain – dancing, the literary heroes created by Miguel de Cervantes, the Civil War, and bullfighting. At the same time, a research approach to determining the specifics of the endo- (external) images of the stereotypical *Spaniard* appears to be heuristically promising, which is reflected in all the elements we have mentioned.

In her discussion of the representation of the peoples of the world and the peoples of the Soviet Union in the works of master sculptors from the LFZ[2], E. Ivanova notes, "national porcelain images […] in the artistic interpretation are laconic and stripped down, devoid of both anatomical and ethnographic accuracy in the creation of pieces. Most important for the sculptor was to create images that reflect the national characters, traditions and customs of the people in question"[3].

Dancing has always been a popular theme for adorning small items made out of plastic. Naturally, Spanish dancing, in its various manifestations and interpretations, is the main hallmark of the "Spanish theme". Most research articles on this subject focus on dance. And sculptors from different Soviet generations focused on this very aspect of Spanish culture. The First sculptor of Soviet porcelain to depict Spanish dancing in their works was the legendary Natalya Danko.

The period of civil war following the October Revolution was not a good time for the development of porcelain production. However, as A. Saltykov noted, "in 1918, a group of young artists came together […] under the guidance of the talented graphic

[2] LFZ her means "Leningrad Lomonosov Porcelain Factory".

[3] Ivanova E. V. Works of the Leningrad Porcelain Factory in the 1950s–1960s in the Context of the History of Soviet Artistic Porcelain. Doctoral dissertation 17.00.04, St. Petersburg, 2020. P. 122.

artist Sergey Chekhonin at the former Imperial Porcelain Factory. These works depicted revolutionary images and slogans in various decorative forms: emblems, allegories, epigraphs, and ornaments […] A short time later, the factory started producing decorative figurines. The main role here was played by sculptor Natalya Danko, who created numerous figurines on contemporary topics" (Saltykov 1959).

Natalya Danko was born in Tiflis (modern-day Tbilisi) in 1892. She studied at the Stroganov School for Technical Drawing and later honed her craft in various private studios. After moving to St. Petersburg in 1908, she studied under Leonid Sherwood and Vasily Kuznetsov, after which she embarked on her professional career, initially creating sculptures as decorations for buildings. In 1914, Natalya found work at the Imperial Porcelain Factory in Petrograd, which was renamed the State Porcelain Factory after the Revolution. One of her most iconic works of this period was the *Reds and Whites* chess set, which is now on display at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. In 1919, she was put in charge of the State Porcelain Factory's sculpture workshop, where she remained until the Soviet Union entered the Second World War in 1941[4]. In 1928, the factory, spurred on by its achievements at various international exhibitions and fairs, started to produce replicas of the most commercially successful works of Soviet masters for export, including those by Natalya Danko. In 1931, Natalya was appointed the person responsible for the production of sculptures for export. Over the course of a quarter of a century, she produced more than three hundred works of porcelain art. She is recognized both at home and abroad as one of the most prominent and original porcelain sculptors of the Soviet period.

In the early 1920s, Natalya turned her creative hand to the subject of ballet, continuing "the tradition of the Imperial Porcelain Factory, which produced sculptures of ballet dancers in the early twentieth century" (Doronina 2015: 145). Her works depicted the most famous names in Russian ballet at the time: Vaslav Nijinsky, Anna Pavlova and Sofia Fedorova. It is no coincidence that ballet occupied a prime position in her artistic endeavours, as this was a time when many of the most popular pre-revolutionary productions were being restored on the stages of Moscow and Petrograd theatres, when "the predictions of sceptics and those of little faith – those who in the initial years following the Great October Socialist Revolution called for the elimination of classical ballet, insisting that the proletarian spectator would never like or accept it – never came to be"[5].

We should also note how popular the Spanish "Panaderos" dance was with ballet afficionados after it was featured in Alexander Glazunov's *Raymonda*. This is what Danko had in mind when she was creating her own version of what a Spanish woman should be[6]. The sculpture was named *Carmen, or Spanish Dance* (*Ballerina Sofia Fe-*

[4] Sametskaya E. B. 2004. *Soviet Propaganda Porcelain.* Moscow: Collector's Books. P. 133–134.
[5] *Soviet Ballet in the Art of Helena Janson-Manizer: An Album.* 1965. Compiled by V. V. Strekalov. Leningrad: RSFSR Artist.
[6] GFZ Report for 1922–1923. Central State Historical Archive of St. Petersburg. Rep. 2555. Invt. 1. S. 565.

