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The creativity of V.D. Kotkov as a cultural code: educating future enamel artists through the lens of his legacy

Abstract. The article examines the work of the outstanding master of Rostov finift' V.D. Kotkov as an embodiment of the cultural code of the traditional art craft. The authors identify and systematize the key components of the cultural code (technological, thematic, and stylistic) through the analysis of Kotkov's works, with special attention to the genre of architectural landscape. The scientific novelty of the study lies in substantiating the didactic potential of the master's legacy for the training of enamel artists in the system of professional education.

Key words: cultural code, artistic enamel painting, V.D. Kotkov, enamel artist, professional education, copying, design.

Enamel painting represents not only a technically challenging aspect but also a profoundly symbolic layer of traditional applied art. In the context of continuous professional education development in the field of enamel painting at the Fedoskino institute of lacquer miniature painting, there arises a pressing question regarding the curriculum for future enamel painters.

The content of instruction in the discipline "Performing skills" at the bachelor's degree level aims to cultivate not only professional abilities in executing enamel painting but also instill value-driven attitudes toward this genre of traditional applied art. A pivotal role in this process is played by the persona of the enamel painter whose creativity connects tradition and modernity in Rostov finift', serving as a model for the professional and spiritual maturation of students.

A vivid example of such orientation is provided by the legacy of Viktor Dmitriyevich Kotkov – a renowned enamel painter whose works embody the cultural code of Rostov finift'. However, despite the artistic value of his creations, the artist's legacy remains insufficiently integrated into the pedagogical process, leading to superficial and fragmented study of his style and technique in the "Performing skills" discipline.

There exists a need for scholarly analysis of the oeuvre of prominent enamel painters and elucidation of its didactic potential for educating a new generation of artists capable of creatively advancing the tradition.

The aim of this research is to identify and characterize elements of the cultural code present in the work of enamel painter V.D. Kotkov and justify the importance of his legacy for nurturing enamel painters within the framework of continuous professional education.

To achieve the stated goal, the following tasks will be addressed:

- examine the creative biography of V.D. Kotkov within the context of the historical development of Rostov finift' in the second half of the XXth century;
- analyze key works by the master and identify their consistent stylistic characteristics (compositional schemes, coloristic solutions, techniques of working with materials);
- determine and systematically organize the didactic potential of his legacy by identifying aspects of his creativity (architectural landscapes, engagement with historical narratives, compositional structures) most effective for developing students' professional competencies within the subjects "Performing skills" and "Design of enamel paintings".

The methodology includes complementary methods: biographical, comparative-stylistic and regional-historical analyses.

The selection of these methods is dictated by the objectives of the study and the nature of the object being studied – the cultural code understood as a complex set of technological, narrative and stylistic constants of the artistic craft. The biographical method will enable examination of how the master became a bearer of this code within the specific historical and cultural context of Rostov finift'. Comparative-stylistic analysis will help identify and classify persistent formal traits constituting the stylistic foundation of the code. Finally, regional-historical analysis is needed to understand the rootedness of V.D. Kotkov's creativity in local tradition, corresponding to the narrative and value components of the cultural code of enamel painting.

In contemporary humanities scholarship, the concept of cultural code is interpreted as a set of enduring values, artistic images and modes of expression formed over many generations and embedded in collective memory. According to S.V. Lebedev, the cultural code encompasses deeper layers of national identity manifested in traditions, customs and folk art, functioning as a kind of "language of culture" [5, p. 64].

When applied to traditional art crafts, the cultural code takes on a concrete form expressed in three groups of stable constants: technological, narrative and stylistic. The technological component comprises specific techniques of working with materials and traditional craft skills: in Rostov finift', this includes multilayer writing with fire-resistant pigments and firing peculiarities. The narrative component relates to a fixed circle of themes, symbols and artistic images reflecting the historical and cultural heritage of the art craft. The stylistic component is defined by characteristic brushwork, color palette and compositional features ensuring recognizability of the artist's works. Key components of the cultural code of enamel painting are summarized in table 1.

