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# Conceptual and Artistic Fundamentals of Tetiana Yablonska's Neo-Folklorism

## Ідейні та мистецькі засади неофольклоризму Тетяни Яблонської

**Abstract.** The paper examines the establishment and development of folk style in the works of Ukrainian artist Tetiana Yablonska (1917–2005), namely in her mid-1950s–1960s paintings. Recent publications allowed to apply general-to-specific approach to the material: identifying socio-political and cultural transformations of the Thaw period in Ukraine and outlining the personal factors that contributed to Yablonska's fascination with folk art.

Based on the material of the corpus of works, the changes of stylistic fabric are examined and the dominant tendencies of neo-folklorism evolution in Yablonska's artworks are revealed. Three-stage periodization of her creative biography is introduced into the broad scientific discourse: preparatory stage (study in the Kyiv Art Institute under Fedir Krychevsky's mentorship during 1935–1941), an academic and folklore stage of the late 1950s, and a folklore stage in the 1960s. The issue of co-relation of the artistic and emblematic language of neo-folk style in painting with other kinds of art, in particular, the search for corresponding stylistics in the Ukrainian cinema in order to refresh theoretical studies concerning tendencies of development of visual art of Ukraine of the period is covered. The main artistic principles of neo-folklorism are outlined, in particular, the sculptural generalization and two-dimensionality of the form, the locally unique color scheme, the concision of folk ornamental motifs.

The research question is the folklore theme in paintings of Yablonska in mid-1950s–60s, the preconditions of its origins and evolution. The aim of the study is to identify the stock-in-trade of neo-folklorism in the artist's canvases based on the analysis of socio-political and cultural factors. The methodology of work is grounded in the complex use of art analysis techniques in the study of the body of artworks, and interdisciplinary principles of culturological analysis in the study of ideological and worldview principles of the period. For the first time, Yablonska's creations are considered in correlation with poetry (album *Tetiana Yablonska. Ivan Drach. The Book that was Destroyed*, 1969), common rhythmic and figurative features and philosophical and symbolic principles of creation are revealed.

**Keywords:** Ukrainian fine art of the twentieth century, painting, works by T. Yablonska, neo-folklorism.

**Problem statement.** The issue of neo-folklorism in the works of Tetiana Yablonska has been studied in a cursory manner. Art explorations lack systematicity and inclusion of the biographic facts, which, once analyzed, provide the research with a solid foundation. Academic publications, present the 1960s works of "new" Yablonska's within the general outline of her legacy—as a stage in her creative biography, without taking into account the general context. Modern studies imply the involvement of interdisciplinary links with regard to the method of comparative analysis. Thus, neo-folklorism in Yablonska's heritage is embedded not only in the artistic space of Ukrainian art, but also into the visual arts dimension in general. Thus, it becomes an essential component of socio-political and cultural processes in Eastern Europe in the mid-twentieth century.

**Literature review.** Materials on the topic constitute two groups: the ones summarizing the issues of neo-folklorism

as a phenomenon in Ukrainian art and the ones that review a new trend in the artist's work. However, sometimes quite succinct mentions of Yablonska's works are presented against the setting of a panorama of cultural and artistic phenomena of the mid-twentieth century.

In the fifth volume of the *History of Ukrainian Art* Olha Petrova considers the artistic embodiment of the national self-awareness idea against the background of the "aura of the Thaw period"—the general socio-political changes of the late 1950s and early 1960s (Petrova, 2007, p. 450). The neo-folklorism movement, according to the author, was shaped on the basis of the 1920s' avant-garde and fuelled by the artistic centers of Western Ukraine, in particular, by the works of established masters (Adalbert Erdeli, Fedir Manailo, Andriy Kotska) and the 1960s' youth (Edita Medvetska, Ferenc Szemán, Yelyzaveta Kremnytska) (Petrova, 2007, p. 457). Olha Petrova also mentions Tetiana

Yablonska's fascination with the primitive folk element. Quoting the artist, the factors that prompted her turn to folk are easily recognized: "the vibrance of Armenian painting and the decorativeness of Transcarpathian holidays."