*dorova the Second in Alexander Glazunov's Ballet Raymonda*). A replica of the model was produced in the early 1950s with the participation of Varvara Rukavishnikova (Nosovich 2005: 373). The figurine was notable for its ornateness and came in two versions: one with a black and purple dress, and another with a white and yellow dress. As L. Doronina notes, "the sculptor emphasized the dancer's stormy temperament, leading, according to E. Goltsman, the audience into a state of ecstasy" (Doronina 2015: 147). The expressive pose of Sofia Fedorova reflects both the passion of the image and the fiery temperament of the of the ballerina herself. The figurine was exhibited at a trade show in Venice in 1922, sold at fairs in Lyon and Stockholm in 1923, and earned a spot "in the list of State Porcelain Factory products that are in greatest demand in the Soviet Union and abroad" (Nosovich 2005: 373).

In the late 1930s, another dimension of the "Spanish theme" in the form of Soviet propaganda porcelain made its way to the fore. The romantic images of ballet dancers captured by Soviet sculptors were replaced by dramatic scenes of Republican Spain fighting the rebels – an image of the country that, according to Ilya Ehrenburg, was "neither Carmen nor bullfighting".

The first to address the tragic events of the Spanish Civil War was Kazimir Ryzhov, a sculptor originally from Kolpino who had studied at the Leningrad Art and Industrial College and the Academy of Arts. He worked at the State Porcelain Factory in the 1930s before being appointed artistic director of the Gzhel Porcelain Factory[7].

Ryzhov's 1936 work *Spanish Woman with Child* appeared in the State Porcelain Factory catalogue[8]. It is coloured in the minimalist style. The artist uses white, along with dark tones and shades of red. Both the woman and the girl clinging to her appear frozen, as if desperately trying to escape from the impending disaster, full of drama and crying out for help. The appeal is fully consonant with the hopes of the Republicans addressed to the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1936.

In 1938, Ryzhov returned to the Spanish theme and created the sculpture *Spanish Vigilante:* the figure of a vigilante holding a girl in his arms and brandishing a rifle in his right hand[9]. He used the bisque technique (unglazed porcelain) to make the figurine, and its laconic texture gives the impression that the sculpture was made out of marble. The figure of the soldier instils a sense of calm and self-confidence as he protects the child. It was important to convey this feeling of composure at a time when sad news was trickling in from Spain and a campaign had been launched in the Soviet Union to help Spanish children.

[7] Sametskaya. P. 279.

[8] Rodinyu I. T. 1938. (ed.). *A Cataogue of Decorative Porcelain,* foreword by E. Y. Danko. Leningrad: Narkomtiazhprom, State Office of Directories and Catalogues.

[9] Sametskaya. P. 279.

Aleksey Zhiradkov was another Soviet sculptor who was inspired by the events of the Spanish Civil War, completing his *Spanish Warrior* (*Female Fighter of the Spanish Militia*) in 1936[10]. The sculpture is also made using the bisque technique, and it depicts a typical Spanish woman of the time, defiant and ready to fight alongside the men. Particularly interesting are the clothes she is wearing – a boiler suit (which were popular at the time), espadrilles on her feet and, of course, the obligatory "Spanish" cap with a tassel.

Ryzhov and Zhiradkov's works are true rarities, and replicas of them are kept at the Kuskovo Estate Museum. The items produced by the Gorodnitsky Porcelian Factory on the theme of Spain were far more widespread.

Back in the late eighteenth century, the Czartoryski princes, who owned Gorodnitsa near Zhytomyr, opened a porcelain factory nearby, hiring French masters to run it. A second branch was opened in Gorodnitsa itself in the early nineteenth century. The factory operated until 1917, when revolutionary events forced it to close. It was reopened in 1923 under a new name – the Comintern Gorodnitsky Porcelian Factory. Its main activity during this time was the production of propaganda porcelain.