Table 1

Components of cultural code in traditional art crafts

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Material handling; - Writing techniques and technology; F	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Historical narratives; - Symbols and motifs; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Brushwork manner; - Compositional patterns; - Color palette

These components create the artistic and technological basis of the craft, ensuring its continuity and identifiability within Russia's cultural space. As noted by S.A. Tikhomirov, traditional art crafts constitute a vital part of the country's cultural code, as they preserve visual images and technological features passed down through generations [10, p. 90].

Within the system of professional education, comprehending the cultural code of an art craft acquires special significance, as it is precisely professional education that safeguards, transmits and furthers its development. This perspective is supported by S.V. Lebedev's assertion that the education system acts as “the main guardian and primary driver of the nation's cultural code development” [6, p. 97]. Therefore, referring to the creative legacies of leading masters of enamel painting becomes an important tool for shaping the professional outlook of future enamel painters.

Victor Dmitriyevich Kotkov (1933–2001) stands out as a prominent figure in the development of Rostov finift’ in the latter half of the XXth century, exemplifying a carrier and continuator of its cultural code. His name naturally ranks among leading artists like V.P. Grudin, A.A. Khaunov, N.A. Kulandin, N.V. Serova, L.N. Matakova, A.V. Tikhov, et al., whose works serve as benchmarks for students, ensuring continuity of artistic traditions [9, p. 190].

Analyzing Kotkov's creative biography and legacy reveals several aspects validating this role. His artwork is deeply rooted in the narrative code of the craft associated with the theme of a small historic town. His architectural landscapes dedicated to Rostov the Great are not only artistic pieces but also illustrative materials revealing the essence of the regional specificity of finift’. This grounding in local context corresponds to the regional-historical approach advocated by N.M. Aleksandrova, suggesting that educational content “derives from the essence of its regionally historical roots, covering the historical period of art's formation and development, along with social, natural and cultural traditions of the region where this art originated” [1, p. 41]. Studying and copying Kotkov's works becomes a practical implementation of this approach, encapsulating historical memory, natural landscapes and cultural meanings, thereby imparting to aspiring artists a holistic understanding of the craft as a living cultural code.

Masterfully excelling in classical genres constituting the core of the craft, he produced portraits and icons. His floral miniatures executed in the finest traditions of “Rostov writing” showcase subtle sense of color and virtuoso command of the brush [3, p. 31]. At the same time, V.D. Kotkov, together with other leading artists

of the late XXth century, actively developed and enriched the genre of thematic composition, notably architectural landscapes.



Fig. 1. Kotkov V.D. Panel “Autumn in Rostov the Great”, 1982

The master created a series of works devoted to Rostov the Great: panel “Winter in Rostov the Great”, panel “Autumn in Rostov the Great” (Fig. 1⁷⁸), plaque “Spaso-Yakovlevsky monastery. View from Lake Nero” [8].

These works do not simply record architectural monuments but act as bearers of historical memory and cultural values, aligning with the profound understanding of cultural code as a “trace of the past” [5, p. 39].

For the educational process, especially valuable is the series of architectural landscapes by V.D. Kotkov dedicated to Rostov the Great, including the panel “Autumn in Rostov the Great” and the miniature “Winter in Rostov the Great” [2]. These works, which students copy in the course “Performing skills”, are not mere instructional standards but intricate compositions where the master's characteristic panoramic composition combines with meticulous detailing. Kotkov frequently depicts architecture from elevated vantage points, allowing him to capture entire ensembles, as seen in “Spaso-Yakovlevsky monastery. View from Lake Nero”, with compositions carefully balanced and well-conceived. His treatment of form unites detailed rendering of architecture with generalized lyrical depiction of nature, lending scenes liveliness and completeness. Such replication exercises enhance not only technical skills (brushwork, light-and-shade representation) but also introduce trends toward monumentalization of miniature form. Consequently, V.D. Kotkov's turn to Rostovian architecture emerges as a profoundly personal statement possessing substantial pedagogical potential.