Olha Lishchynska considers neo-folklorism as a relevant idea of modern Ukrainian art culture and reveals the features of this artistic phenomenon, in particular, "the presence of permanent images and emblems, vitality, theatricality, folk ornamentation and color theory" (Lishchynska, 2012, p. 390). However, we note that when it comes to "intake of new ideas and the current vibe of Ukrainian folklore," the emphasis should not be put on the synthesis with realism and modernity (artistic phenomena of the mid-nineteenth — early twentieth centuries) (Lishchynska, 2012, p. 390); instead, one should try to present a synthesis of folk art and new technologies extensively implemented in the artistic environment.

Lesia Smyrna in her monographic research *The Century of Nonconformism in Ukrainian Visual Art*, in the context of the second wave of "Ukrainian style" of the 1960s, labels Yablonska's work of this period, "a complex stylistic combination of coloristics of the Transcarpathian school, sacred foundations of folk art and experience of European modernism represented by H. Matisse and F. Léger" (Smyrna, 2017, p. 238). The author defines artistic nonconformism as a "disagreement with the generally accepted semantic form of figurative thinking, the intention to overcome the standards of stereotypical dogmatism, and giving the personal touch" (Balashova, 2015, p. 20).

Olha Gulyaeva explores the traditions of neo-folklorism in the works of Ukrainian artist Mykola Pysanko (1910–1996). The scholar states that the artist's legacy belongs to the ethnic-stylistic line or neo-folklorism due to the presence of "archetypes, totemic symbols, allegorical images, ornamentalism and conventionality of the image," which determines the artist's identity in Ukrainian art (Gulyayeva, 2017, p. 265).

Halyna Sklyarenko, analyzing the folklore series of Tetiana Yablonska of the 1960s, notes a clear evolution of her style in these series: from the tangible presence of her teacher Fedir Krychevsky to the "figurative and sculptural generalization... almost formalistic" (Sklyarenko, 2018, p. 34).

Also worth mentioning is the publication *Diaries. Memoirs. Dreams* that includes a large number of reproductions of Tetiana Yablonska's artworks and provides a valuable source for the personal view on the artist's creative endeavors, in particular, on the establishment of a new style (Atayan, 2020, p. 108).

These studies are quite sporadic. However, the presented analysis allows identifying the key factors that contribute to a thorough study of neo-folklorism in the works of Tetiana Yablonska, based on both objective socio-political and artistic phenomena, and the subjective views of the artist. In addition, the characteristics of neo-folklorism help to identify its features in the artist's paintings.

**The aim of this research work** is to identify the patterns of neo-folklorism in the paintings of Tetiana Yablonska of the 1960s based on a study of broad socio-political and cultural factors.

**Results and discussion.** Socio-political transformations in the Soviet Union and in the Ukrainian SSR became important preconditions for changing the style of artistic expression in Tetiana Yablonska's works. A significant "shift" from the cult of personality to its criticism occurred at the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU in February 1956. Nikita Khrushchev's report "On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences" became a catalyst of sorts for many processes that influenced the cultural and artistic space. The relative liberalization of public life and the removal of the Iron Curtain contributed to a certain freedom of creative activity. The Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students, held in 1957, gave Soviet people the opportunity to feel involved in the diversity of cultures, and thus to reflect on the problem of defining their identity. The situation of the mid-1950s and 1960s paved a way for a surge of the national self-awareness ideas in all the republics of the Soviet Union. Therefore, a need for the development of folk-art traditions in Ukraine appeared as well.