One of the most prominent Gorodnitsa artists of the pre-war period was Raisa Marchuk, who is noted for her sculpture *Spanish Soldier with a Child.* The work echoes the image created by Ryzhov, but is more sentimental. In it, the soldier (like Ryzhov's) is clutching a rifle, but he is depicted sitting and holding the child tightly to his body. Additionally, Marchuk's figurine is painted, with the artist imagining what a Republican soldier would typically wear, and here we see the "Spanish" cap once again.

Marchuk also tried her hand at creating an image of the female with her sculpture *Spanish Vigilante with a Wounded Soldier.* Unlike Zhiradkov, she produced a vision of the female as a warrior who was full of tragedy. In terms of composition, the work resembles the classic image of *La Pietà:* the heroine is holding a dying soldier in her arms, and now she, like the woman in Goya's *What Courage!* must continue his work.

Marchuk's works are relatively widespread today, and are mass produced. Although this does not answer the many questions about them. First is the question of exactly when they were created: their hallmarks typically date them to the first half of the 1930s, that is, before the Spanish Civil War had even begun. Most catalogues put "1930s"[11] but the history of Soviet–Spanish relations during that period (1936–1939) tells us that the sculptures were clearly made between 1936 and 1938, and the confusion with the hallmarks is a result of the large number of counterfeits that were produced.

As we know, the Spanish Civil War ended in the tragic defeat of the Republic in April 1939 and a break in diplomatic relations between Spain and the Soviet Union that lasted almost forty years. Informal ties and the development of intercultural

[10] Ibid. P. 187.

[11] Pelinsky I., Safonova M. 2012. *Soviet Porcelain 1917–1991: Illustrated Catalogue with the Names of Porcelain Factories and Prices.* Moscow: Lyubimaya kniga.

dialogue in various fields thus acquired particular significance during this time. The arts and crafts, including porcelain production, were no exception. It was during this period that the theme of Spanish dance first depicted in the works of Natalya Danko lived on in the works of Helena Janson-Manizer, who in 1934–1937 set about creating "original compositions depicting famous dancers dancing" (Doronina 2015: 147).

As early as 1939, Elena turned to the image of *Ballerina Nina Stukolkina Performing the Spanish Flamenco Dance* (*Laurencia*), and then created a series of images of incredibly refined and expressive Spanish girls portrayed by Soviet ballet dancers[12]. These works included *O.M. Berg as the "Spanish Girl" and O.G. Iordan as Kitri from* Don Quixote in 1940, *Ballerina Nina Anisimova dancing the Panaderos* (*Raymonda*) in 1946, and *Ballerina Nina Fedorova Dancing a Spanish Dance* (*Andalusian Wedding*) in 1961. These works are incredibly expressive and give one the impression that they are filled with the energy of Spanish dance, the sound of castanets and the flight of fluffy skirt frills. Equally expressive are the images of men produced by Janson-Manizer, for example the image of *A.A. Lavrenyuk as the Andalusian* (Capriccio espagnol) in 1963.

Researchers note that the "period 1956 to 1966 was marked by major changes in the art industry. From the beginning of the 1950s, the idea of the Soviet residential interior started to take shape. An important role in this was played by works of industrial design – ceramics, porcelain, glass and metal. With the beginning of the construction of small-scale housing and the change in the aesthetics of home décor, the form of works of art starts to change, although the general principle, which is important for the mass interior, does not" (Sapanzha, Ivanova, Balandina 2020: 57). People should be able to decorate their homes with works that show off their own personal tastes. One of the best when it came to creating high-quality home décor items was Vladimir Sychev, who worked at the Leningrad Porcelain Factory.

Among his works, which generally embodied the early post-war aesthetics, "with its fascination with dynamic forms, expressive movements and extremely realistic approach to the image" (Sapanzha, Ivanova, Balandina 2020: 57), two in particular that are connected with the theme of Spain stand out, becoming an "important milestone in the history of interior porcelain" (Sapanzha, Ivanova, Balandina 2020: 61). These are his *Spanish Dance* and *Bolero*, both created in the 1950s. The first is inspired by the Spanish Dance in the ballet *Swan Lake* and depicts the ballerina Nina Stukolkina in a spectacular pose, hands raised holding a folded fan. A version of the statuette depicting a male dancer (a sculptural portrait of A. Andreev) was also produced in the same style (although no replicas of the work were ever made).