V.D. Kotkov's stylistic code manifests in characteristic delicate, almost watercolor-like detail work, scrupulously calculated compositions, and, crucially, nuanced and sophisticated coloring. The latter relies on restrained yet richly varied palettes where colors never scream but rely on subtle gradations and complex mixtures evoking harmony and naturalness. This is evident in architectural landscapes where the artist adeptly captures fleeting states of nature: soft golden autumn foliage in the panel “Autumn in Rostov the Great” (1982) or chilly blue winter skies in the miniature “Winter in Rostov the Great” (Fig. 2).

Often, in his compositional choices, V.D. Kotkov employs the device of panoramic views of architecture from above. His thoughtful and deliberate approach

⁷⁸ Figs. 1-4. State catalogue of the museum fund of the Russian Federation. Collection “Rostov finift”. Kotkov V.D. – URL : <https://goskatalog.ru/portal/#/collections?q=kotkov%20rostov> (accessed December 14, 2025).

to composing is evidenced by his working methodology: preliminary sketches for enamel miniatures were done in watercolors, “meticulously elaborating the tiniest details of color and narrative composition” (Figs. 3, 4) [3, p. 31].



Fig. 2. Kotkov V.D. Panel “Winter in Rostov the Great”, 1982

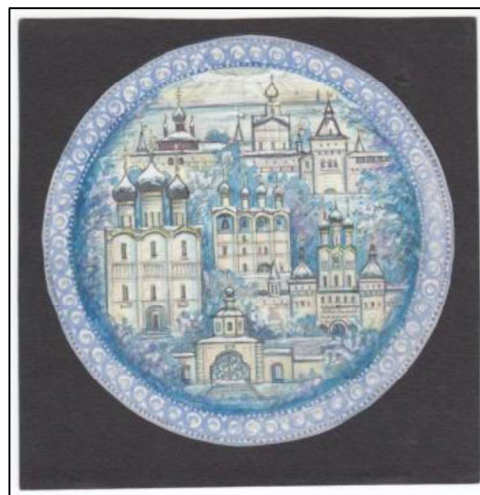


Fig. 3. Kotkov V.D. Sketch “Rostov Kremlin in Winter”, 1985

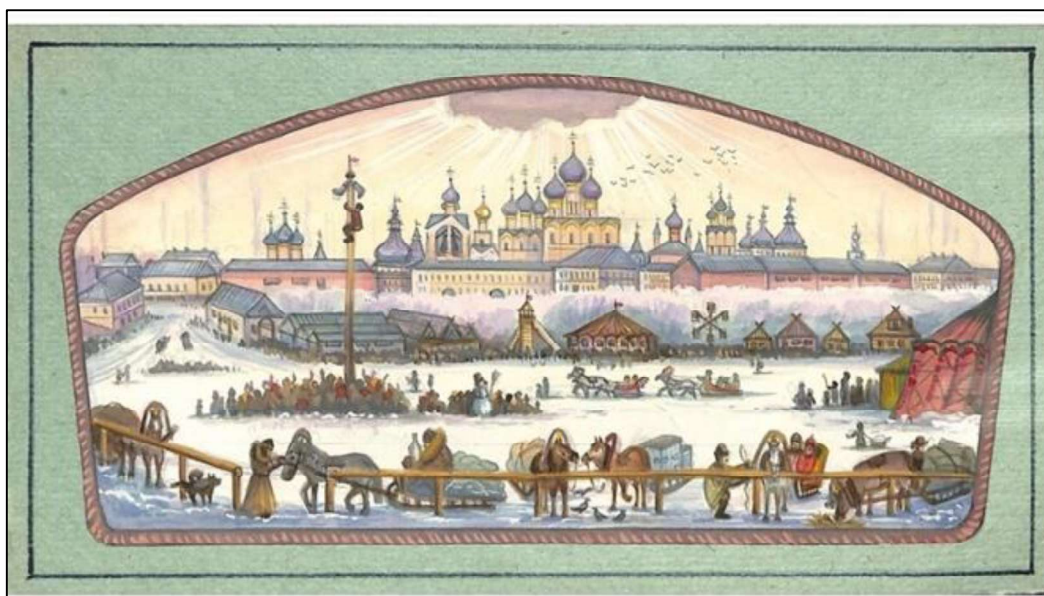


Fig. 4. Kotkov V.D. Sketch “Bygone times. Fair-Maslenitsa before 1941”, 1997

His decades-long dedication to the craft at the factory “Rostov finift” (1958–1961, 1963–1995) and diverse activities ranging from jewelry making to ex libris and memorial medals illustrate his mastery of a broad spectrum of technological codes, another critical trait of a tradition-bearing master.