Crucial events in the cultural and artistic domain became the artistic "aura" that was embraced by the creative intelligentsia and influenced the gravitation of Yablonska's art to the neo-folk style. The era of the Thaw contributed to the emergence of such a socio-cultural phenomenon as the Sixtiers—a movement of creative youth, professing original themes, new ideas in contrast to the officially endorsed ones. Clubs of creative youth, in particular, "Suchasnyk" [Contemporary] in Kyiv and "Prolisok" [Snowdrop] in Lviv became the centers of public activity of the Sixtiers, where literary meetings, commemoration meetings, theatrical performances took place. It was there that the young artists developed their own worldview and shaped the viewpoint of their listeners and readers.

In a broad sense, the sixties are marked with the victory over internal constraints and are the answer to the question of what is freedom (Balashova, 2015, p. 11). One of the criteria for assessing the phenomenon of the 1960s in Ukraine is "rejection of the obtrusive canons of socialist realism as one of the means for advocating freedom of expression for the artist" (Balashova, 2015, p. 12). In the 1950s and 1960s, the "natural vision" underwent a crisis because the established system of art of previous decades was losing its authority (Petrova, 1991, p. 10). Ukrainian artists of the sixties tried to revive the national consciousness with their creations and active public activity. It was the time when previously-shunned works of the avant-garde of the 1910s and 1930s returned to cultural circulation. Ukraine discovers its repressed artists: O. Archipenko, O. Bohomazov, the "Boychukists."

The 1954 All-Union Art Exhibition in Moscow was an important event in the artistic environment. Oleksandr Dovzhenko, critically analyzing the presented paintings, concluded that art no longer can develop according to previously proposed standards. The following quote accumulates guidelines, later embodied in the works of Tetiana Yablonska: "Creative nature of art encompasses both a quest, experimentation, and even, at times, bold extremes in the quest to achieve a true synthesis of realistic art. I do not call artists to abstractions or individualistic aesthetics, but I am deeply

convinced that it is necessary to expand the creative boundaries of socialist realism" (Dovzhenko, 1955, p. 4). In fact, experimenting became the key to the creative changes in the paintings of Yablonska (Dovzhenko, 1955, p. 4).

Theorist and art historian Oleksandr Kamenskyi supported Oleksandr Dovzhenko's statement. In view of recent events, he noted that in many of the paintings presented at the exhibition, "there was everything—prominent historical figures, and applauding crowds, and the relation to a certain very important topic... But there was no real art, because the pictures were created in a hurry, like from the first photo" (Kamenskyi, 1955).

The first large "Exhibition of the works by Transcarpathian artists" held in 1956 in Kyiv also contributed to Tetiana Yablonska's gravitation to folk art. "It had been a powerful post-Fauvist component that impressed the audience, opened other vectors of artistic vision" (Gulyayeva, 2017, p. 29). The art tradition of Transcarpathia was marked with a combination of academicism and decorativeness with a particularly distinct local color, leading to a further visual reflection of changes in socio-political life, resulting in the desire for creative freedom, not limited with Communist Party directives, in attempts to return to national origins. Impressed by the exhibition, the famous art critic Anatolii Chlenov suggested that Tetiana Yablonska "learns from Bokshay", and the artist did not object, calling that exhibition a "real celebration" (Sklyarenko, 2018, p. 31).

Serhii Parajanov's film *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* released in 1965 became a pivotal event in the field of cinema. The film was shot in the Hutsul houses and on the outskirts of the village of Kryvorivnia, Verkhovyna district, Ivano-Frankivsk region. The analysis of the congeniality of the stylistics of the visual series of the film and the paintings of Yablonska goes beyond the scope of this study. However, certain common plot and sculptural and coloristic constants are worth emphasizing. They reflect the ability of talented artists to make philosophical generalizations with a deep understanding of the national spiritual heritage.

Thus, a whole set of phenomena, both socio-political and cultural-artistic, intensified the artists' gravitation to national folklore as a source of renewal of the artistic language and at the same time—to the deep foundations of Ukrainian art. For the first time since the 1920s, there had been a return to the national template within the "Ukrainian style." Victor Zaretsky, Alla Horska, Hryhoriy Yakutovych, Victor Ryzhykh, Halyna Neledva, Halyna Hryhorieva are the ones who shaped the art history of the sixties. However, in the midst of a circle of talented Ukrainian artists, Tetiana Yablonska's "folklore series" also became a distinct phenomenon of Soviet art of the period (Sklyarenko, 2018, p. 33).