Male and female images were personified in Sychev's second famous "Spanish" work – the sculpture *Bolero*, which reproduces a scene from the ballet *Don Quixote* as interpreted by the same Stukolkina and Andreev. The work stands out for its dyna-

[12] Soviet Ballet in the Art of Helena Janson-Manizer: An Album.

mism and expressiveness, and it is painted in such a way that it highlights the "abundant use of the chandelier, gold edging on the pedestal, white porcelain glaze and coloured drawing of the faces" (Sapanzha, Ivanova, Balandina 2020: 62).

In the post-war period, Soviet porcelain artists also turned to the heroes of Spanish literary classics. This happened at almost exactly the same time that Grigori Kozintsev's legendary adaptation of *Don Quixote* hit the big screen.

In 1958, Konakovo Faience Factory master Elena Gurevich created the work *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza,* which was sent to the Brussels World's Fair that year, winning a silver medal there[13]. The artist used underglaze and experimented with the technological possibilities of earthenware, conveying the fine details of the images.

Another sculptor who offered their own interpretation of Cervantes characters was Galina Ozolina, who plied her trade at the Dmitrov Porcelain Factory in Verbilki. Galina studied under the superb sculptor and teacher Aleksandr Matveyev, the father of the so-called "Matveyev tradition" in Soviet and Russian sculpture, which stands for artistic freedom. In the 1970s, Ozolina turned to the art world for inspiration, creating a series of sculptures based on the theatre, including *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.* The work is inspired by the Mayakovsky Theatre's production of *Man of La Mancha.* It depicts contrasting images of the "grounded" Sancho Panza and the tired knight who lives in his own world, leaning on his sword (Soviet Sculpture 1985).

Continuing the theme of the image of the Spaniard in Soviet porcelain in the figure of Don Quixote, we should mention two interpretations of the theme of bullfighting that date back to 1968. The first was embodied in the work *Corrida* by the sculptor Ivan Mozolevsky created at the Polonsky Plant of Artistic Ceramics. The second is represented by the series of sculptures *Toreador and the Bull* by Tamara Fedorova at the Leningrad Porcelain Factory[14]. Both works are miniatures, at 7.7cm and 10cm in height, respectively, and incredibly concise and expressive.

Fedorova also gifted the world one of the most expressive female images connected to the "Spanish theme" – *Gypsy* (some catalogues also refer to this work as *Spanish Dance,* and the name Carmen can also be found), which she created in the 1970s. In terms of the colours used, the work is very much in line with the *Toreador and the Bull.* Once again, Fedorova uses white, black and red, and the figurine is created in a similar style. Therefore, despite the title *Gypsy*, we can conclude that these two works are interconnected, both reflecting the "Spanish theme". As E. Ivanova notes, "Tamara Fedorova, in her characteristic generalized manner, creates the sculpture *Gypsy*, which depicts a female figure in the throes of dance. An anatomically incorrect woman wearing a fluffy and unpainted skirt is placed on a stable base. Despite the laconism of the

[13] Levchenko G. V. 2022. The Art of Elena Gurevich. Tver Regional Art Gallery. 7.02.2022. URL: https://gallery.tverreg.ru/news/5833/ (accessed 10.11.2023).

[14] Tamara A. Fedorova. St. Petersburg Central State Archive of Literature and Arts. Rep. P-78. Invt. 10-2. D. 747.

painting and form, the master, as in her previous works, manages to achieve dynamism through a plastic and colouristic elaboration of the open-work hem of the skirt, and fills the figure with a conditional diagonal of arms and a shawl" (Ivanova 2020: 121).