V.D. Kotkov was highly skilled in the traditional technique of multi-layered painting with fireproof pigments on enamel followed by firing. His mastery is evident in the exceptional purity and transparency of color achieved through precise temperature control and intimate knowledge of materials. To him, the technology of Rostov finift’ was not a rigid set of rules but a living language.

Kotkov's innovation lay not in rejecting traditional methods but in creatively enriching and adapting them to address new artistic challenges. For instance, to achieve a distinctive lightness and airiness in depictions of sky and water, he employed more complex and refined glazing techniques.

V.D. Kotkov's oeuvre represents a unique blend of tradition and innovation. He served as custodian of the traditional technological and stylistic code inherited from previous masters while simultaneously acting as an innovator who found an authentic and artistically convincing language to articulate themes and compositional solutions relevant to his era. This makes his legacy particularly valuable for pedagogy, demonstrating to students a vibrant example of how tradition can serve as a foundation for contemporary creative exploration.

Justifiably regarded as one of the key authors shaping the modern appearance of Rostovian architectural landscapes, Kotkov did more than simply document famous landmarks – he created complete, spirit-infused representations imbued with lyricism and historical memory. His series of works dedicated to the Rostov Kremlin became not only an artistic achievement but also a cultural phenomenon, embedding the image of the ancient city as a symbol of national heritage into the visual code of the craft.

In this genre, he succeeded in synthesizing topographic accuracy with poetic imagination, capturing the essence of his innovation. His architectural landscapes, such as “Kremlin. Water tower” (1962), have become canonical and today are mandatory for study and reproduction by students, affirming their status as classic examples embodying fundamental professional skills and aesthetic ideals of the craft.

V.D. Kotkov's creative legacy constitutes a coherent system where stylistic preferences, technical virtuosity and genre priorities interconnect. Beyond being a mere collection of works, it represents a concentrated embodiment of the cultural code of Rostov finift’, endowed with considerable didactic potential. Functioning as materialized “collective unconscious” of the craft [5, p. 64], these works become a key resource for educational purposes. Their systematic inclusion in the program of the Fedoskino institute of lacquer miniature painting helps address the challenge of training enamel painters, shaping not only technical skills but also a holistic professional mindset. Professional development, as highlighted by I.I. Kurakina, is inextricably tied to the transmission of established artists' professional experiences – carriers of traditions [4, p. 169], hence reinforcing the relevance of drawing on the legacy of a master like V.D. Kotkov.

Studying the works of V.D. Kotkov provides students with a tangible illustration of the dialectical unity between adherence to tradition and creative freedom. By examining his pieces, future artists observe that canon is not a static set of rules but rather a living language through which one can speak about contemporaneity. On one hand, V.D. Kotkov is a brilliant continuation of traditions stemming from predecessors like A.A. Nazarov and A.I. Zvonilkin, masterfully wielding the craft's technology and iconography [7, p. 192]. On the other hand, he is an innovator who developed his own stylistics in the genre of architectural landscapes, elevating it to a new level of artistic generalization.

This approach aids in instilling students with the understanding that genuine innovation is possible only through thorough assimilation of tradition. It shapes a professional mindset wherein the artist does not oppose themselves against the craft but perceives themselves as a link in an ongoing chain of succession, responsible for evolving the cultural code rather than merely reproducing it.

Copying exemplary works by the master, such as the panel “Winter in Rostov the Great”, is intended not for mechanical duplication but for deep analysis and internalization of key elements of his style: color palette accounting for subtle transitions, construction of complex spatial compositions, use of glaze painting to convey luminous atmosphere. During this phase, students technologically absorb the master's language, refining their “sense of the brush”.