Analyzing the evolution of the neo-folklorism stage in Yablonska's art, one also notes a purely individual, personal aspect. In the 1960s, Tetiana Yablonska already was an artist well-known in the Soviet Union and abroad: a winner of two Stalin Prizes (1949, 1951), with a bronze medal for the *Bread* painting at the World's Fair in Brussels (1958), and awarded with the title of People's Artist of the USSR (1960). This recognition and

confidence in her creative strength based on professional art education in the studios of prominent artists (Fedir Krychevsky, Serhiy Hryhoriev) gave Tetiana Yablonska the opportunity to experiment and a certain freedom of expression.

However, the history of fascination with folklore dates back to her studies in the Kyiv Art Institute (1935–1941). The passion for folk art was instilled in the talented student by Fedir Krychevsky. Eventually, thanks to his love for folk art tradition, Yablonska joined the Ukrainian national space, working on masterfully and aesthetically composed academic productions. Yablonska's self-portrait in a national garment (1946) testified the continuity of the artistic tradition from a teacher to a talented student. Color palette with dominating white and laconic accent of ornamental motifs, and most importantly, an open and bold look of penetrating eyes, corresponds to the artistic features and nature of Krychevsky's self-portrait in a white coat (1930). Thus, the period of Yablonska's study may be outlined as the first, preparatory stage of development of her neo-folklorism.

The artist's immersion into the folk nature of art happened after her graduation from the Kyiv Art Institute. The second stage of neo-folklorism in Yablonska's art was the result of the fruitful creative trips to Transcarpathia in the 1950s. Back at the Plenum of the Union of Artists of Ukraine in 1951, Yablonska proposed to send realist artists to the Western regions of Ukraine, who would lead the creative intelligentsia there (Sklyarenko, 2018, p. 31).

Olha Petrova notes that "the paintings *Along with the Father* (1962), *Evening in Solotvyno* (1959) were the first results of Tetiana Yablonska's immersion into folk style" (Petrova, 1991, p. 10). However, it should be clarified that during 1957–58 the artist created portraits, which may be considered the next steps to mastering the folk themes in painting, in particular, *Hutsul Yurko Yanovsky* (1957), *Young Lumberjack* (1958), and *Anutsa* (1958). Types of the Carpathian highlands appeared on the canvases instead of downtown inhabitants. However, it was not only the thematic and figurative component that changed; a colour element with a decoratively infused assortment of embroideries, scarves, and *keptars* (short sleeveless fur coats) also evolved. At the same time, the portraits retain a connection with the academic tradition: light-and-dark modelling and "sculpting" of the form with the active, free brush strokes. Thus, the second period of mastering the folk theme by the artist is marked with the combination of the tradition of academic painting and the folk one.

Since the early 1960s, Tetiana Yablonska drifted from ethnography towards new stylistic solutions, abandoning the academic approach and demonstrating improved colors and sculptures based on the folk art traditions. Thus, the third stage of neo-folklorism in the artist's work begins. Olha Petrova notes that "the transition from the academic form to the conventionality of folk style images was quite difficult, as a method that was established in the bitter strife of creative consciousness, split into two incarnations" (Petrova, 1991, p. 10). Nevertheless, it brought great joy to the artist: "I felt a great pleasure when the illusion prevailed while understanding the space" (Petrova, 1991, p. 10).

Yablonska emphasized in her memoirs: "the search for national forms of self-expression and all new 'discoveries' was a defiant opposition to tedious, threadbare socialist realism" (Atayan, 2020, p. 111). The artist noted the "special flavor" in the works of folk art, in their clarity and perfection of form, as well as the generosity and richness of colors along with extreme conciseness. She also emphasized that the features of national character most clearly are expressed in folk art: "In our country, artists often follow the path of superficial stylization using such tools as the popular *lubok* (amateur painting) or iconography in search for the national identity. Also, they are fascinated exclusively by the ethnographic component. It seems to me that along with a deep knowledge of history, ethnography and folk art, the artists should not limit themselves in their work to any external constraints in search of national style" (Atayan, 2020, p. 110).