Returning to the image of Carmen, let us look once again at the theme of ballet and the most vivid embodiment of the image of this twentieth century dance tradition in the person of Maya Plisetskaya. The ballerina herself said, "I always wanted to dance as *Carmen* […] The thought of my Carmen lived within me, smoldering somewhere in the depths, and then she just burst out of me. Whenever I spoke with anyone about my dreams, I would always mention Carmen first" (Baganova 2015). As M. Baganova notes, "Once, when she had a few moments to herself, Maya Plisetskaya counted that she must have danced the *Carmen Suite* around three hundred and fifty times. But, most of all, she was pleased with how warmly her performance was received by Spanish audiences. 'When the Spanish public chanted 'Ole!' I knew I had made it", she said (Baganova 2015).

Plisetskaya's most iconic role is immortalized in Nina Malysheva's 1967 *Portrait of Ballerina Maya Plisetskaya in the Role of Carmen.* The images created by the great Soviet ballerina have also been encapsulated by Dulevo Porcelain Works sculptor Galina Chechulina in such works as *Plisetskaya – Carmen* (1970), *Maya Plisetskaya as Carmen* (1972), and *Plisetskaya – Kitri* (late 1970s).

Carmen, a flamenco dancer, a gypsy, a ballerina performing a Spanish dance – all these are components of the interpretation of the image of the Spanish woman, and they are reflected differently in Soviet porcelain, both thematically and stylistically. And yet the image of the Spanish woman, passionate and beautiful, so unlike Soviet women and so beguiling, can be called the main embodiment of the "Spanish theme" in Soviet porcelain. One of its most expressive and popular expressions was made by the famous Soviet sculptor Oksana Zhnikrup (1931–1993), who worked at the Kiev Experimental Ceramic Factory and made models at the Polonsky Factory of Artistic Ceramics.

Oksana graduated from the Sculpture Department at Grekov Odesa Art School, and started working at the Kiev Experimental Ceramic Factory in 1955. Her works quickly became popular and would soon be mass produced, both inside the Soviet Union and abroad. In recent years, the name Oksana Zhnikrup has become known around the world thanks Jeff Koons, a renowned contemporary artist who used her 1974 sculpture *Ballerina Lena on an Ottoman* as inspiration for his work *Seated Ballerina*.[15]

There are three versions of the image of the Spanish woman in Oksana Zhnikrup's works: two figurines with the name *Spanish Dance* (one is also known as *Carmen*) and one called *Bolero*. All three are practically the same size. Two (*Carmen* and *Bolero*)

[15] Not Just Lena. The Exhibitions Featuring Ballerinas by Oksana Zhnikrup and Jeff Koons are Not Examples of Plagiarism, they are Collaborations. Artkhiv. 20.07.2017. URL: https://artchive.ru/news/2776~Ne_tol'ko_Lenochka_Vystavki_s_balerinami_Oksany_Zhnikrup_i_Dzheffa_Kunsa_ne_plagiat_a_sotrudnichestvo (accessed 10.11.2023).

are more decorative and resemble one another in terms of style and technique, while the third is more of a nod to Tamara Fedorova, demonstrating the same laconism and minimalism in the choice of colours – white, black and red. In contrast to the "flashier" depictions, the minimalist *Spanish Dance* was never mass produced and is much less common among collectors.

Both *Bolero* and *Carmen* (*Spanish Dance*) use luster paint, which is a kind of organic varnish. Firing items covered with this paint produces a thin metallic coating that gives them a shine and an unusual colour, similar to iridescent overflows. As Y. Wang notes, "it was thanks to this technology that the creator of *Carmen* was able to convey the brightness of the Spanish dress, which shimmers like a chrome or silver surface […] the work is an example of an innovative technique for painting porcelain in colours that had never been seen before" (Wang 2021: 109–110).

It is precisely this iridescent colour and, of course, Oksana Zhnikrup's stereotypical image of the Spanish woman in the figure of Carmen – a brunette with a red rose in her hair – that made its way into countless Soviet apartments, a piece of the Spanish sun, as it were, and the task of embodying the image of the Pyrenean country fell on her fragile shoulders. The figurine, like other representatives of the "Spanish theme" in Soviet porcelain, has much to say, and it has not yet exhausted its capabilities in terms of becoming a symbol of love for far-off and alluring cultures, conveying images and personifying fragile yet extremely meaningful ties.

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***Conflicts of interest.***
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

The article was submitted on October 26, 2022, approved after review on November 24, 2022, and accepted for publication on December 2, 2022.

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