The next step in working on copies of V.D. Kotkov's works involves creating one's own composition based on identified artistic features of his pieces. Students are asked to develop a sketch of an architectural landscape (for example, their hometown or a notable landmark), utilizing characteristic compositional schemes and coloristic solutions typical of the master. This exercise teaches students not to duplicate but to think in terms of the master's logic, applying his artistic reasoning to new subject matter.

Within the discipline “Designing products of enamel painting”, a key assignment is the project “Architectural landscape in modern enamel” (Figs. 5, 6⁷⁹). The task entails a sequential creative process consisting of interconnected stages:

- gathering and analyzing visual material concerning the selected architectural object or type (e.g., a small historic town);
- exploring the historical and cultural context of the object;
- composing and technological analysis of classical works in the genre of architectural landscape in enamel art (including, for example, the legacy of Rostov finift' masters);
- developing an original project for a contemporary piece of jewelry (brooch, pendant) or thematic miniature. The task involves creatively reinterpreting the chosen architectural theme and previously studied traditional techniques. The assignment promotes a holistic approach where genre acquisition occurs not through simple duplication but via in-depth analysis followed by project work aimed at updating cultural heritage.

The artistic-graphic projects illustrated in figures 5 and 6 clearly show how students, building on the studied legacy of V.D. Kotkov, create original compositions. The work shown in fig. 5 demonstrates the use of Kotkov's characteristic panoramic composition and reserved color scheme adapted for a contemporary piece of jewelry. The graphic design project in fig. 6, titled “Omsk Winter tale”, reflects a creative reinterpretation of traditional techniques: the student applies glazing and complex spatial arrangements characteristic of V.D. Kotkov but within the context of a novel architectural theme.

⁷⁹ Figs. 5, 6 – photo from the archive at the Fedoskino institute of lacquer miniature painting.

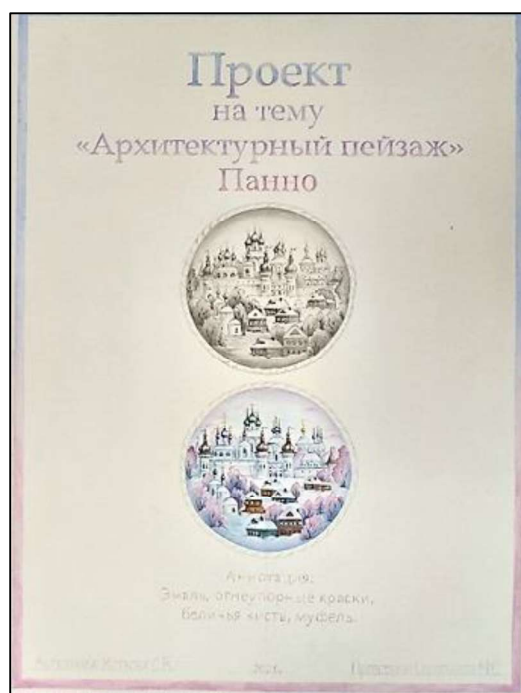


Fig. 5. Kotkova S.V. Project on the topic “Architectural landscape”, supervised by N.E. Skripunova, 2021



Fig. 6. Kotkova S.V. Composition project on the theme “Architectural landscape. Omsk Winter tale”, supervised by M.A. Saltanov, 2023

The pedagogical approach is grounded in a gradual immersion in the master's artistry. The journey, progressing through creative analysis of the artist's works, interpretation and creation of an original project, mirrors the natural development of an artist: transitioning from studying the language of tradition to discovering one's own voice within it. This allows for consideration of each student's individuality, nurturing reflective creators capable of engaging in dialogue with artistic heritage.

The conducted research allowed identification and characterization of key elements of the cultural code of Rostov finift' embodied in V.D. Kotkov's work. His legacy serves as a potent resource for modernizing the educational process, ensuring not only preservation but also progressive advancement of this unique craft in the XXIst century. This corroborates the thesis that “professional pedagogy in the realm of traditional art crafts holds the mission of holistic reception of the cultural code” [10, p. 95].

The structured system of working with V.D. Kotkov's artistry facilitates the cultivation of an enamel painter who harmoniously balances respect for tradition, mindful mastery of enamel painting techniques and courage in creative exploration.

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