Among the picturesque paintings of the third stage of neo-folklorism are the following: *Young Mother* (1964), *Swans* (1966), *Bride* (1966), *Life (Ancestor)* (1966), *Paper Flowers* (1967), *Mother and Child* (1968). Olha Petrova points to the "immersion in the folk style as a breakthrough from the natural and mimetic to the generalized and conditional (figurative and symbolic) system of vision," and cites the artist's reasoning: "In the paintings *Before the Start, Spring, Upon the Dnipro River* I started to slide into naturalism. It seemed to me that I was disappearing as an artist... I came out of a dead-end on a general wave of fascination with folklore. This period was prompted by the colorfulness of Armenian painting, decorativeness of the Transcarpathian holidays that captivated me. The real beginning of the 'folklore suite' was laid by the study of the structure of the works of folk art, and, essentially, by the understanding of folk philosophy, folk understanding of expediency of beauty. I felt that people needed art as much as they needed bread" (Petrova, 2007, p. 459–460).

In 1969, the creative duo of Ivan Drach and Tetiana Yablonska made a failed attempt to publish their joint book. According to their design, Yablonska's paintings of the folklore period were to be complemented with Drach's verses. The entire print run of 4,000 copies was destroyed on ideological grounds. There were several reasons for banning and destroying the publication: first, it was a ban of the Soviet government for promotion of new trends in the paintings of Tetiana Yablonska, a prominent representative of socialist realism art. Secondly, according to the memoirs of Ivan Drach, reprinted in the album *Tetiana Yablonska. Ivan Drach. The Book that Was Destroyed* (2018), the reason for the ban on the publication was the poet's reputation (Atayan, 2017). According to the Canadian Communists' report to the authorities, the poet (a member of the CPSU from 1959 to 1990) was accused in adhering to Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists that canceled the publication. Thirdly, the researcher Olena Yeremenko suggests that the second title of the painting *The Life Goes On* (1971), namely *The Cossack Kin Never Wanes*, was the reason for destroying the edition (Yeremenko, 2001).

The collection of Ivan Drach's ballads does not simply illustrate the paintings of Tetiana Yablonska. Instead, verbal

and visual texts form a single whole. The poet accompanies the painting *Life (Ancestor)* (1966) with the poem "My family has a hundred routes..." (Znyshhenu knygu, 2021). The phrase "a hundred routes" runs as a refrain through the whole poetic work, resonates with the laconic geometry of numerous family photos placed on a whitewashed wall, next to which sits an old woman with a baby on her lap. The symbolic unity of painting and poetry is clearly manifested in verse: "My grandson stomps his little foot / Go on, kiddo, for all it's worth, the world allows a hundred routes, / he'll trample down a hundred and first..." It is about the never-ending cycle of life, and its inevitable movement from childhood to old age is vigorously downplayed by a rhythm reminiscent of bubbly Ukrainian folk dances.

*Visiting Grandchildren* (1965) painting is accompanied by "The Ballad of Knots." "I had grandmother Korupchykha, illiterate and unenlightened, Her tired hands are still my beacon. She baked pies with viburnum, My world's dark one now that she's gone" (Yablonska, T. & Drach, 2017). The canvas depicts an old kind woman with a sooty face and hands exhausted from hard work. Nevertheless, her eyes glow with warmth on the emaciated face, her dark blue-olive silhouette is depicted against a light pink background, decorated with yellow petals. "World being dark" and "hands as a beacon" in Ivan Drach's poem reflect not only the color contrasts of the canvas, built on the depth and decorativeness of folk art but also emphasize the painter's desire to symbolically capture the primordial cycle of human life.

**Conclusions.** The paper formulates the ideological and artistic principles of neo-folklorism in the paintings by Tetiana Yablonska. The ideological principles affirm national self-identification and determine affiliation to her nation. The main artistic principles of neo-folklorism are defined as the changes in the dimensional and sculptural concept, in particular, generalization and two-dimensionality of form, locally unique color scheme, the concision of folk ornamental motifs, a permanent archetypal image of a woman as the ancestor and guardian of the family wellbeing.

Vivid paintings of Yablonska of the mid-1950s and 1960s differ in artistic and stylistic features. Therefore, after a careful analysis, it was proposed to introduce the three-stage periodization of Yablonska's neo-folklorism: a preparatory stage (her studies with Fedir Krychevsky in the Kyiv Art Institute in 1935–1941), merged academic and folklore traditions of the late 1950s, and the stage of rediscovering folklore during the 1960s.

The turn of the tide of the artist's pictorial language instilled confidence into many of her contemporaries and opened the possibility of free style formation and self-expression, experiments, and creative endeavors. Yablonska's important position in Ukrainian fine arts was a pillar for the artists of the next generations.

**Prospects for further research** are in solving two unexplored aspects: an interdisciplinary analysis of Yablonska's works in comparison with the search for neo-folk stylistics of Ukrainian cinema in order to identify a new angle of the development of Ukrainian art of that time; elucidating the place of neo-folklorism in the context of socio-political and cultural processes in Eastern Europe in the middle of the twentieth century.

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**Ситник І.****Ідейні та мистецькі засади неофольклоризму Тетяни Яблонської**

**Анотація.** Досліджено формування та розвиток фольклорного стилю у творчості української художниці Тетяни Яблонської (1917–2005). Увагу зосереджено на живописних творах середини 1950-х — 1960-х років. Із зауваженням наукових публікацій останніх років матеріал проаналізовано з урахуванням логіки від загального до конкретного: від виявлення суспільно-політичних і культурних трансформацій доби «відлиги» на теренах України та окреслення чинників особистісного плану, що сприяли зверненню Тетяни Яблонської, до народної творчості.

На матеріалі корпусу художніх творів досліджено зміни стильової тканини й виявлено домінантні тенденції еволюції неофольклоризму в живописних творах. Уточнено й запропоновано введення до широкого наукового обігу існування трьох етапів творчості художниці: підготувальний (навчання в Київському художньому інституті під керівництвом Ф. Кричевського протягом 1935–1941); академічно-фольклорний кінця 1950-х років і фольклорний — 1960-ті роки. Актуалізовано питання зв'язку художньо-символічної мови неофольклорного стилю в живописі з іншими видами мистецтва, зокрема, із пошуками відповідної стилістики в українському кінематографі з метою оновлення теоретичних досліджень щодо тенденцій розвитку візуального мистецтва України зазначененої доби. Окреслено головні художні принципи неофольклоризму, зокрема, пластичне узагальнення й площинність форми, локальність колористичної палітри, лаконізм народних орнаментальних мотивів.

Предмет дослідження — фольклорна тема в живописі Яблонської середини 1950-х — 1960-х років, передумови її виникнення та еволюція. Мета дослідження полягає у виявленні характерних рис неофольклоризму у полотнах художниці на підставі аналізу соціально-політичних і культурних чинників.

Методологія роботи базується на комплексному використанні інструментарію як мистецтвознавчого аналізу при вивчені корпусу творів мистецтва, так і міждисциплінарних принципів культурологічного аналізу при дослідженні ідейно-світоглядних засад досліджуваного періоду. Вперше твори Яблонської розглядаються у співставленні з поезією (альбом «Тетяна Яблонська. Іван Драч. Книга, яку знишили», 1969), виявлено спільні ритмічно-образні риси й філософсько-символічні засади творення.

**Ключові слова:** українське образотворче мистецтво ХХ століття, живопис, творчість Т. Яблонської, неофольклоризм.

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